



Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

Introduction

During the early years of the twentieth century, a literary tradition was developed by the Mississippi prose writers like the 1949 Nobel Prize winner, William Faulkner and Eudora Welty¹ in the American South. These writers put the local geography, history, traditions, and the habits of people in their writings. The characters in their plays or novels illustrate many different social classes including: wealthy landowners, ex-slaves and poor whites. Later, many plays were written by the outstanding dramatist of postwar America, Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) who is always identified by audiences on account of Williams' many characters of deep religious fever, love of land and family traditions in the American South. He used his expressionistic techniques to show inner experience of people in his writings which reflected America South such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *The Glass Menagerie*. In his book *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*, Bigsby pointed out that Williams' characters have the fragile and deeply wounded spirit and psyche. His popular reputation was as a sensationalist, which characters in various plays guilty of (or victims of) murder, rape, castration, cannibalism, alcoholism, promiscuity, homosexuality, and other shocking violations of moral and

¹ Eudora Welty (April 13, 1909---July 23, 2001) was born in Jackson, Mississippi wrote about the American South. Like Tennessee Williams, her novel--- *The Optimist's Daughter* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973.

social norms. Williams also drew bizarre stories and characters because he found in the fringes of acceptable human behavior clearly dramatic examples of universal experience (Bigsby a: 87).

From 1945 to 1960, Arthur Miller and Williams were considered as the two greatest dramatists. First, Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (in 1955) and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (in 1949) won the Pulitzer Prize, the first of their careers. Second, Miller's *All My Sons* (1947) and Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award during 1950s. Third, both Miller and Williams got the highest theatrical awards in the early 1960s, Miller was elected as the first American president of International PEN² and Williams' *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) won the New York Drama Critics Circle Award.

However, some of Williams' writing skills were influenced by other great writers such as Hart Crane, and Anton Chekhov. In Williams' writing, he shows admiration of the Hart Crane's poems. Once he wrote "I never met Hart Crane. I read of his death in 1932, when he jumped off the stern of a ship called the *Esmeralda*. It was twenty-four hours north of Havana, and in my will there is a codicil that I should be buried at sea as close as possible to the point where he jumped overboard, because I had a great reverence for Hart Crane as an artist" (Ruas 293). Indeed, Williams has brought some of Hart Crane's lyric into his works, for example, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. Williams also valued Chekhov's writing and his character creation. For example, *The Glass Menagerie* was influenced by the Chekhov's nostalgic languages. Chekhov's *Sea Gull* comparing with *The Glass Menagerie*, both plays are dealing with the male protagonists' relationship with their domineering mothers. The

² International PEN (Poets, Essayists and Novelists) was found in 1921 in London to promote the relationship among writers.

Chekhovian influence can also be detected in other Williams' plays over many years.

The detail of Williams' life can be found in his plays. Some of the details are there. We know that Williams, like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, worked in a shoe warehouse. He graduated from high school in January 1929, and went on to the University of Missouri. He was forced to drop out after his third year and then went to work for the International Shoe Company (Weales 7).

Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) deals with the relationships between a strong mother, an absent father, an imaginative son, and a crippled girl. According to Gelder, "the play is semi-autobiographical" (Gelder 10), it talks about the conditions of Williams' life in St. Louis. Williams (Thomas Lanier Williams) was born in Columbus, Mississippi. He is one of the greatest and best-known American playwrights in the twentieth century. He spent his early years of childhood with his grandparents in Clarksdale, a town in the Mississippi Delta about 80 miles from Memphis. Clarksdale plays an important part during his childhood and works, for instance, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; the Delta becomes an important town where Big Daddy lives with his wealth and prosperity. From there Williams has drawn some names or details of the characters into his later plays, such as the families of Cutleres, Bobos, Wingfields, and the names like Brick, Blanche, and Baby Doll; he also takes the experience of his private life as his working sources. He assumed the name "Tennessee" a nickname given to him in the college, when he decided to become a professional writer. He wrote many major plays, *The Glass Menagerie* (opened in Chicago, in the midwinter, 1944) was his first major success. Two years later he wrote *A Street Named Desire*³ (1947) which won the author the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson award, *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose*

³ Because of this play, he was acclaimed the "New" Eugene O'Neill.

Tattoo (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly*, *Last Summer* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *Period of Adjustment* (1960), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961). For this dissertation, I will analyze the struggles of the three male protagonists in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

Drugs⁴ and alcohol play an important role in Williams' life and his works. His plays and fictions reflect his addiction to drugs from the 1930s to the 1980s. For instance, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Amytal⁵ is used to treat Brick's growing pain with alcohol, and morphine is given to Big Daddy to deal with the pain of his cancer. In *Sweet Birds of Youth* many drugs emerge such as seconal, marijuana, and hashish used by Princess Kosmonopolis and Chance. In scene three of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom talks sarcastically about opium dens:

AMANDA: Where are you going?

TOM: I'm going to the movies!

AMANDA: I don't believe that lie!

Tom crouches toward her, overtowering her tiny figure. She backs away, gasping.

TOM: I'm going to opium dens! Yes, opium dens, dens of vice and criminals' hang-outs, Mother.... (*Understanding Plays* 115)

After reading Williams' biography, I have found many characters in his plays resemble the members in his real life. His mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, became a realistic model of the Southern mother in *The Glass Menagerie*. His father, Cornelius Williams, was a powerful member in the family who became the absent

⁴ According to the *Encyclopedia of Tennessee Williams*, in *Williams Memoirs* fully documented his use and abuse of prescription drugs, including sedatives, amphetamines, and antipsychotic drugs such as Mellaril (to treat behavioral disorders), Ritalin (a stimulant), and Miltown (to treat anxiety and tension). See Kolin 56.

⁵ The sodium salt of amobarbital is used as a barbiturate; used as a sedative and a hypnotic.

father in *The Glass Menagerie* and the Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. His beloved sister Rose, who was close to his age, became the fragile young woman in *The Glass Menagerie*. In 1945, *The Glass Menagerie* became his first Broadway success. Jean Evans comments on *The Glass Menagerie*: “When his family had moved to St. Louis from the South, Williams said, they had been forced to live in a congested apartment neighborhood. His sister had helped to brighten her room by collecting a large assortment of little glass figures, mostly animals. When leaving home, he said, “These articles came to represent in my memory all the softest emotions that belong to the recollection of things past” (Evans 12). Bigsby agreed the play as a memory play, as Williams himself insisted, in the production notes which precede the printed text, this is a “memory play because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material,” and it justifies “the atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction” (Bigsby 33). However, Ruby Cohen finds out the original short story, “Portrait of a Girl in Glass,” contains four characters—the narrator Tom, his nameless mother, his sister Laura, and a red-headed Irishman name Jim Delaney. The first half of the story is largely expository, but the second half with the Gentleman Caller scenes of the dramatic versions is the kernel. In this story, Laura is not lame, but she withdraws so deeply into her private world that she is not quite sane (Ruby 56). However, Williams has changed a great deal in the “final version” of *The Glass Menagerie* from the original short story. There is the long dialogue with the conversation of Laura’s mother with Jim:

“She’s light as a feather!” said Jim. “With a little more practice she’d dances as good as Betty!”

There was a little pause of silence.

“Betty?” said Mother.

“The girl I go out with!” said Jim.

“Oh!” said Mother.

....

“Are you thinking of getting married?” said Mother.

“First of next month!” he told her (Ruby 56-7).

In the climactic plot of the original story, Jim admits that he is engaged to a woman whose name is Betty, and Amanda is upset with this news. However, in our version of *The Glass Menagerie*'s dialogues between Amanda and Jim are different from the original version, when Jim is going to leave:

JIM: I have a couple of time-clocks to punch, Mrs. Wingfield. One at morning, another one at night!

AMANDA: My, but you are ambitious! You work at night, too?

JIM: No, Ma'am, not work but—Betty!

He crosses deliberately to pick up his hat. The band at the Paradise Dance Hall goes into a tender waltz.

AMANDA: Betty? Betty? Who's—Betty!

There is an ominous cracking sound in the sky.

JIM: Oh, just a girl. The girl I go steady with!

....

AMANDA: Ohhhhh— how nice! Tom didn't mention that you were engaged to be married (*Understanding* 138).

However, the contents of both versions are the same; Tom and Laura are usually taken as the images of Williams and Rose in their real life. Thomas L. King asserted that “the distortion results from an overemphasis on the scenes involving Laura and

Amanda and their plight, so that the play becomes a sentimental tract on the trapped misery of two women in St. Louis. Tom and Amanda describe how the Great Depression had destroyed The American Dream; Roudance pinpoints the multivalence of *The Glass Menagerie* and the ways in which these pretexts influence audience reception. Williams also discusses the multiple origins of the play, the idiographic backdrop of the Great Depression in the United States, and how these and other factors make the Wingfields victims of fate, time, and of “a prosaic and destructive reality” (Roudane 4). *The Glass Menagerie* has created the new emotions in people. Williams told Robert that “I do think there is a problem of personal integrity involved” (Gelder 10).

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof opened on March 24, 1955, and it won Williams the Drama Critics’ Award, the Donaldson, and the Pulitzer. Because of his talented writing skills, he published his new “reading version” (Murphy 189) which is divided two versions into the third act, one of them Williams called the “Broadway Version” which was developed in collaboration with director Eliza Kazan and the other participants in the plays in 1955.

Williams tried to write the story from the American South as well as to display the myth of South. It is a successful transformation of his career. However, while writing *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams clashed with his father about the Brick’s behavior and he begins to speak about the important issue of homosexuality, and drinking. Williams had drunk a lot in his real life. We can find the same experience, for instance, Brick has become an alcoholic, like Williams. Williams talked about his sources of his works in a letter to his friend Eliza “Gadg” Kazan in November “This play is too important to me, too much a synthesis of all my life”⁶

⁶ This letter is written on the November 31, 1954 in the Beverly Hills Hotel of California.

(Devlin b: 558). Williams has injected many experiences of his life into his work. Along with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and Eugene O'Neill's *A Long Day's Journey into Night* (1956), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is a significant contribution to the genre of modern domestic tragedy (Kolin a: 35). In his plays, he explains the contemporary problems from the different levels of public awareness.

In 1955, after the death of his grandfather Williams felt lost. Unfortunately, by 1960s, he drank more than before, and became an alcoholic. His frustration was similar to what happens to Chance in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. It is one of William's self-described "violent" plays and one of the most torrid and gruesome plays in his canon (Kolin b: 262). He also portrayed himself as a sad old actress, Princess Kosmonopolis, as he had tried and failed for many years in his movie career. Also, he showed his alcoholism and drug abuse in this play. He said in his biography that he could not live without writing, and he liked to reveal himself on his works. We have found striking sources of his background, feelings, and pains through his works.

Ruby Cohn professed that "he reworks by expansion, and comparison of the short works with the longer plays illuminates his focus on dialogue of pathos (Ruby 55). Williams' heroes used many creative and impressive images of the relationship of the people. In the 1975 interview with the Lothar Schmidt-Muhlisch, Williams talked about his viewpoints in his works: "I believe that society can identify again with my current problems. He explained now more clearly what had actually changed. The relationship of people to each other, the need to escape from loneliness, the problem in all its aspects—all that of course has its social and political dimensions. These relationships which I earlier did not see in this way, I now portray in my new plays" (Schmidt-Muchlisch 298). Williams knew that people seemed to like to find out his internal mind from his works, as he mentioned: "Age

bothers me only in this area; at my age, one never knows whether one is being used as an easy mark or if there is a true response” (Jennings 232). He wrote carefully about newspaper files, letters, documents, and other people’s memories, and he broke the old conditional rules into new ones. He often complained that journalists had taken advantage of him, thinking he talked in such an unguarded way that they could take advantage merely by selecting from what he has said (Hayman 217).

While the three plays focus on the pains of men and how they are sometimes controlled by the social rules. Traditionally, men have taken responsibilities for their families. Williams is famous for describing his characters’ experiences living in an extreme predicament of the American South. Robert regards Williams as, perhaps unconsciously, seeking ground for sticking to the disaster of personality—the history, not of the person with hubris of eventual insight, but of the person who cannot cope and cannot face the record (Ruby 75). To analyze those characters, I use the economical and psychological approaches. Richard Schmitt’s *Introduction to Marx and Engels: a critical reconstruction* (published in 1997) offers helpful economical and social information about the society in the ninetieth and twentieth century. Society can be changed as “human beings change their ways of solving everyday problems, and eventually produce changes in the social system” (Cohen 53). Marx regarded history as the story of how social arrangements adapt to technological progress, facilitating the productivity of tools and techniques (Miller 171). In Marxist technological determinism, relationships of production, given the technology at hand, change because a new technology has arisen to which they are ill-adapted (Miller 184). Richard said that there were two answers concerning how technological determinist influences economic structures: first, a stable economic structure is the basic type because that type best promotes the growth of productivity,

given the productive forces at hand. Second, the most important changes among the productive forces are mainly due to a human drive toward change that is independent of the desire to dominate other people (Miller 180). I agree with the first opinion that economic structure is influenced by the growth of productivity.

Since the late nineteenth century, the influences of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud are seen in Williams' choices of characters in his plays. For example, characters' fates are often determined by their psychological, economic, and environmental conditions.

At the beginning of the twentieth century Sigmund Freud, (1856-1939), the founder of psychoanalysis, wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in which he introduced his theory of the unconscious with respect to dream interpretation. This can be used as an explanation of the inner motives of people's choices of actions in the plays. In chapter five of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud gives three peculiarities of the memory in dreams: (1) The dream clearly prefers the impressions of the last few days. (2) The dream makes a selection in accordance with principles other than those governing our waking memory, it recalls not only essential and important occurrences, but also some disregarded incidents. (3) The dream has at its disposal the earliest impressions of our childhood, and brings to light details from this period of life, which, again, seem trivial and long forgotten in waking life (Freud 70-1). I agree with the third opinion that dreams are formed from impressions retained from our childhood. The present actions might be derived unconsciously from one's earlier dreams. Tom wants to search for his adventures, just like his father. Chance wants to have a successful life in order to impress his girl. Brick gets drunk to forget his past. The unconscious mind is deeply involved in people's suppressed desires, complexes, drives, and impulses. This might be an explanation

of three male characters' motives and actions.

Freud claims that an unconscious mind can control our body for “the suppressed material continues to exist even in the normal person and remains capable of psychic activity” (Freud 441). Furthermore, he explains “The unconscious is the true psychic reality; in its inner nature it is just as imperfectly communicated to us by the data of conscious as is the external world by the reports of our sense organs” (Freud 445).

This thesis is divided into six parts: the first is the introduction to Williams' biography and his social background. Chapter one focuses on the illusions of the three male protagonists; they all have unrealistic expectations. Chapter two attempts to deal with their disillusionments and they face the reality of their lives. Chapter three discusses the causes of their failure, both psychologically, and economically. Chapter four discusses the human endurance of the three protagonists, as expressed by Williams. The conclusion sums up the discussions in this thesis about the three male protagonists and Williams' messages to us: through self-awareness all situations can be ameliorated.

Despite all their frustration, Tom has kept his love toward his family, and Chance is faithful to his true love. At the end, Brick comes to achieve a better understanding of his wife and father. Deciding to face the reality, the three protagonists offer their bitter passage through their experiences of illusions and disillusionments. Williams' drama addresses the whole human experience by symbolically to us the binaries: the self and the other, the internal and the external, duty and freedom (Bloom 22).