FALSITY IN MAN: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' VISION OF TRAGEDY

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FALSITY IN MAN: TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' VISION OF TRAGEDY

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams has twice received the Pulitzer Prize and is the only three-time winner of the New York Drama Critics' Award. His plays have run in excess of 2,000 performances on Broadway in addition to successful runs abroad. Motion picture adaptations of the scripts have been equally successful, and many outstanding actors have enhanced their careers with portrayals of Williams' characters. High honors, international fame, and financial independence are things that seldom come in this age to a playwright who is only forty-two years old. Such external signs of success indicate that Williams is a playwright of noteworthy achievement whose position is assured for the present. His continued importance depends upon the degree of permanence and universal value that exist in his plays.

Williams is a dramatist of greatness in many respects. He has his special vision of the world. He is gifted with the ability to hold an audience in suspense as he brings a crisis to a climax in a convincing pattern of

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episodes. He has a feeling for language as a tool for communicating states of being as well as denoting prose meanings. His fundamental skill, however, lies in his brilliant consideration of the tragedy of man which is the underlying power in all his plots and characterizations. Upon this skill of depicting man's tragic situation rests Williams' promise of lasting importance.

William's basic theme derives from a deep conflict within himself in relation to society. The fact that his plays evolve from such a personal source is one of the strengths and main values of his work. He feels the weight of our environment on people of a sensibility too fragile to sustain the burden. In the same manner, he understands the person who mistakenly places too much emphasis upon physical superiority as the means to sustain himself in the world. In fact, there are four principal facets to Williams' sympathy for man, each facet directed toward a type of character who has failed in some way. These four character types are the gentle soul, bruised or broken by the cruelty of living because his illusions do not work (Laura in The Glass Menagerie, Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, and Brick in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof); the healthy,  

exuberant yes sayer to the universe (Stella in Streetcar and Rosa in The Rose Tattoo); the romanticist whose system of illusions keeps him afloat (Mitch in Streetcar, Amanda in Menagerie); and, finally, the primitive, sensual, sometimes brutal individual (Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire), sometimes pathetic (Serafina in The Rose Tattoo).

A brief examination of Williams' background shows some of the reasons that this one man came to have such insight into the problems of so many varied personalities. He was born in 1914, in Columbus, Mississippi, which he still calls home, although at the age of seven he moved with his family to St. Louis. Three people were great influences upon Williams during his childhood: his grandfather, an Episcopal minister, who represented to Williams the Southern aristocracy which was rapidly being displaced by a new society with totally different values; his sister Rose, who personified to him everything in life that was beautiful and desirable; his mother, who coddled him, for as a child he was not robust. As a matter of fact, he was crippled by diphtheria for a year, his last year in Mississippi, and he had not yet recovered from

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4 Ibid., p. 65.
that illness when an eye trouble developed, which eventually resulted in a cataract requiring three operations to remove. During his enforced retirement in Columbus, he started beguiling his hours with fancies of his own concoction, lazily generated behind closed eyelids. The people he knew as a child now emerge at bidding from his childhood and early adolescence as characters in his plays, not realistically, but like the characters who people his dreams. They are transmitted and altered by the shading of memory and the gradual accumulation of experience and understanding.

During the First World War, Williams' father was transferred to St. Louis. The change was enormous and had an overpowering effect on both the Williams children. The standing which their social antecedents and their grandfather's position had given them in the Delta did not impress St. Louis. New companions and surroundings, far less desirable than those they had left behind, rebuffed the seven-year-old boy and his sister. Both of them renounced their environment in large measure and even more than before, led their lives mainly in each other's company. The room occupied by Williams' sister looked out on a narrow sunless areaway so dreary in

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5 Ibid., p. 65.  
6 Ibid., p. 65.
aspect that she kept her curtains constantly drawn and immersed herself in twilight gloom. Williams named the area "Death Valley," for night after night stray cats, pursued by stray dogs, were cornered there and torn to pieces hideously; morning after morning new corpses bled beneath the window. To alleviate the melancholy of their surroundings, together they painted the furniture of Rose's room white and arrayed on shelves around the walls a collection of miniature animals which suffused the room with light and delicate enchantment. As Williams himself has said,

These little glass animals came to represent in my memory all the softest emotions that belong to recollections of things past. They stood for the small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive.

After completing high school, Williams went to work in the St. Louis shoe factory where his father was employed. From the outset he loathed the job and was soon fired for spending too much time in the men's lavatory writing poems and too little time packing shoes into boxes. His mother then decided that her son was to have

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9 Tennessee Williams and others, *Five Young American Poets*, III (New York, 1944), 122.
a college education, regardless of what hardship it might entail for the rest of the family, so Williams entered Washington University in St. Louis, where he was a fairly successful student.

His first attempt at writing a play was a one-act drama entered in Webster Grove's little theatre contest. His entry won first prize, an engraved silver dish. Next spring he entered another one-act play in Washington University's yearly English XVI play contest. This entry won no recognition; Williams was convinced that jealousy and malice had done him out of a prize.

Williams' college career was followed by a nomadic period during which he wandered throughout the United States, stopping for brief periods in New Orleans, where he spent much of his time in the company of fellow would-be artists. At one time he submitted a manuscript of his poetry to a publisher who rejected it.

It was not until the early years of World War II, after Williams had been rejected by the army for physical reasons, that his career took an upward turn. His

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11 Ibid., p. 66.
12 Williams, Five Young American Poets, p. 125.
first full length play, *Battle of the Angels*, was produced under the auspices of the Theatre Guild when he got the backing of Audrey Wood, John Gassner, and Theresa Helburn. It opened in Boston and was one of the most resounding flops of all time. What Williams had written as a moral and tragic romance between a roving poet and a woman married to a hopeless invalid became in Boston's eyes the rather boastful campaigning of a vagrant hillbilly Lothario.  

Fortunately for Williams and for the theatre, the Guild did not lose faith in him, and Audrey Wood used her influence to get him a contract in Hollywood as a script writer. His work there did not impress his studio too well. He did not turn out a single script; instead, he spent most of his time writing a play which was eventually entitled *The Glass Menagerie*.  

In 1942 Williams returned to New York where he received the help of still another theatre dignitary, Margo Jones, who agreed to produce *The Glass Menagerie*. The play opened in Chicago at the end of 1943 to excellent notices. However, the customers stayed away for the first three weeks; then, suddenly, it became the thing

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to see. It played thirteen weeks and could have stayed many more, but the producers wanted to get it onto a New York stage in time for consideration by both the Circle and Pulitzer awards committees. They just made the deadline by opening on March 31. 15 The Pulitzer Prize, incidentally, went to Harvey. The Glass Menagerie ran 561 performances, and one of its most notable features was the acting of Laurette Taylor, a truly great American actress whose career had many ups and downs. Her role in Menagerie put her back on top and ended her career on a high note; she died in December, 1946. 16

Williams was hailed as a new light on the dramatic horizon, but his fame was not firmly established until 1948, when A Streetcar Named Desire won the Circle and Pulitzer awards by overwhelming majorities over the plays of that year. 17 Streetcar cemented Williams' position as a leading dramatist, though he had followed The Glass Menagerie with a collaboration entitled You Touched Me which did nothing for him. A Streetcar Named Desire 18 achieved 855 performances and was made into a highly successful motion picture.

15 Gaver, Critics' Choice, p. 239.
16 Ibid., p. 239. 17 Ibid., p. 365.
18 Ibid., p. 365.
Later in 1948 *Summer and Smoke* appeared on Broadway, and although it was not the critical or financial success that *The Glass Menagerie* or *A Streetcar Named Desire* had been, it could not be considered a failure since it contains one of Williams's outstanding characters, Alma Winemiller, and clearly defines Williams' opinions about man's need for fulfillment.

There was no Pulitzer Prize in the season of 1950-51, and Williams' first effort in the field of comedy, *The Rose Tattoo*, was third in balloting for the Critics' Circle award. In 1949 Williams had spent several months in Italy, and, stimulated by his contact with the Italian people, he attempted in *The Rose Tattoo* to solve a certain aspect of man's inner problem by writing about a group of characters who are less burdened with subjective ambivalence and the tormented Puritanism of his purely American characters. In *The Rose Tattoo*, he freed himself of some of the tensions he suffered at home by writing objectively, so to speak, of strangers.

Finally, in 1955, with the great success of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams reached that peak of his career where he stands today. Some rather unpleasant excitement

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21 Clurman, "Tennessee Williams' Rose," p. 22.
connected with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* did not hurt the play at the box-office, for word got around quickly after opening night that it was a "dirty play." Certainly there is smutty language in the play and a "smoking-car" story in the third act that seems unnecessarily obscene, but sensationalism alone would never account for the overwhelming public acclaim granted to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. In this play Williams tackles a problem that is universal and one that confronts all mankind—the tragic problem of falsity and mendacity in the relationships of man with himself and with his fellow man.

Today Tennessee Williams is famous, eminently successful, and respected among playwrights. Why he deserves such an enviable position and how his major plays have earned this position for him are worthy of consideration. His fundamental theme, his development of character, and his method of presentation all are important factors in his eminence, but most important is his interpretation of man's tragedy as an individual and as a member of society. Williams' importance in the dramatic literature of today can be inferred from his successes, and his significance as a playwright has been established. Such importance and significance deserve consideration, as his plays will

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undoubtedly have great influence upon the drama of the future. It is the purpose of this paper to examine the major plays of Tennessee Williams in an effort to formulate the key concepts which appear in the work of a modern successful dramatist who is sensitive to the tragedy of man and to discover Williams' beliefs in regard to man, his need, and the tragedy that results if he does not find the fulfillment of his nature.
CHAPTER II

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

The most delicate and romantic of Tennessee Williams' plays is the first that brought him fame and success, The Glass Menagerie. Everything about Menagerie is shadowy and fragile—lighting, music, setting, even the characters.

Williams once termed The Glass Menagerie a "memory play," and he is frank to admit that the character of Amanda Wingfield derives from his mother. By the same token, Laura Wingfield is, with modifications, his sister. And Tom Wingfield, the unhappy young man who wanted beauty in his life but had to spend his early years working in a warehouse, is drawn from Tennessee Williams himself.

In The Glass Menagerie there are no completely physical characters. Amanda, Laura, and Tom are sensitive, fragile people for whom the realistic world holds little except fright, bewilderment, and disappointment. The only other character in the play is Jim O'Connor, the Gentleman Caller, "a nice, ordinary young man" described by Tom as

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"the most realistic character in the play, being an emis-
sary from a world of reality that we were somehow set
apart from."

Williams does not imply, however, that the person whose
emphasis is upon the physical aspects of love will find ful-
fillment more readily than the one who searches diligently
only for spiritual love. Williams, who pleads for the
world's dispossessed, begs for understanding for those who
doggedly search for fulfillment through physical relation-
ships as well as for those who mistakenly yearn only for
spiritual fulfillment. He insists, by making the strong,
healthy people like Jim in The Glass Menagerie, John in
Summer and Smoke, and Stanley in A Streetcar Named Desire
more acceptable in the eyes of society than the physically
delicate Laura, Alma, or Blanche, that our utilitarian
system which applauds the physically strong and virile and
ridicules the physically weak and sensitive has brought
into being the cult of worshippers of physical superiority.
In a world where man finds so little tenderness and heart,
it is not surprising that he often turns for fortitude and
fulfillment to the temporary satisfaction that he finds in
purely physical love. But such a person will forever de-
prive himself of ideal love which is spiritual as well as

\[3\] Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. 5.
physical in nature. Although this purely physical lover is missing from *The Glass Menagerie*, he is closely examined in the later plays.

For *The Glass Menagerie* is concerned not with those who over-emphasize the physical aspects of man's nature, but with the gentle and sensitive people to whom physical reality seems harsh and terrifying. Laura, Tom, and Amanda are desperately in search of the thing that will bring beauty into their drab, pointless, and unreal lives. Each of them supplies some poor substitute for the beauty that is missing from his life: for Laura the substitute is her glass menagerie, for Tom it is the movies, for Amanda it is the memory of a glorified past. Their need is for both the love that would supply them with understanding which their sensitive natures require and the love which would revitalize their lives so that the physical aspects of reality would no longer frighten them. Such ideal love would provide beauty in their lives, the beauty of understanding, tenderness, and fortitude. For this ideal love—their only hope for fulfillment—the Wingfields' substitutes are pitiful indeed and fall far short of bringing them any real happiness or beauty.

The most forceful character and the character who commands the most attention in *The Glass Menagerie* is Amanda, the mother who tells endless stories about her
youth when supposedly she was the toast of all Dixie. In his description of Amanda, Williams says that "having failed to establish contact with reality, she continues to live vitally in her illusions." The dowdy Amanda sustains herself by her unreliable prattle of an aristocratic past when endless numbers of dashing gentlemen callers offered to lay the world at her feet. She pretends to a gentility that is not in keeping with her real history and talks incessantly in lofty language about love and her own glorious spiritual love experiences; actually, love has meant only frustration and disillusionment for her. Her husband had apparently been an average fellow who found Amanda and her myths intolerable as well as incomprehensible, for he had finally deserted her and their two children and gone in quest of a more down-to-earth existence. As Tom puts it: "He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances." But Amanda was undaunted. She only added her departed husband to her list of glorified lovers and pictured him in her stories as a dashing World War hero who had simply swept her off her feet and carried her away beneath the very noses of wealthier and more dependable courters.

Amanda is not really a tragic character except in the sense that all people who substitute fantasy for

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reality are tragic. Amanda is contented because she believes the stories that she tells; she has convinced herself that she once had the admirers and the purely spiritual relationship that she believes is necessary for life's fulfillment. As Williams describes her,

There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person. 6

Amanda's son, Tom Wingfield, is a character of special interest because he is unique among the male characters of Williams' plays. With the possible exception of Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Tom is the only male character in Williams' plays who falls into the category of the spiritually dispossessed. Most of the men in the plays are physically strong and spiritually weak. Tom, however, is a young man with great spiritual strength who finds the physical reality of the world with its harshness and tedious routine distasteful. He is a poet with a job that he detests in a warehouse. He cannot escape a sense of responsibility to provide for his mother and sister, but he resents the responsibility and feels that it deprives him of the chance to seek the "adventure," as he describes it, which is missing from his life. He spends

much of his free time at the movies, the only place, he says, in which Americans can find adventure. But Tom will seek in vain to fill the void that exists in his life as long as he insists that the soul and reality be separate. To Tom, physical reality has come to be the unpleasant facets of existence—responsibility, boredom, and association with people who are unintelligent as well as uninteresting. Tom is the sort of person who believes that somewhere else, with different people, under different conditions, things will be better. He is determined to escape from what he believes to be a "trap"; his nature is not without remorse, but to escape from the trap he has to act without pity. His method of escape is to run away from everything that symbolizes to him discontent and hopelessness—the warehouse that bores him, his mother's long and numerous discourses that infuriate him, and his sister's glass menagerie that saddens him.

In the end, however, even though Tom has made the escape that he deemed necessary in order to find fulfillment, he is still searching desperately for peace. He is haunted by the memory of his sister and her plight, and the "adventure" that he has sought diligently eludes him still. For Tom only love can bring fulfillment; if he finds love that offers not only the tenderness and understanding that his gentle nature requires but also an acquaintance with the physical joys of reality, he will find contentment.
If he never knows such love, his fruitless search will go on forever. The forecast at the end of the play is not too bright for Tom. He is plagued by memories and tormented by his conscience: "I didn't go to the moon, I went much further— for time is the longest distance between two places." He is constantly aware of his need, of the great void in his life, and he runs headlong here and there, never quite sure of the purpose of his search but driven to seek just the same: "I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something." Tom has much to offer the world, but before he can give the world his poetry, he must find his own nature's fulfillment; he must find ideal love.

The third member of this dispossessed family is the gentle Laura, as fragile as the tiny animals of her glass menagerie. Of the three Wingfields, Laura is the most tragic because the one opportunity for her to find love results in failure. She is the one member of the family for whom there is a real and tangible chance for fulfillment. Unlike Amanda, who has already let life pass her by, Laura still thinks of love as something that exists in real life, not just in fantasy. Unlike Tom, who is groping about in search of something vague and figurative,

7 Ibid., p. 123.  
8 Ibid.
Laura knows in her heart the one person who could bring ideal love and fulfillment to her. That she actually has happiness within reach and then fails to hold on to it is more tragic than Amanda's living in a world of fantasy or Tom's searching endlessly for his "answer." Amanda's dreams and Tom's search are in a way somewhat fortifying; Laura is left hopelessly adrift without even a dream. As Williams describes Laura, "a childhood illness has left her crippled, one leg slightly shorter than the other, and held in a brace. Stemming from this, Laura's separation increases till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf." 

Even the music of the play portrays Laura's desperate situation; the single recurring tune is one of nostalgia and emotion, and it comes out most clearly, according to the stage directions, "when the play focuses upon Laura and the lovely fragility of glass which is her image. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow." In the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. This is also true of the supper scene, when her silent figure on the sofa should remain the visual center.

although the lines are all spoken by Amanda, Tom, and Jim, the Gentleman Caller. Of course, the purpose here achieved is an illustration of the bitter effects of harshness, cruelty, and domestic crisis upon the tender and sensitive nature of the world's Lauras.

Laura desperately needs love, and her tragedy is that the person she needs is the person who is least attracted to her. In high school she had brief encounters with Jim O'Connor, a boy who excelled in sports and the social graces. Jim had noticed Laura, too, and had been kind to her. But if Laura's feeling for Jim was closely akin to love, his feeling for her was little more than pity.

Through the years Laura has treasured the memory of Jim and his kindness; this memory is the one fulfilling possession that she owns. Her crippled leg, her disastrous effort to attend business school, her mother's attempts to mold Laura into a pitiful replica of her fictional self are all tragedies in Laura's life. Even so, her memory of Jim is one thing that she can turn to for a slight but necessary compensation. It would have been far more merciful if Jim had never come back into Laura's life. As long as he is a precious memory, she has a semblance of love; it is only spiritual love, but it is directed toward a boy who represents the best of physical reality to her. With his visit and the accompanying revelation that there is no
hope for him to share her love, Laura's tragedy is complete. All that she has left is her glass menagerie, a cold substitute for the warmth of a memory that has sustained her for so many years.

As for the Gentleman Caller himself, he is The Glass Menagerie's representative of the character who appears in all of Williams' plays, the exceptionally virile man. When in his heartiness he claps his hands on the shoulders of his friends, "they burn through the cloth of your shirt like plates taken out of an oven." When Tom speaks of Jim he says, "Since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long delayed but always expected something that we live for." This, then, is the key to Laura's hope and frustration. As long as Jim is only a memory, Laura can believe in her heart that some day he might come back into her life and with him would come the understanding and beauty that she longs for. If he had been "delayed" forever, it would have been better for Laura. His return and his subsequent rejection of her love are the disasters that insure frustration and tragedy for Laura.


12 Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. 5.
The simple, physically strong, virile people like Jim are the only ones whom Williams sees as living in the world with any measure of happiness. Jim is the only character in the play who has found love. His love is commonplace, matter-of-fact, and convenient, but he seems content, and he has none of the miseries and problems that beset Amanda, Laura, and Tom. Describing his love, unconscious of the effect that his words have upon Laura, Jim states,

I go out all the time with a girl named Betty. She's a home-girl like you, and Catholic, and Irish, and in a great many ways we--get along fine.
I met her last summer on a moonlight boat trip up the river to Alton, on the "Majestic."
Well--right away from the start it was--love!
Being in love has made a new man of me! 13

That Jim's love has much spiritual quality is rather doubtful, but it will provide the type of relationship that his rather prosaic life requires. The other characters of The Glass Menagerie do not find love, but ideal love is the only thing that will ever overreach the variance between illusion and reality for them. Because of their sensitive natures, they are appalled by harsh physical reality and thus are repelled from the relationship that would mean fulfillment for them. Man cannot deny the physical half of his being and ever know happiness. If Tom insists, as

13 Ibid., p. 114.
Amanda has done before him, that love be purely spiritual, he will destroy every possibility of achieving the ideal love that is the only fulfillment of man's nature.

All hope is not gone for Tom, however, for at the end of the play he is still searching, still pursuing the one "adventure" that will bring satiety to his troubled being. If he recognizes in time his physical need as well as his spiritual need, his search may result in his finding ideal love. If, however, he continues to insist upon a sharp distinction between spiritual and physical experiences, his adventures will always fall far short of his expectations and his life will be forever tragic.

As for Laura, she seems destined to live forever in her glass menagerie, seeing love as the false picture drawn for her by Amanda and fearing reality because of her failure to recognize the dual nature of her need for love. Her self-frustrating characteristics will never permit her to break away from the unhealthy atmosphere of her glass menagerie and her mother's influence. She is so painfully self-conscious about her physical defect that she finds it impossible to believe that she could be attractive to anyone. Her state of mind is aggravated by Amanda's constant tales of her own love conquests and insistence that Laura is going to have to make conquests, also, if she is to capture the husband that she needs to take care of her. Laura is so shy that she cannot bear to be in the company
of strangers and becomes physically ill when she must be with people outside her own family. Jim was her only chance for love; with the loss of that chance, Laura's hope for fulfillment through ideal love becomes tragically impossible.

The tragedy of the Wingfields is the tragedy of all sensitive people who learn too late that life cannot be and should not be all tenderness and poetry. Physical reality is often cruel, but only those who are equipped to cope with that reality will ever achieve the balance between body and soul that is required for a tolerable existence. Brought up in Amanda's unreal world, Tom and Laura find themselves bewildered and frightened by physical emotion that is strange and appalling to them instead of exciting and desirable as it should be.
CHAPTER III

SUMMER AND SMOKE

There is not a more concrete example of Tennessee Williams' insistence upon the necessity of an ideal love, one which gratifies desire and inspires spirit, than the play Summer and Smoke. To illustrate the struggle between the body and the soul, Williams employs a statue of a praying angel (lighted from time to time in the public square, center stage) to indicate eternity or the soul, and a huge anatomical chart (hung in the doctor's office and also lighted from time to time) to indicate the body or passions.

The principal character of Summer and Smoke is a young wraith of a woman named Alma Winemiller who has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Although she is only in her middle twenties, there is something prematurely spinsterish about her; her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainments, to the position of hostess in her father's rectory. About Alma there is an excessive propriety and self-consciousness that is apparent in her nervous laughter. Ever since childhood

1 Tennessee Williams, Summer and Smoke (New York, 1948), p. 11.
Alma has been attracted to the boy next door, young and handsome John Buchanan, the doctor's son. But if Alma is self-conscious and something of a prude, John is an extrovert who knows his own physical appeal and who believes that biological attraction is the only basis for a relationship between man and woman.

*Summer and Smoke* has very little plot. Actually, the chief significance of the incidents in the play is the dramatist's keen, devoted analysis of the two forces, anarchy and order, which torture each of the lovers, or mankind generally, in some form or another. Men and women everywhere are numbed and distraught by unresolved social complications and emotional problems that go deeper than most of our adjustments can delve. In *Summer and Smoke*, Williams attempts to show all the seemingly forgotten, hidden, unknown factors brought to bear on the individual. The presentation and analysis in *Summer and Smoke* are lucid, and the effect is deeply moving, even ennobling. 2

In the play John and Alma come face to face only three or four times, the result being that each time what they call a "deep silence" falls between them. John wonders "if it would be worth trying, you and me" and so he attends an "intellectual meeting" at Alma's house. There are other

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people there, all of whom are would-be poets, novelists, or painters, and their nonsensical prattle makes it impossible for John and Alma to be alone together. John beats a hasty retreat, finds his mistress, Rosa Gonzales, and spends the night in the only way that he considers worthwhile. After this occasion he has an even lower opinion of Alma's insistence that there is something in man that supersedes his physical body—something beautiful, a soul, a spirit.

A few nights after the "intellectual meeting" John determines to make Alma see things his way, and he takes her to the Moon Lake Casino, a combination saloon, brothel, and cock-fighting pit. Alma refuses to go inside the Casino, giving as her reason the fact that she is a minister's daughter and even more that he is a doctor and should lead an exemplary life. They remain on the patio and finally get around to discussing their conflicting opinions about love. John tells Alma that she is a fool for suppressing the excitement that he has seen within her, and as an experiment he kisses her. She is visibly shaken but tells him that she must remember that she is a lady, the type of person that he can respect, the sort of woman that he would want as the "mother of his precious children." She tries to explain to John that for her, love must be a relationship into which she can bring her heart and soul,
but John derisively denies that such a thing as the soul exists. He then cynically and very plainly tells her that "intimate relations" are the only important thing between a man and woman, and he invites her to the rooms above the Casino in order that they may prove his point. The appalled Alma refuses him and goes home alone.

In their final meeting their situations are completely reversed. In the months after the Casino episode, Alma has become almost physically ill from her unfulfilled desire. She approaches John and tells him that she wants his love and is willing to give herself on his terms. But John has changed too. Since their last meeting his father has been killed, and John has taken his father's place in fighting a terrible fever epidemic. He tells Alma that he has been "redeeming himself with good works." When she offers herself to him, he refuses her and attempts to explain:

I've come around to your way of thinking, that something else is in us, an immaterial something—as thin as smoke—which all of those ugly machines combine to produce and that's their whole reason for being. It can't be seen so it can't be shown on the chart. But it's there, just the same, and knowing it's there—why, then the whole thing—this—this unfathomable experience of ours—takes on a new value, like some—some wildly romantic work in a laboratory! Don't you see? 3

With this final defeat, Alma is hopelessly destroyed. She had insisted upon a purely spiritual relationship and

3 Williams, Summer and Smoke, p. 118.
John had insisted upon a purely physical one. During that time each of them was denying one aspect of his nature. When, as Alma described it, "the tables turned with a vengeance," she is left with her terrible desire and without hope for the love that could have been her only fulfillment. In her frustration she turns to promiscuity and begins the career that will lead her eventually, as Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, to the madhouse.

On the other hand, John is able to find in his work of healing and research the spirituality that he needs. His planned marriage to a woman much simpler than Alma will supply the physical love that his nature requires. Thus John will find a sort of substitute fulfillment, not the complete and ideal love that Alma and only Alma could have given him, but at least a rather durable synthetic contentment that will enable him to live his life without feeling that he has been too badly cheated.

But Alma's tragedy is complete, for ideal love has eluded her, and her efforts to find it in the least likely places will never bring fulfillment. With John, Alma could have had happiness, but she refused to compromise her standards with his demands, just as he refused to recognize the necessity of her faith in the spiritual quality of love. In the end Alma loses John, but, far worse, she loses her perspective. Concluding that she did not find love with John because of her beliefs, she violates those beliefs and
thus accomplishes nothing except a change to another extreme. She then sets out to find love with men who are not her intellectual or spiritual equals—men who are worse than John at his worst in stressing the physical aspect of love. Alma finds herself in the ironic position of seeking a distorted version of what John had once proposed and what she had summarily rejected. Alma's mistakes show that recognizing the need for love is not enough. She mistook conformity and mores for ideals, so that when she decided to violate convention, she also violated the principles by which she had lived.

Alma is the unhappiest of women, passionate by nature but loyal in her conscious mind to the ideals of an anemic gentility. The moral complexity of the play arises from the fact that the author's sympathy lies not with the "vital" character, John, who triumphs, but with the ineffectual idealist, Alma, who is destroyed. Summer and Smoke is not a mere object lesson on the danger of "suppression"; the tragedy lies, not in the fact that Alma resists, but in the fact that she has so little to resist with. "Gentility" is the only form of idealism or spirituality accessible to Alma—perhaps, Williams seems to be saying, to anyone. Our culture is ugly because we have no living equivalent for what is by now a mere quaint anachronism. He is not so much ridiculing his Southern "ladies" as he is
reproaching the rest of the world for having found no equivalent of what their ladyhood once represented.
CHAPTER IV

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

The mood of A Streetcar Named Desire is the same as that of The Glass Menagerie—only more so. Once again Williams is a dramatist of despair, though this time frustration has been replaced by disintegration. Once again the world into which he leads the reader is full of shadows. It is a place of gauzes and transparencies in which the reality is suggested rather than reproduced. Although set in New Orleans' French Quarter instead of one of St. Louis's poorer districts, as The Glass Menagerie was set, the scene continues to be a slum. Its physical grubbiness remains a match for the emotional dilapidation of some of the characters it houses. The characters in Streetcar are the victims of the same negation as the characters in Menagerie and sustain themselves by similar illusions. If they lie to others, their major lie is to themselves.

In this way only can they hope to make their intolerable lives tolerable. Such beauty as they know exists in their dreams, for the surroundings in which they find themselves are once again as sordid as their own living.
Blanche du Bois recognizes her desperate need for love, but, to her, love is always either desire or poetry. It is inconceivable to her that she can find both at once. The contrast between the two in her mind is shown when she says to Mitch, the man she hopes to marry:

I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection—here and there, in the most unlikely places—even at last, in a seventeen-year old boy. . . You said you needed somebody. Well, I needed somebody, too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle, a cleft in the rock of the world—that I could hide in! But I guess I was asking, hoping—too much! 1

1. More than in any other of Williams' characters, the weaknesses within Blanche herself are minutely examined to show why she is unable to find the "cleft in the rock" which she easily recognizes to be her need. Fulfillment, love, for her is impossible because her faults are in her nature itself; failure in her quest for happiness is certain. In her effort to cling to the gentility that to her is the basis of idealism, Blanche desperately turns to a series of lies to sustain herself; in fact, Blanche's whole life is one of deception. Although she seeks a love which will be a spiritual bond between herself and a lover, she cannot control her physical desire so that, as her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski, says, "They got wised up after

two or three dates with her and then they quit, and she
goes on to another, same old act, same old hooey!"  
Blanche cannot bear to admit even to herself that her idealism is
false and that it had long ago been destroyed by her own
degenerate living. Instead she continues the pretense
of being poor but delicate and aristocratic. She tells
Mitch, "I don't want you to think that I am severe and
old maid school-teacherish or anything like that. It's
just--well--I guess it is just that I have--old-fashioned
ideals!"

But in sharp contrast to her insistence upon a relation-
ship of the spirit, Blanche is terrified lest she lose
her physical appeal. She spends hours soaking in a hot
tub and then hours more dressing and applying her make-up.
She wears clothing designed for someone much younger than
she, and she cannot bear a bright light upon her because
it might reveal the ravages of time and the bitterness of
the past. Blanche is pitifully coquettish and even carries
on a rather disgusting flirtation with Stanley although she
fears and dislikes him. A young college student comes to
the apartment to collect for the newspaper and Blanche,
full of whiskey and passion, attempts to seduce him but
finally remembers "...I've got to be good--and keep my
hands off children."

\footnote{Ibid., p. 117.} \footnote{Ibid., p. 106.}
In Blanche's past may be found some of the causes for her inability to reconcile herself to the notion that spiritual love and physical love can exist within the same relationship. Her family and the family plantation, Belle Reve, had symbolized to Blanche everything that was genteel, graceful, and poetic. But then the members of the family began to die, and Blanche alone watched them pass away as they begged her to help them hold on to life. And, as Blanche says, "death is expensive," and Belle Reve itself was finally lost. Earlier in her life, Blanche had been married to a young poet whom she worshipped. In Blanche's idealized memory of her marriage, the spiritual bond between them was a thing of beauty, but their physical relationship was a failure. When Blanche discovered that the boy was homosexual, she was disillusioned and he took his own life. So to Blanche spiritual love is synonymous with death. Desire, physical emotion, is the opposite of death, so she begins to take physical love wherever she can find it, first with the men of the town, then, until her house is placed "off limits," with soldiers from a nearby military post, and finally with a high school student in her English class.

Although these past tragedies may have damaged her reason, Williams presents them as being by no means the only tragedies of Blanche du Bois's life. Her abiding
tragedy springs from her own nature: from her uncontrol-
liable duplicity, from her pathetic pretensions to gen-
tility, even when she is known as a prostitute in the
little town in which she was brought up, from her love of
the refined when her life is filled with coarseness, from
the fastidiousness of her tastes and the wantonness of her
desires, from her incapacity to live up to her dreams. She
has substituted high-flown phrases for morality and honesty
and has retreated so far into fantasy that she has no un-
derstanding of the real world.

In Mitch, Blanche believed that she might find pro-
tection from reality and the peace after torment that she
needed to make her happy. It is doubtful, however, even if
Mitch had never learned of her past and had married her,
that he could have given her happiness. Simple, earthy
Mitch would never have understood the complicated Blanche,
and although he would have been tender and kind, he lacked
the intellect and poetic nature to give her the spiritual
love she would have expected, and their physical relation-
ship could not have satisfied Blanche for long. She has
retreated too far into her world of illusion for a normal,
honest fellow like Mitch to rescue her. For Blanche ideal
love that would bring fulfillment has long since ceased
to be a possibility because her efforts to soften reality
have led her too far into duplicity and degeneracy.
Only disillusion, violence, and madness are left for Blanche.
Although the other characters of *Streetcar* are secondary to Blanche in importance, they should be mentioned in so far as they show the need for ideal love in the fulfillment of man's nature. Stanley Kowalski is the most physical of all the characters created by Tennessee Williams. Although Jim of *The Glass Menagerie* and John of *Summer and Smoke* are examples of the exceptionally virile men, Stanley is the epitome of that character type. He is coarse, but his physical beauty and power are emphasized and are irresistible to Stella, Blanche's sister, in spite of her background of gentility. Stanley is savage in his actions, and his sensuality and physical power are like a heavy presence in *Streetcar*. He is described in an author's note:

> Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since early manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. . . . He sizes women at a glance with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. 4

To Stanley love is a physical relationship, pure and simple; he seems to be sincerely in love with Stella, as much as he is capable of loving anyone, but he has absolutely no qualms about being unfaithful to her. His rape of Blanche while Stella is giving birth to a child

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in the hospital is partly to prove to Blanche that her "royal airs" have been wasted upon him but more to prove to himself that his ability to make physical conquests is limitless. The incident shows also that Blanche does not repel men physically in spite of their professed disgust at learning about her past.

But even for Stanley physical love is just a tiny bit short of being complete. He resents Stella's and Blanche's reminders that their background is different from his. In spite of himself he feels inferior to Blanche when she talks in poetic language that is incomprehensible to him. He realizes that even though Blanche has been a prostitute, even though she is having to live off his charity, even though she is flighty and a little ridiculous, she has a quality that is missing from his own make-up. Stanley is without the potential for spiritual love; his physical capacities are undeniable, but whatever love he knows will never be quite fulfilling. Although he gratifies the physical urge that is almost constantly within him, the gratification is and must always be only temporary. He must always be looking for new worlds to conquer. He is indeed fortunate to have a wife like Stella who could give him ideal love, but Stanley does not want to be shown that a relationship can have permanence, quality, and spiritual beauty. He wants only the fleeting pleasure of physical
satisfaction. He has that and nothing more. His overwhelming pride is all the more pathetic because its foundation is so shaky. His appeal is entirely physical and will last only until his rich feathers fade.

In Stella Kowalski one finds the most well-adjusted character in the play. It is difficult to understand Stella's complete devotion to Stanley, but there can be no doubt that she is very much in love with her husband. One of the principal reasons that Stella has been able to leave the past behind with far more success than Blanche is that she was not at home when all of the family died one by one. She had lived in the city and had worked there, brushing shoulders with reality so that she was able to see the life she had known at Belle Reve as one of illusion and one which simply could not exist in the real world of the present. She had taken Stanley at face value and had made no attempt to change him into a replica of what her sister Blanche would have expected in a husband. Such an attempt would have been useless; there was no changing Stanley. And Stanley's love fulfills one aspect of Stella's nature; she seems to expect little more. Perhaps her child will provide the spiritual fulfillment that her nature requires. In any case Stella seems happy enough; certainly her needs are much simpler than Blanche's and reality does not hold the terrors for Stella that it holds for her sister.
A Streetcar Named Desire is a despairing, lovely, and poetic play in which the author says that beauty is shipwrecked on the rock of the world's vulgarity, that the most sensitive seekers after beauty and love are earliest and most bitterly broken and perverted. Williams opposes the idea given in such plays as Harvey and The Iceman Cometh, which say that illusion provides the necessary armor by which man can survive. A Streetcar Named Desire shows that illusion is an armor, but one which is too easily pierced in the most mortal spots. Love, the ideal love for which man ever yearns and searches, is the one impenetrable armor. Blanche du Bois fails in her search for love because of her own weaknesses and because of the cruelty of a society in which she cannot live. Blanche has not been equipped to exist in a world in which the physical aspects of love are at a premium, and idealism and spirituality are almost non-existent. It is pitifully true that Blanche's idealism is nothing but a false gentility, but at one time in her life, Blanche believed that beauty does exist in the world and that tenderness and spirituality are a part of love. Blanche has become coarse. She now believes that there is no ideal love which can encompass both the soul and the body; she can never know fulfillment.

But for Blanche the world must accept part of the blame. It is indeed difficult in a modern physical world,
where reality is brutal and unyielding, for sensitive, delicate people to hold onto their ideals, and to believe that somehow, somewhere, there is ideal love which offers the beautiful fulfillment of man's nature.
CHAPTER V

THE ROSE TATTOO

After the production of Summer and Smoke, a criticism of Tennessee Williams became rather common among the reviewers and writers who chose to speculate upon Williams' importance as a dramatist. It was said of him that he was a "Johnny-one-note," that he had one theme and one character about which to write and that he had exhausted his subject. No one doubted the immense importance of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, but in Summer and Smoke, most critics found a somewhat inferior repetition of the characters and story of the first two plays.

In 1951, after a period of three years in which no Williams' offering appeared on the stage, The Rose Tattoo was presented on Broadway, and this new play seemed to be an indication that perhaps Williams agreed with his critics. Although he used the same general locale for The Rose Tattoo that he had used in the other plays, the differences between

this play and its predecessors were notable. It was a comedy—in fact, a folk comedy; its heroine was no longer the aristocratic, sensitive Southern lady; the accent of the play was not upon the spiritual and dispossessed but upon the sensual and earthy individual. In *The Rose Tattoo* Williams abandoned the doomed, exhausted, and melancholy survivors of the Southern aristocracy to write about a lively colony of Sicilians residing on the Gulf Coast somewhere between New Orleans and Mobile. He also gave up his old preoccupation with remorseless decay for a note of hope. The theme that love is the answer to man's need and the only fulfillment of his nature was the one important feature of the earlier plays that Williams carried over in *The Rose Tattoo*.

The central character of *The Rose Tattoo* is a woman who is passionate and pure, spiritually powerful through her animal innocence, devout in her religion because it is psychologically associated with her sense of glory in being, superstitious because of her profound connection with the most intimate mysteries of life, violent through goodness, and fierce with a chastity that is often the concomitant of great sexual force. This woman—Serafina Delle Rose—is a rich and lyric portrait of an Italian peasant, but she

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2 Clurman, "Tennessee Williams' Rose," p. 22.
is also an embodiment of a credo, the affirmation of sex as the root feeling of a complete existence.

Serafina is an uneducated widow of peasant origin, a lusty, vain and thoroughly female primitive, who strives, though unkempt and in deshabille, for three years to preserve the glory of the love-life memory with which her husband had blessed her. Her fond delusion is that only she had shared his love. The women of the neighborhood wink, smirk, and whisper that this is all nonsense, but they dare not intrude on the obsession which isolates Serafina in her self-imposed retirement. Worshipfully she enshrines the urn containing her husband's ashes beside her beloved Madonna. Likewise she cherishes the memory of the rose tattooed on her husband's chest, and a matching rose, a vision, which appeared on her breast the night she conceived the child she loses at the time of her husband's death.

Because the love of Serafina and her husband Rosario was physically complete, Serafina will not recognize the possibility that her husband might have turned to another woman in search of something lacking in their relationship. She boasts of Rosario: "My husband was a Sicilian. We had love together every night of the week, we never skipped one."\(^3\) She sublimates her hard life into the legend of her

husband's absolutely faithful devotion, and upon learning that Rosario had kept a mistress before his death, Serafina is driven near insanity. Here Tennessee Williams is bringing the same devotion and understanding to his principal character that he brought to the psychopathic women of his earlier plays; it is a redeeming factor, for it made these social misfits sympathetic and their struggle for adjustment pitiful and moving. In The Rose Tattoo Serafina Delle Rose certainly is no Blanche du Bois, but her problem is just as real, and in many ways Serafina is as much to be pitied as Blanche. To Serafina love is a physical relationship, and she believes that by remaining physically faithful to her husband's memory, she can preserve the beauty of the relationship that she had known with him. Actually, there is nothing for Serafina to preserve in memory that would be sufficient to fulfill her need for love. Love that can exist and be a fulfillment even in memory must be spiritual as well as physical in nature. In the relationship of Serafina and her husband the spiritual aspects of love were missing.

The role of Serafina is a terrific one; she is prominent in practically every scene in the play, and with her Williams continues his study of the abnormally possessed woman—not in the sense that Blanche, Alma, and Amanda were possessed, but abnormally possessed just the
same. Serafina is an ignorant, often stupid, peasant woman, with all her loyalty, sensuousness, and earthy preoccupation with natural emotions, plus her slovenly femininity and her conflict with primitive superstition and the mores of the Church. Her fixation about her husband's faithfulness before his death forces her into a false evaluation of facts and a self-inflicted isolation which constitute the core of the drama. While beset with her delusions she is an irrational combination of shrew, saint, slattern, and nuisance, always primitively feminine in her amoral possessiveness. This possessiveness is the result of her emphasis upon the physical, her belief that in physical devotion and loyalty lie the happiness and contentment that love can bring. She therefore insists upon physical purity not only in herself and in the memory that she has of her husband, but also in her daughter and in the boy whom her daughter loves.

The ultimate knowledge of her husband's infidelity is shattering to Serafina. She feels that she has been betrayed not only by love but by religion as well. After Estelle Hohengarten confirms the information that she had been rosario's mistress, Serafina violently addresses the Madonna:

Ora, ascolta, Signora, you hold in the cup of your hand this little house and you smash it! You break this little house like the shell of a bird in your hand, because you have hate for Serafina?--Serafina that loved you! No, no, no, you don't speak!
I don't believe in you, Lady! You're just a poor little doll with the paint peeling off, and now I blow out the light and I forget you the way you forget Serafina! (She blows out the vigil light.) Ecco--fatto! 4

Since Serafina's only conception of love is the gratification of desire, deliverance from her wretchedness can be accomplished only by the introduction into her life of a powerfully virile man who can take the place of her husband Rosario. This man must be physically strong but tender, masculine and virile but understanding. Such a man is Alvaro Mangiacavallo, who describes himself as "the grandson of the village idiot of Ribera" and whom Serafina describes as having "my husband's body, with the head of a clown." In many ways that make him attractive to Serafina, Alvaro resembles the late Rosario. He drives a banana truck as Rosario had done, and like Rosario he is another of Williams' exceptionally virile men:

He is about twenty-five years old, dark and very goodlooking. He is one of those Mediterranean types that resemble a glossy young bull. He is short in stature, has a massively sculptural torso and bluish-black curls. 5

But in other ways, ways that make him the ideal person for Serafina, he differs from Rosario. Alvaro has none of the delusions of grandeur that Rosario had entertained.

4 _Ibid.,_ p. 124.  
5 _Ibid.,_ p. 76.
Rosario had been a Sicilian "baron"; Alvaro is a clown descended from the village idiot. Rosario had been dishonest in practically all of his activities—in his affair with Estelle and in his criminal activities about which he told Serafina nothing; Alvaro is almost painfully honest, like Serafina herself. Alvaro readily admits his own shortcomings and offers Serafina nothing but "love and affection—in a world that is lonely—and cold." His clumsiness and buffoonery are attractive to Serafina. To Rosario she had always felt inferior; she had regarded him with awe: "The Delle Rose! A very great family. I was a peasant, but I married a baron when I didn't have shoes!" With Alvaro Serafina feels needed and equal for the first time. He praises her and admires her humbly. This is an aspect of love that Serafina had needed but had never known with Rosario.

As a lover, Alvaro appears at the psychological moment when Serafina's unwillingness to concede her husband's infidelity drives her into an hysterical frenzy verging on madness. He is a vigorous, ingratiating, and awkward fellow, without a woman of his own and beset by three dependents. Serafina and Alvaro are a pair, being mutually volatile and of mercurial temperament. His desperate

Ibid., p. 84.
loneliness and honesty finally overpower the frustrated Serafina, and, convinced of her husband's faithlessness, she smashes the urn containing his ashes, accepts her new lover, and is restored to normalcy.

The *Rose Tattoo*, in its own way, is another demonstration of men's overwhelming need for love that will fulfill his nature. Serafina is a primitive person whose emotions are so basic that it is necessary for her first to find physical fulfillment. If Alvaro had not been physically beautiful, Serafina would never have been attracted to him, and she never would have known the ideal love that promises to surpass by far the relationship that she had known with Rosario. Serafina's spiritual needs are simple; nevertheless, they are real. She needs tenderness, honesty, devotion, and understanding, and these are the things offered by the clown, Alvaro, and the things that the "grand" Rosario would never stoop to give her. Serafina is one of the select few in Williams's plays who have a chance to find ideal love.

There is a sub-plot in *The Rose Tattoo* which should be mentioned because it concerns the quest for ideal love on the part of Serafina's daughter, Rosa. Serafina is devoted to preserving her daughter's virtue when the girl falls blindly in love with a local sailor home on leave. Serafina instinctively distrusts the sailor: "I know what men want--not to eat popcorn with the girls or to slide on
the ice! And boys are the same, only younger." She corners the lad and forces him to swear by the Virgin that he will respect Rosa's virtue. When he shamefacedly confesses that he, too, is a virgin, it is a matter of indifference to the skeptical Serafina and, later, to the palpitating Rosa. She, like Mama, is passionate by nature and brashly insists that nature take its course.

Rosa appears to be Serafina in miniature, but she is luckier in choosing the young sailor as her first love than her mother had been in choosing Rosario. It appears at the end of the play that the boy will marry Rosa. Perhaps his reserve and morality will be the taming and calming force the young Sicilian girl "with the eyes of her father" needs to teach her that love has an aspect other than its physical one.

Both Serafina and Rosa are given the chance in *The Rose Tattoo* to be successful in love. If they make the most of their opportunity, both will know life's only real happiness. *The Rose Tattoo* does not have the haunting beauty of *The Glass Menagerie*, nor does it have the poetic power of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but it has a refreshing quality that neither *Menagerie* nor *Streetcar* can claim. In *The Rose Tattoo* Williams says that ideal love does exist for man, and so the fulfillment of man's nature is not impossible.

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In the play itself Serafina does not find ideal love, but at least the forecast for her future is not the bleak, hopeless one that was made for Blanche, Laura, and Alma. For Serafina, Williams predicts a most satisfactory physical relationship with Alvaro, a physical relationship that will be accompanied by tenderness and gentle understanding.

And the future looks bright for Rosa, too. Williams points out in the play several times that Rosa is a very intelligent girl, and she is far more capable of comprehending and sharing spiritual love than her mother. By breaking away from Serafina's influence and by choosing the gentle sailor as her lover, Rosa seems headed in the right direction. She has much to learn about dignity, self-control, and true values--qualities necessary for a lasting spiritual relationship--but the evidence indicates that Rosa will meet and overcome this barrier to happiness. At least, ideal love and life's fulfillment seem to be within Rosa's reach. As Williams pictures her, there seems little doubt that she has the good sense to make the most of her opportunity.
CHAPTER VI

CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF

No play in recent years has created more controversy than Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Although the play was a tremendous audience success and although many authorities hailed it as the high point in Williams' already meteoric career,¹ there were other critics who branded it as a thing of needless obscenity and violence and an all-time low in the current bad taste in drama. Lack of a thorough knowledge of Williams' writing, his purpose, his use of symbolism, and the original third act of the play may well account for the failure of some critics to appreciate the play.

For in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams has grown up; in it, for the first time, he sees life with a maturity which marks significant growth. In the plays before *Cat* the divorce between body and soul, leading man to inevitable frustration and tragedy, was always final. The soul aspired to gentility and grace, but, frightened at the contact of

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animal flesh, she locked herself up in perpetual fantasy (Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*), withered and fell into degradation (Alma in *Summer and Smoke*), or suffered rape at the hands of the flesh and collapsed into madness (Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*). Emphasis upon the body, on the other hand, led inevitably to the death of the soul through brutality (Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*) or primitive animal satiation (Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*). But *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is different, although its techniques are familiar: in *Cat* Williams continues his almanac of agony, bristling with brutal language and violent action; the setting remains shadowy and romantic; the locale is still the vicinity of Moon Lake and the Delta; the characters still speak in the soft, musical drawl of lower Mississippi. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams once again probes the wounds of tormented people—this time a couple whose marriage collapses because the husband, Brick, has brooded over a friend's death following an accusation by Brick's wife, Maggie, that an unnatural affection existed between the two men. The title derives from Maggie's application of an old saying to her position in the situation—she's like a cat on a hot tin roof—and a typically Williams situation is developed through typically Williams writing.

In every possible way the various connotations of the word "cat" are applied to Maggie. She has a slender feline
grace that makes her physically attractive; the other characters of the play call her "catty," because she has a sly, smiling way of making very uncomplimentary remarks about the members of her brother-in-law's family. But in Maggie, the soul and flesh are fused. She is no Blanche who finds physical desire incompatible with her spiritual aspirations, but neither is she a Serafina, who sublimates everything to physical love. Maggie is a one-man woman in whom physical desire is a driving force, but she also wants her husband's respect, and she is tormented by his obvious lack of interest in her, not only as a woman, but as a person who needs tenderness and understanding as well. Like Blanche and Serafina, Maggie finds herself brought into turbulent, headlong collision with life, but whereas Blanche is irrational and Serafina is spiritually weak, Maggie is strong, sturdy, and resilient. That she is violently, almost possessively, in love with Brick does not mean that she is oversexed or abnormal. More than any other Williams character, Maggie is fully alive, and she loves Brick, all the more because she cannot reach him. She knows that her love is the only thing that can bring fulfillment to her and peace to Brick.

The probable source of Williams' title contains the key to the characters of Brick and Maggie and shows, according to Williams, why man so often fails in love. The
title, as Henry Barklie points out, could very well have come from a section toward the end of Strindberg's Advent. Advent concerns a husband and wife who have led lives of righteous self-deception, always judging others but never themselves, who have consistently and thoroughly corrupted each other into deceit. Faced suddenly with the spectre of death, they seek significance in their past lives, only to uncover layer after layer of falsity and mendacity. In Act V, Scene 2 they find that their professed ideals are empty:

Judge: . . . Love! What was it?
His wife: What was it? Two cats on an outhouse roof!

This corruption of life, this falsity and mendacity, this deceit which frustrates self-evaluation, is presented in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof as the factor in our society which embitters life and almost guarantees the failure of individual fulfillment. In Cat on a Hot Tin Roof ideal love is still the essence of individual fulfillment, but Williams extends the responsibility for failure to achieve fulfillment beyond the narrow limits of the individual to the ubiquitous relationships within society, which require so little truth from the individual, so much falsity.

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The play begins with a scene between Maggie and Brick, who has withdrawn from any real participation in life. In college he reached a kind of limited excellence as a football player and had a never quite explicitly defined homosexual relationship with another student. It is impossible for him to accept a world that seems to fall so far and "disgustingly" short of his adolescent dreams. Brick is the typical Williams protagonist—the soul self-defeated. He has taken to drink and has injured himself in a childish and drunken effort to recapture the athletic splendors of the past. Maggie loves him, but her physical advances are repugnant to him and he is much too remote to appreciate the desperate humor of her conversation. There is no conceivable method of communication between them, and Williams' underlying thought in the initial scene concerns the profound and tragic mystery that every man is to every man in the world, even himself:

It is a lonely idea, a lonely condition, so terrifying to think of that we usually don't. And so we talk to each other, write and wire each other, call each other short and long distance across land and sea, clasp hands with each other at meeting and at parting, fight each other and even destroy each other because of this always thwarted effort to break through walls to each other. As a character in a play once said, "We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins." 4

This scene between Brick and Maggie is an impressive

tour-de-force. It amounts essentially to a half-hour monologue in which Maggie, a semi-literate woman, gives the whole history of the disaster that has overtaken them to a man who stopped listening to people talk long ago.

A subsequent encounter between Brick and his father, Big Daddy, in the second act, is on a level that few playwrights can approach. Williams reiterates the idea that men are a great mystery to each other and to themselves, but in this scene he suggests that the partial knowledge men have of one another is infinitely preferable to the truth, which no one can face without seeing destroyed all the illusions by which he has managed to sustain himself. Brick has been lying to himself, and the family has been lying to Big Daddy about his cancer. Big Daddy has a speech in which he recalls the lies and hypocrisy he has had to live with all his life:

... . Think of all the lies I got to put up with!
... . Ain't that mendacity? Having to pretend stuff you don't think or feel or have any idea of?
Church!—it bores the Bejesus out of me but I go!—I go an' sit there and listen to the fool preacher!
Clubs!—Elks! Masons! Rotary!—gran! 5

and Brick sums it all up with the remark, "Mendacity is the system we live in. Liquor is one way out an' death's the other." But in this scene in which Brick and Big Daddy condemn the falsity with which they are forced to

5 Ibid., p. 92. 6 Ibid., p. 111.
live, they both learn the truth about themselves and find that truth can be far more bitter than mendacity. Big Daddy, who loves life so much, learns that his death is imminent. Brick can no longer deny his homosexual inclinations, and facing this fact squarely is almost unbearable to him.

In the third act the truth of Brick's and Big Daddy's allegations about mendacity is made all too clear by the obvious selfishness and falsity in the family relationships. Brick's brother, Gooper, and his wife, Mae, are at the plantation with their five devilish children for only one reason—to get control of Big Daddy's fabulous wealth, if not before his death, at least as soon afterwards as possible. Even Maggie, who feels genuine devotion for Big Daddy, is determined that she and Brick will receive the favorite son's share of the inheritance. Her lie about her pregnancy is not all for the purpose of helping Big Daddy face his last days of life a little more happily; she knows that only by producing a family can she and Brick hope for the money, property, and position that she has dreamed of:

You can be young without money, but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old with money because to be old without it is just too awful, you've got to be one or the other, either young or with money, you can't be old and without it—That's the truth, Brick. . . .

7Ibid., p. 38.
However, if truth is the main subject of the play's investigation, sex is the peg that the drama hangs on. Big Mama, Brick's mother, inquires of Maggie whether as his wife, she makes Brick happy, and pointing to her son's bed, exclaims, "When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are here, right here!" When Big Daddy is led falsely to believe that he is healthy, his first wish is to rectify all by spending the last years of his life having a sexual "ball," as he puts it. The source of Maggie's desperation is her exile from Brick's physical love, and she spends a good part of the play being conscious of her body and its attractions:

Why, last week in Memphis everywhere that I went men's eyes burned holes in my clothes, at the country club and in restaurants and department stores, there wasn't a man I met or walked by that didn't just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed by and look back at me.  

The truth Brick is forced to face is his own partial and repressed homosexuality and that of his closest friend, for whose death by alcoholic self-destruction Brick is finally responsible—though it is a responsibility he has projected onto Maggie. For it was Maggie who accused the friend and then allowed herself to help him in his attempt

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9 Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, p. 33.
to prove her accusation false, and it was his impotence on that occasion which convinced him that the accusation was true and triggered his break-down into alcoholism.

The only resolution of any of these relationships is also sexual, although the ostensible subject is still truth. Maggie brings to birth a "desperate truth" by telling Big Daddy that she is pregnant with Brick's child, thus fulfilling the profoundest wish of a dying man; it is a lie different from all the other lies in the play because it impels its own conversion into truth: as the final curtain falls, Brick and Maggie plan to make the lie come true.

Although the theme of ideal love is not the only theme or even the most important one in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, man's need for love is more clearly stated here than in any other of Williams' plays. There is very little of the poetry or symbolism of the earlier plays in Cat; when Maggie the Cat talks about the love that she must have and the love that is essential to Brick, she is not confused, only determined. To Brick, who is far more sensitive and spiritually fragile than she, she says at the end:

Oh, you weak people, you weak beautiful people!—who give up.—What you want is someone to—take hold of you.—Gently, gently, with love! And—I do love you, Brick, I do! 10

Ibid., pp. 149-150.
But that is not how it works for Maggie. She is correct in her analysis of Brick and his need, but she is not allowed to give him love with dignity. She has to choose between abandoning Brick to a life-in-death while she herself goes barren, or wresting life from him by a violating lie. And yet it is a vital lie—for Maggie, for the family, for soul and flesh together a necessary alternative to death.

All this, unfortunately, is true only of the original version of the play. For the Broadway production Williams wrote a new third act, which he includes in the published play as an appendix. He made this change through the "creative influence" of the producer, Elia Kazan. A producer's influence often is creative; Margo Jones, for instance, saved The Glass Menagerie by cutting out a lot of whimsy. Miss Jones persuaded Williams to omit the screen device. But not this time. Kazan had one good idea—Maggie's odd, earthy charm should stand out more; and one bad one—Brick should "progress." But Brick cannot progress logically any more than could Blanche of Streetcar or any other of Williams' frustrated, sensitive characters. The new ending which reconciles Maggie and Brick and gives them Big Daddy's blessing does not convince. It is not Williams at his best. It nullifies the harsh moral point

11 Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. xi.
about truth and mendacity which elevates *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* above the other plays.

Williams' thoughts on truth make *Cat* a play which deals with what he believes to be society's greatest universal problem in contrast to the problems of the individual in the earlier plays. According to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, "truth" is the opposite to "living a lie." Society forces man into mendacity because it condemns the individual for tendencies that are innately within him. Brick calls his relationship with his college friend abnormal because it was so pure. But he fears to acknowledge the true nature of the relationship even to himself because of the connotation that he, as a member of a critical society, places upon any relationship that smacks of homosexuality. All the other characters in the play are involved in their own "mendacities." Maggie hides the fact that her marriage is collapsing; Big Daddy takes part in all of the required niceties of social and financial position; Gooper, Brick's brother, pretends to love his parents, when, actually, he detests them. All of these are falsities of life with which we are forced to abide, since they are an integral part of the system. Truth is the opposite of mendacious living; it is honesty with one's self and in one's dealings with others in spite of the opinions of the conforming majority. Williams does not say, however, that truth is entirely good and mendacity entirely bad. As a matter of
fact, he is careful to point out that mendacity sometimes is the only thing that makes harsh reality tolerable. Oscar Hammerstein II states the case. He says, in commenting upon *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*:

It is the discussion of mendacity between father and son which stays with me now. Too many plays cannot be written to show up the mendacities by which we live. The big mendacities must be slain. The smaller mendacities—I should like to have them remain with us for a while. Let them remain like springs on an automobile to relieve the shock of the trip. Also, before we shed all the mendacities, let us make sure that we know what the truth is. 12

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CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Without question Tennessee Williams is one of the giants in the modern American theater. Indeed, it is likely that in the future Williams will be remembered as the most eloquent dramatic spokesman for a generation spawned by war and the fear of war, a generation whose spiritual ideals were out of place in a world that saluted physical strength and virility. Williams' forte has been the field of tragedy, although on occasion he shows a real talent for comedy, comedy that is often tinged with pathos, however. His plays have been criticized as not being in the "tragic tradition" because "the insanity of the characters and the violence of action in the plays so remove them from common reality that they don't illuminate our experiences."¹ This, however, is disproved by the history of tragic drama. Shakespeare, a man who was not too self-conscious to call a tragedy a tragedy, wrote one about an hallucinatory madman (wife, same) and one about a senile madman (with a few subordinate madmen running about). For violence and degeneracy one can turn

¹ Marya Mannes, "The Morbid Magic of Tennessee Williams," Reporter, XII (May 19, 1955), 42.
to Oedipus for some incest and patricide, Medea for infanticide, and Electra for matricide, to name only a few.)

There is a reason for all this anomalousness in the plays of Tennessee Williams. The violence offers a total challenge. The tragic figure's entire world is in jeopardy; the insanity underscores his unequivocal commitment to the action, and also makes him a medium suitable for the expression of heights and depths of thought and action not usually attained by the quiet-spoken inhabitants of "common reality." The ordinary conflicts seldom come to a violent collision with life and society. For that reason one's common reality will not provide material for a tragedy, and it never has.

And in Williams' plays there is one underlying cause for this "violence" and "insanity." The unalterable fact is that the fulfillment of man's nature is dependent upon whether or not he succeeds in love. The thing most to be feared in life is the complete aloneness which is everyone's lot unless his love is ideal. Ideal love is both physical and spiritual in nature and to deny either of its aspects is to deny one's self life's greatest fulfillment. A study of the major plays of Tennessee Williams must

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necessarily be a study of the characters and their knowing or unknowing search for ideal love and the degree to which that search is successful or unsuccessful, for such is the degree of their tragedy. Many of the characters fail because by nature they are so sensitive that they seek only spiritual love. Reality has been unkind to them, and they are appalled by physical love which to them represents the grossest phase of reality. These gentle people believe that a spiritual relationship will shield them from cruelty and will bring them understanding. Instead, since they strive only for the soul's satiety, they deny one aspect of man's nature, his need for physical love. They seek and seek, but their search results in tragic frustration rather than in fulfillment.

There is another character type in Williams' plays who finds himself in a dilemma opposite to that of the sensitive people. This character believes that life's fulfillment can be found only through physical satisfaction. He gluts his passions at the expense of his soul, and although he usually appears full of confidence that he has the right method for achieving happiness, a seed of doubt and frustration can always be detected beneath the surface of his hard and physically beautiful exterior. He is violent in his actions and frantic in his ever-present desire for physical love which is never quite complete
enough for him. Nor can physical love alone ever be complete, because to bring fulfillment to man's nature, love must be ideal; it must be the love that extends not only to man's physical self but to his spiritual self as well.

The plays that have established Tennessee Williams as a leading modern dramatist contain a number of superficial resemblances. The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, and The Rose Tattoo are mainly about women, and the very important title character of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof is a woman. The plays deal with the grotesque refinement of a decadent Southern society in conflict with a more realistic present; they make incidental mention of Moon Lake Casino, Delta Planter's Bank and other names from the landscape of Williams' memory. Brooks Atkinson, in fact, believes that The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Summer and Smoke form a kind of trilogy, because they trace the development of a woman through the three stages of her tragedy: the destruction of her ideals as the young woman in Summer and Smoke, duplicity and complete frustration as the tortured Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, and finally, retreat into a world of illusion as the elderly mother in The Glass Menagerie. Although Williams has often expressed the desire

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and intention to write no more salutes to Southern womanhood, it is interesting to note that when he attempts to handle abstract material away from the smoky light of his memory-shrouded Blue Mountain and his haunting Moon Lake, he does not receive the same ready approval of audiences and critics.5

The surface likenesses of Williams' plays, however, simply reflect the successful means that he has discovered to achieve an end. That end is often obscure and even more often controversial. The most important common factor in his plays is his attempt to define dramatically man's nature and his insistence that man's failure to fulfill his nature results in tragedy for the individual and has created a tragic society. Williams' concern with man's nature is twofold: he insists that the individual must find both spiritual and physical fulfillment. To Williams the great necessity of life for man is love, love that encompasses his sensibility and sensuality, love that can overreach the variance between illusion and reality. Love is the unalterable essential, for man cannot be alone. And until he is mated, he is excruciatingly alone. If man fails to escape loneliness, as so often he does in Williams'  

4 Ibid.

5 For example, Battle of Angels with a New England setting and Camino Real set in an unnamed Latin American resort.
plays, he has no hope for fulfillment of his nature. The reason then for the failure of Williams' characters is their inability or refusal to fulfill either one or both of love's aspects, because physical love is not enough, nor can spiritual love alone fill the void that exists in all mankind. Ideal love is a combination of physical and spiritual consumption.

To a large extent Williams maintains that each individual is responsible for finding or failing to find his own happiness. If the individual fails, the failure is largely due to his own spiritual or physical shortcomings. However, society comes in for some share of the blame, too. Even if the individual is right in his outlook and well-rounded in his personality, as is Stella of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he finds much difficulty in living happily in a society that to Williams seems hard and heartless. The place of man in the cosmic scheme is a precarious one, to say the least. In *Camino Real* Esmeralda exclaims:

"God bless... all two-time losers who're likely to lose once more, the courtesan who made the mistake of love, the greatest of lovers crowned with the longest horns, the poet who wandered far from his heart's green country and possibly will and possibly won't be able to find his way back, look down with a smile tonight on the last cavaliers, the ones with the rusty armor and soiled white plumes, and visit with understanding and something that's almost tender those fading legends that come and go like songs not"
clearly remembered, oh, somewhere, let there be something to mean the word "honor" again! 6

The key to the twofold nature of man is that he cannot successfully accept one element of his being to the exclusion of the other, and Williams almost, but not quite, presents the conclusion that fulfillment of man's nature, realization of his aspirations, is an impossibility. By the time the reader meets Blanche, for example, her hopes for happiness seem groundless; yet he sees glimmerings occasionally of what must have been at one time the spiritual and physical warmth that makes human beings seek and sometimes find the key to a complete life. Blanche readily recognizes her need for love. She does not find love because she never comprehends love's dual nature. One cannot ignore his soul, but neither can he exist in a physical world without accepting the deliciousness of physical experience. In Williams' plays it is highly unusual for the physical and spiritual aspects of love to exist in harmony. Indeed, the two are almost constantly in conflict. Thus the central dramatic element is the old story of the flesh and the spirit at war.

A feminine character whose failure in love leads directly to her tragic outcome is Alma Winemiller of

Summer and Smoke. Alma is an almost perfect example of Williams' insistence that the individual couple himself with the right person to fulfill the physical and spiritual barrenness that he will always suffer if he endeavors to exist in society alone. Alma strongly believes that love must be purely spiritual in order to have quality, and therefore she insists that a spiritual bond is what she wants between herself and the young doctor, John Buchanan, to whom she is attracted. Alma refuses to accept John's premise that love is a biological urge that can only be fulfilled biologically. John eventually comes around to Alma's way of thinking, at least in regard to Alma herself, whom he comes to believe he is not good enough to touch. As far as marriage is concerned, John chooses a girl who never questions him or his actions, but takes him as he is. Alma herself is plagued by the unfulfilled physical desire that has developed within her, and when she offers herself to John and is refused, she turns to promiscuity in an attempt to find what is missing from her life. She is the victim of her own inability to recognize that her need is for ideal love that will be the answer to both her spiritual and physical desires. Instead, she separates the two in her mind, insisting that physical love can be had only at the expense of one's ideals and spiritual aspirations. She seems doomed to a life of disillusionment and sorrow.
Williams does not forget Alma, nor does he allow the reader to forget her. She appears again a few years later in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as Blanche du Bois in New Orleans still searching, still needing love, but insisting that the soul and the body be separate. Alma Winemiller is a younger, more naive, and more idealistic Blanche du Bois.

*A Streetcar Named Desire*, the play's very title, evokes Blanche's neurotic creed that desire, not just living, is the opposite of death. Her opening line foreshadows the whole play: "They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemeteries... and get off at Elysian Fields." Blanche is a heartbreaking character, and her progressive insanity is only an extension of that gap in all readers between what they think they are and what they are. To be able to create the real Blanche and the Blanche of her illusions at one time is Williams' triumph; watching both is a rack upon which an audience is stretched. Her incessant warm baths, the Japanese paper lanterns over the light bulbs, her very language, all of the pathetic attempts to make herself seem younger and more attractive to men, in spite of her many disastrous love experiences, are constant reminders of the perpetual effort

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of the sensitive, bewildered soul to soften harsh reality and its animalism. Blanche is aware of her need for love, and she has taken physical love wherever she could find it. But that spiritual love and physical love can exist as one ideal love never occurs to her. Reality and experience have been harsh for Blanche, so that she associates physical love with ugliness and spiritual love with death. She cannot believe that the tender, poetic, but, to her, tragic love of the spirit could be compatible with the gross, sordid love of the body.

In spite of the tremendous differences between the gentle Laura of The Glass Menagerie and Blanche, they are sisters in their tragedies. They both fail to find love, that physical love accompanied by spiritual understanding, which is man's fulfillment of his nature. And Tom Wingfield is, like his sister Laura, sensitive and dispossessed. In this respect Tom differs from the other male characters in Williams' plays except for the tortured Brick in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. The other men of these plays are more physical in nature, less poetic, and remain secondary to the women in importance. Tom is determined to find "adventure," but the experience that he must know before he will have true poetry to give to the world is the fulfillment of love, the great adventure for which he is searching. That Tom is capable of spiritual love is evident in
his beautiful devotion to Laura, but he must find a love that will unite his spiritual and physical aspirations before he will find the answer to his need and the fulfillment of his nature.

With all her husband's imagined romantic qualities, with all of the "gentlemen callers" of her youth, Tom and Laura's mother, Amanda, has never known love or happiness. Nevertheless, if she fools no one else, she has succeeded in fooling herself throughout her life, for there is little doubt that she believes the stories that she invents. The saddest thing about Amanda is not her own position or even her own foolishness; rather, it is the effort that she is making to mold Laura into a pathetic replica of herself. Tom can and does escape partially, but Laura must live with the morbid dreams and tales of the past which her mother has substituted for reality.

The characters considered to this point have been those who failed in love because their over-sensitive natures, their existences outside reality, destroy their confidence in themselves and make them fear the physical aspects of any normal love experience. They are convinced that their only need is spiritual love. Paradoxically, Blanche, Laura, and Alma do not look for someone like themselves; they look for a Mitch, a Jim, or a John, who has proved himself capable of living in the real world and dealing with its meanesses, its
insensitiveness—things which are overwhelming to the "different" people. But love is not all abstract or ethereal. It has another side, its physical manifestations which must be recognized, accepted, and welcomed. By denying the physical aspects of love, Williams' lost souls assassinate Love by cutting him in two; they want half of his being to live while the other half withers and dies.

But there is another extreme, and its victims are almost as tragic as those already discussed. There are characters in Williams' plays who miss fulfillment because they are conscious only of physical indulgence and completely unconscious of the soul's requirements. In considering the major plays and looking for a person who seeks only physical satiety, one first thinks of Stanley Kowalski of A Streetcar Named Desire. Stanley is not a likable character, and it is doubtful upon first consideration of him that there is anything pitiable about the "Polack." It is difficult to consider a person a failure in love when he seems perfectly contented and has everything he wants. But that is exactly the great tragedy of Stanley and all of the people like him. He gorges his appetites, which are exactly the same as those of the lower animals—his appetite for food, his appetite for sex, his appetite for rowdiness, his appetite for physical combat; in the meantime,
his mind and soul lie dormant. To Stanley love means only lust.

There is a feminine character, Serafina of *The Rose Tattoo*, whose attitudes are essentially similar to those of Stanley. Serafina has kindness and tenderness in her nature which are lacking in Stanley, but her conception of love is just about the same as his. *The Rose Tattoo* is called a folk comedy by critics and is considered to be Williams' one really successful venture into the field of comedy. However, in spite of the fact that there certainly are many amusing bits of dialogue and some almost farcical situations in the play, Serafina herself is in danger of failing in her efforts to find happiness. Her sensuality is overwhelming and stifles whatever capacity she might have for a semblance of a spiritual relationship in love.

In his most recent play, Williams has created another character whose stress upon life's physical aspects is tragic. Big Daddy, Brick's father, has gone through his life boisterously and with no interest in spiritual values. Now that his life is about to end, he tries desperately to hold on to it, because he knows that somehow fulfillment has eluded him. Even so, he still believes that if he only had time for more physical love, he could make up for what he has missed in years gone by. His
whole conception of life and what makes it worthwhile is badly out of focus.

The fulfillment of man's nature depends upon whether or not he knows ideal love. Ideal love, according to Tennessee Williams, is that elusive relationship which offers understanding and tenderness to man's spiritual self and contentment to man's physical life. The principal characters of Williams' major plays seek and fail to find ideal love, and the plays themselves are devoted to showing us the causes for their failure. An examination of the dramas indicates that Williams sees the difficulties facing man as almost impossible to overcome.

If man is to find ideal love and with it the fulfillment of his nature, he must overcome many complexities and faults within himself as an individual, and he must survive the many pitfalls that are placed in his path by society which is cruel and unmerciful. But one thing is certain; man must never insist upon one aspect of love and, in so doing, deny the other. Love is dual in nature. Physical love alone is degrading; spiritual love alone is unsatisfying. A combination of both is ideal.
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