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Tennessee Williams and the tragic tradition

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND THE TRAGIC TRADITION

by

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PREFACE

This thesis is an attempt to ascertain to what extent Tennessee Williams has accepted or rejected traditional precepts, concepts, and symbolism in the theatre. Inasmuch as his dramas reanimate certain older forms with newer freedom, it is thought by many that he is changing the direction of the modern theatre. Just as Ibsen at one time rebelled against the conventions of romanticism, thereby founding a new school of thought in drama, today Tennessee Williams is leading a revolt against the restrictions of realism. It is hoped that an analysis of his work at this time will help to determine the direction this revolt is taking.

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"Who, if I were to cry out, would
hear me among the angelic orders?"

— Rilke

CHAPTER I

The Episcopal Rectory in Columbus, Mississippi, was the setting for Thomas Lanier Williams' entry into the drama of life. This noble scene was provided by Mrs. Williams' papa, the Rector, and the curtain was raised in the dark year of 1914.[1] Thomas Lanier's family continued to live with his maternal grandparents until his high school days. His early environment made a profound impression on him and he still speaks nostalgically of the cypress brakes and bayous.[2] It was a lovely setting for dreams, dreams which became necessary when diptheria injured his heart and confined him to his room for a year. His imagination contrived the adventures his illness denied him. His world became a gentle utopia in which the social dilemma of race bigotry and materialism was healed.

The three great personal influences in his early life were his grandfather, the aristocrat; his mother, who spoiled him; and his sister, who idealized beauty for him. The people he knew in childhood and early

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1. "Tennessee Williams," Current Biography 1946, p. 644.
2. B. J. Skelton, "Double-Take on Mississippi," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:21, May 19, 1951.

adolescence today emerge at bidding, not realistically, but "like the characters who people his plays, transmuted and altered by the shading of memory and the gradual accretion of experience and understanding."[3] Mrs. Williams, however, is still inclined to bridle at any comparison between reality and her son's imagination.[4]

Williams' first composition, at the age of twelve, was inspired by a picture of Tennyson's heroine, The Lady of Shalott. "She was floating down a river in a state of trance, and did something to me."[5]

When Williams' father accepted a job with a shoe manufacturer in St. Louis and moved his family there, their social standing was almost completely reversed. Williams further withdrew within himself.[6]

> If I had been born to this situation I might not have resented it deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and rebellion that have grown into an inherent part of my work.[7]

To a reporter claiming him as a native son of St. Louis after success he was tactless enough to confide, "I found St. Louisans cold, smug, complacent, intolerant, stupid, and provincial."[8]

Williams released his feelings in composition, and he is a rarity among writers in that he cherishes the actual operation of writing.

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3. Paul Moor, "A Mississippian Named Tennessee," Harpers, 197:64, July, 1948.
4. R. C. Lewis, "A Playwright Named Tennessee," New York Times Magazine, December 7, 1947, p.67.
5. Harry Gilroy, "Mr. Williams Turns to Comedy," New York Times, January 28, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.
6. Moor, op. cit., p. 64.
7. Lincoln Barnett, "Tennessee Williams," Life, 24:118, February 16, 1948.
8. Moor, op. cit., p. 65.

Lincoln Barnett writes of this phenomenon:

> The exterior or active world which men call the world of reality is to him as evanescent as a dream. He feels wholly alive and tranquil only when he is submerged in his inner cosmos, apprehending the stimuli of his own invention.[9]

Williams attended the University of Missouri but received no degree. He later enrolled in the Drama Department of the University of Iowa where his talent for play-writing became more pronounced and where he took a degree. He also attended an advanced play-writing seminar under John Gassner and Theresa Helburn in New York, and received a thousand dollar grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.[10]

Shakespeare spelled his name seventeen different ways, and Williams too is inclined to variety in his reasons for changing his name from Thomas Lanier to Tennessee. Mr. Chapman says, "When he was asked how come the Tennessee, he answered that he did not like the Thomas Lanier."[11] Mr. Moor says that his fraternity brothers at Missouri nicknamed him Tennessee because of his accent.[12] Mr. Barnett says, "He abandoned his given name when he felt he had 'compromised' it by the imperfections of his early writing, and he adopted Tennessee as a gesture to his ancestors who had fought the Indians in that state."[13]

Williams had the usual ups and downs of the struggling young artist, but even at his lowest ebbs he wrote only to please himself.

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9. Barnett, op. cit., p. 114.
10. Ibid., p. 66.
11. John Chapman, The Burns Mantle Best Plays of 1947-48, p. 333.
12. Moor, op. cit., p. 63.
13. Barnett, op. cit., p. 116.

A job as screenwriter in Hollywood resulted in the studio's paying him to stay away. As Mr. Moor observes, "That Williams today finds himself a successful writer, while still writing purely from artistic compulsion is enough to make the true Bohemian lose all faith."[14]

The unqualified success of The Glass Menagerie had an anesthetizing influence on Williams at first. The unaccustomed luxury and vapid compliments were unhealthy opiates. When a series of eye operations for a cataract removed him from that stultifying atmosphere, he again turned his sight inward upon himself, just as he had done in his childhood illness.

"When the gauze mask was removed, I found myself in a readjusted world."[15] He left New York for Mexico and went to work on a play called The Poker Night, later to emerge as A Streetcar Named Desire.

Mr. Williams until recently has been known for a selective rather than a varied type of drama. With the exception of his latest two works, The Rose Tattoo and Camino Real, his dramas have followed a special pattern so far as atmosphere, narrative theme, and basic character types are concerned. All of his plays are unmistakably Southern in effect, whether laid in the South or not. All are serious, if not tragic dramas.

His first accepted works were his one-act plays, later published in a collection entitled 27 Wagons Full of Cotton. In these plays

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14. Moor, op. cit., p. 63.
15. Chapman, op. cit., p. 32.
16. Ibid.

he makes full use of his Mississippi background, portraying the clash of the old and new elements within deep-Southern society. Some of them are early character sketches for types later developed in his major plays. Many of these short plays were produced by his friend Margo Jones in her little theatre in Dallas.

The first professional production of a Williams work was his Battle of Angels, produced by the Theatre Guild. It opened in Boston in December, 1940, with Miriam Hopkins as star and Margaret Webster as director. It portrays "a moral and tragic romance between a roving poet and a Southern woman married to a hopeless invalid."[17] Boston was properly outraged, and the Guild lost the courage to continue on into New York. With this failure Williams felt that his career was over, but his friend and agent, Audrey Wood, never lost faith and found various sources of income for him.[18]

His next production was of the highly successful The Glass Menagerie in April, 1945. Commenting on the disparity of receptions accorded this play and The Battle of Angels, Williams said, "You can't mix up sex and religion ... but you can always write safely about mothers."[19] The cast included the gifted Laurette Taylor, Julie Haydon, and Eddie Dowling. The work is a drama of tender pathos based on his family life and portrays the escape from loneliness and hopelessness sought for by the heroine, his sister. The play received the Drama Critics Circle

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17. Moor, op. cit., p. 64.
18. Richard Gehman, "Guardian Agent," Theatre Arts, 34:20, July, 1950.
19. Barnett, op. cit., p. 68.

Award for the best play of 1945.[20] Some critics were at first inclined to attribute its success to Laurette Taylor rather than to the author, but its continued success with other actresses in the leading role reversed this opinion. Helen Hayes played the lead in London.[21] When the play was later made into a film, much of its dream quality was lost in translation, and the film version further suffered from the miscasting of the late Gertrude Lawrence in the role of Amanda Wingfield.

Mr. Williams' joint effort with Donald Windham entitled You Touched Me, based on a short story by D. H. Lawrence, was also staged in 1945. While receiving not unkind notices, the collaboration was not considered successful. Montgomery Clift, however, was praised for his portrayal of the young idealist who tries to break down the barriers that our society seems to rear between people.[22] The title is the theme of the play in essence, and as Time magazine remarked, "Few romantic comedies have either soared with so much message or stooped to so many monkeyshines."[23]

The production of A Streetcar Named Desire in December, 1947, was received with unanimous commendation. A happy combination of direction and staging further aided the stars, Jessica Tandy, Marlon Brando, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden to give laudable performances. The play is the somber tragedy of a woman whose inability to face the reality of a

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20. New York Times, September 9, 1945, Sec. II, p. 1.
21. Ibid., July 29, 1948, p. 17.
22. Theatre Arts, 24:619, November, 1945.
23. Time, 45:77, October 8, 1945.

cruel and incompatible world renders her helpless in an ineffectual struggle to make others believe in her disillusionment. It was the Pulitzer Prize winner in 1948 and also received the Drama Critics Circle Award. When the play was mounted in London, Vivian Leigh's starring performance was termed her "highest stage achievement," and Sir Lawrence Olivier's production was called the finest "seen in the British theatre since Gielgud's original Hamlet."[24] The London Evening Standard serialized the play as "the most controversial of modern times" and called it "the greatest event in the contemporary London theatre."[25] An adaptation in French by Jean Cocteau had enthusiastic audience reception in Paris but received faint critical praise.[26] The play was made into a highly artistic film with the original Broadway players recreating their roles with the exception of the lead. Miss Leigh's performance in the film lead won her her second 'Oscar'. Mr. John Mason Brown, Tennessee Williams' severest critic, said of this play, "It is an achievement of unusual and exciting distinction."[27]

Summer and Smoke, an earlier play by Mr. Williams, was next mounted in October, 1948, and was received with mixed critical comment. Margaret Phillips and Tod Andrews gave sensitive performances in this allegorical play, Mr. Williams' most lyrical to date. It is the story of a man and a woman who are divided within themselves and whose untimely

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24. The Daily Express, quoted in New York Times, September 29, 1949, p. 38.
25. Quoted in New York Times, October 19, 1949, p. 36.
26. Ibid.
27. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 30:24, December 27, 1947.

recognition of their true natures provides an interesting view of fate. In this play, as Brooks Atkinson points out, Mr. Williams as a poet "is less concerned with events than with adventures of the spirit."[28] As late as last year a critic said of the Greenwich Village production still running, "Is there a better play to be seen on Broadway than Tennessee Williams' Summer and Smoke? I doubt it."[29]

Mr. Williams' comedy-drama, The Rose Tattoo, opened in February, 1951, with a cast of relatively unknown players. It set off a spectacular split among the critics, who called it everything from "twaddle" to "magnificent".[30] In this work Williams deviates from the pattern of his other works, for he has created a powerful love story with a new type of heroine — a positive personality who emerges from an unreal world to a real one where she finds happiness. Life called it "an entertaining ode to earthy living."[31] And even the disapproving Mr. Brown admitted that "Mr. Williams' writing in The Rose Tattoo has its hypnotic qualities."[32] Brooks Atkinson adds:

> To those of us who were afraid that Mr. Williams had been imprisoned within a formula it is especially gratifying ... Mr. Williams can compose in the halcyon style as well as the somber one. Now we can be sure that he is a permanent source of enjoyment in the theatre.[33]

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28. Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," New York Times, October 7, 1948, p. 33.
29. Saturday Review of Literature, 35:28, May 10, 1952.
30. Life, 30:80, February 26, 1951.
31. Ibid.
32. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:24, March 10, 1951.
33. Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," New York Times, February 5, 1951, p. 19.

Mr. Williams' latest play is Camino Real which opened in New York March 19 of this year. It is a highly symbolic fantasy and perhaps his bitterest commentary to date. On this particular highway he reanimates literary characters from the past — Camille, Casanova, Don Quixote, Lord Byron — and into this society he introduces the typical American — Kilroy. He is naive, big-hearted (literally), something of a braggart, has a certain elemental appeal, and is essentially gregarious. While the play is perhaps less tightly integrated than some of Mr. Williams' other works, it shows a new outward philosophical probing. From an essentially family memory in The Glass Menagerie he has progressed to material with a cosmic significance. It is present day civilization itself that he scrutinizes in Camino Real, and it is a somber, brooding piece highlighted by almost shocking scenes of hilarious comedy. The large cast, the director — again Elia Kazan, the set designer Lemuel Ayers, all come in for unanimous critical praise. The play itself, however, has again divided the critics. "The worst play yet written by the best playwright of his generation," writes Mr. Walter F. Kerr in the New York Herald-Tribune.[34] "Virtuoso" is the key word chosen by Mr. Atkinson in the Times, "... as eloquent and rhythmic as a piece of music."[35]

Tennessee Williams' greatest contributions to the modern stage are the clarity of his insight into character and the precision of his

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34. Walter F. Kerr, "Camino Real," New York Herald-Tribune, March 20, 1953, p.12.

35. Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre," New York Times, March 20, 1953, p. 26.

writing.[36] His characters are of three fundamental types in most of his plays. Some are moved by basic emotions, some by environmental influences, and always the protagonist by a variety of emotions.

The protagonist is usually a woman with whom Tennessee Williams identifies himself to varying degrees. They are usually Southern gentlewomen, for Williams says that they are the only remaining members of our populace who can speak lyrical dialogue without sounding highflown.[37] This heroine lives in a subjective world that is incompatible with her nature and intolerable to her ideals. She is a lonely person in need of love and understanding, and, most of all, in need of strength of character. Her struggle is two-fold. First, within herself she struggles continuously to create and keep alive a belief in a beautiful phantasy, a myth about herself. By this belief she can set herself apart from — and above — the less sensitive and the boorish people about her. When this belief wanes and she catches a glimpse of herself as she really is, she is truly destitute. Second, she struggles to make real to others her schizophrenic myth, the mask against her weaknesses, but a deception more to herself than to others. John Mason Brown says of these protagonists: "If they lie to others, their major lie is to themselves."[38] She struggles against her fate, and always her struggle is ineffectual. The end of the drama is trenchant but implacable. This character appears

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36. Brooks Atkinson, "'Streetcar' Passenger," New York Times, June 12, 1949, Sec. II, p. 1.
37. Barnett, op. cit., p. 76.
38. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 30:22, December 27, 1947.

several times in the short plays, and in the major plays she is Laura Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie, Alma Winemiller in Summer and Smoke, and Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire. Marguerite Gautier in Camino Real echoes many facets of this character.

While the protagonist is a three-dimensional character with a colorful but negative personality, the antagonist, the second basic type, is a one-dimensional, positive personality. He is moved by basic emotions, and, in contrast to the protagonist, he is a man of action rather than a contemplative, imaginative individual. His struggle is outward rather than inward; his values, ultra-materialistic. For him, there exists only a brutal kind of strength. He is often an unhappy person, bitter and unsympathetic toward life, and worst of all, unaware of the poverty of his character. In the short play, The Lady of Larkspur Lotion, the landlady has many of these attributes, but in the longer plays he is exemplified by John Buchanan — though with redeeming features — in Summer and Smoke, and vividly by Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire.

The third basic character in the Williams plays is 'The Gentleman Caller.' He is a sympathetic, understanding person, one who possesses strength of character and one who sometimes has an extraordinary insight into the thoughts of persons trapped by misfortune or haunted by their problems. This third character seems to speak for civilization, albeit awkwardly, compensating, so to speak, for the ignorant indifference, the cruelty, and the barbarism that the Williams plays speak of so poignantly. In The Lady of Larkspur Lotion the writer incarnates

this role so that we have a dual identification on the author's part in this play. The Gentleman Caller is Jim O'Connor in The Glass Menagerie, perhaps the late-arriving traveling salesman in Summer and Smoke, Mitch in A Streetcar Named Desire, and Alvarro in The Rose Tattoo.

Mr. Brown states that Williams' attitude towards his characters is as merciless as William Saroyan's is naive. "He sees them as he believes they are, not as they would like to be or as he would like to have them."[39] Another critic says that his emphasis on psychological peculiarities brings up "the characters as if one were to substitute binoculars for spectacles in looking at them."[40] In writing of Serafina in The Rose Tattoo, Brooks Atkinson agrees:

> As usual, Mr. Williams is looking at her with detachment as though she were a specimen. Repeating his attitude toward all his heroines, he is ruthless with her limitations as a member of society and with her romantic illusions. But his objectivity is not judicial; he is not a dogmatic writer. His objectivity is artistic.[41]

As in some of Eugene O'Neill's plays, it is felt that Williams' antagonists sometimes fail to emerge as individuals, for their realism is so profoundly representative of the harshness of our culture that they become symbols and cease to exist in our thoughts as humans, alive and absorbing.[42] While Mr. Brown questions to what extent anyone can feel

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39. Ibid., p. 22.
40. Lewis, op. cit., p. 67.
41. Brooks Atkinson, "Tattooing," New York Times, June 3, 1951, Sec. II, p.1.
42. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:31, October 30, 1948.

real empathy for Williams' characters, he realizes as does Mr. Atkinson that the author does not condemn nor pass any moral judgment upon them. He merely presents these lost people to us, understanding them and desiring that we understand them too. Then, as in the case of Blanche DuBois, Mr. Brown says, "He allows her to destroy herself and invites us to watch in the process."[43] But it is an artistic process, in the great Tragic tradition, and as Mr. Atkinson observes, "He has not forgotten that human beings are the basic subject of art."[44]

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43. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 30:22, December 27, 1947.

44. Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre," New York Times, December 4, 1947, p. 42.

CHAPTER II

The critic, throughout the ages, has formulated his rules which he has used as a critical 'yardstick' to measure the stature of the dramatist. Mr. Williams, being formally educated in the drama, has doubtlessly been aware of these dicta, and, while not necessarily having them in mind during creation, he has given evidence of their influence in a number of instances.

For Aristotle, tragedy dealt with the element of evil, with what we least want and most fear to face, with what is destructive to human life and values. It exploits our sense of pity, and most important, it offers a katharsis, a "proper purgation of pity and terror."[45] Writing of Streetcar, Mr. Atkinson says of the leading character:

> Her agony is no less poignant than the suffering of Oedipus Rex, the victim of whimsical Greek gods with malign dispositions. To tell the truth, the fate of Blanche DuBois purges and terrifies me more deeply than the fate of Oedipus Rex. His gods never threaten me, but her gods are hard at work under a democratic constitution and they speak English.[46]

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45. Aristotle, "Poetics, VI, 2," Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 22.
46. Brooks Atkinson, "Everything Is Poetic," New York Times, June 6, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.

In these general aspects Williams seems to be in accord; however, when it comes to Aristotle's more specific precepts, there is a major deflection. The six components of a tragedy are listed by Aristotle to be Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Song. He writes:

> The Plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy; Character holds the second place.[47] Thus Tragedy is the imitation of an action, and of the agents, mainly with a view to the action.[48]

Plot, as such, has always had a secondary interest for Williams. The focus is on character, the unfolding of which develops the plot.

> My chief aim in playwriting [he says] is the creation of character. I have always had a deep feeling for the mystery in life, and essentially my plays have been an effort to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living.[49]

Atmosphere also is extensively employed to disclose and intensify the feelings of the characters. His emphasis on character leads one writer to accuse Williams of abandoning rather than finishing his plays.[50] John Mason Brown is to an extent justified but is too harsh when he says, "His intuitive understanding of his characters is remarkable ... But he is a wasteful writer who has no disciplined sense of form or structure."[51] "But form is technique," argues Brooks Atkinson in Williams' defense, "which is a matter of secondary importance in a work of art. Character is the element of first importance in every aspect of life."[52]

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47. Aristotle, op. cit., VI, 14.
48. Ibid., VI, 15.
49. Lewis, op. cit., p. 67.
50. Barnett, op. cit., p. 71.
51. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:24, March 10, 1951.
52. Brooks Atkinson, "The Rose Tattoo," New York Times, February 11, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.

Aristotle further speaks against the use of the Deus ex Machina in the well constructed tragedy. Mr. Williams shows great taste in his avoidance of coincidence. This, however, is not necessarily skill; for in plot so dependent upon character analysis this is no difficult task.

In other respects, Williams cleaves close to the precepts. While, with the exception of the short play, The Purification, his plays are not written in verse, he employs a most poetic diction. "The Glass Menagerie is still here as a reminder that, war or no war, the poet goes on forever."[53] Another writer comments on You Touched Me: "Mr. Williams uses a diction that is fresh and arresting; his people speak with the license granted the poet, not in the idiom of the dictaphone."[54] The most poetic of his major works is perhaps Summer and Smoke. After criticizing its symbolism at length, Mr. Brown adds, "Even so, it has its moments of magic. It is the work of a poet."[55] Alma, in Summer and Smoke, sums up the tragic dénouement:

> The tables have turned, yes; the tables have turned with a vengeance! You've come around to my way of thinking and I to yours, like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time and each one finding the other one gone out, the door locked against him ...[56]

It is significant that besides Chekhov, Williams lists as a favorite Garcia Lorca, the Spanish dramatist and poet.[57]

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53. Theatre Arts, 29:555, October, 1945.
54. Ibid., November, 1945, p. 619.
55. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:31, October 30, 1948.
56. Tennessee Williams, Summer and Smoke, Scene 11, p. 121.
57. Lewis, op. cit., p. 19.

Song, listed as one of the embellishments by Aristotle, has been transmuted by Williams into a liberal use of offstage and background music that is effective and haunting. A critic for Time calls it a "crutchlike" device,[58] but others have freely admitted its effectiveness in intensifying mood and underlining climactic situations. From the barely audible music of a "blue piano," a climax is effected and sustained by the loud, brassy triumph of trumpets in Streetcar. Certain themes are associated with his characters in the style of the Wagnerian leitmotifs. The "Varsouviana," with its simple little melody and its associations of a child's folk dance, underlines the childlike pretense of Blanche in her moments of reminiscing. La Golondrina, so evocative of musty romanticism, is called for in no less than four of Williams' plays.

As Aristotle says of Spectacle, it has an emotional attraction of its own,[59] and Williams utilizes the effects of setting probably more extensively than any other modern playwright. Wolcott Gibbs' observations on the setting of Summer and Smoke are equally apropos of all the Williams productions. "Jo Mielziner's scenery, using only a light, graceful framework to indicate walls, so that interiors can be shown simultaneously, is remarkably picturesque and ingenious."[60] These settings follow a pattern throughout most of his plays; they are laid in the deep South where an air of softness pervades. Reality is suggested rather than reproduced, with shadows and grays and lavender-blue skies. When bright colors are used, they are tempered by soft restful shades. Williams describes the first

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58. Time, 52:83, October 18, 1948.
59. Aristotle, op. cit., VI, 19.
60. Wolcott Gibbs, "Summer and Smoke," New Yorker, 24:51, October 16, 1948.

scene of Streetcar:

> The sky ... is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses, with their faint redolences of banana and coffee.[61]

Lighting and calling voices create compelling effects. He explains their importance in Streetcar:

> The night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle. Lurid reflections appear on the walls around Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form ... they move sinuously as flames along the wall ...[62]

When Summer and Smoke moved into a theatre on its tryout tour, it took the electricians eight hours to set up the lights, and an additional eight hours of adjusting by designer Jo Mielziner was necessary.[63]

In commenting on the exterior life, some of it never seen on the stage, that impinges on the drama in The Rose Tattoo, Brooks Atkinson writes:

> He has given his people a wide and busy background. There is not only an abundance of life on the stage. Life is going on also at a brisk tempo all through the neighborhood. Some of it we see, like the children chasing the goat around the dooryard, flying a kite, or stealing bananas, and The Strega with her evil eye casting baleful spells around her ... Trucks race by noisily on the highway, attending to the furious business of a heedless world.[64]

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61. Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, p. 9.
62. Ibid., p. 118.
63. "Lighting Up for 'Summer and Smoke'," New York Times, December 5, 1948, Sec. II, p. 7.
64. Brooks Atkinson, "Tattooing," New York Times, June 3, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.

Looking at the same piece with a more jaundiced eye, Mr. Brown says: "His innumerable villagers, for example, never succeed in serving as the Chorus they were plainly meant to be."[65]

Aristotle tells us that Aeschylus was the first to introduce a second actor and to diminish the importance of the Chorus. One of Mr. Williams' critics condemns him for overdependence upon a central character about whom the entire drama is revolved,[66] but it would seem that in this respect, Williams is close to the classical tradition. Horace advises against having too many principals.[67]

Horace, the great exponent of classical restraint, would survey Tennessee Williams with mixed emotions. Williams repeatedly defies the dictum that "you must not show on the stage itself the kind of thing that should have taken place behind the scenes."[68] Decorum is often sacrificed for direct impact. Even the kindly disposed Brooks Atkinson is constrained to remark of The Rose Tattoo: "For a sensitive man writing for general audiences, Mr. Williams can be curiously insensitive at times to the ordinary amenities of public communication."[69] Again he remarks, this time of Streetcar, "If Tennessee Williams does not spare his audience much, he does not spare his leading lady anything."[70]

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65. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:22, March 10, 1951.
66. Isador Sydnor, Masses and Mainstream, September 21, 1949.
67. Horace, "Art of Poetry," ll. 153-192, Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 54.
68. Ibid.
69. Brooks Atkinson, "Tattooing," New York Times, June 3, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.
70. Brooks Atkinson, "'Streetcar' Passenger," New York Times, June 12, Sec. II, p. 1.

In this respect, Williams is clearly an Elizabethan. He likewise does not adhere to the five-act form advocated by Horace. His plays are episodic, usually divided into about a dozen scenes.

On the positive side, Horace could approve of the remarkable simplicity that Tennessee Williams sometimes achieves. Mr. Brown allows that he is an artist of merit in this respect, that he is "at his best when he writes simply and directly as an emotionalist."[71] Williams also observes Horace's advice to the young artist to rework his material over an extended period of time. Williams devoted a year and a half to his earlier major plays and two and a half years to Camino Real. Each exists in three or four drafts.[72] The Rose Tattoo was rewritten five times.[73] For Horace, the aim of the poet should be "to inform and delight,"[74] and while the Williams plays obviously have some didactic intent, Tennessee Williams regards his work as important principally to himself, as a narcotic, as fulfillment and escape.[75] Even so, it is debatable whether he is the complete romantic in this respect.

In the Renaissance restatement of the classical ideals the unities of time and place were added. Mr. Williams adheres closely to the unity of place in all his plays. This can not be attributed, however, to conscious imitation, but to an instinctive feeling shared with the neo-

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71. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:24, March 10, 1951.
72. Lewis, op. cit., p. 19.
73. Gilroy, loc. cit.
74. Horace, op. cit., ll. 333-347.
75. Barnett, op. cit., p. 116.

classicists that it contributes to the unity of the action. In the Williams plays instead of this unity of place confining the action it rather allows it greater freedom; the flow of his plays is less impeded by having the scenes take place on a unit set that provides a varied background. In this way he does not depart from the cohesion that the unities imply while he achieves the fluidity of the Shakespearean Stage. Nor does he depart far from the unity of time, though he makes no effort to confine the action to the stringent single revolution of the sun.

In Camino Real time is, in a sense, suspended.

> Instead of diurnal chronology, he has substituted a feeling of time by dividing the play into sixteen blocks on the royal or real highway (the ambiguity is intentional). Each block corresponds with a French scene (a character enters or exits) and is announced to the audience by the hotel proprietor ... "I wanted the regular announcement of the blocks as they come along to have the whiplike quality of time," says the poetic dramatist.[76]

When Sir Philip Sidney wrote, "We see virtue exalted, and vice punished,"[77] he formulated the principle of poetic justice that was to become an important element in the drama. Williams allows us to see deep into the hearts of his characters, he seems to want us to understand them and their suffering, but he fails to offer any solution to their problems. As opposed to an "answerer," such as Shaw, Mr. Williams is concerned simply with "posing." Samuel Johnson's criticism of Shakespeare is imminently applicable to Tennessee Williams with respect to poetic justice.

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76. Henry Hewes, "Broadway Postscript," Saturday Review of Literature, 36:25, March 28, 1953.

77. Sir Philip Sidney, "An Apology for Poetry," Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 81.

> He seems to write without any moral purpose ... He makes no just distribution of good or evil, nor is always careful to show in the virtuous a disapprobation of the wicked; he carries his persons indifferently through right and wrong, and at the close dismisses them without further care.[78]

Mr. Atkinson writes: "There is no purpose in Streetcar. It solves no problems; it arrives at no general moral conclusions."[79]

Lodge gives a Renaissance definition of tragedy as "the sower fortune of many exiles, the miserable fal of haples princes, the reuinous decay of many countryes."[80] The Williams plays are not far from fulfilling this definition. Amanda Wingfield and Blanche DuBois are exiles in that they are in environments incompatible with their natures, surroundings which are contrasts to what they have known in happy childhoods. Williams' heroines are in effect fallen princesses; Amanda and Alma Winemiller are daughters of clergymen, ranking nobility in Southern culture. Blanche has been dispossessed of her domain, Belle Rêve. New social orders are taking over all they have cherished and their old institutions and values are indeed in ruinous decay.

With the arrival of the Elizabethans on the stage a new form of drama was introduced — the tragi-comedy. Although the form was frowned on by the rigid classicists as being an unholy alliance, Dr. Johnson defended Shakespeare's use of it by observing, "There is always an

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78. Samuel Johnson, "Preface to Shakespeare," Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 212.

79. Brooks Atkinson, "'Streetcar' Tragedy," New York Times, December 14, 1947, Sec. II, p. 3.

80. Lodge, quoted by Vernon Hall, Jr., Renaissance Literary Criticism, p. 176.

appeal open from criticism to nature,"[81] and as the later Romantic critic, Hazlitt, opined, when introduced in tragedy, side by side with intense sympathy, the detachment of comedy can offer an additional dimension. King Lear especially illustrates the effect that can come from the combination. The Williams dramas most conveniently fall into this classification. Even The Rose Tattoo, which leans heavily to comedy, has its alternate scenes of the tragic and comic. Just as Shakespeare has a fool in the scenes of Lear's greatest grief, Williams, in The Rose Tattoo, has an urchin dart in and shoot a pea at the despairing Serafina alone on the stage. In Camino Real Kilroy is forced to humiliate himself by playing the "patsy" or "fall guy." Williams' staging too is reminiscent of the Elizabethans'. The action of his plays swirls on, around, and about a unit set. There are always clowns who hob-nob with the royalty. In Summer and Smoke, the sensitive Alma and her clerical father are burdened with the ridiculous Mrs. Winemiller. Blanche excuses herself to the boorish card players in Streetcar, "No don't get up — I'm only passing through."[82] Two 'floozies' wave to the Legionnaires from the house of the grieving Serafina.

> In view of the attitude he takes toward the materials of literature, it is difficult, if not impossible, for Mr. Williams to write categorically ... Being independent of the usual forms, he has not reduced his portrait of life [in The Rose Tattoo] to comedy or tragedy.[83]

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81. Johnson, op. cit., p. 210.
82. Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 11, p. 165.
83. Brooks Atkinson, "Tattooing," New York Times, June 3, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.

Dryden, in his Essay of Dramatic Poesy, defends Shakespeare's use of double plots as lending variety to the action. In this usage, however, Williams has been less the Elizabethan. Sub-plots have not been characteristic of his dramas. The first and very effective use of this device was in the contrapuntal love themes in The Rose Tattoo. Here the sub-plot contrasts the passionate devotion of the mother heroine with the refreshingly innocent young love between her daughter and a sailor youth.

Keats speaks of Shakespeare as possessing enormous Negative Capability, that quality that passes by any straining after fact and reason.[84] It is a curious blend of detachment and insight that allows an author to create objectively a character with intense subjective emotions. We envision Shakespeare in none of his great roles, such as is easily done with Byron in his Manfred. Williams, too, may be said to possess this quality of Negative Capability to a high degree.

> A Streetcar Named Desire is a play of subtle perceptions, told coldly by a man looking on from some distance. Mr. Williams' characters are almost like figures in an inhuman fantasy. He knows them intimately. He knows how they were produced and how inevitable their destinies must be. He does not move his pen to one side or the other to help them.[85]

Jonson conceived the "Humours" theory of character and in that the humours are eccentricities in a character which tend to put him off-balance Tennessee Williams is indebted to him. Jonson, too,

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84. Walter Jackson Bate, Criticism: The Major Texts, p. 349.
85. Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," New York Times, May 24, 1950, p. 36.

was adept in presenting the class-types of a highly organized or decadent society, with all their elaborate vesture of custom, manner, and phrase. Amanda Wingfield, living in a squalid section of St. Louis, can no more divest herself of her 'raising' than her son can accept what to him is an outmoded pollyanna optimism.

Beaumont and Fletcher further popularized and gave importance to tragi-comedy, and while their style merits high praise, a strain of the sentimental is apparent in their work.[86] The growth of domestic tragedy, which hastened the decline of the brilliant English Renaissance in drama, leads to Shirley and Ford who further point the way to the modern absorption with questions of sex, the search for new sensations, the perversion of morals. Several of Williams' early short plays in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton can qualify for Thorndike's judgment of Ford: "His plays are immoral because their passion is so often morbid and their sentiment mawkish."[87]

The Williams dramas have little in common with the form of the Restoration tragedies, except, perhaps, the violent conflicts in the main characters and an inclination toward the exotic in setting. The love versus honor theme, so prevalent in the heroic play, is to some extent apparent in Summer and Smoke.

The rise of sentimentalism in the eighteenth century effected a drama of sensibility, sensibility in this instance being defined as

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86. Ashley H. Thorndike, Tragedy, p. 207.
87. Ibid., p. 229.

sympathy for the virtues and distresses of ordinary human beings. The plays of Tennessee Williams likewise have little in common with this type, but perhaps are indebted to the genre for its break with the rigidities of the heroic.

With the advent of the Romantic Movement, a shift of attitude is apparent in the altered approach to the drama, where character rather than plot became the primary concern of such critics as Coleridge, Schlegel, and Hazlitt.[88] An imaginative sort of realism or "Impressionism" fared briefly but received no distinguished treatment to any extent in the drama. There is a marked similarity between this transient mood and some of Williams' work. John Mason Brown commends his ability to evoke mood and transcend realism.[89]

Matthew Arnold, in his nostalgia for the ancients, felt that poetry should be rooted in the Concrete. In his reapplication of classical criteria, however, he declared that a situation can not be simultaneously painful and poetic.[90] Mr. Atkinson disagrees with Arnold's premise in applying it to Streetcar, while not denying that the drama is painful.

> The point is: Does it show a poetic awareness of people and life? I think it does. A poet in his approach to life, he has plucked out the heart of a human being's mystery. Out of commonplace appearances, he has created a vibrant character, immersed in private anguish. His extraordinarily sen-

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88. Bate, op. cit., p. 271.
89. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:31, October 30, 1948.
90. Bate, op. cit., p. 442.

> tient portrait would be excommunicated in Arnold's book of rules.[91]

The modern movement in the theatre with its broadly naturalistic approach to art further liberated the dramatist from the restrictions of form. Not undeplored in some quarters, especially by T. S. Eliot, for its denial of poetry to the contemporary stage, the trend developed into the coldly realistic play with its clinical concern for the concrete and the particular. While Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly a modern in the freedom with which he employs his material and in his subject matter which deals with contemporary problems, he flatly rejects our latter day realism.

> The straight realistic play with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art.[92]

One of the devices tabooed by the modern theatre is the 'aside' or the direct address to an audience by an actor. Ibsen felt that the early nineteenth century romantics had worn out the convention, that characterisation suffered as a result of its abuse by their villains.[93] This convention, however, is extensively and effectively employed by Tennessee Williams in two of his plays. In The Glass Menagerie Tom addresses the audience from the very first and comments

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91. Brooks Atkinson, "Everything Is Poetic," New York Times, June 6, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.
92. Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. ix.
93. Allardyce Nicoll, British Drama, p. 344.

throughout the play in a manner very reminiscent of the Stage Manager in Thornton Wilder's Our Town. In Camino Real Mr. Williams frequently has his characters come to the footlights and confide in the audience. Perhaps the closest analogy to this practice in the modern theatre is contained in Eugene O'Neill's Strange Interlude. The director of Camino Real, Mr. Elia Kazan, sees it as the most direct play of our time:

> It's Tennessee speaking personally and lyrically right to you. That's one reason we've pulled the audience inside the fourth wall by having the actors frequently speak directly to the spectator and by having some of the exits and entrances made through the aisles of the theatre. This device also gives a feeling of freedom.[94]

To say that Tennessee Williams has rejected the theatre of realistic conventions is not to imply that he is unobligated to certain masters in the modern theatre. His immediate predecessor, Eugene O'Neill, contributed many experiments in form that Williams has utilized. Chekhov is freely given credit for inspiration, and certain emotional patterns in the work of Ibsen are apparent in Williams' dramas. Mr. Allardyce Nicoll observes of the subject matters employed by these two masters:

> Tchechov is more visionary than Ibsen, and prefers to deal rather with mental than emotional problems. Ibsen is obsessed ... with the tremendous difficulties which the fact of sex brings to life; Tchechov deals with

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94. Hewes, op. cit., p. 26.

> mental disappointments, with literary ambitions, and with artistic failures.[95]

These subjects are all comprehended in the works of Tennessee Williams to a high degree. Tom in The Glass Menagerie is a frustrated poet in the best Sea Gull fashion. Alma and John in Summer and Smoke wrestle with the devil in the flesh. In Streetcar Blanche's mental and emotional disappointments plunge her into insanity. While perhaps not an artistic failure Lord Byron in Camino Real has wandered far afield. "Nothing really happens in Ghosts," writes Mr. Nicoll; "the action is more psychological than physical in A Doll's House and in The Wild Duck."[96] One could also say that nothing really happens in The Glass Menagerie and Summer and Smoke. In the former Tom brings a friend home to supper. The changes in Summer and Smoke are purely psychological.

Although Tennessee Williams veers from the dictaphone and camera, his dramas for the most part have not embraced the extreme opposite — fantasy. Fantasy has been used extensively in his last play Camino Real, but only to point up symbolically certain bitter actualities. Joseph Wood Krutch comments on this middle path that Williams follows,

> ... a method which is neither that of simple realism nor of frank fantasy. Obviously Mr. Williams is a highly subjective playwright. His stories are not told primarily either for their own sakes or in order to propound a merely ra-

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95. Nicoll, op. cit., p. 347.
96. Ibid., p. 345.

> tional thesis, but chiefly because they enable him to communicate emotions which have a special, personal significance. Already one begins to take it for granted that his plays will be immediately recognizable by their familiar themes and a sensibility as unique as that of a lyric poet. Yet he never quite abandons dramatic objectivity as a method. To go one step farther in the direction of subjectivity would inevitably be to reach "expressionism" or some other form of non-representational art. But though there is in the plays as written a certain haunting dream-like or rather nightmarish quality, the break with reality is never quite made, and nothing happens which might not be an actual event.[97]

The critics are unanimous in recognizing Williams' value as a great lyricist who combines stylization with realism, one who has contributed materially to the restoration of poetry to the stage. Although Tennessee Williams has published poetry per se, he is vitally interested in the theatre as a means to fulfill the Wordsworthian definition of a poet — "He is a man speaking to men."[98]

Williams quite rightly does not conceive of his dramas fitting into any one of the older dramatic forms.

> They have to do with a conception of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.[99]

Mr. Williams' agent, Audrey Wood, credits this conception with inspiring Carson McCullers to dramatize her highly successful Member of the

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97. Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," Nation, 165:686, December 20, 1947.

98. William Wordsworth, "Preface to Lyrical Ballads," in Bate, op. cit., p. 339.

99. Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. ix.

Wedding which is close to the Williams works in mood and setting.[100] Mr. Kazan believes that A Streetcar Named Desire in furthering a less literal approach toward the theatre made Arthur Miller's Death of a Salesman acceptable to the theatregoing public. Both Mr. Kazan and producer Cheryl Crawford express themselves as "pleased to be doing a work (Camino Real) that moves so far away from the strict naturalistic drama that prevails on Broadway."[101]

Sensitivity characterizes his approach to art. Through it, he has become a master of mood so vivid that one feels the color and timbre of emotion and thought throughout his dramas. During the past eight years, the plays of Tennessee Williams have brought to the theatre "a poetic writer who could look through the polite surfaces of life into the pain that froze the hearts of lonely people."[102]

In form, these plays represent a fusion of older elements resulting in a fresh creation. The Pythagorian definition of Beauty as "The reduction of Many to One,"[103] might apply in this instance. The fusing process, however, has been of such an essentially creative nature that when Mr. Williams is asked to explain the origin of one of his plays he struggles with the question for several moments, then gives up: "Perhaps my unconscious could tell, I can't."[104]

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100. Gehman, op. cit., p. 20.
101. Hewes, op. cit., p. 26.
102. Brooks Atkinson, "The Rose Tattoo," New York Times, February 11, 1951, Sec. II, p. 1.
103. Bate, op. cit., p. 373.
104. Lewis, op. cit., p. 19.

CHAPTER III

In the three general periods of tragedy three divergent concepts are presented. The Athenians assumed that righteousness prevailed and the dramatist tried to show how; the Renaissance attempted to answer the question of whether; and the Moderns deny the morality of the universe: nature makes no demands upon man and has no care.[105] Of the Moderns Anatole France says compassionately, "Chacun fait son salut comme il peut." Williams' dramatic philosophy can unquestionably be classified as modern. One writer states that his work "seems devoid of any significance, cosmic, social or political."[106] He stands as aloof and reticent as a social agnostic. Mr. Atkinson offers an explanation. "He seems to know that thinking and logic do not change the will of the cruel universe."[107]

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105. George R. Coffman, "Tragedy and a Sense of the Tragic," Sewanee Review, 50:29,30,32, January, 1942.

106. Leda Bauer, "American Tragedy," Theatre Arts, 35:34 July, 1951.

107. Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, October 17, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.

In writing of tragedy, Aristotle did not recognize or, possibly for some other reason, did not stress the importance of the element of conflict, whether between man and circumstance, or between men, or within the mind of man, although Greek plays themselves exhibit such conflicts.[108] The medieval drama, however, notably in the moralities, emphasized moral conflict, and in certain respects Williams is more closely allied to this period than to any other. The allegorical treatment of struggle between justice and mercy, good and evil, is thinly disguised in some of his works. "Summer and Smoke is really an allegory of good and evil. It is the old, old story of the flesh and the spirit at war."[109] You Touched Me is described as "an allegory of the closed and open attitude toward life."[110] Williams indirectly refers to his own inner struggles when he says that writing is more violent than professional wrestling, and speaks of his periods of composition as the moments of "outer oblivion and inner violence."[111]

The Renaissance modified the medieval concept and took for its theme the conflict of human will with other forces. Even in the plays in which the Greeks were imitated, a typical tragedy came to be concerned with a great personality engaged in a struggle that ended disastrously.[112] With Marlowe, death became synonymous

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108. Thorndike, op. cit., p. 8.
109. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:31, October 30, 1948.
110. "Tennessee Williams," Current Biography 1946, p. 646.
111. Tennessee Williams, "A Writer's Quest for a Parnassus," New York Times Magazine, August 13, 1950, p. 16.
112. Thorndike, op. cit., p. 9.

with tragic catastrophe. Paradoxically, this had its basis in the Elizabethan's new preoccupation with life and worldly delights. The classical point of view, which they found in the philosophy and literature that Italy passed on to them, expressed the sentiments that their rediscovery of the world aroused. "Sensuous things were to be enjoyed for their own sakes, and a robust and harmonious expression of delight in worldly affairs was to be admired and persued."[113] The tradition of the medieval past which taught the exact opposite, that man in the flesh and life on earth was nothing, was still strong and a conflict between these two opposing attitudes to life was inevitable. The result was not only drama in a technical, but also a deeper, a psychological and sociological, sense. "Death, indeed was tragedy; a tragedy was a play which ended in death."[114] Another paradox is that the contemplation of death alone could give life meaning.[115] This conflict and its implications contributed to the greatness of Shakespeare and of the literature which surrounded him. It was a literature eminently aware of the central emotional problems of life, and therefore a literature that made much of death. Death, per se, is the end of only one of Williams' short plays and none of his other works. In Streetcar, Blanche can speak lightly of her own death, envisioning it as being occasioned by eating an unwashed grape,

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113. Theodore Spencer, Death and Elizabethan Tragedy, p. ix.
114. Ibid., p. 232.
115. Ibid., p. 48

of being sewn in a white sack, and being buried in a sea as blue as her first lover's eyes.

Although the plays of Tennessee Williams do not, as the Elizabethan plays, end in death, the preoccupation is evidenced in other ways. With the exception of The Glass Menagerie, the heroines in all his other major dramas give themselves to men without benefit of clergy. This seemingly excessive extra-legal fornication is not, however, based on unbridled lust or depravity of morals. Desire, to Williams' mind, is the antithesis of death,[116] and the sexual act a defiant protest. Blanche looks with revulsion upon Death's repeated calls to Belle Rêve, and goes out and gives herself to every man who will have her. "Everything gone but the death. I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are."[117]

The Elizabethan was not alone preoccupied with physical death, but with mental death as well as portrayed in madness. It represented a true fall from greatness when we consider the sixteenth century poet's saying, "My mind to me a kingdom is." In this respect Williams is a true Elizabethan. Whether occasioned by excessive grief or "the cruel deficiencies of reality," madness has always filled the human breast with horror, and death itself can excite no greater pity. In speaking of the

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116. Tennessee Williams, "The opposite is desire," A Streetcar Named Desire," p. 142

117. Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 9, p. 142.

pathological lying of Mrs. Harwicke-Moore in The Lady of Larkspur Lotion, Williams has the Writer (Anton Pavlovitch Chekhov) say, " ... Is she to be blamed because it is necessary for her to compensate for the cruel deficiencies of reality by the exercise of a little ... imagination?"[118] Another short play, Portrait of a Madonna, ends in madness for the heroine. Ophelia does not recognize her friends in her madness, but more poignantly does Blanche, when her mind has been cauterized by the final degradation, turn to the doctor, "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."[119] Brooks Atkinson calls Streetcar a cruel play, for it "vividly describes the agony, fright and loneliness of a woman who has been pushed out of human society into the pitiless seclusion of madness."[120]

Dryden, living in an age which saw the beginnings of the New Science and a revised concept of the universe, saw the doom of the old tragedy and attempted to rescue the form from certain extinction by introducing the problems of free will, predestination, and reason versus passion.[121] Dryden's heroic characterizations seem to be an attempt to relate the tragic hero to the new concept of the universe. As in Milton's Samson Agonistes, these problems are conventionally introduced in the form

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118. Tennessee Williams, "The Lady of Larkspur Lotion," 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, p. 70.

119. Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 11, p. 170.

120. Brooks Atkinson, "'Streetcar' Passenger," New York Times, June 12, 1949, Sec. II, p.1.

121. Allardyce Nicoll, Restoration Drama, p. 165.

of a debate by the hero with himself over whether he shall follow his reason or his passion. Tragedy results when the hero is a slave of passion. The will is assumed to be free to control the passions. The spiritual tumult that Alma in Summer and Smoke has within herself whether to cast aside her conventional morality and accept the love she longs for is not unlike the introspection in Heroic drama. In reviewing this play, Mr. Atkinson says of the author:

> Although he is dealing in impulses that can not be literally defined, the twin themes of his tone poem are clearly stated: spirit and flesh, order and anarchy. He has caught them in the troubled brooding of two human hearts.[122]

The Restoration age was "hungry for heroism, and feeling itself baulked of it in real life was happy to find it in its art."[123] Admiration took the place of terror in these dramas. Perfect love was exhibited for admiration and was used as a means for procuring pity.

> Thus, in this tragedy we find man, not so much exploring his daring and measuring his acceptance, as reaching for the absolute, trying to establish something definite in opposition to the unsatisfactory compromises of life.[124]

The tragedy of the period failed to please except for a short time because the dramatists of that day were trying to express

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122. Brooks Atkinson, "At the Theatre," New York Times, October 7, 1948, p. 33.
123. Bonamy Dobrée, Restoration Tragedy, 1660-1720, p. 16.
124. Ibid., pp. 21-22.

romantic ideas in a form specially evolved for the classical. The romantic is always in revolt, eager to remould the world nearer his heart's desire. The classicist feels that life is a material with definite characteristics, which can be dealt with, no doubt, in various ways, but which can not be greatly altered. As Bonamy Dobrée phrases it for the classicist, "No art can be really great which does not accept humanity for what it is. The moment it tries to guide mankind into channels, or endeavors to prevent its being mankind, an essential element is omitted."[125]

In this controversy, Tennessee Williams is on the side of the classicist. He does not write propaganda or champion social or political reform. "I don't think I have ever been conscious of writing with a theme in mind."[126] He does not distort nature to produce an idea. "He writes out of the free world of a poet, he looks about him at ordinary people, wonders about their private anguish but knows of no way to relieve it."[127] Even in Camino Real with its long cast of romantics Williams' obvious sympathy with his characters does not lead him to propose a panacea for their ills.

> Now if Camino Real purported to deliver a message, I would have had to be clearer, but

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125. Ibid., p. 179.
126. Tennessee Williams, "Questions without Answers," New York Times, October 3, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.
127. Brooks Atkinson, "Work of Art," New York Times, October 17, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.

> it doesn't, and I don't think the people who find it confusing in its present form would like it any better if it were clarified.[128]

As in the Restoration, tragedy was thought of by the Neo-Classicists as the theatrical equivalent of the epic and the form therefore was made to include what were considered epic qualities. Tragedy was conceived of as a moral lesson in elevated style portraying grandeur d'âme for the example and imitation of the nobility.[129] Another important element in the tragedy of this period, in addition to the heroic, is the romantic or sentimental element. This is exemplified in the tragedies of Otway who was greatly influenced by Racine — "the great sentimentalist."[130] This emotional quality tended toward the pathetic, away from the heroic, and resulted in the replacing of the tragic hero, who disintegrates, by the distressed lady. This epithet would certainly appear to apply to Mr. Williams' heroines. Although the female takes center stage, his tragedies do not continue the tradition of sentimental pathos. As Lincoln Barnett observes: "In mood the plays of both Chekhov and Williams are warm but unsentimental."[131]

The romantic, per se, has had some consideration by Mr. Williams, especially in Camino Real, which he calls "a prayer for the wild of heart kept in cages."[132]

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128. Tennessee Williams, quoted by Howes, op. cit., p. 26.
129. Roswell Gray Ham, Otway and Lee, p. 80.
130. Ibid.
131. Barnett, op. cit., p. 116.
132. Howes, op. cit., p. 25.

One of his short plays is entitled Lord Byron's Love Letter and Lord Byron is also portrayed in Camino Real. He discourses on the death of Shelley, a Shelley who remained to the end a visionary idealist, and apparently Mr. Williams would have us feel that Lord Byron regrets his own loss of innocence. The Gypsy's daughter Esmerelda includes in her prayer "the poet gone far away from his heart's green country and trying to find his way back." Mr. Williams says that Camino Real presents

> ... a picture of the state of the romantic non-conformist in modern society. It stresses honor and man's own sense of inner dignity which the Bohemian must reachieve after each period of degradation he is bound to run into. The romantic should have the spirit of anarchy and not let the world drag him down to its level.[133]

While the concepts of tragedy have mirrored the changes in man's ideas of his relationship to the universe and the nature of existence, some tragic elements have remained unchanged: (1) the brevity of life; (2) the ineluctability of death; (3) man's helplessness in the face of certain forces which are uncontrollable.[134] Williams writes: "Whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are all haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanence."[135] Commenting further on the above tragic elements, Mr. Coffman deduces that "man has therefore conceived of a hierarchy of power which controls existence: (1) Providence; (2) Destiny; (3) Fate;

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133. Ibid., pp. 25-26.
134. Coffman, op. cit., p. 27.
135. Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo, p. viii.

(4) Fortune. The functions of these powers are defined as follows: Providence is the guiding force behind all things; Destiny decrees for Providence; Fate carries out these decrees upon the human race; and Fortune imposes these decrees upon the individual.[136] In spite of science we have found no panacea, man is still helpless and frustrated. Fate still exists in some form, however modified. Man's maladjustment is the source of the modern tragic spirit.[137] Chekhov and Williams both deal with "the isolation of human beings and their tragic inability to understand one another.[138] A Streetcar Named Desire is, by Williams' own definition, "a tragedy of incomprehension;"[139] its protagonist, Blanche DuBois, is, in the words of Brooks Atkinson, "one of the dispossessed whose experience has unfitted her for reality."[140] The latter phrase could be applied with equal validity to the majority of principal characters in Williams' other works, with the exception of The Rose Tattoo.

Joseph Wood Krutch would have it, however, that we have no real tragedy today.

> The Tragic Fallacy depends ultimately upon the assumption which man so readily makes that something outside his own being, some 'spirit not himself' — be it God, Nature, or that still

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136. Coffman, op. cit., p. 28.
137. Ibid., p. 32.
138. Barnett, op. cit., p. 116.
139. Ibid.
140. Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre," New York Times, December 14, 1947, Sec. II, p. 3.

> vaguer thing called a Moral Order -- joins him in the emphasis which he places upon this or that and confirms him in his feeling that his passions and his opinions are important. When his instinctive faith in that correspondence between the outer and the inner world fades, his grasp upon the faith that sustained him fades also, and Love or Tragedy or what not ceases to be the reality which it was because he is never strong enough in his own significant self to stand alone in a universe which snubs him with its indifference ... We can no longer tell tales of the fall of noble men because we do not believe that noble men exist. The best that we can achieve is pathos and the most that we can do is feel sorry for ourselves.[141]

Williams would at least refute the last idea for he writes, "Men pity and love each other more deeply than they permit themselves to know."[142] He would also substitute moral values for the above "something outside his own being," and his attitude is considerably less pessimistic than that of Mr. Krutch. Williams believes that

> The great and only possible dignity of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live steadfastly as if he, too, like a character in a play, were immured against the corrupting rush of time. Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence.[143]

This statement, with its Elizabethan flavor, also has the Metaphysical poet's awareness of "Time's winged chariot hurrying near." This is no momentary obsession with Williams.

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141. Joseph Wood Krutch, Modern Temper, pp. 136-137.
142. Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo, p. ix.
143. Ibid.

Like many writers and most bachelors, he is a hypochondriac. He is continuously and unpleasantly conscious of the pulsations of his heart, the act of breathing, and the flow of blood in his arterial system.[144] We turn on the radio or television to keep from hearing the clock tick. As Williams phrases it, "Time rushes toward us with its hospital tray of infinitely varied narcotics, even while it is preparing us for its inevitably fatal operation."[145]

Perhaps the most universal narcotic is Art. The arrest of time which has taken place in a completed work of art gives it, especially in the theatre, its feeling of depth and significance. "Contemplation is something that exists outside of time," Williams observes, "and so is the tragic sense."[146] In a world without time and its pressures, he feels that people would receive each other with concern and kindness which would further oppose Mr. Krutch's theory of self-pity pathos. Rather it is that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue because we have disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts.[147] If Mr. Krutch should hear an echo of Lawrence Sterne in this, it may be noted here that Mr. Krutch was among those who debated less than fifteen minutes in selecting The Glass Menagerie for the Drama Critics Circle Award and was also one of the seventeen out of twenty-one who voted for Streetcar.[148]

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144. Barnett, op. cit., p. 114.
145. Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo, p. x.
146. Ibid, p. vi.
147. Ibid., p. x.
148. New York Times, April 15, 1945, Sec. II, p. 1, and April 1, 1948, p. 29.

Perhaps, to be fair to Mr. Krutch, it should be recalled that in Modern Temper he was discussing the modern theatre in general. It is possible that today he might make exceptions to his thesis. Certainly his penetrating reviews of A Streetcar Named Desire and Summer and Smoke show an awareness of the tragic content in those dramas.

> Here again the moral complexity of the situation arises out of the fact that the author's deepest sympathy lies, not with the "vital" characters who triumph, but with the ineffectual idealist who is destroyed ... In both cases the tragedy lies, not in the fact that the heroine resists, but in the fact that she has so little to resist with. "Gentility" is the only form of idealism or spirituality accessible to her; perhaps, Mr. Williams seems to be saying, the only form now accessible to anyone, and our culture is ugly just because we have no living equivalent for what is by now a mere quaint anachronism. If I read him aright, he is not so much ridiculing his Southern "ladies" and Southern "gentlemen" as he is reproaching the rest of the world for having found no equivalent of what their ladyhood and their gentlemanliness once represented.[149]

James K. Feibleman also opposes Mr. Krutch's thesis in Modern Temper that we have no real tragedy today. Mr. Feibleman feels that the formal work of art is really an intensification of knowledge gained from everyday life and that tragedy will always be a part of life due to the element of struggle. Struggle always has its tragic aspect, since there must be a vanquished whenever there is a victor. "Every actual thing is both valuable

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149. Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," Nation, 167:473, October 23, 1948.

and logical. Its value has disvalue; its logic has contradictions. Thus it is doomed; and indeed history is the record of doomed things."[150] Mr. Feibleman feels that love reaches beyond reason, and we do not wish the things we love to die.

> We know that they shall die; yet we love them all the same, and we are willing to fight for them. It is a hopeless fight, and we shall undoubtedly lose them in the end which may be near or distant. But we fight for what we love, doggedly, blindly, against all adversaries, though we may know in a way, or feel, that we are certain to go down in defeat.[151]

We fight for what is good and true and beautiful not because we think or hope that these things will exist forever; we know they will not. Our struggle is because we know them to be valuable, and, though in reality these ideals have their being forever, we do not wish them banished from actual existence.

All of Williams' heroines have values that are in conflict with their environments. Their most basic values, their spiritual inheritances, are usually in conflict with the materialistic values held in esteem by his antagonists. In Summer and Smoke Alma exchanges her values to no avail. Blanche in Streetcar goes down in utter defeat clinging tenaciously to the tattered shreds of her values. Williams would seem to propose, perhaps unconsciously, that neither giving up nor retaining our values will save us from inevitable defeat when those values

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150. James K. Feibleman, Aesthetics, p. 63.
151. Ibid., p. 63.

conflict with stronger forces.

Brooks Atkinson likewise supports the position that we do have real tragedy today.

> Tragedies are enjoyable if they are written with imagination and integrity and if they are played with fire and skill. The classic example would be Shakespeare's Hamlet. But A Streetcar Named Desire and, more recently, Death of a Salesman are examples that can be pulled out of the current theatre.
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> The last reticent, muted scene in A Streetcar Named Desire is one of the cruelist in modern drama. But it dismisses the audience in a mood of hushed exhilaration because the writing is exact and the acting incandescent.[152]

Tennessee Williams' dramatic heritage, in all its varied aspects, is everywhere present in his work. He has leaned to the classical in objectivity, and again swung to the romantic in characterization. He has preached no sermons, yet he has deep compassion for mankind. He has remained aloof, but uncynical. Like his best writing, his artistic philosophy is simplicity itself.

> Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and that premise can provide the impulse to everything he creates. For me the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance.[153]

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152. Brooks Atkinson, "'Streetcar' Passenger," New York Times, June 12, 1949, Sec. II, p. 1.

153. Tennessee Williams, quoted by Barnett, op. cit., p. 116.

CHAPTER IV

"Mr. Williams is hopelessly mired in his new love — symbolism," states Walter Kerr of the New York Herald-Tribune writing of Camino Real, and further accuses Williams of being "preoccupied with techniques for getting at truth, without having any particular truth he wants to get at."[154] Writing of the same play Mr. Atkinson says that "Mr. Williams has unlocked his mind and told his version of the truth about human destiny."[155] Does such a difference of opinion mean that criticism is at best an affair of personal preferences or can it mean that Tennessee Williams' symbols convey his message to one critic but not the other?

When the Mohammedan poet wrote of the eyebrows of the Beloved and compared them to the domed or arched recesses of a mosque, when musk, the perfume of the Beloved, was made to stand

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154. Walter F. Kerr, "Camino Real," New York Herald-Tribune, March 20, 1953, p. 12.

155. Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre," New York Times, March 20, 1953, p. 26.

for the fragrant message which the True Beloved sends by death to those who love him, the poet indulged in a symbolism often misunderstood by Westerners.[156] As Alfred North Whitehead points out, symbols do not create their meaning: the meaning exists for us in its own right. "Our relationship to these bodies are [sic] precisely our reactions to them."[157]

Our understanding of any symbol necessarily depends on our individual experiences and knowledge. Mr. Whitehead writes of this:

> Our experience arises out of the past: it enriches with emotion and purpose its presentation of the contemporary world: and it bequeaths its character to the future, in the guise of an effective element forever adding to, or subtracting from, the richness of the world.[158]

That which we have not experienced is more than likely to be uncomprehended; the uncomprehended leads to the misunderstood, and in many instances, the condemned.

Tennessee Williams' use of symbolism, more than any other facet of his work, has disturbed certain critics. Mr. John Mason Brown objects to his symbolism on two counts: it is unintelligible, and it is too simple. Whether Mr. Brown feels that it is obscure in one play and overly simplified in another, or whether he merely contradicts himself in two unrelated critiques is unclear.

Of The Rose Tattoo he writes:

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156. Arthur Christy, The Orient in American Transcendentalism, p. 36.
157. Alfred North Whitehead, Symbolism, Its Meaning and Effect, pp. 57-58.
158. Ibid., p. 59.

> Do not ask me to describe the meaning of all the roses, real or imaginary, with which several of Mr. Williams' characters are tattooed. Let me only confess that not since the Houses of York and Lancaster fonded long and publicly have roses been used more lavishly than by Mr. Williams.[159]

An opposite view is expressed in his reaction to Summer and Smoke:

> In Summer and Smoke Tennessee Williams is motivated by the same commendable impulse [as Eugene O'Neill] to transcend the realistic theatre's usual restrictions and omissions. He, too, does not choose to have his characters remain static. He, too, would have us understand the clashes within as well as between their dissimilar temperaments. And, in his attempt to do this, he, too, is driven, with unfortunate results, to rely upon over-easy outward symbols to denote interior struggles.
>
> Although Mr. Williams seeks honestly to expose the full intricacy of his characters, he fails. He fails as Mr. O'Neill failed before him, and for much the same reasons. He fails because he, too, is unable to make his words do what he wants them to do. Sensing the inadequacy of his dialogue, he resorts in Mr. O'Neill's fashion to outward symbols for inner conflicts. The result is a simplification so elementary that it often comes close to being laughable.[160]

Mr. Brown particularly disliked the statue of the praying angel which Williams calls "Eternity" and the large anatomical chart in the doctor's office which were highlighted at times to

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159. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 34:24, March 10, 1951.

160. John Mason Brown, "Seeing Things," Saturday Review of Literature, 31:31, October 20, 1948.

illustrate the struggle between body and soul taking place within his people.

These two particular viewpoints of the same critic merely point up a universal problem — one of the most difficult problems in connection with language and cognition, as indeed in the theory of knowledge itself. Mr. Wilbur Marshall Urban poses the dilemma in these words:

> If we are to interpret the "sense" of the symbol we must expand it, and this must be in terms of literal sentences. If, on the other hand, we thus expand it we lose the "sense" or value of the symbol as symbol.[161]

Mr. Urban does not feel that the solution consists in substituting literal for symbol sentences for the function of the symbol is to supply intuition to the concept. When John Mason Brown accuses Tennessee Williams of being "unable to make his words do what he wants them to do" and of therefore substituting outward symbols for inner conflicts, Mr. Brown is answered by Mr. Urban's statement: "It is precisely because the more universal and ideal relations can not be adequately expressed directly that they are indirectly expressed by means of the more intuitable."[162]

In referring to the dual character of a symbol — the original character and the object for which it stands — Mr. Urban sees the cooperation of the conscious and the unconscious involved

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161. Wilbur Urban Marshall, Language and Reality, pp. 434-435.

162. Ibid., p. 434.

so that it enables a symbol "to exercise a reconciling function in the life of the spirit, of the conscious and unconscious life of men."[163]

Mr. Brown might be asked what other means are available to the artist to give poetic insight to inner conflicts than the insight symbol.

> Both poetry and religion are full of insight symbols, Dante's Divine Comedy is the epitome of the entire medieval notion of the insight symbol, but modern poetry makes use of the same symbol in the same way. The entire symbolic period of Ibsen, from The Wild Duck on, uses the physical to give us insight into spiritual relations. Perhaps one of the best illustrations, however, is the symbol of the onion in Peer Gynt. The onion which, when one layer after another is removed, finally reveals nothing, is a symbol of the "Gyntish I" — which is also nothingness at the core. Insight into the nature of the social self is here given which no amount of conceptual description could afford.[164]

"The symbol can be larger than fact," writes Joseph Wood Krutch. Mr. Krutch admires the symbolism which John Mason Brown castigates in Summer and Smoke and feels that its use puts that play on a par with A Streetcar Named Desire. There can be no talk of "inferior" or "superior" between the two plays because "Summer and Smoke often achieves a hypnotic, dream-like effect as impressive and as absorbing in its own way as the more sharply defined particularity of Streetcar."[165] Mr. Atkinson likewise

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163. Ibid., p. 419.
164. Ibid., p. 416.
165. Joseph Wood Krutch, "Drama," Nation, 167:474, October 23, 1948.

has no quarrel with the symbolism employed by Mr. Williams. Far from feeling that Camino Real is obscure he finds that "most of the play is only too clear. Mr. Williams conveys his sense of the horror of life only too explicitly. For he is a gifted writer with an extraordinary command of the use of symbols in the theatre."[166]

The escape symbol has been ever present in literature and the "tropical island paradise" or the "pie in the sky by and by" have attained even greater significance in these recent years of stress. This symbol has assumed several guises in the Williams plays. In The Glass Menagerie a picture of Amanda Wingfield's husband who has deserted his family is lighted at climactic moments to show Tom's almost irresistible urge to also fly the stifling atmosphere of his home. The lighted picture of the jovial escapee seems to mock his lack of courage in not fleeing. In Summer and Smoke Alma Winemiller has tried to escape the tedium of her life by organizing the Browning Society but eventually she resorts to her sleeping pills. The almost mythical Shep Huntleigh and his yacht symbolize escape for Blanche DuBois in Streetcar. Escape in Camino Real is symbolized by a non-scheduled flight of a plane christened the Fugitivo. In this last instance none of the critics missed this bit of fancy; consequently they liked it even less than the more cryptic symbols.

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166. Brooks Atkinson, "Camino Real," New York Times, March 29, 1953, Sec. II, p. 1.

Dissatisfaction with things as they are seems to be the underlying motive for the desire to escape in all the Williams plays, as indeed in life. In the opening scene of Camino Real the landlord phrases the sentiment of his bored transients disillusioned by life. "Is this all? Can there be no more?" Later in the play Lord Byron says, "There is a time for departure — even when there is no place to go to." Lord Byron would seem to speak for Williams when he advises Kilroy, "Make voyages — attempt them. There is nothing else to do."

The set of Camino Real is surrounded by a high and crumbling stone wall pierced by an open arch. Stone steps lead up to this arch and presumably beyond are uncharted deserts and snowy mountains. The wall symbolizes the self-placed mental barriers beyond which we fear to probe. Mr. Williams' characters talk of making the voyage, they long for freedom, but in reality the contemplation of its distant vistas overwhelms them. Kilroy wants to escape but he wants a "buddy" to make the trip with him. Lord Byron dares to travel alone and he departs through the gate for Athens. Don Quixote, aged but still heartily tilting, enters the gate for a moment's respite. The ghost of Kilroy has found his companion for the trip into the unknown. Carefully writing "KILROY WAS HERE" he departs with the old knight. As Henry Hewes writes: "Don Quixote, who appears at the end of the play, is the supreme example of the obstinate knight, gallant in meeting ultimate degradation, and unashamed at being the victim of his own

romantic follies."[167] It may also be symbolic that the high wall is crumbling, that Mr. Williams feels that some day we will have no barrier between infinity and our daring intellects.

Mr. John McClain of the New York Journal-American believes that Camino Real will divide any audience that sees it into two sharp categories: "Those who understand it and those who don't," and identifies himself with the latter.[168] Mr. Atkinson says that

> People who say that they do not understand it may be unwilling to hear the terrible things it records about an odious no-man's land between the desert and the sea. A sensitive, virtuoso writer, Mr. Williams knows how to create an intelligible world.[169]

Mr. McClain, however, flings a challenge to Williams:

> However soaring and symbolic, I can not think of one great play, from Shakespeare to Christopher Fry, whose premise could not be reduced to a simple sentence — and I will defy Mr. Williams to explain Camino Real in less than a page of small print.[170]

There are doubtless many who feel that a slick one-sentence definition of the premise of Hamlet would be more misleading than edifying even if one could be generally agreed upon — which is unlikely. In writing of Hamlet Mr. James K. Feibleman reminds

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167. Hewes, op. cit., p. 26.
168. John McClain, "Williams' Play Baffling to Some," New York Journal-American, March 20, 1953, p. 20.
169. Brooks Atkinson, "First Night at the Theatre," New York Times, March 20, 1953, p. 26.
170. McClain, loc. cit.

us that a work of art has a life of its own, one that "may or may not correspond to that which the artist intended to give it."[171] When Mr. Williams is asked about the meaning of one of his plays he is inclined to answer vaguely, "It is a play about life."[172] His intention, however, is certainly not to mystify such people as Mr. McClain.

> Inflated reputations and eclectic styles have cast an aura of gravity over much that is essentially vacuous in painting, obscurity has disguised sterility in a good deal of verse ... For a writer who is not intentionally obscure, and never, in his opinion, obscure at all, I do get asked a hell of a lot of questions I can't answer.[173]

"They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at — Elysian Fields!" These symbolic words spoken by Blanche in Streetcar are her first utterance on the stage. Wolcott Gibbs comments somewhat wryly on the reality of these trolley names, adding, "life in this case being singularly obliging to art.[174] Mr. Gibbs feels that such a brilliant play "has no possible need for the kind of pseudo-poetic decoration that more vacant authors so often employ to disguise their fundamental lack

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171. Feibleman, op. cit., p.281.
172. Tennessee Williams, "Questions without Answers," New York Times, October 3, 1948, Sec. II, p.1.
173. Ibid.
174. Wolcott Gibbs, "Lower Depts, Southern Style," 23:50, New Yorker, December 13, 1947.

of thought."[175] In his desire to have Streetcar stripped of its poetry it would seem that Mr. Gibbs is really making a plea for the straight realistic drama that Tennessee Williams has so studiously avoided. It may be frequently observed that the symbol admired in poetry is condemned when translated to the stage; in a tradition of realism the symbol is especially damned as 'arty.'

Blanche has come from Belle Rêve (perversely pronounced Belle Reeve) which is just what its name implies, for it is no longer a reality. This is obvious. But the value of this symbol does not rest here. It expands into infinitely richer and deeper connotations. It exists as a symbol of past happiness for a younger Blanche and represents that which is essentially lacking in her present situation — security. By extension, when Stanley questions Blanche about the loss of Belle Reve, he is not alone probing into her present but by analogy questioning her right to her past happiness. Writing of a later play Mr. Henry Hewes' comment on Williams' use of symbol to clarify is apropos here.

> By clarifying Mr. Williams doesn't mean that he feels a compunction to iron out the complications or contradictions within his play, because he intends it to be infinitely suggestive and filled with half-truths and intimations.[176]

One might say that a symbol has to be obvious to a degree to be recognized as a symbol, and at the same time obscure — or not

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175. Ibid., p. 54.
176. Hewes, op. cit., p. 26.

literal — to enrich the surface meanings with overtones that give a work of art its peculiar personality.

Alfred North Whitehead writes of a certain vagueness of symbolism in language itself.

> A word has a symbolic association with its own history, its other meanings, and with its general status in current literature. Thus a word gathers emotional signification from its emotional history in the past; and this is transferred symbolically to its meaning in present use.[177]

Mr. Whitehead further states that the transfer of emotion holds for the more artificial sorts of human symbolism as well. "Music is particularly adapted for this symbolic transfer of emotions, by reason of the strong emotions which it generates on its own account."[178] It has already been observed that Tennessee Williams relies on a liberal use of 'motif' music to create some of his most telling effects.

In pointing out the pitfall for all symbolists, Professor Whitehead has perhaps come closest in isolating the fundamental cause of the controversy engendered by Mr. Williams' use of symbolism. In a statement applicable to the discussion he warns:

> Mankind by means of its elaborate system of symbolic transference can achieve miracles of sensitiveness to a distant environment, and to a problematic future. But it pays the penalty, by reason of the dangerous fact that each symbolic transference may involve an arbitrary imputation of unsuitable characters.[179]

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177. Whitehead, op. cit., p. 84.
178. Ibid.
179. Ibid., p. 87.

When John Mason Brown declares that Mr. Williams "is unable to make his words do what he wants them to do," he may be partly justified, but his accusation that the playwright then proceeds to substitute symbol as a second best device is unsubstantiated. Mr. Williams has the poet's regard for the symbol as an enhancement, and harbors none of the realist's horror of the device as a crutch.

> To me, using a symbol is just a way of saying a thing more vividly and dramatically than I could otherwise. For instance, in Camino Real the hotel proprietor's dropping Casanova's shabby portmanteau of fragile memories out the window is a clearer expression of an idea than you might be able to do with a thousand words. However, I don't believe in using symbols unless they clarify. [180]

In condemning Tennessee Williams for being "hopelessly mired in his new love — symbolism," Mr. Kerr writes as a critic of foreshortened historical perspective. First, it may be pointed out that symbolism has been important in all Mr. Williams' dramas, even in his earliest. In The Glass Menagerie Tom speaks for the author in the beginning of the play, "I have a poet's weakness for symbols."[181] But more important is the fact that while symbolism itself may have been held in disrepute in the immediate past when realism reigned supreme, in reality Tennessee Williams continues in a tradition long established in American letters.

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180. Tennessee Williams, quoted by Newes, op. cit., p. 26.
181. Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie, p. 5.

Mr. Charles N. Feidelson, Jr., in pointing out that symbolism has been a pervasive presence in the American intellectual landscape, observes: "In the central work of Hawthorne, Whitman, Melville, and Poe, symbolism is at once technique and theme."[182] He emphasizes its importance, not as a stylistic device, but as a point of view, a governing principle, and further states that "Symbolism is the coloration taken on by the American literary mind under the pressure of American intellectual history."[183] In other respects Mr. Williams has not hesitated to break recent traditions to return to older forms, nor in this particular facet of his work has he caviled at continuing a tradition well rooted in his native soil.

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182. Charles N. Feidleson, Jr., Symbolism in American Literature, p. 43.
183. Ibid.

CHAPTER V

In the modern theatre there are two others contemporary with Williams who deserve the title of poet-dramatist — T. S. Eliot and Christopher Fry. Fry, with a native wit and rare charm, returns to a romantic tradition that is essentially Elizabethan in feeling. He would perhaps agree with Eliot that the English character remains at bottom obstinately 'humorous' and non-conformist.[184] Eliot, however, true to his Catholic preference for Outside Authority as opposed to the "inner voice," returns to Jonson and Dryden as past authorities for justifying the importation of Classicism into the romantic English drama. Eliot's religious attitude has carried over into his concepts of the drama. "The perfect and ideal drama is to be found in the ceremony of the Mass ... The Mass is a small drama, having all the unities; but in the Church year you have represented the full drama of creation."[185] He feels

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184. T. S. Eliot, "The Function of Criticism," Selected Essays, p. 16.

185. T. S. Eliot, "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry," Selected Essays, p. 35.

that the drama can not afford to depart far from religious liturgy and his own creations for the theatre contain certain ritualistic incantations. This logically leads him to feel that the greatest drama is poetic drama, that structural defects can be compensated by poetic excellence. "We can cite Shakespeare."[186] Rather than surmising how Williams would agree or disagree with such precepts and concepts it would perhaps be best to recall that he has freely returned to traditional devices and conventions but has modeled them freshly for his own needs. He has not formulated them in pedantic terms nor applied them in studied artifices. Williams appears to stand on a middle ground between Fry and Eliot. He has maintained a classical objectivity in working with material essentially romantic. Intensely sympathetic with the people he analyses, he proposes no remedies for their salvation. No didacticism permeates his romanticism, nor does his classicism emanate godly inhumanity. At the most, he asks that we sympathize; at the least, that we strive for understanding.

This eclecticism on Williams' part may be attributed to his being an American. While our culture is basically English, it has enough admixtures to make it peculiarly ours. Since American traditions are young traditions when an artist adheres to an older culture he in effect divests himself of his nationality as Eliot did in fact. This is certainly unexceptionable, but it

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186. Ibid., p. 38.

explains in part why an American would more readily choose freely from a number of traditions rather than adhere rigidly to a definite school of thought that was not native to his culture.

Helen Hayes, out of deference to the memory of her friend Laurette Taylor, refused to play in The Glass Menagerie in this country for some years although she played the role of Amanda successfully in London. In finally deciding to play it here she explained her change of mind:

> One of the things that worry many of us in the American theatre is that the American drama has no real roots in our country's life ... This is one reason why I am going to present The Glass Menagerie this summer in Rockland County, where my home is.[187]

That Tennessee Williams' is a native drama is in part attested to by the fact that he is credited with the inspiration of A Member of the Wedding and Death of a Salesman. It is highly doubtful if Frankie Adams and Willie Logan could be translated into any other nationality. They are as American as Coca Cola and hot dogs at a baseball game. It is perhaps needless to point out that Kilroy could never be mistaken for a French poilu or a British Tommy; like him or not, he is ours.

An enthusiastic writer to the Times acclaims Camino Real as "unqualifiedly the great American play." Miss Shirley Booth, our most recently honored American actress, pleads for the acceptance

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187. Helen Hayes, "Rockland County Enlists a Star," New York Times, June 5, 1949, Sec. II, p. 1.

of this play. The august Miss Edith Sitwell was moved to write, "I have long thought Mr. Williams a playwright of very great importance. I now believe him to be a very great playwright." Another correspondent writes that "Thanks to Tennessee Williams, the art of the drama has taken a step forward."[188] In outlook, size, and scope the dramas of Tennessee Williams mark a steady growth. The Glass Menagerie is "a memory play" with only four characters in seven scenes. A Streetcar Named Desire depicts brutal outer conflicts as opposed to the suppressed inner conflicts of its immediate predecessor and has a cast of twelve playing in eleven scenes. The allegorical Summer and Smoke has twelve scenes and a cast of sixteen. The outward-looking Rose Tattoo requires a cast of twenty-three characters in a play of three acts and ten scenes. Mr. Williams' wing-spread in Camino Real, termed a "cosmic fantasy," includes a cast of thirty-six (plus extras) parading through sixteen blocks on the Camino Real.

A commensurate growth is also taking place in the mechanical processes of technique in his writing.

> Purely as craftsmanship, Camino Real is a considerable achievement. After The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire and Summer and Smoke, the theatregoers were wondering whether Mr. Williams could break the formula that seemed to be in control of his work. The Rose Tattoo was a first step toward independence in theme. Camino Real is a bold excursion into a theatre of lyric poetry that incantates fragments of life through the use of dialogue,

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188. Letters, "Concerning 'Camino Real,'" New York Times, April 5, 1953, Sec. II, p. 5.

> pantomime, ballet, music, light and sound. If Mr. Williams' theme were not so abhorrent, everyone would probably appreciate the virtuosity of his craftsmanship.[189]

While Mr. Williams has been surveying wider horizons he would perhaps disclaim that he has ever had his eye focused on any subject less than life itself. Once at a party when he found himself hemmed in by three women in basic black, his friend Margo Jones came to his rescue. "Tennessee does not write about frustrated women," she shouted. "Tennessee does not write about abnormal characters." "Then what does he write about?" the ladies asked in effect. "People," said Margo. "Life."[190]

Mr. Williams credits the Italians with showing him the happier side of life as depicted in The Rose Tattoo, but one can not help feeling that his sensitiveness has exposed his feelings to a greater degree to the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, that he too is caught up in the wonder and mystery that he comments on in the following statement.

> The mysterious thing about writing plays about life is that so many people find them so strange and baffling. That makes you know, with moments of deep satisfaction, that you have really succeeded in writing about it.[191]

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189. Brooks Atkinson, "Camino Real," New York Times, March 29, 1953, Sec. II, p. 1.

190. Tennessee Williams, "Questions without Answers," New York Times, October 3, 1948, Sec. II, p. 1.

191. Ibid.

The body of quality work that Mr. Williams has accomplished has already assured him a place in our literature, but the most gratifying aspect of this work is its marked growth reflecting an expanding and maturing mind. Inasmuch as he is still relatively a young man and of a temperament inclined to steady work we may confidently expect even better things from him in the future. When all that was great seemed to lie solely in the past it is peculiarly satisfying to be able to turn our vision forward and discern mountains ahead on the literary horizon.

A Broadway theatre that has the courage to present works in no way designed to conform to the usual commercial presentations is not to be disparaged. The Glass Menagerie, A Member of the Wedding, and Death of a Salesman are plays that any culture can well be proud to acclaim. And finally, it speaks well for American culture in general that it has accepted and supported the poet-playwright in the best Elizabethan tradition.

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VITA

Edgar Edgeworth MacDonald was born March 5, 1919, in Richmond, Virginia, the son of Marie Edgeworth and John Edgar MacDonald. He attended the Emmanuel Parish School and St. Christopher's. He studied architecture at the University of Virginia for two years.

During World War II he was with the 395th Infantry Regiment of the 99th Infantry Division participating in three campaigns in Europe and receiving the "Fourragere 1940" from the Belgian government on two citations. In addition, he received the Purple Heart Medal for shrapnel wounds, the Bronze Star Medal, and the Combat Infantryman Badge.

After the war he was employed by the Army in a civilian capacity for two years in France. A third year abroad was spent in study at the Sorbonne in Paris. A Bachelor of Science in Social Science was conferred by the Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary in June, 1952.

Although not of settled convictions — rather one who seeks — he has been a lifelong communicant of Emmanuel Episcopal Church at Brook Hill.