CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION
In his Nobel Prize address delivered in 1936, Eugene O’Neill made an observation about the growing importance of American Drama: “The Nobel Prize is a symbol of the recognition by Europe of the coming of age of the American drama”.¹ This is to say that the full-throated American drama is of relatively recent origin. It underwent a long period of gestation. In the beginning European plays were imported into America. It was only in 1870 with his successful play Saratago, Bronson Howard introduced a new era of American drama. And with it, he demonstrated that an American playwright could make a living solely by writing plays. In course of time, the American Dramatist Club was developed in 1891, which later became the society for American Drama Composers. As a matter of fact, this was the period in which realism was experiencing its birth-pangs. The advocates of realism tried to steer audiences away from the artificialities of romantic love, exotic settings and
sentimentality in drama. They preferred to let their actions grow naturally out of the believable situation and familiar environment in which the characters lived and acted. Although the 19th century American drama was not coming into prominence, it was never divorced in theme and treatment from the main currents of other genres of American literature. Around this time the influence of William Dean Howells was also strongly felt in the professional American theatre. The impact of his novels and sound literary criticism was felt by all serious writers for over half a century. He regarded drama as being on a par with other literary genres. His direct contribution to the stage was mainly in the form of one act plays popular with amateur groups. The American theatre was not quite a ‘wasteland’, at that time, although American drama almost invariably tended to tip over into melodrama.  

However, it was James A. Herne with his play *Margaret Fleming* (1890) who made a major breakthrough from the conventional, stereotyped, romantic formula and expressed American themes on stage in the realistic “Howells” manner. One of the first fervent advocates of the realistic ‘problem play’ in the Ibsenite tradition, Herne was an important transitional figure. As a matter of fact, the period from 1900 to 1914 was the period of transition in the realm of American drama. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, there was a genuine reflection of signs of change. There were signs of change in values, aesthetics and life styles. For instance, the year 1912 was really an extraordinary year in America as well in Europe. It was a year of intense Woman-Suffragist activity. As hardly seen before, there was a hue and cry in America as the womenfolk came out and demanded for their ‘voting rights’ in national elections. Such change in the political front had also resulted in the development of a new era in the field of arts. In America, a literary renaissance
was in the offing. Floyd Dell, George Cook and Susan Glaspell were a part of this movement. For the first time in America, it seemed a possibility that the theatre might actually play a role in bringing out a literary renaissance. A new spirit had suddenly come in American drama. The arrival of Irish players during the period also accelerated the pace of American drama. Clyde Fitch and William Vaughan Moody made American drama respectable by their contributions. They dealt with social problems in their dramas. They decided to confront social realities and not to escape into artistic utopias. And gradually American drama ushered into modern period.

In the development of modern American drama, two New York groups – the Washington Square Players (organised in 1919) and the Province Town Players (organised in 1915) – deserve a special mention. These two groups adopted the policy of presenting only those plays which showed artistic merit and of American themes. They provided opportunities to the young writers who had never received any recognition. The first production of the Province Town Players in 1916 was O’Neill’s *Bound East for Cardiff*. The play was a great success and served to consolidate the Province Town as well as the playwright. In fact, it was also a special day in the history of twentieth century American drama as O’Neill’s play brought a new voice and spirit. This achievement of Province Town Players and O’Neill established the theatre, for the first time in America as a serious focus of artistic activity. Together with the Washington Square Players, the Province Town Players laid the foundation of the modern American theatre.

By the beginning of the First World War the centre of the English-speaking theatrical world was shifting to New York. After the war, the dramatic centre of the English-speaking world also shifted to New York. In America,
during the four years of the war many theatres encouraged the production of native plays which were quite unsuited to the big professional stages in Europe. Thus, this proved to be a boon to the budding American dramatists. At that same time, Professor George Baker started a course of dramatic composition at Harvard University. Under his guidance there emerged critics, designers and writers including Eugene O'Neill who became important forces in the American contemporary theatre. Later on Baker moved to the Yale University to head a new department of drama and made it one of the leading academic institutions of its type. Others followed his lead. In this way, drama found a place in the academic curriculum of American Universities.

But it was with the establishment of the Theatre-Guild in 1919, America had its first permanent theatre devoted to the presentation of the best domestic and foreign drama. The Guild became the producing agent for many talented playwrights in the 1920s. By the middle of the 1920s the American dramatic art was well on its way to worldwide recognition. Eugene O'Neill, Sydney Howard, Clifford Odets, Sidney Kingsley and others enriched American dramatic literature with their contributions. The Great Depression of 1929 had a profound impact on American dramatic literature. The dramatists now began to question the social system which denied millions of Americans their livelihood. As a consequence, the 1930s, therefore, witnessed the growth of the social dramatists who favoured the working class people and condemned the wicked exploiters. Clifford Odets was one of the prominent writers who advocated the left-wing views. The realistic 'problem play' found its finest exposition in the works of Clifford Odets. His plays namely, *Awake and Sing*, *Paradise Lost* and *Rocket to the Moon* amply demonstrate the temper of the time. *The Little Foxes* by Lillian Hellman was one of the finest examples of the American
realistic plays. It is also an excellent example of dramatic craftsmanship. It is superb as a piece of realism till now.

After the First World War, Expressionism as a reaction to realism also found its place in the American theatre. This was mainly due to the new-found freedom of thought which permitted the display of many previously forbidden topics and the development of infrastructural and technological development to a degree unimagined in the nineteenth century. Eugene O’Neill, a great admirer of Strindberg’s expressionist and naturalistic plays, was the first to apply the techniques of expressionism in American drama. With The Emperor Jones (1920), the first important expressionist play in America, O’Neill’s reputation as a playwright was established. In some of his later expressionist plays – The Hairy Ape (1922), The Great God Brown (1926), Lazarus Laughed (1928), Strange Interlude (1928), Mourning Becomes Electra (1931) – O’Neill successfully dramatized the suffering man’s search for identity and of man’s relationship to his own soul and his God. Following Eugene O’Neill, three other American writers, Elmer Rice, George S. Kaufman and Marc Connelly also made excellent use of expressionistic technique to present their pictures of the human predicament.

Expressionism was adopted by the American dramatists in the 1920s and 1930s mainly because of its capability in portraying despair and fear as a mark of social protest against the irrational aspects of social set-up. But by the end of 1930s expressionism had almost lost its flavour and playwrights again adopted realism as the pre-dominant style. The perfect integration of realistic and expressionistic technique is seen in Tennessee Williams’ The Glass Menagerie (1945) and Arthur Miller’s Death of a Salesman (1949). With the coming of
Williams and Miller, American drama had finally reached the pinnacle of glory among the dramatic literature of the world in the 1940s.

American drama of the 1940s was deeply influenced by war and its result. During this period American plays largely reflected the agony and anger of people. The major distinguishing feature was a psychological interest in man's emotional reaction to war. American drama, particularly in the nineteen fifties, concentrated on private issues of individuals instead of public problems. It was rather psychological than social in spirit. It could be seen in the works of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller as well as the later works of O'Neill. The dramatic qualities in their plays were more vigorous and intense. Joseph Wood Krutch, in this regard, observed:

In any case the plays of Williams and Miller were major events in a decade of the American drama. They captured attention of international audiences and critics.

The post-war period marked a new shift in American drama with the coming of the Theatre of the Absurd. Abandoning conceptual thinking and logical language, the absurd dramatists deal in paradoxes, illogical behaviour and absurd situations. They attempt to create meaningful insights into the human condition or the identity of the individual. Among the absurd playwrights such as Jack Gelber, Arther L. Kopitt, Jack Richardson, the most prominent one in the American scenario is Edward Albee. The Zoo Story (1958) and the full-length play Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? (1962) are his most notable works. Albee's characters are lonely figures who try in vain to reach out for vital relationships with the fellow human beings. They also try to establish wholesome contacts with the world but always fail at the end. And in
their attempts, they mask their agonising isolation with the illusions spawned by a dry, dehumanised, devitalised and a morally disintegrated surface-culture.

Since its development in the early part of the twentieth century American drama had travelled a long way to reach its maturity. It underwent a different phase, sometimes declining and sometimes emerging again in new shapes and varieties, yet it has never failed to show its phenomenal tenacity and vitality. A large number of American playwrights were making their contributions to the growth of contemporary American Drama. Among them, however, by the common estimate of many eminent critics, the four American playwrights – Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Edward Albee deserve special mention. The theatres of the world could feel the impact of the American Drama in their plays.

Tennessee Williams is one of the most prominent modern American playwrights. He is also a writer distinguished by his Southern background and sensibility and who occupies a pivotal role in bringing the spirit of the “Southern Renaissance” in American literature. In fact, the emergence of a rich and varied literature about the South in the middle decades of the twentieth century is one of the most significant phenomena in American culture. Writers from this area have distinguished themselves in poetry, fiction, and drama. It may not be wrong to say that the Southern writers have exerted an influence on the American literary scene comparable only to that of the great New England writers of the nineteenth century. The rise of this “Southern Renaissance” has been partly explained by critic-scholars like Randall Stewart by saying that the “South has been less affected than other areas by the cultural and industrial changes which have been tended to break down regional patterns.” And according to Signi Lenea Falk, in the South there existed:
a kind of regional loyalty to tradition; a nostalgia for a pattern of aristocratic, non-urban life that was rich in promises; an awareness of distinctive character, mores, and beliefs peculiar to the southern areas ... 6

All these peculiarities of the Deep American South have provided inexhaustible resources to the Southern writers. Unlike other American writers, the Southern writers try to infuse the Southern manners and mores quite sympathetically in their works and thus, in course of time, they succeed in giving a new touch to the American literature which is quite unique.

A considerable part of this literary renaissance began among writers at Vanderbilt University in Nashville with John Crowe Ransom and a group of his students – Allen Tate, David Davidson, Merill Moore, and Robert Penn Warren. And the publication of a little magazine of verse called The Fugitive by these writers around 1922 have also accelerated the pace of this new literary movement of the South. This group (or the “fugitives” as they were popularly known) proposed the idea that the South, with its old-fashioned agrarianism, might counter the materialism and cultural barbarism of the North which was threatening to destroy what had been best in the southern tradition. They published this idea in a collection of essays entitled I’ll Take My Stand. Later it became a “manifesto” of the American Southern writers.

The ‘fugitives’ later became particularly concerned with the predicament of the poet and writers in a society threatened to be torn apart by an industrial code of value imposed by the North. 7 These men, poets themselves, became the Vanguard of the new intellectuals, the perceptive readers of difficult and obscure poetry and fiction. Apart from this, the group also produced critically well-acclaimed novels like Robert Penn Warren’s All the King’s Men (1946).
Moreover, the fiction and poetry of such writers as Katherine Anne Porter, Caroline Gordon, and Randall Jarrell have also contributed to the rise of Southern literary movement.

However, two of the most widely read contemporary southern writers are Thomas Wolfe and William Faulkner. They stand apart from any group. These two writers have a unique place in the Southern literature. Thomas Wolfe’s first autobiographical novel *Look Homeward, Angel* (1929) is a far cry from the disciplined intellectuals of *The Fugitive*. In some ways, he decried the old tradition of the South in this novel. He, in a way, gave a new touch to the “Southern Renaissance”.

But William Faulkner, the 1950 Nobel Prize Winner, was undoubtedly the greatest figure of the Southern Renaissance. He spent his life almost entirely in Oxford, Mississippi. To Faulkner, this town and the surrounding country provided the themes and materials for his novels and stories. His works refer not merely to this limited territory, not even to the entire South, but to the tragic condition of modern man. Faulkner’s fiction such as *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) encompasses:

> a rich and complex overlay of several civilizations; they range from the life of the Indian to that of the Negro slave; to the disruption of southern culture after the Civil War; to the cheap and corrupt materialism of a later industrial society; to the fragmented, external twentieth-century life in which all religious and moral codes have become mechanical rituals.

While Thomas Wolfe wrote of himself and of the South as it touched him, William Faulkner has created, largely from his own imagination, a wide range
of characters, both white and Negro, from southern aristocrats to the contemptible Snopes, who are materialists, largely responsible for the decay and sterility of the South. Besides the rich contributions of Faulkner and Wolfe, a number of other writers have also contributed in varying degrees to the "Southern Renaissance". Among them, Erskine Caldwell, Margaret Mitchell, Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Conn, Truman Capote, Paul Green, Lillian Hellman, and the two black novelists, Richard Wright and Ralf Ellison, have made distinctive contributions to the understanding of life in the South.

Tennessee Williams belonged to this rich and varied literary tradition of the South. Williams, however, unlike his predecessor Paul Green, or his contemporary Lillian Hellman, remained committed southern, and wrote about the South in most of his plays. He explored the Southern myth in deploping the loss of an old aristocratic culture and its replacement by gross mercantile values. His plays reflect the authentic, if eccentric aspects and dimensions of the southern experience. Like Thomas Wolfe who wrote mostly of himself and his own experience, a fair amount of what Williams wrote reflected the circumstances of his own life, particularly those of his pre-adult years. He was born on 26th March 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, an old town on the Tombigbee River deep in the American South. Tennessee Williams was originally named Thomas Lanier Williams. It was some time during 1939 he took for himself the name "Tennessee". He was the second of the three children of Cornelius Coffin Williams, a travelling salesman for the International Shoe Company, and Edwina Dakin Williams, the daughter of the local rector.

Cornelius Williams was a forceful, stocky man with a quick and violent temper of illustrious lineage which has gone to seed. Reared by a older sister, Ella, after the death of his parents, he was spoiled terribly. Throughout his
youth he always had his way and he became extremely domineering. He enjoyed the life of a Mississippi drummer – the travelling, the all-night poker games, the ‘light ladies’. He had been to a military prep school, briefly studied law, and served in the Spanish-American war as a second lieutenant. Among his forebears were John Williams, U.S. Senator from Tennessee to the Fourteenth Congress; John Sevier, first governor of the State; and the poet Sidney Lanier. The First Thomas Lanier Williams, however, paternal grandfather of the playwright, squandered the family fortune in unsuccessful campaigns for governor, and the old Williams residence in Knoxville was turned into an orphanage.

In decided contrast to the paternal branch of the family, which Williams has labelled “violent and aggressive”, Edwina Dakin’s parents were gentle and lively. Edwina’s mother, Rose Otte Dakin, was a lovely and charming woman, and her father, the Reverend Walter E. Dakin, was a stately and dignified Episcopal Clergyman. Reverend Dakin was a deeply religious man but he wore his religion, “like his summer suit, easily and unobtrusively”. He was proud, self-reliant and yet warm and good-humoured. Edwina, his daughter, on the other hand was a small, bird-like, beautiful and sexually fastidious southern belle who lived on the verge of hysteria. There were a number of mental breakdowns in the history of her family, and she spent her last days in a psychiatric ward as a patient later in life. In Facts About Me (1958) Tennessee Williams remarks that he derived from his mother and father an uneasy combination of the Puritan and the Cavalier which helps to account for the thematic conflicts in much of his works.

Edwina and the children lived in a series of Episcopal rectories, the parish residences of the Reverend Walter Dakin in Columbus, Memphis,
Canton, and Clarksdale, as Cornelius Coffin spent most of his time on the road. Tennessee Williams remembered those early peaceful years as summer’s idyll. The climate was warm, and there were grounds outdoors for play. His protective mother and grandmother were near him. By this time Rose, his sensitive and highly spirited sister, and he had become inseparable companions. As Tennessee Williams said:

Life was pleasant – gracious, full of imaginings …… we always had a large backyard …… My sister and I played together. We invented games. The poor children used to run all over town, but my sister and I played in our backyard. We were exclusive …… My sister was an ideal playmate. My sister was very charming – very beautiful. She had an incredible imagination. We were so close to each other, we had no need of others. 12

Williams’ life was marked by the untroubled flow of happiness during this period. However, two sad particular incidents happened during this period gave a lasting impression in his future life. The first was an altercation between him and his Negro nurse, a girl named Ozzie, who had taken care of Rose and him throughout their early childhood. Once, more in a zest than anything else, he called her a “nigger”. Deeply hurt Ozzie soon left them and he felt that he had substantially contributed to her departure. This incident left him with a strong sense of guilt which has evolved over the years into a definite abhorrence of discrimination.

The second incident gave an even more profound influence upon his life. At the age of five Williams suffered an almost fatal attack of what was probably diphtheria and Blight’s Disease which left him partially paralyzed. He lost the movement of his legs for nearly two years, and as a consequence both his
mother and grandmother became increasingly protective. Mrs. Edwina Williams was afraid to allow him to play with other children and in his own words he became “delicate and sissified”. This illness intensified his subjective, highly introspective world and in time his amusements became private and lonely, except for the companionship of his one indispensable playmate, Rose.

Williams became a child living in a semi-solitary universe, hovering delicately between fantasy and reality and comfortably surrounded by people he loved and who in turn loved him too – his grandmother and grandfather, who represented in his child’s mind aristocracy and gentility; his mother, the protector and nurturer; and Rose, the sister, playmate, confidante and symbol of beauty and fragility.

In 1918, when the First World War ended, Cornelius Coffin was promoted to sales manager of the St. Louis branch of the International Shoe Company. Leaving the rural, leisurely community of Clarksdale and the Reverend and Mrs. Dakin, the Williams family moved to St. Louis. What seemed to be advancement in the fortunes of the Williams family was instead a change for the worse. The family lived in a succession of small apartments during the initial years in St. Louis, and according to Tennessee Williams these seemed to be:

a perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structures with no grass and no trees nearer than the park …… If we walked far enough West we came into a region of fine residence set in beautiful lawns. But where we lived, to which we must always return, were ugly rows of apartment buildings the color of dried blood and mustard.\[13\]
In St. Louis, Tennessee Williams was enrolled in the Eugene Field School. His Southern speech and delicate manner was an object of ridicule by his fellow schoolmates. Even at home his father called him "Miss Nancy" because he preferred book to outdoor games. For Williams and Rose, the inescapable fact was that something had ended for them and something new and unbearably alien had taken its place. Williams wrote:

The School children made fun of our Southern speech and manners. I remember gangs of kids following me home yelling "sissy!" and home was not a pleasant refuge …… In South we had never been conscious of the fact that we were economically less fortunate than others. We lived as well as anyone else. But in St. Louis we suddenly discovered there were two kinds of people, the rich and the poor and that we belonged more to the latter …… 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 a rebellion that has grown into an inherent part of my work.14

At the time of his sister’s puberty, Williams withdrew even further into himself. As he reveals in autobiographical short story, "The Resemblance between a Violin Case and a Coffin", the beginning of adulthood for her meant the end for him as he had lost his only close childhood companionship. He and Rose had become more intimate since the move to St. Louis, as a sort of allies in a hostile city. But the mysterious physical change in her seemed a rejection that left him with a deepened sense of being alone. So, Williams, in order to escape from this unfavourable atmosphere and loneliness, began to write. In his *Forward to Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), he explained:
At the age of fourteen I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge.\textsuperscript{15}

Williams produced poems, essays, and short stories though he had still never seen a professional production of a play. At the age of sixteen he won five dollars for third prize in a contest sponsored by \textit{Smart Set} magazine on the topic, \textit{Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?} (1927). This was his first professional publication. While he was a struggling writer in St. Louis, Eugene O’Neill dominated the stage in New York, and simultaneously a group of poets and critics at Vanderbilt University – notably, John Crowe Ransom, Donald Davidson, Robert Penn Warren and Allen Tate – engendered the Southern Literary Renaissance in Nashville. In 1929, when Williams entered the University of Missouri at Columbia, two important Southern novels appeared. They are William Faulkner’s \textit{The Sound and the Fury} and Thomas Wolfe’s \textit{Look Homeward, Angel}. These two novels influenced Williams in his early career as a writer. However, he did not stay long in the University because he failed in the military training course. As a result of this failure his angry father withdrew him from College and put him to work in the warehouse of the International Shoe Company back in St. Louis. It was the time when the United States was in the grip of Great Depression, and there was widespread unemployment problem. For the next three years Williams worked in the warehouse as a shipping-clerk. But at night and weekends he continued to write poems and short stories, fortifying himself with cigarettes and black coffee. He lived this kind of existence for two years. The two years that were an indescribable torment to him as an individual proved to be of immense value to him as a writer. Eventually his health gave ways and in 1935 he had a nervous breakdown.
After a brief stay in the hospital, Williams was sent to his grandparents’ home in Memphis, Tennessee, to recuperate during the summer. Over the summer of his convalescence he met a neighbour, Bernice Dorothy Shapiro, who was working with a little theatre group called The Garden Players. She invited him to try his hand at a play. The result was *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* (1935) – a one-act comedy about sailors on shore leave. The modest success of this little comedy served as a sort of therapy to him.

Delighted by the response of his first play, Williams found that he liked writing plays. In the autumn of 1935, when he returned to St. Louis, he began working for a little theatre group called the “Mummers”. The Mummers were a Bohemian crowd of eager amateurs less interested in doing the Classics than in trying the new. What was new at the time was the drama of social protest fostered by the recently formed Group Theatre in New York and represented by the work of Sidney Kingsley, Clifford Odets, Maxwell Anderson and Irvin Shaw. The Mummers in 1936 produced Williams’ *Headlines*. It was regarded as a curtain-raiser for Irvin Shaw’s anti-war drama, *Bury the Dead*. And in 1937, they produced *Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*, Williams’ first two full-length plays, written in the vein of social protest.

The year 1936 was an important one in the literary career of Tennessee Williams. In this year, he enrolled at Washington University, St. Louis, where he soon made friends with the campus poet Clark Mills McBurney. Together they set up what they called “the literary factory” in the cellar of McBurney’s house to write and read. Williams, unlike before, studied authors like Lorca, Herman Melville, Rainer Maria Rilke, Rimbaud, and in particular, Anton Chekhov, D. H. Lawrence and Hart Crane very deeply. These writers made a deep impact on his mind and art in the later years. In the same year, Margaret
Mitchell’s ground breaking novel, *Gone with the Wind*, was published; and *Tobacco Road* of Erskine Caldwell, another fellow Southern writer, was represented on Broadway as the longest run of the nineteen thirties. The emergence of such Southern writers in the American literary scenario also gave a fresh impetus to Williams. However, when Williams was away at the State University of Iowa for his senior year, his sister Rose suffered a nervous breakdown and was hospitalised. More and more helpless and withdrawn, she was diagnosed a schizophrenic and hospitalised for a second time. In 1937 she was subjected to a pre-frontal lobotomy, and lived the rest of her life in a sanatorium. This news of Rose came as a shock to Williams from which he never fully recovered. This sort of a mental trauma was reflected in most of his writings, especially in the play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945).

In the spring of 1938, at the age of twenty-seven, Williams finally received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa. At this time, the Depression had finally taken its toll and he set out on his own to New Orleans. It was during his days in New Orleans, as he recalled in his play *Vieux Carre* (1979), that he came out as a homosexual and turned himself into a disciplined writer. In early 1939 he won a Group Theatre contest for three one-act plays collectively titled *American Blues*. The most useful contact that he got from the contest was the literary agent Audrey Wood, who for the next thirty years would serve as Williams’ manager, banker, advisor and friend. Under her tutelage, he published his short story “The Field of Blue Children” in June 1939. Then on December 20, 1939, Miss Wood secured for him a one thousand dollars grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. In a letter to her, Williams thus expressed his feelings:
Needless to say I now understand how Lazarus must have felt when he sat up and saw daylight again. My happiness has sort of numbed me, I am warm all through my very bones with gratitude.\textsuperscript{16}

With the money Williams went to New York in 1940 to study advanced playwriting with John Gassner and Erwin Piscator at the New School for Social Research. Through Gassner the Theatre Guild produced Williams’ play \textit{Battle of Angels} in the winter of that same year. The result was fiasco. About this failure, Williams wrote:

The play was pretty far out of its time and included, among other tactical errors, a mixture of super-religiosity and hysterical sexuality coexisting in a central character. The critics and police censors seemed to regard this play as a theatrical counterpart of the bubonic plague surfacing in their city.\textsuperscript{17}

But the script, after seventeen years later, was rewritten as \textit{Orpheus Descending} (1958) and it was marked as one of the important plays of Tennessee Williams.

The World War II broke out and the war years mark a low period in Williams’ fortunes. Having been rejected for military service because of his weak heart, he drifted from New York to Provincetown, Macon, Jacksonville, New Orleans and St. Louis, supporting himself those years in various jobs, including waiter, teletype operator, cashier and movie usher. However, amidst all these difficulties, he continued writing “not with any hope of making a living at it but because he found no other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression”\textsuperscript{18}. In \textit{Facts About Me}, Williams wrote:
There was never a moment when I did not find life to be immeasurably exciting to experience and to witness, however difficult it was to sustain.19

During this hard period, Audrey Wood again came to his rescue. Through her, he was offered a six-month contract by MGM Studios at two-hundred-fifty dollar a week as a scrip-writer. However, MGM rejected his screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller* but Williams' spirits were buoyed by his inclusion in James Laughlin's anthology *Five Young American Poets* (1944) and a citation from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He rewrote the film script as a stage play and sent it to Audrey Wood under a new title, *The Glass Menagerie*. Once it opened on Broadway in March 1945, Williams' place in the American theatre was assured. He received an overwhelming critical acclaim and it also won for him Drama Critics Award, the Donaldsen Award and the Sidney Howard Memorial Award. In the words of many eminent critics such as Esther Merle Jackson, Tennessee Williams' poetic drama *The Glass Menagerie* creates a new epoch in the history of Western theatre. With this play Williams seemed to succeed Eugene O'Neill as the chief architect of form in the American drama.20 The same year another play *You Touched Me!* Opened on Broadway and it found reasonably well.

In 1947, Tennessee Williams produced another major work, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and this play established him as the major American dramatist. It also marked the beginning of his association with Elia Kazan, the legendary director. With *A Streetcar Name Desire* Williams entered his period of greatest productivity and success. Esther Merle Jackson wrote:

The emergence of Tennessee Williams as a major dramatist is a significant development in American
cultural history. Study of the details of his career points up significant parallels. In an important sense, the theatre of Tennessee Williams is an aspect of a second American Renaissance, which, like the first, followed a great war. In the same way as the theatre of Eugene O’Neill seemed to emerge out of the heightened national consciousness which marked the close of World War I, so the theatre of Tennessee Williams seems to have been an expression of a new sense of identity which American arts and letters reflected at the conclusion of World War II.  

may also be seen in the work of Europeans such as John Osborne, Harold Pinter, and Jean Genet.

During the nineteen sixties the theatre in New York underwent a radical change, reflecting the contemporary urban life of the society as a whole. The war in Vietnam had also brought a complete disillusionment to the American people. And in the tide of Women’s liberation and Gay liberations, Tennessee Williams’ plays – which had derived much of this dramatic tension from female dependency and homosexual guilt – began to look outdated. Around this time, audiences were discovering Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, and other European playwrights who set a new pace in the theatrical world. Williams’ play *The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore* (1962) and *The Two-character Play* (1967) received only a lukewarm response. He called the sixties his “Stoned Age”,22 having propped himself up with drugs and alcohol throughout the decade. Toward the end of the year 1969 he suffered the second nervous breakdown of his life and spent the following three months in the psychiatric ward of a St. Louis hospital.

For Tennessee Williams, the nineteen seventies and early nineteen eighties were a prolongation of restless experiment and commercial failure. The only exception was *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), his first financial success since *The Night of the Iguana* over a decade earlier. In 1979 another more appealing minor work, *A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur*, was presented on Broadway. In 1980 on his sixty-ninth birthday, Williams’ last full length play *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* was staged on Broadway. Three years later, in the winter of 1983, alone in a hotel room in New York, Tennessee Williams died. David Mamet in a eulogy to Tennessee Williams thus observed:
His life and view of life became less immediately accessible, our gratitude was changed to distant reverence for a man whom we felt obliged – if we were to continue in our happy feelings toward him – to consider already dead. We [American] are a kind people living in a cruel country. We don’t know how to show our love. This was the subject of his plays, the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language. We thank him and we wish him, with love, the best we could have done and did not. We wish him what he wished us: the peace that we all are seeking.23

For a fuller understanding of Tennessee Williams’ life and career there are a number of books written by scholars on Williams. The most dependable one is Memoirs (1975) written by the playwright himself. In it, Williams has made an attempt with an uncompromising honesty and a graphic, though chronologically disjointed, narrative of the particulars of his life in order to make clear “a continuing preoccupation with the relationship and interdependence of life and art”.24 It also recounts Williams’ early association with three generations of women – his grandmother, mother and sister – and how they influenced his outlook towards women.

Roger Boxill’s Tennessee Williams (1987) is a critical examination of the life and major works of the playwright. This book provides a thorough textual analysis of some of the selected plays of Williams. Another anecdote-based account of the playwright’s life comes from his mother, Edwina Dakin Williams. Her Remember Me to Tom (1964) is a narrative about the youth and career of Tennessee Williams. The book presents stories told by the playwright’s mother to Lucy Freeman, and includes some passages indicating Tennessee Williams’ attitudes toward religion and women. Also included is
considerable collection of correspondence – from the playwright to his mother and brother, from his grandfather, and to and from several agents and critics.

In her *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (1961) Nancy M. Tischler traces the background of how Williams’ world becomes increasingly feminine and how he becomes negatively sensitize to masculine crudities. It also includes a detailed plot summary of his major plays. Tischler’s book on Tennessee Williams is a landmark study of the playwright and gives a lot of insights to his plays. *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (1966) of Esther Merle Jackson is another indispensable book on Williams. It examines some aspects of the drama of Tennessee Williams, and describes the major characteristics of his developing form, character, theme and myth. Esther Jackson also opines that Williams’ use of his theme, myth, and character is not an accidental outcome but is the result of a specific purpose – the creation of a new and relevant model of contemporary dramatic expression.

In Benjamin Nelson’s *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work* (1961), the writer discusses and analyses the major works of Tennessee Williams with relevant to themes, techniques, and basic beliefs which endow Williams to depict highly individualistic character. Benjamin Nelson has also made a study in the context of the playwright’s life with special emphasis upon the early years which manifest Williams’ development as an individual and an artist. As certain character types keep reappearing in most of Tennessee Williams’ plays, Signi Lenea Falk in his book *Tennessee Williams* (1961) has organised a series of discussion of Williams’ plays in which a certain type plays a major role, as for instance, the Southern gentlewoman, the women uninhibited by outworn mores, the frustrated poet-vagabond, and the decadent artist. This book of Signi Falk also attempts to relate the dramatist to the increasing group
of writers such as Erskine Cadwell, Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, who have created the “Southern Renaissance”.

Harry Rasky’s book, *Tennessee Williams: A Portrait in Laughter and Lamentation* (1986), is another personalized account of Williams’ life. This work contains valuable accounts of Williams’ life in Key West and in New Orleans. The infrequent occasions wherein Rasky sets aside his authorial voice and presents block quotes from Williams are historically valuable as well. Another very thorough critical work is Judith Thompson’s *Tennessee Williams’ Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol* (1987). Judith Thompson closely examines Williams’ experiment with the “memory play”, and provides an outline of his approach that is consistent and clear. Thompson also examines the symbolism in Williams’ plays, grouping them into religious, mythological, and existential symbols and imagery. Thompson’s book offers an in-depth study on the works of Williams. Alice Griffin’s book *Understanding Tennessee Williams* (1995) is another indispensable book on the life and works of the playwright. Analysing language, characters, themes, dramatic effects, and staging, this study also calls attention to Williams’ unique gift for heightened dialogue, which is convincing as speech and at the same time poetic. Griffin in her study says that Williams had rebelled against the prevailing realism that had dominated the American theatre for over forty years; and introduced the “plastic theatre” in which action, characters, dialogue, setting, and stage effects are all combined to express the theme. Williams, according to Griffin, brought a new revolution to American theatre.

Many of the critical works on Tennessee Williams discuss his plays in the light of their social background and against the backdrop of Williams’ personal experience and his responses to the contemporary social system. And
even though many critics on Tennessee Williams agree that characterisation is one of the important features in his plays, the studies on characterisation are also done in relation to the playwright’s personal experience. The women characters of Williams are also generally analysed by many scholars as the manifestation of Williams’ yearning for the fulfilment of his desires which lie in his subconscious mind and which is characterised by his sensibility – homosexuality, perverted psychology on love and marriage, nervousness and frivolity, etc. However, these studies generally do not penetrate into the inner psychological motives of the characters as distinct human personality who can exist their own life independently and quite detached from the creator. Thus, an exclusive study of the women characters of Tennessee Williams – as they exist their own life in their own world and free from the world of Williams – has not so far been attempted.

In the present thesis, an attempt is made to study the changing image of Tennessee Williams’ women protagonists and try to show how his women develop through the plays. Like his precursor Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams excelled in portraying women on stage and his heroines are his finest creations. Following the footsteps of O’Neill, Williams had also refrained from the prevalent tendency to portray women as flat characters – either as embodiments of virtues, to be admired as angels; or vices, to be condemned as witches. Williams’ women characters are full of complexities. In fact, Tennessee Williams’ women, however their cases, deserve our sympathy. It is because the problems they face are the old, universal ones of the human heart in its search for reality and meaning in life.

In his works, Tennessee Williams has created a vast range of women characters unlike his contemporary playwrights, with the only exception of
O’Neill. In this thesis, an attempt is made to analyse different facets of Williams’ women characters in some of his major plays. The thesis consists of seven chapters. The first chapter is devoted to an introduction dealing with a brief survey of the American drama and Tennessee Williams. A brief survey of the dramatic career of the playwright as well as the Southern literary background in which Tennessee Williams lived and worked is also examined in this chapter for a better understanding of his ideas and plays. This is followed by a second chapter dealing with the various factors which moulded Tennessee Williams as one of the consummate American playwrights in portraying women’s psyche. A comparative approach along with O’Neill’s women and Arthur Miller’s women is also highlighted here in order to give a clear picture of the different facets of Williams’ women characters. This chapter also discusses the underlying complexities of Williams’ women and an effort is made to group together various images of memorable women characters in the major plays of Tennessee Williams according to their similar traits. The third chapter deals with the study of two remarkable Williams’ women – Blanche Du Bois of A Streetcar Named Desire and Amanda Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie. They are southern aristocratic women who are unable to adjust to the drab social and economic situation of the present contemporary world. In the fourth chapter, Williams’ domineering women such as Maggie (Margaret) of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Serafina Delle Rose of The Rose Tattoo, and Mrs. Violet Venable of Suddenly Last Summer are examined. They are sensual, natural, and pragmatic women and in various cases stronger than men. Another group of women who are delicate and sensitive are studied in the fifth chapter. They include Laura Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie and Alma Winemiller of Summer and Smoke. This is followed by a sixth chapter dealing with an altogether different type of women who are compassionate, virtuous, and full of
understanding for a fellow human being. Hannah Jelkes of *The Night of the Iguana* and Leona Dawson of *Small Craft Warnings* are analysed in this chapter. In the concluding part of the thesis, that is chapter seventh, an attempt is made to register the importance of the works of Tennessee Williams in the development of American drama. This chapter also gives the summary of the whole thesis, and shows the subtle development in the characterisation of women in the major plays of Tennessee Williams. It also attempts to give a comprehensive moral structure in Williams’ outlook towards life.
Notes


