CHAPTER V

DELICATE AND SENSITIVE WOMEN
Alma Winemiller of *Summer and Smoke* and Laura Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* are diametrically opposite to those women characters studied in the preceding chapters. They are idealistic women and live in a secluded world which is hardly in conformity with the world of Maggie; Serafina or Mrs. Venable. Alma and Laura, as a matter of fact, are the symbols of all those sensitive and delicate women for whom Tennessee Williams had the greatest compassion. The radiance of such people is often hidden, obscured usually until a fantastic moment illuminates them. There is a fragile and haunting beauty about them which is appreciated by critics and readers. To quote the words of Benjamin Nelson:

*Summer and Smoke* takes up the Hadrian-Matilda, Jim O’connor – Laura Wingfield theme [in *the Glass Managerie*] of loneliness and the need for a warm,
meaningful relationship, in the plight of Alma Winemiller who bears a particularly marked resemblance to the girl of the glass menagerie. Both cry out in their loneliness for love and both are eventually denied and broken. Both possess the beauty of the ideal which is a pitiful anachronism in a “world lit by lightning”, and both suffer intensely from the inability to communicate their inmost feelings with another human being.

Here Tennessee Williams seems to be a romanticist seeking to live in a world of imagination which is different from the contemporary world of reality even though the characters are tempered by real social experiences. Laura and Alma are not far removed from the romantic tradition which gave us Emma Bovary, the immortal character in Flaubert’s Madam Bovary. As a matter of fact, Myra, the heroine of Williams’ first play Battle of Angels is a Byronic like recollection of a childhood passion, Laura Young. As Williams recalls: “She [Laura Young] was something cool and green in a sulphurous landscape. But there was a shadow upon her. There was something that mattered with her.”

Many critics feel that Alma Winemiller and Laura Wingfield are the extended creations of Laura Young. They are more or less the portraits of the same woman observed at different angles by Tennessee Williams. In this regard, Frederick Lumley comments:

In Summer and Smoke Tennessee Williams seems to return to the theme of The Glass Menagerie, the longing of a young woman to lead a normal life and this time, a normal sex life. The play reveals the failure of Alma to find satisfaction of both sex and spiritual values in the man she loves. Her lover is as frightened of her soul as she is of his body; he could not feel “decent enough” to tough her. She cannot find true
love, she destroys her spiritual quest and gives herself to the first travelling salesman she meets.³

Alma’s predicament is similar to Laura’s in that she sees the only man she loves truly engaged to another. John Buchanan and Jim O’Connor are the intruders who enter their Sanctum Sanctorum of their ideals only to leave it destroyed. Both Alma and Laura believe in the divinity of love and consider their lovers as Gods or Saviours. Alma shares Laura’s love of music though unlike Laura she is a good singer too. Alma the ‘Nightingale of the Delta’ takes pleasure in her vocation and turns towards it like manna in her desolate, love-starved life. Like Laura she is diffident and withdrawn herself into the four walls of her rectory. Alma resembles Laura as both are escapists – Laura escapes into her glass menagerie while Alma turns to her sleeping tablets. Both Alma and Laura live in an enchanted island of their own; a dream land in which like fairies they move about fighting an invisible enemy.

I
Summer and Smoke (1948)

The theme of Summer and Smoke is focussed on the Lawrencian spirit-flesh conflict symbolised by Alma Winemiller, the champion of the soul, and John Buchanan, the standard bearer of the flesh. The title of the Summer and Smoke immediately reveals the nature of its major conflict – the Lawrencian sex dual between the hot passion of summer epitomized in the figure of the lusty John Buchanan and that immaterial something “as thin as smoke” which the spiritual Alma Winemiller represents. The description of Alma as a child in
the prologue of the play gives us a clue to the spiritual nature of her. Tennessee Williams writes:

Alma, as a child of ten, comes into the scene. She wears a middy blouse and has ribboned braids. She already has the dignity of an adult; there is a quality of extraordinary delicacy and tenderness or spirituality in her, which must set her distinctly apart from other children. She has a habit of holding her hands, one cupped under the other in a way similar to that of receiving the wafer at Holy Communion.⁴ [Prologue]

Alma’s excessive awareness of spirituality is expressed further when she tells John: “My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul.” She was the only child in Glorious Hill, Mississippi, who found out that the name of the Angel of fountain is Eternity. Alma refers to the statue of Eternity as “what people’s souls live in when they have left their bodies.” When asked by John, the sensualist, what the meaning of Eternity was, Alma (the spiritualist) answered: “It’s something that goes on and on when life and death and time and everything else is all through with.”⁵ Alma, being the daughter of puritanical minister regards that the physical and sexual nature of man is tinged with an animality. According to her all human beings must overcome such passion.

To get a clear-cut image of Alma Winemiller, it is essential to have a vivid picture of her background. Alma is the only child of the rigid scholarly and self-righteous preacher, Reverend Winemiller, and his wife (Mrs. Winemiller) who is described as perversely childish. Mrs. Winemiller is known as Mr. Winemiller’s “Cross” and as she is also dependant on Alma, she is Alma’s “cross” too. In this household, therefore, Alma has multiple roles to play. Alma becomes the disciplined daughter to her puritanical father; and also plays
the part of mother and sister to the mentally disturbed Mrs. Winemiller. Not only these, Alma also acts as the social head of the household for her father. In trying to fit herself to all these parts, Alma as a young woman has no role that she desires for herself. In such a household, there is a complete failure of meaningful communication and obviously, thus, the private needs of the daughter are never considered by the parents. This kind of upbringing has made Alma excessively sensitive and repressed. Tennessee Williams describes:

Alma had an adult quality as a child, and now, in her middle twenties, there is something prematurely spinsterish about her. An excessive propriety and self consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter; her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainments, to the position of hostess in a rectory. People her own age regard her as rather quaintly and humorously affected. She has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Her true nature is still hidden even from herself.Â³ [Scene One, Part One: A Summer]

As a daughter of the Episcopal Minister, highly idealistic behaviour has come naturally to Alma Winemiller. But this is a far cry to the women of her age. So, no wonder, Alma as a child was adult-like, dignified, with a quality of spirituality and intrigued by the idea of Eternity. Alma’s daydreams about Eternity have solidified into a philosophy of other worldliness. And unlike other women of her own age, her own conviction makes her even see the Gothic Cathedral as a symbol of ‘questing man’. This is evident in the manner she tells John Buchanan:

How everything reaches up, how everything seems to be straining for something out of the reach of stone – or human – fingers? … … The immense stained windows, the great arched doors that are five or six times the
height of the tallest man – the vaulted ceiling and all
the delicate spires – all reaching up to something
beyond attainment!" [Scene Four, Part One: A Summer]

Life to Alma, therefore, as she conceives, is "the everlasting struggle and
aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach." According
to her perception, "all men live in the gutter", but it is because of some who are
"looking at the stars" that the world is balanced and could go on. This
idealistic view is illusory, however, because Alma has been unable to translate
it into positive action. She feels bitter at times about her sensitive and spiritual
life as she could not get anything for her sacrifice, not even a slight recognition
from her parents. Like any other young woman of her age Alma has also a
dream about what she would do if things were different in her family. But on
the contrary, her life has been tied to duty. And she feels that she has
squandered her youth by indulging in the household chores and family duties.
Her cry to her mother, Mrs. Winemiller, about her turmoil is quite heart
rendering:

People wonder why I’m tied down here! They pity me
– think of me as an old maid already! In spite of I’m
young still young! It’s you – it’s you, you’ve taken my
youth away from me! I wouldn’t say that – I’d try not
even to think of it – if you were just kind, just simple!
But I could not spread my life out like a rug for you to
step on and you’d step on it, and not even say ‘Thank
you, Alma’!"

[Scene Two, Part One: A Summer]

Alma Winemiller, as a direct opposite to Maggie the Cat, has an exalted notion
of the role of woman as wife and mother. She thinks that woman must bring her
heart and soul to marriage; and she also rejects sexuality as no better than
bestiality. When John Buchanan talks about “intimate relations” between man and woman and insists that “There’s other things between a man and woman besides respect,” Alma retorts:

> There are some women who turn a possibly beautiful thing into something no better than the coupling of beasts! – but love is what you bring to it ... some people bring just their bodies. But there are some people, there are some women, John – who can bring their hearts to it, also – who can bring their souls to it!\textsuperscript{11}

[Scene Six, Part One: A Summer]

Although Alma has this beautiful notion about love and human relationship, she admits to John that her attempt to have relationship with men have failed because of “a desert between us.”\textsuperscript{12} But it is clear that the one Alma loves is John who is full of sensuality; and she has loved him with her soul. So Alma, as Tennessee Williams portrays, is a confused character who has a bundle of contradictions in herself. However, it is through the character of Alma, Williams gives an exposure to the Southern dilemma most explicitly. In his works the mythical South becomes synonymous with the era of faded elegance inhabited by gentle dreamers and misfits, losers who are not meant to win. There is an awareness of loneliness and loss and a sense of corruption that is necessitated by the environment. Alma Winemiller, in this sense, like other Williams' women characters, is a true representative of the South. Her loneliness arising from an inability to communicate becomes a major factor preventing reconciliation between the flesh and spirit.

Jacob H. Adler, who regards \textit{Summer and Smoke} as Williams’ most revealing play about the South, calls it “an allegory of the Southern dilemma.” He sees Alma as the soul of the South, “daughter of a desiccated religion and of
the soul of dementia that causes retreat into childhood.” And in the portrayal of Alma, he further says that Williams depicts:

... a stale, poetico-idealistic culture, refusing to face reality, yet still partly beautiful; and unable to achieve, or to attract, power, until reality is faced.\(^\text{13}\)

In the play, it is John Buchanan who disregards Alma’s idealistic concept of human soul and tries to pull her away from such ideal eternity. Only John realises the true self of Alma; that beneath the iceberg of Alma’s spirituality she is possessed with a deeply sexual nature which threatens to overwhelm her. In some ways quite like a medieval body and soul allegory, *Summer and Smoke* is complicated by the fact that there is attraction between Alma and John. Indeed, on her side the temptation is a very strong one. Slowly, Williams gives in more realistic view of the clash of her ideals with her basic impulses, a clash that makes her a neurotic. Her split personality is first reflected when John tells her that she has palpitation because she has a “doppelganger” and the “doppelganger is badly irritated.”\(^\text{14}\) Continued argument of John and Alma over the spiritual and physical life has reached the climax in an anatomy lecture. John shows her the anatomy chart and points to what he feels are the three essential parts of the human body – the brain, the belly and the sex – all of which must be fed, the latter no less than the others.

As John says:

**Hold still! Now listen to the anatomy lecture. You see this chart? It’s a picture of a – a picture of a – tree – with three birds in it. This top bird is the brain. The bird is hungry. He’s hungry for something called Truth. He doesn’t get much, he’s never satisfied with it, he keeps on shaking his cold and weak little wings and saying:**
‘Cheep! Cheep’ – this bird underneath is the belly. He is hungry, too, but he’s the practical bird, just hungry for food! – And down here’s the lowest bird – or may be, the highest, who knows? – Yes, take a look at him, too; he is hungry, too, hungry as both the others and twice as lonesome! – What’s he hungry for? Love! – There they all are on the chart! Three birds, three hungry little birds in one tall, withering tree! – Yes, a withering tree they can’t fly out if! – Well – I’ve fed the birds, I’ve fed all three of those birds as much as I was able. You’ve fed none of them, nothing! – Well – may be the middle bird, the practical one, the belly, a little – watery substance. But love? Or Truth? Nothing – nothing but hand me down notions – attitudes – poses! And two of the birds in your tree are going to die of starvation before the tree falls down – or gets blown over! That’s what I had to tell you, and – now you can go! The anatomy lecture is over.15

[Scene Seven, Part Two: A Winter]

But Alma Winemiller who was dissatisfied with the anatomy lecture of John replies that there is something not shown in the chart – the soul. In retaliation to John’s conception of human desires, she says:

ALMA: So that is your high conception of human desires. What you have here is not the anatomy of a beast, but a man. And I – I reject your opinion of where love is, and the kind of truth you believe the brain to be seeking! – There is something not shown on the chart.

JOHN: You mean the part that Alma is Spanish for, do you?

ALMA: Yes, that’s not shown on the anatomy chart! But it’s there just the same, yes, there! Somewhere, not seen, but there. And it’s that that I loved you with – that! Not what you
mention! Yes, did love you with, John, did nearly die of when you hurt me!16

[Scene Eight, Part Two: A Winter]

In the above arguments between John and Alma, the sexual and the religious approach to life and their conflict is clearly hinted. In Alma, this conflict has a dire consequence. Even though she loves John, her sanctified approach to life could not put up with John’s sexual drive. This is the reason why their first and only date ends disastrously. It is because Alma goes away insulted and humiliated at John’s vulgar suggestion to go up to a room at the Moon Lake Casino. However, from another angle, it can be viewed that Alma’s behaviour (her role as the embodiment of repressed humanity in the play) is not merely an outcome of her puritanical family background but also that of society. In support of such woman as Alma, Eva Figes writes:

Most of the feminine traits that psychometrics have revealed can be easily explained in sociological terms. So woman is less dominant because that is what society requires of her, more emotional because her thoughts and education have been directed to the heart rather than the head, more conservative because hearth and home do not change much and do not like (like the competitive world of business and public affairs) require the capacity for change as a condition of survival.17

Alma’s austerity is therefore a natural consequence of her social as well as filial upbringing. Had John been in Alma’s place he would not have behaved in the same manner.

In scene seven and eight, there is a sudden twist in the play. John who is a Promethean figure gets involved with Rosa Gonzales. Unlike Alma, Rosa
Gonzales is a Mexican and a full-bodied glamorous girl. In fact, Rosa is an opposite of Alma as she (Rosa) represents a body without a soul. And while Alma is quite sensitive and kind, Rosa is insensitive and animalistic. In order to settle his gambling debts with Rosa’s father, John has agreed to marry Rosa. Ironically John is saved from marrying Rosa by Alma, though John’s father is killed by the old Gonzales in that process. The traumatic experience of his father’s death results in John’s metamorphosis. The repentant John goes to a neighbouring town where an epidemic is occurring and where his father had organized the medical services. John’s work is a success, and he returns as idol of the town. In still another sudden reversal Alma and John exchange character positions. Alma becomes the advocate of the physical life and John of the spiritual. Alma now chooses action and feels that she must offer herself to him. After the long period of agony, an internal crisis with the ‘doppelganger’, she succumbs to it. She goes to John and tells him:

I’ve thought many times of something you told me last summer, that I have a doppelganger. I looked that up and I found that it means another person inside me, another self, and I don’t know whether to thank you or not for making me conscious of it! ... once time I said ‘no’ to something. You may remember the time, and all that demented howling from the cock-fight? But now I have changed my mind, on the girl who said ‘no’, she doesn’t exist any more, she died last summer – suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her. No, she doesn’t live now, but she left me her ring – You see? This one you admired, the topaz ring set in pearls ... And she said to me when she slipped this ring on my finger – ‘Remember I died empty handed, and so make sure that your hands have something in them!’ [She drops her gloves. She clasps his head again in her hands.] I said, ‘But what about pride?’ She said,
‘Forget about pride whenever it stands between you and what you must have!’ ... ...  
[Scene Ten, Part Two: A Winter]

But the new person in John Buchanan gives a different answer:

JOHN: I have a respect for the truth, and I have a respect for you – so I’d better speak honestly if you want me to speak;  
[Alma nods slightly]

ALMA: What – argument?

JOHN: The one about the chart.

ALMA: Oh – the chart! [She turns from him and wander across to the chart. She gazes up at it with closed eyes, and her hands clasped in front of her.]

JOHN: It shows that we’re not a package of rose leaves, that every interior inch of us is taken up with something ugly and functional and no room seems to be left for anything else in there.

ALMA: No ... ...

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

[Scene Nine, Part Two: A Winter]
Completely shocked and shattered, Alma replies back:

ALMA: It’s no longer a secret that I love you. It never was. I loved you as long ago as the time I asked you to read the stone angel’s name with your fingers. Yes, I remember the long afternoons of our childhood, when I had to stay indoors to practise my music – and heard your playmates calling you, “Johnny, Johnny!” How it went through me just to hear your name called! And how I – rushed to the window to watch you jump the porch railing! I stood at a distance, half-way down the black, only to keep in sight of your, torn red sweater, racing about the vacant lot you played in. Yes, it had begun that early, this affliction of love, and has never let go of me since, but kept on growing.  

[Scene Nine, Part Two: A Winter]

Alma, then, asks John straightway:

ALMA: Why didn’t it happen between us? Why did I fail? Why did you come almost close enough – and no closer?  

John in a symbolic gesture strikes a match and they both stare at it with mixed understanding. With a jolt Alma is brought down to the reality that John does not need her as her body ceased to exist for him. John says:

JOHN: ... [in the] three or four times that we’ve – come face to face ... we seemed to be trying to find something in each other without knowing what it was we wanted to find ... It wasn’t the physical your that I really wanted! ... You didn’t have that to give me ... you had something else to give ... you couldn’t name it and I couldn’t recognize it. I thought it was just a puritanical ice that glittered like flame.
But now I believe it was flame, mistaken for ice. [Scene Eleven, Part Two: A Winter]

It is because of the crystallization of Alma’s image as a human version of the “Angel of Eternity” in the mind of John. In the earlier scene John confesses to Alma that he would not have made love to her the night at the Moon Lake Casino because he is:

More afraid of your (Alma’s) soul than you’re afraid of my body. You’d have been as safe as the angel of the fountain ... I wouldn’t feel decent enough to touch you. [Scene Eleven, Part Two: A Winter]

John now realises that he never wanted Alma’s body and Alma realises that she has lost the man she loves. John by that shift his love to the former student of Alma, Nellie who is all sensual and does not need an “anatomy lecture”. Alma sees the whole situation as retribution and vengeance, and she cries in anguish. In Alma’s outcry Tennessee Williams employs such poetic devices as alliteration, assonance, balance, and quaint, everyday imagery to achieve a poignant, emotional effect:

You talk as if my body had ceased to exist for you, John, ... Yes, that’s it! You tried to avoid it ... The tables have turned, yes, the tables have turned with a vengeance! You’ve come around to my old way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time, and each one finding the other gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer the bell! [she laughs] I came here to tell you that being a gentleman doesn’t seen so important to me any more, but you’re telling me I’ve got to remain a lady. The tables have turned with a vengeance! [Scene Eleven, Part Two: A Winter]
Alma's predicament conforms with Robert Heilman's definition of tragedy as "polypathic", in which the audience experiences "the conflicting impulses of the divided man", as opposed to melodrama, which is "monopathic", in which there is a "oneness of feeling", the hero is not divided, not in conflict over opposing alternatives. Diagnosed by John in scene one as having a doppelganger, Alma recognises in their final scene together that, in contrast to John's "singleness", she is "weak and divided", one of those "who slip like shadows among you solid strong ones." She is the more complex of the two, and the ice-fire conflict within her evokes sympathy; while an audience may pity her unrewarded love for John, they might respond to him with impatience.

It is pertinent to say that Alma's characterization in *Summer and Smoke* also throws light on Williams' dual concept of life. As Peggy W. Prenshaw aptly states, the playwright:

> is in many ways an old fashioned moralist. He vacillates between opposing dogmas, however, never quite convinced of either Cavalier sensuality or Puritan transcendence.

Alma is at once both cavalier and Puritan by nature. Her Puritanism dictates her social graces and 'genteel' code while her cavalier spirit does not hesitate to acknowledge her need and love for John and all along the play there is a persistent chase of her desire. Alma's final choice is symptomatic of the victory of the long suppressed Cavalier over the Puritan. Though the playwright never approved of her repressive spirituality, her ultimate release hardly wins the author's acclaim. Strong sexuality denotes power, for Williams, but not promiscuity which entails a loss of control. Looking again from another angle, the flesh-spirit dialectic in *Summer and Smoke* recalls a similar juxtaposition
of opposing values between Connie and Sir Clifford in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* of D.H Lawrence; and it can also be said that Mirriam in *Sons and Lovers* is indeed Alma's prototype. Both women share the conviction that if one must submit to the sexual relationship it must never be merely a sensual one, but subordinated to a higher and more spiritual experience.

It can be said that in the final scene, from the moment of John's refusal Alma grows in strength and depth. Her momentary unhappiness is overpowered by her new awakening to life. Relaxed and calm she takes a sleeping tablet and drinks from the "Fountain of Eternity" for the last time. Alma is now left to resolve her life without the hope that John might become the completing part of her half fulfilled life. So Alma, trying to find a substitute, strikes up a friendship with a travelling salesman in the park near the "Angel of the Fountain". She senses in him the same self-doubts and loneliness that had been in her and had tormented her a few months before. As she says: "Life is full of little mercies like that, not big mercies but comfortable little mercies. And so we are able to go on". In the young travelling salesman, Archie Kramer, she finds an outlet of her turmoil; and with John's rejection she is forced to see that idealism does not lead to the action. Thus Alma decides to pursue personal fulfilment at the end, rejecting her puritanical airs, and walks off arm-in-arm with Archie Kramer to the Moon Lake Casino. The end gives us a hint that Alma has taken the path of Nellie's mother, the fallen woman, who had been ostracized by the society. With this change in her mind Alma seems to have bid a permanent farewell to her "soul". Tennessee Williams writes:

 Alma rises from the bench. As she crosses to the fountain the grave mood of the play is reinstated with a phase of music. She faces the stone angel and raises her gloved hand in a sort of valedictory salute. Then she
turns slowly about towards the audience. With her hand still raised in a gesture of wonder and finality as … … [Scene Twelve, Part Two: A Winter]

However, to Maurice Yacawar, the last scene on Alma’s part indicates an act of mercy and not degeneration. As he comments:

... thus when Alma goes to the salesman at the end of the film, she goes not in resignation but in joy. She takes a real interest in the lonely man. She will be a sister of mercy, not fallen woman. For spirituality has its roots in man’s physical nature.

Although the ending of Summer and Smoke is less theatrical than that of A Streetcar Named Desire, the sense of loss is great. A finely wrought, sensitive, vulnerable woman here realizes her true nature too late and veers from one extreme to the other, led by a “stranger” along a destructive path. The feeling of loss which pervades the ending of these two plays also is felt at the final curtain of The Glass Menagerie. In the draft of an unpublished article among his papers at the University of Texas, Tennessee Williams mentions that he thought of the three plays as:

a trio … which embodied a single theme, or legend, that of the delicate, haunted girl who first appeared as Laura, the basic theme of the over-sensitive misfit in a world that spins with blind fury.

Critically examining the play, it is understandable why John Buchanan chooses to settle with Nellie who is not half as worthy as Alma. To John, Alma has become more and more identical with the “Angel of Eternity”. John refers to her as an “angel of mercy” when he tells Nellie how his life is redeemed by Alma. Alma’s lecture to John asking him to serve a noble humanitarian cause,
to relieve human sufferings, makes him a new man. In Part One she tells John quite ecstatically:

To be a doctor! And deal with these mysteries under the microscope lens ... I think it is more religious than being a priest! There is so much suffering in the world it actually makes one sick to think about it, and most of us are so helpless to relieve it ... But a physician! With his magnificent gifts and training what a joy it must be to know that he is equipped and appointed to bring relief to all of this fearful suffering and fear!31

(Scene One, Part One: A Summer)

This concern about his profession gives John a new courage in his troubled times; and thus, John regards Alma as a merciful angel. To John, Alma is also expected to have the pure soul as the Angel of Eternity but not the heart with the warm blood of a young maiden. As Alma’s preoccupation is with soul, John finds it impossible for him to live with a woman whom he can worship at a distance. So John responds negatively to Alma when she comes to give herself to him. Brooks Atkinson says:

The insight into character is almost unbearably lucid. Williams is a writer of superb grace and allusiveness, always catching the shape and sound of ideas rather than their literal meaning. As its title suggests, “Summer and Smoke” deals in truths that are unsubstantial. But as Mr. Williams sees it, these are the truths that are most profound and most painful, for they separate people who logically should be together and give life its savage whims and its wanton destructiveness ... the twin themes of this tone poem are clearly stated: spirit and flesh, order and anarchy. He has caught them in the troubled brooding of two human hearts.32
Alma Winemiller, however, despite her spirituality and idealistic nature is as human as anybody else. Alma who displays an admirable fortitude in bearing the "cross" of her demented mother faces life courageously. She lives only for what she considers the finer things – Church socials, literature, tea, music, culture, and community service. She is also a sort of a scholar as she defends herself and her accent by explaining that some people disapprove of good diction that her father brought back of a British accent from his years as a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford. She has graceful mannerisms and a self conscious nervousness when she sings. Alma is also kind and understanding towards fellow people. In fact, she is the only kind person to Nellie whose mother is ostracized by all in the town. In spite of the town's puritanic hostility towards Nellie and her mother, Alma welcomes Nellie in the rectory and also gives her the music lessons like any one of her pupils. It is because she feels that "life is such a mysteriously complicated thing that no one should really presume to judge and condemn the behaviour of anyone else." This shows that Alma has a different set of principle and does not blindly follow conventional rules of the society. And John, in spite of his sensual obsession, recognizes this virtue in Alma. John Buchanan regards Alma as she is a sensitive woman and stands apart from the common people.

Looking again from another perspective, John and Alma, in fact, are closely modelled after Eros who represents sexual love and Psyche whose very name like Alma is soul. However, after a long period of struggles and miseries on both sides, Eros and Psyche were reunited. But Alma is not as fortunate as Psyche. Her tragedy stems from the fact that both John and Alma came to understand that each needs the other to give life a perfect equilibrium at too late a moment. It, therefore, results in the collapse of Alma's personality. So, at the end, she moves from a life of perplexity to that of fallibility.
With this play *Summer and Smoke* we also notice a change in the playwright's attitude towards the characterization of women. Alma, unlike the heroines in early plays, does not confront the reality. From a woman who lives in the illusionary world, she gradually develops into one who accepts the truth and actively seeks what she wants. She realizes that her idealism did not reap positive results and only brought about physical collapse and mental torture. So she decides to lead a life of personal fulfilment. Her choice does not bring happiness and satisfaction but at least it proves to be a step in that direction.

Appearing a year after the success of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the Broadway production of *Summer and Smoke* in 1948 was not well received by many critics. Many critics found the play more tenuous and less convincing than *Streetcar*. John Mason Brown in the *Saturday Review of Literature* commended Williams for his attempt to transcend the realistic theatre's usual restrictions and omissions. He wrote:

> There is a certain similarity in some of these early Williams plays — a sameness of mood, the identical sense of Southern nostalgia, music employed ... to underwrite the heroine's thoughts. It fails because it does not really explain the complications of the natures of Alma and John ... Although he failed, Williams tackled a big job. To have the hardihood to want to tackle this problem of the flesh versus the spirit is something. It is an indication that he is not an average playwright but unfortunately in "Summer and Smoke", courage is not enough.\(^{34}\)

Harold Clurman laments that so much time was given to the conscious exposition of theme in the play that the playwright had lost the specific sense of his people. Fellow critic John Gassner also termed the play "an incompletely realized but sensitive and affecting drama."\(^{35}\) Richard Watts of the *New York*
Post reacted to the performances in the play rather than to the script when he observed, “while its hero and heroine think and talk a lot about sex and passion, there is an almost academic quality about their preoccupations” (7 October 1948). One critic also comments that *Summer and Smoke*:

... is really not a play, but the outline of a play. It has a kind of dance like movement balanced, regular, precise and obviously contrived. Its structure is elegance itself, but it is not life. The characters are excellent as allegorical figures, but are not living people. They do not stir the sympathy of the audience like Blanche or Alma. Alma [is] an affected and silly hypochondriac. Her symbolic role as “spirt” is too obvious. Symbolism gives little pleasure when it is so transparent. The symbolic role of John, the young doctor, is equally obvious in its representation of the flesh and the world of science.

Two critics, however, fought heroically in its defence. Brooks Atkinson said that *Summer and Smoke* showed Tennessee Williams’ sure insight into the character that is almost lucid. Atkinson felt that the play’s insistence on truth and compassion worked it as a fine play. He praised Williams’ freedom from convenient categories – his not being willing to resort to psychoanalysis, not being governed by social or political ideas. Tennessee Williams, he said, is an author writing “out of the free world of the poet: he looks about him at ordinary people, wonders about their private anguish but knows of no way to relieve it.” Joseph Wood Krutch also praised *Summer and Smoke*. He notes that the author’s sympathies in the play lie not with the triumphant vital characters, but with the ineffectual idealist. He also explains that both Alma and Blanche have a dilemma in common: “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.” Whatever
the diverse opinions, it is safe to say that *Summer and Smoke* can be appreciated for its originality of characterization, its poetry, and its poignancy. Alma Winemiller joins the Williams’ galaxy of women whose characters are so completely delineated that they themselves become prototypes.

II

**The Glass Menagerie (1945)**

*The Glass Menagerie* is a realistic family portrait laced with the poetry of mood-memory monologues. The play is a conventional, autobiographical reminiscence permeated with tenderness and lyricism. It is a memory play in which the narrator regards his unhappy mother and retiring sister with a mixture of guilt and sentimentality. In it, Tennessee Williams created the unforgettable Laura Wingfield who is modelled upon his sister Rose. Rose is unsullied, noble and delicate as “thistledown”. Williams, who had a deep and abiding affection for Rose, considered her as the epitome of everything that is beautiful and desirable. The beauty and gentility of Laura and Rose make them anachronism and they must either retreat into the ideal beauty of unreality or break in the face of the meaningless and harshness of the world outside the ‘glass menagerie’. According to the words of C.N. Stavron:

Laura Wingfield and Alma Winemiller are frail forlorn creatures whose natural habit is the shadow of the magnolia and whose natural endowment are unsuited to coping with the tragic disparity between inner dream and external reality.

Tennessee Williams’ *The Glass Menagerie* revolves around the introversion of Laura. Unlike other women, she withdraws from the normal course of life
because of her crippled state and sensitive nature. Signi Falk describes Laura as:

"the morbidly shy, overdelicate sister who is as fragile as the little glass ornaments and phonograph records which are her escape."\(^{41}\)

Laura, in fact, is one of the unforgettable portrayal of women characters of Williams. She has evanescent loveliness which readily touches the heart of the reader. And like Shakespeare's Ophelia in *Hamlet*, Laura is pathetic rather than a tragic figure. Whenever she appears in the play, she evokes genuine sympathy to the reader. Laura like Amanda or Blanche has refused to accept the harsh reality of her life and has withdrawn into the world of glass figurines she has collected till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf. It is interesting to note here the description of Laura given by Tennessee Williams in the Production Notes at the beginning of the play and which tells us about this unearthliness of Laura. Williams writes:

The lighting in the play is not realistic. In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim. Shafts of light are focused on selected areas or actors, sometimes in contradiction to what is the apparent centre. For instance, in the quarrel scene between TOM and AMANDA, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest pool of light is on her figure. ... The light upon LAURA should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas.\(^{42}\)

This short description of Laura by Williams clearly shows that she is like Alma who stands for spirituality and divinity in a world rendered by materiality.
Laura, who evolved from Williams’ various versions of the play and the story *The Portrait of the Girl in Glass*, is a fragile delicate beauty. A Childhood illness has left her slightly crippled and introverted. Studying her, it is difficult to draw a line between her mental and physical aberrations. She has nothing of her mother’s (Amanda) robust countenance. On the contrary she has turned extremely self-conscious and unsocial. As Laura was miserable at school, her mother’s attempt to instil confidence in her by sending her to secretarial school has also been a dismal failure because Laura spends most of her time in the park, the zoo, and the art museum. At home Laura cannot get consolation from the family as both her mother and brother are immersed in their own problems. As a result she recedes more and more to her own world of glass menagerie and music for solace and companionship. Sam Blue Farb has made an analysis of Laura and her glass animals in this way:

*The movements that Laura comes face to face with the present – the uncertainty, the insecurity of all life in that present she turns and runs away. For it has been her experience to see the present ... with its shattered hope, that lies smashed, no longer a cohesive unit, around her, curiously, the glass animals instead of being vague, distant, fairies-like are the only artefacts in the play that held away degree of reality for Laura. If they are fragile, they are also strong. And if they are glass, they have a certain quality of transparency which permits their owner the full view of the world that is not bounded by time and lameness. For even in their fragility, they are at least tangible and therefore, for Laura they can be seen, touched, feel, even folded. And they have more substance than mere memory. They will be there tomorrow, as they were yesterday, as they are today; broken or not they will always be there.*

43
In the play, when her mother desperately asks her whether she had not ever liked anybody Laura confesses about her secret love of Jim, her childhood friend. Jim O’Connor, Laura’s dream hero was a member of the choir, a star in the basketball games, a leading member of the debating club and president of the senior class. He had been in the centre of the limelight during his school years while Laura had remained hidden unnoticed in the same social circle. Yet Jim O’Connor was the only one in the school who tended to overlook Laura’s physical disability and the only one to whom she offered her friendship. In the course of time, Laura’s devotion to Jim increased and ultimately it left an indelible mark to her memory. Not surprisingly even after six years of school life Laura can recollect minutely all about Jim’s life in High School for he was the only friend she had. In scene seven of the play when Jim says that he had seen Laura somewhere before:

JIM: [smiling doubtfully] You know I have an idea I’ve seen you before. I had the idea soon as you opened the door. It seemed almost like I was about to remember your name. But the name that I started to call you – wasn’t a name! And so I stopped myself before I said it.44 [Scene Seven]

Laura immediately answers back “Wasn’t it – Blue Roses?” to Jim; and again when Jim asks “How was it that I got started calling you that?” Laura in a reminiscent tone recollects:

I was out of school a little while with pleurisies. When I came back you asked me what was the matter. I said I had pleurisies – you thought I said Blue Roses. That is what you always called me after that.45 [Scene Seven]
The happy thoughts of Jim which she cherishes in the secret chamber of her heart are the anodyne that assuage her physical defect and makes her long for a normal happy life. But next minute, emerging out of her reverie, she faces the reality that she is a crippled woman for whom connubial happiness is a fruit out of reach. However, on the contrary, her mother's last hope is to find a husband for Laura who will provide her and somehow save her from submerging entirely into a world of imagination. At his mother's almost cajoling instance Tom (Laura's brother) finally brings home a gentleman caller who works with him at the Continental Shoemakers. Here Fortune plays a mischievous trick on Laura. By sheer coincidence or fate, the gentleman caller brought by Tom to the Wingfield apartment is none other than Laura's childhood hero Jim O'Connor. For Laura, the evening Jim's visit begins in panic because the dream that she dared to dream has come true. Like the sleeping Beauty of the Fairy Tale she waits for the Prince Charming to wake her up from her spiritual slumber. The princess is ready to emerge from the spell that shyness and lameness have cast upon her.

Jim's arrival is marked by the coming of rain but the hopes of fertility and renewal which this night suggests are soon dashed. Jim is referred to by Tennessee Williams as an emissary from a world of reality. Vibrant, simple and hearty he seems to Tom and others "the long delayed but always expected something we live for." In fact, Jim is the only character in the play who goes out of the house into a normal world of "reality"; he does not belong to the Wingfield world of dreams and fears and unexpressed desires. Jim is not an especially effective character study because Williams can feel little sympathy with such a substantial and placid citizen. Yet he is a kindly reminder of the reasonable, normal human pattern, like the men Williams had met at the shoe
factory – clean-living, honest, sweet natured, materialistic, eager American businessmen. He, according to Williams, seems to represent the average, unimaginative American – a contrast to the more perceptive Tom or Laura. In the Play, however, Jim serves as an important figure to Laura. For a few moments he replaces Laura’s monotonous life with colours of excitement. When alone with Laura, Jim begins to persuade that her limp is only a minor disability, that she is pretty and lovable. In trying to console her, Jim like a psychologist reveals that her inferiority complex is the root of all problems. He talks to her as if he were addressing his public speaking class in evening school, thinking of himself, making his point, and completely insensitive to his little one-girl, wide-eyed audience. He also urges her to forget her crippled leg and the brace she wears, and tells her that it is only her imagination that has magnified her trouble when she ought to forget it and think of herself as superior to other in some way. Williams, in fact, was propounding his views of mankind in the mouth of Jim. As Jim rightly says to Laura:

**JIM:** People are not so dreadful when you know them. That’s what you have to remember! And everybody has problems, not just you, but practically everybody has got some problems.

You think of yourself as having the only problems, as being the only one who is disappointed. But just look around you and you will see lots of people as disappointed as you are.

... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...
... ... ... ... ... ... ... ... ...

[aruptly] you know what I judge to be the trouble with you?
Inferiority complex! Know what that is? That’s what they call it when someone low-rates himself! ... A lack of amount of faith in yourself as a person. You don’t have the proper amount of faith in yourself ... A little physical defect is what you have. Hardly noticeable even! Magnified thousand times by imagination!

You know what my strong advice to you is? Think of Yourself as superior in some way!

LAURA: In what way would I think?

JIM: Why, man alive, Laura! Just look about you a little. What do you see? A word full of common people! All of ‘em born and all of ‘em going to die!

Which of them has one-tenth of your good points! Or mine!

Or anyone else’s, as far as that goes – Gosh!

Everybody excels in some one thing: Some in many! All you’ve got to do is discover in what!* [Scene Seven]

Laura eventually responds to the encouragement of Jim, and shows him her precious glass collection. As a token of her confidence in him, she picks up and trusts him her dearest treasure, the thirteen-year-old Unicorn. She says that she loves it dearly as it is extinct and is quite lonely among other animals of her collection. In this symbolic action we can see Laura’s surrender of herself to Jim O’Connor whom she worships in the altar of her heart. The Unicorn is obviously a symbol for Laura who is also a delicate translucent being, out of place in the contemporary world. The dialogue between Jim and Laura in this part of scene seven is, in fact, the best that Tennessee Williams has written:

LAURA: Go on, I trust you with him! [places it in his palm]. There now – you’re holding him
gently! Hold him over the light, he loves the light! You see how the light shows through him?

JIM: It sure does shine!

LAURA: I shouldn’t be partial, but he is my favourite one.

JIM: What kind of thing is this one supposed to be?

LAURA: Haven’t you noticed the single horn on his forehead?

JIM: A unicorn, huh?

Laura: Mmmm – hmmm!

JIM: Unicorns, aren’t they extinct in the modern world?

LAURA: I know!

JIM: Poor little fellow, he must feel sort of lonesome.

LAURA: (Smilingly) Well, if he does he doesn’t complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some horses that don’t have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together.49

[Scene Seven]

The above lines echo Laura’s resignation to her fate. The interest in her glass collection and Jim’s ability to break through her reserve and the defences which she has set up bring her a woman of new found elation. Laura is readily caught up in the warmth and confidence of Jim. To prove that her limp is no barrier he asks her to dance and as he takes her in his arms, fragile, unearthly prettiness
has come out in Laura. And as they dance they inadvertently break the glass
unicorn which evokes Laura’s comment:

LAURA:  Now it is just like all the other horses.

JIM:    It’s lost is --

LAURA:  Horn!
        It doesn’t matter. May be it’s a blessing in
disguise.

JIM:    You’ll never forgive me. I bet that was
your favourite piece of glass.

LAURA:  I don’t have favourites much. It’s no
tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily.
No matter how careful you are. The traffic
jars the shelves and things fall off them.

JIM:    Still I’m awfully sorry that I was the cause.

LAURA:  [Smilingly] I’ll just imagine he had an
operation. The horn was removed to make
him feel less – freakish! [they both laugh]
Now he will feel more at home with the
other horses, the ones that don’t have
horns... 50 [Scene Seven]

It is easily noticeable from the above comments of Laura that there is a marked
change in her behaviour when she is alone with Jim O’Connor, the gentleman
caller. Extremely self-conscious and nervous initially, she later begins to shed
her morbid shyness. That she is able to achieve this state in her mother’s
absence is significant. It points to her inability to attain normalcy in Amanda’s
domineering presence. Her maladjustment, her sensitiveness, is heightened by
abnormal family relationship and so she strives to break through this bondage
by attempting to find a mate. Benjamin Nelson calls this phenomenon as the "awakening of a repressed female by a vital male".51 The incident of the "broken horn" by the gentleman caller is symbolic of Jim's ability to rid Laura of her sensitiveness. His continued attentions can turn her into a normal healthy girl. However, when Jim kisses her, he realizes his mistakes for "the kiss made Laura comes closer than she ever has been to emerging into a new world"52 and so at the end Jim confesses that he is already engaged to a girl. This confession shatters her only hope and leaves her more broken and secluded than ever. It leaves Laura to retreat into her glass world. Her brief joy is "snuffed" out and her loneliness is only intensified. It is quite obvious that she will never allow a Jim O'Connor to happen to her again. The scene, in fact, when Laura gives the broken unicorn as a souvenir to Jim is pathetic because he has not only broken her unicorn but also her heart. As Williams writes:

She [Laura] bites her lip which was trembling and then bravely smiles. She opens her hand again on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes his hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it.53 [Scene Seven]

However, from another angle, to view Jim's embarrassed confession to Laura as the result of his realization that she may be falling in love with him is to see only one side of the situation. It is true that Jim has unwittingly aroused emotions in Laura with which he cannot cope. But it is similarly true that she has aroused emotions in him which have suddenly upset his life. Though Jim seems to be the young man who is likely to succeed in life, he is not at all as confident as he would have Laura believe. Beneath the bravado and good
hearted bluster, Jim is still in his mind the sense of fear and insecurity. In this regard, Nelson rightly says:

Laura is not the only person ‘awakened’ in their moments together; Jim is awakened to a part of himself that he has not quite successfully suppressed: the unsure, uncertain, frightened Jim O’Connor. His reaction to Laura is that of a bewildered boy, needing tenderness and beauty, and seeing it for a moment in a strange girl. But he cannot accept Laura and preserve his wonderful dream of himself, and she in turn is much ineffectual to make any positive gesture toward him.54

The story of Laura and Jim is simple and poignant as it reveals Laura’s personal dilemma. In the process of the play, the character of Laura is clearly revealed as inevitably doomed to heartbreak and pain and lost in a struggle against a reality which she does not comprehend. The world of Laura has music of its own — soft, delicate, melodious and haunting. She knows that she is like the unicorn or the blue roses which have no place in this world – being extinct, nonexistent, and anachronistic. And like the unicorn, she represents purity and innocence. Laura, unlike other women characters of Williams, is also highly sensitive. It is revealed in the way Amanda, her mother, tells Tom:

You know how Laura is. So quiet but – still water runs deep! She notices things and I think she – broods about them.55 [Scene Four]

These words show Laura’s sensitivity and sensibility. In the play, one can feel her stoicism which radiates its calmness to soothe the angry mother and the frustrated son. Laura’s fragility, sensitivity and humble quietness always draw tenderness from Tom. Unable to adapt to the modern scene of “electrodynamics” she lives in a world of candle light and fantasy. In fact, it can be said that Laura is a fugitive
who has given up all ideas of struggle convinced of, and frightened by the 
unfriendliness of the world outside she has discovered her own world. Laura, as 
one critic says, is almost too ethereal to exist as a human being. The readers 
also undoubtedly echo the poignant cry of Tom who could not forget his sister 
however far he may wander. She tugs at our heart strings as compellingly as she 
did at those of her brother’s: “Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, 
but I am more faithful than I tended to be!”

According to Judith J. Thompson, the symbolism woven around Laura 
has religious and ascetic connotations: Candle light, the halo of illumination set 
before shrines is her milieu. The advent of Jim “lights her inwardly with altar 
candles” suggests the warmth of religious devotion. And her disappointment on 
Jim’s departure is projected as if the “holy candles in the altar of Laura’s face 
have been snuffed out”, signifying loss of faith. To emphasize her saintly aspect 
she is referred to by Amanda, Jim and Tom as “sister”, the traditional address 
for a nun. The “little silver slipper of a moon” on which Amanda asks Laura to 
wish becomes an image of her reclusive state. C.W.E. Bigsby appropriately 
explains her enigmatic behaviour:

Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase 
each other’s tails in the revolving wire cage of our 
nervous world. They distract us from feeling two much 
about things ... This is the temptation to which Laura 
succumbs in The Glass Menagerie but the alternative 
is equally chilling and she is unwilling to surrender her 
dreams for the prosaic world of the typing pool and the 
frightening casualties of time.
The above lines can be truly said of Alma also. Unlike other women characters of Tennessee Williams, Alma and Laura are too delicate and sensitive to live in the world which is "lit by lightning."

Tennessee Williams' compassionate women portrayed in his later plays, *The Night of the Iguana* and *Small Craft Warnings*, are taken up and studied thoroughly in the next chapter.
Notes


