CHAPTER III
THE MAKING OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Tendulkar’s art was an infallible mirror of his contemporary Indian society and specifically Maharashtrian culture, much in the same veins was the artistic world inhabited by Tennessee Williams’s drama. Williams preceded Tendulkar temporally and was easily assimilated in the canon. Tendulkar’s translations of three major American works in Marathi bespeaks not only of his exposure to the west but illuminates the fact that Tendulkar, as a dramatist was quite impressed by the dynamics of the western theater. The present chapter is an effort to unravel the remarkable literary feat of Williams and identify the thematic and technical innovativeness that established him as one of the renowned writers of American drama.

Twentieth century was the bloodiest century ever witnessed by the mankind. Hard hitting realism and insecurity loomed large. American society was under the spell of rapid transition after the First World War. The parallel process of disintegration and reformation of the conventional social set up consequentially imparted an uncontrolled sense of freedom which left its lasting imprint on the literature of the period. American drama was in a curious state of evolution. Emerson’s call for an American Renaissance in literature proceeded from poetry and fiction to the dramatic genre. The period was characterized by commercialization of the American theatre. “The first theatrical Syndicate was formed in 1896 that eventually exercised control over most theatres in America. Melodramatic, sensational pieces, light entertainment were the predominant forms on the stage. With no tradition to fall back upon, American playwrights were compelled to cater to the popular tastes and devise forms and subjects that appealed to the masses. The literary output meant to negotiate with the popular demand compromised with the quality. Even the best American dramatists of the time like Moody, Herne and Fitch were of ordinary standing as compared to their European contemporaries – Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Shaw and Synge” (Tornqvist 1969: 18-19).

The unparalleled artistic dexterity of Eugene O’Neill resuscitated the theatre and modern American drama experienced a dynamic breakthrough in the first half of the twentieth century. O’Neill’s two mammoth plays Strange Interlude and Mourning
Becomes Electra attested his dramatic talent in the international scenario with the accolade of the Nobel Prize in 1936. His plays demonstrated the spiritual failure and the dehumanizing materialism of America, recorded the discomfiture of the mobile society, the tensions within the nuclear family, the loneliness and inarticulacy of the individual.

The second decade of twentieth century witnessed a fertilizing period with the advent of new theatre magazines, new ventures in publishing and tourism by European companies. These changes ushered in new ideas about theatre and plays that had been fermenting in European countries since the early 1880s. The synchronized arrival of Naturalism, Symbolism, and Expressionism in America infused enthusiasm in young writers and thinkers. As a result various independent theatre groups and companies like Provincetown Players came to the fore-front in search of new forum for the contemporary drama.

The Provincetown Players (founded 1915) introduced the works by Theodore Dreiser, Wallace Stevens, and John Reeds to the American stage. Elmer Rice employed Expressionist techniques to denounce the business world in his *The Adding Machine* (1923). But O’ Neill’s dramatic achievements surpassed his predecessors with his remarkable ideas and unrelenting theatrical innovativeness. His phantasmagoric visions, syncopated sounds, development of a lively and flexible verbal language at once confirmed the accomplishment of his plays *Emperor Jones* (1920), *The Hairy Ape* (1922), *Desire under the Elms* (1955) to achieve glorious success.

Thrice awarded Pulitzer Prize, Thornton Wilder often painted an affectionate but astute picture of provincial American life. Pain and melancholy never lie beyond the borders of any of his plays like *The Long Christmas Dinner* (1931), *The Skin of our Teeth* (1943), *Our Town* (1938) and *The Matchmaker* (1954). Wilder often related electrically charged dramatic action from the minutiae of the experiences. Even festival events could be transformed into curious psychological episodes in his works. Susan Glaspell, another contemporary of Wilder, played a pivotal role in establishing the serious American theatre and founding the influential Provincetown players with her husband George Cook. Her play *Trifles* (1916) presents an acute account of unraveling a murder mystery. *Inheritors* (1921) is a well–crafted longer play which examines the corruption of the pioneering spirit and the American dream illuminates many dark facets of the
contemporary American attitudes. *The Verge* (1921) spun around the heroine on the point of a breakthrough either into madness or understanding, anticipates the hothouse atmosphere of Tennessee Williams.

Clifford Odets, a chronicler of moral malaise, was the star dramatist of the Group Theatre and his early plays *Waiting for Lefty* (1962) and *Awake and Sing* (1962) were both premiered there. His plays may seem melodramatic and ponderous, but are astounding in the moral vigour. Amongst the post-war dramatists David Mamet occupies a unique position in the history of American drama. His work harmoniously blends innately American idiom but his skilful linguistic word play and silences owe a lot to the iconic European playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. As a co-founder of Chicago’s St. Nicholas Theatre company his socially conscious plays such as *American Buffalo* (1975) *Sexual Perversity in Chicago* (1976) *Edmond* (1982), comment on the limits of American capitalism and are serio-comic satires on business. His plays sum up the price of capitalist ethics with compactness in structure and moving irony.

Eugene O’Neill, Susan Glaspell, Thornton Wilder and Clifford Odets dominated the American theatre in the first five decades of the twentieth century, the later half was to be occupied by Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepherd among others, and David Mamet belonged to the second half. It was evidently Tennessee Williams who invigorated the middle years of the century, figuratively as well as metaphorically occupying the central position of the American stage. “While O’Neill was the tragic dramatist and Miller remains the theatrician of the ethical, Williams emerged as the poet of the heart. He took quite acutely Yeats’s epigraph: “be secret and exult” (Roudane 1997: i). Chronology is not the only abiding factor in determining the centrality of Williams but the originality of his theatrical accomplishments as well.

To cite Arthur Miller’s views:

The fifties became an era of gauze. Tennessee Williams is responsible for this in the main. One of my own feet stands in this stream. It is cruel, romantic neuroticism, a translation of current life into the war within the self… The drama will have to find its way back into the daylight world without losing its inner life. I sometimes long to see a set with a ceiling again. The drama will have to re-address itself to the world beyond the skin. (Miller qtd by Murphy in Demastes 1996: 189).
Ultimately Williams would become more revealing about his life and art, a writer who turned his own poignant life into the raw material for some of the most rending and luminous plays of the times. Williams borrowed from the past and refurbished the present to leave inimitable mark on the future. Thomas Lanier Williams was born on 26th March 1911, in the Episcopal rectory of Columbus, Mississippi, home of his maternal grandfather. Cornelius Coffin Williams, his father descended from “pioneer Tennessee stock”, which gave the writer’s adopted first name. His parents were virtually separated, his traveling-salesman father appearing only to disrupt the tranquility and harmony within the household and threaten the children. Tom’s mother Edwina, gifted with the grave and charm of a Southern belle, often performed as a singer. Hence music formed an integral part of his life since early years. Tom was quite attached to his sister Rose, almost like twins and were often addressed as ‘the couple’. The empathy and perfect understanding of the women characters created by Williams owed a lot to the upbringing in the female dominated atmosphere in his formative years.

The southern idyll was ruined when his father got a managerial job with the International shoe company and at seven, Tom was compelled to forsake his agrarian Eden to a polluted, suffocating city, St. Louis. Edwina’s loneliness turned Tom into her confidante whereas Cornelius pejoratively called his sensitive, delicate son ‘Miss Nancy’. Trapped between the incompatible marriage partners, Tom often sought refuge in a Forest Park Zoo nearby which perhaps evoked the analogy of home-as-menagerie in his play. Allean Hale comments “thus Tom first got the sense of being an outsider, which would become a pervasive theme in his writing” (Hale in Roudane 1997: 13). At thirteen, he published his first story, ‘Isolated’, that appeared in *The Junior Life*, followed by poems and ‘our literary boy’ discovered his vocation as a writer at the age of fourteen. He won a five-dollar prize for the best essay in the contest of *Smart Set* magazine ‘Can a good wife be a good sport?’ where he answered as the wronged husband. At seventeen, he sent a story to *Weird Tales*, ‘The Vengeance of Nitocris’, a gory adventure that narrates how an Egyptian princess avenges the death of her brother by inviting his enemies to a banquet and then drowns them to death by opening the sluice gates to the
Nile. The tale established the brother–sister affinity and the embodiment of violence as the key to his writings in the future.

Tom embarked on his journalistic career at the University of Missouri in 1929 where he recklessly misreported a news event and abandoned journalism altogether. He read the works of O’Neill and Strindberg to prepare himself for play-writing. As a novice at writing, Tom would experiment, selecting a different master as model each time. When St. Louis was rocked by Great Depression in 1932, his father compelled him to take up a job in a shoe factory. The tedious job at factory was a thorn–in-flesh for Tom, which pricked him to work even more passionately so that he set himself to work at a speed of one story a week. The hectic work, pressure of deadlines led to a physical and nervous breakdown that relieved him from his arduous work. Recuperating from his illness at Memphis, Tom joined another theatre group and wrote his third play, Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay! a comedy about two sailors on shore leave. Entering the Washington University, he met Clark Mills, French Scholar and a recognized poet, who would have primary influence on him, introducing him to Rilke, Rimbaud and Hart Crane who became his idols. The other two significant influences at the University were Professor William G.B Carson’s playwriting class and an amateur theatre group, the Mummers. “The Mummers never put on a show that didn’t “deliver a punch”, Williams wrote later (Williams 1978: II). Prof Carson’s class organized a year end contest in which every student had to write a one–act play. Williams wrote the play ‘Me, Vashya! that unmasks a ruthless munitions maker who cheats his country by supplying ammunition to his enemies. However Tom’s play lost the contest to a light comedy and the sensitive playwright unable to accept the defeat quit the university.

In 1937, Tom chose to join University of Iowa, well aware of his freedom and Rose’s confinement at Farmington State Hospital under treatment for acute mental illness. Rose underwent a prefrontal lobotomy to cure her schizophrenia but the operation was unsuccessful. She remained institutionalized for the rest of days, outliving her brother, whose love for her and pangs of guilt for his sister lasted life-long as reflected in much of his works, notably The Glass Menagerie. Iowa proved to be a boon in disguise for Tom who received systematic exposure to dramatic theory and theater literature. It
was here that he acquired his new name, ‘Tennessee’ dubbed by his schoolmates who were unable to decipher his southern accent.

Back in St. Louis, Williams wrote his play *Battle of Angels*. Audrey Wood his agent secured him a grant of $1,000 dollars from the Rockefeller foundation. Williams went to New York to study advanced playwriting with the financial gain under the guidance of John Gassner and Erwin Piscator. Williams saw *Battle of Angels* as the record of his youth and wrote: “My next play will be simple, direct and terrible – a picture of my own heart. It will be myself without concealment or evasion … a passionate denial of sham and a cry for beauty” (Williams in Lyle Leverish 1995: 301). Gassner recommended that the Theater Guild produce Williams’s play but it quickly closed down and seventeen years later Williams revised it as *Orpheus Descending*.

Significantly Williams was by then admittedly a homosexual. In 1939, a homosexual was branded a pervert by conventional society and would be outlawed. This partly accounts for the persistent theme of the marginal character which began with *Battle of Angels*. Myra, the central character is significant in Williams’s canon and especially in American theatre because she exhibited the boldness to violate the thresholds of conventional morality and shattered the stereotypical image of woman on the stage.

In the military draft for World War II Williams received a 4F rating because of his ill health and sustained himself during those years by doing various odd jobs, including waiter, teletype operator, cashier, and movie usher. 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” (Williams 1978: 61-62). “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” (Ibid: 62).

However, although briefly established as a professional playwright, Williams was offered a six month contract by MGM Studios at $250 a week to write a film script. MGM rejected his screenplay called *The Gentleman Caller*, which would become a glorious success, *The Glass Menagerie* in the following years. Then he was dismissed by MGM but he used the duration to complete his play and once it opened on Broadway in March 1945, Williams’s place in the American theatre was confirmed.
In the next sixteen years all of his major works were published and produced. Williams received many awards and prizes including Pulitzers, Honorary degrees and invitations to membership in prestigious organizations. The fecundity of his writing encompassed short stories, one-act plays, poetry, and a novel. Most of his plays were converted into motion pictures.

By the age twenty-eight, Williams was already a successful craftsman. His mastery of scenes, characterization, dialogue, monologue and introduction of music, sound effects, lighting to present complex themes and to produce theatrical excitement contributed to his acclaim as a literary figure. Much of the expressionistic techniques that are prevalent in the contemporary theatre owe their indebtedness to Williams’s manifesto for a “plastic theatre” and according to Esther Jackson, may be one of his most lasting contributions to American dramaturgy (Jackson 1965: 89).

Williams developed a fourteen year intimacy with Frank Merlo in 1948, but Merlo’s death due to cancer in 1960 left him totally bereaved and depressed. This period which he referred to as ‘Stoned Age’ was characterized by a mental crisis, to overcome his loneliness and despair he surrendered to alcohol and drugs and spent three months in a mental institution. Although Williams continued to write during this phase, the plays were minor ones, his masterpieces belonging to an earlier phase.

Williams’s struggles in personal life, his feelings of responsibility and guilt for his sister Rose implicated his artistic concerns. Theatre was a forum to express himself; he converted life into work and misery into art. New Orleans was the city to which he often returned, for it epitomized the freedom against the entrapment of St. Louis. If St. Louis was an inferno, New Orleans was his motivation. The two cities signified his perpetual conflict between two opposites – the stress which he endured in life time and on which he based his plays.

Tennessee Williams was consciously engaged in trying to create a new form “Plastic theatre” which traced its origin to Chekhovian impact. Stanislavski had remarked of Chekhov’s work, “At times he is an impressionist, at times a symbolist; he is a ‘realist’ where it is necessary” (Chekhov 1959: 7-8). Same holds true for Williams so that Stanislavski observations of Chekhov also mirror William’s art:
A purblind eye would see only that Chekhov lightly traces the outward lines of the plot, that he is engaged in representing everyday life, the minute details of ordinary living. He certainly does these things, but he needs all this only as a contrast to set off the high ideal which is ever present in his mind and for which he longs and hopes all the time. In his dramatic works Chekhov has achieved an equal mastery over internal as well as external truth… he knows how to destroy both the inner and outer falsity of the stage presentation by giving us beautiful, artistic, genuine truth (Ibid 7-8).

It was primarily this internal as well as external truth that Williams explored through his works. His attempt was to unfathom the private world beneath the social fabric. Let us examine his dramtic oeuvre in detail:

The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie (1944), Williams’s highly successful play is a “memory play” as he himself mentioned in the production notes that preceded the text, which, because of its considerably “delicate or tenuous material” justifies “atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction” (Williams 1971: 131). The play evokes a nostalgic mood, with a walk down the memory lane by Tom, the participant narrator. The non-realistic lighting amplifies the impact of the play’s major theme, illusion versus reality. The visual image and its implications were as significant to Williams as his dialogue. “When I write, everything is visual, as brilliantly as if it were on a lit stage” (Rader in Devlin 1986: 334). With its distinct dream like quality Tom’s opening monologue presents him as a magician who intends not to deceive the audience “I have tricks in my pocket. I have things up my sleeve” but to present illusions that lie under the façade of reality – “I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (Williams 1971: 144). The sense of anachronism and the way in which the past is being retroactively criticized is especially significant. The action rooted in the time before the world war emphasizes the relic repeatedly.

“To begin with, I turn back in time. I reverse it to that quaint period, the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for blind.” (Ibid: 145)
The story and plot are rooted firmly in Williams’s own life. Laura patterned after and modeled on the playwright’s sister Rose, is the first of a series of Williams’s characters who exhibit a frailty that renders them incapable of coping with the harsh, insensitive and intolerable reality. Laura, a shy, recluse, physically disabled is unable to come to terms with life. Amanda, the mother, a southern belle, pins all her hopes on her daughter’s marriage and despite all the odds, fortifies herself with her youthful memories. Tom, the brother seeks refuge from his responsibilities and nagging mother by writing poetry, going out to movies and finally by deserting his family like his father, a telephone man, “Who fell in love with long distances”. The visit of Jim, the gentleman – caller raises hopes about a change for better but proves to be a short lived episode that leaves the family desolate and miserable. Hurt and distracted Laura returns to her cloistered world of the glass menagerie. Tom leaves the house to pursue his dreams, Amanda warns him, “You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!”(235). Amanda is left frustrated and desolate to continue the hardships.

Delma Presley views Amanda, along with Laura and even Jim, as “Characters caught up in illusions of their own making.” “All of them … have built their lives on insubstantial premises of deception” and it is Amanda “who always seems to reap the bitter consequences of deception, by her husband, by Laura (in going to the zoo instead of business school), by Tom (in using the light bill money to join the merchant seamen), and even, unwittingly by the gentleman caller” (Presley 1990: 34, 38).

All the characters seem to survive in their own illusory world, each being content in the utopian world distinct and distanced from the mundane, sordid world of reality. Joseph Wood Krutch, who conceded that the play had “a hard substantial core of shrewd observation and deft economical characterization,” nevertheless felt that “this hard core is enveloped in a fuzzy haze of pretentious, sentimental, pseudo-poetic verbiage” (Krutch 1945: 424). Stark Young, who was not only an excellent drama critic but also a Southerner like Williams, criticized the production’s “artificial” theatricality but praised the dialogue, especially the Southern speech in the mother’s part (Young in Griffin 1945:42). Williams’s language is certainly lyrical; the dialogues embellished with poetry render a direct emotional appeal. One could certainly say of Williams’s work what Jean Cocteau said of his own, that “the action of my play is in images, while the text is not: I
attempt to substitute poetry in the theater by poetry of the theatre” (Duran 1962: 172). Probably the loss of harmony in personal life was atoned by creating a symphony in literature. Arthur Miller much later acclaimed Williams’s unparalleled achievement as a writer with the potentialities of poetic talent, when he remarked:

Tennessee Williams broke new ground by opening up the stage to sheer sensibility, and not by abandoning dramatic structure but transforming it. What was new in Tennessee Williams was his rhapsodic insistence on making form serves his utterance. He did not turn his back on dramatic rules but created new ones, … with The Glass Menagerie, the long lost lyrical line was found again, and supporting it, driving it on, an emotional heroism, that outflanked even values themselves; what he was celebrating was not approval or disapproval but humanity, the pure germ of enduring life (Miller in Roudane 1997: 31).

Indeed the play is more than a lament for a tortured sister; it is an elegy for a loss of innocence in the human world. Set in a transient phase it turns the private world of the characters inside out. The fragility of Laura’s glass menagerie symbolizes the delicacy of the dreams that are ruthlessly crushed under the pressures of socio-political changes. The depression destroyed the American dream and then the world war snuffed out the remaining hopes as Tom asks Laura to blow out the candles. The enactment of a family melodrama magnifies itself into a colossal loss and assumes the dimensions of a social tragedy.

The Glass Menagerie attains a degree of complexity beyond Williams’s private glimpse into a slice of life enacted by the Wingfields. It is reminiscent of America during a crucial phase of history, the great depression. The play mirrors the intellectual and political history of the twentieth century. Williams purposely incorporates popular culture, social trends and historical developments corresponding to the contemporary period. Deconstructing the play merely as Tom’s subjective memory of his wrecked family would tantamount to negligence of Williams’s artistic feat of portraying a genuine memory of contemporary time and place.
A Streetcar Named Desire

The reality seems so relentless and torturing that it needs to be converted to become acceptable. Similar interplay of illusions and reality is also knit into the texture of A Streetcar Named Desire. The first indication of the play’s brilliance lies in its title which is clearly echoed in the words of Blanche Dubois at the outset: “They told me to take a street–car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields!” “That’s where you are now,” says Eunice (Williams 1971: 246). These words allegorize Blanche’s life journey and state a major theme of the play (Glimpses of Blanche’s character and actions are offered throughout the play by unfolding her past). Death is symbolized by the Streetcar Cemeteries, Blanche has consciously chosen to respond to desire and reached the Elysian Fields, her future rests on the courtesy of Stella and Mitch. Her blissful marital life ends with the discovery of Allan’s homosexuality followed by his suicide. She tells Mitch in scene nine: “After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with …. I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely places” (386). Thomas Adler interprets her behavior with the young soldiers as a “kind of desperate flailing about for gratification as a compensation for powerlessness” (Adler 1990: 43). Her failure to help Allan and the ensuing pangs of remorse and guilt that haunt her seem to explain her promiscuity.

At the opening of the play, the thirty year old Blanche having lost her youth, her husband, her inheritance, her shelter and nearly all her family seeks relief from her isolation in Stella’s household. Reared in an aristocratic family, Blanche is stunned by the mediocrity of Stella’s life. Her fantasy refuge is Shep Huntleigh, a wealthy Texan and former college beau. She tries to convince Stella to escape from her unrefined, barbaric husband, Stanley Kowalski – “Your fix is worse than mine is! … I’m going to do something … But you’ve given in. And that isn’t right, you’re not old! You can get out.” Stella retorts, “I’m not in anything I want to get out of” (313-14). Blanche’s derogatory comments about Stanley’s “ape-like” bestiality are overheard by him, who is swift in his revenge in fear of losing Stella to an adversary. Blanche’s futile efforts to start the life anew with Mitch are upset by Stanley. Her confrontation with Stanley ends up in her
rape, her final degradation. Having been molested by the host, her “protector” supposed to offer “refuge” to her unhinges her mind, and she is shifted to a public asylum for an indeterminate future.

In *Memoirs*, Williams speaks of Blanche as “a relatively imperishable creature of the stage” (Williams 1975: 231). He observes that “nearly all of her cries to the world in her season of desperation have survived because they were true cries of her embattled heart; that is what gave them the truth which has made them live on, echoing in the hearts of so many known and unknown ladies” (Ibid 231). Elia Kazan identified Blanche with Williams himself – “an ambivalent figure who is attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time he fears it, because it threatens his life” (Kazan in Michel 1974: 71). Although Blanche is not a mere mouthpiece of Williams, the qualities that Kazan identified are certainly shared both by the writer and the character. Later he adds “Blanche Dubois comes into a house where someone is going to murder her. The interesting part of it is that Blanche Dubois-Williams is attracted to the person who’s going to murder her. That’s what makes the play deep… So you can understand a woman playing affectionately with an animal that’s going to kill her. So she at once wants him to rape her, and knows he will kill her. She protests how vulgar and corrupted he is, but she also finds that vulgarity and corruption attractive” (Ibid 71). This certainly echoes the powerful epithet that evil is tempting. However Williams had to struggle against the secular and religious censors – Hays Office, the Roman Catholic Church for articulating and exhibiting lasciviousness and physical outrage – the forbidden subjects in the social circles. In dramatizing the powerful climax and the subsequent denouement, Williams was challenging the censors and the ethical norms of the era. The mounting social pressures led to certain changes in the final scenes of the film versions where the rape scene was retained but the rapist was not allowed to go scott-free.

Although the play was engulfed by controversies it established Williams’s reputation as a dramatist par excellence. Nancy Tischler claims:

The artistic triumph is in no small measure the result of Tennessee Williams’s constant insistence on the integrity of his own vision. In retrospect, we can see how intricate and nuanced his characterization, how inextricably entangled his relationship and
actions. Like the blues music that underscores the entire play, it is full of passion, laughter, brutality and lyricism. And like Blake’s tiger, Blanche and Stanley both stand before a backdrop that is dark and mysterious, not easily understood or domesticated, splendid and dangerous, the creations of an imagination that loved both tigers and lambs (Tischler in Voss 2002: 67).

These laudatory remarks are resonated by the superlatives drawn together in Philip Kolin’s excellent collection of commentaries of the plays: “There are very few nearly perfect plays,” wrote Robert E. Lee (Lee in Kolin 1993:188). “Streetcar is one of them” (Ibid: 188). Dennis J. Reardon declares: “The search for the great American play can stop with A Streetcar Named Desire. It’s the genuine article. I know this to be true because even after all these years, the thing still takes my breath away” (Ibid 193). Paul Zindel: “Streetcar for me will always be a poetic, brutal, thrilling lesson in how a single brave playwright let his demons and angles dance with every ounce of truth he could know” (Ibid 202). According to Garson Karin, “Tennessee Williams was the best, and A Streetcar Named Desire was his best” (Ibid 186). The Streetcar is evidently a play that portrays Blanche’s cathartic downfall, but it is premised on the metaphors of man’s essential solitude and of his harrowing disenchantment. Stripped of the mask of sophistication, Blanche is pushed over the edge of tolerance and loses her sanity, Stanley emerges victorious by avenging the dame who insinuated him and the brute treads the earth unbridled. Williams appreciates Blanche’s culture and sympathizes with her as the oppressed victim but he chooses Stanley who undeniably establishes the materialist’s triumph over the romantic. The consequence of the strife is presented as bleak necessity rather than blissful conquest. The dramatist clearly considers realism as a limited approach to life, but leaves us with no alternative: whether we like it or not, we must, finally acknowledge it. If the parameters of performances determine the success of the play, A Streetcar ran for eight hundred and fifty five performances and won both the New York Drama Critics Circle Award and A Pulitzer Prize. It was followed by a highly successful film version, as well as London and Paris Productions and attested Williams’s reputation as playwright internationally as well as in America. “A Streetcar named Desire is one of the most charged and fevered works in American drama, a play that rides high on its own unresolved ambiguities and resounding internal clashes” (Hirsch 1979: 34).
This play ceases to be a simple, pure moral fable but thickly textured with its ambivalent distribution of rewards and punishments, its complex pattern of sympathy and disapproval unravels psychological depth and questions the validity of truth over illusions.

**Summer and Smoke**

If Stanley exhibits coarse physicality, diametrically opposed is Blanche with her ethereal fragility that is rocked to pieces, similarly irreconcilable are Alma and John who represent spirit and flesh dichotomy in *Summer and Smoke* (1947).

John: What is eternity?
Alma: [in a hushed wondering voice] it’s something that goes on and on when life and death and time and everything else is all through with.
John: There’s no such thing.
Alma: There is. It’s what peoples souls live in when they have left their bodies. My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul (Williams 1971: 129-30).

Both *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were launched in 1945 and both were first performed in 1947. The elaborately designed cinematic stagecraft of *Summer and Smoke* corresponds with its discursive form. At the pinnacle of his fame, Williams wrote that a new tradition was taking root in the theatre, which he called ‘the play of sensibility’. It could be recognized by ‘the fine texture, the sensitive surface that is found more often in stories and novels, the poetic detail and the quiet progression of serious fiction’. His comments appear in the programme for the production of Donald Windham’s ‘The Starless Air’ which he directed at the Dallas playhouse in 1953. In praising Windham’s kind of play, Williams was characterizing his own, kind of play for which he is commemorated in the literary canon.

Indeed, the present play possibly best illustrated the canon of what the dramatic genre ‘play of sensibility’ subscribes. The prologue alludes to a time fifteen years earlier. Later John and Alma have a brief encounter that comes to naught partly because the Episcopal minister’s daughter is trying to cope with her repressed sexuality, partly because the doctor’s son is adapting himself to his adolescent self-indulgence, but
primarily because her consuming love for him remains unrequited. As Alice Griffin aptly points out “The symbols representing Alma – the statue of Angel of eternity, the fountain of water, winter–summer, and fire beneath the puritanical ice- all serve to strengthen an impression of her cold exterior hiding an interior flame that matches and even exceeds the passion of John” (Griffin 1995: 95).

In evading her responsibilities and forcing them on Alma, her mentally unstable mother has deprived her of a normal childhood and womanhood: “People …. Pity me – think of me as an old maid already! (169). She accuses her mother. Alma, as Louise Blackwell observes has “Multiple roles to play” that of daughter and hostess for her minister father and sister and guardian to her mother, with “no role that she desires for herself” (Blackwell in Griffin 1970: 10). The moral concerns of the Southern small-town society that harbor ideal notions on the one hand and the existent family tensions on the other contribute to the inhibitions of Alma and the doppelganger that John diagnoses. John is depicted as Promethean and flesh, but is clearly more conscious of its nature than the spirit, his estrangement and discontent are as palpable as Alma’s. His behavioral change from an irresponsible, carefree person to a dutiful doctor after his father’s sudden demise is equally convincing. Roger Boxill however points out “whereas Alma’s change is fundamental, John’s is merely developmental. He pulls himself together after sowing his wild oats. She falls apart after losing the love of her life” (Boxill 1987: 98-99).

Although an allegorical drama that presents the conflict of body and soul, John is not a mere stereotype but demonstrates the subtleties of psychological complexities. He is aware that he himself also has a doppelganger and tries to resolve it by bringing Alma into his world, a date at the gambling casino. This is not just a seduction as viewed by Griffin (88) using the duality of the sensualist and the repressed. John confesses to Alma that he wouldn’t have physical intimacy with her, despite her consent because “I’m more afraid of your soul than you are of my body” (222). In the subsequent scene, with the link between body and soul severed, Alma returns to her social club and John to his sexual overtures with Rosa. John not only seeks delight in his passion but revels in his corruption: “Has anyone slid downhill as fast as I have this summer? Like a greased pig!” (212). John comes to term with life, is driven to self awakening only after his encounter with death.
Alma, the faded belle stoops to degradation by accepting to accompany the stranger. In her turmoil to grasp the intolerable truth of life she resembles her literary predecessors, Amanda and Blanche who opines Nada Zeineddine, are “alienated from a tenable life within themselves and their societies by their moral illusions of their own purity and innocence” (Zeineddine 1991: 136). She notes that “a concern with the flesh spirit duality … runs through Williams’s plays and characterizes his vision of life” (Ibid:136). Quite rightly Roger Boxill points out the fact that “*Summer and Smoke* and *Streetcar* form a diptych whose subject is the fading belle. The first shows her background, the second her downfall” (Boxill 1987: 102).

It is clearly discernible that the plot progresses in an hourglass pattern. John begins in the flesh and ascends to the spirit while Alma begins in the spirit and descends to the flesh. Yet the play deflates any notion that life can be viewed in simplistic binaries. As Marlon B. Ross, expresses in the tragic irony of *Summer and Smoke* that Williams makes movingly persuasive, “these two characters need each other to be whole, but instead each is transformed into the other, John sacrificing his capacity to revel for Alma’s earnestness, Alma sacrificing her belief in the soul for John’s capacity to experience the passion of flesh” (Ross in Roudane 1997: 131). The emphasis in the play seems to be more upon sensibility than the allegory. Williams’s dexterity is not the punctilious examination of ideas but the compassionate delineation of the painful moment. The play attains a degree of pathos by presenting a sensitive woman wasted away in a condition of loss and bewilderment, which is reminiscent of Chekhov. Jack Brooking argues from an existentialist perspective that “It is unimportant to theorize about Alma’s future and wrong to moralize upon the direction her life has taken [for] it has neither good nor evil connotation to her but reflects her new life where vague nostalgias and longings have been replaced by the fresh examination of experiences” (Brooking in Roudane 119). However Alma herself categorically foreshadows a magnanimous acceptance of her fate when she speaks about Nellie’s mother, “I always say that life is such a mysteriously complicated thing that no one should really presume to judge and condemn the behavior of anyone else” (148). In the light of the remark, Alma’s descent into a life of profligacy can be seen as a necessary antidote to human need and her initiation into an integrated selfhood.
Summer and Smoke originally suffered because of its comparison with Streetcar but it can be certainly appreciated for the originality of characterization, its poetry and poignancy. Alma unquestionably belongs to Williams’s galaxy of female portraits that are so thoroughly portrayed that they themselves become prototypes. An acquaintance with this heroine may lead to a better understanding of the “Almas … of this world.” Williams wrote “I am perplexed at the shortness of the run (Play). I suppose people just don’t care enough about the Almas and Roses … of this world as they ought to, or I was not able to put it into sufficiently eloquent words to make them care that much” (Williams in Just 1990: 540). Certainly Williams’s words of regret guide us to the psychological realism of the play, or else Alma would have been dismissed as an eccentric heroine and the enduring appeal of the play would have been lost. Williams’s depiction of the inexplicable coexistence of culture with evil, exposure of the highly civilized societies countenance and even acquiescence in inhuman acts was certainly not new but totally shocking to confront.

The Rose Tattoo

During this period Williams developed intimate relationship with Frank Merlo, a young Sicilian from New Jersey and their ties deepened so that The Rose Tattoo (1950) which opened in 1951 after they had been together for two and half years, was dedicated “To Frank in return for Sicily.” Williams describes the play as “the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance” (Williams 1951: 96). The play is a comedy celebrating the elemental human passions – love, superstition, jealousy, possessiveness.

Serafina Delle Rose is a voluptuous Sicilian seamstress whose devotion to her husband Rosario is both cheerful and passionate. The affirmation of carnal desire – lust, pervades the entire play and echoes the influence of D. H. Lawrence. In the forenote to his One Act play I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix about the death of Lawrence, Williams observes: “Lawrence felt the mystery and power of sex, as the primal life urge, and was the …. adversary of those who wanted to keep the subject locked away … Much of his work is … distorted by tangent obsessions, such as his insistence upon the
woman’s subservience to the male, but all in all his work is probably the greatest modern monument to the dark roots of creation” (Williams 1971: 56).

Williams referred to *The Rose Tattoo* as his “love-play to the world … permeated with the happy young love” for Frank Merlo (*Memoirs* 162). In acknowledging his relationship to Merlo, Williams underscores the position of their Italian holiday as a watershed that renewed his realization of the extent to which he had to exist “outside” the conventional society while contriving somewhat precariously to remain in contact with it (Williams 1975: 162). As Joseph Roach aptly conveys, “If memory is the surrogate for absence, it is also the grounds of desire” (Roach in Gross 2002: 65). In the words of John L. Gronbeck Tedesco “In part, it is in memory of and longing for his Italian experience that Williams bequeathed such a strongly stated and combustive sexuality on the play’s protagonists, Alvaro Mangiacavallo and Serafina delle Rose, whom I take to be both surrogates for and parodies of Frankie and Tenn, and at the same time, embodiments of what Williams found so significant in his Italian experience: “the total freedom of life” that seemed “a golden dream” (Tedesco in Gross 2002: 65). The memory of Italy infused in Williams a yearning for a relationship with Frank that could be publicly open and transparent, equally acceptable, less condemning and more permissive in his own country.

It is clearly apparent that in the play, Williams displaces the American scenario with an Italian, firstly as he retaliates against the New England cultural conservatism that dislocates him and secondly it affords him the opportunity to relive his cherished pleasures. He finds the prevalent culture wanting on the same grounds that it has rejected him as wanton – for a perverted view of human sexuality. Again to quote John Tedesco “To Williams, the politics of normalcy was nothing more than yet another acting out of the national anxiety over sex and gender, only this time in the name of national security and social stability” (Ibid: 65). It is significant that the social context of the anxieties of the post-war period and the commitment to win the cold-war formed a backdrop of the literary endeavour during the period. It gave rise to a distinct cultural rhetoric – the obsession with normalcy inadvertently reflected upon the rhetoric of domesticity and the rhetoric of cultural dominance. Notably it is the ellipses around sexuality that gesture to the horror and suppression which Williams candidly discusses in many of his works
written during the post–war period. In the decade that followed the war, the American bedroom became a space that nurtured anxieties and dreams hit the harsh ground realities. It was “the place where the war visited the dreams and impulses of former soldiers whose status as victors was incompatible with the post–traumatic reactions that could not be named until much later” (Tedesco 1993). This is reflected intensely in the Streetcar and later plays carry the shadows. For Williams, the normalcy that expressed itself in the forked tongues of domesticity and national security was intimidating. Hence The Rose Tattoo like A Streetcar precariously shifted its locale (setting) from the calm living rooms and placid kitchens to the morally safeguarded precincts of the bed–room and unleashed the Lawrencian force of carnal passions. By rendering the Italian scene for sexual freedom The Rose Tattoo undermined the cultural equations of the post-war period.

In the expository scene Serafina’s neighbor, gifted with the power of occult, learns that Serafina was conscious of her pregnancy ‘on the very night of conception’ because she felt stigmata, the mysterious rose tattooed on her husband’s chest, being visualized on her breast momentarily. Serafina’s self imposed abstinence, her single-minded devotion to her dead husband, Rosario is misguided for he turns out be a philanderer and a racketeer who met his end in a gangland battle. She insists that the priest, who heard Rosario’s confession, should confirm or discredit the rumor of infidelity but he denies complying with her wishes. “I will go mad with the doubt in my heart and I will smash the urn and scatter the ashes – of my husband’s body!” (Williams 1971: 345). She warns and then turns to the Madonna, weeping, “Give me a sign!” (347). At the crucial moment, as if in a mocking answer, a novelty salesman appears followed by Alvaro. Roughed up by the salesman when Alvaro takes off his jacket for her to mend, she exclaims, “My husband’s body, with the head of a clown!” (357). Rest of the play advances smoothly depicting the growing intimacy between the two and Jack and her daughter. The initial conversation marked by curious hesitations, broken sentences and fumbling attempts at communication gradually rises to a symbiosis of lyricism and symbolism. John Mason Brown remarked, “Not since the Houses of York and Lancaster feuded long and publicly have roses been used more lavishly .... To Mr. Williams roses are mystical signs, proofs of passions, symbols of devotion, and buds no less than thorns in the flesh” (Brown in Griffin  95: 121). The profundity of the symbol “rose” adds to the
theatrical effect; as an emblem of love and life since times unmemorable, the rose rules the Delle Rose household; its profusion as symbol reflects the extravagances of the characters. Rosario and Rosa are the father and the child, roses are seen in abundance – in Serafina’s hair, in a bowl, on the wall–paper, carpet, the tattoo, rose oil and even the rose – colored shirt signify the triumph of life over death in the form of love.

Signi Falk, who characterizes Serafina as a “Southern wench”, deplores that the play is “overlaid with comedy and low farce; with rhetorical outbursts, and, at times, even with obscenity” (Falk 1961: 102). She finds as many erotic symbols as Williams could crowd into one play. There is some rather beautiful dialogue; but the play also has some of the usual rhetoric and regrettably adolescent vulgarity (Ibid: 97). Nevertheless the fact cannot be ignored that the play is celebratory in tone, carnivalesque festivity and merriment is displayed in the transition from the early elegiac mood of Serafina to her final rejoicement with the chorus handing over Rosario’s red silk shirt. Certainly the symbols permeate the entire play, but they are much varied than “erotic” and enhance the dramatic effect as a whole. In his study of modern plays that encompasses both tragic and comic elements, J. L. Styan suggests that *The Rose Tattoo* might be so classified. Serafina’s “sin of pride” regarding Rosario might be tragic in another context, he notes, but the emotion contrasts with the “incongruous details of her ordinary life”, which provoke comedy” (Styan 1968: 49-51).

The play presents a segment of life, romanticized, unique as is true of all Williams’s plays, a complete poetic environment that synthesizes dialogues, lighting, setting, music to deliver a heightened sense of dramatic experience – “snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence”(262) to quote Williams’s illuminating treatise on theater, “The Timeless World of a play”, the Sunday piece he wrote for the *The New York Times* before the opening of *The Rose Tattoo* presently printed as the foreword of the text.

**Camino Real**

In continuation of the non–naturalistic plays, *Camino Real* (1953) followed *The Rose Tattoo* (1950). Strangely enough the play has its genesis in the apprehensiveness
caused by an illness, when Williams felt trapped by his desolation and pennilessness. He brooded over the possibility of ever writing a play again:

I thought …. that those “huge cloudy symbols of a high romance” that used to lift me up each morning …. had gone like migratory birds that wouldn’t fly back with any change of season. And so it was written to combat or to purify despair that only another writer is likely to understand fully (Williams 1960: I).

The terrifying visions appeared as a pageant and a dream which set the pace for Camino Real. Structured on surrealistic combinations the action encapsulates elements of melodrama, force, ritual, romance, satire, tragedy and comedy – a groundbreaking drama that exploded the notion of realism on the American Stage.

It is a carnivalesque comedy rejoicing the Dionysian elements and upholds the philosophy that romanticism is extremely indispensable.

Don Quixote describes his dream to Sancho in the prologue: “… my dream will be a pageant, a masque in which old meanings will be remembered and possibly new ones discovered” (Williams 1971: 437). Befitting the dream atmosphere, the play is a microcosm inhabited by strangers and renowned personalities, rich and poor located in an unknown terrain outside of time, haunted by fear and uncertainty through which glimmers hope. It is a microcosmic world where events unfold and characters enter and exit without explanation as Williams recorded in an article written before the Broadway opening for the 15 March 1953, Sunday New York Times, the play is “my conception of the time and world that I live in, and its people are mostly archetypes of certain basic attitudes and qualities …. A convention of the play is existence outside of time in a place of no specific locality. If you regard it that way, I suppose it becomes an elaborate allegory.”

Originally written as a One Act Play entitled Ten Blocks on the Camino Real Williams later decided to enlarge and elongate it to a full length play. Gutman who rules the Camino tyrannically and who is the actor-narrator of the play has been deftly used as a theatrical device. The gallery of characters ranges of figures from Dumas, Proust, and Cervantes to the archetypal Kilroy. They are trapped within the Latin – American police state, an archetypal hell. The encaged travellers can escape the hellish Camino and the
despotic Gutman only in three ways: by death, being lucky enough to take a plane entitled fugitive, or to jump from the high wall that may lead them to distant highlands across a great desert. By abandoning the interior altogether, Williams moved directly into the public sphere, he was endeavoring to discover a new post–domestic theatrical language. Perhaps Williams’s experimentation was to share his ‘sensation of release’ in the world of theatre where he anticipated the reaction of the audience who would challenge the new discourse. He wrote that the play seemed, more than any other work he had written, “Like the construction of another world, a separate existence...it is nothing more or less than my conception of the time and world that I live in” (Williams 1971: 419). He was quite doubtful of the reception from the audience who would particularly find it difficult to swallow the “separate existence” and leave the accustomed pattern of “home” and its conventional languages; he accused the spectators of being a little domesticated in their theatrical tastes.

_Camino Real_ also like the earlier plays _The Glass Menagerie_, and _A Streetcar_ beckons the past and casts a nostalgic glance to a forsaken home that was once capable of creating inter-subjective meaning. Don Quixote, a chronicler in transition reminisces of the past glory—“It …. reminds an old knight of that green country he lived in which was the youth of his heart, before such singing words as Truth!” (Ibid: 433).

Unlike _Streetcar_, the quest for companionship is related to the search for meaning in the play which strikes an optimistic note. However, as in the _Streetcar_ the play resolves around a visit; visit to the infernal Camino. Williams had established his apocalyptic vision and romantic sensibility in _Glass Menagerie_ and _A Streetcar_ in which the collapse of Laura and Blanche coincided with the devastation of a culture and its myths. Similarly Kilroy is also a romantic on the brink of disintegration. The play can be read as the playwright’s response to the fifties in America, a time when “the spring of humanity [had gone] dry” (5), when the romantic ideals of nobility, truth, valour were being replaced by futility. In the socio-political context, _Camino_ denounced “the fascist demagoguery then spreading over the country in the voice of Joseph McCarthy” (Spoto 1985: 187). Jan Balakian remarks “_Camino_ was not only aesthetically difficult for Americans at first, but its mounts of darkness contradicted an intrinsic American optimism” (Balakian in Roudane 1997: 85). _Camino_ seems to suggest that some of the
lostness on the Camino can be attributed to the American politics of the 50’s, in America’s paranoia, ignorance and misconceptions about things that were alien to American culture. Marguerite Gautier crystallizes the apocalyptic vision of the play.

We’re lonely. We’re frightened. We hear the street cleaners’ piping not far away. So now and then, although we’ve wounded each other time and again – we stretch out hands to each other in the dark we can’t escape from – we huddle together for some dim – communal comfort – and that’s what passes for love on this terminal stretch of the road that used to be royal. What is it, this feeling between us? When you feel my exhausted weight against your shoulder – when I clasp your anxious old hawk’s head to my breast, what is it we feel in whatever is left of our hearts? Something, yes, something – delicate, unreal, bloodless! The sort of violets that grow on the moon …. But tenderness, the violets in the mountains – can’t break the rocks (96-97).

Love here becomes a passion born out of necessity. Marguerite maintains that the feeling between her and Casanova is as insecure “as violets growing between rocks”. Esmeralda too voices her fears and is resistant when Kilroy woos her for she believes no one is “sincere”. Contrarily Casanova contradicts this idea when he declares to Marguerite, “I’m terrified of the unknown country inside or outside this wall or any place on earth without you with me!” (71).

The romantic spirit is especially important on the Camino Real as a means to defy the spiritual dislocation in a post –atomic, post –industrial, godless world. However unlike the earlier plays, eroticism is subdued in the play. Esmeralda and Kilroy symbolically consummate their relationship when Kilroy lifts her veil. Moreover, the ties of love hardly offer solace to Kilroy who is disillusioned. In opposition to the fictional and historical figures of Camille, Casanova and Lord Byron are the tough - spirited, powerful authorities- Gutman and his soldiers, the street cleaners who collect the corpses and the medical team who conduct the autopsies. Although efficient and disciplined, they represent the violence through repression, exploitation and annihilation. The scientists’ clinical dissection of Kilroy and the ominous street cleaners – a chilling image of Death – represent a cold, inhuman disregard of life and bespeak of devastating violence. Benjamin Nelson complains that the characters represent “attitudes rather than
individuals and thus their plights become abstractions” (Nelson 1961: 183). However the conflicts in Camino verge almost on the absurd, the death of Kilroy by the street cleaners lacks the finality and grandeur of romantic literature but it is significant as he is able to retrieve his golden heart and is magically resurrected by La Madrecita. “Unlike naturalistic plays in which heredity and environment shape character, his protagonists’ conflicts in Camino Real are more metaphysical than social” (Bigsby 1992: 39). The sheer force of the play lies in its roots in a medieval literary tradition, the pageantry of the miracle plays and the art of expressionism that is characterized by intense subjectivism – the externalization of the writer’s inner feelings. However the play received a lukewarm response from the audience and failed to receive due critical attention. Williams recalled that the opening of Camino Real on March 19, 1953 was the worst night he had ever spent in his life. Most of the audience had walked out, demanding their money back (Devlin 1986: 67). John O’Connor argued that Camino “is the most painfully autobiographical of Mr. Williams’s plays that drifts into hazy banalities of self pity and sentimentality” (O’Connor 1970: 10).

Nevertheless Williams’s concern in the play is the diminishing values, dramatizing a time of spiritual crisis but the affirmative message of endurance and acceptance is voiced in Quixote’s counsel for Kilroy: “Don’t! Pity! Your! Self!” He further advises Kilroy to fortify himself against all loses and embrace life’s betrayals squarely:

The wounds of the vanity, the many offenses our egos have to endure, being housed in bodies that age and hearts that grow tired, are better accepted with a tolerant smile .... Otherwise what you become is a bag full of curdled cream attractive to nobody, least of all to yourself!” (159).

The play ultimately strikes a positive note, as the violets peep through the rocks, love triumphs over tyranny and cruelty and equally powerful is Quixote’s conviction that “Time for retreat never comes” (155).

Years later after the dismal failure of the performances, Harold Clurman perceptively remarked on the difficulties faced by the upcoming experimental theatre which quite often are unheeded: “The sad fact of our theater is that a play like Camino Real with all its faults ought to be produced, listened to, criticized with measure and
affection, but that this is difficult when its production costs a fortune, when it is forced to become part of the grand machinery of investment, real estate, Broadway brokerage and competition for reputation” (Clurman 1974: 23). This evidently was an insight into the insensitivity of the audience who failed to realize the craftsmanship of Williams.

By 1970, when the play was revived at the Vivian Beaumont Theater with Al Pacino as Kilroy, it no longer seemed vague or obscure. As Clive Barnes commented in his review in the New York Times of 9th January, “Our standards of obscurity, like our standards of obscenity, have escalated since those dark days of theatrical innocence,” Barnes viewed the play “as a symbolic portrait of the American poet …. of genius lavishly misspent, a defiant play about defeat, a play with the shabby smell of death to it …. a lovely play, a play of genuinely poetic vision …. Seen now from the brink of the seventies, Camino Real seems oddly prophetic about its author” (Barnes in Griffin 1970: 42). Yet Williams’s apocalyptic and romantic sensibility that enables him to envisage the end of humanity paradoxically features the romantics escape from the road of reality, and exemplifies the redeeming power of imagination through Quixote’s dream.

Williams voiced his philosophy:

The people in my play are romantics confronted by real situations as they come to the end of the road. It is a real road. The play … is about the indomitability of the romantic spirit. I approve of romantics. They fascinate me. (Williams in Roudane 71).

The play ends on an optimistic note that “let there be something to mean the word honor again! it is reverberated in Gutman’s transcendent vision “Revolution only needs good dreamers who remember their dreams…” and Casanova’s suggestion to Kilroy to have “patience and courage” despite all odds as Quixote envisions “the time for retreat never comes!”(435).

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Cherished by the intimate relationships as the thematic bottom-line, yet commercially a grand success was Tennessee Williams’s later play Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955). The play commences with Jack Straw and Peter Ochello, a homosexual couple who sympathetically hire the services of Pollitt to run their cotton plantation in
Mississippi Delta and Pollitt who proves his mettle and worth, gradually rises to the position of overseer and then the owner of 28,000 acres of rich land. From his 1952 short story “Three Players of a Summer Game” Williams borrowed the names of Brick and Maggie (Margaret) the son and daughter-in-law of Pollitt the “larger – than – life”, character of Big Daddy who reigns supreme over his domain like a colossus. Brick, a former athlete is an alcoholic and Margaret is a self assertive woman with feline energy who echoes Strindberg’s heroines. She is bold enough to withhold sex as her strategy to wean her husband from succumbing to drinks. Robert Siegel likens her to the robust Stanley, suggesting that she also has the practicality of the body, like Stanley in some ways,” and “the same kind of earthy perspective as Stanley” (Siegel in Voss 2002: 119,120). She can be outspoken about sex as she desires her husband to give up drinking and give her a child so as to please Big Daddy and win a greater share of the family fortune. She tells him: “My hat is still in the ring, and I am determined to win. What is the victory of a cat on a hot tin roof? I wish I knew …. Just staying on it, I guess, as long as she can …. ” (Ellipses both Williams’s). She frantically tries to save a precarious marriage and cites herself as a cat on the hot tin roof. David Savran characterizes her as castrating (Savran 1992: 10). Her jealousy of Brick’s friendship with Skipper pushes her to the farthest point of seducing Skipper but unlike Blanche or Alma, she feels the pangs of guilt and remorse and confesses to Brick, I said “SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN’ MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE’S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!” – One way or another! (59) I’m not trying to whitewash my behavior. Christ, no! Brick, I’m not good …. but I’m honest! Give me credit for that, will you please?” (60). Stanley loses no opportunity of humiliating Blanche but Maggie is more circumspect about attacking Skipper and appeals to Brick for a considerate understanding : “I’m naming it so damn clear that it killed poor Skipper! You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes! - and death was the only ice – box where you could keep it!” (58). However Brick is totally unresponsive to her yearnings. Interestingly Dianne Cafagna compares Brick to Blanche, pointing out that he drinks “to induce illusion” (Cafagna in Kolin 1993: 127). But it must be remembered that Brick is neither indulgent in reviving any magical past nor interested in the present when he resorts to drink. He has grown addicted to it; although it helps to mitigate the facts about his “relationship” with
Skipper, it does not obliterate the facts. Both Big Daddy and Maggie compel Brick to face the facts of his friendship with Skipper and Skipper’s death squarely. Brick’s defense in response to Mae and Gooper of homosexuality is plain and unapologetic –

Why can’t exceptional friendship, real, real, deep, deep, friendship between two men be respected as something clean and decent without being thought of as – Fairies …. Normal? No! It was too rare to be normal (120).

Brick’s defensive mannerisms certainly relate his kinship to his creator, Williams. Assuredly the suppressed homosexuality reinforced by the social pressures and family honor forms the subtext of the play and Brick finds it increasingly difficult to negotiate his return from the forbidden territory that demands his sexual orientation through heterosexual union with Maggie. Maggie’s determination to catapult Brick from his objectionable relations with Skipper and his unsafe reliance on liquor is not a smooth task to accomplish. Like Big Daddy’s cancer, the diseased avariciousness of the family, Brick’s dependence on crutches and drinks are wrecking the family, tearing it apart. Interestingly each of the family members has selfish interests that fosters mistrust resulting from their flawed egos - Mae and Gooper’s lust for money is clearly evident, Big Daddy tenaciously clings to life as for the patriarch “There’s nothing else to hold onto”, Maggie’s confession of being “god damn disgustingly poor all my life” and Brick’s memories of failure and neurotic despair, “Time just outran me, Big Daddy- got their first” which leads him into alcoholism dictate the complex pattern of relationships.

Maggie lies about her pregnancy to Big Daddy and others and locks away the liquor to compel Brick for consummation of love. She says: “Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you – gently, with love, and hold your life back to you, like something good you let go of and I can! I’m determined to do it – and nothing’s more determined than a cat on a tin roof – is there?” (215).

According to Peter Hoffman, Williams said that revising Act III to please Kazan ‘ruined’ him as a writer because it prevented him from dealing honestly with Brick’s homosexuality (Hoffman 1983: 45). Mark Royden Winchell’s article in the Mississippi Quarterly, using the hetero-homo duality, finds the resolution unconvincing and claims
that Williams “may have lost his nerve”, returning Brick to the heterosexual fold to placate the audience (Winchell 1995: 712). Yet it may be understood that while the Broadway version moves finally to the happy ending, the original is only less sentimental in degree and the script of the 1974 revival compromises between the two. Even the screenplay depicts the hero resuming physical relationship with his wife soon after confirmation of his paternal love from Big Daddy. As Arthur Ganz has shrewdly remarked, “what Williams did in Cat was to pull Streetcar inside out” (Ganz 1980: 114-5). The dream of the past is unraveled in the fabulous reality of the present. The past glory and splendour lost to decadence is regained by paternal endeavour. But exposure and eviction, ravaging in Streetcar are merely idle threats in the Cat and sexual assault is also reduced to mere gesture. At the end of Streetcar, the bestial Stanley, dressed in red silk pyjamas, forces Blanche, the ‘tiger’ to drop the bottle top she holds in her defense and tames her to his will. At the beginning of Cat, the celibate Brick, dressed in immaculate white silk pyjamas, shirks off Maggie, the cat’s sexual advances by placing a boudoir chair between them like a lion–tamer.

The counterpoint of life and death is quite hopeful in Cat. Blanche’s departure corresponds to the arrival of Stella’s baby, just as the prognosis of Big Daddy’s death coincides with the declaration of Maggie’s pregnancy. Hence we can assume that Streetcar contemplates an end whereas Cat subscribes a beginning. Williams’s craftsmanship in leaving the play open-ended is intriguing yet commendable. The action glides onwards from one explosive encounter to the other with the lively characters and witty dialogue that crackles. As a domestic drama, it is a skilful blend of prohomosexual, antibourgeois stance of the playwright.

Suddenly Last Summer

Brick ascribes the status of platonic love to his relationship. Starkly contrasted to Brick’s candid defense is Catherine’s version of Sebastian’s sexual hypocrisy in Suddenly Last Summer (1971). Sebastian tries to compensate the creative void, unable to write a poem by a heinous appetite for passing out tips to the hungry, homeless wanderers who blindly fall into his trap. Catherine tells the doctor, “Don’t you understand? I was PROCURING for him! She used to do it, too. Not consciously! She didn’t know that
she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go to before last summer!’ (412). Sebastian almost plays the role of a pied piper leading a penniless entourage and alluring them to his pedophilic advances. He is a kind of inhuman pervert who goes to the extreme and is thus punished in the most horrifying and brutal manner. Conversely Brick’s relationship is attributed a kind of spiritual piety by Maggie also “It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, it couldn’t be anything else, you being you, and that’s what made it so sad, that’s what made it so awful because it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly” (57). Brick represents a wounded spirit. His self-hatred springs from his guilt of being unable to assist his friend when he required him the most. Brick does not seem to be confused about his sexual identity, he simply withdraws into his cloistered world cut off from a father who never openly confessed his feelings of love, cut off from a family struck by the avarice to grab the family fortune and he also wishes to sever his ties from a world full of mendacity, that includes his relationship with Skipper. “This fall from grace, and not fear of being homosexual has landed Brick in the bottle” asserts Gulshan Rai Kataria (Kataria 1992: 75). Like Brick, Alma Winemiller in the Summer and Smoke is also a non-conformist. She refuses to be cowed down by social pressures or demands from the family. She gradually descends to prostitution. If Summer and Smoke is a play about tragic descent, Suddenly Last Summer is a play about mutability, metamorphosis; it is Williams’s homophile fantasy. The charming style of Sebastian sets the tone but the spectacularly decadent character never appears on the stage, although it is he who influences all the action. Sebastian’s sophistication is a mask; hidden beneath is virtual cruelty and exploitation cloaked in pretense. It is like the ignominious facade that victimizes Catherine to be date–raped by the stranger feigning concern at the Mardi gras ball. Once Sebastian is set free in the grittier world, his vices and concealed abnormalities surface and reveal themselves. He interprets the nightmare on the beach as “the truth about the world we live in”, and perversely, he lives his life acquiring, selecting and rejecting people like items on a menu- in authentication of this dark “truth”. “Truly”, Williams said at the time the play opened, “egos eat egos, personalities eat personalities… The human individual is a cannibal in the worst way… In Suddenly Last Summer it was more symbolic than actual” (Williams in Hirsch 1979: 55). The Venus fly
trap, the horror on the Encantadas, and his final annihilation are the play’s three key symbols that knit a corrupt universe. Hence, Sebastian’s amorous adventures are linked to a malevolent cosmos; faith in a malicious God, and living in homage to him, Sebastian is the consumer who is finally consumed, ironically he is the cannibal who is devoured alive.

Like *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer* is a play about confession; but unlike Brick, Catherine is able to convey her thoughts. The therapeutic value of confession is discerned in Catherine’s purging and cure on her revelation whereas Mrs. Venable, who declines to tackle the truth, remains unpurified. Clearly Sebastian’s end echoes Blanche’s catastrophic fall although the former is more hideous and uglier in his vision of life. Blanche’s moral excesses, her amorous advances to draw the attention of Mitch and Stanley are harbingers of the tragedy that befalls her. Her illusions and fantasies are soiled by the rape and she is penalized by madness. Sebastian’s crimes are more physical; he is an evil spirit incarnate and ends up being devoured by the cannibals. Assuredly Williams has rendered a peculiar kind of poetic justice in their tragic downfall. Antithetically Brick is a more compassionate figure and the end of the play opens up various possibilities. If *Streetcar* seals the destinies of its protagonists by insanity, *Suddenly Last Summer* does so by death.

**The Night of the Iguana**

In *The Night of the Iguana* (1972), Shannon, like Blanche, is on the verge of a nervous breakdown. His descent like the aristocratic Blanche is phenomenal. He is a defrocked minister who once conducted exclusive worldwide tours for the rich and reaches Maxine’s hotel in a school-bus with a group of school teachers who are infuriated over his indecency. Shannon is fully aware of his failing and admits that he is being “accused of statutory rape for sleeping with a minor”, that his act would cost him his job and dignity, where losing either would mean dismal failure for him. Strangely enough Shannon’s demeanor shows an exemplary shift in his behaviour.

Charlotte: Yes, I remember that after making love to me, you hit me, Larry, you struck me in the face, and you twisted my arm to make me kneel on the floor and pray with you for forgiveness.
Shannon: I do that, I do that always when I, when … I don’t have a dime left in my nervous emotional bank account – I can’t write a check on it, now (298).

The same aggressive Shannon desires to redeem himself and deludes himself like Blanche in thinking that the Church still holds his possibility of returning, he desperately clings to his delusion when Mrs. Fellows flings accusations at him. “Miss Fellows don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t … do what … you’re doing! [He is on the verge of hysteria …] Don’t! Break! Human! Pride!” (298).

Again it is the same Shannon whose futile efforts of shielding himself from his moral excesses being frustrated, reveals himself to be a weakling at the mercy of Maxine and Hannah, who very strongly resists the temptations of rum-coco offered to him by Maxine. Rita Colanzi’s article in *Modern Drama* uses Sartre’s duality of the rebel and the revolutionary to interpret his conduct. Shannon wishes to retain his faith in the traditional values and continue to grapple with them as a rebel rather than transcending the world like a revolutionary. Rita Colanzi makes a valid point: “Why doesn’t Shannon just leave the church rather than continuing to sin within it?”(Colanzi 1992: 456-57). While Sartre’s bad faith describes Shannon’s contradictory impulses, the model doesn’t adequately explain why he is trapped in them. His proclivities are partly explained by Maxine as resulting from his being spanked for masturbating as a child and then being reprimanded by his mother for offending God. But Shannon’s crisis is much more pervasive Shannon is belligerent at the complacency of his tourists and their God, whom he calls “a senile delinquent …, the sort of old man in a nursing home that’s putting together a jigsaw puzzle and can’t put it together and gets furious at it and kicks over the table (304). His God is in the wild thunderstorms, who announces – “His oblivious majesty – and here I am on this … dilapidated verandah of a cheap hotel, out season, in a country caught and destroyed in its flesh and corrupted in its spirit by its gold hungry conquistadors that bore the flag of the Inquisition along with the Cross of Christ” (305). Colanzi terms this God as nihilistic and views Shannon as refusing to face his existential anguish, evading the nihilistic God, refusing to accept nothingness in favour of redeeming a meaningless world (Ibid: 456). But a close observation reveals that Shannon’s God is not nihilistic but Rousseauean, closer to nature. Moreover Shannon runs to his God, does not run away
from him. He senses God in the starving people; touched by the underbelly of life he finds the profane, holy. His existential anguish springs from his awareness that the Rousseauean God (close to nature) is irreconcilable with the spiritual. As Hannah puts it perfectly that his fleeting seductions testify “how lonely the intimate connection has been… You have always traveled alone except for your spook” (358-359).

Unlike Brick, who medicates his spook, Shannon is reluctant to escape into Maxine’s soothing rum-cocos; nor is he willing to invent illusions, as Blanche does, to buffer the crisis (Siegel in Voss 125). Shannon finds solace and reassurance in the words of Hannah, whose optimism is clearly contagious, “We all wind up with something and with someone, and if it’s someone instead of something, we’re lucky, perhaps… unusually lucky” (365). Shannon knows that his spook is not easily placated and that his is an endless battle, one that could end in what he terms “the ruins out to China”. He is markedly different than the other protagonists of Williams, for rather than self destruction, he chooses to live on. Although a drowning man, he selects a life-buoy in the spiritual calm offered him by Hannah and the physical comfort that finally he negotiates in staying with Maxine.

The Night of the Iguana dramatizes Williams’s belief in the transforming and remedial powers of art and confession. Shannon draws his life-force from Hannah, who acts as a mentor and teaches him the worth of self-esteem and honor amidst all odds. Her serenity soothes the tormented Reverend, while his coarseness relaxes her. “Williams also deals quite successfully with the conflicts of sexuality” (Johns in MacNicholas 1981: 331). She sees through Shannon’s “Passion Play performance” and realizes that he is uncomfortable with his self-decreed roles of atheist and seducer. Their kindness to each other is the main axis on which the play is poised. Though penniless Hannah is undaunted and indefatigable when bullied by Maxine and shows the courage to brave a storm with Nonno. Despite her confrontation with a shady past, unlike Blanche she does not stoop to promiscuity nor is she like Maggie who shows unflinching faith in the power of money. She proves Maggie wrong and proves that pride can be retained despite the power of money.

Hannah’s words carry a loud and clear message:
I think of a home as being a thing that two people have between them in which each can, well, nest – rest – live in, emotionally speaking … I’m not a bird Mr. Shannon, I’m a human being and when a member of that fantastic species build a nest in the heart of another, the question of permanence isn’t the first or ever the last thing that’s considered (357).

It is Hannah’s deep compassion and empathy for others that make her an envoy of spirit and an endearing portrait ever created by Williams. Gulshan Rai Kataria, aptly remarks that she is, “a reconciliation of masculine and feminine polarities … Hannah is a complete …. human being whose love-life manifests itself through helping people (Kataria 1992: 126). The play does not sensationalize the perennial theme of conflict between the spirit and flesh but presents the defrocked Reverend and the New England spinster as freshly radiant characters rather than as stereotypes. Although reluctantly optimistic the play, is superbly poised by the release of the Iguana, the cleansing declarations of Shannon and Hannah and Nonno’s completion of the poem. The drama embroidered with enlightening speeches about God and Art, realistic and fantastic is an interesting character study that offers the theme its mellow tone.

**Orpheus Descending**

Hannah’s uncompromising integrity stands in sharp contrast to the sexually transgressive figures in *Orpheus Descending* (1971) Lady Torrance, Val Xavier and Carol Cutrere. Carol is the pampered, spoilt, wayward daughter of the richest family in town, a ‘lewd vagrant’ who is a self-proclaimed exhibitionist. Truly rebellious in spirit, she demands of pleasures that she craves for. She recognizes in her a remnant of an earlier, less civilized time : “This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now its sick with neon, it’s broken out and sick with neon, like most other places.” (Williams 1971: 327) Carol patronizes an old Black Conjure Man who is paid for producing a wild Choctaw Indian cry. The strange sound highlights otherness and seems to epitomize the sexual energy from the wildness of the past. However Carol’s savage force is more an embarrassment to her family and an outrage to women folk than a threat to patriarchal set-up.
Val, the handsome hero of *Orpheus* has lived the life of a vagabond and is a potential threat to other men because the sexual agent is like a magnet, pulling women outside the thresholds of patriarchal authority and marital bounds. The stage directions reveal that Val “has the kind of wild beauty about him that the cry would suggest” (240) when he appears on his thirtieth birthday, as if summoned by the wild Choctaw cry. His snakeskin jacket, a kind of Dionysian attire acquiesces with his affinity to the undomesticated nature and world of libidinal desires. He carries with him a guitar, his versions of Orpheus’s lyre on which are engraved names of great Black musicians: Leadbelly, Bessie Smith and others. Val’s speech is earnest “I’m through with the life I’ve been leading. I lived in corruption but I’m not corrupted” (261). Unlike Chance Wayne, Val does not mourn the passage of youthfulness but wishes to retain the freedom ascribed to it. He claims to be a free spirit, completely detached from the materialistic system of ownership. At the outset, he declares to lady Torrance:

Val: Lady, there’s just two kinds of people, the ones that are brought and the buyers! No! – There’s one other kind…
Lady: What kind’s that?
Val: The kind that’s never been branded (265)

The only way to remain uncorrupted is to be like “a kind of bird that don’t have legs so it can’t light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky” (265). Such freedom is clearly improbable, but freedom also comes with a cost of isolation: “We’re all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life!”(271). The action of the entire play hinges on the juxtaposition of the impossibility of freedom eloquently hinted at by Val and the inexorable solitariness of the sojourn that he laments.

Lady, the third figure of the triangular relationship has had an extraordinary passionate relationship with David Cutrere, “Like you struck two stones together and made a fire! – Yes – fire” (230). Lady bemoans the loss of her love and the sexually idyllic garden of her father that was burned down killing her father. David forfeits his relationship for economic survival and the bereft Lady literally sells herself in a sexless, barren marriage for financial stability. Relationships here seem to be governed more by mercenary motives than emotional concerns, the blissful Eden of life is replaced by the barren, commercial world of shop, a system of trade and bargain. The moment Val steps
into the shop he perilously exposes himself to be susceptible to a dehumanizing, unfeeling, cold world. The system itself is unproductive that denies fertility and twice Lady is robbed of motherhood.

In essence, Val is killed for bringing life to the town. He literally brings life to the caged, embittered Lady. John Clum renders a true understanding of his character “Val, the disseminator of Black culture through his music, the rebel who will not conform to patriarchal order, threatens the social order by bringing life and a measure of autonomy to the women” (Clum in Roudane 138). Val is the invigorating source of life as against the men, destroyers of life that sap the vital chords of life.

However lynching of Val and shooting down Lady do not recapitulate the end, for Carol possesses the snakeskin jacket, as though to signify that the spirit embodied in Val exists and prevails, it is indestructible and is metamorphosed in the transgressive isolated woman. “Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind” (341).

In Val, Williams created a protagonist entirely different from his gallery of male portraits – either gay or straight. Unlike Tom or Brick, Val does not evade the facts as an escapist, nor is he like Stanley or Shannon who possess the virile energy to satiate their libidinal desires. He is a relatively passive character, a man, ironically charming in his sex appeal but one who seeks liberty from women. His reluctance and passivity imply a sexually ambiguous character. He tries to leave when he realizes Lady’s insinuations and sees through it: “A not so young and not so satisfied woman that hired a man off the highway to do double duty without paying overtime for it ….I mean a store clerk days and a stud nights” (304). Incidentally it is the women like Carol or Lady who take the leading role and are aggressive. The world of Orpheus Descending, like that of Suddenly Last Summer, is that of dominant women and sexually ambivalent men. The patriarchs seem to be impotent, capable of taking lives but not of creating life. In the Amazon society, man’s primary function is to be, however unwillingly, a “stud at bay” since there is no place for marital knot. The potential for a new, democratic, non-patriarchal order is destroyed by killing Val and Lady. Yet Carol, Val’s snakeskin jacket and the wild Choctaw cry epitomize the continuum of life.
Sweet Bird of Youth

Like Lady and Carol, Alexandra Del lago is the femme fatale in the Sweet Bird of Youth (1972). Alexandra is a voluptuous woman who seeks fulfillment through Chance Wayne. Akin to Orpheus Descending, the play is structurally patterned by an interesting love triangle with Heavenly and Alexandra vying for the same man – Chance. They are two disparate personalities that suggest separate sexual and emotional worlds available to Chance. Heavenly is a sort of mirage, who bestows a glorious moment on a speeding train to Chance and he devoutly flings his entire life to recreate that moment from the past. He desperately tries to defeat time by believing that regaining Heavenly is like reviving his lost youth and purity.

Chance: I go back to Heavenly, or I don’t. I live or die. There’s nothing in between for me.
Aunt Nonnie: What you want to go back to is your clean, unashamed youth, and you can’t. (83)

Instead Chance is forced to serve the Princess “to put to sleep the tiger that raged in my nerves …. Why the unsatisfied tiger? In the nerves jungle? Why is anything, anywhere, unsatisfied, and raging? …. (33) She quite unabashedly tells Chance:

I’ve been accused of having a death wish but I think its life that I wish for, terribly, shamelessly, on any terms whatsoever.
When I say now, the answer must not be later. I have only one way to forget these things I don’t want to remember and that’s through the act of love-making. That’s the only dependable distraction so when I say now, because I need that distraction, it has to be now not later ….
Now get a little sweet music on the radio and come here to me and make me almost believe that we’re a pair of young lovers without any shame (44).

The aging star Alexandra is very real; with her neurosis who seeks sexual gratification as a temporary refuge. She resembles Alma, Maggie, and Catherine – emissaries of truth who help the weak men to confront reality. Like the other strong, assertive women from Williams’s plays she asserts her right to sexual satisfaction placing
it within a material economy. It is the commodification that causes the undoing of Chance. He is the male version of the whore with a heart of pure gold. His downfall and depravity is caused by his ensnaring deception within a consumerist system. The play offers a comment on the malevolent patriarchal judgments that have a predefined moral set up and unsparingly victimize men like Chance to forfeit their masculinity en route for vindicating themselves.

Heavenly in *The Sweet Bird of Youth* on the other hand poses a threat to Boss Finley’s patriarchal power set-up by indulging in sexual relationship with Chance Wayne. The consequential “secret” operation and the resultant scandal threaten to dismantle Finley’s political reputation and she boldly refuses to follow her father’s mandates despite his admonitions.

Williams’s world which is premised on Lawrencian energy celebrating carnal desires has devised its own principle of morality, so that castration of Chance by the hegemonic superiority of Boss Finley is nothing short of death, for in Williams’s world ‘sex’ is the fountainhead of life, castration is the end of it. Boss Finley, the sadistic politico decrees the castration of Chance which is executed by his sexually depraved son and his wanton friends. Boss Finley, a self-advocated moral crusader, maneuvers the castration of Blacks who commit miscegenation. If desexualization of Chance links him to the Blacks, the racial other, the term “criminal degenerate” connects him to the sexual other. Chance is clever at analyzing the situation, when he tells Alexandra about the threats of sterilization “That can’t be done to me twice. You did that to me this morning, here on this bed, where I had the honor, where I had the great honor ….

Princess counters: Age does the same thing to a woman (120)

Certainly she voices the predicament of Heavenly, but indirectly Chance is responsible for rendering her sterile by giving her “the venereal disease” for which the doctor has to cut out her diseased womb.

Williams’s drama celebrates the endurance of characters like Alexandra Del Logo, Nonno and Val who are the envoys of art and leave behind their footprints in the sands of time to be commemorated. Although “Time” is the greatest destroyer, Art proves to defeat Time and establish its supremacy over the ephemeral moments that Williams’s characters cherish in a nostalgic mood. The legacy of art outlives Time in the
form of the film of the Princess who once again comes in limelight, Val’s legacy of singers prevails, Nonno’s last poem triumphs over time. Alexandra’s knowledge of truth that ‘one is always essentially alone in beanstalk country’ is the authorial epigram of revelation “Out of the passion and torment of my existence I have created a thing that I can unveil, a sculpture almost heroic, that I can unveil, which is true” (120). This is endorsed by Val’s philosophical statement: “Nobody ever gets to know no body! We’re all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life... we got to face it, we’re under life-long sentence to solitary confinement inside our own skins for as long as we live on this earth!”(271). The end of Sweet Bird of Youth with Chance directly addressing the audience is vociferous and weak for Chance’s submission to emasculation, his inability to seek compromise offer a bleak vision of future. Instead polemically positioned Alexandra’s parting words are the positive counter to the vandalized martyrs, frozen in time that inhabit Williams’s dramatic world. Chance’s closing lines are: “I don’t ask for your pity, but just for your understanding – not even that, no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all”. Donald Spoto calls this “the single most jarring interruption of dramatic structure in Williams’s work” (Spoto 1985: 257). Similar views are expressed by Harold Clurman, whose displeasure is more direct, commenting on the curtain speech,

What is it we were asked to recognize in ourselves? That we are corrupted by our appetite for the flesh and clamor of success? That we are driven to live debased existences by the constrictions and brutality which surround us? That the sound instincts of our youth are thus frustrated and turned to gall? And that we have an inordinate fear of age, for the passing of time makes us old before we mature? (Clurman 1959: 281).

Definitely, Williams did not intend the audience to identify with the categorical degeneration embodied in Chance, but the concluding remarks of Chance create an awareness of the flying Time that rarely allows us to gather the fleeting moments of pleasure and seals the destinies of its victims.

Marya Mannes deplored the “violence of corruption and decay … in which a poet’s imagination must feed on carrion” (Mannes 1959: 34). Despite the weakened
dramatic effect, the play as an organic entity represents Williams at his best in his remarkable fusion of realism, lyricism and theatricalism that proved to have a long lasting impact on American Theater.

In the two decades between *The Night of the Iguana* and his death Williams wrote at least twenty five more plays manifesting similar thematic concerns “loss in time” but never reached the similar intense or heightened dramatic appeal partly remaining beyond the critical attention and partly because of the raucous and harsh tone that characterized them. However in consideration of the canon, scope and complexity of Williams’s literary endeavors, such critical myopia is clearly lamentable and unjustified. These works were disappointing to those expecting reincarnations of his earlier masterpieces and nearly all triggered negative critical comments.

The aforesaid discussion of the various thematic parallels and contrasts in Williams’s plays clearly embodies a pattern. The fabric of his literary endeavour is knit together by an autobiographical strain that is evidently discernible in his art of characterization and events but significantly a nostalgic longing for bygone days expresses itself through the plays and forms a texture in the later plays also.

In *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda’s continuous reference to the past glory becomes a perpetual tool to handle the unbearable present. Her fantasies enrich her life and ascribe a new meaning to it.

Amanda: One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain. Your mother received – Seventeen! Gentlemen callers! (4). For Tom the past bears a traumatizing confrontation with guilt and the painful realization of his emotional and psychological ties with his sister that he was never able to break. Tom declares pathetically “Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! (63).

For Blanche, like Tom the past impinges with an irrepressible guilt and self reproach – “when I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love” …. “He came to me for help. I didn’t know that …. “He was in the quick sands and clutching at me – but I wasn’t holding him out, I was slipping in with him! (120)

Later in the play she voices her latent anguish, her pricking conscience that the young lad she married, shot himself after she exposed the truth – “It was because on the
dance – floor unable to stop myself – I’d suddenly said – “I know! I know! You disgust me …” (121)

Much in the same manner Maggie declares her responsibility in Skipper’s downfall but unlike Blanche she does not sentimentalize the issue and craftily overcomes her feelings to promote her own desires:

In this way, I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told? - From then on Skipper was nothing at all but a receptacle for liquor and drugs …” “- Who shot cock robin? I with my – merciful arrow! (59)

The addiction to drinking and alcohol or drugs seems to be an escapade from the agonies and painful memories of the past. Williams’s characters Amanda, Tom, Blanche, Maggie, Brick, Shannon are oscillating between the past and the present. Torn between the past and present they feel ‘unfit’ in the world of the present.

It is with his later plays, that Williams was able to finally accommodate his Artaudian vision of “plastic theater” that enfolds a “metaphysical fear” – beyond the articulation of language. Some such works are elaborately discussed in the next chapter; hence suffice it to mention a few characteristics of these plays in passing. Although these plays merit attention and appreciation, it is hard to separate these plays from the antagonistic biographical criticism that thickly surrounds them. As Marc Robinson aptly conceded, “Tennessee Williams spent a lifetime trying to escape clichés, but clichés cling to him” (Robinson 1994: 29). Shrouded in a biographical pallor plays like Vieux Carre, Something Cloudy Something Clear have been venomously attacked by the critics, misreading them as a demonstration of Williams’s memories rather than original works in their own right.

The transitional Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore bridges the gap between the resolve of the naturalistic Iguana and the turbulence of the absurdist Gnadies Fraulien and The Mutilated: the latter being slapstick tragedies. The Outcry too belongs to Williams’s experimental work of the sixties.

The Two-character Play is another of Williams’s soliloquies in a duologue where Felice and Clare Devoto, brother and sister, ostensibly the stars of a theatrical company
that has deliberately deserted them, express the trauma of their lives and end in pathetic suicides. The play carried overtones of incest in the relationship of the siblings. In *Small Craft Warnings* Williams once again restored to his accustomed mode of lyric naturalism. Marc Robinson scathingly attacks the attempts of Williams to keep going – “Such opulent poignancy seems old-fashioned from our perspective. Williams himself saw this emotional accessibility going out of style even as he was writing toward it….The stammered cry encountered in his plays sounds only like rude, tuneless wail. And, at his theater’s most strained, the awkwardness that Williams hoped to reveal really only reflects his own desperation” (Robinson 1994: 57). His works continued to project the pervading sense of loss and decay and the maudlin and strident notes permeated his dramatic world.

Nevertheless like Byron says “Make voyages, attempt them …” Williams continued his relentless struggle in art as in life. “The diversity and breadth of Williams’s canon defies easy homogenized rubrics” says Philip Kolin in an attempt to “reappraise and recuperate” Williams’s later work (Kolin 2002: 3). In fact Williams’s works about fleeting time outlast the time, being qualified by characters that are schooled rigorously in adversities, to be skeptical of insubstantial and gossamer “Happiness”. His characters often diagnosed and dissected more than being listened to, conjured repetitive labels such as “lonely outcasts”, “torn by passion of life”, “pathetic and forlorn” establish the need to be placed in their artistic world, weeding away the accolades or blasphemies of the personal hues of Williams’s life. In his characters one discerns heliotrope temperament that dazzles the onlookers. His drama is quintessentially character-centered drama – a paramount contribution to twentieth century literature. The American theater was pre-dominated by plays with a properly framed, close- knit plot structure. Williams paradigmatically moulded the plays he wrote with nuclear focus on individuals at the centre, a striking shift in the post-war period that idolized individual as a social construct. Williams stripped the plays of the paraphernalia of myth, story, and philosophical essence and renovated them with internal catastrophes and endearing characters that are like ‘stars to wandering barks’. “The fugitive characters are destroyed because they offer love in a world characterized by impotence and sterility” (Williams in Lesniak 1990: 466). Amanda, Maggie, Blanche, Alexandra, Catherine, Hannah are among those endearing
pen portraits that overwhelm the readers and enthrall the audiences. They learn to hope against hope – Carol Cutrere overpowers the panic that escalates the play when she utters “What can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your hands, until your fingers are broken?” (245).

Gay or straight, feeble or strong the male characters also are successful in drawing attention to their own private, disaster prone small microcosmic spheres. From the commanding and dominating Big Daddy and Boss Finley, the aristocratic politicos of the bourgeois world to the uncompromising, unrelenting men ready to sacrifice themselves in the new consumer world that betrays their feelings and emotions are Val, Chance with Brick and Tom who never belong to the predefined ‘spaces’ but are escapist or outsiders, disillusioned at the end. Williams, expressed himself quite truly “So successfully have we disguised from ourselves the intensity of our own feelings, the sensibility of our own hearts, that plays in the tragic tradition have begun to seem untrue” (Williams in Robinson 1994). Perhaps his authorial comment justifies his theatrical pursuits. Full blooded characters that exhibited the fundamental emotions “sorrow”, “frustration”, “love”, “hatred”, “jealousy”, what ultimately is expressed is not a bombastic show of emotions but the transparency of psychological turmoil, feelings that sweep across, bursting out, measureless and unwieldy, unfathomable but longing to be let loose.

Apart from Williams’s memorable characters and poetic lyricism, Williams’s innovative technique of dramatic form established his unquestionable supremacy in the American literary scenario. In running an aesthetic risk, Williams opened his play The Glass Menagerie by addressing the dichotomy between realistic and nonrealistic plays in the authorial character, Tom who confides directly to the audience: “Yes I have tricks in my pocket; I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician ....” He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion (144). These lines unique on classic American stage are explicitly theoretical that demand a certain understanding from the audience of the dramaturgical concepts. Focusing on the binaries, the representational or illusionistic drama demands that the audience comply with the make-believe for the real thing; paradoxically accept that the enlightenment about life can come in the garb of an illusion not necessarily
faithful to life. Stanley Cavell, commented “the audience vanishes” in the very act of being recognized”, as Williams’ employed myriad devices to violate the “fourth wall” between the stage and the auditorium declaring his work to be “unrealistic” (Cavell 1976: 157).

Robert Scholes asserts that “it is because reality cannot be recorded that realism is dead. All writing, all composition, is construction. There is no mimesis, only poiesis. No recording, only constructing” (Scholes 1975: 7). In the poststructuralist interpretations, realism then is disavowed; the paradigms of realism are rendered nearly impossible in the context of fictionalization of facts. In keeping with the theoretical matrices is Esther Merle Jackson’s observation that neither in show nor in practice is Williams’ “highly abstract” form realistic. She prefers to regard him a romantic or an expressionist, or some hybrid of the two, while more recently – though perhaps less convincingly – David Savran rejects the expressionist–realist designation all together in favour of surrealist and post–modernist (Savran 1992: 92,98).

In European realism, the hermeneutic clashes are frequently counterpoised between idealistic and realistic featuring of events or characters who espouse misconceptions about the world they inhabit – Ibsen, Shaw and Chekhov’s characters illustrate it. In American realist drama, the emphasis is often less metaphysical than social or psychological where the celebrated playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, later Sam Shepherd harped on the major aspects of the mythic vision of American society and delineated diverse yet acute versions of social existence. This stage realism is essentially unveiled through the technique of characterization. Virtually all of Williams’s works exemplify fully dimensioned characters with psychological probity. This receives acute critical observation from Singh:

The playwright Tennessee Williams presents before us the dark world of one-dimensional society of the modern civilization that survives in the midst of exploitation, violation of moral code of conduct, corruption and dehumanized passions of power and intimate relationships. He makes us realize that such worldly circumstances of the tainted world drives the misfits, the rebels, the artist figures or the fugitive kinds to lead lives of depression,
alienation and unhappy madness. It happens due to their failure of adjustment with the worldly norms and they construct make-believe worlds around them through fabricated illusions in order to feel a sense of untrammeled freedom. The playwright through his impulsive creative activity provides us with a basic premise to understand with tenderness and fortitude such individuals trapped in their own predicament (Reuben-Singh 2009: 1).

In his essay “Critic says ‘Evasion’, Writer says ‘Mystery’” Williams proclaims: “My characters make my play …. I always start with them; they take spirit and body in my mind …. They build the play about them like spiders weaving their webs, sea creatures making their shells” (Williams 1978: 72).

Williams’s realism, then is actually distinct from his American counterparts such as William Inge – and it dwells in a tension and finally reconciliation between characters devised for their psychological verisimilitude and in a setting that is presented non-realistically or even expressionistically. In the production notes preceding Glass Menagerie Williams wrote a manifesto for the theatre at par with Strindberg’s on Naturalism in his Preface to Miss Julie or Bertolt Brecht’s in his essay “Theatre for Learning” where he differentiates between the dramatic and epic forms. Challenging the pre-existent norms of the “straight realistic play” Williams in “a closer approach to truth”, calls for “a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture.” (Williams 1971: 131). Arthur Miller has termed the resultant style “theatre of gauze”; Jackson has referred to it as “American formalism …. in which [Williams] has rewoven the complete fabric of the performing arts.”(Jackson 1965: 156). On the other hand Williams named it “personal lyricism” linking it with his perennial thematic stress on the need to move from loneliness and estrangement to community and society. “Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life” (Williams 1978: 76).

Thus Williams never really fell in with prevailing tastes even in his golden age. Tracking his dramatic journey from its beginning to his last plays like Something Cloudy, Something Clear (1995) one finds that the stage as a space gains an entity and Williams’s masterstroke converts it into a mode for exploring and exposing life’s transitional events.
as well as those individuals who touched him. A kaleidoscopic vision unfurls his Homeric artistic ambitions, his tumultuous sexual orientation, his access to the polemics of spiritual love and cruder sexual longings enshrined within the transitoriness of time. Williams left an everlasting impact on the American theatre and the world at large.

David Mamet’s eulogy recounted Williams’s impact on theater in the years of the major plays, and observed ironically that Americans 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” (Mamet 1983: 124).

Mamet’s appraisal of William’s literary contribution is equally relevant and appropriate to Vijay Tendulkar in the Indian context. Both the dramatists left an indelible mark on American and Indian theater respectively. Exploring the artistic kinship between the two would certainly be an interesting feat. The next chapter is an attempt to make a comparative analysis of the dramatic art of the two iconic literary figures and illuminate some of the unknown areas of their art.