Chapter – 1

Introduction
The dramatic world of Tennessee Williams, one of the most powerful of the twentieth century American dramatists, is filled up with the emotionally disturbed characters trapped in a world of repression. The tension emanating out of psychological repression and attempts of sublimation that Williams experiences in his own life owing to his unfavourable family environment and his own sexual preference, is reflected in his creation. The study finds his plays revealing the creator’s experimentation with the theme of repression with the intention to give his otherwise repressed world a more meaningful communication. The attempt is to minimize the pressure of repression by ensuring the process of sublimation, to give the personal feeling a more meaningful universal outfit, to provide the singular with comprehensive plural response.

In the context of the above the researcher has taken up nine major plays of Tennessee Williams focusing repression and sublimation that are ingrained in his plays, but have so far remained almost unexplored. The selected plays are: The Glass Menagerie (1944), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Summer And Smoke (1948), The Rose Tattoo (1951), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), Orpheus Descending (1957), Suddenly Last Summer (1958), A Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), and The Night of the Iguana (1964). The dissertation titled “Repression versus Sublimation: A Critical Study of Selected Plays of Tennessee Williams” is organized into six chapters and the first one is
is again designed in the following way - a) the terms ‘repression’ and ‘sublimation’ are defined; b) brief introduction on Tennessee Williams to initiate the discussion of how strongly repression and sublimation are operated in his ‘world’; c) elaboration of the concepts as developed by different psychoanalysts, especially, Sigmund Freud, Carl Jung, and Jacque Lacan. The relevance of Queer theory, mainly Judith Butler, Joan Riviere’s ideas of masquerade, and Michel Foucault’s ideas of sexuality and subject are also explored with frequent reference to Tennessee Williams; d) a brief discussion on Tennessee Williams’ contribution to American theatre and the place that his works secured for him as a dramatist; e) a detail account of his life and works, highlighting the crucial ones, that provides a strong source of materials for the repressed world of his plays.

Chapter 2 deals with the theme of repression and delusional projection that has highly coloured Williams’ The Glass Menagerie and A Street Car Named Desire, though one can come across the same in many of his other plays. The researcher has engaged this chapter in the discussion of the two above mentioned plays mainly in the light of the theme.

Chapter 3 is a study in highlighting the threat of castration that has haunted Williams’ characters. Castration enhances repression as Lacan defines castration as a process of giving up of a part of one’s “Jouissance” (drive). It is a fundamental loss experienced by both the sexes. A human being is forced to
acknowledge the impossibility of the fulfilment of his or her desire and so destined to feel castrated. Lacanian view of castration involves everyone as psychologically castrated experiencing the lack at every moment. Castration is one of the major themes in Williams’ plays as most of his characters are delineated as psychologically castrated. But castration is treated as an external threat with the social intervention in the plays Orpheus Descending, Suddenly Last Summer and A Sweet Bird of Youth which are elaborately discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 4 contributes in dealing with the theme of flesh and spirit, the tension of which is a recurrent phenomenon in Williams’ plays. His protagonists move between the two poles: on one hand, to sublimate the repressed desire they prefer to put themselves in spiritual attire and on the other, unable to eliminate the pushes of the unconscious. The play Summer and Smoke delineates the drama of puritan conscience in battle with the instinctual freedom proposed by Calvinism. The world of the play The Rose Tattoo also elaborates the same tension of flesh and spirit. The dichotomy of flesh and spirit is essentially entangled with repression and sublimation and this is highly focused in the two mentioned plays which are elaborately discussed in this chapter.

Chapter 5 is a discussion of sexual repression and human compassion and of how the plays of Tennessee Williams are always haunted by the pressure
of sexual repression substantiating the problems of the creator’s life. The deep chasm created by the sexual repression, which in turn caused alienation, can only be cured by human compassion. This is the inherent message in Williams’ play. An in-depth study of the plays of Tennessee Williams displays the creator’s experimentation with the theme and technique with the sole intention to give his otherwise repressed world a more meaningful communication. In this chapter *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *The Night of the Iguana* are analyzed as both the plays end with a ray of hope moving from the dark world of repression to that of compassion.

Chapter 6 of the dissertation is the conclusion which is the summing up of the preceding chapters and points out to the conclusion to the work undertaken. It incorporates the final findings of the research that in turn confirms the hypothesis of the work and exhibits attainment of the objectives.

I

Psychoanalytic literary criticism attempts to delve deep into the psyche of not merely the individuals in the work of art but also the writer, where most of the issues seem to emerge out of sexual frustrations and repressions. Repression means psychological act of eliminating desires from one’s consciousness and retaining or subduing them in the unconscious. Repression is
of different phases of which the Primary Repression phase originates in an infant’s psychology that makes the infant believe some aspects of reality as pleasant, controllable, and some are not. This phase prompts the child to develop the sense of what is self and what is other. The child learns to distinguish between what is good and bad, between desires, fears, self, and others.

Secondary Repression is related to the realization that acting on some desires may bring anxiety and is related to the threat of punishment which in turn necessarily involves repression of such desires. The ‘superego’ developed at this phase as the threat related to anxiety is internalized in the psyche. This ‘superego’ starts operating against the desires of the ‘id’ and the conflict is enacted in the ‘ego’.

The third phase is related to abnormal repression that gives rise to complex neurotic behaviour. When repression, initiated in the secondary phase due to the internalized feelings of anxiety, develops and/or continues to develop, it invites behaviour that is self-destructive, incoherent, against the social norms or anti-social.

Both repression and sublimation are devices of defense mechanisms which are given specific place in the structure of defense mechanisms designed on the basis of the psychical health of the individual.
Repression of some of our tendencies to pleasure and gratification is harsh necessity for Freud to maintain a balance between personal and social life. But too much repression may cause neurosis or various other forms of mental disorders. W. David Sievers states: “...he (Freud) scientifically named them as abnormal psychic disorders like neurosis, hysteria, hypochondria, irrationality and hypertension.” (Sievers 40) All these occur due to sexual maladjustment and an unconscious repression of sex drive results into unconscious conflicts which give rise to hostile impulses and split personality. One way to cope with the unfulfilled desires is by sublimating them which means shifting incestuous desire from their original sexual goals to nonsexual “higher” goals. Freud asserts that the artist possesses to a higher degree this power to sublimate and thus able to resolve the conflict between the need for

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expression and the compulsion to repress such self-revelation to a greater extent by his art.

“Modern literary criticism, even when - as is now customary – it is not concerned with questions of authentication, still defines the author the same way: the author provides the basis for explaining not only the presence of certain events in a work, but also their transformations, distortions, and diverse modifications (through his biography, the determination of his individual perspective, the analysis of his social position, and the revelation of his basic design). The author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing - all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence. The author also serves to neutralize the contradictions that may emerge in a series of texts: there must be - at a certain level of his thought or desire, of his consciousness or unconscious - a point where contradictions are resolved, where incompatible elements are at last tied together or organized around a fundamental or originating contradiction.” (Rabinow 111)

This account of author’s function taken from Michael Foucault’s “What is an Author?” provides a suitable platform for this present study where the resemblances between the protagonists and their author is intended to explore. Tennessee Williams once told an interviewer: “My work is emotionally autobiographical. It has no relationship to the actual events of my life, but it reflects the emotional currents of my life”. (Stine 453) The psychological repression that Tennessee Williams experiences himself is transmitted to the protagonists of his plays.

The childhood experience of Tennessee Williams was not a happy one. The sudden shift of the family from Mississippi to St. Louis left a deep mark in
young Williams' life as it was a painful experience for him to adjust in a totally different environment. The lack of understanding between his parents due to their different family background, his sister Rose's disturbed emotional life that culminated in an unsuccessful lobotomy, his most undesired assignment at a shoe company that lasted for three years, his own physical crippling caused by diphtheria resulted in leading a secluded life for almost two years at home, contributed in his having a conflicting personality. As an artist Williams used his personal life, his own alcoholism, homosexuality, his family and friends, to provide materials for his plays which display the intense passions and frustrations of individuals trapped in an insensitive and frequently brutal society. It is during the period of his seclusion at home that his mother seems to have inspired him to make use of his imagination by providing him a type writer. This may be considered as the starting point of the process of sublimation in his artistic career. With the passage of time he was found to have given expressions to his imagined and experienced pleasures and frustrations of sexual relations in his dramas. He himself confessed that although his plays are not autobiographical, they do “reflect somehow the particular psychological turmoil I was going through when I wrote them” (New York Times, December 21, 1975). So we notice changes in the treatment of his characters especially in respect of the intensity of psychological conflicts in the plays written in the different phases of his literary career. In a conversation with Charles Ruas he
states: “My plays in the 1940s and 1950s were relatively conventional in their construction, because my mind was relatively balanced....But as my life became more desperate I had to change the style, because the conventional pattern of a play no longer could contain that kind of frenzy.”(Devlin 285) Thus the plays The Glass Menagerie (1944), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) and Summer and Smoke (1948) appear to belong to the phase of his relatively balanced mind. But with the progress of his literary career, “the work has become darker. It began to become darker in the sixties and it became so dark that people find it painful” (Devlin 287).

Williams himself thinks that Camino Real (1953) was a real departure from convention but it was Suddenly Last Summer (1958) that reflected for the first time the emotional trauma of his life very deeply. In a letter to Donald Windham. July 28, 1974, Williams wrote:

“I have plunged into one of my periodic neuroses, I call them “blue devils,” and it is like having wild - cats under my skin. They are a Williams family trait, I suppose. Destroyed my sister’s mind and made my father a raging drunkard. In me they take the form of interior storms that show remarkably little from the outside but which create a deep chasm between myself and all other people, even deeper than the relatively ordinary ones of homosexuality and being an artist.”(Windham 91)

Freud's essays on art and literature invoke the belief that unconscious process facilitates creative writings. In this process the symbols and themes relating to the lives of the writer are taken into consideration as these are
believed to have motivated the creation. Williams’ personal experience of attachment to his mother and a consequent ambivalence to his father, the fear of castration and homosexuality function as strong motivating forces for his creations. He dares to give expression to these problems in his works keeping the promise he made in the last mentioned letter to Donald Windham: “...when I have the courage I will sit down and face them and write them all out.” His obsession with the theme of repression and the internal pressure of channelizing the same in an accepted way can be discerned both in his life and works as well. He writes, “... people trying to be comprehended by other people, and talking all most compulsively about themselves. I find myself doing that.” (Devlin 289) But his desire for expression is time and again thwarted enhancing his depression which ultimately led him to his emotional breakdown in 1969. During that time he has written In the bar of a Tokyo Hotel regretting his waning creative genius. The play exhibits the theme of creation and in his own words “...the artist and his wife in the play, were two sides of one person. One side was a man driven mad by the patient to create, which was frustrated, and the woman, as he described her, was a compulsive bitch.” (Devlin 294)

This interpretation of the play Tokyo Hotel has the echo of Carl Jung’s theories on personality and also his idea of anima and animus signifying human rational thought to be the male nature while the irrational aspect to be the natural female. Jung notices two personalities operating within him. The first is
the primary personality concentrating on personal development in accordance to social norms and the second personality is unconcerned with social constraints. According to Freud, personality is produced by the conflict between biological impulses and social constrains that were internalized. Jerry Cross and Pauline Bondono Cross considered that the type two personality of Jung is wiser and greater than the primary one. It possesses uncanny knowledge experiencing great dreams and visions of the world not involving the questions of the right and the wrong. It is always in touch with eternal values. Williams' protagonist strongly exhibits this personality and suffers disillusionment as it is not always in conformity with the social norms. Later on Jung termed this number two personality - Self, whose task is to maintain relationship between conscious and unconscious processes. Normalcy or psychological damage depends upon how successfully this relationship is fostered. Following Freud, Jung could not consider sexual trauma as a cause of all repression. People tend to repress those psychic contents which are morally incompatible with his conscious values. But Jung thinks "The unconscious background does not remain inactive e.g. it produces fantasies of a peculiar nature which can easily be interpreted as sexual image or it produces characteristic disturbances of the conscious process, which again can be reduced to repressed contents" (Leitch 987). The world of Tennessee Williams displays these psychological processes very well. It is very difficult to overcome the resistance of consciousness in
giving expression to the most secret mental impulses. So the artist, Freud thinks, tends to give expression of a repressed impulse or of a thwarted wish in a distorted form. Jung viewed psyche structured as the ego, persona, shadow, anima/animas, and the self. Out of these Jung considers shadow as an unconscious complex defined as the repressed, suppressed, quality of the conscious self. This reality of the shadow is dealt with in four ways: denial, projection, integration, and transmutation.

Freud stresses repression at the child’s infancy when with the emergence of ego the child has to take up his assigned role in sexual, familial and social setup. But in doing so he finds himself as a split subject repressing his guilty desires or oedipal tendency into the unconscious. Repression is the Freudian term for forgetting or ignoring those fundamental elements of human experience that cannot be expressed in the civilized society. He thinks that civilization is made up on a repressive mechanism. In his Civilizations and its Discontents, Freud has discussed the source of man’s unhappiness. To get happiness is the aim of life, and whenever it is obstructed we seek substitutive gratification. “The Pleasure Principle” has to be accommodated with the reality principle under the external pressure of civilization. This substitutive gratification has given rise to counter illusions like religion, art etc. which compensate our sufferings though cannot protect us against it. In the world of Tennessee Williams the characters that are seen apparently victorious are also
not totally out of the pressure of repression. Compromise or distraction from the original goal fails to give sense of fulfilment because designation, renunciation and sublimation are only phases of the denial of the pleasure principle.

Following Freudian concept, it is a well known fact that too much repression is harmful and finds an outlet through illicit channels. Sexual maladjustments and carnal repressions are referred to the reason of deviant behaviour. The clash between the instinct to express and the obligation to repress can be broadly accounted for the psychic tension. But Williams' characters can't be simply defined in light of the Freudian conception of repression as something harmful because it is assigned to produce only deviant characters. Here Williams' indebtedness to Carl Gustav Jung can be discerned. For him repression is not simply harmful, it rather facilitates canalization of the libido which means vital urge and contributes in formation of the individual consciousness. The source of repression and the consequent split personality need to be traced back to Freud again who assigned sexual difference to anatomical differences of the male and female organs interpreting the same in terms of presence and absence. As a result of which both sexes are incomplete as female suffers from 'penis envy' whereas male suffers from 'castration anxiety'. Lacan has gone a step further in considering every human being submitted to castration 'being'.
Jacques Lacan rediscovered Freud in new form with insights from linguistics. Following Freud, Lacan also conceived that the repression of the child's desire originated as he enters into the system of language, getting aware of his differences from others. In this state of Lacanian symbolic stage the child's socialization takes place along with the prohibition of the incest. This repressed desire is retained in the unconscious and Lacan termed this desire as Lack as it is never fulfilled. Freud's castration complex has been transformed in Lacan, and he considers castration as a symbolic process intended to recognize the lack caused for the deprivation of one's jouissance (drive). Lacan has not considered sexual differences from the anatomical perspective, and for him the 'phallus' is a signifier, not directly equivalent to the male genital organ. It is the signifier of the lack. Masculinity and femininity are defined in each one’s relationship to the phallus, the signifier. In the mirror stage the child remains under the imaginary unity with his mother. But the braking up of this imaginary unity in the symbolic stage has given rise to the shocking realization that desire cannot be satisfied. Initially the phallus functions as the imaginary object assumed to satisfy the mother's desire. But the shattering of the imaginary unity between the mother and the child leaves the phallus as an object beyond reach. The phallus thus symbolically represents the moment of split between the subject and its objects of desire and also the lack caused by the split. Both boys and girls experience symbolic castration by compromising with the partial
fulfilment of their jouissance. Jouissance is identified with the drive and the real.

Lacan is indebted to the structuralist theory of Ferdinand De Saussure and borrowed the terms ‘signifier’ and ‘signified’ to analyze the unconscious. For Lacan unconscious has a structure, repressed desire moves from signifier to signifier forming a chain of signification in search for the true signified which again is impossible to attain as it is absent. So the human being is destined to feel always dissatisfied, incomplete and thus experience the split. The protagonists of Tennessee Williams are also found chasing signifiers and emerge as split personality. Lacan has found out three orders in human psyche and these are imaginary, symbolic and the real. The child develops relation between the self and its image as the infant recognizes its image in the mirror. This constitutes the imaginary dimension of the psyche, as the child is fascinated by a sense of wholeness which is actually impossible to attain. Symbolic denotes a structure of relations. In the “Agency of the Letter in the Unconscious” (Écrits: a Selection), Lacan writes that the Real cannot be talked about as it is outside language and this resistance to symbolization absolutely is that which lends the Real its traumatic quality. It is always disturbing.

Lacan thinks that the human subject is always split between a conscious and an unconscious. By the former he intends to mean the conscious side of the kind that is accessible and the latter indicates a series of drives which remain
inaccessible. The subject experiences something to be missing from them and this ‘something missing’ is the other side of the split out of which unconscious emerges. Throughout life the subject desperately tries to replace that ‘something missing’ which is experienced as a lack. Lacan calls this lack desire which is always beyond reach. Even when our demands are met, desire remains unsatisfied. In this respect sexuality is not the result of a simple need. It is the human predicament to be driven by an inherent dissatisfaction and sense of insufficiency. There is always an imagination of something more which we do not have any idea about, but which we believe is there. Tennessee Williams in the Foreword page of the play *Sweet Bird of Youth* has made a very striking comment which is very relevant in this context. He is of the view that “there is something much bigger in life and death than we have become aware of (or adequately recorded) in our living and dying.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 154)

It is derived from Lacan that through Oedipus complex the boys recognize mother as a lacking other and the father as possessor of the phallus, object of mother’s desire. So it is the pretence of having the phallus, the object of desire for the Other (women), which is identified with the masculinity. But the girl’s case is much more complex where she ultimately chooses to become the object of desire for the Other (men). Here unlike masculinity, femininity involves the masquerade of being the phallus. In both the cases the phallus is
represented as a signifier of the desire of the Other. The following comment of
Lacan regarding woman’s position has made him come closer to the concept of
masquerade:

“... it is in order to be the phallus, that is to say, the signifier of the
desire of the Other, that a woman will reject an essential part of
femininity, namely, all her attributes in the masquerade. It is for that
which she is not that she wishes to be desired as well as loved.”
(Lacan, Ecrits 289-90)

A feminist psychoanalyst Joan Reviere in her concept of masquerade
also throws light on repression, especially that experienced by women in the
paper “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929). Ernest Jones in his paper “The
Early Development of Female Sexuality” concentrates on the types of female
development. Other than heterosexual and homosexual groups, he talks about a
number of intermediate groups. This paper of Ernest Jones has motivated Joan
Reviere to develop his concept of masquerade in his paper “Womanliness as
Masquerade” (1929). Every individual has more or less an inherent bisexual
tendency, and there is not necessarily only fundamental heterosexual or
homosexual attributes being displayed in an individual. Sexual manifestations
are the outcome of the playing out of this conflict and the differences in the
degree of anxiety.

Joan Reviere has pointed out the case of a new type of woman, that is,
‘intellectual woman’, who aspires to intellectual pursuits or masculinity sharing
the traditionally consigned field of man. This ‘intellectual woman’ quite naturally raises fear and anxiety in men who tends to believe intellectual pursuit as their enclosed field. Reviere thinks, “Women who wish for masculinity may put on a mask of womanliness to avert anxiety and the retribution feared from men” (Reviere 35). She further writes that womanliness “could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found to possess it” (Reviere 38).

Reviere traced the idea of masquerade at work in female oedipal complex and hence it contributed in the development of female sexuality. The girl experiences the rivalry with both the mother and the father. Reviere has analyzed the case of an ‘intellectual woman’ and revealed that after her successful intellectual exhibition she preferred to enjoy the favour of male partners especially the ‘father figures’. She has the conscious feeling of rivalry and superiority over the male partners, and does not like to be judged by men. Moreover she inwardly wished men to recognize masculinity in her. But publicly she exhibits her condition of womanhood. According to Reviere this compulsion is due to evoke friendly feelings for her in man and to protect her by masquerading as innocence.

For Reviere there is no essential distinction between genuine womanliness and womanliness as masquerade. In this respect womanliness put on as mask is applicable to women in general other than only to ‘intellectual
women'. Reviere has raised a dilemma by considering the appearance and essence of womanliness as the same. But the term ‘mask’ implies something hidden, and this something hidden is always assumed to be the genuine and authentic one. It is the dilemma of appearance and essence of womanliness that Lacan takes into his consideration. Lacan thinks that masquerade reveals “the feminine sexual attitude’ par excellence, that is to say, it is the mask or veil that is constitutive of the feminine libidinal structure” (Heath 52). It is the constructed nature of woman’s identity that masquerade put forwards and not the essential one. “The masquerade says that the woman exists at the same time that, as masquerade, it says she does not” (Heath 54).

The traditional concept of sexuality is grounded on the biological considerations. Psychoanalysis has offered an extended and transformed perspective of understanding sexuality. The traditional concept of normal and perverse have been received a shocking exposure in the light of psychoanalysis in the sense that any clear and definitive distinction between the two is impossible. It is no longer simply the reproduction which sexuality was designed to manifest as its aim, but the satisfaction.

Lacan has discarded the possibility of a stable fixed sexual identity. It is merely a fiction rather than biologically given. This non essentialist stand of Lacan regarding sexual identity influenced Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble—Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (1990), a founding document of the
queer theory. It rejects an essentialism of identity and the binary opposition of heterosexual/homosexual advocating for a more fluid and impermanent nature of the same. For Butler there is not any essential relation between anatomy and desire. She questions society’s “compulsory heterosexuality” that imposes fixed expectation about sexual desires on the basis of anatomical difference. Desires cannot be channelized in a single direction to be fitted under a fixed sign. She considers identity as a trap and its cost is very high for the so called natural and the deviant. Williams’ homosexual tendency has made him experience the traumatizing effect of this identity politics and his protagonists are also not aliens to this experience. In support to “destabilize the naturalized categories of identity and desire”, Butler, at the end of Gender Trouble, advocates parody in general and drag performances in particular and it is where queer theory makes its appearance. It is interested in “any and all acts, images, and ideas that “trouble”, violate, cross, mix, or otherwise confound established boundaries between male and female, normal and abnormal, self and other. Foucault’s concept of subject formation has also influenced Butler and is very much relevant to the present study.

Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* has elaborated the concept of repression and has pointed out its characteristic features which distinguish it from the prohibitions maintained by penal law. “...repression operated as a sentence to disappear...an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence,
and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know.” (Foucault 4) Foucault has put forward his arguments on sex to explore how the term repression has been attached to sex especially under the influence of Puritanism and of Victorian bourgeoisie society. Taboo, nonexistence, and silence - these triple edicts are imposed on sex. He has pointed out the relationship between sex and power in terms of repression. One cannot speak about sex without defying the established order if it already considers sex as something to be repressed. Foucault, in the chapter “The Repressive Hypothesis” of his book *The History of Sexuality*, Vol.1, explores the contradictory position of history in relation to sex. On one hand, repression is attached to sex and, on the other hand, a veritable discursive explosion around it is also very much evident. The confession procedure practiced in the catholic countries is nothing but to put the secrets, which are otherwise supposed to repress, in words. The purpose is to make the person concerned free of the burden of repression. It is found that the practice of transforming sex into discourse had been devised long before in an ascetic and monastic setting. The individual must confess not only the acts which are against the law, but also has been sought to transform his every desire into discourse. It was developed with an ideal goal that was intended to initiate a path towards sublimation. The root cause of the deviation is shifted from the act itself to the stirrings of desire. The evil lies in the desire that
infected the whole man. So, meticulous self examination is made the criteria to find out the evil which stays in the most secret forms. Psycho-analysis has made a successful entry with Freud in performing the task of examining the ‘secrets’.

Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* concentrates on locating the forms of power that acts through different channels and discourses in order to reach the most tenuous modes of individual behaviour. Psychoanalysis has been assigned a crucial role in the power mechanisms of the society to control and regulate the desires through its various devices. History of sexuality reveals that, on one hand, power has been creating refusal, blockage, and invalidation around sex and, on the other, facilitating incitement and intensification. Foucault says, “What is peculiar to modern societies, in fact, is not that they consigned sex to a shadow existence, but that they dedicated themselves to speaking of it *ad infinitum*, while exploiting it as the secrets.” (Foucault 35)

II

The plays of Tennessee Williams exhibit his ambivalent attitude towards sex. Sex is projected both as a threat and as a redeeming quality, and, so possesses the germs of repression and a relief from it. In his plays, the characters that are mainly marked for their sexual vulgarity are also the very characters haunted by a sense of guilt. Williams’ experiment also creates
characters that are not associated with sexual activities but ironically they become lifeless. So in his plays a desperate need to maintain a balance between flesh and spirit can be discerned, which may give finality to his characters. It seems that both the author and the characters are searching for that finality.

Tennessee Williams is universally acknowledged as one of the greatest American dramatists of the post World War II era. A general speculation finds him at his height during the first half of his literary career. With his first success *The Glass Menagerie*, that earned New York Drama Critics Circle Award, he has taken American theatre to a distinctly new height. When *The Glass Menagerie* opened on Broadway in 1945, says Kalem, “it galvanized a theatre that had exhausted its creative momentum. Onto this becalmed stage, Williams brought a kind of drama that reflected an entire generation’s failure of nerve, and touched the exposed nerve ends.” (Kalem 88) With the subsequent arrival of his plays, especially *A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Night of the Iguana*, Williams emerged more as an artist than a mere dramatist. He has revolutionized American theatre with the shocking exposure of such themes like schizophrenia, homosexuality, neurosis, cannibalism, nymphomania, sexual promiscuity, which then American drama could not even think of. His use of dialogues is vibrated with poetic touch. The spontaneous use of symbols, images, metaphors, installs an unearthly grace in an otherwise dark, repressed world of his plays.
To investigate the position that the works of Tennessee Williams demands for him in the arena of American theatre, we need to have a look at the factual details of the amount of scholarly criticism generated by his works along with that of his contemporaries. Charles Carpenter's bibliography of *Modern Drama Scholarship from 1966 to 1980* shows 384 entries on Eugene O'Neill, 224 on Miller, 239 on Albee, and 237 on Williams. *The New York Times Directory of the Theatre for 1920-1970* shows twice equal listings of New York productions and revivals for both O'Neill and Williams though O'Neill started much earlier. A compilation of all entries listed in Theatre Communications Group's *Biannual Theatre Profiles Series from 1977 to 1985* (Vols. 4-7) shows that there were 3 plays of Williams (a total of 113) for every 2 productions of plays by O'Neill (a total of 71). Miller and Albee fall short, in the last two listings, from Williams. An exact calculation of Williams' literary works is very difficult to make as he has revised many of his plays and a number of them were published in two or three different versions. Boxill's tabulation of the cannon displays: "He published two books of poetry, two novels, four books of short stories (one including a novella), a book of essays, and his Memoirs. During his life time, at least sixty-three of his plays and playlets (thirty-two are short, twenty-four full length and seven mid-length) were published or given a major professional production or both. He wrote or collaborated upon seven of the fifteen film adaptations." (Boxil 21) Much of the
later plays of Williams are found rewriting of his earlier plays and stories, and have received negative reception in comparison to his early plays. Though he has made experiments with the style, any remarkable development is hardly noticed and it may be because of the recurrence of the themes he had started with.

The psychologically disturbed individuals, trapped in their predicament, haunted by a sense of guilt, are desperately searching out for moral values of life in a hostile society. Gore Vidal said in 1976, "Tennessee is the sort of writer who does not develop; he simply continues. By the time he was an adolescent he had his themes....I am not aware that any new information (or feeling?) has got through to him in the [past] twenty-eight years." (Stine 454)

But in spite of such negative and hostile criticism, an in-depth study of Williams reveals that writing was not simply a profession for him; it was rather an integral part of his very existence. In his Memoirs (1975), Williams refers to the 1960s as his ‘Stoned Age’, and he clarified in an interview that “after 1955, specifically after Cat on a Hot Tin Roof...I needed [drugs, caffeine, and alcohol] to give me the physical energy to work....But I am a compulsive writer. I have tried to stop working and I am bored to death.” (Williams, Memoirs). The rewriting of his early plays in such a huge number cannot be considered as because of the lack of new material. His obsession with the theme of the repressed personalities are motivated by his desperate need to find out
ways to realize the moral values of life which may break the shackle of repression; but which for him has become Lacanian ‘real’ that cannot be captured within the symbolic structure of language. “...it should be clear that toward his material Williams has alternately been elegist, soothsayer, myth-maker, immolator, exorcist or consoler - none of the incarnations final and no one incarnation carried through to finality....” (Gilman, *Com* 460) It is true that critics, however, continue to find value in the experimentation of his later plays fulfilling Williams’ belief that the latter works “would one day be regarded as his crowning achievement.” (Kuehl 9A)

Williams’ contribution in American theatre is nicely summarized by Gilman:

“If you don’t know what the American theatre was like when he first came into it, you can’t know what he meant to so many of us. From the beginning he was an original, not simply a more ‘talented’ writer than his contemporaries but a different breed, an artist where the others were craftsmen....In the blood-less, ‘liberal’, cautious atmosphere of American drama, the Southern wildness, the sexual perversities and ferocities, the dangerous quality of what he dreamed gave his plays heart; their mingling of corruption and emotional accuracy touched us far more deeply than did any ‘reasonable’ American drama.” (Gilman, “Theatre: Tennessee Williams”)

Williams has also gained a very prestigious position in the international theatre scene since 1950s. According to Leverich, Williams’s authorized biographer:
It can safely be said that no American playwright has ever been so widely recognized or so universally admired. Tennessee Williams cut across the grain of societies in countries all over the world to reach people on every level of life (Leverich 30).

“To know me is not to love me” (Williams, Memoirs xii), a very striking comment of Tennessee Williams himself, provides the strong motivation to search out his life and to know why the dramatic world of Williams is crowded with disturbed personalities. During his childhood, the physical crippling caused by diphtheria made him stay out of school for long periods. Again, the abusing remarks of his fellow mates, who used to call him “Sissy” from his first day at school, supports him to regard himself as frail and vulnerable individual.

The frequent move of his family due to his father’s profession of travelling salesman left a sense of rootlessness in his mindset. The love-hate relationship with his father, who rejected his identity calling him “Miss Nancy”, the strong influence of his mother and his only companion Rose, his disabled sister, strengthened his feeling of being separate from others. Living in an unfamiliar and frightening environment at St. Louis, Williams had to develop a tendency to avoid the other boys who used to make fun of him. His experience of reality of the outside world was not at all a comfortable one. So, he turned inward becoming a voracious reader and writing stories quite filled with violence and death. The reality of his family environment was also not a supporting one as well. He relates in his Memoirs that the gap between the
crude and the dominating father and his frightened, inadequate son was never
minimized. He could never identify himself with his father; and this fact may
be the logical explanation for the obsessive presence of castration and Oedipal
complex in his works.

Williams’ desperate drive to come out of his shell began as a college
student at the University of Missouri where he became a fraternity member. But
to overcome his excessive shyness he had to drink heavily. It was during this
period that his homosexual tendencies developed as he relates in his Memoirs.
This realization of his attraction towards homosexual relationship made the
situation worse for him. A sense of insecurity or suspicion about the outside
world originated in his thought, as he himself confessed in an article published
This background enhanced Williams’ coming under the influence of D. H.
Lawrence whose theme of rebellion against a destructive Puritanical social
order is quite often present in Williams’ works. The process of repression
originated in the very childhood itself, was gradually being intensified by his
failure to lead a normal sexual life. This pressure of repression is transmitted to
his characters that may be described more as personifications of the creator’s
fears and desires. In Memoirs Williams contends: “all true work is personal,
whether directly or obliquely, it must and thus reflect the emotional climates of
its creator” (Williams, Memoirs 188). The writer’s psychological makeup gets
involved in his character portrayal, in an interview for the *News Week* in 1957 Williams talks about writing from his own tension: “I can’t handle people in routine situations. I must find characters who correspond to my own tensions.” The world of Tennessee Williams is one of repression, and in his plays he is “trying to discover where the devil lies inside all of us.”

In the dramatic world of Tennessee Williams psychological forces are confronted with but these are undoubtedly in association with the forces of history. C.W.E. Bigsby’s observation has rightly pointed out the influence of the Depression of the 1930s, the World War II, and the advent of the Nuclear Age on Williams’ early works. Many of Williams’ characters are sprung up from the southern region which is disintegrated due to the advent of the forces of industrialization. This necessitated an unhappy compromise with the long cherished modes of southern life. The Puritan dominance of the South is also an important contributing factor in intensifying the psychological conflict experienced by Williams’ characters. The Puritan heritage of the Southerners struggles with the Cavalier spirit which is ingrained in their personalities. Here the characters share the creator’s struggle with his Puritan heritage and regarding it, Nancy Tischler opines that Williams can’t decide whether he’s for sex or against it, and this is symptomatic of his conflict between rebellion and repression.
There was also a strong influence of the Absurd Drama in Tennessee Williams. The unbearable gap in the relationship which Williams experienced in his own life haunted his characters. To reduce this pressure of repression it is necessary to know the “broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it’s for one night only”, as has been put by Hannah to Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* (Williams, *Plays: 1957-1980* 408).

Thomas Lanier Williams III was born in Columbus, Mississippi, the second child of Edwina and Cornelius Coffin Williams. His maternal grandfather, the Reverend Walter Dakin, was the local Episcopal priest, and his grandmother, Rose O. Dakin, was a music teacher. His father was a travelling shoe salesman whose major part of life was spent on road. The behaviour of Williams’ mother, Edwina, to some extent, was neurotic and hysterical. Williams’ early childhood was spent in the rectory in Clarksdale, Mississippi where his grandfather Dakin was assigned to a parish.

Williams suffered from diphtheria in his early childhood which left him weak and for a year, during a period of recovery, was almost confined to his house. Due to his illness Williams was a little frail as a child which his father, who had a violent temper, disdained as his wish to see the robustness of his son was failed. That made his mother Edwina to focus her overbearing attention almost entirely on her feeble son. According to many critics and historians, his own dysfunctional family environment was an inspiration for much of
Williams’ writings. His biographer Donald Spoto comments: “[Williams] work is a series of variations on the great emotional cycles of his own tortured life” (xviii).

Williams attended Soldan High School for his school education and later he went to study at University City High School. At the age of 16 Williams published his first literary work in the form of an essay in Smart Set entitled, “Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?” and won third prize of five dollars followed by his first short story “The Vengeance of Nitocris” which was published in the August 1928 issue of the magazine Weird Tales. During the period of 1929 to 1931 Williams attended the University of Missouri, Columbia to study journalism. With the publication of his first play Beauty Is the Word (1930), a play about rebellion against religious upbringing, he became the first freshman to receive honourable mention in a writing competition. That was followed by another play Hot Milk at Three in the Morning (1932).

Williams’ father pulled him out of school and put him to work at the International Shoe Company factory which he disliked and it made him to draw more towards writing and he set himself a goal of writing one story a week. In the words of Williams’ mother:

“Tpm [Tennessee Williams] would go to his room with black coffee and cigarettes and I would hear the typewriter clicking away at night in the silent house. Some mornings when I walked in to wake him for work, I would find him sprawled fully dressed across the bed, too tired to remove his clothes.”(Williams, Notebooks xi)
In 1936, after resigning from his job, he went to Washington University in St. Louis where he wrote the play *Me, Vashya* (1937). In 1938 he went to University of Iowa from where he graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English. In subsequent years he studied at the Dramatic Workshop of The New School in New York City. Being a part of an amateur summer theatre group in Memphis, he produced a collaborative play called *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay*.

Williams received his true recognition as a playwright during the winter of 1944–45, when his "memory play" *The Glass Menagerie* was successfully produced in Chicago earning good reviews from theatre critics. It was then moved to New York where it became an instant and huge success and it ran for a considerable period on Broadway. One cannot miss Williams' use of his own familial relationships in the play. In this context Elia Kazan, who directed many of Williams' plays said: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life." (Spoto 171) The play also won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play of the season.

Williams' next play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, produced in 1947, was also a huge success and it established his reputation as a leading playwright in America. During the next few years, between 1948 and 1959, seven of his plays were successfully performed on Broadway: *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose*
Tattoo (1951), Camino Real (1953), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), Orpheus Descending (1957), Garden District (1958), and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959) were huge successes and confirmed Williams’ position as one of best American playwrights during the era. These plays also earned him two Pulitzer Prizes, three New York Drama Critics’ Circle Awards, three Donaldson Awards, and a Tony Award.

Moreover when The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire were adapted into motion pictures in the early 1950s, Williams’ works reached to world-wide audiences. These were followed by some more films based on his plays viz. Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, Orpheus Descending, The Night of the Iguana, Sweet Bird of Youth, and Summer and Smoke.

But his theatrical fortune did not move on smoothly as, after the extraordinary successes, he experienced theatrical failures primarily due to his habit of increasing alcohol and drug consumption which in turn caused low quality production. Moreover the death of his partner Merlo resulted in his depression which was multiplied by the negative press coverage after his plays: Kingdom of Earth (1967), In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel (1969), Small Craft Warnings (1973), The Two Character Play (1973), The Red Devil Battery Sign (1976), Vieux Carré (1978), Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1980) and others.
were all box office failures. His last play, *A House Not Meant To Stand*, produced in Chicago in 1982, was also a theatrical failure.

The inability of the critics and audiences to understand his new style and the approach to theatre which he developed during 1960s, left Williams depressed as he said, “I’ve been working very hard since 1969 to make an artistic comeback...there is no release short of death” (Spoto 335). In another place he said, “I want to warn you, Elliot, the critics are out to get me. You’ll see how vicious they are. They make comparisons with my earlier work, but I’m writing differently now” (Spoto 331). According to Leverich, Williams, during that period, was concerned with "the depths and origin of human feelings and motivations, the difference being that he had gone into a deeper, more obscure realm, which, of course, put the poet in him to the fore, and not the playwright who would bring much concern for audience and critical reaction” (Leverich xxiii).

On February 25, 1983, Williams was found dead in his suite at the Elysee Hotel in New York and it has culminated the illustrious career of one of the most powerful playwrights of America. He was honoured by the U.S. Postal Service on a stamp in 1994 as part of their literary arts series. He was also honoured with a star on the St. Louis Walk of Fame. Williams’ life and works strongly exhibit the framework of his belonging to unconventionality that becomes both his strength and weakness. The unconventional nature of
Williams’ life is reflected in his feelings on the death of his friend Frankie. He says: “My first reaction was a hard thing to analyze now. I think it must have been relief that his and my torture was finished . . . . As long as Frank was well, I was happy. He had a gift for creating a life and, when he ceased to be alive, I couldn’t create a life for myself. So I went into seven-year depression.” (Williams, Memoirs 194) The same incident brings for him relief from sufferings but necessitates depression by taking out the spirit of life from him. So for Williams, sometimes suffering is related to the spirit of life, and it is this suffering that he wants to communicate to the world. He has to experience the pang of repression at different levels of his life especially due to his unfavourable family environment and his sexual preference. His works reflect his suffering repression and a symptomatic search for sublimation. The theme of a rebellious child emerging out of a repressed world, introduced with The Glass Menagerie, quite often appears in his subsequent works. Repression enhances the spirit of rebellion that encompasses both Williams’ life and works. Repression and an unconscious search for sublimation of repression is an integral part of Williams and of his repressed protagonists.
Works cited


