Chapter - 3

Threat of Castration
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. Following Williams’ conventional pattern, Chance Wayne in Sweet Bird of Youth and Val Xavier in Orpheus Descending are fugitives haunted by the threat of castration. Castration is related to repression as it is defined as a process of repressing or giving up of a part of one’s “jouissance” that means drive. When it becomes impossible to fulfil the desires, it is repressed creating a lack in the persona as a consequence. Lacan considers castration as a symbolic process meant to identify the lack that is developed for the deprivation of one’s drive or desire. Lacanian view of castration involves everyone as psychologically castrated, experiencing the lack at every moment.

On one morning Williams found an unmailed letter of his own lying on his writing desk where he came across a sentence, “We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behaviour.” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 151) This inherent savagery of civilization is reflected in its extreme form in the plays Orpheus Descending, Suddenly Last Summer, and Sweet Bird of Youth. In Orpheus Descending, Val Xavier is physically killed. His guitar and the snakeskin jacket are symbols of his being an artist and his otherliness. He injects the spirit of fertility and love
in an otherwise sterile conventional society and naturally becomes a threat. But
his snakeskin jacket, which cannot be destroyed, has left the stamp of his spirit.
In *Suddenly Last Summer*, the devouring Mother, who is responsible for her
son’s psychic dismemberment, is “committed to the annihilation of a fellow
human being through the agencies of society” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980*
146). Here Sebastian Venable, a pleasure seeking homosexual, used his mother
to make “contacts” for him, something that his shy and introverted nature
prevented him to do it himself. But with his mother’s physical disabilities, his
dependent self explores another signifier (Lacan) in his cousin, Catherine. The
unconscious or the repressed desire goes on shifting from one signifier to
another in searching for an end signified in the chain of signification. The girl,
the only witness to Sebastian’s terrifying death, will have to tell the story in
front of the mother and the doctor, who are operating to make her repress the
truth. Here we see the sadistic plight of a girl struggling to assert the truth of her
story. Only to save the dignity of a man who is dead, the society is almost
negating the dignity of a girl who is alive. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the Boss is
presented as a symbol of Power operated against the individual desires of both
his daughter Heavenly and her lover Chance Wayne. Again in this play the
focus is, time and again, shifted from the power of social force to that of
universal force of Time which is unbitten. Princess, Heavenly and Chance
Wayne are all in a sense victim of that unbitten Time. Ultimately Chance
surrendered himself to the social forces to save his moral dignity as a human being with an earnest appeal “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.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 236) All the three plays depict the savagery of civilization that assigns power to those who are at the summit of social and economic success. In all the three plays repression is operated both at the individual and social levels where sublimation comes only through sacrificing or surrendering one’s life.

In *Orpheus Descending*, the savagery of civilization is reflected in its extreme form where the individuals have to pay their lives to live their dreams. The societal norms of the extremist offer two unwritten options for its citizens: they are either to endure the pang of repression throughout their lives or to get out of their lives. The world of the play is one of “intrigue, violence and meanness of a bigoted southern town,” peopled by the extremists like Jabe, Sheriff and their ilk. The protagonist of the play Val Xavier is a fugitive, accused of raping a woman in another town. Val, so far leading a wild and meaningless life, descends into this world of intrigue of a small town of two rivers to realize his shortcomings and to rectify it. But the barren society of this small town does not allow anyone to fulfil one’s dream and gets rejuvenated. Naturally Val also has to depart from his life here. According to Thompson: “The failure of Val’s efforts to reconcile spirit and flesh- to become, as it were,
a winged serpent, mediator between heaven and earth- reveals only how tightly wrapped around him is his own earthly nature of tainted sexuality.” (Thompson 76)

The history of Orpheus Descending carries one of the best examples of how an artist becomes obsessed with a particular theme related to his own life and seeks sublimation by constantly reworking upon it. The intention is for better communication of his thoughts which itself is dynamic by nature. The playwright explains: “Why have I stuck so stubbornly to this play? For seventeen years, in fact? Well, nothing is more precious to anybody than the emotional record of his youth, and you will find the trail of my sleeve-worn heart in this completed play that I now call Orpheus Descending.” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 4) Williams possesses the attributes of both a moralist and a psychoanalyst, and his plays are happened to throw light upon some unanswered questions. They propose choice for either to go with the accepted answers formulated by the external machineries of the society or to search out individually. Williams writes that both The Battle of Angel and Orpheus Descending are “the tales of a wild spirited boy who enters into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop.” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 4) But the journey of playwright from The Battle of Angel to Orpheus Descending is a prolonged one. Orpheus Descending can be considered an old play dealing with the materials that The Battle of Angels
already offered long back. Then what necessitates an artist to rework on a particular play for the long seventeen years should demand a serious query. Psychoanalytic study with Freud throws light on this issue of an artist’s obsession with a particular work. He is of the view that an artist has the power to sublimate the pressure of repression to a greater extent through his work. Williams’ steady reworking on a particular theme for seventeen years can be considered his efforts to achieve a balance between the urgency for expression and the pressure to repress such self-revelation. When the play is finally ready to come out, Williams himself states his thoughts in a very simple, straightforward language: “I am offering it this season because I honestly believe that it is finally finished. About 75 per cent of it is new writing, but what is much more important, I believe that I have now finally managed to say in it what I wanted to say, and I feel that it now has in it a sort of emotional bridge between those early years described in this article and my present state of existence as a playwright.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980*)

In the play Valentine Xavier is introduced in a snakeskin jacket with a guitar in search of fulfilment. South Bethlehem provides him the final stage of his long search. He is a divine artist with refine, noble, and humane attributes, standing in sharp contrast to the primitive energy of the Dionysian spirit represented by the inhabitants of Two Rivers. He brings fertility and spirit of compassion in an otherwise barren, inhuman orthodoxy of the society. The
patriarchy of the society always creates women victim to its norms and the play reflects the phenomenon. In such a society a woman is forced to sleep "with a son of a bitch" because the man bought her "at a fire sale and not in fifteen years has she had a single good dream." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 39) A woman is destined to repress her desires because the society has laid down her fate where she has no choice. In this society the women are naturally found to search out their minimum enjoyment through their conversation with each other and their usual subjects are sex, death and disaster. The arrival of Val, a lonely artist, has shaken the rigid and conservative impulse of the society. Women get attracted to this extraordinary creature, symbolically represented by his snakeskin jacket, who is totally a misfit in such a society. He brings fertility in this barren society represented by the impotent Jabe Torrance, now dying of cancer.

The play starts with the typical women characters of this small society of two rivers engaged in conversation on Lady and Jabe Torrance highlighting society’s practices at the same time. Through day to day common conversation of society’s women, Williams intends to touch upon the darker side of man-woman relationship. They point out how couples without loving each other develop passion for money and how they manage to live in hate. People are very rarely found to stay devoted to each other forever. There are plenty of examples of relationships where both are just tolerating the existence of each
other. In this context Lacan is worth quoted when he says: “There is no sexual relation” and it is “because the unconscious divides subjects to and from each other, and because it is the myth of that relation which acts as a barrier against the division, setting up a unity through which this division is persistently disavowed.” (Lacan 46) Jabe and Lady are tolerating the existence of each other for long years, and it is reflected in their having separate rooms with extreme distance in the house. The big distance of their rooms signifies the big gap in their relationship. Lady’s hurried effort to clean up everything relating her confectionary, before bringing Jabe back home from the hospital, reveals a sense of alienation prevailed in their life. Confectionary represents that desired window in Lady’s life that supplies momentary relief to her life which is not better than a prisoner’s one.

Val appears in the play as a young man of about thirty, displaying a wild beauty about him. His appearance in this rigid, lifeless, society throws a challenge that has to be confronted with savage tricks. Women so long habituated with a life of repression get attracted to the wild beauty of Val and that makes him a suspect for the society. He is an artist with the stigma of a rapist. He possesses both the attributes of noble creativity and wild sexuality, again proposing the dichotomy of flesh and spirit. This small town of two rivers is lacking in both as it need to offer separate rooms for the couples without passion. Carol says to Val: “This country used to be wild, the men and women
were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it’s sick with neon, it’s broken out sick, with neon, like most other places.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 86) In this phase of his literary career, that includes all the three plays discussed in this chapter, Williams reflects upon the decadence and destruction of the South in mid-fifties. Here Vee, who makes oil painting, is lacking in her vision that is symbolized by her weak eyesight. Val, himself a lonely artist, happens to ironically break the lonely, monotonous existence of society’s women. His presence offers something new for them to get relived their lives. Carol Cutere, a nymphomaniac and a sister to Lady’s former lover, offers herself to Val recklessly. Vee Talbot, a religious fanatic and Sheriff’s wife, finds the reincarnation of Christ in Val. She explains: “The vision I waited and prayed for all my life long!...... I saw TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST RISEN! ..... YOU!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 77) Lady finds herself rejuvenated by coming in contact with Val as she tells him, “True as God! I have life in my body, the dead tree, my body has burst in flower! You’ve given me life.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 94) In her account the word ‘life’ bears double meanings corresponding to the seed of life that is conceived and life to her in the true sense of the term. Since the time of her being bought by Jabe, she has been destined to lead a life of repression without a sense of fulfilment. She has even been deprived of enjoying pregnancy, one of the most desired statuses of a woman. In this respect it
should be mentioned that Williams seeks victory for his vulnerable women characters in pregnancy. Stella, Serafina, and Maggie, in *Streetcar, The Rose Tattoo*, and *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* respectively, confirm their proud existence by declaring their prospective pregnancy. This phenomenon elevates their otherwise vulnerable existence and acts as source of experiencing sublimation in their repressed world. But pregnancy is something most desired not simply for the women, but men also find here a source of release from the darker aspects of their lives. Stanely wants to forget the mishap with Blanche caused by him and seeks solace in his wife and their approaching baby. Brick silently confirms Maggie’s false declaration about her pregnancy and it reflects his concealed desires for the same to happen. He becomes exhausted in his life of alcohol and abstinence, and so allows Maggie to fulfil her dream. Val is ordered to leave the town but he is tucked emotionally to Lady and their baby. He is accused of taking out a woman’s chastity and here he finds a vocation to fulfil a woman by making her conceived. But in Williams’ world the artist is always lonely either in life or in death. He is suffocated in between expectations of society and compulsion of his own needs. In the play Val goes with the latter and is thrown away of his life.

In *Orpheus Descending* Tennessee Williams juxtaposes mythical elements in a modern context where Val is representing Orpheus and a lonely artist with human conflicts. Like Williams’ other male protagonists, he is a
fugitive but with extraordinary qualities that sometimes reach the point of exaggeration. He tells Lady: “I can sleep on a concrete floor or go without sleeping, without even feeling sleepy, for forty eight hours. And I can hold my breath three minutes without blacking out; I made ten dollars betting I could do it and I did it! And I can go a whole day without passing water…Well, they say that a woman can burn a man down. But I can burn down a woman.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 37) This statement of Val is not totally devoid of truth as since the time of his coming to Two Rivers, the women have been looking up at him to fill up the vacuum created by years’ repression. Lady confesses to Val that so long she has been enduring her husband only on the basis of her wish that “somebody must be coming to take me out of this hell! You did. You came. Now look at me! I’m alive once more!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 91) Val’s knowing the art of relaxing oneself is symbolic of his becoming an agent of releasing one from bondage both of sexual and spiritual sterility. In the play Williams builds up an association of Val to the mythical birds of paradise to emphasize his wandering tendencies with ethereal attributes. Val offers a visionary life to Lady by describing the birds as “those little blue colour birds, they have no legs at all and they just sleep on the wind like other birds- never light on the earth, but one time when they die!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 38) The earthly life does not allow Lady to fulfil her dreams as it offers her only a life of betrayal, exploitation, deception, and overall one of repression. Now Val
brings to her an image of a totally different life and she readily accepts it to relive her life like those birds without having a contact to this sterile land of hypocrisy. The image of the birds displays a life of freedom that is sought to embrace by both Val and Lady.

The relationship between Val and Lady is a momentary sexual one as well as a deeper one having a dream like stance. It is not that only Lady was badly in need of someone like Val but he was also in need for. Val finds in Lady someone with whom he can stop his search but there is a threat for him if he continues to stay in this country. So he fails to take Lady out from her existential predicament though he has been desperate about her. Before departing from Lady, Val declares his deeper feelings for lady that displays his having the human attributes and human crises. He says, “I wanted to tell you something I never told no one before. I feel a true love for you, Lady! I’ll wait for you out of this county, just name the time and the...” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 89) This passionate wish of Val to take Lady with him in his journey never materializes. But the meeting of Val and Lady is successful in so far it works for both of them to experience positive transformation within. Lady admits Val’s power to “to burn down a woman and stamp on her ashes to make sure the fire is put out!” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 89) Pang of repression so long has been mounting up fire within Lady as she tells Val: “Ask me how it felt to be coupled with death up there, and I can tell you. My skin crawled when
he touched me. But I endured it.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 91) Though the consequence is disastrous, the association of Val to Lady operates to make her taste the warmth of love in her otherwise repressed predicament. His touch has quenched her thirst for life. Lady in her past aborted her former lover David Cutere’s child and became an accursed barren fig tree. There is a Biblical reference of a fig tree that is cursed with barrenness by Jesus but Williams’ new Christ is benevolent who removes the stigma of barren tree from Lady. Val in his aimless wandering finds a meaningful existence by coming in contact with Lady. But as he is destined to move, so his relationship to Lady is deprived of enjoying the bliss of any terrestrial existence. What makes them come closer to each other is their inclination to art. Lady’s artistic impulse, after a long period of suppression, gets stimulated to flourish in Val’s acquaintance. She gives an outlet to her passion for art by decorating the confectionary and she is thrilled with excitement when Jabe comes down to have a look at it. For the first time in her life she expects to take out appreciation from her husband. Her words are vibrated with the spirit of achievement when she says to Jabe: “Oh, yes, yes! Take a look at it! Val, Val, turn on the lights in the confectionary! I want Jabe to see the way I done it over! I’m—real—proud!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 73) Val brings happiness in her lonely existence and her joy is multiplied when she finds a vocation in her life by giving a new look to the confectionary. Val, the lonely artist, showers power to create in Lady’s life, both within and
without. The barren fig tree turns to blossom rapidly. Lady’s excitement to show Jabe her achievement in confectionary is motivated for more than a single reason. When her husband is dying of cancer she takes extra care not for him but for the confectionary and she further appoints Val not simply for the business but for her personal purpose. These create a guilty conscience in her subconscious that she needs to make silent by making her dying husband feel happy at her eagerness to show him. Here again Williams’ characters take help of the art to outwit the pressure of repression. From a different point of view, Lady experiences boundless joy in her life at this moment along with the assurance that her tyrant husband is going to leave her very shortly, and so a happy mind always prefers to extend happiness in its surroundings. Another reading finds Lady’s excitement as her desperation to conceal her weakness for Val from the hawks’ eyes of her husband.

Lady’s blissful hours are very short lasting as art gives momentary distraction from harsh reality that envelops her very soon. Jabe out rightly negates her achievement by calling it “artistic as hell” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 73). The second heart breaking shock comes to her when she comes to know that her husband was involved in burning her father including their house, orchard, vines. For her the journey takes the form of cyclic order which is from repression through sublimation to greater repression that ultimately rests in death. Val understands Lady when he describes her as “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...” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 68) Val initiates Lady to the truth of her existence along with exposing her hypocrisy. Like many other women characters of Williams, she at first reacts violently against Val but when he is about to leave, she surrenders herself honestly. She cries out helplessly: “NO, NO, DON’T GO. . . I NEED YOU!!! TO LIVE . . . TO GO ON LIVING!!!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 68-69). It is happened that she surely starts living but when the object of her need is snatched away from her, she is destined to die.

Vee Talbott seeks to search out her satisfaction in this sterile land through her oil painting and religious meditations. Val’s magnetic power also catches Vee’s personal world and it is as if a calm river suddenly becomes violent. She feels burning in her eyes that saw the eyes of her Saviour. Her religious preference cannot allow her to look at Val from what the other women can see him and she speculates to have vision of her Saviour in Val. The appearance of Val flashes light in her shadowy existence. The religious Vee is seen philosophizing life which is a mixing up of light and shadow that can be corresponded to sublimation and repression. Val’s magnetic presence stimulates Vee to experience positive transformation in the sense that she gets the vision for which “I waited and prayed for all my life long!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 76) But her moment of elevation is also short lasting because the
intervention of Sheriff at once destroys her imagination. She is thrown away from the height of aesthetic exhilaration to the repressive ground of harsh reality. Regarding Carol Cutere, Val recognizes her inherent vulnerability and suggests her: “fly away little bird...fly away before you get broken.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 51) She is delineated to represent rebellious freedom in a corrupt society that criticizes her as a public nuisance. She is also a lonely wanderer who tries to destroy her loneliness by engaging herself in sexual affairs.

In this play Jabe and Sheriff are representing cruel, authoritarian sentiments of a barren society that comes under the threat of Val’s magnetic qualities. The dull, passive atmosphere of the society suspects the artist in Val that becomes centre of attraction among women. When Jabe and Sheriff discover their wives’ excitement in Val’s association, the threat of castration is happened to start lurking on Val and he has to sacrifice his life finally. Lady, Vee, Carol, and Val are the innocent victims in a corrupt society that tends to paralyze the spirit of life. Williams presents Carol with the voice of a revolutionary who speaks against corruption, injustice prevalent in the society. But she is too weak to challenge the devouring norms and the cruel patriarchs of the society. So she is advised to fly away to avoid annihilation. Vee is a submissive type who easily gets scared of everything. The moment of her visionary elevation is shattered by her cruel husband. Lady experiences
fulfilment by conceiving and dares to defy the repressive norms by shouting at her authoritative husband. Her repressed suffering with anger is burst out when she is confirmed of her pregnancy. Williams describes her action of this moment in the parenthesis thus: “In a sort of delirium she thrusts the conical gilt paper hat on her head and runs to the foot of the stairs with the paper horn. She blows the horn over and over, grotesquely mounting the stairs, as Val tries to stop her. She breaks away from him and runs up to the landing, blowing the paper horn and crying out...” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 94-95) But this society never allows happiness to those who violates its rigid norms; so Val and Lady are destroyed as a consequence. Carol takes back the snakeskin Jacket of Val representing the stigma of fugitive kind that is continued to exist in all ages to put challenge the established norms.

*Suddenly Last Summer* is one of the darkest plays ever written by Williams where the savagery of human nature is presented in its extreme that in the opening page of scene one it is symbolically introduced. The garden of Sebastian Venable is described thus: “...there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature....” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 101) In this play the influence of Williams’ over-possessive mother and his sister who had undergone a neuro-surgery of lobotomy can also be discerned strongly. In this context Freud is worth quoted as his essays on art and literature delivers the
belief that unconscious process, where the symbols and themes relating to the life of the writer are taken into consideration, motivates creation. Williams himself thinks that it is *Suddenly Last Summer* that reflects for the first time the emotional trauma of his life very deeply. So the characters in the play can be trapped in a world of repression but it can be speculated to bring an extent of relief for its creator from the pang of repression. For Tennessee Williams, just as for O'Neill as well, writing is used as means of minimizing the pressure of repression or as a means of escape from a world that provides little space of comfort for them.

The play *Suddenly Last Summer* is focused on the ambiguous life and awful death of a homosexual poet Sebastian Venable. The drama is centred upon Mrs. Venable and Catherine’s observation of Sebastian’s life after his terrible end. Being an over-protective mother throughout the forty years of her son’s life, Mrs. Venable finds it extremely intolerable to accept the story of her son’s savage end. Even after his death she is desperate to protect the clean image of her son and for this purpose she is ready to bargain a life. Like many of Williams’ women characters, Mrs. Venable is not ready to face the truth but to refute the truth by exercising her social and economic power. She has confessed to doctor, “I’ve waited months to face her because I couldn’t get to St. Mary’s to face her—I’ve had her brought here to my house. I won’t collapse! She’ll collapse! I mean her lies will collapse—not my truth—not the
truth." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 103) Her preference to face Catherine not in St. Mary's but in the enclosed circle of her house betrays her attempt to repress the truth. By slip of tongue she first said 'my truth' and after that with consciousness comes 'the truth'. Obviously Mrs. Venable is intending to manipulate the truth to impose her truth upon Catherine's. Catherine's story was a threat for her to sustain the reputation of her poet-son. She declared her insane and deposited in the torturous mental asylum of St. Mary's.

Her failure in leading a healthy heterosexual life is quite evident in her act of deserting her ailing husband. When her husband was badly in need of her assistance, she decided to support her son to overcome his obsession in the Buddhist Monastery in the Himalayas. The relationship that has been developed between Mrs. Venable and Sebastian cannot be defined as something normal one of mother and son. In his forty years of life Sebastian fails to make any sexual relationship with any girl which is a subject of pride for Mrs. Venable. She never likes to be called Sebastian's mother and she rather tells the doctor, "Both of us were young, and stayed young" (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 109). Her preference to be referred to as the “famous couple....Sebastian and Violet” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 111) evokes the possibility of her hidden homosexual tendencies resulted in strengthening the bond between them. But Sebastian breaks it in the last summer by replacing Catherine for Violet and has to pay for it. Even after his paying the penalty by his life, Mrs. Venable’s ego
fails to forgive her son for his act. But she is determined to save the image of her son, and in order to defend a dead poet’s reputation, she can go to any extent to make Catherine repress the truth. It is Mrs. Venable who has truly destroyed any possibility of Sebastian’s leading an individual life. Now after his disastrous consequence, the destroyer of a promising life has been turned up into a defender of its reputation as she puts it with emphasis: “I have to be the defender.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 110) Mrs. Venable speaks of the crucial moment of her life to doctor when she decided to stick to her son other then to her husband. The mother and son, from then onwards, were leading their lives in a “world of light and shadow…” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 108) Now to defend his son and their relationship, she is magnifying the stature of ‘light’ to repress the deadliest ‘shadow’ that was inherent in it. Mrs. Venable’s words to doctor clearly betrays the point when she says, “My son, Sebastian, and I constructed our days, each day, we would—carve out each day of our lives like a piece of sculpture.—Yes, we left behind us a trail of days like a gallery of sculpture!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 111) This hyperbolic statement is obviously intended for sublimating the pattern of life or relationship that otherwise entertained repression.

Mrs. Venable is depicted as an agent of power that enhances the trauma of repression for others but she herself is not an alien to this experience. It is always difficult for a mother to consciously accept the homosexual identity of
her son and so her unconscious was always crazy to prevent her son from any social contacts so that it could not be disclosed to the outsiders. His shyness and introverted nature is in a sense caused by his mother’s over protectiveness. She made contacts for him but here it is a big question of whether he used to exploit his mother for himself or the mother exploited son to satisfy her domineering ego. Her desperation to elevate the image of her son to a mythical stature can be exemplified for her lifelong possessiveness of her son. He was the only life force for her that is reversely applicable in his case also. He needs the warmth of mother’s womb for the long nine months to execute his creation. She exploited him by never allowing him to grow up. Her influence over Sebastian is so intense that his first and single attempt in his life to grow up and get himself free of her engulfment, destroys his very life. As Thompson puts it, the son,

“Emerges from the sanctuary of his mother’s womb—like the newly-hatched turtles, vulnerable and (psychologically) defenseless—consciously desiring to escape from an all-consuming mother-love, but pursued by his unconscious desire to return to the womb.” (Thompson 116).

Why Sebastian preferred to remain unknown as a poet to the outside world and wanted recognition only after his death is a thing of serious concern. In this respect Mrs. Venable’s explanation is that “he dreaded, abhorred”
because "false values ...come from being publicly known, from fame, from personal—exploitation...." (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 103) Following Mrs. Venable, he did not want to be disturbed from his work's publicity. But it is only partial explanation imbibed with mother's utmost care to save the son from degradation. Sebastian wrote one poem a year and that he used to print himself 'on an eighteenth- century hand-press' in his supreme privacy so that there was little chance for others to see it. The only plausible explanation for this will be that Sebastian could not dare to face the world with his work during his being alive. He wants to repress it from the world. His works display his life, and it is the life that is being viewed by Mrs. Venable and Catherine from totally two different stand points, one is for its elevating and the other is related for its degrading respectively.

Sebastian's life was one of repression which is strongly confirmed from his not willing to communicate his works to anybody during his life time. The repression is caused mainly for the engulfing passion of his mother and for his being a homosexual one. Mrs. Venable never allows her son to grow old. It is symbolically asserted in her showing the two photographs that were taken twenty years apart with the forceful remark: "The photograph looks older but not the subject. It takes character to refuse to grow old...." (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 109) But ironically the story reveals that it was not Sebastian who refused to grow but the mother who didn't allow him to experience maturity. In
Sebastian's case, experience of sublimation is threatened by the devouring mother who has finally emasculated him. In the "last summer" with Catherine as his companion, he for the first time "attempted to correct a human situation!" and in that very "summer" he realizes his inability to create without his mother. Sebastian finds similarities between those newly hatched sea turtles viewed on that terrible Encantadas and his own life. Just as the sea turtles in their search for life towards the sea lost their lives, Sebastian in his search for life with freedom has to experience a break down as Catherine puts it "something had broken, that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a... sort of umbilical cord, long-after..." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 138) So Sebastian has gone for introducing judgment into his world and judges himself. He has intentionally sacrificed his life because only death can release him from a life of repression. So far his work is concerned, that too he can communicate to the world only after his death and this task is entrusted upon his mother who fails him in his life. His concept of God is a cruel one who is found in the sight of carnivorous birds devouring the vulnerable sea turtles. He was looking for God and after watching the spectacle in the Encantadas "when he came down the rigging he said 'Well, now I've seen Him!' and he meant God." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 107) Sebastian’s dreadful death demands more than a single interpretation. His repressed self speculates to surrender himself to that cruel God and accordingly climbed the steep street instead of following Catherine’s
direction and delivered himself to Him, here in the form of a “band of naked
children” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 146). Previously his repressed desires
consumed some of those naked children sexually, and so his guilt conscience
instigated him to let them consume him in return to satisfy their hunger. Here it
will be quite apt to say that Sebastian wants to experience sublimation through
death which was otherwise impossible for him to taste in life.

Sebastian’s oedipal period was like never-ending and he suffered less
from oedipal complex but more from the sting of castration. In his case there
was little intervention of the competing father-figure in the strong bond of
mother and son. Castration is caused due to the over possessiveness of the
mother who could never forgive her son for his first and single act of separating
himself from her. Keller points out in this relation: “masculinity is connected to
the developmental process of separating self from mother. The boy who must
not only become a separate self but also a separate gender from the mother, is
likely to defend himself. . . from ‘re-engulfment’ by the mother. . . .” (qtd. in
Johnson 87-88) Throughout his life she captured him in every respect—
physical, moral, sexual, and intellectual as well. Like his very life, his power of
imagination is also thwarted without the physical presence of mother with him.
Mrs. Venable can be aptly equated with the archetype of the terrible Mother
who entertained absolute power over her son negating his individuality. His
repressed desires for individual freedom got a chance to execute itself in the
'last summer' but failed to sustain it resulting in a disastrous consequence. With mother like Mrs. Venable, Hull points out: "the son . . . may appear in the role of a sulking boy whom no one understands, or as a potentially creative man who never develops his talent, who always misses projects and shows great promise but never follows them through." (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 191) Unfortunately Catherine could not be the substitute for his mother, and so she thought that she might have failed him in some way. But it is actually the mother who destroyed him.

The savagery of the civilization as depicted in the play puts the most normal one of the characters in the torturous mental asylum of St. Mary's only because she prefers to stick to the truth. Being herself the symbolic destroyer of her son, Mrs. Venable has ironically attached the adjective 'destroyer' with Catherine whom she is determined to destroy in reality. Catherine loved Sebastian but knew little of his real nature. Her acceptance of his offer to 'fly' along in north in the 'last summer' is met only with finding herself exploited by him. Her first love encounter was also a disappointing one that left her in a world of alienation with an unbearable burden of repression. In Sebastian's proposal to accompany him in his voyage she found an opportunity to re-live her life for the second time. But unfortunately her love for Sebastian has left her in a situation where her very existence as a normal human being is threatened. Along with the truth of her story she also has to prove her sanity not to that
devouring mother who desperately seeks her annihilation but to her own mother and brother. With the unpleasant experience in his company and the traumatic experience of his death, Catherine also has to confront a brutal society which is deliberately operating to prove her insane. Catherine is destined to face the pressure of repression both within and without. She is being haunted within by the unpleasant memories of her days with the son and is being pursued by the mother and her agents without. Following Williams' conventional pattern here a normal, intelligent, and more significantly, an honest girl is made a fugitive. She finds herself exploited by both son and mother, the former for his pleasure whereas the latter for her unblemished power.

In the play it is the innocent Catharine who is under the threat of castration. She is either to repress the truth or to go for the surgery of lobotomy. Mrs. Venable wants to erase that part of her memory which is forbidden for the untainted image of her son. In his autobiography of 1925, Freud wrote: “The castration complex is of the profoundest importance in the formation alike of character and of neurosis” (Freud, SE XX 37). Again castration is, in Freud’s writing, related to “Something intruded from without into the child’s world. Something that was not innate but came from outside....” (Freud, SE XX 13) Freud speaks of the paternal threat of castration. In the play Mrs. Venable because of her monetary power is symbolically representing the father patriarch who is supposed to regulate those lives that are in need of her financial support.
With her financial strength she has even compelled the doctor to act against his suit will.

There are similarities between the victimizer and the victim in their respective relation to the male agents of the play, one dead and one alive. Roger Boxil states:

“The contest between Violet and Catherine over Dr. Sugar continues the sexual rivalry between them that began over Sebastian. Indeed the lobotomist with his glacial brilliance and icy charm bears a striking resemblance to the elegant and ruthless poet. The white-on-white figure of the doctor, a blond man 'all in white', reflects that of the wondering writer in his white suit . . . who died against a white wall near a white bench on a blazing white day.” (Boxil 126).

Mrs. Venable exhibits her physical weakness to draw sympathetic attention of Dr. Sugar and Catherine finds in him a kind but silent support as he believes her story. Here again Catherine follows the legacy of Williams’ heroines to depend upon the kindness of strangers. Suffocated in a hostile environment Catherine discovers warmth of love for her in the doctor’s eyes. The pang of repression is at least minimized for Catherine when doctor has responded to her story with kind comprehension.

J.P. Greenhill points out: “Many women . . . exaggerate the severity of their complaints to gratify neurotic desires . . . The woman who is at odds with
her biological self—develops psychosomatic and gynecologic symptoms. (qtd. in Margolis 247).

In the Foreword pages of the play *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Tennessee Williams has expressed some vital realizations of his life which become the sensitive issues of the world of the play. During the course of a dinner that Williams once had with one of his distinguished colleagues he came across a question and it was whether he did not feel that he had been blocked as a writer. To this Williams’ immediate reply was, “Oh, yes, I’ve always been blocked as a writer but my desire to write has been so strong that it has always broken down the block and gone past it.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 151) In the play all the major characters and especially Chance Wayne, Heavenly, and Princess are trapped in confronting this ‘block’ in the form of external pressures. Being himself a neurotic, the first obstruction Williams has to face is to make his theme understandable to anyone who is not a neurotic. The heart touching cry of a person who felt himself castrated can be discerned in the words of Williams when he says, “All my life I have been haunted by the obsession that to desire a thing or to love a thing intensely is to place yourself in a vulnerable position, to be a possible, if not a probable, loser of what you most want. Let’s leave it like that. That block has always been there and always will be, and my chance of getting, or achieving, anything that I long for will always be gravely reduced by the interminable existence of that block.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-*)
In Williams’ case his belonging to a sexual identity that doesn’t deserve to be labelled as so-called normal or heterogeneous type operate as an ever-existing block in the way of leading his life in a society that supports heterosexual hegemony. But it is a fact that every human being with a conscious mind, in some way or the other, has to experience block that always intends to resist the spontaneous activities of life along with its many-folded desires and aspirations and as a consequence feel castrated in accordance to Lacan.

In the play *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Chance Wayne, the male protagonist of the play who has turned up into a gigolo, has come back to St. Cloud, his birthplace but which has been a forbidden one for him now. He was in love with Heavenly, Boss Finley’s daughter. In the words of Boss, Chance is a handsome young criminal degenerate who had his daughter when she was only fifteen. The allegation against Chance is that he has transmitted corruption to Heavenly’s body in the form of disease and for which she has to be undergone a whore’s operation. Chance was driven out of St. Cloud and was threatened with castration if he was again seen in the place. Since then he has been leading the life of a fugitive searching for his fate, and now again he is in St. Cloud with Alexandra Del Lago, a renowned film actress currently under mental depression for the waning of her beauty. Chance’s return to St. Cloud is spread like fire in the state and he is treated like an alien, in his own homeland, by both his friends
and foes. His very presence in St. Cloud has become a suspect for everyone. Scudder who bears a soft corner in his heart for Chance tries to make him feel the urgency of the situation and suggests him to keep on travelling till he has crossed the State line. But he is here for his love, Heavenly, with the firmness of his mind, “I go back to Heavenly, or I don’t. I live or die. There’s nothing in between for me.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 207) The play ends up presenting Chance Wayne, surrounded by his enemies, with an earnest appeal which is not for mercy but for the recognition of a Chance Wayne in every one of us.

In the play *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Chance Wayne and Heavenly are victims of the savagery of civilization which is hidden under the mask of so-called civilized behaviour. The play displays the savagery and hypocrisy of civilization to its extreme when Boss Finley is organizing a Youth for Tom Finley rally to state his position on the emasculation business that is stirred up a mess in the state. In the name of business about white women’s protection in this state, they picked out a nigger at random and castrated the bastard. Castration is used as a metaphor in this play where all the three major characters are victims of their desires gnarled by the corrupt society and the unbitten Time. Concerning Chance and Heavenly, the society spares little space for those loving hearts to stay together. So we hear Chance Wayne’s determination, “Because I have come back to St. Cloud to take her out of St. Cloud. Where I’ll take her is not to a place anywhere except to her place in my
heart.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 212), which has a pathetic overtone as it is only illusory.

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. In his *The History of Sexuality* Foucault 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).

In the play Boss Finley, symbol of the repressive force of power, is instrumental to impose restrictions upon the love affair of his daughter and Chance. He even goes further to drive Chance out of St. Cloud so that there is little possibility for the lovers coming closer to each other. Chance had sex with his (Boss) young daughter and so he has to 'disappear' from the place so that there is an 'affirmation of nonexistence' of any further possibility of love making, the desire for each other must be thrown to silence.

In the play Chance Wayne has been haunted by an impending threat of castration but Heavenly already feels herself castrated. The intensity of
repression is much more in Heavenly than in his fugitive lover. The ‘Voice of God’ speech of her father tortures her as she knows it motivated for her father’s interest only and not for his only daughter’s. In a sense her lover himself has ironically castrated her by putting the “rot in her body” which “had to be gutted and hung on a butcher’s hook, like a chicken dressed for a Sunday...” She is infected by Chance Wayne but she knows it well that her father is ultimately responsible for her being deprived of her youth. She is accusing her father who could have saved her by letting her marry a boy that was still young and clean. But he separated them and forced her to marry a fifty year old money bag for his own interest. All the subsequent selections are also arranged on the basis of his profit motive and not for his daughter. To compete with those of her father’s selection, Chance made effort to become big but unfortunately the right doors did not open and so he went for the wrong and got infected in the process without knowing of it. Chance is an innocent victim of the situations that has been created by Boss Finley, and it did not spare Heavenly who is now left ‘dry’, ‘cold’, ‘empty’, as a consequence. But even after that Heavenly is not allowed to search out her peace in her loneliness that she desires most; rather, going against her own wishes, she has to perform in accordance to the suit will of her father who declares, “I didn’t say would you, I said you would, and you will.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 199) Helpless Heavenly surrenders herself to her father’s wishes under the threat which is about Chance’s life. In this play
Foucauldian repression is more strongly operated than that of Freudian which is more or less inherent in every individual.

Freudian repression is exhibited in its extreme in the depiction of the character of Princess. Repression as a form of defense mechanism is reflected strongly in her fractional conversation with Chance Wayne. She is desperate to forget everything and even her own identity that tortures her most. She, masquerading as Princess Kosmonopolis, does not even want Chance to expose her name to any outsider because the youth and beauty that is attached to the name Alexandra del Lago is on the summit of decaying. She does not want to pull down the legend of Alexandra, the famous actress, by revealing the truth of her physical appearance which is now turned into that of a middle aged woman. Her desperation is for sustaining youth and beauty with her name. Just from the starting of the play Princess is shown engulfed in depression. The pressure of repression is so acute that it leads her toward intense depression often causing unbalanced mental set up. What she desires most at this crucial juncture of her life is put to Chance, her only appointed companion, in her own words: “I want to forget everything, I want to forget who I am ....” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 163) There is a striking contradiction in between Chance and Princess in responding to their repressed world that has marginalized their existence. Whereas Chance is determined to face his present, Princess is desperate to avoid hers as she utters: “I can, I will. I’m forgetting ... I’m forgetting.”
In the play Chance is finally found to make a daring effort to control his life and not to let others to regulate it, but Princess’ effort is to control her disturbing memory through repression. Princess’ concern for her figure reminds us of Blanche’s obsession and both are, in a sense, victims to the unbroken Time that has taken away the precious part of their lives and thrown them in a world of repression.

Princess is also a victim to Lacanian castration. The relationship that is developed between Chance and Princess is purely on physical level as each one is found exploiting the other. A spiritual union that has strongly coupled Chance and Heavenly even in their physical separation is missing in the case of Princess and Chance. Princess has appointed Chance mainly to get rid of her loneliness but the cramp of alienation still exists because “something is not satisfied in the relation between” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 166) them. Here it is inevitable to make reference of Psycho-analysis which reveals that “Desire persists as an effect of a primordial absence and it therefore indicates that, in this area, there is something fundamentally impossible about satisfaction itself. It is this process that, to Lacan, lies behind Freud’s statement that ‘We must reckon with the possibility that something in the nature of the sexual instinct itself is unfavourable to the realization of complete satisfaction’ (Freud, *SE XI* 188-9). Chance with his practical insight has pointed out the block that comes in the way of their relationship. He says: “You’ve had your experiences, I’ve
had mine. You can’t expect everything to be settled at once....Two different experiences of two different people. Naturally there’s some things that have to be settled between them before there’s any absolute agreement.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 166) Chance’s comment bears the germs of Lacan’s famous dictum ‘there is nothing called sexual relationship’ because the partners are always searching out their desiring ‘other’ in one another and it is never found. It is worth noting that Chance has not dared to speak for any absolute relationship but has used the term ‘agreement’. And in Williams’ dramatic world, the characters those are happened to settle down are found to go for agreement just as Maggie and Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Shannon and Maxine in *The Night of the Iguana*. Princess’ over consciousness to repress her disappointments has turned her into a neurotic who often fails to relate the incidents. Her repressed self is violently shocked at the gleams of her present existence. Princess’ insistence to make her look outside the window is actually her uncontrollable longing to look within. So when she is asked to describe the view, she says, facing the audience, with ‘squinting and shielding her eyes, as if in her dream-like vision: “I see a palm garden...I see that and a strip of beach with some bathers and then, an infinite stretch of nothing but water and ...” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 169) After that she trembles for a sudden confrontation with the truth of her life: “Oh, God, I remember the thing I wanted not to. The goddam end of my life!” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 169)
Williams’ highly sensitive characters are quite often got frightened in confronting the truth that stimulates the intensity of repression for the characters.

Chance and Princess with the pang of their waning creative force are leading life for a meaningless existence. Chance’s efforts to achieve success earn him castration for himself and for his beloved Heavenly. In this respect J. Thompson is worth quoted who states:

“Chance’s is a tale of missed opportunities or chances and of successive failures, until the only pleasure he brings to Heavenly is the venereal disease with which he corrupts her.” (Thompson 180).

Princess’ association with Chance has necessitated her taking an instant leave from St. Cloud. In spite of being an innocent outsider, she could not help but fell in the purview of the repressive power mechanism of St. Cloud represented by Boss. In order to separate Princess from Chance, Boss has gone further to order Dr. Scudder to, “Say she’s got something contagious, typhoid, bubonic plague. Haul her out and slap a quarantine on her hospital door. That way you can separate them.” (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 189) Here Boss Finley is doing exactly what Mrs. Venable intends to do with Catherine in Suddenly Last Summer to preserve the dignity of her dead son. Boss is degrading an innocent woman for the sake of his daughter and himself. If the truth of his daughter gets exposed then it will bring disgrace for both his daughter and Boss himself. The
mighty is distorting the identity of the marginal according to its own will. Williams' dramatic world is filled with this confrontation of mighty and marginal where the marginal has to surrender sometimes with asserting its identity and sometimes with its annihilation. The repressive force of power is lurking as a constant threat in this world that has compelled its protagonist to become a fugitive. It is because of frequent changing of identity and address that Chance Wayne could not get the report of his mother's death. But now Chance Wayne has changed himself as for "to change is to live...not to change is to die" (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 210). He dares to face Tom Junior not by subduing himself to his man power but by strongly asserting his rights for his existence in St. Cloud. He says "I used to leave places when I was told to. Not now. That time's over. Now I leave when I'm ready. Hear that, Tom Junior? Give your father that message. This is my town. I was born in St. Cloud, not him... He was just called down from the hills to preach hate. I was born here to make love. Tell him about that difference between him and me, and ask him which he thinks has more right to stay here...." (Williams, Plays 1957-1980 219) Here Chance's words are vibrated with the prolonged repressed outrage that has been exploded in a moment. In the same platform, a little later, Chance is found confessing about his ignorance and wrong deeds with the similar courage to Tom. His clear declaration: "...I know that since the last time I was here something has happened to Heavenly and I...I know I've done many
wrong things in my life, many more than I can name or number, but I swear I
never hurt Heavenly in my life.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 220) The irony of
Chance’s life is that he has unknowingly hurt Heavenly and for which she has
to pay her ‘youth,’ metaphorically representing the failure of his wild dream of
acting together with Heavenly in ‘Youth’. It is probably for the first time
Chance has got to experience the pang of Freudian repression when he comes to
know about the venereal disease of Heavenly caused by himself. His self
castration can also be accounted for his desperate dive to get rid of the pressure
of repression that is infused with the burden of guilt conscience. It can be
interpreted like to achieve sublimation of his repression he goes for sacrificing
himself. He does not listen to Princess’ earnest appeal to him to go away from
St. Cloud because “Nothing ever comes after failure but flight.” (Williams,
*Plays 1957-1980* 221-222)

However, Chance and Princess contribute at least something positive for
one another to get out of their meaningless existence. Chance’s preoccupation
with his dream of a film actor so long helps him to tolerate the demands of
Princess who is, on the other, absorbed in the shadow of her former self.
Chance’s a little act of kindness in the form of giving her oxygen in the moment
of her extreme need strikes the passive cells of Princess that she reveals later to
Chance. He unconsciously helps her to experience a positive transformation
from a barren self of repression to a living one of compassion. Princess’
realization of Chance as one similar sufferer as herself is a turning point in her world of repression. She confesses to Chance: “when I saw you driving under the window with your head held, with that terrible stiff-necked pride of the defeated which I know so well; I knew that your come-back had been a failure like mine. And I felt something in my heart for you. That’s a miracle, Chance. That’s the wonderful thing that happened to me. I felt something for someone besides myself. That means my heart’s still alive, at least some part of it is, not all of my heart is dead yet.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 216-217) But unfortunately the little act of kindness that has initiated to destroy the ‘monster’ in Princess is revived again later due to the absence of it. The indifferent attitude of Chance fails princess’ expectation “you’ve got to help me stop being the monster...you can do it, can help me.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 217) Consequently she betrays Chance because “Monsters don’t die early; they hang on long. Awfully long. Their vanity’s infinite, almost as infinite as their disgust with themselves....” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 230) She did not respond to his lifelong desire which is about his becoming a star. She rather shows the mirror to Chance to have a look at what he really is. Princess’ betrayal helps Chance to get out of his long cherished illusion and to make up his mind to face the truth.

In the play the fate of Chance, Heavenly, and Princess is in a sense related to one another. On one hand they are victims of the society that did not
allow them to have their wings to fly in their own way and, on the other hand, they are victims of eternal Time that has taken away their precious 'youth' from them. Both the society and the unbitten Time impose repression upon the characters who are struggling for their existence. The external pressure is strongly internalized in Heavenly and Princess than in the male protagonist, presenting them more repressed and vulnerable as a consequence. Chance Wayne, on the other, has made up his mind to confront the pressure at least to assert his identity. Heavenly and Princess have already found themselves psychologically castrated whereas Chance is under the threat of physical castration. In the Foreword of the play Williams has Written, “I have always felt a release from the sense of meaninglessness and death when a work of tragic intention has seemed to me to have achieved that intention, even if only approximately, nearly.” (Williams, *Plays 1957-1980* 154) In this respect *Sweet Bird of Youth* is successful to achieve ‘that intention’ with its characters’ tragic plight and predicament.

In all the three plays, *Orpheus Descending* (1956), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) Williams reflects upon the moral responsibility of an artist, his facing dilemmas and experiencing conflicts in consciousness. Williams finds himself in his life a lonely, wandering poet and so in these plays the artists are sought wandering for their vision of life. But the vision comes momentarily, it flashes like sparkle of light and makes one
feel elevated. What Vee Talbot says regarding an artist’s efforts and achievement is significant in this respect: “I been painting all day, finished a picture in a ten-hour stretch, just stopped a few minutes fo’ coffee and went back to it again while I had a clear vision. I think I got it this time . . . . There’s nothing more exhausting than that kind of work on earth, it’s not so much that it tires your body out, but it leaves you drained inside. Y’know what I mean? Inside? Like you was burned out by something? Well! Still!—You feel you’ve accomplished something when you’re through with it, sometimes you feel—_elevated!_” (Williams, _Plays 1957-1980_ 19-20) The success of an artist lies in this feeling of getting ‘elevated’ because this is exactly where he experiences sublimation of his otherwise concealed thoughts.
Works cited


