CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

The quality and limitation of Tennessee Williams' achievement may be summed up best in his own words:

There is too much to say and not enough time to say it. Nor is there power enough. I am not a good writer. Sometimes I am a very bad writer. Indeed, there hardly a successful writer in the field who cannot write circles around me... but I think of writing as something more organic than words, something closer to being and action. I want to work more and more with a more plastic theatre than the one I have (worked with) before. I have never for one moment doubted that there are people... millions!... to say things to. We come to each other, gradually, but with love. It is the short reach of my arms that hinders, not the length and multiplicity of theirs. With love and with honesty, the embrace is inevitable.

This is a very significant statement and perhaps also a very honest one. Obviously, Williams seems to admit that he is a minor writer who has happened to write some major plays. He is aware of his shortcomings as a writer, but nevertheless stresses his belief in something that is much more important than the mere act of writing and that is "something more organic than words, something closer to being and action." It means that he is not concerned so much with art as with existence. He believes that there are many things worth saying to a large

1 Tennessee Williams, Person To Person (Prefaced to Cat On A Hot Tin Roof), op.cit., p.101.
nature and the world. O'Neill came to the conclusion that human life was a long day's journey into night. His characters are unable to adjust themselves to their surroundings and their hearts are torn between life and death. Loneliness always haunts them as they fail to establish any permanent relationship with anyone in the world. They try to belong to something but they cannot. This desire to feel the pleasure of belonging to something is very keen but it is never fulfilled.

Edmund, in *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, says:

> It was a great mistake, my being born a man who doesn’t really want and is not really wanted, who can never belong, who must always be a little in love with death.  

Man has lost his sense of identity. He does not know who he is and where he belongs. O'Neill explains this confusion in *The Hairy Ape* by presenting characters like Yank, Paddy and Mildred.

O'Neill and several other important dramatists like Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller have reached the same conclusion that man feels a sort of maladjustment in this world. He remains lonely throughout his life and his search for truth ends in destruction. Tennessee Williams agrees with O'Neill that destruction is brought by Time. Time makes man move from certainty into uncertainty, from light into darkness and from possibility into no possibility. O'Neill shows how the present

---

have studied such helpless victims. Williams has studied various types of individuals trapped by circumstances, like Cassandra Whiteside in *The Battle of Angels* and Carol Currrere in *Orpheus Descending*. Fugitive type characters are especially attractive for Williams and he is at his best in portraying wild, drunk and sex starved crazy people like Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* or Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Some examples of the old Southern aristocracy in the present mechanistic society like Big Daddy, Brick, Mrs. Venable, and Sebastian are of special interest for him.

Tennessee Williams' most important contemporary in the post war period is Arthur Miller. Miller has taken up the struggle between individual and society. His first successful play, *All My Sons* deals with the conflict between social responsibility and personal interest. In *Death of a Salesman*, Miller describes the pathetic lot of a salesman named Willy Loman. He has many problems in the way of his little ambitions, He tries to maintain his self esteem and the heroic efforts are really praiseworthy. The play narrates how the ambitious travelling salesman fails due to social causes and personal inadequacy, both. He wants to maintain an ideal image of himself at every cost. He never sees himself as he really is. Willy Loman is a very complex character. He is a victim of his dreams which are too big for him. He is not a protagonist. The values and standards, which he considers ideals, are ready to engulf him. The world proves too vicious to let him feel happy. At the end
Willy Loman faces not only the frustration of his own hopes but those for his sons as well. The elder son cannot compromise between what he thinks the world should be and what it is. The younger son has accepted exploitation as a standard but he is also unhappy because business success is not 'fulfillment'. Willy Loman tries to help his son by one last attempt to end his life. He wants to die so that his son may start anew with the insurance money.

Arthur Miller believes that man's noblest act is to die. He can compensate for his failure to achieve his dream only by embracing death. Miller divorces the cause for despair between man and society. Willy Loman subscribes to the ideals of his period. He has neither the skill to win through nor the realisation necessary to cast them aside. O'Neill also maintains the same attitude. Both Miller and O'Neill dwell upon the theme of man going down to defeat in a materialistic society. Miller abandons the society. *Death of A Salesman* represents Miller's estimate of man in his relationship to contemporary society.

Arthur Miller is very close to O'Neill and Tennessee Williams in his view of the world. The law of life, as Miller observes, is that people are always frustrated in some important regard. All the plays of Miller are built around his firm conviction that man is gradually and gradually going ahead towards disaster. Disaster is always impending in human life. Life has meaning but the only meaning is that nothing comes
next but everything exists within us. There is no past to be 'brought forward' in a human being, but that man is his own past at every moment. The present is only that which the past is capable of noticing, smelling and also reacting to. People can easily drown their past into nothingness and without past there can be no comprehensible communication among men. Willy Loman, in The Death of A Salesman, has destroyed the boundaries between now and then. There is an inevitable horror in the spectacle in which a man loses his knowledge and consciousness of his immediate surroundings. This self escape reaches a point when man engages himself in conversation with unseen persons. Miller feels that this world is a strange place which is neither home nor an open battle ground. It is full of people but they are all strangers for one another. The fear of falling down is always haunting man. The galaxy of high promises are all illusions. Ultimately man feels that society is a power and a mystery full of customs. It is inside the man and also surrounds him just like a fish in the water and the water surrounding it. Society is the place where man is born and finally buried and cremated. It is promise and threat, both, for man. Poor man is constantly in search of some meaning and he has to resist all the social threats and fears to pursue the search.

Tennessee Williams has a close affinity with O'Neill as well as Arthur Miller. He, like the other two dramatists, feels a sympathy with the characters who possess inherent goodness. These three dramatists are almost similar in their treatment
of emotion. Their characters always make efforts to search some meaning in the universe through emotion. Ultimately emotion causes loss and destruction. O'Neill conceives of fate in a manner which is both in him and also outside him. It paralyses his mind, his consciousness and his will. The emotions of man are his worst enemies. Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams bear a close affinity in their characterisation. They are incapable of creating mature characters but their characters have a childlike innocence. The characters are easily drifted away from their desperate condition through illusions. Miller and Williams bear a very close resemblance in their neglect of God. Tennessee Williams does not mention God at any place. In Williams' play Camino Real, the street cleaners come for Kilroy because he has forsaken adventure and love. In Miller's play The Death of a Salesman, Willy Loman drives himself to death with his failure to satisfy himself with commercial success. He is unable to take refuge in this success or seek any justification for himself in it. O'Neill shows how man tries to justify his life through different ways. The old aristocrats who have experienced glory in their lives, justify their present lives by putting their dreams behind them. They try to seek the reality and the truth of this universe but the end tells there is none in this world. O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller are totally different in their concern with God. It is O'Neill's main concern to explain the relationship of man with God while Williams and Miller are completely silent on this point. O'Neill believes that man
can give no meaning to this life or the next without God to sustain him. Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller make no mention of it in any of their plays.

Arthur Miller has given a full interpretation of the conflict between the sphere of hopes and self built illusion on the one hand and a merciless reality on the other as in The Death of A Salesman. The conflicting elements are much more complex in this play than in A Streetcar Named Desire where a direct moral issue is at stake. The plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, both, are a reflection of that unending struggle between hope and disappointment, between what is desirable and what is actually possible. The conflict between different forces creates a kind of tension which culminates into tremendous disturbance. This conflict is, roughly, between an outlook based on the acceptance of reality and the other that looks for values beyond the world of experience. This conflict is found in the plays of O'Neill also. In Great God Brown, Billy Brown yearns for the values of the creative artist without being really creative. He is desperately in love with this desire but he succeeds only in posing himself as an artist. He is in a dilemma which he has bought or rather exchanged for material values. He knows, the crowd, that is public opinion, will hunt him down as soon as he tries to escape this dilemma. Dion Anthony is a sensitive and creative man who would like to be his own natural self and give warmth and beauty to the world. He cannot do so because the world of Billy Brown appears cruel to him and it hurts him deeply. He wears the mask of the crudely
sensual person to win the love of Margaret. He breaks down under the strain to adjust himself to conventional life because the conventional modern woman prefers the sensual type of creative man to the outwardly successful Dion Anthony. Miller's heroes are involved in a struggle which emanates from his acceptance or rejection of an image which is the product of his society's values and prejudices. The society may be a very small neighbourhood only or it may be as wide as the contemporary American society. The hero finds himself between two opposing images, both of which are assumed to have validity for him. In another play, They Too Arise, Miller shows Ben in a confusion as he has to decide whether he is to be the man that his businessman father expects or the comrade that his radical brother demands. Both have validity for him. Another character, the hero of The Man Who Had All The Luck, accepts the town's opinion about him that his success is not the result of his ability but a favour of luck. He assumes that all luck must turn and, in his obsession, he almost brings disaster on his head till his wife convinces him that he should reject the town's rationalising opinion and accept the principle that man makes his own luck. In Miller's novel entitled Focus, the hero finally accepts the label that his neighbours force on him. He admits that he is a Jew. Most of Miller's short stories reflect the same kind of preoccupation with the self that someone else expects the hero to be. In one of his most recent stories, I Don't Need You Anymore, the five year old hero's idea of himself is formed on half understood perceptions picked up from
his parents and from other adults outside himself. Most of Miller's heroes do the right things and come to the wrong ends because they realise themselves as other men tell them to do.

In *All My Sons*, Joe Keller, who is a good husband and a good father, fails to be the goodman and the good citizen that his son Chris demands. Joe commits suicide out of frustration. There is nothing ruthless about Joe, no hint of the criminal in his personality or behaviour and nothing abnormal or fantastic in his mind. He simply wishes for a comfortable home and a successful business to pass it on to his sons. When he accepts the American concept of the primacy of the family he has to forget his self esteem. His vision narrows and he does not attach any importance to the society at large. This narrowness is also a product of society but punishment is given to the man.

Miller believes that man is a helpless creature who has no choice in anything in this world. Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* stands beyond the point of choice as Joe Keller is. There are different ideals before him and he is forced to imitate and follow them. He cannot have his own way. Miller's heroes do not make their fortune because they do not know that a fortune is a thing worth making. They need the good opinion of the world and it is difficult for them to decide which action would enable them to seek it. Willy chooses three ideals to follow. The first ideal is his own father, the inventor, flute maker and worker who walked away one day leaving the family to shift for itself. The second ambition is to be
rich and the third to be physically attractive and lovable. The chances of Willy's going the way of his father are dead due to circumstances. He tries to adhere to the second but fails. The only ambition before him is to acquire the greatest charm. He has accepted the American myth, that love and fortune come to man as soon as he clears the pimples on his face, stops underarm perspiration and learns to play the piano. For this reason Willy regularly confuses other illusions with reality. He tells many lies about the size of his sales, the warmth of his reception and about the number of his friends. He doubts himself because he assumes he is too noisy and undignified, not physically handsome and charming. He reconciles with his failure and occasionally feels proud of his self-awareness. By the time we get to him, his struggle to hold on to his dream, has become so intense that all control is gone. Past and present become one for him and so are fact and fiction. In another play the hero chooses to convince himself that his friend is a homosexual and he is marrying a girl for some political reasons. He wants to give some name to his love for the girl named Catharine and his homosexual attraction to his friend, Rodolfo. He cannot express his feelings honestly due to the fear of society. It is almost evident that poor individual is at the mercy of social pressures in Miller's plays. Each of his heroes is caught in a trap of social and psychological forces and ultimately everyone of them is destroyed.

This theme of the relationship between a man's identity and the image that society demands of him, recurs in almost all
the plays of Arthur Miller. Some of Miller's plays are contradictory in themselves. His play, *Situation Normal* applauds the society while *Focus* condemns it. *All My Sons* again applauds the society but *The Death of A Salesman* and *The Crucible* condemn it. *A View From The Bridge* again honours the society while *A Memory of Two Mondays* rejects it. In *The Right Dream*, Miller deals with the relation of one man to another. He wants to emphasize that man has to accept the meaning given by society. Miller fears the possibility of a society that might lead the Willys of this world astray but through Chris he embodies the hope that a good society will follow when men will choose not to live for themselves only. This hope is the most powerful elixir for his characters and he is very close to Tennessee Williams in sustaining such a bright hope. Like Williams, Arthur Miller also assumes that in our society the hero is reduced to the misfit in the absence of love which possesses a wonderful creative power. In *The Misfits*, Miller tells the story of three men who have no place in the world of job, home and family. The dilemma of life baffles the characters of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, both. They have to struggle against their fate and the universe. At last they fall a prey to the tensions and complexities which wreck their hopes, and destroy their dreams and ideals. The struggle between individual identity and society turns into a conflict within man himself. Miller, has followed O'Neill by challenging life itself as it is opposed to the transient perils and disasters of living it. It is a source of human decay and
corruption in O'Neill and also in Arthur Miller.

Williams' plays, on the other hand, are psychological tragedies. These are neither associated with an integrated tragic view of life nor related to a strong sense of ritual. The plays look upon the possibility of happiness in life instead of the inevitability of frustration and defeat. The defeated and frustrated characters, in Williams' plays, lack the true dimension of tragic types representing universal unhappiness or defeat. He is fully faithful to the modern spirit of unrelieved failure or disaster. His vision is tragic but not barren. Like Miller and O'Neill, Williams' characters believe in a bright future.

Unlike Ibsen, the well-known Norwegian playwright, Williams digs deeper into the turbulence of life and dramatizes the subjective experience of the characters. Ibsen is more interested in analysing the social problems which confront man. Williams is most effective in evoking an atmosphere and not very perfect, like Ibsen, in constructing a plot. His dramas are works of psychic intensity probing into the problems of frustrated personalities who are emotionally displaced and feel an inability to come to terms with their environment. His characters seek to escape through fantasy, alcohol or sexual promiscuity. They often behave in a neurotic manner. Williams' approach to truth is very close as his characters stand psychologically nude before us. He peels the outer covering off by gradually varying the tension and leading up effectively to
climax which enables him to present human perversity on the one hand and man's impassioned vitality on the other.

Williams' plays are the tales of a 'dingy alley shrouded down in poverty and despair.' There is a pervading softness throughout his work and there are frequent expressions of sympathy for the misfits. The plays are the true stories of the American society. They relate the decay of human values and deplore the ugly view of the American world in which all the spiritual and cultural values are at stake. The civilised west is changing into a spiritual and cultural waste-land, a desolation where man would soon degenerate back to the ape. He is surrounded by isolation on all sides. A spiritual crisis is emerging from the clash of fundamentally incompatible concepts of life. The unending struggle between hope and disappointment is the cause of the tragedy of human life. The position of man between the realm of imagination and actual reality is very delicate. Williams has taken man as the subject for his dramas and he appears to reach the conclusion that man cannot enjoy full liberty till he comes out of the cage of a decaying civilization.

Critics have gone to extremes in criticising as well as appreciating Tennessee Williams. For instance, the sexual frankness of Williams' plays is condemned by Alfred Kazin, who writes:
I am tired of love and love and love. And when I see a play like "Suddenly Last Summer" or "Cat On A Hot Tin Roof", I recognise that its chief appeal to those of us in the audience who are not homosexuals is that it offers a touch of "rebellion" or "depravity".  

Another critic, Marya Mannes, criticises the material of Tennessee Williams' plays. She finds something unpleasant in Williams' portrayal of addicts, perverts, Sadists, bums and others afflicted in mind and body. She does not reject the theatrical brilliance and verbal magic used in portraying these characters but she objects to the lack of honesty, love and honour in Williams' work. She expresses a wish that the evil and horror of drama should be balanced by opposing virtues. It is the absence of this balance, according to her, which makes Williams' plays explorations of viciousness.

Critics also object to his habit of giving wide reference to his very special characters and his very special situations. Mrs. Stone represents the decay in western civilisation, while the homosexual's tale in Suddenly Last Summer is a true story of the universal perversity. This habit, of universalising his characters, has been criticised by many literary scholars. Critics also raise questions about the ambiguity with which the playwright handles character and situation. But there are limitations to everything and Williams himself admits that he cannot handle people in routine situations. The events described in a play must be more violent than the events of a lifetime.

---

Today Tennessee Williams is acknowledged as the most significant American playwright. He has completed sixtyseven years of his life and he is still turning out play after play. After completing Out Cry in 1971, he tried his hand at another play named Small Craft Warnings in 1972. He is certainly the most significant figure among the post-war dramatists of America. He is anxious to complete his life's work in the shortest possible time as the clock is ticking loudly for him. He knows that Time may run out for him also and so he is writing as much as he can in the shortest possible time. This is further testified by the recent appearance of his Memoirs (1976).