INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is one of the most controversial playwrights of America. The bulk of critical opinion about him has leaned heavily on the side of condemnation, while a few perceptive critics have been able to catch the feel of poetry in his plays. John Mason Brown regards him as "a wasteful writer who has no disciplined sense of form and structure."1 Similarly, Williams is charged with irresolution and inconclusiveness as far as the meaning of tragic conflict in his plays is concerned. Yet another prominent opinion regards him as the foremost influence on the "violent theatre"2 of today, a theatre which can be characterised as dehumanised and degenerate and marked by unrelieved evil and corruption. As Brooks Atkinson puts it, "Tennessee Williams evokes a central mood of evil, decadent luxury, cruelty and tropical degeneracy through the sheer necromancy with which he fashions it."3 There are others who feel that Tennessee Williams' world is a hospital, or a big neurological ward.

There is, however, another side to this picture. For Benjamin Nelson, Williams is the most exciting writer in the contemporary American theatre. Robert Brustein believes that

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2 Ibid., p.230.
"only Tennessee Williams has consistently created a dramatic language which a good novelist might not have been ashamed to have written." But such comments are rather exceptional. The general trend of Williams' criticism is directed towards the weaknesses of dramatic structure and the failure of vision. In such a climate of critical opinion it becomes necessary to make an intensive enquiry into the meaning and vision of Tennessee Williams' plays.

It is obvious that Williams, though enjoying wide popularity in the theatres of the world, remains largely a misunderstood playwright. He has become almost notorious for exploiting all forms of sexual perversity in his plays and is frequently regarded as a decadent bohemian writing violent plays of horror, brutality and moral squalor. But we know that any artist worth his salt must be imbued with a creative purposiveness. Tennessee Williams is a gifted playwright and the abundance of evil, violence and perversity in his plays indicates only the quality of the world his characters live in. His treatment of some of the most sordid aspects of life is touched with an artistic sobriety which saves his plays from falling into the pit of uninhibited mediocrity and degeneracy.

Though Tennessee Williams' skill in characterisation, in evocation of genuine poetic atmosphere, and in the creation

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of realistic dialogue has been acknowledged by some of his critics, the central quality of his vision has generally been ignored or lost sight of. We must remember that Tennessee Williams has been concerned with the human predicament in a world that is torn with hatred and violence, where the lonely and weary fugitives are lost in the bewildering maze of cruelty, inhumanity and seething passions of all hues and variety. In such a disturbing world man's assertion of some basic human values becomes a challenging proposition. Tennessee Williams himself remarks that "the dominant theme in most of my writings is that the most magnificent thing in human nature is valor and endurance. My dramas are basically concerned with morality. The dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstances."  

It is imperative, therefore, that Williams' themes and vision be given an honest appraisal. Williams' plays certainly deserve fresh critical exploration so that the principal thematic threads in his plays may be isolated and the nature of his vision be comprehended.

In my study of "The Theme and Vision in the Plays of Tennessee Williams", I have begun my investigation with the examination of Williams' life, formative influences on his art and vision and his dramatic credo, all of which are included in the first chapter. This provides me with a basic framework from which to launch into the rich and complex world of

5 Ibid., p.211.
Tennessee Williams' plays. Then I have divided the plays of Tennessee Williams into five thematic units, each unit highlighting a particular aspect of his vision. First, I have taken up the discussion of Tennessee Williams' early masterpieces, *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, both of which have been discussed under the general title of 'The Lyric Despair'. Laura and Blanche Du Bois are Williams' two poetic creations who remain aliens in a world of harsh and bitter reality. They seek shelter in illusions which constantly face the threat of extinction by the brutal forces of the outside world. Their retreat into their private shells, however, is touched with a kind of lyric despair.

In the next group of plays I have discussed "The Failure of Communication" as providing the central dramatic tension in the plays. This includes plays like *Summer and Smoke*, *Suddenly Last Summer* and *Something Unspoken*. The polarity of the flesh and the spirit hampers communication between Alma and John in *Summer and Smoke*. Similarly, in *Suddenly Last Summer*, the communication between Mrs. Venable and her son Sebastian remains unrealised till at last one falls a victim to cannibalism and the other retreats into a corner of private hell. In *Something Unspoken*, the relationship between Cornelia Scott and her Secretary - companion Grace Lancaster defies the normal channels of human communication and assumes a distorted image of something unspoken.
The next group of plays revolve round the one powerful
centre of 'Desire'. In this chapter entitled 'The Spectrum
of Desire', I have examined four plays of Tennessee Williams
that reflect the variegated colours of human passion and
desire. In The Rose Tattoo, the starved and thwarted emotions
of Serafina seek fulfilment in an awkward love affair. Cat on
a Hot Tin Roof dramatizes the desire for elevation and fulfil-
ment through love but it is proved that 'to love is to lose'.
Baby Doll centres on the sexual conflict of the three main
characters, while The Period of Adjustment explores the problem
of getting married couples back into bed.

The next group of plays included under the general title
of "The Poetry of the Night" seeks to explore man's endeavour
to survive in the face of the forces of night that threaten to
swallow him. This night of decadence and despair is, however,
suffused and irradiated by the soft touch of the poetry of hope.
Both the Battle of Angels and Orpheus Descending dramatise the
relationship between the decadent milieu and human frustration
while the theme of The Night of the Iguana is "how to live
beyond despair and still live".

"Time" has been one of the most serious concerns of
Tennessee Williams, particularly in his later plays. He is
deeply aware of the havoc caused by Time, the 'endless idiot'
that runs 'screaming around the world'. For Tennessee Williams

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6 Horst Frenz, ed., American Playwrights on Drama (New
York, Hill and Wang, 1965), p.84.
"the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, Loss, Loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition." 7  "Time rushes towards us with its hospital tray of infinitely varied narcotics, even while it is preparing us for its inevitably fatal operation." 8  This concern with time is reflected in Plays like Sweet Bird of Youth, The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, The Eccentricities of a Nightingale and Slapstick Tragedy.

After an intensive discussion of Tennessee Williams' plays, I have derived the total image of Tennessee Williams' vision in Chapter VII. In the concluding chapter, I have examined the relevance and significance of Tennessee Williams' plays in relation to other significant American playwrights to see if there are any signposts planted by Tennessee Williams that may earn him a permanent place in the history of world drama.

8 Ibid., p.87.