Tennessee Williams and his Themes

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INTRODUCTION

Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and that premise can provide the impulse in everything he creates. For me, the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstances.1

Throughout his rather long career as a representative playwright in mid-twentieth-century America, Tennessee Williams may be said to have been writing about “individuals trapped by circumstances” in a broad sense of the words. But when we consider that he made the above remark just after he presented A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), his second popular and critical success, following his first, The Glass Menagerie (1945), we can safely assume as prototypes of his trapped individuals Blanche DuBois in Streetcar or the Wingfields in The Glass Menagerie.

Take for example the Wingfield family, who live in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood in the Midwestern industrial city of St. Louis. Tom Wingfield is a poetical youth frustrated by his routine job in a warehouse and his living in a small apartment with his mother and sister, whom he has to support. Writing poetry and going to the movies are his only ways to escape from the circumstances. His sister, Laura, because of her extremely sensitive, retiring nature, and her slight physical defect of a limp, lives in her own world of her glass menagerie, after she dropped out of a business college on her failure in a speed test in typing and had to give up her attempt at a business career. Their mother, Amanda, wrapped up in her memories of youth and happiness as a Southern
belle surrounded by wealthy gentleman callers in the Mississippi Delta, is now confused and bewildered by the present shabby life in a mid-western industrial city. The Wingfields are too romantic, or too weak and timid, or too proud and stupid to be adjusted to the modern, urban way of life.

Jim O'Connor, a gentleman caller, is the only realistic character in the play and so he is "an emissary from a world of reality" that the Wingfields are set apart from. As such he proclaims: "You know, knowledge — ZZZZpp! Money — zzpp! Power! Wham! That's the cycle democracy is built on!" (2) The world of reality Jim represents is the one where knowledge, money and power are deified; it is a civilization of industrialism and materialism.

Not only Amanda and Laura Wingfield, but also Blanche in Streetcar and other Southern gentlewomen in Williams' works are confused and frustrated in the modern world. And like Tom Wingfield, who, in his desperate efforts to escape from the circumstances, leaves his job and family in the end, other poetical or romantic figures are seeking freedom from the civilization. In Williams' point of view, poets and artists are destined to be Bohemians in this mechanical, conformed society. This means that the playwright himself is one of these trapped figures, and he is quite ready to admit it.

Of course, it is a pity that so much of all creative work is so closely related to the personality of the one who does it. (3)

I am a deeply disturbed person and I write about disturbed people. (4)

Williams may be said to be a latter-day romantic presenting on the stage people of his kind, heroes and heroines trapped by the modern civilization in mid-twentieth-century America. Kenneth Tynan, an English critic, says rightly about Williams in parallel with Arthur Miller:

Arthur Miller is a rebel against, Williams a refugee from the familiar ogre of commercialism, the killer of values and the leveller of men. (5)

What is important, however, is that as Tynan argues Williams and Miller share protest against the materialistic civilization and sympathy for frustrated individuals in it, however different they are
in other respects.

Through Williams' works, based on his basic premise, the theme of the romantic figures, or in his own words, "the fugitive kind" being trapped and destroyed by the modern world is one of his prevalent and recurrent themes.

Along with this theme, there is another major theme noticeable in his works: the one he has inherited from D. H. Lawrence. There is sufficient evidence in his works to prove Lawrence's influence on him. It is clear that he followed the British novelist in his ideas and ideals of life and criticism against the modern world, and it is partly because he recognized Lawrence as a romantic rebel or refugee like himself. The doctrine of life-worshipping he adopted from Lawrence, however, does not seem to be in exact accordance with his basic premise: there is a conflict, as well as consistency, between the theme on his basic premise and the Lawrencian theme.

It is the purpose of this thesis to illuminate an aspect of Tennessee Williams as a romantic refugee by examining these two themes which seem to be connected with his view of life and his morality.

The first chapter aims at an explication of some factors in his familial and social backgrounds that made up his personality and his view of life and the world.

The second chapter deals with his adoption of Lawrence's ideas of life and his application of the Lawrencian theme to his work with his own variation imposed on it.

In the last two chapters, Orpheus Descending (1957) and A Streetcar Named Desire are respectively analyzed in terms of their themes, for these plays not only typically show the two themes of the dramatist's but also they present between them different ways of combination of the two themes.

CHAPTER I

At the age of fourteen I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became
my place of retreat, my refuge. From what? From being called a sissy by the neighbourhood kids, and Miss Nancy by my father, because I would rather read books in my grandfather’s large and classical library than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games, a result of a severe childhood illness and of excessive attachment to the female members of my family, who had coaxed me back into life.\(^{(1)}\)

It will not be difficult to imagine from these words a portrait of the playwright in his boyhood; a sensitive, introverted boy who, brought up under the maternal protection, fears his father in his Oedipal feelings, and shrinks from any contact with the world outside of his own.

He recognized writing as an escape at the age of fourteen, and from that time to now, even at the height of his literary success, it does not seem that he has ever felt the need to alter this early and basic recognition of his writing.

When he was fourteen he lived in St. Louis, and it was of some significance. His family had moved into this mid-western city from the Mississippi Delta about three years before, as a result of his father’s transfer to the position of a sales-manager with a shoe company in the city. This change of his circumstances from the quiet, rural life in a small town in the South to dirty, noisy industrial St. Louis was a horrible shock to him.

It was a tragic move. Neither my sister nor I could adjust ourselves to life in a mid-western city.\(^{(2)}\)

The school children made fun of their Southern speech and manners, and in this way he found himself a Southerner. But what was more shocking to him was this:

In the South we had never been conscious of the fact that we were economically less fortunate than others. We lived as well as anyone else.

But in St. Louis we suddenly discovered there were two kinds of people, the rich and the poor and that we belonged more to the latter.\(^{(3)}\)

His family lived in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood, in a “perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structure with no grass and no trees nearer than the park.”

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This harsh experience of his failure to adjust himself to the new circumstances in the modern industrial life and of his realization of his family's social status in the city seems to have worked as a leaven in him to produce his basic premise.

In contrast to the shabby, seedy life in the city, his childhood in the South seemed to him blissful and graceful, though it must have been beautified in his memory.

He was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, in a rectory of his maternal grandfather, an Episcopal rector in the town, and throughout his childhood he and his family lived with his grandparents in small towns in the same state. And it was because of his grandfather's position in the community in the South that his family thought of themselves as leading citizens there. The Reverend Walter E. Dakin was an aristocratic, well-read, liberal clergyman, and, as his grandson called him, "a typical Southern gentleman." His daughter, Edwina, the playwright's mother was a small refined lady, composed and proper to the point of puritanism. In striking contrast to her, her husband, Cornelius Williams, was a vigorous, blunt man with a quick and violent temper, from an old East Tennessee family of frontiersmen and Indian fighters in pioneer days. He liked drink and rough humour, and insisted upon his place in the centre of the universe. Their marriage was not successful. The husband felt himself alien in his own home, where the gentle, refined atmosphere created by his wife and her parents stifled his vivacity. A traveling salesman for a shoe company, he was always on the road, and there he could find the companionship which he could not enjoy at home, while the wife devoted her love to her children, Tom and Rose.

These familial backgrounds of Tennessee Williams are very similar to those of D. H. Lawrence. Besides, their common ill-health in their childhood increased their dependence on their mothers' love and protection. Williams contracted a serious case of diphtheria, and became "delicate and sissified" under the shelter of his mother and grandmother. His only playmate was his sister, Rose, and they were so close to each other that they had no need

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of others, playing alone together in the yard of the rectory.

Thus he spent his childhood, surrounded by people loving him and loved by him: his grandparents, and his mother and sister. These loving people, at the same time, represented to him a Southern way of life, with its aristocracy, gentility and puritanism, which was then being replaced by another civilization.

Later, as he grew up, he began to rebel against these circumstances, particularly against Southern puritanism, but he has never ceased feeling sympathy with the decaying civilization and the people in the old South. The Mississippi Delta, after all, signified innocence and security of his childhood among these gentle figures.

With the move of his family to St. Louis, apart from his grandparents in the South, his circumstances suddenly changed from sweet protection to bitter hostility. In this city, he had to realize that his family belonged to the poor. He hated his new residence of a small shabby apartment and its dirty neighbourhood. At school he was an object of the boys' ridicule because of his Southern accent. At home he feared the presence of his father, who, as a sales-manager, had quitted the road.

The lapse of years could not adjust him to the city-life. Far from it, his hate and fear of the city was intensified and aggravated by his experience of working in a shoe company there. In 1932, the year of the height of the Depression, his father thought it better to withdraw his son from college and enter him in the company he was working for. As a practical businessman, the elder Williams had good reason for it in his own view; he must have thought it was his paternal duty to train his effeminate son for business in this hard time. To the son, however, the job as a clerk-typist seemed to be a job "designed for insanity," and he felt himself trapped by a living death. To escape from it, he spent most of the night in writing, after dreary days in the factory. Nearly three years he struggled through the circumstances, working by day and writing by night, but in the end, this struggle brought him into a nervous breakdown from exhaustion, which meant the end of his business career. He took a year's rest in
Memphis, where his grandparents had retired; he found again in the South a refuge from the industrial world of St. Louis.

Looking back on these three years in the factory, he admits that they were an indescribable torment, but "of immense value to me as a writer, for they gave me first-hand knowledge of what it means to be a small wage earner in a hopelessly routine job."

Though Williams did not write about this experience in a realistic way, it was evidently used for the characterization of Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Besides, in a short story, "The Malediction," through a description of a small wage earner in a routine job, he seems to be telling of his own experience in his way.

The work that he did was what he had always done, a thing that you did with your fingers without much thought. A chain clanked beneath you, you made some little adjustment, the chain moved on. But each time it moved beyond your place in the line it took a part of you with it. The energy in your fingers was drained out slowly... When the day ended you were left feeling empty... What had gone out of you? (4)

Williams is not a writer primarily concerned with social issues; his attempts to join the Writers Project and the Theater Project were unsuccessful, because his work was regarded as lacking in the social content and protest. His primal concern has been "trapped individuals." But from his compassion for small wage earners comes his "social protest" in "The Malediction:"

There was a slump at the plant. The stockholders had to decide what action to take... The answer was obvious: They would cut down on production, preserving the margin of profit... One third of the plant shut down and the men were laid off: the problem was solved. (3)

This ironic criticism, however, is followed by a fantastic unrealistic world of Williams.

There were sixty-eight of them given their notices that morning. There was no protest, no demonstration... It was almost as though these sixty-eight factory workers had known from the beginning that this was in store. Perhaps in the wombs of their mothers the veins that had fed them had sung in their ears this song: Thou shalt lose thy job,
thou shalt be turned away from the wheels and the bread taken from thee!

It was a glittering wasteland, the town that morning... The steep, narrow streets were rushlessly brilliant as arrows.

Cold, cold, cold is the merciless blood of thy father!\(^{(5)}\)

From this passage, we can see that Williams, instead of developing the subject in social terms, turns to personal interpretations and description with his own images. The last line of the passage is taken from his own poem, "Cortege", which portrays his own father:

Cold, cold, cold
was the merciless blood of your father.
By the halo of his breath
your mother knew him;
by January she knew him
and dreaded the knowledge
His winter breath
made tears impossible for her.\(^{(7)}\)

In this poem Williams' Oedipal feeling to his father is clearly expressed. The image of his father, symbolized by cold winter, is probably associated in his mind with mercilessness of an industrial society. In social terms it is unconceivable to identify his father with a man of power in the business world, but in his private experience, his father is representative of the business world. If we admit a reflection of his personal experience with his parents in the passage, it will be possible to consider that the image of the womb can be interpreted as a symbol of the maternal protection in his childhood, during which he was destined to be an unfit for the business world.

This short story surely indicates the author's inability to pursue social subjects in realistic ways, but at the same time it tells his concept of the modern society is gained from his own experience and that it is inseparable from his situation with his parents.

After a year's rest in the South, he returned to St. Louis in 1936, and now his rebellion against the circumstances began with the contact with The Mummers, a little theatre group, in which
Williams found his comrades, the rebellious against the conformity of the modern society. The group had "something wild, something exciting, something that you are not used to." They did what he thinks is a social function of these groups, "not to conform, not to wear the conservative business suit of their audience." He wrote some one-act plays for them, but in two years The Mummers were beginning to disband because of the economic difficulty under the Depression. Another thing that discouraged him about this time was that his sister, Rose, no more able to adapt herself to the city-life than he, was committed to an asylum in schizophrenia.

There was no reason for him to stay in St. Louis, and probably he thought he should decide to free himself from his home and the city.

He went to New Orleans in 1938 at the age of twenty-seven. He was fascinated by the Bohemian way of life there, quite content with odd jobs, such as a waiter in a cheap restaurant. At night he wrote or walked through the streets, and he met lonely, rootless, queer people. With these outcasts he found a kind of kinship; they were the rebels or refugees like him in the mechanical world.

And here among the Bohemian friends, "I found the kind of freedom I had always needed," he says, "and the shock of it against the puritanism of my nature has given me a subject, a theme, which I have never ceased exploring." (5)

Now we can see that he needed freedom from the Southern puritanism that he inherited from his mother, as well as freedom from the society his father represented, the world of conformity and industrialism in St. Louis.

It was in New Orleans that he found himself as a Bohemian writer. And to Williams, to be an artist is to be a Bohemian, because "art is a kind of anarchy."

Art is only anarchy in juxtaposition with organized society. It runs counter to the sort of orderliness on which organized society apparently must be based. (9)
His idea of an artist may betray himself as a latter-day romantic, but upon this idea he tried to establish himself as an artist. "If I can be said to have a home," he said, "it is New Orleans where I have lived off and on since 1938 and which has provided me with more material than any other part of the country." (10)

The hotel-rooms and apartments in the French Quarter, where he lodged at first, are the scenes of his one-act plays, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* and *Portrait of a Madonna*, the heroines of which are archetypes of Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar*. The scene of this full-length play is also set in New Orleans, a street named Elysian Field. The playwright's love of this place is evident in the description of the scene.

The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm... The sky that shows around the dim white building is peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. (11)

If we compare this lyrical description with the critical one of the neighbourhood of the Wingfield apartment in St. Louis in *The Glass Menagerie*, we may see Williams' love of New Orleans and its Bohemian life, and his hate of St. Louis and its industrial conformed society.

The familial and social or geographical backgrounds that brought up Tennessee Williams as a refugee from the modern world may be roughly summed up. In small towns in Mississippi he was protected by his mother's and grandparents' love in the gentle and puritanical atmosphere of the Southern aristocratic civilization. In St. Louis, he faced the modern industrial civilization represented by his father, and he could not adapt himself to it. In New Orleans he found freedom from the Southern puritanism of his mother and the modern industrial civilization in St. Louis, and reached his self-realization as a Bohemian artist.
CHAPTER II

Williams' self-adaptation to the Bohemian ways of life in New Orleans was a kind of struggle against his two enemies: the Southern puritanism and materialism of the modern industrial world. The same kind of battle for the liberation of life was what Williams found in D. H. Lawrence, his literary idol.

He read a considerable number of the novelist's works, and one of the books that particularly impressed him was Sons and Lovers. It may be conceivable that in this autobiographical novel by D. H. Lawrence, he recognized a striking similarity between the novelist and himself in their familial backgrounds. Each of them was a product of an unhappy, incompatible marriage between a rough, boisterous, convivial husband and a gentle, puritanical, cultured wife. Both writers were brought up in typical Oedipal situations with their parents, with their mothers' excessive love and their hostility and fear to their fathers. And their delicate health in childhood added to their dependency on their mothers. Williams' recognition of their similar backgrounds probably motivated his compassion with the British novelist, but at the same time, he admired Lawrence as a rebel against the modern civilization and puritanism like himself. He regarded Lawrence, first of all, as a preacher of life-worshipping, who celebrated the body and sex, since he felt the mystery and power of sex as the primal life urge.

There is a poem he dedicated to Lawrence, called "Cried the Fox." (1) In this poem, adopting Lawrence's technique to symbolize the uncivilized sensuality by the image of wild animals, he portrays "the fugitive fox" chased by "the pack" representing the mechanic power of industrial civilization. Probably he means to tell the fate of not only the Lawrencian sensual figures, but Lawrence himself.

Another token of his admiration for Lawrence is his dramatization of the novelist's short story, "You Touched Me!" Williams, however, did not mean to make a faithful adaptation of it, but romanticized the story in his way.

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The original story is about the marriage between Matilda, the daughter of a retired pottery manufacturer, and his adopted son, Hadrian. Though the marriage is brought about by the father’s help, who threatens to leave the daughter penniless, it after all rescues Matilda from her sterile, empty life. Williams has given romantic transfigurations to the original characters. Matilda, a thin spinster of thirty-two turns into a delicate maiden of twenty; her younger sister, Emmie, is changed into a frigid, spinster aunt. Hadrian, a neat, scheming little soldier, is changed into “a clean-cut, muscular young lieutenant.” The old pottery manufacturer turns into a spry, old sea captain. These changes of the characters do not mean that he altered the theme of the story, but that he could not help purifying the theme with beautiful youths. For, while in the original story, Hadrian’s interest in the inheritance is involved in the marriage, in Williams’ play Hadrian’s love is the only motive for it.

Arthur Ganz says that the characters are obviously broken down into the good guys and the bad guys in the play; Hadrian, Matilda, and the captain, who are in favour of sexuality, against the sterile Emmie and her suitor, clergyman. And from this Arthur Ganz concludes that Williams is not a psychologist, but a moralist who judges the characters by his own moral, and what “Williams sees as profoundly good” is Hadrian’s action that “defeats the forces of sterility and rouses Matilda to new life.”

Whether he is a moralist or not, the theme of the awakening of life through sexuality is one of his main themes or subjects he uses for his work. In most of his major plays this theme is recognized but usually it is confused with his other themes, and the awakening of life is not so triumphantly shown. An exception is _The Rose Tattoo_, because the play ends with the evident triumph of life and sexuality. The play is about a passionate Italian widow, who, after her husband’s death, devotes herself to his memory, secluded in a solitary, sterile life. But when a virile truck driver comes into her life accidentally, and simultaneously she finds her late husband’s dishonesty to her, she disclaims her rejection of
life, and returns to life through love with the young driver.

It is not without reason that Williams chose an Italian as the heroine; the Italians seemed to him to be leading a fully realized life without repressions.

I think Italians are like our Southerners without their inhibitions. They are poetic, but they don't have any Protestant repressions. Or if they have any, their vitality is so strong it crushes through them. (3)

These words may correspond to the following of Lawrence's.

In America, nobody does anything from the blood. Always from the nerves, if not from the mind. The blood is chemically reduced by the nerves, in American activity.

When an Italian labourer labours, his mind and nerves sleep, his blood acts ponderously. (4)

Whether Williams followed Lawrence in his notions of the Italians or not is not a problem. What is important is that Williams talks about Southerners as well as Italians in the above passage. Southerners are poetic like Italians, he thinks, but they have their repressions. Indeed, the Southerners, particularly the Southern ladies, in Williams' plays are too repressed to live a fully realized life, but these figures are the objects of Williams' sympathy because they are "poetic" and "trapped individuals."

One of these, Laura Wingfield in The Glass Menagerie, is awakened to life by the gentleman caller, Jim, only for a moment, but, as he leaves her, she retreats into her world of seclusion. Another Southern lady is Alma in Summer and Smoke. She is the daughter of a Southern minister, and her circumstances have repressed her sensuality. In her middle of twenties, she is "prematurely spinsterish." Her lover, John Buchanan is a young doctor, virile enough to free her from the repression and awaken her life. But what prevents him is not only her strong puritanism, but his own respect to her soul. He admits that he was afraid of her soul as much as she was of his body, and that in her soul he found a "passion to aspire to higher things, beyond the limits of human existence."

It is significant that Alma shares this passion with other South-
ern ladies, such as Blanche DuBois, and Amanda Wingfield. Though in Alma's mind this passion has no clear ideals to aspire to, and in Amanda's mind, it is combined with her vulgarity, or her snobbism, this romanticism or "dream" is what Williams regards as precious and rare in the modern civilization. Maybe, this is what he means when he calls the Southerners poetic.

Williams symbolizes these ladies with moths in his poem called "Lament for the Moths."

A plague has stricken the moths, the moths are dying,
their bodies are flakes of bronze on the carpets lying.
Enemies of the delicate everywhere
have breathed a pestilent mist into the air....
Give them, O mother of moths and mother of men,
strength to enter the heavy world again,
for delicate were the moths and badly wanted here in
a world by mammoth figures haunted!(5)

The moths, symbols of the fragile gentle women, are being extirpated in the modern society which is haunted by mammoth figures. Probably the moth figures, at least in the poem, do not represent Alma's passionate idealism, but only tenderness, gentility and loveliness, but Williams thinks that because of these qualities the moths are badly wanted in the inhuman, mechanical civilization. His sympathy for the moth figures is, first of all, due to his nostalgic feeling to his childhood protected by those gentle figures, but at the same time, he has found they have offered something that the modern world can not.

Here is one of the differences between Williams and Lawrence; Lawrence is not so sympathetic with these spiritual, pale figures. He despises them. The difference means that in Lawrence's world, the fox, symbolic of wild, uncivilized life-power, and the moth are in conflict with each other, while in Williams' world, the fox and the moth are both hunted by the mammoth in the present civilization; they are both the "fugitive kind" and the objects of the playwright's lament and compassion. It does not mean, however, that the moth and the fox always form a united front in Williams'
world: they have to fight each other in his Lawrencian theme.
In his other theme, the theme of the fugitive kind hunted in the
modern world, they are opposed not to each other, but to the
society and the mammoths haunting it.

In most of his major plays these two themes are recognized. In
the following chapters his two plays are to be analysed in terms
of these two themes.

CHAPTER III

*Orpheus Descending* is the revision of one of his earliest full-
length plays, *Battle of Angels* (1940), which was his first play pro-
duced in Boston but ended in a fiasco, in spite of his estimation of
this play above *The Glass Menagerie*. Seventeen years after, he
offered the revision since “I believe that I have now finally man-
aged to say in it what I wanted to say.” That tells how much he
was attracted to the subject of the play.

In his introduction to the play, he says:

> On its surface it was and still is the tale of a wild-spirited boy who
> wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the
> commotion of a fox in a chicken coop.

But beneath that now familiar surface it is a play about unanswered
questions that haunt the hearts of people and the difference between
continuing to ask them, a difference represented by the four major
protagonists of the play, and the acceptance of prescribed answers that
are not answers at all, but expedient adaptations or surrender to a state
of quandary.⁴

This is suggestive of his two themes to be found in the play.

Through the plot of the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop,
we can recognize the same theme of a fox figure who liberates
life from repressions. Besides, the playwright meant to generalize
the theme as a battle of life and death by applying the legend
of Orpheus and Eurydice for the plot, on which the play is evident-
ly based.

Orpheus in this play is an itinerant young musician, Val Xavier,
whose snakeskin jacket symbolizes his wild beauty and uncivilized
freedom. He is called a “savage,” explicitly characterized as a fox
Val (Orpheus) descends into the hell of a small Southern town, to rescue Lady Torrance (Eurydice) from her husband, Jabe (Pluto). Jabe, dying from cancer, embodies both evil and death; he snatched Lady away from her happy life with her father, a winemaker owning an orchard and casino, for, unknown to her, Jabe was a leader of the vigilantes who were responsible for her father's death when they burned down his orchard and casino because he had sold wine to Negroes.

Lady’s love for Val gives her a wish for life, to escape from her present living death. And when her resurrection is nearly realized through her pregnancy by Val, Jabe, discovering it, shoots her dead, and the mob, incited by him, lynchest Val to death with burning torches. Thus the play ends in the hero’s failure to bring back the heroine from death, as does the Orpheus-Eurydice legend.

Williams, however, as suggested in his introduction to the play, has introduced another theme into it; the theme of the difference between the four protagonists who continue to ask questions and those who accept prescribed answers. This is, in other words, Williams’ familiar theme of the battle between the fugitive kind and the mammoth figures. Incidentally, the film version of this play is titled “The Fugitive Kind.”

One of the fugitive kind in the play, Carol Cutrere says to Val, “You savage. And me — aristocrat. Both of us things whose license has been revoked in the civilized world. Both of us equally damned and for the good reason. Because we both want freedom.” (This is from the old version of the play.)

Not only Carol and Val but Lady Torrance, and Vee Talbot, a fanatic religious painter, are in a way or another, damned in the civilized world; they are not willing to accept the prescribed answers it offers.

Carol is a typical ex-moth-figure from a Southern aristocratic family. Once she was an idealist, a social reformer, and now, frustrated in humanitarian ventures, she has turned into an exhibitionist, as she calls herself, who exhibits the corruptions of the world as well as of her own. Her promiscuity in the affairs with
men discloses her perverted puritanism; she is not built for passion, as Val says to her.

Another protagonist is Vee Talbot, a religious visionary and painter, who has seen the corruptions of the society. As wife of the brutal county sheriff, she witnessed beatings, lynchings, convicts torn to pieces by hounds, and then she started to paint to make “some beauty out of this dark country.” Her paintings, however, betray her repressed sexuality through the religious visions.

Compared with these Southern puritanical women, Lady is free from the repressions, as she is the daughter of an Italian winemaker with his casino which was a lovers’ rendezvous. But she is repressed by her circumstances in which she is confined by her husband. She married him, as an act of self-destruction, after her father’s death and the loss of the casino, which meant also her loss of a lover who deserted her to marry wealth. Yet, her eagerness for her past happiness in the old South is represented by the confectionary connecting to the general drygoods store, which she furnishes with shadowy and poetic tones, immitating the atmosphere of her lost casino. Then her love to Val encourages her to try to regain her life and she suggests that love can be the answer to “the unanswered question.”

Val, on the other hand, does not have so much confidence in love; he answers to Lady, “That’s a make-believe answer. It’s fooled many a fool besides you and me.” In fact, he is reluctant to be involved in love with women, for though he is a virile youth he wants to use his virility to keep his freedom, to keep himself from the corruptions of the society. He talks about legless birds flying through life without alightening on the earth, which are his ideal beings. His aspiration for purity or freedom from corruptions of the earth seems akin to Alma’s to higher existence beyond the limits of human beings.

His idealism, or puritanism if it could be so called, invests his personality with a kind of passivity which is seen in his relation with Lady; he is not so passionate a life-bringer as Hadrian. This seems to be an effect of the playwright’s application of Orpheus
to the characterization of Val. Williams used not only the Orpheus- Eurydice legend but also the legend of Orpheus' death. It tells that the most famous poet and musician in the Greek myths was torn to pieces by the Maenads because he neglected to honour Dionysus, and that "Orpheus had condemned the Maenads' promiscuity and preached homosexual love; Aphrodite was therefore no less angered than Dionysus." (3)

It is evident that the character of Orpheus in this legend attracted the playwright's interest and influenced on his characterization of Val. Though his role is to bring Lady to life again, he is reluctant to get involved with her love.

It is also obvious that the death of Val by the mad mob corresponds to Orpheus' death by the Maenads. This is certainly what Williams considers to be the fate of a poet in the modern world. Thus, in the legend of Orpheus' death, the playwright surely found one of his basic themes, the theme of a poet, or the fugitive kind in general, hunted by the mammoth figures.

Williams, however, as Signi Falk points out, has merely presented this theme in the play, but failed to develop the battle of the four protagonists against the mammoths, and this particularly with Carol and Vee, who remain out of the plot of the play.

In the legends of Orpheus, Williams has recognized his two themes, and found two aspects of Orpheus' image, as a life-bringer and as a fugitive poet, which he has applied to the hero in his Orpheus drama. Then the battle between Val-Orpheus and Jabe-Pluto in the play means not only the battle between life and death but also that of the fugitive kind against the mammoths. And on these two battlefields Val and Jabe fight the battle between good and evil. This play tells us the dramatist's morality rather explicitly, but at the same time this clear contrast between good and bad has upset balance in the play. Besides the play has failed in developing two themes in contrast, and instead, it has too hastily confused and mixed up the themes, as seen in the sensational catastrophe of the play.
CHAPTER IV

A Streetcar Named Desire, probably his masterpiece and a milestone in contemporary American dramatic literature, expectedly shares his basic themes with Orpheus Descending and other full-length plays.

It is apparent that the subject of this play is the conflict between two major characters, Blanche DuBois, the last relic of the decaying Southern aristocracy, and Stanley Kowalski, a virile, primitive laborer. The conflict is inevitable because they represent two opposite, unreconciled ways of life.

That Blanche is a moth figure is explicitly shown in the description of her first appearance in a poor laborers’ section of New Orleans:

She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district... There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth.(1)

In contrast to her, Stanley is described:

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. Branching out of this complete and satisfying centre are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his...(2)

Part of this characterization of Stanley must have been based on what the playwright found in his father: his appreciation of rough humor, his love of good drink and food and games. Then it may be reasonable that, though Stanley shares virility and wild, physical charm with Val, he has nothing poetic about him, and
in fact he is neither a wandering artist like Val, but an ex-officer and a mechanic now. He might be a fox figure, but he is not hunted; rather he is hunting a moth. Blanche, who has come into his world.

In that respect Blanche is as akin to Val as Carol in Orpheus is to Val: they are all banished in the modern world. Besides, as Val comes into a small Southern town as an outsider, so Blanche enters a poor section of New Orleans, the world of Stanley, and both outsiders make a commotion in the community, and in the end they are destroyed by it. If we seek more analogy, Blanche tries to save her sister, Stella, from the savage world of Stanley, and Val tries to liberate Lady from the world of death. However there is a great difference: Val liberates Lady from death to life, while Blanche tries to bring back her sister from savage life to a dying civilization.

Stella left her family and their decaying Southern plantation to have a new life with Stanley in New Orleans, while Blanche stayed at Belle Reve and struggled against its destruction, against “all of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother, Margaret, that dreadful way!” Her struggle in the corrupting tradition and civilization was indeed tragic and brave, but corruption has crept into herself through the struggle. Defeated, and deprived of Belle Reve, she has come to her sister in New Orleans for refuge. But she is shocked and frightened by the vulgar, primitive life of her sister and her husband, who, she says, “acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one!” She cannot believe that Stella is content with this life, forgetting her past civilized life, and begins to persuade Stella to get out of the circumstances.

Stanley is probably not so much offended by her insult and disdain on him as afraid of her presence which criticizes his own way of life by a standard he can not understand, and he fears she might possibly deprive him of his wife. To protect their life from Blanche’s threat, he feels bound to banish her out of it. His counterattack against her is launched with a weapon of revealing
corruption in herself: her scandalous, nymphomaniac behavior in the South. The weapon is effective enough to destroy her, but Stanley adds a violence to it as a finishing blow on her.

The scene of violence might be seen as the playwright's preference of sensationalism, as some critics say, but Williams defends it:

The rape of Blanche by Stanley is a pivotal, integral truth in the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society.

As this is a quotation from a letter he wrote to the chief censor for the Production Code about the film version of the play, it may be supposed that he is emphasizing only one aspect of the play here. Taking that into consideration, we can still assume that at least one of the themes of the play is that of the moth figure destroyed by the mammoth figure and that Stanley is representative of the brutal forces of modern society.

Yet this does not explicate the play as a whole. There is some doubt in the exposition that Blanche is a victim and Stanley a victimizer; perhaps Stanley is in danger of becoming a victim, and Blanche has the seed of her destruction in herself. John Gassner says that Stanley performed the act of destruction that Blanche should have done for herself. It is true that she is corrupted enough before her encounter with Stanley, which is betrayed by her being alcoholic, neurotic, nymphomaniac.

It might be instructive to compare this play with his two one-act plays in which he shows the destruction of the same type of Southern ladies. One is The Lady of Larkspur Lotion in which a heroine turned prostitute is clinging to an illusion of her rubber plantation in Brazil to defend her respectability from a landlady who sneers at her illusion and threatens to send her out of the room. The other play is Portrait of a Madonna, the heroine of which is a Southern spinster living a poor solitary life in a hotel room. She is mentally deteriorated with delusions betraying her...
sexual obsession. The play ends with the scene of the lady taken to an asylum; this is the original of the last scene of *Streetcar*.

In these two plays, the cruel forces of modern society can be said to be represented by the landlady in the first play, and by a doctor and a nurse in the second who treat the heroine with professional efficiency and heartlessness. But they are only minor figures, not fully characterized figures like Stanley. And Williams' sympathy all goes out to the deteriorated ladies.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams characterizes Stanley as the antagonist to the heroine, and what is more important is that the antagonist is not only a representative of the cruel modern society; he is also an embodiment of primitive, uncivilized life, like Val and Hadrian. It might be said that Stanley plays the part of a mammoth figure in the struggle with Blanche, while his part as a life-bringer is seen in his relation with Stella, as is symbolized by Stella's pregnancy in contrast to Blanche's nymphomaniac love.

Besides, Arthur Ganz regards the conflict between Stanley and Blanche as the one between life and life-denying power, and in the latter's destruction he sees the morality of the dramatist as a life-worshipper. He says that the destruction of Blanche is a punishment Williams imposed on her for her crime of rejecting life; she is responsible for her young husband's suicide after his sexual perversion was discovered by her. From the beginning of their marriage, the husband needed her help but she could not give it. Instead she drove him to suicide, when she said, "I know. You disgust me..."

Therefore, Ganz says, Stanley becomes the avenger of her husband by destroying Blanche.

Although he is Williams' melodramatic exaggeration of the Lawrencian lover, the embodiment of the admired sexuality, it is appropriate from Williams' point of view that Kowalski should to some degree be identified with the lonely homosexual who had been driven to suicide, for Williams saw Lawrence not only as the protagonist of sexual vitality but as the symbol of the solitary, rejected exile. By implication, then,
Williams has extended Lawrencian approval to the rejected homosexual.\(^{(4)}\)

Ganz is right in his remark on Blanche; she is haunted by consciousness of the sin she committed on her husband. However, her sin of rejecting life seems more evident in her attempts to deny the life and love of Stanley and Stella, and when she condemns their “animal life and brutal desire,” she must deny her own with more reason. And if her nymphomaniac is considered to be a perverted expression of sexuality repressed by her puritanism, the conflict between Blanche and Stanley in this aspect is the one between puritanism and life-power.

It is true that, as Ganz says, Williams saw Lawrence not only as the protagonist of sexual vitality but as the symbol of the exile, but when he says that Williams extended Lawrencian approval to the rejected homosexual, he seems wrong. There is some difference, at least in this play, between Williams’ admiration to primitive virility in Stanley and his sympathy for sexual perversion in the Southern boy. In his short story, “The Night of the Iguana,” the historical Southern family the heroine belonged to produced “an efflorescence of nervous talents and sickness, of drunkards and poets, gifted artists and sexual degenerates…”\(^{(5)}\)

In the play, too, the young husband’s perversion and Blanche’s nymphomaniac should be regarded as symptoms of corruption in their life and their civilization with its puritanism repressing sexuality. As such, they are objects of the dramatist’s sympathy, which is quite different from his approval to Stanley’s vitality.

Therefore, it seems difficult to agree with Ganz that Stanley should be identified with the perverted youth. On the contrary, Williams seems to put in contrast not only Blanche and Stella but also the two husbands the sisters chose: a handsome Southern boy and Stanley, a savage Polack. Perhaps, Blanche was wrong in her choice; her husband belonged to the same decaying class and civilization as she. They could not help each other; they were both falling, as she confessed: “He was in the quicksands and clutching at me, but I wasn’t holding him out, I was slipping in
with him.” Blanche and her husband represent the decaying civilization against Stanley’s uncivilized vitality which Stella chose.

However, if Stanley were a Lawrencian fox, that is, not only a virile savage but an exile in the modern world, then he might be identified with the perverted moth-figure, as Arthur Ganz says, because they both are the fugitive kind hunted in the modern world. But Stanley, embodiment of primitive life as he is, is not a fox-figure; he is not a poetic exile like Val. He is settled as a laborer in a poor section in New Orleans, enjoying his life in the center of his world. He belongs to the modern industrial world.

Arthur Ganz confines the conflict between Stanley and Blanche to the one between a life-bringer and a life-denier. The other aspect of the conflict is argued by Benjamin Nelson. He sees in the play a desperate struggle of an out-of-date romantic in the modern materialistic society. Though he admits Stella’s choice of Stanley is right, he is more eager to defend Blanche.

Blanche chooses the dream of the past and becomes the victim of this impossible choice. Her greatness is that she does choose it rather than make the adjustment which Stella makes. For Blanche even destruction is preferable to barbarism.

Nelson emphasizes the gallantry of her desperate struggle in which she knows she is bound to be defeated. Indeed, of all moth figures, she is the bravest in the battle for her dream or illusion against the reality.

I don’t want realism. I want magic! . . . I don’t tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it.

“Blanche has no illusion about her illusions,” says Nelson. In this sense, she may be called a realist. She is quite aware of, and prepared for, the punishment for her rejection of reality, and still she sticks to her illusions or “what ought to be the truth” to her.

She might be qualified to be a tragic heroine, but what fails her to become a heroine and fails the play to be a tragedy is the nature of ‘her truth’. Can it be anything but the genteel traditions
of the old South? It might be said that her idealism or romanticism is only a reflection of the dramatist's regret for his childhood in the South. But it might as well be said that he is criticizing the modern materialistic society with no equivalent for Blanche's illusions that were real in her past way of life.

Thus the theme of a moth destroyed by a cruel force of materialism is in this play combined with the theme of the conflict between a life-bringer and a life-denier, and between the two protagonists Stanley is an emblem of life-power and the modern mechanic world while Blanche represents puritanism as a life-denying force and out-of-date romanticism. This means that in each of the opposing characters there exists a mixture of good and evil by the dramatist's moral standard, and this explains his ambiguous attitude toward these characters.

Signi Falk's criticism of the play is that Williams has romanticized both protagonists, virile Stanley and romantic Blanche. But it is evident that the playwright has never overlooked the cruelty of Stanley and the destructiveness of Blanche. As for Stanley, Eric Bentley notices the mixture of good and evil in him:

Kowalski is an impure phenomenon: if he is the full-blooded husband that every woman craves, he is also destructive and evil. In fact it is the cunning mixture of good and evil, health and sickness, that, for millions of spectators, has proved a fascination.(9)

And this is the same with Blanche; it is true she is a destroyed romantic, but she has within herself forces destructive to herself and to others.

Williams' attitude to the two protagonists should be called not ambiguous, but ambivalent: he feels sympathy and repulsion to both of them. This means that the battle between the two protagonists in this play is not a battle of good and evil by his moral standard, as is the one between Val and Jabe in Orpheus Descending, and as a result of it, the play has a dramatic tension that Orpheus has failed to have. Besides, in spite of some critics' remark on the dramatist's ambiguous attitude in it, A Streetcar Named Desire expresses his morality no less obviously than Orpheus
Descending.

I write out of love for the South. But I can't expect Southerners to realize that my writing about them is an expression of love. It is out of a regret for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it.\(^{(10)}\)

His ambivalent feeling to Blanche is likely to be identified with his feeling to the South. For it is obvious that when he says "the forces that have destroyed it," he means not only the materialistic civilization of the modern world, but corruptive forces within the Southern civilization itself, especially its puritanism. Against these enemies Williams has rebelled in his life and writing with his romanticism and Lawrencian doctrine of life-worshipping, which have formed his morality.

The two basic themes of Williams are, as we have seen, closely connected with his morality; it is natural that the themes prevail throughout his works. In his other full-length plays, particularly in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and his latest full-length play, *Kingdom of Earth* (1968), we can find the struggle of the fugitive against the mammoth and the battle between a life-bringer and a life-destroyer. Fundamentally these themes are unchanged, though they show their variations in each of his plays, which are problems left to be examined.

Notes:

**Introduction**


(3) Williams, Foreword to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (London: Penguin Plays) P.7.


Chapter I

(2) Williams, "Facts about Me" (1952) Record Cover Caedmon TC 1005.
(3) Ibid.
(5) Ibid. p. 50.
(6) Ibid. p. 50.
(9) Williams, "Something Wild..." Foreword to Twenty-Seven Wagons Full of Cotton (New Directions, 1946) p. VII.
(10) Williams, "Facts about Me"
(11) Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 1.

Chapter II

(1) Williams, "Cried the Fox", In the Winter of Cities, p.16.

Chapter III.

(2) Williams, Battle of Angels, Act 2.

Chapter IV.

(1) Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Scene 1.
(2) Ibid., Scene 1.
(5) Williams, "The Night of the Iguana," *One Arm and Other Stories*
    (New Directions) p. 170.
(10) Edwina Dakin Williams, *Remember me to Tom* (New York: Putnam's, 1963) p. 213.