

# The Predicament of Modern People

## An Analysis of the Southern Gentlewomen of Tennessee Williams's Major Plays

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**Abstract**—Tennessee Williams is famous for his portraits of the southern gentlewomen. It is with these gentlewomen that a study of Tennessee Williams's plays must logically begin. This thesis is based on the typical examples of gentlewomen of Williams's major plays: *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*. By analyzing the mind of the South and the character of its people, the thesis draws the conclusion that these gentlewomen are the embodiment of modern people and their predicament is exactly the same as that of the modern people.

**Keywords**—Tennessee Williams; Old South; southern gentlewomen

### I. INTRODUCTION

The American South includes the southeastern states and the Southern states along the Gulf of Mexico. It had distinguished geographical features which made it different from other parts of the nation. It was abundant in natural resources and its pace was slow. The rhythm of social motion of the American South was passive. It was a unique land which was less affected by the cultural and industrial changes. Therefore, American South is another land with its distinctive culture, viewpoint, and history.

From the aspect of writing, every writer's creation will be greatly influenced by the place he or she lives, thus forming a certain writing style. This unique writing style always has the characteristic of local identity.

### II. WILLIAMS: THE SOUTHERN STANDARD-BEARER

The Old South is an important symbol to the American nation. Southerners had a fairly definite mental pattern. They had their own ways of thinking and unique outlook on life. So, it is important to know the character of the Southern people as another way to understand this unique region.

On the one hand, Southerners were the pious protectors of the American Puritanism. It emphasized the hard work and righteous life. On the other hand, the Southern people were also greatly influenced by Hedonism, which was in conflict with Puritanism. From the myths created by the Old South, people might find clearly that the Southerners were always in favor of romance and pleasure. Bear little relation to reality, Southerners' another striking characteristic was

their tendency toward unreality, toward romanticism and hedonism.

Therefore, southerners stood before us as a romantic and a hedonist. In the long run, they had succeeded in uniting the two incompatible tendencies in a single person without ever allowing them to come into obvious disharmony. Even after the Civil War, the two currents of Puritanism and Hedonism continued to go side by side. As a matter of fact, the Southerners had a strong sense of the past and the weight of history. They were afraid of new spirit. For them, this tradition was very important. They had a strong sense of loyalty to the tradition. Actually, they were cut between the cultural past and the cruel reality. On the whole, the South is a region possessing a uniquely clear and responsible memory of its glorious past and myth.

Tennessee Williams was born in a small town of the American South. He spent a very happy time there in his childhood. The southern idyll was shattered suddenly when his family moved to St. Louis in 1918. In St. Louis, Mrs. Williams was transported overnight from his agrarian Eden to a busy and smoky metropolis. The move was actually a shocking event in Williams's life. He was teased for his Southern accent and manners. He found himself not being able to face the ugly reality. Then, Mississippi, the small Southern town where he lived happily came to represent the "vanished Eden". For Williams, the South was the place where he felt most urgently the war between civilization and materialism.

When he was fourteen, Williams began to write. From then on, he kept writing in order to escape from the ugly reality. It became his place of refuge. In all his lifetime, he published altogether sixty-three plays.

Most of Williams's plays contain a large amount of autobiography. His personal past was always used as writing materials in his plays. Therefore, Williams, who was brought up in the South, drew on his Southern background for the environment of his plays. He gave a wide panorama of life in the South and became the standard-bearer of the South.

Williams is now considered by most people the most influential Southern dramatist of American literature. His writing about the South is an expression of both love and regret. He even changed his name "Tom" into "Williams" (the state of his birth) to show his deep feelings towards the

South. Discussing his life experience, people may find that his relationship with the Old South is personal as well as cultural. His nostalgia for a bygone age has its roots in his earlier life in the small Southern towns.

### III. SOUTHERN GENTLEWOMEN IN WILLIAMS'S MAJOR PLAYS

There have been Southern belles in literature before, but Williams's portraits of the Southern gentlewomen are always considered as the most successful ones.

Williams's Southern gentlewomen represent the culture and gentility of the Old South which disappeared in the modern age. They are always attractive young women of sensitive nature. Born in the South, these women always have an elegant taste and graceful attitude towards life. Caught between Puritanism and Hedonism, they cannot find a way out. When they are young, they are disappointed in love. And they are always abandoned by the young man in the end.

In fact, the predicaments of these Southern gentlewomen are universal problems for human beings while reaching for the meaning of the society and personal life. So this thesis purports to give a study of the most striking gentlewomen in Williams's trio of plays: *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*.

#### A. *Amanda: Being Romantic and Practical*

Amanda is the protagonist of *The Glass Menagerie*, which is Williams's first major success. She remains as a marvelously rich character of one of Tennessee Williams's most memorable and impressive creations.

*The Glass Menagerie* is an autobiographical play. It tells the stories of a fallen Southern family struggling to survive in a slum in St Louis. The mother Amanda is a typical southern gentlewoman who lives in the fantasy of the glorious South.

As a minister's daughter of the South, Amanda's illusion about the Old South is one she has absorbed as a young woman rears in the Mississippi Delta. She clings stubbornly to the unforgotten elegance and social glamour of the old South. Her charm and the swiftness are the perfect reflection of gracious Southern ladies. She never talks about coarse and vulgar things in the world and only focuses on the important ones. She believes that Christian adults should be concerned with spiritual issues rather than physical. She is really offended by Tom's vulgar language and she also considers D.H. Lawrence as insane and offensive.

Unwilling to accept the cruel reality of life in the St. Louis tenement, Amanda tries to find comfort from the fantasy of the past South. She loathes vulgarity and works to maintain an air of propriety and delicacy. She lives in the memories of the glorious South before the Civil War, and her attitude toward life is greatly influenced by the Puritanism. In Amanda's mind, it is safe for a woman living in the past. She could have married to a rich plantation owner, waiting on by lots of servants. However, it is a time irrevocably lost. Now she is a poor single mother living in a small tenement.

Later in the play, she tells Jim O'Connor, the gentlemen caller of the present about her gentlemen callers in the past south.

At the beginning of the play, Amanda tries to remind the audiences that she still lives in the plantation of the old South. Actually, she inherits the values of the Old South completely. She always compares her current situation with the life of the Old South and she refuses to accept the present life. She chooses to close her eyes to the brutal reality and live in the dream of the glorious life in the past. Actually, she is unable to sustain a relationship between realism and her fantasy. She imagines herself still as a graceful gentlewoman in the past time.

Williams describes Amanda as "a little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place."<sup>1</sup> Clearly, Amanda is a person full of paradoxes. She is cut off from her culture of the past South and unable to accept the culture of the present. She fluctuates from the world of illusion to a world of reality. This fluctuation is a kind of defense which helps her fight with sufferings of the real life in the tenement.

To some extent, the problem of Amada which withdraw from the reality is further developed by Blanche DuBois.

#### B. *Blanche DuBios: Being Puritanical and Hedonic*

Blanche DuBois is a tragic representative of the sensitive Southern gentlewomen in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

When she gets to Elysian Fields, she is surprised at the downstairs living accommodations of her sister. She tries her best to win back her sister's Southern aristocratic attitudes. Be born on the Southern plantation, Blanche behaves gracefully with all the genteel Southern propriety. Her speech and manners are over-refined and in obvious contrast with people around her.

If Blanche is a puritan of the Old South, she is also a hedonist. In fact, Blanche's tragedy comes first from her earlier failed marriage. Her husband's suicide has greatly influenced her later life. After her homosexual husband's death, Blanch drinks too much and finally becomes an alcoholic. Only in this way, can she forget the brutal past. She runs from one man to another and indulges in promiscuous sexual behaviors. In doing so, she tries to alleviate her guilt and to fill the vacant corners in her life and her emotions. Blanche changes then from a graceful southern gentlewoman to a hedonist. Blanche feels unfit in the reality. She knows she can never prettify herself, but she still hopes to discover some kind of purity, to perceive wholesomeness.

Actually, Blanche's inner conflict between Puritanism and Hedonism, between old southern values and those of modern society, is played out clearly through her relationship with Stanley. Stanley is the husband of Blanche's sister. He is supreme hedonist. Stanley's animal vigor and sensuality seem at first contrast extremely with Blanche's Puritanism. However, her attitude towards Stanley is ambivalent. In fact,

<sup>1</sup> Williams, T. 1970. *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: New Directions Book: XX

she is attracted to Stanley and at the same time she is also repelled by him. As a combination of both puritan and hedonist, Blanche has struggled desperately to balance these two conflicting drives. At first Blanche tries to keep in touch with the real world. However, when all the doors are close to her, she has no choice but to hide in the illusion.

Blanche thinks that women should create an illusion because they are too fragile for the cruel world. As matter of fact, Blanche tends to live in the illusory world created by her. She denies facing the true life. So she tries to find the shelter in "the broken world"<sup>2</sup> and looks for "the visionary company of love."<sup>3</sup>

According to the southern chivalric, a woman's permanent protection and security can only be gained through a gallant gentleman. Mitch is the gentleman Blanche has been seeking for so long. He is the last remnant of her ideal. But Blanche has lied too much to conceal her past, and when Stanley exposes her, Mitch is unable to withstand the truth. He tears off the colored lampshade and holds up the naked bulb into Blanche's haggard face. For a person who tries hard to escape from the reality, it is a really heavy blow. Thus forcing Blanche under the light is the same as making her see the ugly truth. At last, Blanche has to transfer all her life-hope from Mitch to the illusory gentleman caller. However, Stanley breaks Blanche's last thread with reality by raping her. In the final scene, she is taken to an asylum and bids a farewell remark "Whoever you are — I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."<sup>4</sup> Thus, Blanche is destroyed in the hands of a strange gentleman.

Blanche is a gentlewoman from the Old South. She is dated. Her speech, manners, and habits are outmoded. But still she always reminds herself as the gentlewomen in the in the Old South. She is passionate by nature but loyal to the code of gentility of the Old South. She chooses to live in the dream of the Old South and becomes the victim of this impossible choice.

In fact, Blanche is a gentlewoman who tries hard to raise the level of her current life. Her tragedy is that of the sensitive individual unable to reconcile the conflict between ugly reality and the quest for beauty. She can only find shelter by means of illusion. Thus, her destiny is doomed. This play can be considered as Williams's clearest treatment of the human dilemma.

In this play, Williams seems to suggest that Blanche might have been like Alma Winemiller, the protagonist of *Summer and Smoke*. In a sense, Alma's experiences may give us clues for understanding Blanche's later misfortunes.

### C. Alma: Being Spiritual and Sensual

To some extent, *Summer and Smoke* is an advance section of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is considered as Williams's most complete interpretation of the southern

gentlewomen. It gives serious treatment of the Puritan-Cavalier conflict — a modern psychological version of the dialogue between body and soul.

The play deals with the relationship between two neighbors who serve as embodiments of contrary principles. John Buchanan, a doctor, is a pleasure-seeking sensualist. In contrast, Alma Winemiller, is a southern gentlewoman. She is a delicate minister's daughter who falls in love with John but in the end she is rejected. In fact, the play offers a milder version of the Blanche-Stanley choice.

Alma is the soul of the South. She is very serious about the culture and her social manners are conventional. In a stage direction, the author describes Alma: "She seems to belong to a more elegant age, such as the Eighteenth Century in France."<sup>5</sup> As a typical southern gentlewoman, Alma lives only for what she considers the finer things. Actually, her Latinate vocabulary is a defense against the vulgar of reality. Her special way of talking is really natural to many southern girls.

The confrontation with John who represents the body and sensuality best illustrates Alma's character as an outdated southern gentlewoman. Alma loves John, but she is afraid to confess her love to him. She approaches him only through cultural assistance. John is embarrassed by Alma's efforts, but is also attracted and makes minor efforts to please her.

Although there are constant wars between Alma and John, they attempt sincerely to establish some mode of communication at first. However, that Sunday evening date reveals profoundly the desert that stretches between the young doctor and the minister's daughter. John makes advances towards Alma but she refuses to respond. From that point on, she can be only considered as an angel to John and becomes identified as his mother-image, but never a potential wife. In fact, Alma hungers for spirit, while John hungers for flesh.

Brought up in the Old South, there is a devastating conflict between physical desire and a stern super-ego within Alma. She hides her true nature from everyone even herself. John once said: "Under the surface you have a lot of excitement, a great deal more than any other woman I have met. So much that you have to carry these sleeping pills with you."<sup>6</sup>

Of course, Amanda is delicate, refined, sensitive and the symbol of the soul. She rejects physical nature in favor of spirituality. But, unconsciously, she is strongly sensual. As a defense mechanism against her sexuality, she develops a kind of prissiness, nervous laughter, prudery, and somatic symptoms as well. In fact, her neurosis results from sexual repression.

Alma has been hopelessly in love with John. Her constant devotion to him puts her in a humiliating position. Although Alma tries her best to win John, she fails in the end.

<sup>2</sup> Williams, T. 1971. *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (Volume II). New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation:1810

<sup>3</sup> Ibid:1810

<sup>4</sup> Ibid:1869

<sup>5</sup> Williams, T. 1960. *Tennessee Williams's Four Plays: Summer and Smoke, Orpheus Descending, Suddenly Last Summer, Period of Adjustment*. New York: New American Library:139

<sup>6</sup> Ibid:200

The experience has wrecked Alma. At the end of the play, Alma, is not a pure angel any more, sheds her affection and establishes a relationship with a salesman. Thus, she becomes to depend on the kindness of the stranger just like Blanche. In depicting Alma, Williams seems to imply that beneath the spinsterish behavior, Alma is basically a nymphomaniac.

Joseph Wood Krutch, a famous critic on Tennessee Williams, believes that Alma is "an unhappy woman, passionate by nature but loyal in her conscious mind to the ideals of an anemic gentility."<sup>7</sup>

#### IV. PREDICAMENT OF MODERN PEOPLE

On the one hand, Williams's gentlewomen all stand for idealism, culture, and the love of beauty, but on the other hand also stand for falsehood and escapism. They are associated with the romanticized past.

These gentlewomen are not able to face the sharp contrast between the cruel present and the glorious past. They live in the conflicting worlds of realism and idealism. They try desperately to maintain the traditional morality, but at the same time they violently betray their own code. Their efforts all end up as a failure. They have no way out and are doomed to be defeated. In fact, frustration is the surface evidence of the predicament of these women. Williams explores the underlying reason carefully for their behavior.

The Civil War is crucial to all the southerners. It is considered as the war followed by years of struggle against change. Actually, the old mind of the South has never stopped after the Civil War. The defeat of the civil war enforces southern gentlewomen's love for the Old South by strengthening loyalty to it. They always try to withdraw into the Old South, which is a paradise now lost. They are not only ready but also eager to believe in the myth of the Old South. They are all influenced by the impact of the aristocratic idea on this romantic pattern. In their mind, the Old South is the last purely agricultural land of the West.

Placed in the awkward situation after the plantation system is gone with the wind, these gentlewomen are thrown suddenly into an indifferent universe. Most of the sensitive southern gentlewomen are filled with an immense regret and they yearn backward toward their past with passionate longing. This period is commonly known as an age of nostalgia. It is an age with an intense revulsion against the ugliness of the new industrialism and a yearning for the glory of the aristocratic and agricultural past.

Obviously, the South, Williams employed in his plays, is in fact America in miniature. Thus, the collapse of the South, its ruin, its decline and fall are the reflection of the backsliding of civilization in America in the modern age. Then these gentlewomen are the embodiment of sensitive modern people and their predicament is exactly the same as that of the modern people.

When the First World War ended, life changed greatly in America. There was no longer calm and peaceful life. The old tradition shattered. Under the pressure of the development of industry, modern people faced an utter spiritual wasteland. People at this time were cut off from the old values and yet unable to come to terms with the new era. It means that modern people have lost the beautiful sense of the calm idyllic past. It is this new and impersonal world that terrifies modern people.

Like Williams's Southern gentlewomen, modern people have to find something to justify their search for new meanings to replace the old ones. They try to escape from reality. Yet, being cut off from their past and without a meaningful future to fall on, they become anachronistic. They indulge in hedonism in order to make their life less unbearable. They all think that they have no choice. For them there is no escape from life's anguish and loneliness. When facing this cruel age, Williams's own statement of his play's meaning is as "the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, and the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society."<sup>8</sup>

On the one hand, Williams criticizes forces which destroys the traditional moralities. Actually, this is a society that is organized to serve the machine. Williams dramatizes the pathetic results when beauty and refinement are challenged by the vulgarity and brutality of this mechanistic world. In such world which insecurity is the norm, facing the irreversible changes, modern people can no longer find their way.

On the other hand, Williams reminds people that the world is bound to develop. Everyone should confront the reality and adapt themselves to the new changes no matter how hard it is. Williams thinks that these gentlewomen's downfall demonstrates that they are unable to cope with the changing society.

Modern people are just concerned with such an attempt to discover a way and a purpose for life in the brutal society. Williams seems to encourage people to fight back in spite of the result. In fact, he has celebrated courage in his harmed and anguished gentlewomen.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In fact, in the late 1920s, American Southern writers began to attack the Southern myths and Southerners' unrealistic attitude towards reality. They began to examine their society critically and tried to show the differences between Southern myths and Southern reality. Williams is one of the most outstanding among them.

Williams focuses his Southern gentlewomen in the setting of the American South. Almost all of his Southern gentlewomen are defeated. They are victims of their own guilt or illusion, and they are preys to the world's brutality. As he is attracted by the sensitive southern gentlewomen and their predicament, he looks deeply into the psychology of the

<sup>7</sup> Boxill, R. 1987. Tennessee Williams. London: Macmillan:101

<sup>8</sup> Bloom, H. 1988. Modern Critical Interpretations: Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers:46



fugitive of society. The world in his plays is ruled by irrational forces and his characters are driven by desire and loneliness into extreme behavior.

Clearly, William is not only cares about the development of the South but the whole situation of human. The theme of most of his plays depicts the unavoidable emptiness and loneliness of modern people. His work is considered as one of the most savage indictments of culture in modern time. Through exploring the typical problems of the South, Williams reveals the social reality of America and even the predicament of modern people.

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