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"The Spectators and the Performers: Reflection Versus Action in the Plays of Tennessee Williams"

by

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THE SPECTATORS AND THE PERFORMERS:

REFLECTION VERSUS ACTION IN THE PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

BY

SUSANNE THOMAS

A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Manitoba in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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There always comes a time when man must choose between contemplation and action.

Albert Camus, _The Myth of Sisyphus_

Introduction

A large proportion of the critical writings on the plays of Tennessee Williams were produced in the 1960's, and many espouse interpretive theories which now appear outdated for a number of reasons, the most obvious being the fairly large number of plays which Williams wrote during the 1970's and early 1980's. Academic interest in Williams tapered off in the 1970's, and during the last decade, publication has been quite limited. Drewey Wayne Gunn writes in the Introduction to the criticism section of his bibliography of Williams, "above all, the reader should be struck with how little, comparatively, has been written on Williams, especially when one takes out all the dramatic histories and superficial gossip about his plays which are interspersed among the genuine criticism." (207) Nevertheless, during the last two decades certain subject areas have received a great deal of attention, the most notable being explorations of mythic and religious themes in Williams' work, and comparative analyses of Williams and other playwrights.[1] Other areas which have been explored are the treatment of women and of homosexuality in Williams' work, the influence of the cinema on Williams, and Williams' use of language.[2] However, many of Williams' late plays have received little or no critical attention, and more often than not, critics have compared the later plays unfavorably with those of other playwrights, or with Williams' earlier work. Many possible areas of analysis of the entire body of Williams' work remain unexplored, and it was my intention in this thesis to explore a particular thematic link which would integrate the later plays with the earlier ones, which have received by far the largest proportion of critical attention.

One of the first writers to discuss Williams' writing at length was Benjamin Nelson in Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work published in 1961. Nelson, like many to follow him, chose a dualistic approach to the works. He writes:

> Williams is the romantic and the realist, and his best work is marked by this important juxtaposition of beliefs. Thus, in The Glass Menagerie the author's sympathies for his ineffectual dreamers are tempered by his objective attitude toward them. While portraying their tragic attempts to establish contact with each other and with the world in which they live he is nevertheless able to see that they are doomed to failure because of their inability to do more than dream. Blanche DuBois also represents the honor, gentility and basic decency which is starkly contrasted against the world of Stanley Kowalski. Hers are the values which, untainted, should pervade our world, but they do not, and in seeking them in someone else she only hastens her final destruction. She refuses to give up her dream and her refusal is heroic, perhaps tragic. But in the end she is destroyed because she really has nothing but illusions and chimeras to throw in the face of the brute force of Kowalski's reality" (289).

Nelson points out the contrast in Williams' works between romantics and realists, between illusion and reality. He has a problem dealing with plays such as Summer and Smoke, where the non-romantics are no more "realistic" in their beliefs than the romantics, as he would as well with with Sweet Bird of Youth (which he does not discuss) where the

romanticism of Chance is ironic, and where the "realist" Princess has a romantic vision of herself. Any attempt to say that one character type represents illusion and the other reality is doomed by the fact that those held up as the supreme realists, especially Stanley and Jim O'Connor, base their realism upon illusions about themselves or about the world. Plays written after Nelson's work was published do not fit comfortably, if at all, into his described scheme of things. Works such as The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore and Kingdom of Earth, as well as numerous later plays, do not present the dreamers and romantics as the upholders of civilized values, whereas it is the supposed "realists" who often see themselves in romantic terms. Nelson runs into an irreconcilable problem by suggesting that certain characters represent realism and others illusion.

Norman J. Fedder in The Influence of D.H. Lawrence on Tennessee Williams, published in 1966, places Williams' works into a theory of dualism based on a Lawrencian mold. In his conclusion he explains:

> Tennessee Williams, as we have seen, is chiefly concerned, like D.H. Lawrence, with the duality of flesh and spirit, of the fox and moth. . .There are characteristic differences, however, between Lawrences's and Williams' physical and spiritual types. The Williams fox is, more often as not, some kind of sex pervert. . . . In this respect, Williams' attitude differs from Lawrence's. Lawrence abhorred sexual perversion and everywhere condemned bohemianism. It is true that on occasion Williams' fox figure approaches his Lawrencean prototype in moral stature: The playwright's Jim O'Connor (The Glass Menagerie), Maggie the Cat (Cat on a Hot

> Tin Roof) and Hadrian (You Touched Me!)--although lacking the profundity of a Birkin or Mellors--embody a healthy sensuality, worthy of admiration. However, the predominant foxes. . .are rather sad specimens of the virtues of sensual awareness.
>
> With respect to the differences inherent in the two authors' depiction of spiritual figures, Williams is more greatly concerned with delicate, hypersensitive types who can hardly bear contact with gross reality and must perforce escape into a private world of illusion (Laura in The Glass Menagerie), or into insanity (Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire), or into a narcosis of sensual dissipation (Alma in Summer and Smoke). Williams laments for the "dying moths", as he pities the "fugitive foxes": both are "individuals trapped by circumstance"; and it is the need for understanding them which Williams has stated as his "basic premise" (122-123).

One problem in Fedder's work is that his dogmatic sexual politics overwhelm any attempt at dispassionate judgement. As well, those characters whom he refers to as the prototypical "moths," especially Blanche and Alma, are much stronger characters than he assumes. Williams referred to Blanche and those like her as "ladies that had somehow resulted from the fantastic crossbreeding of a moth and a tiger," ("T. Williams's View of T. Bankhead," 150) as they have a tenacity which is neither frail nor pathetic. The flesh/spirit dichotomy is, in Fedder's explanation of it, again largely inapplicable to ironic plays such as Sweet Bird, Milk Train, and Kingdom Of Earth

where there are no spiritual moths. Also problematic is Fedder's characterization of as pathetic a character as Chance Wayne as a "fox." His insight about Jim O'Connor's "healthy sensuality" has no apparent basis in the play itself, for at no point does Jim display any overt signs of sensuality, healthy or otherwise. Furthermore, the "fox" of The Glass Menagerie is not Jim O'Connor, but is much more likely Tom. There is probably only one truly spiritual "moth" in the whole body of Williams' work, Laura in The Glass Menagerie, and thus according to the moth/fox dualism one has to see the body of work as a gradual degeneration of a dualism set up in one play. The problems which ensue from attempting to place Williams' characters into Lawrencean categories are difficult to surmount, and in the final analysis, Fedder's study convinces us that the differences between the two writers are actually more profound than the similarities.

As Esther Merle Jackson discusses in her work The Broken World of Tennessee Williams, Williams continually used the anti-heroic protagonist in his drama. In her chapter on Williams' use of the anti-hero she writes:

> One of the most controversial aspects of the drama of Tennessee Williams is his use of an anti-heroic protagonist as an image of man. Williams appears to reject the Aristotelian concept of the protagonist and to substitute for it an anti-hero, the personification of a humanity neither good, knowledgeable, nor courageous. In Blanche, Alma, Brick, Kilroy, Val, Chance, and Shannon, we see this anti-heroic image of man. Even those figures who command some sympathy, characters such as Tom in The Glass Menagerie

> and Catherine--the victim of Suddenly Last Summer--may be described in the language of T.S. Eliot as "non-beings" -- "Caught in the form of limitation/Between un-being and being." Williams claims that such is the image of modern man -- poised as he is between the contrary imperatives of his world. As he examines humanity through the patched glass of his synthetic myth, the playwright perceives a creature transfixed in a moment of stasis, halted at the point of transition in the process of becoming" (68-69).

It is primarily the tension caused by this "stasis" which I have chosen to explore. As I propose to argue, it is the dualism between stasis and its opposite, movement, variously referred to in Williams' works as "Time," and "The Parade," which sets in motion the real battle of forces contained within the plays. The dualistic obsession in Williams' works is not, as has been suggested by various critics, between reality and illusion, or between spirituality and sensualism, but between movement and stasis, depicted in the form of "spectator" and "performer" character types.

The binary opposition between movement and stasis is correlative to the opposition beween action and thought. The dilemma which Williams continually strives to give expression to is the failure to integrate thought and action. The end result of this failure is psychological entrapment within the self. Drama constructed on duality can be seen as simplistic and melodramatic; however, a dualistic thematic structure is designed to express the sense of alienation and separation which is so central to Williams' thought. Williams' plays are based on a dualism which symbolizes modern man's sense of alienation from himself. In the

later plays, the human body itself becomes a source of alienation and betrayal, and characters' attempts to escape from both their physical and psychological entrapment are doomed to failure.

In spite of the fact that Williams has been accused of creating a simplistic moral universe, there is no simple formula of integration offered in Williams' plays. In fact there appears to be no communion at all possible, either between humans, or between the opposing drives of thought and action, or between man and the mechanistic universe in which he lives. Man's primitive impulses to action are at odds with the constructs of his mind; "centuries of cerebration" (to use Grahame Greene's phrase)[3] have led to a crippling stasis where, for the thinking man, action is no longer meaningful. Characters may turn to primitivism (in the form of mindless sensuality or violent ritual) as a cure for what ails them, but the results are shocking and grotesque, and merely serve to underline their already apparent entrapment.

Endnotes

[1]Works on Williams and myth (since 1969) include: Mary Ann Corrigan, "Memory, Dream and Myth in the Plays of Tennessee Williams", Renascence 28 (Spring 1976), 155-167; Gilbert Debusscher, "Oedipus in New Orleans: Myth in Suddenly Last Summer," Revue des Langues Vivants, Bicentennial Issue (1971), 53-63; Hugh Dickenson, "Tennessee Williams: Orpheus as Savior," Myth on Modern Stage, Urbana: University of Illinois, 1969: 278-309; John Ower, "Erotic Mythology in the Poetry of Tennessee Williams, in Jac Tharpe, Ed. Tennessee Williams: A Tribute. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977: 609-623; Judith J. Thompson, "Symbol, Myth and Ritual in The Glass Menagerie, The Rose Tattoo, and Orpheus Descending," in Tharpe, 679-711; Nancy Baker Traubitz, "Myth as a Basis of Dramatic Structure in Orpheus Descending," Modern Drama 19 (March 1976), 57-66; Diane E. Turner, "The Mythic Vision in Tennessee Williams' Camino Real, in Tharpe, 237-251; Constance M. Drake, "Six Plays by Tennessee Williams: Myth in the Modern World," Ohio State University, 1970. DAI 32 (July 1971), 426-A.

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Element in the Work of Tennessee Williams," Lousiana State University, 1973, DAI 34 (March 1974), 5954-5955-A; Nelvin Vos, "A Kingdom Not of This Earth," Christian Scholars Review 1984, 13 (4), 373-377.

Works of comparative criticism (since 1969) include: Peter L. Hays, "Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams," Essays in Literature 4 (1977) 239-249; H.J. Gerigk, "Tennessee Williams und Anton Cechov," Zeitschrift fur Slavische Philogie 39 (1976), 157-165; Koji Ishizuka, "Two Memory Plays: Williams and Miller," American Literature in the 1940's (Annual Report), Tokyo: American Literature Society of Japan, 1975, 208-212; Warren Roberts True, "Chekovian Dramaturgy in the Plays of Tennessee Williams, Harold Pinter, and Ed Bullins," University of Tennessee, 1976, DAI 33 (July 1972) 308-A; William Heard Inglis III, "Strindberg and Williams: A Study in Affinities," University of Washington, 1975, DAI 37 (August 1976), 698-699-A; Larry T. Blades, "Williams, Miller and Albee: A Comparative Study," St. Louis University, 1971, DAI 32 (February 1972) 4600-A.

[2]Works on Williams' depiction of women (since 1969) include: Louise Blackwell, "Tennessee Williams and the Predicament of Women," South Altantic Bulletin 35 (March 1970) 9-14; Anthony Bukoski, "The Lady and Her Business of Love in Selected Southern Fiction," Studies in the Humanities, 5 i (1976), 14-18; Jeanne M. McGlinn, "Tennessee Williams' Women: Illusion and Reality, Sexuality and Love," in Tharpe, 510-524; Nancy M. Tischler, "A Gallery of Witches," in Tharpe, 494-509.

Works on Williams' depiction of the homosexual (since 1969) include: Geoges-Michel Sarotte, Comme un frère, comme un amant: l'homosexualité masculine dans le roman el le théâtre americains de Herman Melville à James Baldwin, Paris: Flamarion, 1976; Edward

Sklepowich, "In Pursuit of the Lyric Quarry: The Image of the Homosexual in Tennessee Williams' Prose Fiction," in Tharpe, 525-544; Russell Williams McRae, "Tennessee Williams: An Artifice of Mirrors," York University 1975, DAI 36 (July 1976), 6687-A; Glenn Thomas Embry, "Sexual Confusion in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams," UCLA 1975, DAI 36 (July 1975), 309-A.

Works on Williams and the cinema (since 1969) include: Foster Hirsch, "Tennessee Williams," Cinema 8 (Spring 1973); Jack Babuscio, "The Cinema of Camp," Gay Sunshine 35 (Winter 1978), 21-22; Maurice Yocowar, Tennessee Williams and Film, New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977; Molly Haskell, From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974.

Works on Williams' use of language (since 1969) include: Thomas P. Adler, "The Dialogue of Incompletion: Language in Tennessee Williams' Later Plays," Quarterly Journal of Speech 61 (February 1975), 48-58; James Hafley, "Abstraction and Order in the Language of Tennessee Williams," in Tharpe, 624-630; Morris Philip Wolf, "Cassanova's Portmanteau: Camino Real and Recurring Communications Patterns of Tennessee Williams," in Tharpe, 252-276.

[3]Graham Green writes in Journey Without Maps, Penguin Books, 1978, "when one sees to what unhappiness, to what peril of extinction centuries of cerebration have brought us, one sometimes has a curiosity to discover if one can, from what we have come to recall at which point we went astray." (19)

Chapter One

A Song That Echoes: Laura, Blanche, and Alma

> the great difference between people in this world is not between the rich and the poor or the good and the evil, the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have had pleasure in love and those that haven't or hadn't any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick envy. The spectators and the performers (50).

So speaks cabana-attendant turned personal-companion Chance Wayne in Tennessee Williams' Sweet Bird of Youth, a play whose central characters are an aging film-hopeful turned gigolo, and an almost over-the-hill silver screen goddess. While these lines are, in their context, an ambiguous analysis of human nature, they allow an insight into the world and characters of Tennessee Williams. In Williams' early plays the great difference between characters often is the difference between those who have had "pleasure in love" and those who haven't. Many of Williams' plays depict the opposition between these two character types, the spectators and the performers. Williams' major works of the 1940's, including The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Summer and Smoke, are characterized by the contrast between characters who are, or can be, performers, and those who are, or will be, passive, immobile spectators. For example, we see the contrast between Laura and Jim in Menagerie, between Blanche and Stanley in Streetcar, and between Alma and John in Summer and Smoke. Laura is a spectator who cannot escape from this role, despite the brief intervention of the performer, Jim. Blanche was once a performer, but is now in the process of

disintegrating into a spectator, thwarted in her attempts to find a place of refuge by the performer, Stanley. Alma is transformed in the course of the action of Summer and Smoke from a spectator into a performer, while John undergoes the opposite transformation. The early plays, three of which will be discussed in detail in this chapter, are based on Williams' vision of the tragic opposition between the spectators and performers as character types. This opposition was to become central to most of Williams' plays.

Laura, Blanche, and Alma share the common characteristic of excessively fragile and tender natures; all three fail to find proper recipients to bestow this tenderness upon. They are full of passionate sensitivity, yet are thwarted from receiving in return what they are capable of giving. Lacking a sense of purpose and worthfulness, they float through meaningless, desperately unfulfilled lives. As Alma says of herself, "Most of us have no choice but to lead useless lives!...to go on enduring for the sake of endurance" (154).

Jim, Stanley, and John belong in the unpoetic, somewhat crude, world of action and performance. While the spectators lead unfocused, rootless lives, the performers are rooted in the earth of sensual, physical experience. Their strength comes from an obstinate singlemindedness and selfishness of purpose.

The spectators suffer, as perpetual outsiders, from the lack of a milieu in which they can achieve a sense of accomplishment. Alma laments in The Eccentricities of a Nightingale for those like herself: "The ones that could bring to marriage the sort of almost transcendental! tenderness that it calls for--what do they do? Teach school! Teach singing! Make a life out of little accomplishments" (15).

Something to do with the "transcendental" nature of these characters dooms them to lead lives of bleak unfulfillment. They lack, as Thomas P. Adler describes it, "the validation that can only come from being observed by an audience" (371); unlike the performers, the spectators have no "stage". Having no validation of their own performance, worth, and reality, they exhibit a failure of will, and often this culminates in a failure of their rational faculties, and the dissolution of their personalities into a mere mirage or reflection of their former selves.

Laura Wingfield's accomplishments will be even more trivial than those outlined by Alma in Eccentricities. Half lost in a fantasy world of glass ornaments and old phonograph records at the beginning of Menagerie[1], she appears at the conclusion of the play destined to remain permanently imprisoned in the family's cramped apartment under the supervision of her tyrannically well-meaning mother, Amanda. As "Portrait of a Girl in Glass", the title of the short story on which the play was based, suggests, Laura is imprisoned "in glass." When Laura explains to Amanda her prolonged absence from classes at Rubicam's Business College, she tells her: "Lately I've been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-box, that big glass house where they raise the tropical flowers" (737). The "glass house" symbolizes the suffocating entrapment Laura and her spectator counterparts live in. It represents an enclosed world; in Laura's case it is like an enclosed garden. The glass house symbolizes, as well, the spectators' sense of living "in glass houses," having only fragile, brittle protection from the outside world, and sensing the intruding eyes of critical strangers examining and watching them. Like the relative positions of John, the doctor, and Alma, the patient, in Summer and Smoke, the spectator is vulnerably open

for examination and critical inspection, naked before the eyes of the all-knowing, all-seeing physician. Similarly, in Menagerie, Jim takes on the role of doctor/analyst and examines Laura's transparent flaws, while he remains invulnerable to critical inspection by her.

The glass effectively freezes the spectators off from the outside world, yet it offers them inadequate protection from intrusion and inspection. Laura is trapped as a spectator within the world of performance; she is only a watcher hiding behind billowing white curtains. When Amanda prepares the tawdry apartment for the arrival of "their" gentleman caller, she hangs a new rose-silk shade on the floor lamp and a colored paper lantern to conceal the broken light fixture in the ceiling; these features, like the shadows thrown by the candelabrum in the final scene, represent the "shades" the spectators wish to hide behind. The attempt to draw curtains around the naked, transparent glass self will be seen again when the same devices are used by Blanche in Streetcar to transform the home of Stella and Stanley into what she hopes will be a safe hideaway from the intruding eyes, and gossiping mouths, which have driven her out of Laurel. The glass house effectively entraps the spectators, yet they are not protected by its walls.

A mirror appears on stage at the beginning of Scene VI of Menagerie. The stage directions state: "Laura moves slowly to the long mirror and stares solemnly at herself. . .She turns slowly before the mirror with a troubled look" (758). Immediately afterward, Amanda appears, wearing "a girlish frock of yellowed voile with a blue silk sash" and recreates in a full-fledged performance "the legend of her youth." The performance ends when Amanda stops in front of the picture

of her missing husband, portrayed in a blown-up photograph taken in his youth. All three props (the mirror, the costume, and the portrait) function in similar and complex ways. As Adler has discussed, the presence of a mirror on stage "is almost a hallmark of the Modernist age . . .Gazing into a mirror results in a doubling, a fragmentation or dissolution of personality into the reflection and the thing reflected and the person doing the reflecting. . .the mirror is the stage wherein the character, as his own audience, sees himself" (363-4). Laura looks into the mirror and appears to see herself as others see her, causing the "troubled look." Amanda dresses up and presents a mirror-image of her past; the portrait on the wall presents another, disturbing mirror of the past and its consequences for the present. Far from using her own costume-image as a reflection of the disparity between the past and the present, Amanda uses it to recreate the illusion of the past. When Blanche finally loses her grip on herself in Scene Ten of Streetcar, she dresses up in an old ball gown and gazes into a hand mirror. The anguish Laura and Blanche feel when their mirrors fail to express what should be there, or what they need to see for their own validation, is central to their characterizations. The mirror is not a "stage" wherein the spectators can "act."

Laura is fascinated by other types of reflection, specifically by the reflected light given off by the collection of glass animals she spends her time at home looking after. Narcissus-like, Laura bestows her care and tenderness upon things which are incapable of anything but reflection, thus dooming herself to a life of longing. As in the Narcissus myth, the mirror's reflection does not validate, but fragments the personality into a double image, and leads to the eventual agonized

dissolution of the watcher. The glass menagerie, like Narcissus's pond-mirror, is a reflection of Laura's self. As Narcissus casts himself into his mirror, so Laura has "cast" herself into her menagerie-mirror. She is emotionally frozen in an internal, self-reflective world. The symbolic glass house which entraps the spectators has mirrored walls on the inside which reflect the self back in multiple grotesque and distorted images. As Laura magnifies her own physical disability and exaggerates the reactions of others to it, so do Alma and Blanche constantly sense and fear the mockery of others. The glass house functions as a magnifying glass which they both feel themselves under, and use to distort the outside world.

Laura's brother, Tom, is a divided character who escapes out of Laura and Amanda's glass house into the world of performance; yet, part of him remains confined in the glass world. Tom is doomed to be divided against himself: he lives the footloose, callously-carefree life of his telephone-man father, yet is heartbroken by his own callousness. He reveals his inner torment at the conclusion of the play:

> The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass--Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors,

> like bits of shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes . . .Oh, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am faithful than I intended to be (783).

In order to become a performer, Tom must submerge the internal limitations of guilt and sadness beneath a man-of-the world facade. He is caught up partially in the world of glass and self-reflection himself. He outlines, in his emphasis on "transparent bottles" and "shattered rainbows," the central motifs of the spectator character in this and many subsequent plays. The bottles represent the claustrophobic glass houses, and will symbolize, in later plays, the bottles of alcohol which will obsess Blanche, Brick, and Alexandra del Lago, among others. The "shattered rainbow" is, of course, the prismatic reflection of light, representing beauty, but also fragmentation and refraction. The "shattered rainbow" is also a shattered promise or hope--"the long delayed but always expected something that we live for" (<u>Menagerie</u>, 731) destroyed or lost forever.

Laura's inability to act is imposed upon her both internally and externally. She attempts to curtain herself from the outside world, yet her rejection by the gentleman caller is a confirmation of the failure of the objective world to validate her. She has been frozen out of ordinary existence. Laura begins her waltz with Jim as if she were frozen; however, his inescapable charm melts her and she loosens her icy stiffness. When Laura's glass walls dissolve she is left exposed, and far more vulnerable than she already is. It is the melting of the glass, her fragile armor, which results in the tragedy of the play's conclusion.

Jim, like other performers, is too determined to act and to succeed to understand the emotional or social situation that the spectator is in. The performers can show no real compassion for the spectators because they are blind to the nature of the transparent walls which encircle them. The performers are unable to see how the spectators can be able, and yet unable, to act, or how internal limitations can be insurmountable, as the only limitations the performers acknowledge are external ones. Jim, vaguely understanding the shattering blow he has given Laura, offers her a Life Saver. Though kind and sympathetic, Jim represents what Tom in his opening monologue describes as "the huge middle class of America. . .matriculating in a school for the blind" (730). Jim's Horatio Alger dream and the speech he gives Laura, aptly described by Roger Stein as a "Dale Carnegie version of the Sermon on the Mount" (152), reveal his intellectual banality. He says without a touch of irony of the exhibition called the "Century of Progress:" "What impressed me most was the Hall of Science. Gives an idea of what the future will be in America, even more wonderful than the present time is!" (769) The Great Depression seems not to have dampened Jim's spirits, and unlike Tom he does not understand the ominous portents of Guernica and the war in Spain.

One cannot determine just how effective a performer Jim will be in the long run, though Tom tells us that since his triumphant march through high school, "His speed had definitely slowed" (757). However, Jim's lack of awareness of the hollowness of the dream he holds dearest allows him the confidence to act. As Lewis H. Lapham recently wrote of American politicians: "If they knew what they were doing they would find it impossible to act" (12). Conversely, because the spectators are

always watching, not just others, but themselves, they are too conscious to act. When they look at others all they see is the reflection of their own feelings of inadequacy; everything reflects back to them what they don't want to see, so they hide behind curtains, in a glass house, in a glass menagerie, and later in bottles.

Jim is essentially unaware of the symbolic significance of the breaking of the glass unicorn, the figure in the menagerie with which Laura most closely identifies. Laura downplays the real tragedy of this occurrence when she assures Jim, "I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less--freakish!. . .Now he will feel more at home with all the other horses, the ones that don't have horns. . ." (777). It seems that in this context the unicorn is being used as a sexual symbol, more specifically as a symbol of Desire. It has been interpreted as a symbol of Christ by Gilbert Debusscher, yet the unicorn more plausibly represents what the rose (another ostensibly Christian symbol) does in _The Rose Tattoo_:

> the Dionysian element in human life, its mystery, its beauty, its significance. . .it is the lyric as well as the Bacchantic impulse, and although the goat is one of its immemorial symbols, it must not be confused with mere sexuality. The element is higher and more distilled than that. Its purest form is probably manifested by children and birds in their rhapsodic moments of flight and play. . . the limitless world of the dream. It is the _rosa mystica_ (Williams, _Playbill_ cast page).

The unicorn is, to use _Streetcar_'s terms, Desire, the opposite of Death.

Although Laura says that now the glass unicorn will be just like all the other horses, it has essentially been robbed of its vital life-force, or castrated--the "operation" she speaks of. Its dehorning symbolizes Laura's loss of any chance from this point on to find a suitable object for her desires, or to achieve the kind of fulfillment which would allow her to emerge as a human being in her own right. Benjamin Nelson has accused Williams of failing to make Laura into a "whole" character (99), even though the point of the play seems to be exactly this, that she will never attain the wholeness of a performer. Imposed chastity has been forced on Laura; like the unicorn of medieval tapestries, she is tied to a leash and fenced in, guarded by the "eternal virgin" Amanda. The male unicorn represents the passionate, sensual side of Laura's character, which cannot be unfrozen or set free. Tom concludes the play by saying "Blow out your candles, Laura. . ." (783), and we envision Laura's own flame extinguished, snuffed out by the unfortunate conclusion to the visit of the gentleman caller. As Lester A. Beaurline writes, "The events represent Laura's pitiful initiation rites; this is as close as she will ever come to the altar of love. . .The empty ceremony is over" (149).

Tennyson's poem "The Lady of Shalott" tells the tragic story of the ultimate female spectator. A curse has been laid upon the Lady, with the result that she must never look upon the world except through the reflection in her "blue glass." She spends her time weaving the sights she sees in her mirror into a "magic web." Ruby Cohn has insightfully described Laura's menagerie as representing "animal drives frozen into aesthetics" (101), and the Lady's "web" obviously functions in a similar fashion. Enticed by the reflection of Sir Lancelot in the

mirror, and by the music of his armor, the Lady leaves her weaving, and her mirror, and dies.

In terms of the poem's metaphors, the Lady of Shalott is "a song that echoes," while Lancelot's music is the call of the bugle and the clink of armor. In terms of light, the Knight and the Lady are contrasted as "mirror blue" and "brazen greaves." The landscape is bathed in dazzling sunlight which turns the Knight's helmet into a "burning flame," while the Lady is identified with water lilies, willows, and the cool green and white of aspens. Using similar metaphors, Williams said of Laura Young, a girl he once claimed inspired the writing of Menagerie, "she was something cool and green in a sulpherous landscape" (Moor, 65). This is how Laura is characterized against the world of "hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier. . ." (751). Yet inside, both Laura and the Lady have a fire that burns: "'I am half sick of shadows,' said/ The Lady of Shalott" (71-72). Laura is obviously sick of shadows, too, when she looks into her high school yearbook and excitedly points out the picture of Jim O'Connor to her mother. Yet, when the shadows come to life, neither Laura nor the Lady are able to capture them. When the Lady of Shalott steps out of her mirror, she withers, enticed by a world which glitters, flames, and burns. Robed in snowy white she floats slowly down the green river in her boat, like a water lily, an image that will recur in relation to both Blanche and Alma.

Jim, like Lancelot, unwittingly provokes the destruction of the Lady who comes out of her glass to admire him, just as Alma, dressed in serene lily white, is drawn by John into the physical world only to be

abandoned there by him. John leads Alma out of her "Puritanical ice" during the anatomy lesson to tell her finally that it isn't the physical side of her he wants, just as Jim has awakened Laura's romantic, sensual nature only to tell her, "I wish that you were my sister" (777). In Streetcar, Stanley pulls Blanche off of her pedestal because he wishes first to expose and then to destroy her sensual or sexual nature. The performers are essentially indifferent to the destruction that they cause. Lancelot says of the dead Lady: "'She has a lovely face;/ God in his mercy lend her grace'" (169-170). Like Jim, he sees a physical facade and misses the essence.

The spectators are not strong enough to withstand the onslaught of the physical world so they remain static, enclosed within the walls of the family home. Jim kindly explains to Laura, "other people are not such wonderful people. They're one hundred times one thousand. You're one times one! They walk all over the earth. You just stay here" (777-778). The performers "walk all over the earth" in a trampling sense, while the spectators remain incapable of movement. Alma tells John, "I've lived next door to you all the days of my life. . .", and Blanche accuses Stella, "you left! I stayed. . .". The family home functions as the Lady of Shalott's mirror and castle tower does; it is a prison, yet it offers protection from the physical world.

In Williams' early one-act play "Something Unspoken" two widows live out their lives together in the roles of society matriarch, Miss Cornelia Scott, and her paid companion, Miss Grace Lancaster. Grace, describing the gradual transformation of the two of them over a period of years, delineates the differences between spectators and performers:

> --Both of us have turned grey!--But not the same kind of grey. In that velvet dressing gown you look like the Emperor Tiberius!--In his imperial toga!--Your hair and your eyes are both the color of iron! Iron grey. Invincible looking! People nearby all are somewhat--frightened of you. They feel your force and admire you for it. They come to you here for opinions on this or that. . .I am--very--different!--Also turning grey but my grey is different. Not iron, like yours, not imperial, Cornelia, but grey, yes, grey, the--color of a cobweb. . . --Something white getting soiled, the grey of something forgotten" (234-5).

After Laura, the character of the spectator will typify this cobweb-like image of someone becoming soiled and forgotten. Laura, being all glass, is never soiled, nor completely forgotten. Little bits of shattered rainbow remain as mementos of her, just as they have for the girl with the prisms upon whom her character was based.[2] However, both Streetcar and Summer and Smoke contain fragile, tender characters in different stages of becoming soiled and forgotten. Blanche, the most complex of the early spectators, is a woman caught in an intense conflict, not just between herself and the performer Stanley, but between the spectator and performer halves of herself. She is ultimately in conflict with the world of performance or "realism," which she attempts to deny, and which will ultimately deny her an existence.

Stella, reprimanding Stanley for his behavior towards Blanche, tells him: "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (111). The change the spectators undergo is

partly self-imposed, due to a fault in their self-conception or in their strength of will. It is also imposed upon them by the iron force of the performers, and the demands of performance itself. Like Sir Lancelot, the performer is encased in armor and the world he exists in is a battle of forces. The destruction of maidens trapped in glass towers by these iron men and the world that contains them is the theme and action of Menagerie, Summer and Smoke, and Streetcar. In Streetcar the destruction is more purposeful and calculated than in the other plays. Stanley is the only performer in these works to have a reason to harm the spectator "maiden," as Blanche and Stanley are caught in a conflict over the affections of Stella, whom Blanche wishes to lure away from her brutish husband. Stanley wins easily by shattering the mirror-image of Blanche. He purposefully destroys the "Southern Belle" persona which Blanche has effectively lost in Laurel, but which she desperately needs to recreate in New Orleans. Stella has ominously told Blanche: "Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night--soon as we came in here--he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the lightbulbs with it" (64). Stanley has no problem smashing his way through glass walls, and Blanche, while starting out as a reasonably effective opponent for Stanley, quickly loses ground because she is forced to stand upon the mere illusion of her no-longer-acted-upon ideals.

Blanche realizes, as Grace does, that she is becoming soiled and grey. She tells Stella, "soft people have to shimmer and glow. . .It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft and attractive. And I--I'm fading now!" (79) Blanche is comparing herself to someone like Laura, who shimmers and glows for a few moments in Menagerie, but who

will quickly fade. As Laura has identified with her glass unicorn, Blanche identifies with the paper lantern she places over the bedroom lightbulb. In both instances in the play where the lantern is torn off the bulb, she cries out as if she has been wounded. The lantern is Blanche's curtain, but the bulb is her self. Lightbulbs "shimmer and glow," yet hers must be covered up, as Blanche feels the compulsive need to hide the truth of the present behind a delicate image of romance and exoticism.

The division between the actual woman and the image Blanche attempts to create slowly widens throughout the course of the play. The tenth scene of <u>Streetcar</u> could aptly be subtitled "The Mirror Cracks," as this is the point at which Blanche is no longer able to maintain the distinction between her adopted persona and her true self. The scene opens with Blanche dressed up in an old ball gown, recreating and reliving the happy days of her youth at <u>Belle Reve</u>. She calls out to her imagined companions: "How about taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock-quarry?. . .Best way in the world to stop your head buzzing! Only you've got to be careful to dive where the deep pool is--if you hit a rock you don't come up till tomorrow. . ." (122). Then, as the stage directions state, Blanche "lifts the hand mirror for a closer inspection. She catches her breath and slams the mirror face down with such violence that the glass cracks" (122). The breaking of the mirror is analogous to diving into the pool and hitting a rock. Blanche doesn't come out of the pool of the mirror "alive." At this point in the play a crack between the actual and the imagined is formed in Blanche's mind, and quickly widens. The subsequent stage direction reads: "Stanley appears. . ." (122).

Tennyson describes an analogy of Blanche's situation in "The Lady of Shalott":

> She saw the water lily bloom,
>
> She saw the helmet and the plume,
>
> She looked down to Camelot.
>
> Out flew the web and floated wide;
>
> The mirror cracked from side to side;
>
> "The curse is come upon me," cried
>
> The Lady of Shalott (111-117).

Blanche's Camelot is <u>Belle Reve</u>, which symbolizes simultaneously the family home, the "beautiful dream" of the past, and the dream of being a "belle." Camelot is a dream of gentility, action, and beauty. Yet, the "real" Camelot, the one Lancelot represents, is hard and dull, like Blanche's real "knights," Mitch and Stanley. She is the water lily, who wants to float on the rock quarry pool, who floats constantly in her narcissistic pool of bathwater. Stanley is the armored, "plumed" knight, dressed in a satin bowling shirt and later in silk pajamas. Camelot--<u>Belle Reve</u>--has been Blanche's curse in the many things the ambiguous words <u>belle reve</u> stand for: the family home filled finally with death, the "beautiful dream" ("the long delayed but always expected something that we live for"), the curse of being born a "belle" in the wrong era. These elements of Blanche's Camelot lead to her undoing. In the cracking of the mirror, the woman and the dream separate.

When Blanche looks into the already-cracked mirror in the final act, she is not sure what she sees. After she is assaulted by Stanley in Scene Ten, the division in her is complete; the image has separated itself from the actual person and has taken on a life of its own. From

this point on the "real" Blanche will exist interchangeably with the ephemeral mirror-image. Her self at times becomes a spectator of the false image in the mirror, as the illusion itself becomes an ineffectual performer who performs in the realm of the insane. The illusion-self alternates with the real person in the final scene.

I disagree with critics who claim, as Ruby Cohn does, that "In the last scene, Blanche is blind to the reality of her situation" (105). It appears rather that Blanche alternates between a realization of her actual situation and regressions into fantasy when this realization becomes unbearable. Cohn more aptly describes the situation when she writes of Blanche, "We are not quite sure whether her story of Shep Huntleigh is an illusion or a brave front against Stanley" (104), as it is the tension between her real illusions and her conscious creations of illusion which forms the complexity in Blanche's character. This tension is heightened in the final scene when Blanche cannot control the conscious creation, though she is capable of moments of lucidity and awareness.

In the final scene, Blanche fantasizes about spending the rest of her life adrift at sea. She dreams of becoming a water lily rather than Blanche Dubois, the lily of the woods. She fantasizes of her death, caused by eating an "unwashed grape," and imagines: "I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard--at noon--in the blaze of summer--and into an ocean blue as my first lover's eyes!" (136) We see here the image echoing again of "something cool and green in a sulpherous landscape:" the white shroud in a the blaze of summer dropped into the blue-green sea. But the sea is specifically the pool of the loved-one's eyes. Narcissus-like, Blanche wishes to be cast into

the pool of the eyes.[3] What Narcissus sees at the bottom of the pool is his own eyes watching himself, and this total introspection and self-reflection results in a tragic division. Looking into the mirror divides the character of Blanche, until she sees herself as an image of an ideal which she tries to create for people, rather than as an actual person. To throw yourself into the mirror is to kill yourself; however, it is also an attempt to integrate the real with the image. In death Blanche will become whole; the image in the mirror will integrate with the actual woman--thus her fantasy of death.

"He was in the quicksands and clutching at me--but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that" (95), Blanche tells Mitch about her late husband. The quicksands of immobility which will be explored in later plays catch Blanche in their trap at her unfortunate marriage. The seventeen-year-old Allen appears in mirror-image throughout the play, each time as another quicksand trap. He is mirrored by the seventeen-year-old boy Blanche gets mixed up with in Laurel, her final undoing in the town, and then by the newsboy who appears one rainy afternoon at the apartment in New Orleans.[4] These traps catch at Blanche, who now, as John T. von Szeliski has pointed out, needs to keep moving in order to survive in her delusions (210). An alternative to movement now that she has reached a dead end in Stella and Stanley's apartment is to dissolve into the mirror of the happy past. Soaking in her hot tubs, floating on her pond, is for her a way of looking into the pool, of tranquillizing herself, of compensating for the tensions of immobility. Finally, when she has nowhere to go, and when no movement is possible for her, Blanche dissolves into her pond-mirror. Unlike Amanda and Stella, Laura

and Blanche cannot successfully tranquilize their pain with an illusion. While Amanda can live in the illusion that the past still exists, and Stella can mask the fact that she has "sold herself out for a temporary solution" (Kazan, 25) with the illusion of "sexual fulfillment" or "love," the integrity of the spectators forbids them this escape; they, therefore, can only withdraw into their mirrors.

Summer and Smoke is a play almost exclusively about mirror images, about characters seeing themselves in the mirrors of others' eyes, or as mirror-images of others, or in the mirrors of inanimate things. The play centers around Alma, a proper minister's daughter, who must confront a double within herself, as well as one outside of herself. John is the boy, and then man, Alma has loved since she was a child; he represents, as well, another side of herself. At the beginning of the play he is the rebel angel hiding inside the respectable parson's daughter--the shadow "in the shadow of the church." Alma is an emotional young woman forced to act the circumspect roles of parsonage hostess and model Christian daughter. Another side to her character appears as a shadow behind the curtains late into the night, as she watches the active life that John leads. The internal world of the parsonage is in sharp contrast with the external, physical life of the neighbor-boy John.

The shadow which exists at night and lurks at the curtains, and runs to the doctor's office because of heart palpitations, is the other side of the proper, rather rigid, daytime Alma. Forced into the role of spectator by her family situation, Alma appears throughout most of the play to be on the brink of falling apart from the strain of her repression. Not just sick of shadows, but also in a state of conflict

with her own shadow, Alma must endure the ruthlessly accurate taunts of John and her mother. John becomes more and more obsessed with the physical aspects of life throughout the course of the play, until the death of his father, the point at which he reaches the brink of complete moral and physical dissolution. He, too, is divided in light and shadow; a physician by day, John turns into a bohemian gambler by night. The resolution of the play involves a transformation of both Alma and John. She becomes a performer in the sense that John has been one, while John admits his own fear of the "flame mistaken for ice" and settles for a circumspect, respectable life. Tragically, Alma and John move from their respective roles as spectator and performer into limited versions of what the opposite role represents. They become imitators of what they think the other person has represented, and thereby merely exchange one form of limitation for another.

The tragedy of the play's conclusion is that the tables turn for Alma and John in a way which prevents the two opposites from ever meeting. The spectator and the performer should be united, yet they merely exchange positions, leaving each in a state of unfulfillment and incompletion. Alma asks John in their final scene together: "Why didn't it happen between us? Why did I fail? Why did you come almost close enough--and no closer?" (245) As Alma correctly surmises, they have failed to resolve the conflict which has existed between them. At this point Alma is on the verge of integrating the spectator and performer elements of her self. We see a realization of the latent strength in her character, and yet John at this crucial moment of the play, backs away from her.

Alma and John's opening exchange in Scene Eleven indicates the alteration that each of them has undergone since they last met:

> Alma: It's rather late to tell you how happy I am, and also how proud. I almost feel as your father might have felt--if ... And--are you--happy now, John?
>
> John: I've settled with life on fairly acceptable terms. Isn't that all a reasonable person can ask for?
>
> Alma: He can ask for much more than that. He can ask for the coming true of his most improbable dreams.
>
> John: It's best not to ask for too much.
>
> Alma: I disagree with you. I say, ask for all, but be prepared to get nothing! (240-241)

We see in this exchange Alma, in her plumed hat, playing the cavalier knight, John the stay-at-home maiden. John for the first time is incapable of easy grace and captivating charm. Alma's replies to John suggest the redemptive power she has received through her acceptance of the performer within her. Not only is Alma able to accept the "other" in herself, but she is able to accept the possibility of failure in a way in which John now cannot.

Alma reveals an understanding of what has happened to her which is in contrast to John's evasiveness in this scene. She tells him with startling frankness:

> I've thought many times of something you told me last summer, that I have a Doppelganger. I looked that up and found that it means another person inside me, another self, and I don't know whether to thank you or not for making me conscious of it!--I haven't been well. . .For a while I

> thought I was dying, that that was the change that was coming. . .But now the Gulf wind has blown that feeling away like a cloud of smoke, and I know that I'm not dying, that it isn't going to be that simple. . .(241).

The dignity of Alma comes out fully in this scene. She reveals herself nakedly in this speech, as she no longer hides behind curtains or in the strained "belle" persona and mannerisms she once adopted. John's reply: "Have you been worried about your heart again?", is an obvious evasion. John is beginning to hide behind the curtains of his profession, and he demonstrates discomfort with Alma's frank honesty throughout this scene. John hides behind his professional manner, as Alma has formerly hidden behind her role as parson's daughter.

If John has come to some understanding of his interior self, then he, more so than Alma, should be the character who can articulate an understanding of his metamorphosis. Yet, his former exaltation of the power and necessity of the physical aspects of life revealed in the anatomy chart, which won Alma over in its eloquence and passion, is reduced to his new interpretation of what the chart reveals. He now explains:

> It shows that we're not a package of rose leaves, that every interior inch of us is taken up with something ugly and functional and no room seems to be left for anything else in there. . .But I've come around to your way of thinking, that something else is in there, an immaterial something--as thin as smoke--which all of those ugly machines combine to produce and that's there whole reason for being. It can't

> be seen so it can't be shown on the chart. But, it's there, just the same, and knowing its there--why, then the whole thing--this--this unfathomable experience of ours--takes on a new value, like some--some wildly romantic work in a laboratory! Don't you see? (244)

In this speech, John is vague, and his revelation somewhat uninspiring. His description of the "soul" as something "as thin as smoke" appears incorrect in the context of the play. It was the sensual side of Alma that sat at the window at night which was shadowy and ephemeral. What Alma claims has "blown away. . .like a cloud of smoke" is the intimation of death. John's discovery appears to be a realization of his own mortality; his marriage to the young Nellie, like Blanche's flirtations with teenagers, is an attempt to restore his lost youth. John takes over not Alma's strength of character and faith, but incorporates her shadow-self, the part of her that lurked at windows in the night and was terrified by the intimations of mortality. John has rejected not just his old ideals, but Alma's old ones as well, settling merely for "life on fairly acceptable terms." Although John says that he has been redeeming himself with good works (240), the redemption results in no exultation. His description of life as "some wildly romantic work in a laboratory" is both reductive and ominous.

John, having turned the tables with Alma, should be the character who ascends in status, yet John's ascension is purely in the external world; internally he has come down a long way from his confident, charming, and eloquent former self. Alma, who should be coming down off her pedestal by discovering her physical self, has matured from the hysterical, claustrophobic girl who was trapped within the parsonage

walls. Alma's eloquence, and the grace and dignity which she reveals throughout the final three acts, show that her character has indeed been tempered by fire. Alma understands her situation in a way which Laura cannot, and views herself with a lack of self-pity which Blanche can never master. Alma tells John: "the girl who said 'no', she doesn't exist anymore. She died last summer, suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her" (243). It is Alma's shadow-self, the mirror image, who has died. The part of her that "watched" at the window has been overwhelmed by the performer in her. She can now scathingly castigate John, whose weakness and vacillation become more and more apparent to her throughout the scene.

Alma takes on a strength and vitality which John now lacks. John, the hero turned cynic, backs off from the flame that he has come to realize Alma embodies. By realizing that it wasn't the physical Alma that he wanted, John casts an ambiguous light on his present situation. He backs off from the physical now, but is about to marry the childish, but apparently over-sexed, Nellie. John's final action in the play is to allow Alma a dignified exit from Scene Eleven; yet this action results in Nellie's plea, "Johnny, let go of me, Johnny! You're hugging me so tight I can't breathe!" (249) This plea suggests an ominous claustrophobia descending over the engaged couple.

Despite Alma's new strength, the ending of the play seems tragic for her. Her reaction to Nellie's solitaire, which mirrors her own ring, almost certainly foreshadows her own status as an eternal solitaire. Her request for more "little white tablets" (241), and the emphasis placed on the pills again at the conclusion to Scene Eleven when John reminds her, "Don't leave without your prescription", suggests

a narcotized state will begin to envelop her. At the fountain where Alma once told John of gothic cathedrals reaching to the sky, she now tells The Young Man of her tablets: "The prescription number is 96814. I think of it as the telephone number of God!" (254) Ultimately, the play is about the destruction of ideals. All that John and Alma learn from each other is "be prepared to get nothing." In the final scene Alma engages in a sexual flirtation with a young man, a game which is devoid of real passion and in which she is a narcotized participant. Alma has walked away from her shadows, yet her new life contains an alternative form of entrapment.

In the "Author's Note" to The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Williams implies that Summer and Smoke is conventional and melodramatic, and he states his preference for the new version of the play. However, Eccentricities is in many ways a less effective play, which lacks much of the dramatic tension of Summer and Smoke. Critics such as Nelson and Cohn have castigated Summer and Smoke for being simplistic and for containing one-dimensional characters, seeming to pick up on and amplify the author's own criticisms. Even writers who are not overtly critical of the play, such as Jack Brooking, ascribe to it a simplistic theme. Brooking in "Directing Summer and Smoke: An Existentialist Approach" states: "Alma and John's basic action is a search for 'balance' and the play's theme can be stated as, 'Existentialist balance is essential for personal freedom and fulfillment'" (381). This interpretation leads Brooking to a narrow understanding of the play's conclusion, of which he writes:

> Both [Alma and John] have achieved a sense of freedom by the final curtain. Both are relaxed, sure of who they are and

> what must be done. Alma reveals the extent of her change when she says, 'I know I'm not going to die--it isn't going to be that easy!' John's achievement of balance is more passive, but no less complete. He states, 'I've settled with life on fairly acceptable terms. Isn't that all a reasonable person can ask for?' (382)

As I hope I have shown, the ending to Summer and Smoke is not a "happy" one, for, by the conclusion, the central characters have achieved only a flawed freedom.

Summer and Smoke appears to have neither one-dimensional characters, nor a simplistic plot, for the play explores the complexities of the spectator and performer aspects within the two main characters. The ending, with its ambiguity, its sense of both attainment and loss, reflects the irreconcilable conflict between the spectator and performer halves of the individual. There is a sophisticated play on doubles which occurs throughout the play--with Alma seeing mirror images of herself in the fountain's statue, in the anatomy chart, in John, in Rosa Gonzales, in Nellie when she tells Alma, "I am learning to talk like you," and then in the young travelling salesman who tells her, "It's my first job and I'm scared of not making good" (254). The constant mirroring and confusion of symbolism, with John and Alma representing Performer and Spectator, Body and Soul, Anarchy and Order, Cupiditas and Charitas, Rationalism and Faith, results not in simplicity, but in confusion and complexity, reflecting the confusion and complexity of experience and reaction to experience.

The ending of Summer and Smoke is balanced between gaiety and despair. When Alma tells Archie that Moon Lake Casino is "Gay, very gay, Mr. Kramer," her cavalier attitude is reminiscent of the Alma of the short story "The Yellow Bird" who "kicked over the traces and jumped right back to the plumed-hat cavaliers" (237), ending her days as "a character in the old French Quarter of New Orleans." Yet the Alma of the play is too ideal for the audience not to perceive it as a terrible loss for her to enter into a life of "little mercies." Alma's father comments on John's completion of his father's work, saying: "after years of devotion and sacrifice someone young and lucky walks off with the honours." Similarly, young and lucky Nellie walks off with the partner that seems to rightfully belong to Alma. But John's wedding is also a balance between gaiety and despair. As Nellie describes it, it will be held on "the first Sunday in spring, which is Palm Sunday."

In my title to this chapter I refer to Laura, Blanche, and Alma as "a song that echoes." While this is meant to point to their connection with Tennyson's Lady of Shalott, it also makes reference to Echo, the nymph who fell in love with Narcissus; rejected by him she faded into a mere echo. Similarly, the female spectators fall in love with and are rejected by unattainable men, eventually dissolving away into something less than their former selves. At the conclusions to these plays the female spectators end up living only half-lives, limited by their methods of escape. Alma says near the conclusion to Summer and Smoke, "I feel like a water lily on a Chinese lagoon." Like Laura and Blanche she is seeking an artificial tranquillity which becomes a tranquilization and a form of dissolution. The dilemma of the female

spectators is the imperative of leaving the world of shadows (Death) for the glittering landscape (Desire), which is harder and less beautiful than it appears.

Endnotes

[1]References will be to what has been designated as the "reading" version of the play, copyrighted in 1945 and which differs slightly from the "acting" version copyrighted in 1948. James L. Rowland in "Tennessee's Two Amandas" Research Studies (35) 4, Dec. 1967, 331-340, and Lester A. Beaurline in The Glass Menagerie: From Story to Play" Modern Drama 8, Sept. 1965, 142-149, argue in favor of the superiority of the acting version; however, as copies of this version are difficult to obtain, it seemed wisest to discuss the version most commonly read, as the differences between the two texts are irrelevant to the discussion.

[2]Paul Moor quotes Williams in "A Mississippian Named Tennessee," Harper's, July 1948, 65, as saying:

> I remember a lady named Laura Young...She was something cool and green in a sulpherous landscape. But there was something the matter with her and for that reason we called upon her more frequently than anyone else. She loved me. I adored her. She lived in a white house near an orchard and in an arch between two rooms there were hung some pendants of glass that were a thousand colors. "That is a prism", she said. She lifted me and told me to shake them. When I did they made a delicate music.
>
> This prism became a play.

[3]When I refer to Laura and Blanche as Narcissus-like, I don't mean that they are narcissistic in the conventional sense of the word, but that they are like Narcissus in their tragic desire for the unattainable.

[4]For his discussion of the newsboy scene in _Streetcar_ I am indebted to Bert Cardullo's article "Williams' _A Streetcar Named Desire_" _Explicator_ 43 (2), Winter 1985, 44-45.

Chapter Two

Watching the Parades Go By: Brick and Chance

> So what are we going to do with the rest of our lives? Stay at home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling?. . .What is there left but dependency all our lives? (*Menagerie*, 737)

When the spectators reach the dead end which results in enforced immobility, there is nothing left for them to do but, as Amanda puts it, "watch the parades go by." The spectator's vision of time is distorted by his static entrapment. Time itself become something which inspires horror, like Alma's description of eternity: "something that goes on and on when life and death and time and everything else is all through with. . . .It's what people's souls live in when they have left their bodies" (*Summer and Smoke*, 130), or like John's description of Alma's existence: "One day will come after another and one night will come after another till sooner or later the summer will be all through with and then it will be fall, and you will be saying, I don't see how I'm going to get through the fall" (182). The spectators in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* express a sense of horror at the passage of time. Once the brightness of their youth is over they undergo a figurative death. Their souls go on and on even though a part of them has died; they then either give up any attempt to keep up with the parade quickly passing them by, like Brick, or desperately attempt to maintain the illusion of forward movement despite evidence to the contrary, like Chance.

It is Chance's frantic vision of time which leads him to grotesquely scramble and crawl throughout the course of Sweet Bird in an attempt to keep up with the world he sees passing him by. As Chance explains to the Princess:

> In a life like mine, you just can't stop, you know, can't take time out between steps, you've got to keep going right on up from one thing to the other, once you drop out, it leaves you and goes on without you and you're washed up . . . .I'm talking about the parade. THE parade. The parade. The boys that go places that's the parade I'm talking about, not a parade of swabbies on a wet deck (48).

Chance's desperation results from his refusal to accept the fact that the parade has passed him by, while Brick's detachment results from his desire to be left behind. Brick describes his situation to Big Daddy, explaining why he has been unable to continue his career as a sports announcer:

> Sit in a glass box watching games I can't play? Describing what I can't do while other players do it? Sweating out their disgust and confusion in contests I'm not fit for? Drinkin' a coke, half bourbon, so I can stand it?. . .time just outran me, Big Daddy--got there first. . ." (97).

While Chance refuses to accept the life of dependency which is all that is available after the parade passes by, Brick is more than willing to accept dependency as an alternative to movement.

Amanda spoke of financial dependency in the lines quoted at the beginning of this chapter, but other forms of dependency become associated with the spectator character after Menagerie. Blanche's

desire for alcohol and Alma's "little white pills" represent other methods of escape which the spectators develop in order to minimize the frustrations of immobility. Brick is willing to shut life out in favor of the consolation of alcohol. The image of the perfume shop full of "tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors" which reminds Tom of Laura at the conclusion to Menagerie, is transformed in Cat into a collection of liquor bottles. The design notes for Cat specify that a prominent feature of the set should be:

> a huge console combination of radio-phonograph. . .TV set and liquor cabinet, bearing and containing many glasses and bottles, all in one piece, which is a composition of muted silver tones, and the opalescent tones of reflecting glass, a chromatic link, this thing, between the sepia (tawny gold) tones of the interior and the cool (white and blue) tones of the gallery and sky (xiv).

The interior set, Brick and Maggie's bedroom, represents the world of performance. While the grotesque Pollitt family parade is always trying to force its way into this room, Brick constantly attempts to escape out of it to the silvery spectator world of the gallery. Brick's dependence on alcohol is symbolic of his desire to escape from the fecund, rather vulgar, world of performance into the cool, pure, and watery land of the spectators.

What Williams refers to as Brick's "tragic elegance" is highlighted by the desperate nature of the performances which surround him. Everyone except for Brick is frantically struggling for something: Big Daddy for life, Big Momma for love, Maggie for a future, and Mae and Gooper for a plantation. Brick, on the other hand, explains:

> I'm sorry, Big Daddy. My head don't work any more and it's hard for me to understand how anybody could care if he lived or died or was dying or cared about anything but whether or not there was liquor left in the bottle and so I said what I said without thinking. In some ways I'm no better than the others, in some ways worse because I'm less alive. Maybe it's being alive that makes them lie, and being almost <u>not</u> alive makes me sort of accidentally truthful-- (111-112).

In the course of the play it turns out to be the burlesque performers who are "accidentally truthful," and not the detached Brick, whose abstractions cause him to consistently evade the truth. Brick searches for a "mechanical click" which arrives after a suitable amount of alcohol has been consumed and brings him the peace he desires. The liquid nature of his obssession further separates him from the concrete and earth-bound performers.

Brick's metaphor of sitting "in a glass box watching games I can't play" reveals that, as in previous plays, the spectator is shut out of the world of physical performance. Brick is trapped in the slow suffocation of the glass world, as he has run there in an attempt to protect himself from the knowledge that the death of his college pal Skipper taught him. Desire having taught him its horrible lesson, that the other side is Death, Brick tries to protect himself from it with his glass walls. While the glass box offers Brick some protection from his increasingly desperate wife, Maggie, his father, Big Daddy, has no trouble getting through to Brick. Big Daddy, the consummate performer, tells Brick: "All my life I been like a doubled up fist. . . --Poundin', smashin', drivin'!. . .(76). Having lived a life of

"poundin'" and "smashin'," Big Daddy has no difficulty exposing and shattering Brick's narcissistic mirror. A literal glass is smashed in the middle of their encounter in Act Two. The stage directions state: "Brick wheels on his crutch and hurls his glass across the room shouting . . . .Brick is transformed, as if a quiet mountain blew suddenly up in volcanic flame" (101). The splintering of the glass symbolically causes a crack in Brick's facade which allows his sublimated emotions to escape. What Brick has tried to conceal in his glass box is the knowledge of himself that his final conversation with Skipper taught him: the depth of his narcissism in its multiple facets--homosexuality, self-involvement, and the obsessive desire for the unattainable.

The liquor cabinet functions for Brick as the menagerie has for Laura. It is an escape from the world of performance, a reflection of the self, and a symbol of frozen desire. Laura never left her "blue mirror," but the spectators who leave the crystal tower undergo a slow dissolution, ending up floating down the river in a boat that's taking them nowhere. The handsome, god-like Brick's brand of bourbon is ironically named Echo Spring, representing another manifestation of the narcissistic mirror-pond. Not only Brick, but his wife Margaret is caught up in the obsession with his narcissistic reflection, just as Skipper fatally was. Maggie tells Brick, explaining why she can't be unfaithful to him: "I can't see a man but you! Even with my eyes closed, I just see you! Why don't you get ugly, Brick, why don't you please get fat or ugly or something so I could stand it?" (24) In this speech Maggie reveals the depth of her entanglement in the fascination of physical reflection. Maggie's desire for the unattainable hero's shell leads her to join him in his glass box. "I'm not living with you.

We occupy the same cage" (19), she exclaims to Brick. Later, she cries, "WHY!--Am I so catty?--Cause I'm consumed with envy an' eaten up with longing!-- (22). Her image of herself as "a cat on a hot tin roof" is an image of static endurance, as Maggie admits to Brick that she is unable to "jump off the roof" (23).

At one point in the first act Maggie identifies herself with Diana the moon-goddess. When Mae brings the bow of a bow and arrow set into Brick and Maggie's room, Maggie explains:

> Why Sister Woman--that's my Diana Trophy. Won it at the intercollegiate archery contest on the Ole Miss campus.--Brick and I still have our special archer's license. We're going deer hunting on Moon Lake as soon as the season starts. I love to run with the dogs through chilly woods, run, run, leap over obstructions-- (20).

Maggie is making an ironic association between herself and the goddess of chastity in this speech, but she is also identifying herself with the ancient White Goddess of the moon, who as Robert Graves has noted, "demanded that man should pay woman spiritual and sexual homage" (11). Brick, as Diana's hunting companion, is a symbolic Adonis, the beautiful lover gored in the genitals who dies an untimely death. As companion to the White Goddess he must pay homage to her, thus his forced sexual act with Maggie at the conclusion to the play, of which Bernard F. Dukore has written: "Brick exercises virility, but in doing so he is emasculated; Maggie takes the initiative and leads him around like a child, dangling the key to the liquor cabinet before him as she leads him to bed" (100). In either case the association with the moon-goddess results in a sexual wound which cannot be healed.

Brick makes repeated references to the moon in the final act of the play, and his attempted escapes from the performance stage to the gallery are identified as attempts to escape to the moon. As passive, reflective satellite, the moon is a fitting metaphor for Brick; it both gazes down from an unreachable height, and is a reflective facade. Brick's withering gaze greatly disturbs Maggie when she catches sight of it in the dresser mirror in Act One:

> Margaret: [She catches sight of him in the mirror, gasps slightly, wheels about to face him. Count ten.]
> --Why are you looking at me like that?
>
> Brick [Whistling softly, now]:
> Like what, Maggie?
>
> Margaret [intensely, fearfully]:
> The way y' were lookin' at me just now, befo' I caught your eye in the mirror and you started t' whistle! (11)

The entrapment of Maggie, who claims to be a performer, is revealed in this action. In the above interaction Maggie can see in the mirror what she is incapable of seeing face to face--Brick's withering deadness. The mirror's reflection, in its two-dimensional flatness and projection of illusion, is a pitiful venue for revelation, especially self-revelation; yet, Maggie attempts later in this scene to seek her own identity in the mirror (32). It is indicative of her obsession with physical facades that even after what we can only assume is a failed attempt to define her identity in the mirror, Maggie tries to explain to Brick how others see her by making him look at her image in the mirror (33). This attempt to illuminate Brick fails. Maggie wishes to show Brick her sexual warmth and the warmth she arouses in other men, but the

cool surface of the mirror is an unsuitable medium for the transmission of this knowledge. While Maggie in the opening act tries to represent herself as the performer who can counterpoint Brick's spectator apathy, her potential as a performer is limited by the fact that she is in thrall to his reflection, and obsessed by physical facades. Maggie is thus drowning with Brick in Echo Spring.

A discussion of Cat is complicated by the existence of two published versions of the play. The "original" version of the third act, and the "Broadway" version inspired by Elia Kazan, depict contradictory endings to the play. In the original version, Brick continues his dissolution into immobility and self-reflection. The play concludes with Brick repeating a line of Big Daddy's, "Wouldn't it be funny if that were true." Both spectator son and performer father remain to the end of the play incapable of receiving or giving love. True to his behavior in Act One, Brick refuses to willingly perform his part in Maggie's scheme to have a child and take over Big Daddy's plantation. The play ends with Brick's virtual rape by Maggie, while Big Daddy ends his performance howling with rage at the spectre of death, refusing to "go gentle into that good night." Brick and Big Daddy remain polarized, neither one redeemed or mitigated by the other. The impasse of the play's ending acknowledges the depth of the gulf between the spectator and the performer--one merely watching the parade go by, the other desperately wanting to remain at the head of it, feverishly trying to outrace time.

In the Broadway version of the play Brick becomes a reluctant performer, being brought back into the parade by the redemptive nature of his revelation to Big Daddy and by the life and vitality of Maggie.

Big Daddy, conversely, willingly gives up his life of "poundin'" and "smashin'" and learns "to touch things real gentle." Brick will, it is assumed, take over the performance that Big Daddy, now a spectator, has let go of. The return of Big Daddy in the third act results in the further development of his character through speeches which reveal Big Daddy's ability to finally transcend the limitations of performance when faced with death. Big Daddy goes off not cursing the dark, but accepting the inevitable movement of time with grace, and hoping to pass on his life's work to Maggie's promised child. He develops a generosity and even tenderness of spirit, taking on the best of the spectator attributes, while transcending the selfishness and vulgarity of the performer. He is able to let the parade pass him by as an act of heroism, rather than defeat.

The redemption of Brick in the Broadway version appears incongruous in terms of the symbolism of the earlier acts of the play. It is also awkward in terms of what it means to want to be a spectator, to live, as Big Daddy says, on "the other side of the moon, death's country, son" (104). The breaking of the glass which Big Daddy brings about should not result in any redemption or integration, but like Blanche's shattered mirror, should further the disintegration of Brick. Brick cannot bear to have his mirror-image shattered; his ideal friendship must remain on the moon in its pristine, chaste state. Brought down to earth by Maggie and Big Daddy it becomes a deeper wound. As Maggie explains it to Brick:

> It was one of those beautiful, ideal things they tell about in the Greek legends, it couldn't be anything else, you being you, and that's what made it so sad, that's what made

> it so awful, because it was love that never could be carried through to anything satisfying or even talked about plainly . . . .Brick I do understand all about it! I--I think it was--noble!. . .My only point, the only point that I'm making, is life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is--all--over. . . . --You two had something that had to be kept on ice, yes, incorruptible, yes!--and death was the only icebox where you could keep it . . ." (41-42).

Like Blanche's rejection of her homosexual husband, Brick's rejection of Skipper entraps him in the quicksands of immobility through his knowledge of his own guilt and failure. Maggie, as Narcissus's Echo, or Adonis' Diana, cannot save her lover from his own destruction. As a "cat on a hot tin roof" she is not even capable of rescuing herself. Nor can Big Daddy resurrect Brick by making him confess what he is incapable of admitting about himself and Skipper. For Brick to become a performer would deny what Brick represents. Charles E. May has written of Brick's psychological state:

> Brick's detachment is an existential levelling of values that makes no one thing more important than another. It is the result of an awareness of absurdity that, as Albert Camus says, can come at any time with no discernible cause and that resists any attempts at psychological explanation (280).

Brick's image of himself as "sitting in a glass box" is strikingly similar to an image that Camus uses in Le Mythe de Sisyphe to describe what he refers to as "human beings secreting inhumanity:"

> In certain hours of lucidity, the mechanical aspect of their gestures, their senseless pantomime, makes stupid everything around them. A man speaking on the telephone behind a glass partition--one cannot hear him but observes his trivial gesturing. One asks oneself, why is he alive? This malaise in front of man's own inhumanity, this incalculable letdown when faced with the image of what we are, this "nausea," as a contemporary writer calls it, also is the absurd. Likewise the stranger who at certain seconds comes to meet us in a mirror, the familiar and yet alarming brother we encounter in our own photographs is also the absurd (20-21).

Brick sees himself as the man in the glass box gesticulating meaninglessly and absurdly, thus his disgust with himself is a feeling of nausea at his own absurdity. His drinking is an attempt to escape from his vision of himself.

Williams had reservations at the time of the Broadway revision about the alteration of the play's conclusion. He wrote in the Note of Explanation included in the publication of both versions of the play:

> I felt that the moral paralysis of Brick was a root thing in his tragedy, and to show a dramatic progression would obscure the meaning of that tragedy in him and. . .I don't believe that a conversation, however revelatory, ever effects so immediate a change in the heart or even conduct of a person in Brick's state of spiritual disrepair (*Cat*, 152).

Critics have agreed with Williams' reservations about the revision.

Benjamin Nelson writes: "In the final act, Brick does not undergo any physical or mental alteration because of his dissection by his father, and this is as it should be. Big Daddy has in no way solved Brick's problem. . . (215). Ruby Cohn points out, "The original version of the play stresses the contrast between Big Daddy's acceptance, and Brick's rejection, of the lies that are life" (114).

In Act Two of Cat Brick has identified his two possible modes of escape as liquor and death (111). His choice is liquor, although the two choices are not so far apart. Drinking for Brick is a method of producing the mechanical senselessness he longs for. He willfully chooses to be a spectator, to merely watch the parade and thus avoid the taint of its fecundity. Trapped like a glass maiden, Brick cannot expose his one sacred thing, his friendship with Skipper, to the light. Because of his need to hide from full exposure, Brick becomes as fragile as the spectator maidens who cannot step away from their glass houses. The liquor cabinet containing Echo Spring is Brick's glass house, so in the revised version Maggie tosses the bottles off the balcony, proclaiming, "Echo Spring has gone dry," thus signaling his release. In the original version Maggie merely temporarily locks it up, answering Brick's question, "How are you going to conceive a child by a man in love with his liquor?" with the response, "By locking his liquor up and making him satisfy my desire before I unlock it!" (148)

Critics, not surprisingly, side with Maggie as being the "sympathetic" character of the play. But in so doing they tend to overestimate her abilities as a performer, or as a proponent of the "vital life force." For instance, Sacksteder admits to the conundrum of his interpretation of Maggie, when he writes, "to the extent that it is

Maggie's show, the tendencies of the drama are affirmative, and it is accordingly suprising that Williams himself seems to have preferred Cat 1" (264). Susan Neal Mayberry writes, "It is only Maggie who is fully perceptive of the struggle going on around her and within her. . . .the only one aware of the true significance of the conflict between illusion and reality" (363). However, the fact that Maggie in the original version persists in clinging to a man who just as persistently rejects her, reveals that she is as caught up as any other character in the conflict between illusion and reality. The lack of mutuality in Maggie and Brick's relationship intimates clearly that her desperate clinging to it is not particularly life-affirming, but it is rather the result of an obsession as sterile as Brick's obsessions with Skipper and Echo Spring. Her "rape" of Brick at the conclusion of the play is further evidence that Williams did not see her character as completely life affirming, nor her role as the center of the play.

The sexual wound resulting from Brick's relationship with Skipper causes him, like Narcissus, to fall into sterility and dissolution. As Brick is a willing participant, obsessed with love's wound, his redemption seems unlikely. Neither Maggie nor Big Daddy can give Brick his life back to him once he has "not lost but just quit playing" (14). Brick's tragic fault of "being crowned with Laurel at an early age," which he shares with Chance Wayne, dooms him as it does Chance, to a wasted, misguided life of longing after unattainable ideals. Both Brick and Chance end up, Adonis-like, castrated at the conclusions to each play.

Sweet Bird of Youth opens with Echo Spring bubbling up in an anonymous bed in a Louisiana seaside hotel. The play contains a great

deal of discussion between the main characters, Princess and Chance, concerning the difference between spectators and performers. Chance envisions himself as a performer, yet he is critically blocked in his attempts to fulfill this vision by his fear, even terror, of performance itself. Unable to accept the alternative of following along after the parade, Chance ends up as a spectator in the only arena in which he actually can perform--the sexual circus. At the conclusion of Sweet Bird Chance refuses the only possibility for performance left to him, as the Princess' paid companion, and in its place accepts the role of sexually frozen spectator. Like Brick, Chance retires, willfully castrated, to the moon, "that withered, withering country of time coming after time not meant to come after" (Sweet Bird, 33).

Critics who see the conclusion of Sweet Bird as an act of redemption on Chance's part, and there are many who do[1], fail to recognize the ironic tone of the play and overestimate Williams' interest in writing overtly "Christian" plays. The opening of the play on Easter Sunday with the Hallelujah Chorus wafting on the breeze through the gallery door ironically counterpoints the Princess's struggle to awaken from the "dead" of her drugged sleep, as well as the ensuing attempts of both Chance and Princess to "resurrect" their dead careers. Any reference to a spiritual resurrection from death is purely ironic, as these characters do not attempt to perform in the realm of the spirit, but in that of the flesh only, thus their obsessions with the passage of time and the fading of physical beauty and sexual potency. Brick's pronouncement about the difference between himself and Boss Finley, "he was called down from the hills to preach hate. I was born here to make love," is not a reference to any Christian dichotomy

between himself and the Boss as representatives of good and evil. For Chance, love is a mechanical act, not a spiritual or even an emotional experience. He repeatedly avoids truth with abstractions of language, as Brick has, and it is erroneous to associate Chance with any Christian ideal of love, or to see any overtly Christian message in the play. Any Christian allusions refer to a world completely outside of the context of the characters and actions of the drama, and these allusions exist to emphasize the separation of the characters from this other world.

Chance's love affair with Heavenly has gradually corrupted and finally castrated her. Chance's own sexual performances corrupt, and eventually castrate him. He boasts to Princess of his performance in the New York social register: "I gave people more than I took. Middle aged people I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls? Understanding, appreciation! An absolutely convincing show of affection" (47-48). Chance claims to have been "born to make love," yet all he is capable of is a "convincing show of affection." Subjects such as unrequited love, sexual desire, and the redeeming qualities of passion, which Williams once treated with seriousness, are now looked at with wry humor, revealed in lines like the Princess' self-reflective comment, "Heart? Oh, no that's gone, that's. . ." (35), and in her ironic comment on Chance and Heavenly's love, "Something permanent in a world of change?" (50)

Chance offers Princess an impassioned declaration of his philosophy of the world:

> the biggest of all differences in this world is between the ones that had or have pleasure in love and those that haven't or hadn't any pleasure in love, but just watched it

> with envy, sick envy. . . .I don't mean just ordinary pleasure or the kind you can buy, I mean great pleasure, and nothing that's happened to me or Heavenly since can cancel out the many long nights without sleep when we gave each other such pleasure in love as very few people can look back on in their lives. . .(50).

The Princess' mechanical response is, "No question, go on with your story" (50). Chance and the Princess have, as Eric Bentley says of the characters in Cat, "an obsessively and mechanically sexual interpretation of life" (59-60). They live in an exclusively physical arena, and suffer the consequences of this interpretation of life. Castration is their inevitable fate, and for them it represents a premature death. Chance and Princess remark near the conclusion of the play on the fate that awaits them:

> Chance: Time--who could beat it, who could defeat it ever? Maybe some saints and heroes, but not Chance Wayne. I lived on something, that--time?
>
> Princess: Yes, time.
>
> Chance: . . .Gnaws away, like a rat gnaws off its own foot caught in a trap, and then, with its foot gnawed off and the rat set free, couldn't run, couldn't go, bled and died. . . .(122-123).

At the very conclusion of the play Chance comes to a dim recognition of the limitations of his vision. He sees his mirror image dissolve and escape his grasp, but in the end he can only gnaw off his own foot, rather than fleeing and escaping from the entrapment of his obsession with physical reflections and hollow facades.

Chance is a parody performer, always attempting to create a show of performance. His phony show is painfully absurd, from his attempt to blackmail the Princess in Scene One, to his "big phony display" around town in the Princess' Cadillac in Scene Two, to his submission to castration by Boss Finley's son in Scene Three. Even in his final act, Chance seems to be misjudging the location of, and misplacing the responsibility for, his moral corruption. Chance fits M.H. Abrams' definition of the "naive hero," who "acts in a way grossly inappropriate to the actual circumstances," and "whose invincible simplicity or obtuseness leads him to persist in putting an interpretation on affairs which the knowing reader. . .is called on to alter and correct" (92-93). By consenting to castration, Chance is assuming that his guilt can be removed by a physical operation, thus continuing his insistent belief in the pure physicality of life.

The Princess is a parody of the Lady of Shalott figure. Like her she has been unwillingly forced into the role of the spectator, in her case by the curse of age. The Princess's "blue mirror" is the movie screen where she sees not the parade of life passing by, but the parade of time in her own face. Ironically, all the Princess can see is herself in the mirror. She tells Chance: "The screen's a very clear mirror. There's a thing called a close-up. The camera advances and you stand still and your head, your face, is caught in the frame of the picture with a light blazing on it and all your terrible history screams while you smile" (34). The Princess' "magic web" is the alter image which she has created larger than life on the screen; the supposed death of this image has caused her to withdraw from the world of performance into the silvery realm of palm gardens by the sea. Images from "The

Lady of Shalott" and from earlier plays are treated satirically in _Sweet Bird_. The cracked mirror/glass appears, but this time instead of the romantic symbol of love shattering the lady's glass heart, it is in parody form:

> Chance: You had a little accident with your glasses.
>
> Princess: What was that?
>
> Chance: You fell on your face with them on.
>
> Princess: Were they completely demolished?
>
> Chance: One lens cracked (24-25).

There is also a parody of the attempt to escape from the tragic past by withdrawing into the glass house:

> Princess [_drinking_]: Please shut up, I'm _forgetting_!
>
> Chance [_taking the glass from her_]: Okay, go on forget. There's nothing better than that, I wish I could do it. . . .
>
> Princess: I can, I will. I'm forgetting. . .I'm forgetting. . . (22).

Even the narcissism of the spectator is ironic. The lost lover the spectator longs for in the Princess's case is herself, the screen image she was once able to create. As the Princess explains to Chance: "It gives you an awful trapped feeling this, this memory block. . . .I feel as if someone I loved had died lately, and I don't want to remember who it could be" (28).

In _Camino Real_ Marguerite says to Jaques, "Time betrays us and we betray each other" (529). _Sweet Bird_ is an elaboration of this theme. Chance says of Heavenly's image on the photograph which accidentally became distributed, "The water is just beginning to lap over her body

like it desired her like I did and still do and will always, always" (50). Later, in Scene Two, Tom Jr. says of Heavenly: "She's lying out on the beach like a dead body washed up on it" (59). Chance's love affair symbolizes the desire of the narcissistic hero to unwittingly drown the thing he loves. Everything works in the play to submerge the ideal creature, Heavenly, and to taint her with corruption. In the story "Three Players of a Summer Game" the narrator describes "physical beauty" as, "of all human attributes the most incontinently used and wasted, as if whoever made it despised it, since it is made so often only to be disgraced by painful degrees and drawn through the streets in chains" (342). Beauty in Sweet Bird is the one thing most betrayed by time's passage.

Susan Mayberry defines "the grotesque" as:

> an outgrowth of the contemporary distrust of any cosmic order, an interest in the irrational, and a frustration at man's position in the universe. In a sense, then, the grotesque is a merging of the comic and the tragic; through physical or spiritual deformity and abnormal action, an individual reflects both a comic deviation from the rational social order and a tragic loss of faith in the moral universe" (359-360).

While the Princess is a merging of the comic and the tragic, of slapstick and grandeur, Chance is a grotesque character who is neither comic nor "tragically elegant." This, I believe, is a flaw in the play, which Williams attempted to rectify by the "apology" of Chance at the very conclusion. Whether this apology works is questionable. Jacob H. Adler has written, "in asking us to recognize ourselves in him, Chance

is not really asking us to recognize our own capacity for evil (which would be legitimate) but attempting to justify his own. . ." (48). The apology may be Williams' recognition of the lack of sympathy that Chance's fate elicits.

The ending of the play is an enactment of an earlier line of Chance's: "Imagine a whole lifetime of dreams and ambitions and hopes dissolving away in one instant. . ." (49). The play enacts the dissolving of Chance's vision, and the resurrection of the Princess' beloved self-image. The Princess has said to Chance, "Well sooner or later, at some point in your life, the thing that you lived for is lost or abandoned, and then. . .you die, or find something else" (35). At the conclusion Chance chooses to die with the love god persona he has created rather than abandon it for something outside the self-reflective world. Chance's final act is actually only a parody of self-sacrifice. He sacrifices his genitals for his own sins, but he has accused the Princess of having already performed this act for him in the opening scene. At the conclusion, Chance has to choose between two forms of castration, one of which is slavery to the Princess' sexual domination, and the other, a graphic and masochistic imitation of Adonis. Chance plays out his self-given role as love god to its ultimate conclusion.

Unless the reader or audience can believe in the sincerity of Chance's pronouncements about "love," and especially in his love for Heavenly, the ending of the play fails to be tragic. One can find many reasons to discredit everything that Chance says, and to feel impatient disdain for his simple-mindedness. Yet, it is Chance's childlike simplicity which is his one redeeming characteristic as well as his tragic fault. His simplicity, rather than any predilection for evil,

leads to his corruption. The audience, however, must believe in the the sincerity of Chance's simplicity--to believe for example that he is honest when he says "I gave people more than I took," and "I was born to make love." His theory about "the great difference between people in this world" is not without merit, it is merely not quite adequate.

There is something so grotesque as to be obscene about Chance's phoniness, arrogance, and lack of insight. He represents naked naivety, greed, ambition, and envy, so devoid of dignity as to make us, as witnesses to his drama, squirm. The "obscenity" of the ending, its graphicness, also challenges our comfortable notions of human dignity and decency. By defying rationality, as Boss Finley also defies it, Chance is a threat to our notions of the rationality of ambition. The true spectator's apathy challenges our belief in the validity of action as the appropriate response to experience. When Chance gives in to his ~~defacers~~ mutilators, he denies that there is any appropriate ambition available to him, just as Brick's refusal to act and function in his given roles challenges Big Daddy's social order, and places Maggie's future ambitions in jeopardy. Chance's naivete regarding his conception of "love" and his role as degenerate love god mirrors Brick's naivete regarding the nature of his "one true thing."

Chance orders Fly in the opening lines of the play: "Open the shutters a little. Hey, I said a little, not much, not that much!" (14), and, by the conclusion, the shutters on Chance's illusion have opened only a little. He fails to redeem his "terrible history" by any positive motion, or to continue on and accept the consequences of his actions in a heroic way.

The characters in Sweet Bird form a grotesque parade through a "blue mirror". There are repeated references in the play to things which refract light--Boss Finley repeatedly discusses diamonds and his rally takes place in the Crystal Ballroom--and to things which reflect or project light--in Chance and Princess' hotel room the fourth wall is a mirror, while in the lounge the back walls serves as a television screen. Significantly, there is a limited attempt at realism in the play. The Princess says at the opening, "My vision's so cloudy!" (24), and the play's vision itself is cloudy, being set in St. Cloud. Arthur Ganz has said of the setting of Sweet Bird, it "is always closer to the mysterious country of Camino Real than to anything in the southern United States" (200). Sweet Bird is set in the shadowy world of the spectators, as most of Williams' late plays will be, and it reveals the alteration of the tone of his plays from sympathy to dark irony.

Endnotes

[1]For example, see M. Roulet, "_Sweet Bird of Youth_: Williams' Redemptive Ethic." _Cithara_ III (1964): 31-36, or M.A. Corrigan, "Memory, Dream, and Myth in The Plays of Tennessee Williams", _Renascence_ 28 (Spring 1976): 155-167, or Peter L. Hays, "Tennessee Williams" Use of Myth in _Sweet Bird of Youth_", _Educational Theatre Journal_ 18 (October 1966): 255-258, and Arthur Ganz, "The Desperate Morality of the Plays of Tennessee Williams", _The American Scholar_ XXXI (1962): 278-294.

Chapter Three

The Last Decade: Death and Desire on the Vieux Carré

> It is extremely unattractive and humiliating and sleep-destroying to still be at my age a sensualist as well as a romanticist (Williams, Memoirs, 287).

Vieux Carré, the most remarkable of Williams' plays of the 1970's and early '80's, largely abandons the central spectator/performer conflict around which the earlier plays were formed. This work is an impressionistic memory play, and like a "dream play" it depicts not the working out of a particular plot or conflict, but a state of mind. It portrays what Martin Esslin describes as "the projection into concrete terms of psychological realities" (301). The play depicts the state of mind of the dreamer, who is the playwright himself. In Vieux Carré Williams uses the dramatic characters to depict the conflicts of his own mind. The subject of the play is the relationship of the past to the present in the mind of the author, and thus Vieux Carré is linked more closely with Williams' Memoirs than with any of his earlier or later works.

Vieux Carré depicts Williams as a young man in the character of The Writer, who is both a character in the play and the narrator of it. However, the true narrator, or "dreamer," is the author, now a man in his mid-sixties, who has recently published his Memoirs. The Writer explains the significance of this period in his life at the opening of Part Two of the play. Speaking to the audience, he says:

> Instinct, it must have been directed me here, to the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, down country as a--river flows no plan [sic]. I couldn't have consciously, deliberately, selected a better place than here to discover--to encounter--my true nature (69).

When The Writer goes out to meet his future at the conclusion to the play, this journey will take him in a circle back to this place in time which was the realization or foreshadowing of his future. The "nature" which the character discovers is his sexual nature, however the author as "autobiographer" or dreamer realizes that it was at this point in time and at this place that he discovered his true nature as a creature of flesh. The consciousness behind the work (the dreamer) sees a deeper significance to this sojourn in the Vieux Carré than the character of the Narrator (his younger self) does. The dreamer's life has turned him in a circle to the point where he must, like his long-abandoned fellow tenants, confront the fact that flesh is something which is devoured and which is itself a devourer. His flight into the future at the conclusion of the play is a "desperate undertaking" (116) as he has unwittingly seen to what physical and psychological point this journey will take him. In this sense, the Vieux Carré symbolizes the destination of all flesh for Williams--it is the "old quarter" not just of New Orleans, in which the play is set, but of life itself.

The play is set in an ancient New Orleans rooming house, now in a state of mouldering decay, and haunted by the moans and cries, and occasional appearances of its former tenants. The Writer describes the house as a "waiting station." For him it functions as a station on his way out into the world, but for the rest of the tenants it is a waiting

station on their way out of it. As dreamer, the Writer is now in the same situation as they are in. The tenants are, for the most part, spectators, and the house is the locus of their immobility. It is the last place left for them to run or creep to, and becomes a prison from which they cannot escape. Significantly, Nursie says of Mrs. Wire, the landlady: "she got the idea that 722 Toulouse Street is the address of a jailhouse. And she's the keeper--" (10-11).

The theme of Vieux Carré is psychological evasion. The empoverished inhabitants of the aging house are, for the most part, unable to face the most horrible truths about themselves. Both Jane and Nightingale evade until the last possible moment acknowledging the fact of their imminent deaths. The two elderly sisters, Mary Maude and Miss Carrie endure imprisonment in a damp, lightless room, and scavenge the alley for scraps to keep from starving, yet insist that they have "positions to maintain." The landlady, Mrs. Wire, though prone to bouts of brutal realism in reference to her indigent tenants, is herself entrapped in madness and illusion by the end of the play.

The theme of evasion is also important to Williams' Memoirs. Although the author begins this work with a statement of his desire to reveal the truth, the Memoirs are about actions performed in the outside world and mostly avoid reflective consideration of the motives for action, or of the motives and themes behind Williams' writing. The Memoirs reveal Williams as a performer, and evade discussing the reflective side of the artist who, in his plays, was so absorbed with the conflict between self-reflection and action. Vieux Carré is also a type of memoir, being based on actual events in Williams' life. In the multiple characters of the play we see a more complex inner portrait of

the artist than the actual Memoirs provide. In effect, The Memoirs present the story of the man as performer, while the play presents a portrait of the playwright as spectator. Vieux Carré serves to explain, and perhaps apologize for, the problem of evasion in the Memoirs.

Vieux Carré illustrates the hopelessness, as well as the necessity, of our evasion of the truth about ourselves. There is an absurd and grotesque pathos to Nightingale's refusal to admit that he is dying of tuberculosis, yet the only dignity he has left is his romantic pose as a falsely persecuted outcast. The Writer confronts him: "A man has got to face everything sometime and call it by its true name, not try to escape it by--cowardly--!--evasion--" (51). Later, however, The Writer perceives the error of this stance when he explains the necessity of Nightingale's evasion to Mrs. Wire:

> Writer [sotto voce, near tears]: Be easy on him, he's dying.
>
> Mrs. Wire: Not here. He's defamed this place as infested with bedbugs to try to explain away the blood he coughs on his pillow.
>
> Writer: That's--his last defense against--
>
> Mrs. Wire: The truth, there's no defense against the truth (74).

The truth strips Nightingale of even the posture of dignity, and when it is shouted at him through his cubicle door by Mrs. Wire, he can no longer maintain his defense against death. He is carried off to the charity ward after admitting with pathetic pride that he is not a Nightingale after all, but a member of "the Baton Rouge Rossignols" (76), a name which translates both as "nightingale" and as "a piece of

unsaleable merchandise." Similarly, after Jane admits to her lover, Tye, the fact that she is dying of leukemia, she immediately regrets the admission, and confesses to him: "I've really got no reason to hit a goddamn soul but myself that lacked pride to keep my secrets" (108). Not long after, when Jane is alone with The Writer, he takes off her watch to wind it and tells her, "I'm afraid its broken" (112). Jane's future has run out, and she is left to face the thing which most horrifies the spectator--the stillness of stopped time--alone. By admitting to the truth, both Nightingale and Jane lose their defenses against it.

The truths about flesh which the tenants of the house, and certainly Williams himself, attempt to evade are its dualism and duplicity. They are, as creatures of flesh, both parasites and prisoners. Their fleshly nature turns them into devourers, while as prisoners of flesh they are being devoured from within. This situation is depicted symbolically in the relationship between the tenants and their landlady, Mrs. Wire. The tenants refer to themselves as Mrs. Wire's prisoners, yet she counters their attacks upon her by calling them "Deadbeats all!", and by referring to them as parasites and dependents. The atttacks and counter-attacks are attempts to evade the double nature of the situation; the tenants evade their roles as parasites by calling themselves prisoners, while Mrs. Wire justifies her abuse of them by referring to the fact that they are living off her, and ruining the character of her "historical" house.

As prisoners of desire, the spectators are entrapped in their own bodies, thus the house itself functions as a symbol of the body as prison and tomb for those entrapped in physical desire. The house

represents the dreamer's body, in which he is entrapped as the ultimate spectator, watching voyeuristically the death agonies of the other tenants. Symbolically, the author as dreamer is entrapped in the house of his decaying body, with its haunting memories, and endless conflicts between the different aspects of his psyche.

Vieux Carré is essentially a lament of age and alienation. Williams depicts himself throughout the Memoirs as a prisoner of compulsive physical desires. He exhibits the compulsive and unending need for touch in order to escape from his overpowering sense of loneliness. However, the attempt to escape one's sense of alienation from the world through physical connection with others merely results in a dependency upon the body. This in turn becomes a form of entrapment in the body, which in the Vieux Carré is set on a course of relentless decay. Vieux Carré illustrates that if touch is our way of reconnecting ourselves to the world, then we are doomed to alienation, as our bodies are going to become our prisons and then our tombs.

Mrs. Wire represents the "begrudging mother," and as such she plays a central role in Williams' psychological self-portrait. Mrs. Wire is obsessed with the role of motherhood and begrudgingly adopts her adult tenants as children. However, even though she needs to control them and to be obeyed by them, she deeply resents their dependency upon her. She is the mother who resents her role as life-giver because it is an eating away of herself. As a begrudging mother, Mrs. Wire both feeds and starves her adopted children, giving them such meagre sustenance that they are forced to live in a state of semi-starvation. The appetites which most arouse her wrath are those for food and sex, both types of devouring in the imaginative world of the play. Mrs. Wire's

horror of ravenous appetites results from her fear of being devoured herself.

Mrs. Wire's tenants have been reduced, like infant children, into mere appetites because they are being physically and psychologically devoured from within. Jane explains her future situation to her lover: "What's understandable is that your present convenience is about to become an encumbrance. An invalid, of no use, financial or sexual. Sickness is repellent, Tye, demands more care and gives less and less in return" (110). The play dramatizes the desperation of the characters to avoid admitting that as creatures of flesh they are the devourers of themselves and of others.

Nightingale, a symbol of the whole house in microcosm, is both a prisoner of sexual desire and a sexual parasite. He explains to The Writer: "Little man, you are sensual, but I, I--am rapacious" (49). Desire in the Vieux Carré is essentially reduced to commerce and predation. One progresses from being valuable merchandise--Tye's price is, as he claims, "a hundred dollars"--into unsaleable merchandise. Jane refers to her own reduced condition when she tells Tye: "The Brazilian must have been blind drunk when he took a fancy to me in the Blue Lantern, mistook me for a hundred dollar girl" (96). Instead of the sound of the Brazilian coming up the stairs to purchase her, Jane soon hears the footsteps of the attendants carrying away Nightingale, now a piece of unwanted and unsaleable flesh.

The progression for the prisoners of desire is from seller to purchaser, and once one is a purchaser, the price keeps going up. Finally, one is merely a scavenger of stolen scraps. In the *Memoirs*, Williams recalls once exclaiming to a friend: "Oh, Christ, you don't

understand. There's nothing emptier, nothing more embarrassing than a streetcorner pickup. . . .each time a little bit of your heart is chipped off and thrown in the gutter" (287). Ironically, Mrs. Wire explains to The Writer about her necessary curtailment of Nightingale's scavenging activities: "I stop him from bringin' pickups in here at midnight that might stick a knife in the heart of anyone in the buildin' after they done it to him" (73); and The Writer reflects. "Oh--there's a price for things, that's something I've learned on the Vieux Carré. For everything you purchase in this marketplace you pay out of _here_! [_He thumps his chest._]" (43-44) In Williams' mind, homosexuals, as the greatest prisoners of desire, are those most tormented by the fact that flesh is reduced to merchandise on the vieux carré. The desperation of Nightingale's imprisonment in his desires is heard in his outcry to The Writer: "I have a fever you'd be lucky to catch, a fever to hold and be held! [_He throws off his tattered silk robe._] Hold me! Please, please hold me" (50). Calling the charity ward to come and collect him, Mrs. Wire exclaims, "the Nightingale is violent with fever" (89). Nightingale, like all prisoners of desire on the vieux carré, is tormented by his entrappment in the body. Sensualism and Romanticism in the Quarter are transformed into physical and psychological forms of torment.

Miss Carrie and Mary Maude are, like Nightingale, reduced to feverish appetites--in their case by the fact that they are half-mad for lack of food. They also scavenge the alleys at night for scraps, which, along with the pick-ups Nightingale brings home, Mrs. Wire ejects back into the street. Mrs. Wire's greatest targets of abuse are Nightingale and the sisters, as they are the most defenseless victims of the

appetites which so horrify her. Pathetically, scraps are their only source of sustenance, yet there is a rapaciousness to Nightingale's and the sisters' cravings which makes them both horrifying and highly comic. Mrs. Wire reduces the three of them to the most grotesque of metaphors, describing them as: "Two worthless dependents upon me, that pair of scavenger crones that creep out after dark. And I got that TB case spitting contagion wherever he goes, leaves a track of blood behind him like a chicken that's had its head chopped off" (72). While Mrs. Wire begrudgingly feeds and houses the sisters, her terror of the parasitic disease which is devouring Nightingale leads her to evict him. It is her overriding fear that she will become the devoured instead of the devourer.

Mrs. Wire, who relentlessly abuses her tenants with the truth about themselves, evades the truth about herself with reversions into dementia. In her hallucinations she is once again the mother of "the son took away from me by the late Mr. Wire and a--and a crooked lawyer" (77). The pathos of her madness is comic, and the relation to Williams' own portrait of his mother in the Memoirs is fairly apparent. In Williams' psychological self-portrait, at the heart of the adult is the figure of the mother who begrudges the fulfillment of the appetites. It is thus ironic that The Writer remonstrates: "Mrs. Wire, I'm not your child. I am nobody's child. Was maybe, but not now. I've grown into a man, about to take his first step out of this waiting station into the world." (107) The dreamer realizes that we always remain children of the reluctant life-giver and, in fact, that we carry the begrudging mother around with us as the voice which urges us to deny the fulfillment of the appetites, and as the voice which relentlessly

assaults us with the truth about ourselves. Just as we "can't escape from the truth," we cannot escape from the Puritan mother, the reluctant life-giver.

There are two figures in the house who exist apart from those in the position of evading their imminent decline into stillness. Aside from The Writer, who is merely waiting for the journey to begin, Tye and Nursie, for different reasons, stand outside of the panic and desperation of the spectators who surround them. Tye and Nursie are performers, although their performances rest on different sets of beliefs. They accept contradictory visions of the world as true, and their faith in, and acceptance of, their visions allows them to escape from the house which is slowly dissolving into oblivion.

Tye lives in a world where man is reduced to animal nature. In his theatre of performance, people devour one another, and he accepts the brutality of this, and the fact of the eventual consequences to himself of existing in this world. In Tye's vision, sexuality is reduced to a cannibalistic devouring. He can describe in detail, and with a certain relish, the horrible fate of the headliner at the stripshow, the Champagne Girl:

> Lupos are those big black dawgs that are used for attack. The Man has three of 'em, and when he patrols his territory at night, they sit in the back seat of his Lincoln, set up there, mouths wide open on their dagger teeth and their black eyes rollin' like dice in a nigger crapshooter's hands. And night before last, Jesus! he let 'em into the Champagne Girl's apartment, and they--well they ate her. Gnawed her tits off her ribs, gnawed her sweet little ass

> off. Of course the story is that the Champagne Girl entertained a pervert who killed her and ate her like that, but it's pretty well known it was them lupos that devoured that girl, under those ceiling mirrors and crystal chandeliers in her all white satin bedroom. --Yep--gone--the headliner-- . . . All champagne colored without face or body makeup on her, light gold like pale champagne and not a line, not a pore to be seen on her body! Was she meant for dawg food? I said, was she meant for dawg food? Those lupos ate that kid like she was their--last--supper. . . (98-99).

When The Man, Tye's boss, is denied the continuation of his sexual relations with the Champagne Girl, he has his dogs devour her, as if their relationship has actually been a devouring process all along. Similarly, Tye's rape of Jane, which occurrs just previous to this speech, is a devouring which gnaws away Jane's ability to continue to evade the fact of her immanent death.

In Clothes For a Summer Hotel, a later play, a character explains: "I just said "Yes"--I've said wittier things but none so appropriate to an occasion of unlimited license. Death is that: after many outraged cries of "no," well, its finally, "yes" and "yes" and "yes". . ." (61-62). In the scene of Tye's assault of Jane the same words are used, and serve to equate this act as a cannibalism of her by the flesh, of which Tye is a representative:

> Jane: The bed bit is finished between us. You're moving out today.
>
> [He slowly stumbles up, crosses to the table, and

gulps coffee, then grasps her arm and draws her to bed.]

No, no, no, no, no, no!

Tye: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!

[He throws her onto the bed and starts to strip her; she resists; he prevails.] (85-86)

In the animal world sex is not only a devouring process but this process is seen in sacred terms. The red and white--the blood in the white bedroom--is in Tye's terms a "last supper." Tye's definition of God is: dog = god. Similarly, in Suddenly Last Summer, Sebastian Venable sits atop a boat in the Galapagos Islands and watches birds tearing at the bodies of newly-hatched sea-turtles, and interprets this as a vision of God. He later offers himself as a sacrifice to this god, by being cannibalistically devoured by a group of young boys. His cousin Catherine attempts to explain the circumstances of his death:

Catharine: I tried to save him Doctor.

Doctor: From what? Save him from what?

Catharine: Completing!--a sort of!--image!--he had of himself as a sort of!--sacrifice to a!--terrible sort of a--

Doctor: --God?

Catherine: Yes, a--cruel one, Doctor! (267)

Williams once wrote in explanation of Suddenly Last Summer: "what the drama truly concerned was all human confusion and its consequence: violence ("Five Fiery Ladies," 131). Sebastian appears to confuse Darwinism with divinity, and as a result, to merely offer himself as a

sacrifice to Darwin's version of Nature. Tye also confuses natural religion, or primitive myth, with "the survival of the fittest." These characters express the tendency of the modern world to debase mythology and profane ritual. In place of the kind of mythic thought which would reintegrate us with the world, we tend toward violent myths of our own making, which only serve to further alienate us from ourselves and others.

Nursie is a primitive, or a representative of "natural man," in the sense that she is pre-modern in her sense of faith. Nursie is a performer in a world of absolute certainty and faith. She *lives* in a genuinely mythic world. When she enters the kitchen in the midst of the demented turmoil created after Mrs. Wire pours boiling water through the floorboards into the photographer's studio, the stage directions state: "*Nursie enters with black majesty. She is humming a church hymn softly, "He walks with me and he talks with me*" (59). On another occasion she sings softly "my home is on Jordan" (95). At the conclusion of the play The Writer sends Nursie upstairs to be Jane's last companion. As she is described in the stage directions, Nursie "*looms dimly behind him, a dark solemn fact*" (115). She takes up the cat, Beret, to Jane and we see for the first time this representative of the animal world. He proves to be, not black as his name would suggest, but "*white and fluffy as a piece of cloud*" (115). The cat is another representative of grace, like the lady in the alcove. Nursie is an appropriate bearer of this gift of grace, as she is the one character in the play enveloped in grace herself, who stands completely outside from and untouched by the appetites and evasions which grip the tenants and proprietoress of the house.

Jane has attempted to rely on touch--the connection of herself to another--to prolong her life. By submerging herself in the purely sensual she hoped to block out the thoughts which made her confront her immanent death. At one point Jane tells Mrs. Wire in defense of her relationship with Tye: "I've stopped thinking. Just let things happen to me" (10). However, the truth she attempts to evade is a physical truth and not an abstraction after all. She discovers that at the heart of the physical world in the unappeasable appetite for flesh. Tye's flame, which once seemed able to offer Jane a remission, is now a devouring one and once again "the tables have turned with a vengeance."

Jane is a romanticist who poses as a sensualist, just as Nightingale is a sensualist who poses as a romanticist. These two characters portray the "unattractive and humiliating and sleep-destroying" aspects of the dreamer (the author) himself, torn between romanticism and sensualism at a point in life where neither one can provide sustenance or dignity. In the old quarter of life they become parodies of themselves. For example, Nightingale's pose as a martyred Christian is made ludicrous by the fact that he is so devoid of grace that the lady in the alcove is invisible to him, just as Jane's pose as a sensualist is made grotesque by the brutality of her final encounter with Tye. In this quarter, the Vieux Carré, romanticism and sensualism are reduced to evasion and appetite. There is no escape for the sensualist nor for the romanticist in the Vieux Carré for both can only attempt to evade the fact that they are imprisoned in the decaying house of the body.

Conclusion

The movement of Williams' works is ultimately inward. The plays move further and further towards the enclosed, motionless domain of the spectator, until finally they are set within the mind of the spectator himself. One of the ironies of the modern age which Williams expresses in his depeiction of the spectator character is that modern man cannot bear stillness, and yet this is his fate. Once stillness is no longer equated with perfection, the movement of time produces a reaction of horror and desperation. The spectator is in conflict with Time itself, and his fate is necessarily tragic. Throughout the course of the plays the spectators move through a progression of dependencies in order to escape from Time: yet, as the late plays illustrate, there is finally nothing left for them to depend upon, and no escape available.

Sensuality becomes increasingly the way in which the alienated in Williams' works attempt to make contact with the world; however, rather than providing a release, sensuality becomes a form of entrapment in the body, which always betrays the spirit. Reconnecting oneself physically with the world in order to cure the alienation one feels doesn't work once one starts travelling towards the Vieux Carré. The body as locus is a reductive definition of the connection one has with the world. The body becomes a vehicle of death and one becomes meat, thus the obsession with devouring in _Vieux Carré_. Eventually there is no door to escape through anymore; when the body is locus one becomes one's own tomb.

Romanticism and sensuality ultimately throw the spectator back into himself. When people depend upon an almost exclusively sexual connection with one another, the world ends up as a marketplace of the

flesh, where as The Writer explains in Vieux Carré, people pay with their hearts. The parade everyone wants to be a part of is really just an exhibition of "physical beauty. . .drawn through the street in chains" ("Three Players of a Summer Game," 342), because the parade functions on Darwinian terms. Always in the background of Williams' plays is the ominous sense of a mechanistic universe. Helena, a performer, remarks in A Lovely Sunday for Creve Coeur: "The weak. The strong. Only important division between living creatures" (43), thus summing up the Darwinian world in which all performance takes place.

The central dilemma of Williams' drama is always the conflict between thought and action. The spectators challenge the appropriateness of action by their refusal to, or inability to, act, while the performers challenge the appropriateness or worthfullness of thought, especially of self-contemplation, by their refusal or inability to consider the consequences of action. The spectator/performer conflict is based on the irony that while action alone is immoral, thought alone is self-destructive. The dilemma of modern man which Williams continually gives expression to is the failure to integrate thought and action. As Eliot wrote in "The Hollow Men:"

> Between the idea
> And the reality
> Between the motion
> And the act
> Falls the Shadow (72-76).

By the late plays, works such as Small Craft Warnings, Clothes For a Summer Hotel, and Vieux Carré, all there is left to dramatize is the Shadow. Williams' works move progressively further inside the shadow world of the disintegrated spectator who has become the "hollow man."

Williams' characters are repeatedly seduced by the mindless sensuality of primitivism. A mystical desire to lose oneself in mindless sensation is expressed in, for example, Blanche's sexual escapades, the Princess' desire for sexual narcosis, and Jane's avowal "I don't think anymore." As the primitive mind thinks in dualities, Williams characters are always forced into dualities and torn by extremes. It seems ironic that so much has been written on the Christian element in Williams' works, when what is most striking are the primitive and anti-Christian tendencies of his major characters. Even the most ideal of Williams' characters, Laura, is lost in a form of "mysticism" which is not Christian, but rather, totemistic. What Sebastian sees in his revelation of god is the mindlessness behind it all. The real force behind creation is not intellectual, but purely physical. Similarly, when Chance says he is "born to make love" this is not a justification of his actions, but an admission of mindless sensuality; like Sebastian he attempts to cure his fault with a savage ritual of atonement. As there is no cerebral atonement possible in a mindless universe, the atonement has to be a physical one. This idea is delineated most explicitly in "Desire and the Black Masseur," where the atonement also becomes a mingling of violence and sexuality. In Blanche as well as in other characters, sensuality is mixed up with thoughts of higher things, even with spiritual aspirations, and this type of confusion is what Williams expressly refers to when he explains that confusion inevitably leads to violence.

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