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## Women Characters in the Plays by Tennessee Williams

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## Women Characters in the Plays by Tennessee Williams

WOMEN CHARACTERS  
IN THE PLAYS BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS.

An Abstract of a Research Paper  
Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams is one of the most important figures in American dramaturgy of the twentieth century. His drama expresses the main points of American contemporary culture. The complex dramatic world created by Williams consists of many levels and components. One of the fundamental themes on which Williams' theater is based is a theme of the dying "noble" tradition of the Southern life style and its conflict with the rigid and pragmatic modern world.

This conflict is presented from the point of view of action and characters as a conflict between reality and illusion, the collision of sensitive and brutal and resulting destruction of the personality. Personality disintegration is expressed through violence, sex, alcoholism and personal frustration.

The aim of the research is to explore how these themes are explored by Tennessee Williams through the female characters in his five plays: The Glass Menagerie, The Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, Orpheus Descending and The Night of Iguana.

The study is limited to these five plays because they illustrate the gradual stage by stage development of female characters throughout Williams' dramaturgy. They are a convincing example of Williams' attitude towards

contemporary reality; no wonder that the depiction of women in his plays changed with time.

All the chosen plays contain strong women characters and deal with the same problem of living in an illusory world and thus trying to escape the reality. All the characters have much in common and illustrate various aspects of Williams' basic themes.

It is possible to say that Williams' women characters gradually changed from the weak, dependent and doomed beings of the early plays to the strong and powerful personalities of later dramas, whose future is not entirely deprived of hope. This gradual change from fatality to hope is clearly perceived through the female characters of the five plays in question. Analyzing these plays, I intend to trace the development and alteration of Williams' views on life and also to reveal the consequent changes in the means of their expression.

Women characters created by Williams seem to have been thoroughly investigated by world critics. This study will be based on works by Boxill, Donahue, Jackson, Tischler, Thompson and some others. Almost all the time female characters are depicted as victims of the society or of their own corrupted nature, and no strong parallels have ever been drawn between women characters of different plays to reveal the possible points of similarity.

Close examination of the plays makes it possible to reveal the said similarities in the depiction of women characters in all the five plays. Women are considered to be weaker than men and that is why it is interesting to analyze the tragedy of the sensitive soul by concentrating upon female characters. Also, though these characters are tragic figures, it is possible to offer non-traditional, innovative interpretation of the nature of their tragedy and see how Williams develops different aspects of this human tragedy in each separate character.

This study will be presented as literary research. In the first part of the research I mean to explore how the theme of the South, which symbolizes human tragedy, is depicted through women characters. The second part will deal with the basic conflict of illusion versus reality as realized through the relationships of women and men from the unconventional point of view. The research will reveal the peculiarities in the depiction of these characters in Williams' works. Characters' Weltanschauung and attitude towards life will be analyzed through the dialogue and action.

Careful investigation of female characters makes it possible to understand Williams' own attitude to established values and beliefs. Through his characters the author questions these values and beliefs and creates a

world of tragedy where sensitive people are victims of the cruelty of the modern society.

This approach makes Williams' plays especially humane and provides new insights as far as the dramas in question are concerned. It also emphasizes the originality of Williams' approach towards life. On the whole, this comparative research is supposed to fill in the gaps overlooked by the majority of critics, while providing an innovative interpretation of the nature of Williams' tragedy.

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The dramatic world of Tennessee Williams' plays is very complex, consisting of many levels and components. A Southerner by birth, Williams almost always deals with the Southern history, the events of the South and the fates of his characters as being inseparably connected, while their destiny often serves as a reflection of inevitable historical processes that affected the South after the Civil War.

That is why the basic themes of Williams' works are "the conflict between reality and illusion, the destruction of the sensitive by the insensitive and the human corrosion wrought by time" (Donahue x). These themes, presented in the plays in a metaphorical way, are expressed through the "world of sex, violence, neuroticism and personal frustration" (Donahue x). The conflict between the old Southern aristocratic tradition and the brutal world of money in contemporary society is always present in a more or less explicit form.

The aim of this paper is to explore how these themes are developed by Tennessee Williams through the women characters in five of his most representative plays: The Glass Menagerie (1944), Summer and Smoke (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Orpheus Descending (1957) and The Night of the Iguana (1961). Women characters dominate many of Williams' writings. Amanda (The Glass Menagerie), Blanche

(A Streetcar), Alma (Summer and Smoke), Hannah (The Night of the Iguana), Lady (Orpheus Descending) control the action of the plays, leaving a powerful imprint upon the reader's and spectator's memory. I think that it is interesting to examine the women characters of these particular plays not merely because there are quite a few common features that they share, but first and foremost because these women allow us to perceive Williams' basic themes from different angles. Also, I will try to show the gradual changes in the presentation of women characters that mark different stages in Williams' creative heritage. It is also essential to explain the necessity that dictated the said changes, the attention being focused upon how women characters function in the plays.

Almost all of Williams' women characters represent the history of the South, particularly the downfall of its "noble" traditions and beliefs which exist no longer in modern society, and its conflict with "brutal reality." This conflict is shown through the hidden worlds in which characters live, "worlds which are usually sharply different from the "real world" which they physically inhabit" (Donahue, 220).

First, the theme of tragedy of disillusionment was presented in the play Glass Menagerie through the characters of Amanda and Laura who represent the South from two

different points of view. Amanda, the mother, is a symbol of the past. Finding herself in a large alien northern city and unable to adjust to it, she unconsciously returns to her memories of bygone years, of the aristocratic way of life, that she had known in her youth. She never ceases bringing to mind the one and the same story of "Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain" (148) which became a ritual in her family, the ritual that had lost its meaning but preserved the form.

Amanda: My callers were gentlemen--all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta--planters and sons of planters! (148)

Living in her past, Amanda wants Laura to marry a person of "her own status," the one who would pertain to the society of her memory, ignoring the fact that this society had disappeared long ago. The same obsession with the past connects Amanda with Blanche from The Streetcar Named Desire who rejects her sister's marriage because it does not conform to Blanche's social standards. This also can be said about Alma from Summer and Smoke who is trying to change the man she loves according to her understanding of what a "gentlemen" should be. Unable to find the high society long gone, to the social norms of which they stubbornly adhere, in the present reality, these women are trying to hide in their memories. However, in Williams' plays we can never be sure whether the past that his heroines are recollecting is real and not illusory: in

their obsessed memories history seems to be blended with myth. For the purposes of this particular research it is not essential to differentiate between the two: the past is perceived as an illusion, the illusion as something remote in times. An exemplary case is Amanda's, who perceives her semi-legendary gentlemen callers from the past as saviours from the poor and dull routine of her present life:

The hopelessness of Amanda's existence is framed by the humble tenement environment to which she and her family are now reduced. They are far from the highly cultivated soil of the South, having been transplanted to a Northern urban area.  
(Donahue 22)

Deserted by her own husband, Amanda is now trying to find one for her daughter Laura, because Amanda is "rooted in a tradition of genteel Southerner" (Tischler 500), where it is impossible for a woman to have a social position or "financial security apart from her husband" (Tischler 500).

Amanda pretends not to notice that they are poor, that her daughter is scared of life and doesn't have any acquaintances. But her pretenses are meant not even for Laura but for herself and are depicted by incessant waiting for the miraculous appearance of the gentlemen callers:  
"Resume your seat, little sister--I want you to stay fresh and pretty--for gentlemen callers!" (150)

I think that there are two reasons why Amanda is so fixated on the subject of "gentlemen callers." First, as mentioned, to be popular was the only way she knew to be a

respectable woman. Second, as her understanding of what young girls might need and wish is based on her own experience derived from the past, to be charming and flirty with men is her perception of a girl's role in general. Therefore Amanda firmly believes that gentlemen callers are of the same importance for Laura, that they occupy her daughter's mind as much as they used to occupy hers when she was young. That is why in her attempts to support Laura she constantly returns to the same game and creates the same illusion: "It's almost time for our gentlemen callers to start arriving. How many do you suppose we're going to entertain this afternoon?" (150).

But though she tries to hide herself from modern life and stay within the illusory world of the happy past, Amanda realizes her present situation. Her childish, coquettish talk and nervously cheerful behavior cannot deceive anybody. Her fears about the present, her understanding of its cruel fatality are seen in her conversation with Laura about the business college, in which for one brief moment she betrays her confusion:

What are we going to do, what is going to become  
of us, what is the future? (152)

and,

All of our plans--my hopes and ambitions for you--  
just gone up the spout . . . (154)

But her mind, even when she talks and thinks about the future, is still locked in the past. Amanda is lost in her

present life and does not know how to deal with it, so she brings up her former knowledge of life and norms of behavior which are old-fashion and pathetically out of place:

I've seen such pitiful cases in the South--barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife!--stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room--encouraged by an in-law to visit another--little birdlike women without any nest--eating the crust of humility all their life! (156)

At these moments, when Amanda is forced to face reality, she is shown as a scared, pathetic old woman, which is what she is in her conversations with Tom in which she is most sincere and does not put on airs:

Tom--life is not easy, it calls for--Spartan endurance! There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you! I've never told you but I--loved your father . . . (172)

Perhaps it is because Amanda used to be surrounded by men in her youth that she feels more comfortable with her son than with her daughter. Also she was brought up in a tradition where women admit men's superiority; therefore, realizing the truth about Laura, Amanda does not want to show it to her but she admits it to Tom:

She's older than you, two years, and nothing has happened. She just drifts along doing nothing. (174)

and,

Now all she does is fool with those pieces of glass and play those worn-out records. (175)

Amanda tries to fight against reality, desperately attempting to find a gentlemen caller for Laura; at the same

time she protects herself from this direct contact with reality by recollecting her own successful past.

And although in the last scenes and almost to the very end Amanda represents the past in the way she is dressed and "entertains" the guest, she turns to reality by calling things by their proper names. In her last reference to Laura she finally dares to use the disparaging term that she had strictly prohibited to be uttered within her family circle: "Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who is crippled and has no job!" (236).

The same theme of a dying South is continued in A Streetcar Named Desire by the character Blanche. Though Blanche has much in common with Amanda, she is already a far more tragic character. And if in the first play the ruined South is represented rather more nostalgically than tragically, in the second one it has an aura of deep and fatal tragedy.

Amanda and Blanche cannot adjust themselves to the present as they are obsessed by the idea that they are (or used to be) "ladies":

[They] keyed [their] life and thinking to a Southern way of life composed of beautiful clothes, fine manners, and established aristocratic values. But at the time of the play his way of life has disappeared. (Donahue 226)

The idea of the past oppresses them and predetermines their behavior, thus influencing the present.

In the same way as Amanda, Blanche DuBois, in Streetcar, tries to escape reality by recollecting her life at the family plantation "Belle Reve." She tells herself: "I don't want realism. I want magic!" This is the result of her tragic experience of reality. It is seen in Stella's words: "Nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (79).

Blanche had to face cruel reality for the first time when she found out the truth about her husband, whom she had been worshipping: "[She] adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human . . . This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate" (73).

The loss of her husband was at the same time the loss of the beautiful world of illusions in which Blanche had lived before. This situation, though it is more tragic, draws a distinct parallel between Blanche and Amanda who also locked herself in the past after her husband's escape. Trying to diminish the pain which comes from inevitable clashes with reality, they do their best to hide in the past and to embellish the present by futile memories, half-imaginary, half-forgotten.

Next in Blanche's tragic experience with reality was the gradual dying out of her family and the destruction of her house. The deaths of the DuBois family is also a symbol of a slow and painful death of the South as a culture and a



civilization, which Blanche had to witness. And though she tried to fight against this doom, she was condemned from the very beginning.

Funerals are quiet, but deaths--not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, sometimes it rattles, sometimes they cry out to you, Don't let me go! Even the old sometimes say, Don't let me go! As if you were able to stop them! . . . You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw! (16)

Blanche as well as Amanda is afraid of reality; that is why both of them put on the worn-out mask of a lady and a former belle. By doing this they try to keep a "spirit of refinement in [their] speech and actions and try to act above environment into which they were descended" (Donahue, 33). And though these "romantic roles of "Queen," and "cultivated woman" had mocked [them] in reality (Thompson, 27), they are playing them to survive. Blanche says: "Magic! I try to give that to people. I do misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth . . ." (84).

Amanda and Blanche do not want to admit that the way of life they are representing, its criteria and demands, which had been suitable at the time of their youth, have disappeared, and in the present they do not even have enough money to make a living. They try to adjust themselves to the modern environment, but the ways they choose are doomed to failure. That is why their attempts to create an illusion of wealth are pathetic and ridiculous. But at the

same time, this make-belief world of illusion gives them strength and will to go on living.

As it has been already mentioned, the convulsive attempts to create this illusion of wealth in Amanda's decorating her home for the arrival of a guest are similar to Blanche's paper lampcovers in Stanley's house:

Blanche DuBois in Streetcar has a mania for covering electric bulbs with colored lampshades. Blanche explains her own attitude in these words: "I can't stand a naked light bulb any more than I can stand a rude remark or a vulgar action." (Donahue, 224)

In the same way Amanda cannot stand their poverty and crude reality and tries to hide behind good manners and cheap scenery. These attempts are seen in Amanda's trying to trim up the dingy house for a gentleman caller:

All my wedding silver has to be polished, the monogrammed table linen ought to be laundered! . . . fresh curtains put on . . . of course I'd hoped to have these walls re-papered. (182)

The same lame pretence to re-enact a high society soiree is shown in the scene of a social gathering in Alma's house in Summer and Smoke. It is also expressed in Amanda's and Blanche's manner of speaking which is very coquettish and artificial. Trying to conceal their nervousness, they talk with Laura and Stella as if the latter were little children; the pathetic baby-talk is a sign of infantile helplessness in the utterers:

Amanda: No, sister, no, sister--you be the lady this time and I'll be the darky. (147)

Blanche: You messy child, you, you've spilt some thing on that pretty white lace collar! . . . (12)

The uselessness of these attempts is evident as they change into a grotesque caricature. For their plans Amanda and Blanche need a rich, open house which they do not have. And instead of great parties and crowds of noble and refined aristocrats, there is one not very successful evening and a "nice, but ordinary" young man in The Glass Menagerie; a brutal poker game and a very common workman Mitch, in A Streetcar; and a boring, quarrelsome meeting in Summer and Smoke. But the tragedy increases by the failure of even these wretched attempts to create an illusion of propriety when the light died out in Amanda's house because Tom had not paid for it, the party at Stanley's apartment ends up with wife-beating; and John runs away from Alma's party in such a hurry that he forgets his coat.

The theme of people who are locked in the dead past is also presented in Orpheus Descending by the character named Lady (a token-name, given almost in derision). She lost everything with her father's death, whose wine garden also had burned down. Though Lady does not recollect her bygone days, she often seems to live in them as it were the only happy time of her life as it had been for Amanda and Blanche. But unlike them she is not stuck in the past when she is bringing it back. That is why she wants to decorate the confectionery as her father's garden:

The confectionery . . . I'm going to redecorate . . . My father, he had an orchard on Moon Lake. He made a wine garden of it. We had fifteen little white arbors with tables in them and they were covered with--grapevines and--we sold Dago red wine an' booted whiskey and beer. They burned it up! My father was burned up in it . . . (39)

Lady believes that life has some meaning and does not want to die. She is struggling more violently than Amanda or Blanche, since she is absolutely alone in this world; there is nobody else she can lean upon. With the opening of the confectionery "she will reassert her father's presence and her own identity in the face of the town's resistance" (McGlinn 521). But it is impossible to bring back the past; that is why Lady has no future and cannot succeed.

In The Glass Menagerie the illusionary hope, when ruined, resulted in mere disappointment and increased realization of the hopelessness of existence. In Streetcar, however, it destroyed Blanche's personality and led her to a mental asylum. In a gradual progression from play to play tragedy enhances: in Orpheus Descending disillusionment leads to Lady's death; the modern world is no place for noble dames.

Williams continues to develop the theme of the illusory character of the noble South in the play Summer and Smoke through Alma, the protagonist of the drama, but from a different angle. Alma cannot boast of an aristocratic background as does Amanda or Blanche. But if she is not an

aristocrat by birth, Alma is a symbol of spiritual aristocracy, which is also outdated in the world in which she lives. In stage directions Williams describes her in the following way:

Her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainments, to the position of hostess in a rectory . . . She has grown up in the company of her elders. (135)

and,

In Alma's voice and manner there is a delicacy and elegance, a kind of 'airiness', which is natural . . . to many Southern girls. (139)

She has her own very definite scale of values which Blanche and especially Amanda lack, since these two cared about preserving the form of the tradition more than the essence.

Besides, Alma is not concentrated upon herself as much as Amanda and Blanche are and has enough courage to stand up for her beliefs. She can ignore public opinion; she refuses to give up her student Nellie in spite of the girl's lack of talent, because Alma realizes that her music lessons are means of rehabilitation for the girl. The mother of this girl, a bored lady, picks up young men at the railway station to escape loneliness, as Blanche had done before she came to Stella's house:

Alma: Father didn't want me to take [Nellie] as a pupil because of her mother's reputation, but I feel that one has a duty to perform toward children in such--circumstances. (148)

Alma's idea of spiritual aristocracy does not have any social basis. She lives in the world of fiction, like Blanche and Amanda. The high moral values of life that she is cultivating, exactly because of their refinement, are too illusory and because of that they cannot resist crude material reality.

Alma does not want to accept modern reality which for her is represented by John's attitude to life. But her belonging to the past is artificial and the reason she hides in it is a fear of her own self. That is why Alma always "carries around with her a box of sleeping pills--a symbol of escape" (Donahue 225) as Lady uses the same remedy to keep going with life. In the same way Blanche cannot stand "naked" light and Amanda pretends that "gentlemen" for Laura will arrive the next minute.

The idea of the South found its further development in the play The Night of Iguana through the character of Hannah. She has "a refined nature and sensitive reactions" (Donahue, 147). We don't know anything about her past, but there is a pronounced nobility in her nature.

Hannah--heroic statue and remains undefiled--a model of limitless compassion, selfless devotion, and stoical courage in the face of the world's suffering and her own loneliness and despair.  
(Thompson 151)

Hannah does not try to hide in the past, but she cannot escape it as she is linked to it through her grandfather.

Like Alma, she represents nobility of mind, but at the same time the difference between them is that Hannah realizes in what world she lives, and struggles with it just like Lady in Orpheus Descending. Her tragedy is in this realization: being faithful to her spiritual values, she remains very lonely. But unlike Lady she does not bury herself in the past. Life taught her "how to live beyond despair and still live" (85). That is why she tries to find some support in her grandfather which is very illusory.

Hannah shares Shannon's "need to believe in something or in someone, almost anyone, almost anything, something" (92). But at the same time she is skeptical about it: "We all wind up with something or someone, and if it's someone instead of just something, we're lucky . . ." (93). But even being skeptical about life she does not hate it and is not frustrated about it:

I know people torture each other many times like devils, but sometimes they do see and know each other, you know, and then, if they're decent, they do want to help each other all that they can. (76)

Hannah represents a woman who is much stronger than other women characters from the plays cited above. She is able to take care of her grandfather and sympathize with Shannon, herself being in a desperate situation. From her words we know that her life was not easy or happy at all, but it had not broken her personality. She says of herself:

"I am not a weak person, my failure here isn't typical of me" (72).

The contrast is still more manifest if we compare her to Shannon, the wreck of a man: it is Shannon who lives in an illusory world of self-delusion, enjoying the past and seeking consolation in bygone years: "I want to show the ladies that I'm still a clocked--frocked!--minister of the. . ." (52); and: "I want to go back to the Church and preach the gospel of God" (57).

He does not try to fight reality as Hannah does and goes back to his illusions, finding pleasure in his own failure.

That is why at the end of the play Hannah is not disappointed and destroyed, like Amanda, Blanche, Lady and Alma in spite of her grandfather's death. I think that the grandfather's death is a symbol of Hannah's liberation from the past: she has enough strength to live further, to face the reality that the women of the above-cited plays had proved unable to withstand.

Laura of The Glass Menagerie stands apart from other women characters. Though she is young, she is also a figure from the past, just like her mother. In a way, she is Amanda's reflection. While Amanda's memories have some realistic background, Laura does not have even this. She lives in an illusory and absolutely unrealistic world of her



dreams totally separated from everybody and even from her own family. This attitude towards life was probably created by her mother's stories and the feminine inferiority which Amanda unconsciously fosters in her daughter and which Laura meekly accepts: "I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain" (150).

Laura's existence is symbolized by her glass toys and old records. The stage directions indicate that whenever something touches Laura's feelings she goes to Victrola or to her glass collection.

Laura's physical deficiency, her short leg, could symbolize her affiliation to the degenerating world of the South. She is suffering because of her leg and because she cannot stand the tensions of real life which make her sick. In the same way as all the other women characters do, Laura tries to shape her own world; this is her doom and her tragedy.

I think that for Williams Laura is a symbol of the South; the author identifies her with the "blue rose," something beautiful and unreal. Her character represents illusion, fragility, and purity which cannot survive in the modern reality and which depict the tragedy of the South.

The theme of illusion and reality, the tragic collision of sensitive and insensitive, could also be examined through women characters. In Orpheus Descending Carol says: "What

on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your hands, until your fingers are broken?" (21).

In these words she expresses fear of a sensitive nature, threatened with the loneliness which is well known to all women characters in the plays in question. The reason they lost their balance in life is either because they had lost somebody before or have not found somebody yet or both. That is why they are using all the means they have to fill this emptiness inside them. Williams explores this theme through men/women relationship which also becomes a manifestation of the conflict of sensitive versus insensitive.

These men/women relationships are usually presented from the sexual point of view. However, these women resort to sex merely to protect themselves from the inner frustration and which comes from their being lost in life. Love, that is the physical aspect of love, is in most cases synonymous with life itself. As it is said in Streetcar, it is death that is opposite to desire. I think that for these women characters their abilities to oppose reality could be measured by their attitude to physical love.

In The Glass Menagerie Amanda, who is left by her husband, tries to rehabilitate herself: she keeps retelling the same story about twelve "gentlemen callers" all over

again. Also she often recalls the men whom she used to know, who were rich, good and loving husbands to their wives, or, being her admirers in the past, had never married. In these legends she finds some revenge for her unhappy life:

There was young Champ Laughlin who later became vice-president of the Delta Planters Bank. . . . Fitzhugh boy went north and made a fortune--came to be known as the Wolf of Wall Street! . . . And I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But--I picked your father! (149)

Because of her lack of confidence she cannot resist competing with her daughter when they are getting ready for the coming gentleman caller: "I'm going to show you something. I'm going to make a spectacular appearance!" (193).

Likewise, Blanche in Streetcar, not having a husband, at the beginning starts flirting with Stanley and always reminds everybody about her admirers: "I ran into Shep Huntleigh . . . getting into his car--Cadillac convertible, must been a block long!" (47); and: "This wire--inviting me to a cruise of the Caribbean!" (89).

In Streetcar the tragedy of personal frustration is shown through the sexual relationships in a very sharp way. Blanche is very sensitive by nature and through sex she tries to overcome the frustration of the ruined illusions and ideals which she had met in life. She tells Stella about her experience: "I took the blows in my face and my

body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard!" (16). Later she will tell Mitch the story of her marriage, which eventually dealt the first and crucial stroke to her beliefs.

For Blanche sex is something that unites people even if for a very short time if nothing else can unite them. Thus, by being spiritually empty and disappointed in finding anybody's sympathy, she looks for the warmth that could come from another body, and as she has nothing, the only thing she can share is the warmth of her own: "After the death of Allan--intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with" (85).

Blanche is looking for a "human contact" because she was deprived of it by all the deaths and disappointments that she experienced. For a long time this contact was possible for her only through physicality, as opposed to the ethereal spirituality of her failure of a husband. By the psychotrauma of her marriage she is rendered temporarily incapable of finding any other way to communicate with men, while, being extremely lonely, she is scared to stay alone with herself and needs anybody, no matter whom, to be around.

But at the same time this "physical contact" is not crucial for Blanche. Her relationship with Mitch is a proof for that. She does not want to have sex with him; his

respectful attitude and human compassion are enough for her. And that is what she desperately looks for in a man, realizing that she is quickly moving to a terrible end from which she is trying to hide in her fantasies: "I want his respect. . . . I want to breathe quietly again. I want to breathe quietly again! Yes--I want Mitch" (57-8).

Blanche's inner purity is clearly perceived in contrast with Stella. In strict accordance with the norms of common morality Stella lives a decent life, being married and not sleeping with strangers as Blanche does. But Blanche's soul is not affected by her way of life; its impact, though tainting, is not degrading. Her behavior is only external and does not affect her spiritual values: she is driven to promiscuity by the absence of choice, by psychotraumas of the past and implied insanity of the present, by the circumstances over which she has no control. Stella, on the other hand, consciously makes her choice and accepts and even enjoys her husband's cruelty, thus giving up her former values: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark--that sort of makes everything else seem--unimportant" (49).

Unlike her sister, Stella values this brutal sensuality above everything else, and what is only a form of surviving for Blanche is the essence of being for Stella. That is why

she had left the burden of the family to Blanche before; that is why she betrays her at the end.

In Summer and Smoke the same problem is represented from the opposite angle. Alma believes in high moral standards, which do not allow her to openly express her real feelings for John. Alma's frustration comes from the excess of her spirituality which is too far removed from the real life and goes against her nature; that is what makes her change at the end. This change is her tragedy, because she is unable to find a compromise between the physical and the spiritual; and the contradiction destroys her.

In Orpheus Descending Carol expresses her attitude to physical love in terms similar to Blanche's: to her sex means an escape from loneliness:

The act of lovemaking is almost unbearably painful, and yet, of course, I do bear it, because to be not alone, even for a few moments, is worth the pain and the danger. (58)

For this very reason both she and Lady need Val. Before he comes Lady is figuratively dead. For years she has been living with her husband "in hate" (9); but the remembrance of love, that she had experienced in her youth, haunts her memory. Val saves her from mere existence and gives her strength to resist cruel reality. Lady does not actually need him as a person, but as a living soul to be beside her: "To live . . . to go on living" (107). "When she realizes she is pregnant, Lady does not need Val anymore

. . ." (McGlinn 521). Now that she has a new life in herself, she finds it is enough for her to live further.

Unlike Blanche and Alma, Hannah in The Night of Iguana and Laura in The Glass Menagerie do not need to escape from life by means of sex. They are "never blooming belles, who live in neither the lost past nor the elusive future" (Rohill 78). Though sensual feelings do arise in them while they communicate with men, this is only a brief outburst of emotions and they still do not need anybody, as they live in their own, very separate world.

Reality in Williams' plays is usually represented by men (except The Night of Iguana), who are closer to life and therefore stronger. In many a controversial way, through the relationships between his protagonists and their attitude to physical love, Williams shows the struggle between flesh and spirit, which is a visible manifestation of the eternal conflict between illusion and reality.

In Streetcar, unlike Blanche, Stanley uses sex to reaffirm himself as a strong creature. "Blanche is a social type, and emblem of a dying civilization, her behavior is social . . . Stanley's behavior is social too. It is the basic animal cynicism of today" (Tischler 167). Blanche and Stanley recognize themselves as antagonists. She has some charm and light of the dying out world of poetry, and he does not have any light, being extremely realistic,

calculating, sensual and selfish. Williams stresses the primitiveness of Blanche's opponent, his brutality and lack of manners. Blanche says to Stella:

He acts like an animal, has an animal habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something sub-human. Something not quite to the stage of humanity yet. (50)

Destroyed by life herself, subconsciously Blanche likes his strong nature and his confidence in life, and at the same time feels aversion for his lack of culture which is deliberately ignored by her sister. "She [Blanche] is attracted and repelled by Stanley's sexuality" (Thompson 42). On his part Stanley intuitively wants to prove to Blanche his superiority over "the lady." A common person, he is trying to suppress what he does not understand and what he subconsciously resents, by the only means available to such as he, by means of open physical violence: "What such a man has to offer is animal force . . ." (49). These two people from very polar societies are linked by passion which is an expression of hate.

There are features in Stanley's character that could be defined as neo-fascist. As a strong and healthy creature Stanley despises everybody who is weak, like Blanche, and has no scruples against finishing her off. His democracy is a variant of fascist ideology which is based on the right of the strongest, the jungle law of the survival of the fittest. His love for Stella is inseparably blended with



sexual and physical abuse and friendship and distinctly brings to mind the "laws of honor" in a gang. He is an embodiment of the brutal material life which destroys Blanche. "The biological necessities of human nature are personified by the play's antagonist to the romantic sensibility, Stanley Kovalski" (Thompson, 25).

In opposition to Stanley, Blanche is revealed as a tragic figure. Ridiculous and pathetic, unable to do anything, she nevertheless has the courage to resist Stanley by not giving up her illusions till the very end.

In The Night of Iguana it is Mrs. Faulk who functions as a double of Stanley. The very material perception of life is manifest in her character even more vividly than in Stanley's. She is more simple in her aggression; her sexual needs and her way of life are simple and primitive; they are more characteristic of an animal than of a human being. Just like Stanley wants Blanche to leave because she represents a different world, Maxine's desire to get rid of Hannah is unconsciously cruel, as she is just trying to get out of her way everything that disturbs her: "I want you to lay off him [Shannon], honey. You're not for Shannon and Shannon isn't for you" (73).

In Summer and Smoke there is the same struggle of the flesh and spirit which is an expression of the opposition of reality and illusion as represented by Alma and John. This

time it is an intellectual struggle. Both Alma and John are young and have the power and will to live. Their antagonism is a result of two different attitudes to life. John is a materialist and a doctor, thus representing both material and physical attitude to life, which are in opposition to Alma's spiritualness. Though John is very sure of his own position in life and therefore he is more capable of making a compromise which is impossible for Alma, which causes her tragedy. She does not like John's views and tries to change him, to purify him in a way, thinking that her own world is not so dirty and rude as his. However, Alma fails to notice that this world of hers does not exist; it is but fiction. Alma's name is a token-name; she is the "soul" of the play; but in this world a soul cannot exist bodiless, apart from the demands of flesh. Life is changeable, and John knows how to change together with life, unlike Alma, who is static; John's strength is in his adaptability, his capability to adjust. After his father's death, through suffering, the doctor's son managed to find the "golden middle," a means to balance physiology and spirituality. This way is closed to Alma and that is why John stays with Nellie and not with her.

In The Glass Menagerie Jim O'Connor invades the world of illusory past weaved by Amanda and Laura just like John disturbs the dreamy spirituality of Alma. For a brief

moment Laura is awake; but in this play reality is not yet shown as cruel and fatal, and Jim is only a reminder of it, a momentary glimpse of the world outside the walls of Amanda's quiet flat. As soon as he disappears, Laura returns to her dreams again.

Thus it is possible to say that the presentation of women characters in Williams' plays gradually changes. In his earlier plays they live in the past, and by doing so they are rendered weak and unprotected (Laura, Amanda, Blanche). But in later works women are shown as stronger beings, though still tragical personalities (Alma, Lady, Hannah). Women are considered to be more sensitive than men, and perhaps that is why Williams expresses the tragedy of sensitive natures through them. I think the author sums up the tragedy of human existence in the following words of Shannon (The Night of Iguana):

See? The Iguana? At the end of its rope? Trying  
to go on past the end of its goddam rope? Like  
you! Like me! . . . (88)

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