

**TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: ESCAPE FROM LONELINESS**Dr. Sonia Rani\*

---

Williams was a precursor , and perhaps the founder in American theatre, in the depiction of what today is known as the unisexual character, a person in whom only the organs of generation define the differences between the sexes. From a psychological point of view many of Williams 'ostensibly male and female characters share a sexual ambivalence, the portrayal of which has enriched our knowledge not only of human nature but, as well of the society that produced these types. In his creative world his characters, no matter what their apparent sexual orientation, seek love and tenderness as a release from loneliness. But too often when these two aspiration fail to materialize, the seeker looks for forgetfulness or very temporary companionship in sexual acts that are dominated by desire. This desire, which usually represents more a psychological than a physical need has little to do with the emotion of love, yet, the quest for love, for belonging for the ability to give love to and accept love from another might be said to be the major theme in his dramatic works and much of his fiction, but only in *The Rose Tattoo* and *Period of Adjustment* can love be found; and in the latter play its stability is somewhat precarious. The fact that love is rarely achieved in them gives to Williams 'plays their pathetic and often tragic overtones because the loneliness that results from being unloved makes his characters the prey of psychological and physical desire which almost inexorably leads to their own destruction.

---

\*Temp. Lecturer, Guru Nanak Khalsa College, Karnal

When we read a Williams' play we find his characters playing carefully defined sexual roles. We find women as women and men portraying men. But we often wonder if the men are really male and the women really and exclusively female. Quite often the sexual roles of the characters are ambivalent. Williams sees strong elements of the female in the male and the male in the female. The conventional role of the male as the aggressor in a sexual relationship is rarely to be found in Williams' plays the most notable exception being *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Men are the sex objects sought by desperate women whose interests are usually predatory. Women tend to take centre stage in the plays and attempt sexual dominance. Leona in *Small Craft Warnings*, one of the author's most underestimated dramas, is distinctly masculine in her aggressiveness even though Williams calls her fully integrated woman, "the first really whole woman I have ever created and my first wholly triumphant character" he says. Leona is stronger than many men in the play-Bill, the hustler whom she has been keeping in her trailer. In *Small Craft Warnings*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Night of the Iguana*, *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* men are passive sex objects and children to be manipulated by aggressive mother figures, and they masochistically seem to enjoy the role.

The leading male characters remain essentially similar in Williams' plays and fall into several convenient categories. Most of them are outwardly and sometimes aggressively masculine like Stanely Kowalski. All seem to have or to have had a certain animal vitality that makes them attractive to women and to other men. All these desirable sex objects appear ready to let them be victimized. Some of them are "the fugitive kind" like early heroines, Blanche and Alma, in flight because society will not permit them to be what they are or what they would like to be. Another group of male characters might be classified as the mutilated, those who for one reason or another, have been maimed by society either physically or psychologically. They may be the objects of sexual desire, but they also have as Maggie remarks of Brick, the charm of the defeated, which possibly explains their sexual appeal, especially to mother figures. They are passive victims both of domineering women and of the social group. They remain passive sexual objects and other aspects of their personalities are rarely explored. They are present in the plays only to satisfy if they can, the physical or psychological needs of women. Both men and women desire the masculine male who is tender and has a sense of poetry to complement his virility. Williams portraits of his male characters, like the men, combine in their personalities both

feminine and masculine traits. Women are basically stronger than the men with whom they come into contact, and they essentially direct the action of the plays.

The need for opposites, sexual or not, is a dominant theme in Williams' plays. The weak seek out the strong rather than the masculine or feminine. The weak are looking for love and protection. Yet we find Williams commenting in *Suddenly Last Summer* that love finds its existence in the company of the other person. Thus the equality among people in Williams' works is only among victims. In general, however, Williams presents a dominant person and one less strong who either aspirates to dominance as is content to be dominated as long as he or she is provided with the material things in life. When such a relationship is formed, the characters are willing to go along with their chosen roles as tormenter and tormented. "Sexual boundaries are unimportant; individuals, regardless of their sex, however, are important and when one does not respect another's individuality disaster ensues. 'Yet Williams' work show the value of living. The failures fail because they more involved with preconceived stereotypes of what their roles should be the concerns of others. His works are a celebration of life because many of the characters, haunted by a fear of death and decay, and sexual impotence provokes them to live with abandon and enjoy momentary pleasures even when they know that they will ultimately fail to possess what they are seeking for. Unfulfilled desires, their consequences and physical and psychological violence, however, dominate Williams' universe. However, we find a battle for domination constantly in this play. The Princess in *Sweet Bird of Youth* says, "When monster meets monster, one monster has to give way, AND II WILL NEVER BE ME". Chance comments later :

Princess , 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 pleasure in love and those that haven't and hadn't any pleasure in love, but just watched it with envy, sick enemy.

Love and compassion are the only virtues in the modern world and these two virtues are to be prized. The final picture presented by Williams' work is not as pessimistic as one might think at first. Without love and compassion life is meaningless even if possession of these qualities leads a person to destruction. With them life can be tolerated if not completely enjoyed.

The best examples of sexual ambivalence in Williams' works are to be found in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*. In both plays the portrayal of the leading female characters is ambivalent. Blanche is the daughter of a once genteel Southern family, which surrounded his death – both, physical and psychological [she had married a homosexual whom she loved and unwittingly caused to commit suicide] – turns into a creature crazed by desire, the desire to belong, the desire to be half by men. The men to whom she has given herself are servicemen, truck- drivers, travelling salesman and finally a schoolboy; she has become the whore of the town. Alma of *Summer and Smoke* is the daughter of a minister in a small Mississippi culture. But she, as well is in love with the young doctor next door. The doctor likes her but cannot return her love and she ends up on a park bench waiting for a travelling salesman to spend her night with him. We know from contemporary Southern fiction that women of good birth might well turn into whores, it seems more logical that young homosexual men rather than young gentlewomen would seek out the masculine types at air force bases, bus and railroad terminals.

Until the production of *Small Craft Warnings* no major homosexual character actually appeared on Williams' stage. In this play the two homosexual are masculine in appearance, but in the character of Bobby the unisexual aspect implicit in many of Williams' earlier plays finds its expression. Bobby says :

On the plains of Nabraska I passed a night with a group of runaway kids my age and it got cold after sunset. A Lovely wild young girl invited me under a blanket with just a smile, and then a boy, me between, and both of them kept saying 'love', one of them in one ear And one in the other, till I did not know which was which 'love' in which ear or which..... touch.... The Plain was high and the night air ....exhilarating and The touches not heavy.

Closeness to another [though temporary] and disappearance of loneliness are the most important goals of Williams' dramatis personae. Neither male nor female but an individual with whom one can communicate, brings relief and compensation from the horrors of modern life. The sexual boundaries are dropped in Williams' plays, and thus the sexes are often interchangeable. The sexual character of Williams' person is ambivalent but nonetheless extraordinarily human.

**REFERENCES:**

- 1 Tennessee Williams' Sweet Bird of Youth, [ iv, 50 ]
- 2 Tennessee Williams' Small Craft Warning, [ v, 264]
- 3 Bloom, Harold(ed.). The Glass Menagerie: Modern Critical Interpretations. New York: Chelsea House, 1988
- 4 Tennessee Williams : Modern Critical Views, New York : Chelsea House, 1987
- 5 Falk, Signil. Tennessee Williams. Boston : Twayne, 1961, Revised 1978