SOME EVIDENCE OF ALIENATION
IN THE LIFE AND PLAYS OF
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts.

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PREFACE

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CHAPTER I

THE MEANING OF ALIENATION

The term "alienation", as well as the condition of being alienated, is becoming increasingly common today.

As a critic remarked in a recent book review in the <u>New York Times</u>:

> "Alienation", a term once confined to philosophy, law, psychiatry and advanced literary criticism, has entered the daily vocabulary. Newspaper editorials refer without quotes or elucidation to the alienation of the slum dweller, the drug addict, the vanguard painter; popular fiction writers rely on readers to recognize the symptoms of alienation as motive for adultery or murder. Alienage, or strangeness, is understood to be not only a condition (as of foreigners) but a process. As they say in the health drives, it can happen to anyone.[1]

Today man's concern about alienation is expressed by many: by theologians and philosophers who caution that progress in scientific knowledge does not enable us to penetrate the mystery of being and does not bridge the gap between the knower and the reality he tries to understand; by psychiatrists who try to assist

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[1]Harold Rosenberg, "It Can Happen To Anyone," <u>The New York Times</u>, December 20, 1964, p. 1.

their patients to retreat from their world of illusion; by critics of the increasing mechanization of life who attack the popular code that progress in technology or the acquisition of economic security will automatically lead to the enrichment of human lives; by political scientists who observe that even democratic institutions have failed to effect the genuine participation by masses in the important issues of the time.[2] This is to cite but a few examples.

Gerald Sykes recently published a two volume edition of literary selections entitled Alienation: The Cultural Climate of Our Times. In it he describes alienation as being subtle and mysterious and states that "...in one hidden way or another it affects all of us for the worse."[3]

In the November 6th issue of Life, 1964 reference is made to alienation as the "...existentialist concept which has had the most influence on

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[2] Fritz Pappenheim, The Alienation of Modern Man, an interpretation based on Marx and Tonnies (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1959), p. 14.

[3] Gerald Sykes (ed.), Alienation - The Cultural Climate of Our Times, Vol. 1 (New York, George Braziller, 1964), p. xxiii.

post-war artists and writers."[4] By this is meant more than simple estrangement from others. The alienated person experiences himself as an outsider rather than as the centre of his own universe and the originator of his own actions.

Fritz Pappenheim develops the same theme in his book, The Alienation of Modern Man, the first chapter of which is entitled "The Mood of Our Age: Awareness of Man's Alienation." He begins by citing examples of contemporary man's fear that his individuality will be destroyed, that he is living under conditions which force him to become estranged from his own self and concludes by remarking that one of the numerous indications that this apprehension is one of the decisive forces in the thinking of modern man is the strong appeal of existential philosophy.[5]

Within the last eighteen months a visiting German philosopher lectured at Dalhousie University one evening on "Some Aspects of Some Concepts of Self-Alienation." Such a division of the topic might

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[4] "Existentialism," Life, November 6, 1964, p. 92.

[5] Pappenheim, op. cit., p. 24.

serve to indicate the scope of the general subject.

What is alienation? How is it manifested? The <u>Concise Oxford Dictionary</u> defines alienation as "the loss or derangement of mental faculties; insanity."[6] The <u>Encyclopedia Britannica</u> defines alienation "as the act or fact of being estranged or separated."[7] Thus men's estrangement either from himself or from the world in which he lives seems to be the essence of alienation.

Melvin Seeman of the University of California writing on the meaning of alienation comments that in one form or another the concept of alienation dominates both contemporary literature and the history of sociological thought. In the same article he denotes five aspects of alienation: (1) powerlessness manifested in general in the feeling that one's own behavior does not achieve the outcomes desired; (2) meaninglessness manifested in the search for meaning, for intelligibility in the world; (3) normlessness evident in the loss of commonly held standards and in the fact that socially unapproved behavior is required

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[6] <u>The Concise Oxford Dictionary</u>, p. 31.

[7] <u>Encyclopedia Britannica</u>, Vol. 1, p. 628.

to achieve popular goals; (4) isolation seen in an apartness from society, in rebellion against the social structure; (5) self-estrangement obvious when a person experiences himself as an alien. This latter aspect involves such things as loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in one's work. Examples of self-estrangement are found in the worker who works only for his salary, in the housewife who works to 'get it over with' and in fact, in any other-directed type who acts for his effects on others.[8]

Jean-Paul Sartre in his recent work, Saint Genet, gives an excellent example of the latter aspect of alienation in referring to a woman's marital problems. She feels her husband is slipping away from her, and in her confusion, she reacts with anger, an inept reaction to a complicated problem. Her husband concludes that she is irascible. Eventually she adopts her husband's judgment as the absolute truth about herself. Sartre concludes from this that she is alienating herself from the object which she is to others.[9]

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[8]Melvin Seeman, "On the Meaning of Alienation," American Sociological Review, December, 1959, pp. 783-791.

[9]Jean-Paul Sartre, Saint Genet, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Ontario: The New American Library of Canada Ltd., 1964), p. 43.

John P. Clark of the Ohio State University asserts that the common feature of all types of alienation is man's feeling of lack of means (power) to eliminate the discrepancy between his definition of the role he is playing and the one he feels he should be playing in a situation. "Alienation is the degree to which man feels powerless to achieve the role he has determined to be rightfully his in specific situations."[10]

Alienation can manifest itself in many diverse ways. Man can become estranged from himself, from the external world, from the political community, from society, and from God. These divisions can be further subdivided or found to overlap depending on the point of view from which they are considered.

A person can become alienated from himself in many ways and to varying degrees. He can flee from insight and from reality to the extent that the real world is left behind totally. This results in a psychotic condition and the projection of a world that satisfies a deep yearning but which is built away from

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[10]John P. Clark, "Measuring Alienation within a Social System," American Sociological Review, December, 1959, p. 849.

reality. Schizophrenia, described by Edward Strecker as "the greatest disease menace of our time" [11] is the most common type of mental disorder and certainly cuts one off from the mainland of reality and sanity. A person may become alienated from himself in a less absolute and drastic way; for example, when a person is mainly motivated by his passion for money, money becomes the idol he worships as a projection of one isolated power in himself - his greed of it. In this sense he is an alienated person whose actions are not his own. Though he may be under the illusion of doing as he wants, he is driven by a force separate from himself. He experiences the other and himself, not as what they really are, but distorted by an unconscious force operative in him. Man may also become self-alienated by treating himself as a thing to be employed successfully on the market. He fails to consider himself as an active agent, as a bearer of human powers. He has been alienated from these powers. His purpose is to sell himself. His sense of self does not arise from his activity as a thinking and living individual but from his socio-economic role. He considers himself

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[11] Edward A. Strecker, Basic Psychiatry (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 184.

as a clerk, industrialist or lawyer. This is the way he experiences himself, not as a man with love, fear doubts, anxieties but as that abstraction, alienated from his real nature, which fulfills a certain function in the social system. With this kind of thinking his sense of his own value is always dependent on factors outside himself, on the fickle judgment of the market, which decides his value like the value of commodities. As Erick Fromm remarks "the alienated personality who is for sale must lose a good deal of the sense of dignity which is so characteristic of man even in the most primitive cultures."[12]

Alienation is becoming almost total in modern society.[13] It pervades the relationship of man to his work, to the things he makes and consumes, to the state, to his fellow man and to God. Man in many ways is becoming de-personalized. Work is becoming standardized more and more. Man's labor has taken on the character of a commodity, which loses its human

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[12] Erick Fromm, "The Sane Society," Alienation - The Cultural Climate of our Time, ed. Gerald Sykes (New York: George Braziller, 1964), p. 67.

[13] Ibid., p. 70.

meaning. It is most often not a means of enabling man to realize himself; it is not a medium of expressing and fulfilling one's life; it is rather a device for securing one's livelihood.

Alienation in work carries over even to alienation in man's choice of leisure. Man 'consumes' his ball games, movies, books, social gatherings as a passive alienated customer. He fails for the most part to participate actively; he wants to 'take in' whatever is to be had. In such an alienated form of pleasure nothing happens within him. He is the same after the experience as before.

Alienation is seen also in man's relation to things. Often he wants things for their status value without any pretense of use. The expensive china is displayed in the cupboard but not used for fear it will be broken; the sterling silver is locked in the chest for fear it will be stolen. Often too the things he does use are chosen for their appeal to artificially stimulated phantasies, alienated from our real selves. We eat and drink the slogans, the pictures and the labels associated with foods. Too, we are surrounded by things we know how to use but the nature and origin of which is foreign to us. We live in a world of things and our only connection with

them is that we know how to use them. It is no wonder that man is becoming less attached to particular property and is ready to release it as something new appears.

Man is likewise alienated from the political community, from the state. Even in the face of crucial public issues in which the fate of the nation is concerned, personal questions appear to be the only ones that matter. Thus is seen the split between man as an individual and man as a citizen.

Alienation is seen in modern man's relationship to his fellow man. "It is one between two abstractions, two living machines, who use each other."[14] Individuals are so isolated that they establish contact only when they can use each other as means to particular ends. Genuine bonds between human beings are replaced by useful associations, not of whole persons but of particularized individuals. These associations are formed, not because of personal liking but out of motives of usefulness. This leads to a suppression of personal likes and dislikes and to using human beings as tools for purposes which are not inherent

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[14] *Ibid.*, p. 79.

in them but devised by us. "The individual centred on himself [as a possessor not a person] and what belongs to him increasingly is becoming the predominant type of man in society. He is always reckoning his advantage - to him everything is a means to an end."[15]

And certainly modern man is alienated from God. We say we are a Christian country but so many factors point to the contrary. An illustration of this is to be found in S. A. Stauffer's recent work, Communism, Conformity and Civil Liberties. In answer to a question directed to a cross section of American public "What kinds of things do you worry about most?", the vast majority answered in terms of personal, economic or health problems. It is interesting to note that although almost all of those interviewed believe in God, the survey would seem to indicate that almost no one is worried about his soul, salvation or spiritual development.[16] This would seem to indicate that God is as alienated from man as the world as a whole.

To develop the concept of alienation any more

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[15] *Ibid.*, p. 74.

[16] *Ibid.*, p. 80.

fully is beyond the scope of my present enquiry. To trace the possible cause or causes of the increasing trend towards alienation in our contemporary society is also a tempting but irrelevant pursuit for this paper. Yet it remains evident that frustration, anxiety, insecurity as descriptive words have achieved a degree of currency in present-day thought that is astonishing and that common to all of them is some form of alienation. Robert Nisbet maintains that this is so to the extent that "...for our age, it is the alienated or maladjusted man who will appear to later historians as the key figure of twentieth century thought."[17]

Inadequate man, disenchanted man, insufficient man as a type reflects a multitude of themes in contemporary writing. In a Life book review the critic praises a recent novel in that it seems to break away from the dominant contemporary theme of alienation which to him was becoming monotonous.[18]

That alienation is a factor of contemporary life

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[17] Robert A. Nisbet, Community and Power (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 10.

[18] David E. Scherman, "Alienated Hero - Please Go Home," Life, July 24, 1964, p. 8.

and an insalutary influence in the literary works of our age seems evident in the life and plays of Tennessee Williams, a contemporary American playwright. It is hoped that an examination of his life and three of his representative plays will provide some evidence of the man's personal alienation and its possible effect on his artistry.

CHAPTER II

SOME EVIDENCE OF ALIENATION

IN THE LIFE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

It would seem from what I have read about Tennessee Williams' life that there are certain personal factors which account for his possible alienation.

Tennessee Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi. He was christened Thomas Lanier, a name he later rejected because he thought it sounded too dull and too much as if "it might belong to the sort of writer who turns out sonnet sequences to spring."[1] Certainly Tennessee Williams is no such writer.

His father, Cornelius Williams, a proud and blunt man, was spoiled in his youth and became extremely domineering. He liked drink and rough humour and used profanity with ease. He was employed as a travelling salesman for the International Shoe Company and because

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[1] Stanley J. Kunitz (ed.), Twentieth Century Authors: First Supplement (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1955), p. 1087.

of the estrangement between him and his wife, he spent unnecessarily long periods away from home.

His mother Edwina Williams, the daughter of a rector, was a small, beautiful woman, prim and proper to the point of puritanism. She and her husband were opposites in almost all ways and from the beginning their marriage was a silent struggle. She and her husband lived with her parents who had as little regard for the shoe salesman as he had for them.

Tom had an older sister Rose. From infancy he grew to rely on her presence as well as that of his mother and grandmother. "His father's presence frightened him, not only by its coarseness, but by its strangeness, and from earliest childhood, he regarded his father with awe, fear and a definite sense of disgust."[2]

As he grew up he and Rose became inseparable companions. They invented games and played together in their own backyard. Tom considered his sister an ideal playmate. They were so close to each other that they had no need of other companions. Thus we see the beginnings of his personal isolation from all

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[2]Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work (London: P. Owen, 1961), p. 17.

but family members.

A serious case of diptheria which left him with partial paralysis and a kidney ailment was also to prove a profound influence on his life. He spent months in bed before he was able to regain complete use of his legs; he missed a complete year from school and as a consequence of his prolonged illness both his grandmother and mother became increasingly protective. Mrs. Williams was afraid to let him play with other children. Benjamin Nelson remarks that "his illness intensified his subjective, highly subjective world and in time his amusements became private and isolate, except for the companionship of his one indispensable playmate, Rose. He became a child living in a semi-solitary universe, hovering delicately between fantasy and reality, and comfortably surrounded by people he loved and who in turn loved him..."[3]

Then came the unhappy move from his grand-parents home. When Tennessee was eight years old his father received a promotion to a managerial position which necessitated that the family move to St. Louis. This uprooting for Rose and her brother was a violent one. Their carefree, happy existence had ended for

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[3]Ibid., p. 18.

them and something new and alien had taken its place. The school children taunted them because of their Southern speech and manners. Tennessee says that he can recall gangs of kids following him home yelling "Sissy!" and that home was not a pleasant refuge.[4] His home life was now filled with the overpowering presence of his father, a loud exacting man who terrified his young son and who showed his irritation by dubbing him "Miss Nancy." Tom in turn hated his father whom he saw as being crude and insensitive.[5]

The birth of Tennessee's brother released him from this unhappy situation. His mother had a difficult confinement and protracted illness after child-birth. In order to speed her recovery Tennessee was sent to live with his grandparents for a year, a period which he spent reading prodigiously and happily.

His return home brought with it the old terrors and anxieties. The mother was now busy with the new baby and Tennessee again turned to Rose and the small, almost wholly exclusive world they had created. Their magical intimacy and dream-like existence together cut

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[4]"Angel of the Odd," _Time_, March 9, 1962, p. 50.

[5]_Ibid_., p. 51.

them off almost totally from the life around them, from the apartment dominated by their father's presence, from the streets and the schoolrooms alive with alien and terrifying children.

Rose's development into puberty ended this intimate, constant companionship and came as an unnerving shock to both of them. A gulf opened between him and his sister described with an intermingling of truth and fiction in "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin." Tom could not understand the reason for their estrangement which to him was shrouded in mystery. His mother now became concerned that he was so dependent on his sister, and that he did not make friends with other children.

For Rose and her brother the road to adolescence was more than a break of the childhood intimacy they had known. For both of them it was a frightening experience which was to throw them off balance. The boy was profoundly affected by this loss of equilibrium; his sister was never to recover.[6]

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[6]Nelson, op. cit., p. 25.

Tennessee Williams writes in "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin" published in Hard Candy:

> And it was then, about that time, that I began to find life unsatisfactory as an explanation of itself and was forced to adopt the method of the artist of not explaining but putting the blocks together in some other way that seems more significant to him. Which is a rather fancy way of saying I started writing...[7]

He wrote in the Preface to the Sweet Bird of Youth:

> I discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge.[8]

He also recognized the causes of this need to escape. In the same work he continues:

> From what? From being called a sissy by the neighbourhood kids, and Miss Nancy by my father because I would rather read books in my grand-father's large and classical library than play marbles and baseball and other normal kid games, a result of severe childhood illness and of excessive attachment to the female members of my family, who had coaxed me back to life.[9]

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[7]Tennessee Williams in Nelson, op. cit., p. 25.

[8]Tennessee Williams in Nelson, op. cit., p. 26.

[9]Ibid.

During his high school years he was not happy. His high school English teacher describes him as being not well adjusted, as belonging to another world.[10]

With an increasing alienation he wrote more prodigiously, and as he lost himself in his writing, his alienation was intensified.

The first person outside his family with whom he acquired any intimacy was Hazel Kramer. The attachment between the two developed in adolescence and evolved into romance in his last year in high school. From the beginning his father saw this relationship as only another example of his son's effeminacy and pressured her grandfather not to allow her to attend the University of Missouri, where Tennessee was then a student. This ended the relationship; she married someone else and Tennessee was never to come even close to marriage again.[11]

Williams stayed at the University of Missouri for three years. He settled into a state of apathy, his grades declined progressively after his relationship

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[10]Margaret Cowan in Nelson, op. cit., p. 28.

[11]"Angel of the Odd," Time, p. 51.

terminated with Hazel Kramer, and he failed his R.O.T.C. entrance exam, a factor particularly galling to his father, a second Lieutenant in the Spanish American War. His father then yanked him out, financed a quick stenographical course for him, and Williams found himself as a clerk typist and odd-man in a shoe factory.

In this position he was a "miracle of incompetence." Although physically present, his mind was far removed from his daily work. Nelson refers to one incident which ably testifies to this. On one occasion he was given an order for $50,000 worth of shoes which he casually put in his pocket and promptly forgot until the customer complained of non-delivery.[12] The monotonous routine of this work stifled him. He felt trapped for these three years in a job designed for insanity. He made no friends at work and at night he entered a private world of writing. Primed with cigarettes and coffee he wrote long into the night. Often too tired to undress, he would fall across his bed where his mother would find him in the morning. This period ended in a nervous breakdown in 1935. The diagnosis was that he had collapsed from exhaustion

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[12]Nelson, op. cit., p. 30.

and needed rest. Tennessee, however, felt that the illness was a result of a weak heart, and this neurosis still remains with him despite contrary medical findings. This period of his life provided the material for the alienated characters in his first successful play, The Glass Menagerie, in which Tom Wingfield is his copy and his mouthpiece.

Whether his efforts were satisfactory or not Williams continued writing. It was his great outlet, his fatal need. Now primed with alcohol he wrote almost continuously. The relationship between his parents now was deterioriating even more; in 1937 Rose was committed to a mental hospital, lost in schizophrenia and Tennessee himself, became wholly immersed in his work, never "lifting the curtain between himself and anyone who attempted to know him."[13]

A period in New Orleans in the fall and winter of 1938-1939 saw him evolve as a complete bohemian. He met and acquired an intimate knowledge of strange, twisted, alienated characters and felt a relationship with them never experienced previously. As Nelson remarks, he developed a

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[13] Ibid., p. 42.

> sense of kinship with the lonely, the rootless and the outcast. In New Orleans Williams recognized that loneliness and despair were not just private griefs and with this growing realization he came to know that a world existed which was permeated with individuals who would do anything, experience anything to escape loneliness... New Orleans became for him a kaleidoscope of drink, sex and revelry, and his companions were prostitutes, procurers, homosexuals and any other of the broken but unbowed night people who through quirks in Fate - or in themselves - were living on the perimeter of life, fraught with desperation and wild despair.[14]

Not only did he make a violent, excessive break from some of the repressions and inhibitions he previously had but the knowledge of such people gave him a subject which he never ceased exploiting in his drama. Henceforth the stark and lonely condition of man was to obsess him in all his work.

He continued to write and to roam. Although for short periods he could dim the memories of his sister and parents with sex and alcohol, his personal sense of alienation could not be penetrated. In vain did he throw himself into parties and seek out the most extroverted acquaintances. Such attempts only served to increase his sense of his own loneliness and despair and that of his companions. His sense of aimlessness persisted even with his first overwhelming

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[14]*Ibid.*, p. 45.

success, The Glass Menagerie, in 1945.

In the next decade he produced a vast amount of literary works some great successes like A Streetcar Named Desire and others box office and dramatic failures like Camino Real and Orpheus Descending. He continued to fear that he would die of a heart attack. The pressure imposed on him by the separation of his parents, by the death of both his father and his grandfather, and by Rose's incurable illness intensified his fears. Spells of claustrophobia which had intermittently overwhelmed him now became more frequent and prolonged. He was no longer able to sit in a theatre or walk along a street unless he knew that liquor was easily accessible to him, not because he was addicted to alcohol but because of his need of it to calm his fears. His very valid fear of blindness (he has almost no sight in his left eye) also intensified his neurosis. While he had his work as an outlet, he was content, but with his failure particularly of Orpheus Descending, he began to doubt himself as a writer and was forced to obtain relief or lose his sanity. This time in 1957 he sought and found relief at least temporarily from psycho-analysis.[15]

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[15] Ibid., p. 214.

Williams is still writing. One of his most recent plays The Night of Iguana is now running as a movie; The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Any More is playing in New York. His later works, however, show an obsession with violence for its own sake and a delight in the exploitation of the obscene. As this violence becomes unfettered, Williams' plays lose their dramatic power.

Thus it would seem that there are certain factors in the life of the playwright which influenced him towards personal alienation and which make him as uncomfortable today in the world of reality as he was when he started writing.[16] It would seem also that writing for him is a means of escape from reality; it performs for him a therapeutic function. An examination of some of his works will reflect a continual pre-occupation with the same kind of characters - warped and broken in their perversity and incompletion, and with variations of the one theme, man's alienation.

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[16]Gerald Weales, American Drama Since World War II (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1962), p. 19.

CHAPTER III

SOME EVIDENCE OF ALIENATION IN THE GLASS MENAGERIE

Having examined Tennessee William's life and having noted in it some factors influencing the man's personal alienation, I intend to move from a consideration of his life to a consideration of his plays. The transition here is, however, not too great. It would seem that the author's inability to find any meaning in his own life, to grapple with reality and to find happiness seems to prevent him from developing balanced, well-adjusted characters capable of meeting the problems in their lives. His characters like himself are inadequate to face life and so they evade it in different ways.

In an effort to show this, it is my intention to examine three of Tennessee William's plays. For this purpose I have chosen The Glass Menagerie, which opened in New York in 1945, and which won for the author his initial fame as a dramatist; A Streetcar Named Desire which opened in New York in 1947 and acquired for him additional awards and acclaim; and lastly, Orpheus Descending which enjoyed a short run

in New York in 1957. These three plays, it is hoped, will provide some evidence of the existence of alienation in the characters, themes and situations of the dramas of Tennessee Williams and will show the progression of this alienation with its resulting effect on the author's work.

Williams' transition from his personal world to the world of the stage is less marked in The Glass Menagerie than in any other of his plays as this play to a large extent recalls the unfortunate situation of the author's home. In this play there are marked similarities between Tom Wingfield and the author himself. In Tennessee's own life his father was away a great deal with his work and the family was for the most part without paternal influence. In addition, Tennessee's mother and father were eventually separated as were Tom's. Tennessee, like Tom, worked in a shoe factory, found the work stiflingly monotonous, and wrote poetry as an escape. Each had a sister who lived in a world of dreams and eventually retreated totally into her illusions. Both of them felt a need to break away from their mothers and their homes. Tom Wingfield in many ways is like the author and in many ways is his spokesman.

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play; it is a

series of seven scenes poignantly recalled by Tom Wingfield who escaped from a nagging mother and a dependent sister and left them destitute.

There are four characters only in this play and a fifth who appears only as a large size photograph hanging over the mantle of their living room. Each of these characters is unable to cope with his universe; each succumbs to personal illusions.

The father is introduced by the stage lights which illumine his larger-than-life photograph and by Tom's comment about him. In his picture he is wearing a doughboy's First World War cap and is smiling gallantly. In his introduction to the play Tom describes his father as an employee of the telephone company and as a "telephone man who fell in love with long distances."[1] He deserted his wife and two children and later announced his permanent departure by sending a telegram which read "Hello-good-bye."[2] Failing to face his situation, he gave way to alcoholism and finally escaped to a world of his own making.

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[1]Tennessee Williams, "The Glass Menagerie," Studies in Drama, ed. Blaze O. Bonazza and Emil Roy (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1963), p. 284.

[2]Ibid.

Amanda, his wife, is the protagonist of the play. In her first speech we see her nagging Tom and being critical of his eating habits. Almost immediately we can see that she is existing in two worlds: the pleasant world of her youth in Blue Mountain, with its servants and security and the fantasies of seventeen gentleman callers for her on the one Sunday afternoon, and her harsh present world with its drabness, dependence and demanding problems.

Amanda tells Tom and Laura:

> One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain - your mother received - seventeen - gentleman callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accomodate them all. We had to send the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house.[3]

At the end of this first scene we see her keeping up this game of pretense as she refuses her daughter's help in clearing away the table.

> No, dear, you go in front and study your typewriter chart. Or practice your shorthand a little. Stay fresh and pretty! O It's almost time for our gentleman callers to start arriving. How many do you suppose we're going to entertain this afternoon?[4]

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[3]*Ibid.*, p. 285.

[4]*Ibid.*, p. 285, 286.

Amanda, in her dream world, can say this, although in actual fact she realizes her daughter's deficiencies. Only recently she recognized Laura's excessive shyness in her inability to socialize with those of her own age level in a church group. Yet, it is almost as if she can't face the fact of Laura's introversion. She denies that Laura won't have gentleman callers. She asserts that:

> It can't be true! There must be a flood, there must have been a tornado.[5]

Nor will Amanda face the fact that her daughter is crippled:

> Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a little defect - hardly noticeable even...[6]

She is not, however, entirely oblivious to Laura's condition. She knows that Laura just drifts along doing nothing but playing with her pieces of glass and worn-out records. She knows that this situation will lead only to dependency. When her efforts to have Laura qualify as a secretary fail, she

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[5]*Ibid.*

[6]*Ibid.*, p. 299.

tries to find her a husband. She asks Tom from among the men he works with to "find one that's clean-living, doesn't drink, ask him out for sister!"[7] Here she deludes herself into believing that all Laura needs is the contact and the proper setting to acquire a husband.

As soon as Tom fulfills her imploring plea and invites home his only speaking acquaintance at the warehouse, she critically examines her son about the young man's position, drinking habits, ambition and general character. She reasons that if this gentleman doesn't fulfill her standards, she would prefer that Laura not meet him as "old maids are better off than wives of drunkards."[8]

"O my God! " Tom replies and later cautions his mother that she should not expect too much of Laura.

> Amanda. What do you mean?
>
> Tom. Laura says all these things to you and me because she is ours and we love her. We don't even notice she's crippled any more.
>
> Amanda. Don't say crippled! You know I never allow that word to be used!

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[7] *Ibid.*, p. 301.

[8] *Ibid.*, p. 309.

Tom.	But face facts, Mother. She is and - that's not all.
Amanda.	What do you mean "not all"?
Tom.	Laura is very different from other girls.
Amanda.	I think the difference is all to her advantage.
Tom.	Not quite all - in the eyes of others - strangers - she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.
Amanda.	Don't say peculiar.
Tom.	Face the facts. She is.[9]

Tom then leaves allegedly to go to the movies. Yet Amanda does not and indeed can not face the facts. Instead, she calls Laura outside on the landing and has her look over her left shoulder and wish for happiness and good fortune as if her wish would soon find fulfillment.

Amanda then begins working feverishly to make the apartment more alluring and to transform Laura into a "pretty trap."[10] She fusses to such an extent about the meeting that Laura is nervous before the event and sick with tension when their guest arrives.

Amanda keeps up a pretense of gaiety with Jim

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[9] _Ibid._, p. 310.

[10] _Ibid._, p. 312.

O'Connor, their gentleman caller. Breathlessly almost, she engages in long monologues which show how she obscures reality. She tells Jim:

> It's rare for a girl as sweet an' pretty as Laura to be domestic! But Laura is, thank heavens, not only pretty but also very domestic. I'm not at all. I never was a bit. I could never make a thing but angel-food cake. Well, in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone... But what am I going on for about my - tribulations? Tell me yours - I hope you don't have any! Tom?[11]

In this manner she pretends that Laura cooked the supper and exclaims about the lovely way it is prepared. Thus Amanda hopes to trap a son-in-law and bring a myth to life. She hopes that Laura will acquire the popularity and the gentleman callers that Amanda deludes herself into believing she had in Blue Mountain.

Eventually her bubble of happiness bursts as Jim O'Connor announces that he is engaged. She then keeps up a brave show until her guest leaves and she can admit that "things have a way of turning out badly."[12] Unreasonably she lashed out at Tom for bringing home an engaged man, for allowing her to make such fools of herself and Laura and to go to such

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[11] Ibid., p. 316.

[12] Ibid., p. 332.

preparations and expense. Ironically, in this instance, she accuses Tom of being selfish and of being a dreamer. She forgets that Tom had tried to warn her and to help her face the facts.

Although Tom Wingfield attempts to help his mother face reality, in his own way, he himself also evades it. One Williams' critic characterizes Tom as an "itinerant dreamer like his creator."[13] Tom is a man with dreams who, because of his father's desertion, is bound to his mother and sister. He is presented as a man trapped by circumstances, and as a poet with a job in a warehouse. Eventually he breaks his physical ties with his family and escapes from the trap. Yet there is nothing grand or heroic about his leave-taking. He has been fired from his job in the shoe factory. He must now find another source of employment.

Benjamin Nelson another critic, describes Tom thus:

> Tom, the protagonist in the story, possesses the romantic soul of a dreamer. Despite the perceptions he shows as Narrator, he has as much trouble facing reality as does his mother. In part, the play is

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[13]Signi Lenea Falk, Tennessee Williams (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 75.

his attempt to overcome his fears, but we are left with no assurance at the conclusion that he has succeeded. He is plainly disgusted with his mother for her poses and apparent refusal to cope with reality, and yet he, too, escapes daily from the oppression of his life by seeking the narcotism of the cinema. Before he makes his final departure Amanda accuses him of living in illusions:

> Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go - to the movies![14]

Movies, liquor and writing are Tom's means of escape from his home situation. These eventually prove inadequate and Tom deserts his family. Apparently, however, in his thoughts he never fully escapes. In the concluding scene of the play, he remarks, "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!"[15] He then describes himself as travelling around a great deal, going frequently to the movies and the bars, talking to strangers - all of which seems to imply that he has

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[14]Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams - The Man and His Work (New York: Ivan Obolonsky Inc. 1961), p. 107.

[15]Williams, "The Glass Menagerie," p. 333.

not found the adventure or any of the fulfillment which he sought which he escaped from his home. He is presented along with the rest of his family as trying to exist in a world which offers no sensible reason for existence.

Of all four characters Laura is certainly the most alienated from reality. She is shown to be as unearthly as her nickname, "Blue Roses." Hypersensitive always because of a defective leg, she avoided any real contacts with people. She left high school because of her embarrassment about the clumping noise she made as she walked with a brace on her leg. This was,however, apparently slight except to Laura for as Jim O'Connor later remarked:

> You dropped out of school, you gave up an education because of a clump, which as far as I know was practically non-existent.[16]

She was so introverted and shy, she could not compete with other girls in a commercial course. When her mother learns this about her twenty-three year old daughter, she lashes out at her:

> I thought that you were an adult; it seems that I was mistaken.[17]

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[16]*Ibid*., p. 327, 328.

[17]*Ibid*., p. 287.

Laura had apparently broken down completely the first time she was given a speed test in typing, became nauseated and almost had to be carried to the wash-room. She did not return to school again but deceived her mother into thinking that she was attending regularly for the next six weeks by spending the required time away from home in the zoo, at the movies or in a flower conservatory.

Laura lives in a make-believe world of victrola music with her glass animals as her only significant companions. She is poignantly depicted by Williams as being too fragile and weak to cope with life. Her solution was to retreat from it into the world of dreams.

The fourth character of this play, Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller, is described by the Narrator as "The most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we are somehow set apart from."[18] I would agree with Tom's statement. Yet while he presents some contrast to the Wingfield family and their inability to cope with their situations in life, in a measure Jim too is alienated from his present life. He was the human dynamo in

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[18]<u>Ibid</u>., p. 284.

high school, the star of the operetta, the idol of the girls and the boy judged most likely to succeed. When Laura produces a copy of their high school yearbook, The Torch, they both stare at it reverently. Jim becomes lost in his past glory. In his reminiscing his feeling of insecurity and his disquieting fears are revealed. He tells Laura:

> I had hoped when I was going to high school that I would be further along at this time, six years later, than I am now - You remember that wonderful write-up I had in The Torch.[19]

The previous high school hero has a job in a shoe factory little better than Tom's. Admittedly he is studying radio engineering at night "planning to get in on the ground floor" of an industry that has not yet got underway. Dreamily he talks of his future with starry eyes:

> Full Stream - Knowledge - zzzzp! Money! - zzzzp! Power! That's the cycle democracy is built on![20]

Yet I am left with the feeling that six years have passed since Jim's graduation with little knowledge, money and power being acquired, and that another

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[19]Ibid., p. 326.

[20]Ibid., p. 328.

six years won't make much difference.

Certainly the characters of this play with the possible exception of the gentleman caller fail to cope with their situation in life. Of these, two are unforgettable characters:

> the retiring sister Laura, too shy to face reality and the mother Amanda, too incompetent to cope with it effectively; the one sullied and noble and delicate; the other battered, ineptly designing, querulous and pathetically ridiculous.[21]

These portraits of trapped and frustrated womanhood were to appear again.

In this play, not only is alienation evident in the character's withdrawal from reality into their illusions, it is also evident in the theme of the play itself. This I judge to be man's incomprehendibility - the inability of one man to communicate with another. This alienation of man from man and the essential loneliness and isolation of the individual is not as marked in The Glass Menagerie as in many of William's later plays, but nevertheless, it is there. We see it openly stated by Tom and Amanda in the fourth scene in which Tom is apologizing for insulting his mother,

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[21]Nelson, op. cit., p. 181.

and Amanda is about to implore her son to bring home a man from the factory who might provide a husband for Laura. Amanda acknowledges to Tom:

> I know your ambitions do not lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world, you've had to make sacrifices... There's so many things in my heart I cannot describe to you! I've never told you but I - loved your father...[22]

Tom replies also:

> That's true of me, too. There's so much in my heart I can't describe to you![23]

In this moment of revelation they each see a little more deeply into the personality of the other, yet each admits ineffability regarding personal issues which can't be shared even by son with mother or mother with son.

Later again, we see in this instance with Laura and Jim how people reach out for satisfying contacts and experiences yet pass each other as ships in the night. Jim is at one point succeeding in wiping away Laura's paralyzing shyness. He is drawing her out of herself and awakening in her interest in new topics and

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[22] Williams, "The Glass Menagerie," p. 300.

[23] Ibid.

in another human being than herself. Then characteristically he forgets her and concentrates on himself. He drops one trend of their conversation to remark as he stretches:

> Well, well, well, well - look how big my shadow is when I stretch![24]

Later he restores their communiion, and their contact reaches its climax and its conclusion with a kiss. Jim is as much awakened at this moment as is Laura but he cannot preserve his wonderful dream of himself and accept the retiring Laura as well. For a fleeting moment they established contact, they came together; then the "stumble-john," embarrassed and apologetic, slipped away.

In these two examples from the play we see the beginnings of what becomes a constant theme with the author - man's failure in communication, man's isolation and loneliness.

Also here we see the beginnings of his philosophy of life which would seem to be direct result of his own alienation. It stems from his attitude that no man can cope with his situation in life. A man might struggle, he might hope, but in the end he must be defeated.

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[24] Ibid., p. 328.

Yet the author expresses this view less emphatically in this play than in any other. Here certainly he conveys the inevitability of man's failure in life and his lack of responsibility. He shows how the Wingfields, as broken and fragmented people, find their escape from reality in dreams.

However, by making The Glass Menagerie a "memory play", he seems to be portraying a mood rather than an actual commitment. In this play more than in any of his other works, the sympathy he elicits for his ineffectual dreamers is thrown into focus by his objective attitude toward them. In his later works he becomes less detached from his characters, and more hardened in his conviction that the universe is hostile and corrupt and that man's situation is hopeless.

CHAPTER IV

SOME EVIDENCE OF ALIENATION IN *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

With the overwhelming success of *The Glass Menagerie* behind him, Williams began to write a play first called *The Poker Night* and later to be incorporated into *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Streetcar* opened in New York in 1947 for 855 performances; won for Williams a second New York Critics Circle Award 1947-1948; won the Pulitzer Prize 1947-1948 and became one of the best known plays in the mid-twentieth century American reportory.[1]

Evidence of alienation can be found in the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, from several points of view and alienation of a more intensive degree than that found in *The Glass Menagerie*. Here again it would seem that Williams' own avoidance of reality is evident in the way he develops his characters, in the themes he presents and in the situation of the play itself.

Although one play followed almost immediately

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[1]Signi Lenea Falk, *Tennessee Williams* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 17-18.

after the other, the second drama shows an increasing preoccupation with the trapped and frustrated individual caught in a hopeless situation. The second play establishes Williams as a writer of the inadequate.

The main character in this play is Blanche Dubois, a southern gentlewoman who is portrayed as being too delicate to withstand the crudeness and decay of the world in which she finds herself. Throughout the play her standards and those of a primitive labourer are in conflict. She is portrayed as the representative of a dying culture and her antagonist as the uninhibited man, the embodiment of virility.

The plot of the play is centred around Blanche's degeneration. A brief summary will show Blanche's resistance to reality, her avenues of escape from it and her eventual, total alienation.

It is obvious from the first scene that Blanche is not well. A streetcar named Desire brings her to a rather "elemental" quarter of New Orleans to seek refuge with her sister. Blanche appears there immaculately dressed in a white suit looking as if she were arriving for a summer tea. The author suggests that "there is something about her white clothes, that suggests a

moth."[2] She surveys the sordid scene, fears that she has been misdirected, learns, however, that she is in the area where her sister lives, and is shown to her apartment. Her sister is not at home but she is admitted by the landlady who lives in the upper flat.

Upon entering Blanche first looks for the whiskey bottle. She drinks the whiskey and then murmurs faintly, "I've got to get hold of myself."[3]

When her sister Stella arrives home, Blanche speaks to her with "feverish vivacity"[4] begs for a drink of liquor to quiet her nerves and explains why she has come. Supposedly because of nervous exhaustion, she is on a leave of absence from a teaching position. She relates that Belle Reve, their family estate,has been lost. She admits she can't be alone. She shows an excessive preoccupation about her appearance and seeks repeated assurance from her sister that she is looking well. Nervously she flits from one topic to another until her brother-in-law arrives home surprised to discover her there. From the beginning Blanche and

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[2]Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (A Signet Book, The New American Library, 1964), p. 15.

[3]Ibid., p. 18.

[4]Ibid.

Stanley are uneasy in each other's presence. Blanche makes an attempt to converse casually with Stanley but becomes nauseous.

In the second scene Blanche and Stanley clash. Stanley arrives home to dinner to learn that his wife is taking her sister out for the evening because of his poker party at home that night as Stella does not know how it would affect Blanche. Stella reports that Blanche is soaking in a hot tub to quiet her nerves for she is terribly upset about losing their family estate. Later Stanley demands all the details fearing that he might have been swindled out of his wife's share. Blanche vaguely suggest that it was lost on mortgages and is forced to produce the papers to prove this. All the while Stanley is extracting the story from her, Stella is outside on the landing and we observe Blanche's sexual by-play as she asks him to fasten her dress and sprays him with her perfume. This and the whole tone of her conversation prompts Stanley to say:

> If I didn't know that you were my wife's sister, I'd get ideas about you![5]

In the third scene Blanche and Stella return home to find the poker game still in progress. Blanche

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[5] _Ibid._, p. 41.

waylays one of Stanley's friends, Harold Mitchell, who seems more sensitive and refined than the others, as he is on his way to the "little boys' room" as he calls it. She immediately lies to him about her age and then asks him to put the coloured paper lantern she has bought over the bare light bulb explaining that

> I can't stand a naked bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action.[6]

She tells Mitch that she is an English teacher attempting to instruct "a bunch of bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos with reverence of Hawthorne and Poe."[7] She then turns on the radio, lures Mitch into dancing, and angers Stanley who hurls the radio out the window. The scene erupts into a riot as Stanley slaps Stella and has to be held down by his friends.

Now that Blanche has established herself as a resident in the Kowalski home, a never-ending war sometimes silent and sometimes viciously loud, is being waged between Blanche and Stanley. Stella's relationship with Stanley appears to Blanche to depend on the physical only. Blanche tries to

> awaken Stella to what she feels is a brutish existence on a sub-human level, while Stanley, in defense, begins to pry into her past, bit by

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[6]*Ibid.*, p. 55.

[7]*Ibid.*, p. 56.

> bit, obsessed by the belief that beneath all her pretensions she is no better than he, and maybe worse.[8]

In the fourth scene Blanche attempts to persuade Stella to leave her husband. She deludes herself into thinking that a Shep Huntleigh whom she knew in college and who is now married and wealthy, would set them up in a shop of some kind. All of this seems somewhat ambiguous in the light of Blanche's half-conscious efforts to arouse Stanley and her deliberate exhibiting of herself in the poker scene.

The dream world in which Blanche lives is further revealed in scene five. Blanche burst into a peal of laughter and explains to Stella that she is laughing at herself:

> Myself, myself for being such a liar! I'm writing a letter to Shep. "Darling Shep. I am spending the summer on the wing, making flying visits here and there, And who knows, perhaps I shall take a sudden notion to swoop down on Dallas! How does that sound? ... Most of my sister's friends go north in the summer... continued round of entertainments, teas, cocktails, and luncheons...[9]

In the same scene we learn that Stanley is still digging up Blanche's past. In self-defense Blanche

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[8]Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams - The Man and His Work (New York: Ivan Obolonsky Inc., 1963), p. 132.

[9]Williams, op. cit., p. 74.

explains to Stella that:

> I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers.[10]

She explains further:

> I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft - soft people have got to shimmer and glow - they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a paper lantern over the light... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft and attractive. And I - I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick.[11]

She then tells Stella she wants to marry Mitch very badly because she wants a refuge, a place to hide.

Blanche's complex personality is further unfolded when later that day while she is waiting for Mitch to arrive, the paper boy comes to collect his money. Blanche offers him a drink, asks him to light her cigarette, draws the reluctant youth into conversation, seductively drapes a gossamer scarf about her shoulders, and flatters the young man that he looks like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights. The boy laughs uncomfortably and stands before her bashfully. Blanche softly says to him:

> Come here, I want to kiss you, just once, softly

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[10]*Ibid.*, p. 79.

[11]*Ibid.*

and sweetly on your mouth![12]

Blanche's preoccupation with sex, as a revulsion and as an attraction, is becoming more evident as the plot develops.

Scene six takes place between Mitch and Blanche. Blanche acts as coyly as if she were an innocent sixteen-year old. Mitch stands somewhat in awe of Blanche and regards her as a lady fit to be presented to his mother. Blanche is making a definite effort to impress Mitch with her goodness. Up to then she has allowed him only a good night kiss, yet in French she can ask the ignorant Mitch:

> Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quelle dommage! I mean it's a damned good thing.[13]

Blanche tells Mitch about her childhood marriage, one real cause of her unsuccessful efforts to live a balanced life. She relates that she was married as a very young girl to a boy who needed her help and whom she failed. She found out soon after that he was a homosexual when she found him with an older man who had been his friend for years. Later her husband shot himself with a revolver through the head and Blanche still feels the

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[12]*Ibid.*, p. 84.

[13]*Ibid.*, p. 88.

guilt of having failed him. Mitch then recognized her need of someone, he reaches out to her, and she huddles in his embrace gratefully sobbing:

> Sometimes - there's God - so quickly.[14]

Soon we find her 'god' is far too human. Stanley has discovered her past and pours out all to Mitch and Stella. After her first ill-fated marriage, her life has been one of gradual degradation. She was dismissed from her teaching position after seducing one of her seventeen-year-old boys, and for the last two years has been living as a prostitute on a series of intimacies with strangers of many types. While Stanley is revealing the results of his research to his wife, Blanche is concluding one of her hour long bath sessions and bits of her song can be heard:

> It's a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be - But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me![15]

She is rooted from her place of refuge by Stanley who yells out:

> Hey, canary bird! Toots! Get OUT of the BATHROOM![16]

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[14]*Ibid.*, p. 96.

[15]*Ibid.*, p. 100.

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 105.

This is the crisis of the play[17] and thereafter every event which follows contributes torments to unsettle an already badly jolted mind.

Blanche's birthday supper which follows is a sad affair. A fourth place set for Mitch is conspicuously vacant. There is little conversation except a weak attempt by Blanche to tell a joke which nobody finds funny. Blanche retreats as soon as possible and Stella continues her defense of Blanche. She tells Stanley:

> 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.[18]

Then as Stanley defends himself indicating how Blanche is spoiling their lives, Stella who is expecting a baby begins her labour and Stan rushes her to the hospital.

In scene nine Mitch, angered and hurt by Blanche's lies, appears for revenge. He is unshaven and is dressed in his dirty work clothes. Both Blanche and he have been drinking. Blanche is obsessed with a disturbing polka tune, the same one playing when her husband shot himself, which keeps running through her head. Mitch

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[17] Travis Bogard and William I. Oliver (ed.), Modern Drama - Essays in Criticism (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 382.

[18] Williams, op. cit., p. 111.

knows Blanche's story and proceeds immediately to unveil her illusions. He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb to get a better look at her. Blanche utters a frightened gasp and in answer to Mitch's statement that he wants realism Blanche remarks:

> I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it![19]

Blanche refuses thereby to face the truth about herself; she resists reality. She has no pretense about her delusions. She dons them purposefully as a defense against a world that is too harsh for her.

Like the Wingfields in The Glass Menagerie, she is presented by the author as unable to cope with her situation in life. She succumbs to illusion willingly to escape a reality which she finds horrifying.

Mitch now refuses to marry her but proceeds to make advances toward her which she stops by yelling from the window "Fire! Fire! Fire!"[20]

From then on Blanche drinks fairly steadily and when Stanley arrives home from the hospital where his wife is waiting to give birth, Blanche is clinging to

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[19] Ibid., p. 117.

[20] Ibid., p. 121.

an illusion of having received a telegram from an old admirer, Shep Huntleigh, to go on a cruise of the Caribbean and is already packing her clothes. Stanley too has been drinking and the war between them surges again. Blanche tells Stanley what a wonderful thing it will be to have privacy again; she tells him that Shep is a gentleman who respects her and what he wants is companionship which she with a rich mind and tender heart can supply. She remarks:

> How strange I should be called a destitute woman when I have all of these treasures locked in my heart.[21]

Blanche also deludes herself into believing that Mitch has returned with a box of roses to beg her forgiveness. Stanley soon dispels her dreams by saying:

> There isn't a goddam thing but imagination ...and lies and tricks.[22]

Then Stanley, sensing that although Blanche appears to despise him, secretly she has always been rather attracted to him, breaks her last contacts with reality by raping her. Blanche tries to strike him with a broken bottle which he retrieves as he grabs her remarking:

> Tiger - tiger! Drop the bottle-top. Drop it!

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[21]*Ibid.*, p. 126.

[22]*Ibid.*, p. 127.

We've had this date from the beginning.[23]

Scene eleven occurs some weeks later. Blanche is by then hopelessly insane. She is still harbouring the delusion that Shep Huntleigh is coming for her. She is packed, dressed and is waiting for him when the doctor and nurse arrive to take her to the institution where the Kowalskis have committed her. She, suspecting something, protests violently until the doctor, touching the right cord in her by treating her as a lady, supports her with his arm and leads her away with extreme courtesy. Blanche lady-like to the end, remarks:

> Whoever you are - I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.[24]

Blanche's story is one of total disintegration which ended in insanity. Her inability to face life ended in complete alienation. Williams unfolds her story as if no other alternative were possible. She was, as depicted by the author, too delicate and fragile to face her harsh world. She deliberately chose what was obviously wrong but Williams presents her as if she could not have acted differently. Unmistakably Williams

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[23] *Ibid*., p. 130.

[24] *Ibid*., p. 142.

sympathizes with her and seems to exonerate her from all guilt.

The other characters in this play, while not succumbing totally to their illusions, yet need their measure of alienation to live their lives.

Stanley, while having a realistic insight into his own character, nevertheless depends on all illusion to live his kind of life. He is well aware that he is an animal and he knows also that he was very base to treat Blanche as he did. Blanche, for all her sordid past, still has qualities of refinement, culture and humanity which impress Stanley, but which are foreign to him. Consequently, in order to retain his illusion that no one is any better than he is and that everyone else is purely animal also, he must destroy Blanche and pull her down off her columns. Nelson describes Stanley's alienation this way:

> Stanley's existence depends upon his illusion that the world is a pigsty and he is the king of the pigs. Into this existence comes a person who threatens this illusion; threatens it by clinging to old half-dead codes and traditions which make her appear ludicrous and yet endow her with a dignity and worth which even Stanley dimly perceives. His great fear is not so much that Blanche is depriving him, by her presence, of getting the colored lights going but that she is challenging in some semi-realized manner the illusion upon which his very existence is based.[25]

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[25]Nelson, _op. cit._, p. 146.

Stanley operates on one dimension only, the sensual or physical - and to this extent he is alienated from true manhood. Williams tells us this in his first description of him:

> Animal joy in his being, is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women...Branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes up woman at a glance, with sexual classification, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them.[26]

When Blanche is trying to persuade Stella to leave Stanley, she offers as her basic reason his primitiveness. Blanche tells Stella:

> He acts like an animal, has an animals 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! Yes, something - ape - like - about him... Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image but Stella - my sister - there has been some progress since then! Such things as art - as poetry and music ... tenderer feelings ... Don't hang back with the brutes![27]

Obviously Stanley, the animal, is developed to the fullest extent; Stanley, the rational man, is almost totally undeveloped by contrast. In his being the animal

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[26]Williams, op. cit., p. 29.

[27]Ibid., p. 72.

dominates over the spiritual and to live as he does, Stanley must continue to delude himself that this is the proper order.

Despite Blanche's condemnation of Stanley, Stella, who comes from a cultured background and a refined family, does "hang back with the brutes."[28] She professes to love Stanley and probably does love him but their existence together is based almost entirely on their sexual life. Stella has been awakened to her physical self as a woman yet has paid a very high price. She has submerged her personal dignity and has built a personal world to exclude the outer world and its challenges. She moves slowly, prepares meals, tidies her two-room apartment, sips cokes and sleeps. Elia Kazan, the director of this drama for its New York run noted that "she is buried alive in her flesh. She's half asleep."[29]

Blanche's presence is disturbing to Stella as well as to Stanley because Blanche offers Stella an example of the gentility and tenderness lacking in her own life and reminds her of her human need of it.

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[28] *Ibid.*

[29] Nelson, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

Williams implies that Stella knew in her heart that her husband had violated her sister yet Stella could not admit to this and go on living with Stanley. She must delude herself to live with her husband; she must become impervious to reality. Her friend Eunice advises her:

> Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going.[30]

To quiet her sobbing after Blanche is taken away Stanley approaches her a bit uncertainly. Voluptuously and soothingly, for his last speech of the play, Stanley coos:

> Now, honey. Now, love, Now, now love. (He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse.) Now, now, love. Now, love.[31]

Stanley then obviously must submerge half of herself to live with Stan. To the extent that she is not an integrated personality, to the extent that she is not herself, she is self-estranged; she is alienated.

Mitch too is alienated to the extent he fails to live a self-directed life. His life is a projection of what his mother thinks he should be and do. He himself wants Blanche even after he learns her sordid past but

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[30]Williams, op. cit., p. 133.

[31]Ibid., p. 142.

cannot take her because

> you're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.[32]

He is a mother-coddled lad powerless to act without her approval.

From all of this arises many interesting questions. Where do Williams' sympathies lie - with the cultured, intelligent but weak and ineffectual Blanche or with the strong but primitive Stanley operating as from the cave. This is never totally clear but Blanche is brought to total destruction with Stanley administering the last fatal blow that led to her final breaking with reality. Blanche represents the honor, gentility and basic decency (however faded and illusory) that is starkly contrasted against the world of Stanley Kowalski. Yet in seeking her values (admittedly in the wrong way and in the wrong places) Blanche is only hastening her final destruction. Yet finally she is destroyed as she has only illusions and fancies to fling against Kowalski's brute force. With the threat of Blanche removed, Stanley is left to harbour the delusion that his is the only way of life.

As in The Glass Menagerie, in this play also, William seems unable to create a strong character who is

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[32] Ibid., p. 121.

an integrated balance of body and soul, and who is capable of coping with his situation in life. Here, as in all his plays, his compassion reaches out to the ill-adapted, but there appears to be no outgoing feeling in any other direction. This seems to be the only attitude towards life that triggers any sympathy on the part of the author; nothing else has any terms of reference. In this way, it would almost seem the author is feeling sorry for himself.

In his preoccupation with sex and in his inability to determine its function, we see also a major theme in Williams' plays. There is ambiguity within Blanche's nature particularly in her attitude toward sex. While Stanley's coarse virility repels her, in another way it attracts her. We see many examples of this ambivalence. Blanche accuses Stella of going to bed with her Polack when she could have been helping to save Belle Reve; at the same time, Blanche is being generally licentious with anyone from soldiers to school boys. Blanche explains that sex is her only answer to loneliness. It is her unhappy solution to man's incomprehendibility, to the alienation of man and woman. For her, it acts as a destroyer; for Stanley it is a preserver. Williams' implicit view of the role of sex seems confused in all of his plays and A Streetcar Named

Desire is no exception.

Again in this play we see Williams' "almost neurotic recurrence of the loneliness theme which would seem to suggest that the writer is again imposing on his characters his own personal state of mind."[33] Blanche is the individual trapped by circumstances; she does not or cannot communicate her innermost feelings to others although she is constantly talking flitting nervously from one topic to another. Her promiscuity is explained as resulting from her personal alienation; she wants real, satisfying contacts with other human beings. She has depended on man's love-making to give her a sense of existence.

And finally the situation in the play results likewise from Williams' own outlook on life. No one in the universe can triumph. Blanche is doomed from the beginning as she cannot find anything to give her a basis for living. There is no source to which she can appeal. Destruction is inevitable.

Nelson supports my conclusion; he says:

> The sense of wholeness in the universe and in man and in human relationships escapes Williams. It is as if he cannot perceive the possibility of completion either on earth or in the heavens. Rather, he is a poet of the inadequate.[34]

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[33]Falk, op. cit., p. 167.

[34]Nelson, op. cit., p. 154.

CHAPTER V

SOME EVIDENCE OF A MORE INTENSE ALIENATION IN ORPHEUS DESCENDING

Since the scope of this paper allows me to examine three plays only in detail, I gave much thought to my last choice. The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, in my estimation and that of most critics, are considered Williams' best works but the last of these was written in 1947. Since this time Williams has written many more plays, one of which is Orpheus Descending. This is a fitting play on which to conclude my study because it is the "root play of Williams' work."[1] It is the fifth revision of his first produced play, Battle of Angels, which in its original form "got as far as Boston back in 1940 and blew up in a cloud of scandal over its sulphurous dialogue."[2] But in Williams' own words, "about seventy-five percent of Orpheus

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[1]Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 54.

[2]Newsweek, April 1, 1957, p. 81 and 82.

Descending is new writing."[3] It opened in New York in 1957 and lasted for sixty-eight performances only. This play received few favorable reviews from the New York critics and was pretty much ignored at the box offices.[4] Later it was made into a movie and renamed The Fugitive Kind.

Shortly after this play was presented Williams revealed in an interview that:

> I may write about troubled people but I write from my own tensions. For me this is a form of therapy. Frankly there must be some limitations in me as a dramatist. I can't handle people in routine situations. I must find characters who correspond to my own tensions. If those people are excessively melodramatic...well a play must concentrate the events of a lifetime in the short span of a three-act play. These events must be more violent than life.[5]

Not only do Williams' characters in Orpheus Descending correspond to his own tensions, they also become puppets for his notions and symbolism. Here again we find Williams preoccupied with the same themes and characters. Yet in his later works as illustrated

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[3]Tennessee Williams, Orpheus Descending with Battle of Angels (New York: A New Directions Book, 1958), p. x.

[4]Signi Lenea Falk, Tennessee Williams (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961), p. 19.

[5]Newsweek, April 1, 1957, p. 81 and 82.

by Orpheus Descending, his development of his characters and themes seems to be too intimately linked with the author's manipulating character and situation and working from without rather than from within a situation.

The story of misfits, the souls too tender to survive in a world of harshness and cruelty, is one of his favourite themes. Yet by contrast to his characters in his early plays, the characters in this play remain relatively commonplace. "They never approach the tragic level, and we do not feel for them as we feel for Blanche du Bois or even Amanda Wingfield and her luckless offspring."[6] The promise of his two earlier works in the 1940's was never fulfilled. The artist and the man seem to have degenerated. Some evidence of this can be found by examining the play from the point of view of characters, themes and the situation in which the characters find themselves. In this treatment will be revealed marked similarities with The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire but obvious differences as well, differences which indicate a more intense alienation in the author and in his characters.

In the epilogue to the play Orpheus Descending we learn that Jabe Torrance is dying of cancer; that his

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[6]Theatre Arts, May, 1957, p. 20.

wife, Lady Torrance, was in love with a man who deserted her; that she sold herself to Jabe and lived with him in hate.

In the first scene we meet the four main protagonists of the play, all of whom are "the fugitive kind."[7] The central male character is Val Xavier who comes into a small southern town and finds employment in a dry goods store. The inhabitants of this town (a corner of hell) are a motley collection of commonplace towns people, most important of which for Val (Orpheus)[8] Xavier are three women. The play revolves around his relationship with them.

The first of these women we meet is Carol Cutrere. She wears theatrical make-up and is bare-footed. One character remarks about her:

> The last time she was arrested in the highway, they say she was naked under her coat.[9]

When she sees Val in her own home town and recognizes him as a previous entertainer whom she had met in her night life, she immediately propositions him by asking

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[7]Tennessee Williams, "Orpheus Descending," Theatre Arts, September, 1958, p. 55.

[8]The bracketed insertions refer to the underlying symbolism in the play under discussion.

[9]Williams, "Orpheus Descending," Theatre Arts, p. 30.

him to go "jooking" with her. In answer to Val's Question, "What is jooking?",[10] she replies that it means drinking and driving and stopping and dancing until you are satiated with all these things and then you spend the night together. Val (believing herself to be mature) spurns her offer because he himself, now thirty, intends to give up his wild freedom of former days for security. He replies to Carol that:

> Heavy drinking and smoking the weed and shacking with strangers is okay for kids in their twenties but this is my thirtieth birthday and I'm through with that route.[11]

We next meet Vee Talbot, the wife of the brutal sheriff, who seeks release by painting. She is "the visionary who has hopelessly - and melodramatically - confused sexual repression with religious exaltation."[12] She painted a "vision" of the Holy Ghost ascending which she is bringing to put in Jabe's room. It is she who introduced Val to Lady on the chance he might be hired as a clerk in the Torrance's store.

Lady brings Jabe home from the hospital and he

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[10] Ibid., p. 32.

[11] Ibid.

[12] Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams - The Man and His Work (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1961), p. 225.

is met by a welcoming committee which soon disperses. Jabe is obviously dying. Obviously too Jabe and Lady are hostile to each other.

In the second scene Lady meets Val and with some reluctance hires him as a clerk. Val appears to be a rather strange young man. He is wearing a snake-skin jacket, mottled white, black and gray and he carries a guitar. He offers some rather peculiar qualifications for employment:

> I can sleep on a concrete floor or go without sleeping, for forty-eight hours. And I can hold my breath three minutes without blackening out... And I can go for a whole day without passing water... and I can burn down a woman...[13]

Val then proceeds to tell Lady that he wishes to avoid involvement with people; he wishes to remain uncommitted. He tells Lady about a

> kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on anything but has to stay all its life on wings in the sky.[14]

Val tells Lady that this bird comes to earth only to die. He expresses his desire

> to be one of these birds and never be corrupted.[15]

Lady, too, would like a measure of this bird's freedom

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[13]Williams, "Orpheus Descending," _Theatre Arts_, p. 36.

[14]_Ibid_., p. 37.

[15]_Ibid_.

as she is forced to

> sleep with a son of a bitch who bought me at a fire sale, and not in the fifteen years have I had a single good dream.[16]

Williams presents this bird as a symbol of freedom and the earth and involvement with others he views as a source of corruption.

In the second act Williams explores his incommunicability theme and his characters again become his mouthpieces. Val and Lady consider how one person gets to know another. Val said he used to think it was by touch but later he found out this made people more strangers than ever. Val concluded that:

> Nobody gets to know nobody! We're all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins for life! You understand me, Lady? - I'm telling you the truth, we got to face it, we're under a life-long sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth.[17]

Lady disagrees and states that love is the answer to people's separation and loneliness. Val replies:

> That's the make-believe answer. It's fooled many a fool besides you and me, that's the God's truth, Lady, and you better believe it.[18]

Apparently Carol still believes that sex is the

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid., p. 38.

[18] Ibid.

answer to the alienation of man and man, and she is back again defying her brother and braving a town that has ostracized her to give Val a message that his type is in danger in that town. Carol started out an idealistic girl, a daughter of a rich gentleman, championed the cause of the negro and the down-trodden, came into trouble with the law, was arrested for "lewd vagrancy" and henceforth retaliated and became an exhibitionist and a loose woman for whom the desire for sex became a compulsion. Yet now she reveals to Val that:

> the act of love-making 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.[19]

In the next scene Val meets Vee Talbot again. She talks about her visions and how her painting has given her a whole new outlook on life. Painting for her has become a reason for existing, and a means of escape through which she deadens the memory of the brutal treatment of man by man. Williams then has these two characters speak of the violence and corruption in the world thereby portraying his own conviction that life is meaningless. The sheriff finds Val holding Vee's hands,

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[19] *Ibid.*, p. 41.

and mistaking Val's sympathy for the deranged woman for amourous advances, begins to plot his revenge.

In scene three the plot again returns to Lady and Val. Lady offers Val a room on the premises but Val at first rejects it as it will restrict his freedom. He makes a number of futile efforts to escape. The mutual recriminations are ugly. He accuses her of being a

> not so young and not so satisfied woman, that hired a man off the highway to do double duty without paying overtime for it... I mean a store clerk days and a stud nights, and...[20]

When he attempts to leave, Lady calls out:

> NO, NO, DON'T GO... I NEED YOU!!! TO LIVE... TO GO ON LIVING.[21]

After this dramatic statement highlighted in the published version of the play by the capitals, the curtain falls for the inevitable bedroom scene.

In the final act the antagonist, Jabe Torrance, struggling for strength and looking like "a fierce dying old beast", comes down the stairs with the assistance of his nurse. Allegedly the dying man makes this effort to view his store but actually he comes to check on his wife and to appraise their new clerk. Lady, in panic

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[20]*Ibid.*, p. 46.

[21]*Ibid.*

chest. Just at that time Talbott comes in on the two of them thus and the interpretation immediately is that this "son of a low-down bitch is fooling with ..."[22] his wife. After a scuffle Val escapes but with a warning from the sheriff. "Boy, don't let the sun rise on you in this country."[23] In this way Val is threatened with violence.

In the final scene the nurse is looking for Lady who is at the beauty parlour and busy planning for the opening of the confectionery that evening. Its realization will fulfill Lady's dream of her youth, and its opening while her husband is dying upstairs is her way of revenging herself on her husband for his part in her father's death.

> I want that man to see the wine garden coming open again here tonight! While he's dying! I want him to hear it coming open again here tonight. While he's dying...[24]

Acting on Talbott's advice Val then asks Lady for his wages and plans to leave town. His intended departure does not appeal to Lady in the least for she not only needs his services that evening,but she also needs him as a lover. She forces him to stay momentarily by

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[22] Ibid., p. 49.

[23] Ibid., p. 50.

[24] Ibid., p. 51.

stealing his guitar; then she makes a desperate appeal to him saying:

> My skin crawled when he [Jabe] touched me. But I endured it. I guess my heart knew that somebody must be coming to take me out of this hell! You did. You came. Now look at me! I'm alive once more.[25]

She continues to ignore her husband's nurse who is calling repeatedly for her; finally the nurse appears downstairs in desperation and accuses Lady of indifference and cruelty. In the process of lashing out at her the nurse exclaims condemningly:

> The moment I looked at you when I was called on this case last Friday morning I knew that you were pregnant. I also knew when I looked at your husband it wasn't by him.[26]

Lady seems to be overjoyed to have her suspicions about her pregnancy confirmed; Val becomes frightened. Lady, seemingly dazed, waxes poetic at a most unlikely time:

> I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body has burst in flower! You've given me life, you can go![27]

Half consciously then she recognizes the danger Val is in; she tells him to take his wages and her car and leave. Then she seems to loose her self-control totally.

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[25]*Ibid.*, p. 52.

[26]*Ibid.*, p. 53.

[27]*Ibid.*, p. 54.

She rambles on comparing herself to a barren fig tree which suddenly bloomed and then in a sort of dilirium, she thrusts a gilt paper hat on her head and blows a toy horn again and again as she races upstairs toward her dying husband shouting:

> I've won, I've won, Mr. Death, I'm going to bear![28]

Suddenly from the stairs come sounds of slow clumping footsteps and hoarse breathing as Jabe appears on the landing with a gun. "Buzzards! Buzzards!"[29] he exclaims as he aims for Val but shoots Lady who shields him. Accompanied by a mob with blow torches, Sheriff Talbott, in drunken suspicion over the vagrant's attention to his wife, Vee, and also in response to Jabe's false charges of murder, drags Val away. There are terrible cries of anguish off stage and the dialogue implies that Val is being castrated.

Carol Cutrere, picking up Val's discarded snake-skin jacket, upon hearing the cries nods with understanding saying:

> Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind...[30]

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[28] Ibid.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., p. 55.

Thus the play concludes. The unnecessary violence of this melodramatic conclusion shocks the nervous system. It never assumes the rhythm of inevitability; it seems to be a literal throwing of two people to bloodhounds. I feel along with the critic quoted in Commonweal that this sensational climax "seems a wanton stroke by the playwright, an outrage to human feeling, and a mean trapping of the audience into emotion from which it cannot escape."[31] I would also agree with John Gassner that in this play it is the violence rather than the meaning which is uppermost.[32] Williams' theme, the loneliness and desperation of people trapped by circumstances, is subordinated to a plot which never really explores them. As Nelson observes, "Williams is too concerned in Orpheus Descending with a special myth of his own in which he envisions a conflict between light and darkness with the powers of darkness emerging triumphant in a welter of destruction."[33]

In conclusion, to summarize briefly - Williams' main characters in this play are escapists, unable or

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[31] Commonweal, April 6, 1957, p. 95.

[32] Falk, op. cit., p. 135.

[33] Nelson, op. cit., p. 228.

unwilling to conform to the dull or cruel world in which they find themselves. Here again Williams' deals with the ill-adapted. He functions as the spokesman for the defeated, the frustrated, the beaten - the alienated.

His theme, inadequately developed here, is the stark and lonely condition of man. In this play it is obscured by several levels of meaning. Snarled symbolism, over-lapping mythical legends, and a general diffuseness of plot obscure both characterization and meaning.

The situation in which the protagonists find themselves in this play is far more terrible than that found in The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire. In Orpheus Descending Williams no longer admits the complexity of forces affecting human lives. Neither of the first two plays examined close with any kind of resolution. This very indecision seems to attest to the author's own struggle. Yet in Orpheus Descending there becomes a myopic view, the world is corrupt. In this play there is "a strong sense of disgust with reality. Whatever is human, whatever is on earth, is prey to corruption. The sole escape is the shedding of human ties, loyalties and relationships...The universe of

Orpheus...is confused with reality and offers no escape."[34] His characters meet with destruction, his only answer for individuals trapped by their inability to communicate with each other in a pitiless and cruel universe.

I agree wholeheartedly with Richard Watts, Jr. who remarked that "the world of Mr. Williams is certainly dark, tormented and haunted by evil, and this has never been more true than in the case of Orpheus Descending."[35]

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[34] Ibid., pp. 238, 239.

[35] Richard Watts, Jr., "Orpheus Descending," Theatre Arts, September, 1958, p. 26.

CHAPTER VI

POSSIBLE EFFECT OF WILLIAMS' ALIENATION ON HIS ARTISTRY

In the previous chapters I have endeavoured to explain what is meant by alienation, to show what factors influenced Williams' personal alienation, and to illustrate the presence of alienation as a theme in three of William's representative plays. Now, in conclusion, it remains for me to indicate what effect Williams' own alienation has on his plays.

This has been implied in part in discussing the difference between his two plays written in 1945 and 1947 and the play put on in New York in 1957. In his best plays, _The Glass Menagerie_, and _A Streetcar Named Desire_, Williams has been able to keep a balance between the rational and the irrational. He seems to view his characters objectively in these dramas; he can see their plight and the complexity of their situation. Here for the most part he has been able to hold in check his tendency towards the sensational. Yet Williams has not always retained this self-control. As a consequence his later works as represented by

Orpheus Descending were thrown into violence and sensationalism.

Since Orpheus Descending Williams has written other plays including Sweet Bird of Youth, A Period of Adjustment, The Night of Iguana and The Milk Train, all of which were described by one critic as "melodramatic versions of former themes."[1]

Despite Williams' recognized position as one of the leading American playwrights today, he remains the restless running author seeking solace in privacy and far corners of the earth and never finding it. Lewis quotes Williams as saying:

> I still believe that a writer's safety, especially in his middle years, if he began writing in his adolescence...lies in a fugitive way of life running like a fox from place to place...I found one other expedient, which is to stop taking a problem as if it affected the whole future course of the world.[2]

Lewis concludes that "his success in the forties has not been sustained" and that he is "something less than a serious writer and more the latest sensation of the entertainment world...He is troubled, full of self doubts, and produces increasingly morbid exhibitions

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[1]Allan Lewis, American Plays and Playwrights of the Contemporary Theatre (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1965), p. 54.

[2]Ibid.

of violence and sexual depravity."[3]

With each play Williams has narrowed his scope to include only one small corner of reality. This corner is dark and shadowy, is peopled by the hurt and the obsessed and is surrounded by evils in many forms. The victims do not rise in splendid opposition; rather they retreat more deeply into their aberrations. Their revolt, if expressed at all, is shown in sexual freedom. It would seem that Williams, unable to solve his own human problems, cannot solve those of his characters. He then relies on perversions of sex and violence as avenues of escape. Often the intrusion of these elements comes as a shock to the audience and seems quite contrary to logic, psychology, and the audience's plausible assumptions. Yet in the movie version of his plays, it is this very sensationalism which make them box-office attractions.

Admittedly, a playwright cannot be charged with believing everything his characters say and do, for they have a life of their own. But as Mrs. Venables (one of Williams' characters in his play, Suddenly Last Summer) remarks about her dead son, Sebastian: "A poet's life is his work and his work is his

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[3] Ibid.

life."[4] The frequency with which this sickened view of life turns up in William's plays suggest that it represents his experience and belief. It would seem that it is not just a theatrical pose and that it is the author's distorted view of reality. It would seem possible that Williams' own alienation is defensively exaggerated in his plays by an exhibitionistic defiance.

His progressive alienation is likewise reflected by a decline of artistry. Orpheus Descending offers examples of the author's subjective attitude towards his characters. In many parts of the play he is presenting his own warped view of life as if it were the characters. In this play Williams puts an intense strain on his performers. They find themselves forced to make momentary responses which do not arise out of their characters.

All of Williams' work reflects a preoccupation with the same themes and with the same characters. His themes vary little from the stark and lonely condition of man and the need for individuals to establish a vital and meaningful contact with each other in an essentially

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[4]Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer (New York: The New American Library of World Literature, 1958), p. 12.

hostile world. His range of characters is restricted by his inability to sympathize with any except the broken and the weak.

Williams' adherence to brokenness as the root condition of the universe causes his great failing as a writer. His characters struggle without any possibility of success. Terrible things happened to them but nothing is ever gained. They are victims of others or life generally. They operate as if they had no choice and were consequently not responsible. They are ineffective as tragic heroes.

Nelson states that:

> No one in Williams' universe can triump because there is nothing to which the individual can appeal. The sins of the earth are its incompletions, Williams tells us; the universe is fragmented and man born into it is born into incompletion. Everything that governs human action emanates from this broken condition which is the root condition of the universe...In the work of Tennessee Williams, human action is defined by universal incompletion... There is no sense of individual responsibility in this deterministic view of existence, and without this responsibility no one can attain tragic fulfillment. If there is tragedy in Williams' work, it is the tragedy of circumstance rather than character: Blanche trapped by her past and her dreams and fighting heroically for survival; Amanda struggling to hold a disintegrating family together; ...The characters are not large enough spiritually or morally to triumph even in their destruction...[5]

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[5]Benjamin Nelson, <u>Tennessee Williams - The Man and His Work</u> (New York: Ivan Obolensky, Inc., 1961), p. 225.

In his best plays Williams has created genuine beauty in depicting the stark and terrible loneliness of individuals in their isolation. In his later works, as his view of life became simplified, the plights of his individual became simplified and the tendency towards sensationalism increased. As Williams' alienation intensified, he seemed unable to control his material or objectify it as art. It is this very lack of control which throws <u>Orpheus Descending</u> into chaos. His image of the universe as corrupt and evil seems to have hardened into a philosophical as well as an artistic commitment. In the light of the evidence adduced in this paper, it would seem that the author's personal alienation is a plausible explanation for the dark and narrow world he presents in his plays.

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