

**“The Past Becomes an Everlasting Regret”:
The Interrelations between Past, Illusion and Gender
in Three Selected Plays by Tennessee Williams**

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Below is a list of abbreviations often used in the following thesis:

Tennessee Williams plays:

GM: *The Glass Menagerie* (1945)

SND: *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)

S&S: *Summer and Smoke* (1948)

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Introduction: Williams' Collection of Fragile Women

*“All my relationships with
women are very,
very important to me. (...)
I understand women, and I can
write about them”
- Tennessee Williams*

When I first decided to pursue a Masters Degree, the process of finding a thesis topic that could sustain my interest for more than a year was rather hard. In the spring of 2008, however, I took a course in Drama, a genre of imaginative literature that was rather new to me. In the course of my previous academic endeavors I had only come across a few plays before (Ibsen's *Ghosts* and *A Doll's House*). The plays that I now encountered by prominent playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Edward Albee, David Mamet and Tennessee Williams were new and exciting to me. These diverse playwrights introduced me to a large spectrum of the genre of drama and made me see how different they could be. This ultimately triggered my interest in the playwright Tennessee Williams, as it was my first time reading any of his plays. *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* raised many interesting questions about the human condition which took hold of my interest. I became particularly intrigued by the theme of illusion versus reality, encapsulated in the famous line by Blanche DuBois “I don't want realism. (...) I want. Magic!”(SND: 204). Blanche's vision of life fascinated me as she constantly needs to ameliorate and embellish reality. I was also struck by her dependency on others as she “always depended on the kindness of strangers”(SND: 225) to get by in life. This inevitably compelled me to read most of Williams' prominent plays, and I soon discovered that there seemed to be some distinctive, reoccurring themes in his work. The themes of the role of *the past*, *illusion versus reality* and *gender and sexuality*, seemed predominant in Williams' drama and soon inspired me to explore *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*, as all three had these themes in common. This became the basis for my thesis and as I began to explore my three main plays I also realized that they all had another thing as common denominators, namely a fragile female protagonist, to whose life and struggle we are introduced. This thesis will explore the conflicts

between these women protagonists and characters close to them in terms of the three prominent themes mentioned above.

Chapter One of this thesis gives a short rendition of the playwright's background and focuses on the relation between past and present. In all three plays the female characters seem to struggle with either a physical or a mental condition which separates them from the outside world. The women are vulnerable and dependent characters, relying on others to survive. This to some degree destroys their relationship with the very people they rely on. The main characters are portrayed as characters past their prime, unable to take care of themselves. Most of Williams' main characters seem at the end of their rope, and their fall from grace is what the limelight often falls upon. The preoccupation with such "fallen" icons is seen in almost every major play by Williams, but is particularly prominent in the three plays I have chosen to study. This chapter makes a point of presenting how devastating the power of the past can be, as all the main female characters seem unable to let go of their once glorious bygone days.

The "fallen" icon theme in Williams' portrayal of women continues in Chapter Two, where the main focus lies on their inability to distinguish illusion from reality. The main character's failure to free themselves from their past makes them seek refuge in illusion and delusions. Confronted with a present they are unable to relate to forces them to create a world of their own. This chapter thus explores the different illusions the women protagonists cling to and the consequences those illusions have for them as well as people around them.

The final chapter focuses on an related aspect of Williams' drama, namely the importance of gender and sexuality in his plays. As Matthew C. Roudané states in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*: "no American playwright before Williams eroticized the stage the way Williams did" (Roudané: 6). His women characters in particular struggle with their sexuality. As Williams notes in an interview with Mel Gussow for the *New York Times*:

"All my relationships with women are very, very important to me. The most stupid thing said about my writing is that my heroines are disguised transvestites. Absolutely and totally none of them are anything but women. It's true about my work, and it's true about Albee's in 'Virginia Woolf.' I understand women, and I can write about them". (Gussow)

As my primary interest lies with practical textual analysis rather than with theory, my main approach in this thesis is that of close reading of formal and thematic features in my

three chosen plays. Since Williams is one of the most prominent playwrights in the United States, he is also one of the most written about. But as I began to examine what I believed was a massive collection of secondary literature I was amazed to discover that the themes I had decided to write about were not extensively analyzed except, of course, Williams' female protagonists in relation to the 'Southern belle' theme. This made my further study both intimidating and exciting at the same time.

All though my three themes are analyzed one by one, each in a separate chapter, they are of course very closely related. The past lives of these women characters have of course contributed to their present predicaments; gender has served to construct their role in the past as well as the present; and their need for illusion is inextricably bound up with their former experiences as well as their gender. In the conclusion to my thesis I will therefore focus on the interrelatedness of these themes.

Chapter 1: The Relationship between the Past and the Present

Introduction

It is said that only by learning from the past can one truly prosper and grow. But what happens when past memories are too hard to shed and when one finds oneself mentally stuck in the past without any desire for escaping it? Is there any hope for the future when a person clings to the traditions and values of the past? These are all questions Tennessee Williams raises in his plays. His preoccupation with the past, as his depiction of the old versus the new South, and his focus on the disintegration of the once powerful aristocratic South are what dominates most of his early plays and serves as his main themes. Williams' work and his poetic yet sometimes tragic ways of portraying the human condition are as he states, rooted in "the need of a great worldwide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better" (Williams: 183). By acknowledging our past we can move on and take hold of the future. But how many of his main characters actually do so? These are some of the questions this chapter will explore, at the same time as it will look into the role of the past as a determining factor for identity development and the sense of self, first partly in terms of the biography of the playwright.

Born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, March 26, 1911, Williams had a rather troubled childhood. At the age of four he was diagnosed with diphtheria, an illness that caused his legs to deteriorate to the point where he was almost completely paralyzed for two years. Although confining also in the years of his youth, his illness introduced him into the imaginary world of literature; encouraged by his mother, Edwina, he soon became acquainted with authors such as Shakespeare and Dickens. Due to his illness he became very dependent on his mother, which in return made him a weak and needy child in his father's eyes. His relationship with his father never prospered due to his father's continuous bullying of both him and his sister Rose. The fact that the young Williams felt

terrorized by his father had a great impact on his adolescent life. Mostly surrounded by women and literature during his childhood, Williams naturally gravitated towards the poetic side of life rather than the athletic and masculine one, which gave room for his father's perpetual ridicule. The latter drove Williams further into the realm of poetry and literature, which pleased his mother as it proved that he was on her side rather than his father's. Despite testimonies in her book *Remember Me to Tom*, in which she denies that the role of Amanda was derived from her, many records show that Edwina Williams was in fact quite manipulative of her children just like Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*. "Warning that any misbehavior would be punished by God" (A&E, Television Networks; Biography [minute: 3.0] she controlled her children to a much greater extent than their father did through his relentless verbal abuse.

Caught in the middle of a dysfunctional relationship between his parents, Williams eventually broke free and set his eyes on an academic future rather than going into the same trade as his father, a shoe salesman. He was admitted to the University of Missouri in 1929, where he discovered Henrik Ibsen's *Ghosts* and decided to become a playwright. This nevertheless only lasted a year because his father refused to have an author for a son and forced Williams into work at the International Shoe Company. This, however, did not last for long as it affected Williams' health to the point where his father had no other choice but to let Williams enroll at the University of Iowa some years later. It is here that he got his nickname, Tennessee, which would stay with him for the remainder of his life. He would often joke about it, saying: "It's better than being called Mississippi". During his years at the University of Iowa he not only got his BA, he also began his writing career as two of his plays, *Candles to the Sun* and *The Fugitive Kind*, were staged by the Mummerys of St. Louis. After graduation Williams moved to New Orleans, a place where he, as he put it, "entered the decadent world of New Orleans, [and] discovered a certain flexibility my sexually nature [had]" (A&E, Television Networks; Biography, [minute: 10.7-10.23]. New Orleans was a city of considerable license, and Williams finally felt at ease for the first time in his life.

After winning a 100 dollar prize for one of his plays, Williams was approached by a woman by the name of Audrey Wood, convincing him to come to the theatre capitol at that time, New York City. Here he stayed for three years before he, through his agent Wood, finally broke away from poverty by getting a job as a Hollywood screenwriter for MGM Studios. But this ended when the studio refused his unrefined play *The Gentleman Caller*,

after which Williams packed up his things and went back to New York in 1943. After the wide success of what eventually became *The Glass Menagerie* Williams returned to New Orleans, the place where everything had started, and continued writing. This time the play was *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his most renowned and successful play. Williams followed up this success with several other Broadway hits including *Summer and Smoke*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. He received his first Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and reached an even larger worldwide audience in 1950 and 1951 when *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* were made into major motion pictures.

Williams' own background serves to explain why he seems driven to explore the theme of the past as extensively as he does. It becomes apparent that this obsession lies as much in his own life as in his desire to know humankind better. As Patricia Schroeder points out in her book *The Presence of the Past*, Williams had come to terms with the fact that "the past is not necessarily something separate from the present" (Schroeder: 24). Most of his renowned work is loosely based on his own life as he uses it as a kind of a therapy, working through some of his previous experiences. As Williams notes in his own *Memoirs*: "I have never written about any kind of vice which I can't observe in myself" (Williams: 183), suggesting that his dramatic art comes from a place he is most familiar with, namely his own family and surroundings.

The preoccupation with the past is found already in his first successful play *The Glass Menagerie*. This has been said to be the most autobiographical play Williams has ever written as the main characters are all based on people in his own life. Tom the narrator is indisputably Williams. He is clearly evoking his own adolescence by giving Tom his own name as well as something similar to his prior occupation. He also assigns him the role of the ringleader in the play, a function which resembles Williams' role as the author. This can be seen in the stage directions of *The Glass Menagerie*: "TOM WINGFIELD [*her son, and the narrator of the play*]: A poet with a job in a warehouse. His nature is not remorseless, but to escape from a trap he has to act without pity" (GM: 228). Through Tom, Williams gives expression to his own desire to get away from his own family and to live the life he longs for as a writer. The portrayal of Tom also gives an indication of how Williams was affected by his upbringing and the role that his mother played in his life. As stated by his brother Dakin Williams in an interview:

Amanda Wingfield is our mother Miss Edwina, beyond any doubt. I used to hear those lines of dialogue every morning as a child: 'Rise and shine!' And her talk about

gentleman callers is right there in the play. [...] But because he drew the character from her, Tom gave Mother the 'Glass Menagerie' royalties, and she willed them to me. I'm living off them now, instead of the kindness of strangers. (Cuthbert)

This statement both underlines and confirms the extent to which *The Glass Menagerie* indeed is an autobiographical play.

If one explores further Williams' early life and family relations, the evidence of the autobiographical character of *The Glass Menagerie* becomes even more evident. The character of Laura is clearly based on Williams' sister Rose who suffered from a nervous breakdown. In the late 1930s, when Williams was away at college, his parents consented for Rose to have a prefrontal lobotomy to cure a supposedly worsening case of schizophrenia. But according to Dakin Williams: "all the fighting between my mother and father is what gave my sister Rose her nervous breakdown. Before her illness, Rose was not at all like the fragile Laura in 'The Glass Menagerie.' She was very smart, very quick, very alive. She was so alive she once went after my father with a butcher knife" (Cuthbert). But nonetheless the operation was executed and proved unsuccessful. This rendered Rose utterly ruined and she was forced to spend the rest of her life institutionalized. This event had an enormous impact on Williams and was a tragedy that haunted him until his death in 1983. Rose became somewhat of a muse for Williams and when asked about her he would simply answer: "she is tranquil".

It may therefore be argued that Williams and his siblings were affected by their mother in the same way Tom and Laura are affected by Amanda. *The Glass Menagerie* is unquestionably Williams' ultimate retaliation against his parents, exposing their flaws to the world. However, as mentioned earlier Williams' mother Mrs. Edwina Williams retaliated in her book about her son, *Remember Me to Tom*, where she writes:

I think it is high time the ghost of Amanda was laid. I am *not* Amanda. I'm sure if Tom stops to think, he realizes I am not. The only resemblance I have to Amanda is that we both like jonquils...

I never woke Tom up with that sugary chant, "Rise and shine, rise and shine." Nor did I matchmake for Rose, who was quite able to find her own young men and, incidentally, I don't think marriage necessarily the culmination of a woman's life, for some of the happiest women I know have never been married. Nor did my husband walk out on me." (Da Ponte: 265)

Of course *The Glass Menagerie* is a product of an author's creative imagination, but the parallels between literature and life are too insistent in this play to be overlooked. Similar to many of his predecessors, Williams "told his story—or [...] some versions of it— again and

again, in a lifelong effort to come to terms with his family” (Boxill: 3), which also implied coming to terms with his past.

The Glass Menagerie

The Glass Menagerie (1945) is the first play by Tennessee Williams to attract wide recognition, placing him on the map as one of the great American dramatists. It is a memory play, divided into seven scenes where the narrator Tom Wingfield looks back at a time and a situation he eventually managed to escape from. The play is set in a cramped St. Louis apartment, inhabited by the nagging mother Amanda and the extremely introverted and shy daughter/sister Laura. This family play evokes the themes of isolation and entrapment due to the characters’ inability of letting go of the past. The apartment of the Wingfields is unmistakably a place where the past lingers. It is described as dark and grim, placed at the rear of the building. Contrasted with Amanda’s childhood home with constant gentlemen callers dropping by, this home is harder to enter as well as escape. The fire-escape on the outside of the apartment functions as a symbol, representing precisely what its name implies: an escape from the “fires of human desperation” (GM: 233) and the frustrations that are in the Wingfield household. “The apartment is both literally and metaphorically a trap” (Bigsby: 34). At the same time it holds different meanings to the different characters as their individual relations to the outside world differ. Tom uses it to escape to the outside world, while Laura remains in the trap that is the apartment.

For Tom, the fire-escape represents a way out of the suffocating world of the household and a welcome entrance into the world outside. The initial presentation of Tom takes in fact place outside at the foot of the fire-escape, indicating that he eventually will achieve his ultimate getaway. During the play he frequently steps out onto the landing to smoke; he stands as much as he can outside the apartment, distancing himself from the despair inside the four walls. For Laura, on the other hand, the fire-escape is a way into her sheltered world as she seldom steps off it willingly. Tom stands steady on the fire-escape, whereas Laura slips and falls on it in Scene Four, which highlights her inability to escape from her situation. Laura is portrayed as being as fragile as her glass menagerie, and the fire-escape clearly becomes an unsafe place for her to be. Her immobility and her insecurities automatically place her inside the household with her mother and without any hopes of an

escape. To Amanda the fire-escape oddly enough symbolizes much of the same as it does for Tom, namely both isolation and dreams of escape. Accustomed to a Mississippi porch she expresses disappointment as she sits down and exclaims: “A fire-escape landing’s a poor excuse for a porch” (GM: 265), well aware of its limitations. To her the fire-escape is a constant reminder of what she had and what she now lacks, as well as an embodiment of the present which she reluctantly faces. She knows that she too is isolated and like Tom sees the fire-escape as an opportunity, a tiny hint of hope that it someday might bring a gentleman caller to their front door yet again.

There are many features pointing to the past in this play, and one of the most significant embodiments of the ways in which the past serves to obstruct the future is the picture of the absent father. Although not present in person, Mr. Wingfield functions as the fifth character in the play and is often referred to both by Tom and Amanda. He functions as the ultimate reminder of the past as his “larger-than-life picture” (GM: 235) hangs on the mantel as a dusty, old reminder of what the past used to be. It also represents escape and freedom, as he is the only one who managed to get out when things started to deteriorate within the family. His getaway might have been long coming as the stage directions read: “He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say ‘I will be smiling for ever’” (GM: 234). This indicates that he might have had his escape up his sleeve for a long time and that the smirk left on his face is his last laugh, a sort of victorious and taunting gift to the family. After all the years that have passed he still plays a role in their lives; his departure is something they can never forgive. His sixteen year long absence has irreparably damaged their lives and exerts an influence which, as seen at the end of the play, has almost fatal consequences.

As Tom seems to be following in his father’s footsteps by working at a dead-end job, one might be tempted to assume that Mr. Wingfield’s smile becomes torturous to Tom as he has to live with the knowledge that his father’s desertion is the cause of his own misery. Not only has it had an impact on his life, it has also stripped him of his identity. Being forced to step into his father’s shoes and fend for his family, Tom’s own hopes and dreams for the future have also assumed a lesser priority than they might have had if Mr. Wingfield had stayed. But oddly enough this is something Tom does not blame his father for. The expected hatred towards him is instead replaced by admiration. Using him as a beacon of hope, Tom suggests to Laura that their father managed to “get himself out of [a nailed-up coffin] without removing one nail” (GM: 255). Tom even foreshadows his own guilt for running away by

saying to Jim: “I’m like my father. The bastard son of a bastard!”(GM: 283). His father has managed to do what Tom initially dreams of—having a life of his own without Amanda. Tom’s identification with his father can be seen as early as in the beginning of the play when Tom appears wearing a merchant sailor uniform. This mirrors his father’s doughboy uniform from the First World War and reflects Tom’s aspirations of breaking free from his boring life and his craving for adventure, just like his father. The smile on Mr. Wingfield’s face then ultimately becomes an encouragement for Tom, showing that escape is possible.

For Amanda, however, the smile bears a completely opposite meaning. To her it works as a constant reminder of the impact his personality has had on her life. His appearance is what first attracted her to him. While Tom interprets the smile on his face as encouragement, to her it is a smirk and a painful embodiment of the mistakes she has made and their consequences. For Amanda the absence of her husband is a tremendous blow to her ego. The sixteen years of loneliness have clearly affected her life; the once vibrant and vivacious Southern Belle has now most definitely become a broken one. Everything she has known as comfort evaporated with the loss of her genteel stature. The circumstances he left her in are too hard for her to forgive and she transfers her disappointment and rage towards him onto her children. This has made them—particularly Tom—resentful for the sixteen years of psychological abuse she has put them through. But her relentless nagging of Tom comes from a place of pure desperation instead of cruelty, as he now has become the sole provider for the family. When threatened with a potential repetition of the past—with Tom leaving his job—Amanda’s initial reaction is that of paranoia, which is neither surprising nor unjustified: “What right have you got to jeopardize your job? Jeopardize the security of us all? How do you think we’d manage if you were —” (GM: 251). Her anxiety about the past repeating itself and her fear of destitution drives her to guilt-trip her own son into remaining their source of income.

In the course of the play it becomes evident that the despondency of the Wingfields is largely due to Amanda. Portrayed as a woman with “endurance and a kind of heroism” (GM: 228) she comes off as a driving and a relentless force, refusing to let go. She is without a doubt a caring mother but her overbearing way of controlling people’s lives is one of her major flaws. Amanda constantly talks about the past and compares everything in the present with the splendor of old times. Descending from the old South of privilege and chivalry she finds it hard to adapt to her “present drab social and economic situation and the alley

apartment in St. Louis” (Mathur: 75). Despite the time she has spent in the apartment she nevertheless still holds on to the romantic idea of how things were before. She is so preoccupied with the past that she even has to plan for it, exclaiming to Tom: “You are the only young man that I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it” (GM: 269). Ironically her dream of the future involves a reenactment of the past. Nevertheless, she is not entirely out of touch with the present as she is well aware of her daughter’s shyness and knows that Laura’s future all depends on her.

Driven by the need to ensure her daughter’s happiness, she wants everything to be perfect when the opportunity of a gentleman caller finally offers itself. She even lays out “a little trap” as Laura calls it, enhancing Laura’s appearance in hopes of luring him in. Even though Laura feels that this is wrong, Amanda disregards her plea, stating that “All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be! Now look at yourself, young lady. This is the prettiest you will ever be!” (GM: 275). Desperate for securing Laura’s happiness, she may be argued to some degree to be justified in her actions. As Signi Falk writes: “She has known firsthand what can happen to a southern girl without a home of her own. Her cry comes from experience” (Falk: 72). Formerly accustomed to a life of endless suitors, she understandably finds her present situation somewhat hard to handle. Her relentless hunt for the perfect gentleman caller may in fact be said to reflect her concern for her daughter, in order to prevent her from ending up like Amanda herself.

But dependent as Amanda is on others, there is of course an ulterior motive behind her plotting as well. Just like Tom, Amanda looks for a way out. Even though she bases her interfering in her daughter’s life on the notion that she is helping Laura, she ultimately does it for her own benefit. This is most clearly seen in Scene Two when she realizes that Laura has dropped out of school:

So what are *we* going to do rest of *our* lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuses *ourselves* with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? *We* don’t have a business career—*we’ve* given that up because it gave *us* nervous indigestion! What is there left but dependency all *our lives*? (GM: 245, my italics)

Realizing that her youth has faded, she projects her own needs onto Laura and tries to use Laura as her ticket out of the grim and dark alley apartment and back into the world to which she once belonged. Everything she does seems to be centered around herself and what others

can do for her. As Mathur notes: “her efforts are always centered around others. Her own ‘career’ as a magazine agent is secondary since she is only bothered about coping with a financial stringency. She prefers to beg and goad her son for money rather than achieve financial independence herself” (Mathur: 80). It therefore becomes evident that just as she uses Tom for financial security she uses Laura as a social security, partaking in Laura’s opportunities in order to get back into society herself.

One may argue that Amanda’s severe dependency on others is rooted in her past as a Southern belle. The concept of the Southern belle is another characteristic Williams has drawn from his own life and family. Spending “the most impressionable years of his life with the three generations of women in his family—his grandmother, mother and sister” (Mathur: 74)—it came easy for him to create a character such as Amanda. Originating from the pre-Civil War era, the concept of the Southern belle has become a stereotypical symbol of the young woman of the old American South. She is from a prominent Southern family with a traditional upbringing and in literature she sometimes appears as a figure that at some point in her life has suffered a reversal of economic and/or social fortune. Coming from a time and place when the plantations of the Southern gentry disintegrated, the women caught in this time of transition experienced a fall from grace and became disillusioned. This is certainly seen in the character of Amanda as she during her youth was primarily concerned with how many gentleman callers would appear on her front porch. Raised to “understand the art of conversation” (GM: 237), her principal characteristics and skill were to be charming and entertaining for the gentlemen, instead of trying to be self-sufficient and independent, which she is forced to try to be in the present. As a former Southern belle Amanda has a hard time coming to terms with her present loss of social status that undermines the social distinctions she was once taught to value. This makes her actions paradoxical and contrary: she extols the need to move forward while doing everything to hold back and recreate a dead past.

Amanda with her endless stories of entertaining gentleman callers gives an impression of having once been a highly regarded Belle with various offers and doors open to her. This is revealed in Scene Six when she appears after changing her clothes while they wait for Jim, Laura’s gentleman caller:

Now look at your mother! This is the dress in which I led the cotillion, won the cakewalk twice at Sunset Hill, wore one spring to the Governor’s ball in Jackson! See how I sashayed around the ballroom, Laura? I wore it on Sundays for my gentlemen callers! I had it on the day I met your father—(GM: 276).

She constantly refers to this time with great vigor: “My callers were gentlemen—all! Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi Delta—planters and sons of planters!” (GM: 238). These dear memories indicate what a prominent icon she seemingly was and what big fall she has suffered. As she looks back on this time of her greatest prosperity she in fact realizes that she could have done better, stating: “I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But—I picked your *father!*” (GM: 239).

Amanda’s memory is another factor that keeps her grounded in the past. Her flashbacks are many and frequent. Her memory is simply astonishing as she recollects everything from how many jonquils she picked to how the weather was that affected her malaria that summer. These are all precious memories which she happily revisits when life in the apartment becomes too drab. But being so dependent on the past poses serious problems that do not only affect herself, but the people around her as well. As the stories get more distant, Amanda’s attempts to keep the details fresh in mind become imperative. As they are memories she treasures, the only way she can preserve them is unsurprisingly through repetition, something she often practices to the point where her children barely can take it anymore:

TOM: I know what’s coming!

LAURA: Yes, but let her tell it.

TOM: Again? (GM: 237).

Her memories seem to be her only means of enduring the drabness of her present situation.

The clash between the genteel society she is used to and the bleak surroundings she is faced with can at times seem both tragic and comic. Even though she is the play’s most extroverted character she nonetheless seems to be constantly turned inward as well. Her paranoia about being left alone is also intensified by her memories and is portrayed in the passage where she confronts Laura with the reality of spinsterhood:

I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife!—stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—a little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! Is that the future that we’ve mapped out for ourselves? (GM: 245)

Although realistic, this portrayal seems carried to the extreme. Because of her old Southern outlook she sees absolutely no future for either of them if Laura fails to marry. On one hand her outburst becomes comic because of her grossly exaggerated portrayal of secluded outcast

women living in mousetrap rooms just because they fail to marry. On the other hand it is tragic since she fails to see Laura as anything other than marriage material, thus undermining Laura's self-worth. Her inability to see any of the other qualities Laura might possess is perhaps what keeps Laura from exploring any alternatives on her own. Having her role forced upon her gives Laura very little room to find her own self. Creating an identity of her own becomes impossible, and the situations she is forced into become heart-shattering and degrading. Amanda fails to understand that her efforts at recreating a genteel past are counterproductive, driving Laura even further into her seclusion among her glass figurines. Despite everything she has been through, Amanda ultimately fails to gain any insight into her own self or her complicity in Laura's fate. Her inability of letting go of the past prevents her as well as Laura from forever moving forward, dooming them both to remain in the past.

Although Tom seems to escape from the family apartment, the fact that *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play shows how deeply its entire telling as well as its characters are molded by the past. The role played by the past seems equally dominant in the next play to be examined, namely *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

A Streetcar Named Desire

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) nonetheless differs from other plays by Williams in the sense that the past in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is something the main character tries to escape by all means possible. In contrast to *The Glass Menagerie*, where the past is a realm Amanda wants to escape to, this play portrays the past as a threat rather than a relief, despite the protagonist's deep rootedness within it. To many of us, the past is considered to contain the key to the present, and this is certainly the case for the main character, Blanche DuBois. As the play unfolds and glimpses of her past are revealed, it becomes evident that her desire to withhold the truth about her former life is more than understandable. Since she already at the beginning of the play comes off as destitute and desperate, to have the truth revealed about how she came to be in her present predicament poses an even greater threat to her mental balance than keeping it a secret. Blanche desperately embellishes the truth in her own favor rather than admitting it to herself and to others. Through her strategies of evasion, Blanche hopes to create an opportunity for something other than destitution. If she were to fail in this endeavor, she would risk not only to condemn herself to a life of desperation but also to

shatter the picture of herself as a virtuous Southern belle which she is working so hard to uphold.

The Southern belle motif that we found also in *The Glass Menagerie* reflects Williams' deep preoccupation with the issue of class in Southern society. The social background of the characters is revealed through their past as well as their present. Combining an in-depth portrayal of their present situation with flashbacks to their past, Williams' drama reveals the social dynamics of a particularly Southern development. Like Amanda of *The Glass Menagerie* and Alma of *Summer and Smoke*, Blanche is a product of the old South. But compared to Amanda, who gives an extensive rendition of her past on several occasions, Blanche volunteers little information about her former life. We discover, however, that she belonged to a wealthy plantation family once upon a time, with a privileged life style. But other than that, the information available about her past is both limited and more often involuntarily given.

In addition to glimpses of her traumatic family history, there is her early marriage to Allen, which ended abruptly when she by accident realized he was homosexual. As the play progresses it becomes quite apparent that Allen's suicide has had an irreparable impact on her psyche, equaled only by her fall from social grace. The decline of Blanche's family reflects the deterioration of the plantation aristocracy in the wake of the Civil War. As Robert E. Jones notes: "When the economic system on which this society had been based was destroyed, the society fell with it" (Jones: 211). The fall of the once grand plantation Belle Reve has had devastating impact on Blanche and she is now caught in the clash between the worlds of the old and the new South, clinging to the idea of the protection the Southern way of life once provided.

Devastating as her family decline has been, the repercussions of her own conduct are even worse. The loss of their family home Belle Reve has forced Blanche into circumstances she never thought possible. Humbled by the society's condemnation of her illicit and immoral behavior Blanche stands as a "jobless widow [...] a refugee from the collapsed ruling class of the old agrarian South" (Boxill: 80) who takes refuge in the dingy apartment in New Orleans with her sister. She stands as a woman who has lost everything but who still refuses to let go of her identity as a Southern belle in spite of her changed circumstances. As mentioned earlier, there are indications of her destitution and instability already at the beginning of the play. Being described as moth-like with "delicate beauty that must avoid a strong light"

(SND: 117), she comes across as a fragile character. Her past trials notwithstanding, Blanche's fragility must not be confused with weakness, as she already from Scene One is seen as being very much in command, at least with her sister Stella. She is portrayed as a self-centered woman, who both demands and takes up a lot of attention. Accustomed to occupying the center of attention in the past, she attempts to use her charms as a way to control the situation she is forced into. By creating and performing the part that suits her best, she to a certain degree manages to evade the insecurities of her new life. As Elia Kazan points out in his *Notebook on A Streetcar Named Desire*, play-acting is something she feels forced to. Since the reality is too disturbing to handle, she must create a truth according to her own ideals or she "cannot live; in fact her whole life has [then] been for nothing" (Kazan: 22).

Blanche freely modifies her recent past in order to escape it. Her quick tongue and slightly hysterical disposition rattles her listeners, confusing them enough for her to swiftly change the subject to her advantage. The way Blanche embellishes the truth can be seen in Scene One when she lies about her financial circumstances. Rather than admitting to her sister, her only remaining relative, the real reason for her visit, she puts on a show of rants: "I was so exhausted by all I'd been through my—nerves broke. I was on the verge of—lunacy, almost! So Mr. Graves—Mr. Graves is the high school superintendent—he suggested I take a leave of absence" (SND: 122). She offers this information so openly and with such conviction that she almost seems to have convinced herself of this truth. What she initially hides is the fact that she was laid off and practically chased out of town, due to her indiscretion involving a seventeen year old high school student. With the help of her imagination and selective memory she embellishes the facts of her former life.

But despite her best efforts of hiding the truth, Blanche is at times forced to reveal, in partial glimpses, what she has been through in the past. Her tirade to Stella in Scene One suggests that what she had to endure will eventually catch up with her:

Well, Stella—you're going to reproach me, I know that you're bound to reproach me—but before you do—take into consideration—you left! I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! *I* stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I'm not meaning this in any reproachful way, but *all* the burden descended on *my* shoulders. [...] you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I! I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it! (SND: 126).

Here she more or less reveals what Stanley eventually will disclose in Scene Seven, minus the truth of her sexually licentious behavior. Playing on both her own and Stella's memory of the past, she gives her side of the story at the same time as she tries to make Stella feel guilty.

Excluding the essential details about her promiscuous past which enabled her to survive after the loss of Belle Reve, she portrays herself as a martyr who sacrificed herself for others. Seeing herself as a victim of her past, she to some degree justifies her actions which later will shock the ones around her and ultimately ruin her chances of a better life. The past thus has a double significance in the play as the incarnation of both virtue and sin and a representation of what memory can do to actual facts.

Having been raised a Southern belle, Blanche, like Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, has grown quite accustomed to certain social codes. She is used to Southern gentility and courtesy where the men are supposed to respect women, or at least get up from their seats when women enter the room. But this, unfortunately, is something that is never to be seen in the Kowalski apartment. As Stanley puts it when Blanche encourages the men to stay seated, when she and Stella pass through the room: “Nobody’s going to get up, so don’t be worried” (SND: 145). This rude behavior goes against everything she is used to, and at the end of the play, despite her breakdown, she takes it upon herself to make a point of it by repeating: “Please don’t get up. I’m only passing through” (SND: 221), reverting to her role as a Southern gentlewoman. The brutish environment of New Orleans is mostly dominated by gambling, bowling, sex and drinking and the lack of the ideals most important to Blanche. This common and vulgar nature of the setting becomes apparent already in Scene One when Stella tries to warn Blanche about the company she is about to enter: “I’m afraid you won’t think they are lovely [...] They’re Stanley’s friends. [...] They’re a mixed lot, Blanche” (SND: 124), indicating that Blanche will have problems in adapting to the group. It also exposes Blanche’s difficulty in coping with these “assorted” types of characters as she tries to sustain the appearance of being a woman of dignity. The uncivilized manners of Stanley and his friends continue in Scene Three. As the women return from their cultural and civilized evening out, the men have been hard at drinking and gambling and Stanley ultimately proves to be the worst of them all. The poker night eventually culminates in a brawl which deeply shocks the frail Blanche. Stanley’s brutish behavior therefore becomes symptomatic of the Quarter in which the periodically violent treatment of women seems to be a fact of life.

Blanche’s privileged plantation past thus makes it difficult for her to adapt to her current surroundings and situation. Her reaction of disbelief upon arriving at her sister’s apartment and its sordid urban character reveals how out of place she is. The distress she feels is reflected in several scenes as she gradually tries to improve the primitive apartment she has

to inhabit with her sister and her husband. She in fact never tries to disguise her discomfort with the place and parades it for everyone to see. She goes as far as confronting her sister about her living situation, stating: "I'm not going to be hypocritical, I'm going to be honestly critical about it! Never, never, never in my worst dreams could I picture—Only Poe! Only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!—could do it justice!" (SND: 121). The comparison of the Kowalski apartment to something taken out of a grotesque gothic story makes it clear that she finds it insufferable. But given the nature of her desperate situation and lack of opportunities, she nevertheless sees no other way but to endure it for as long as possible.

Blanche's conduct raises the issue of the true nature of her values and ideals. Although Blanche is born and raised with genteel norms, she nonetheless during her most desperate times seems to have lost them all. It is only when she reunites with her sister and is faced with a brutish situation and confrontations such as the ones with Stanley that she in fact falls back upon her old values. She cannot by any means accept her sister's Poe-esque lifestyle which includes sex and alcohol although she herself obviously has indulged in both. Not only does her reaction to Stella make her a hypocrite, but it also reveals her to be thoughtless. Completely disregarding her sister's feelings she unleashes her shallow and judgmental tongue without even considering the fact that this life is something Stella has chosen out of her own free will. Even though Blanche sees herself as a Southern belle, she also possesses some rather unflattering traits that at times are both offensive and impolite. When she first arrives in New Orleans and meets Eunice she comes off as very short and impolite in her answers and soon loses her patience, asking Eunice to leave. Her aloofness distinguishes her as a snob, although we discover that her self-centeredness is connected with her despair. Nonetheless, also her frequent sarcastic remarks aimed at Stanley reflect her genteel arrogance. Talking down to him is something Blanche does often with malicious pleasure. She takes satisfaction in both flirting with him and mocking him, constantly insinuating that he is beneath her on the social ladder. This, however, eventually encourages him to retaliate, which he does with a vengeance. As she behaves both as a virtuous lady and a seductive temptress, her "contradictory attitudes betray a contradiction within herself" (Mathur: 84).

Even though Blanche presents herself as the embodiment of the past values of Belle Reve, she nonetheless reveals the truth about their "beautiful dream" and discloses the economic and moral decline of the plantation when she finally presents Stanley with the legal papers on its foreclosure:

There are thousands of papers, stretching back hundreds of years, affecting Belle Reve as, piece by piece, our improvident grandfathers and fathers and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications—to put it plainly! Till finally all that was left—and Stella can verify that!—was the house itself and about twenty acres of ground, including a graveyard, to which now all but Stella and I have retreated. (SND: 140)

The picture she ultimately presents is not that different from the place she now is forced to endure; fornication and male dominance can be observed in both. This revelation about her past is reluctantly given. Forced into a corner by Stanley's greed, she tries to cope by shifting the attention to Stanley and flirting openly with him. But he does not let her off the hook until she finally reveals her destitute state to him. It is at this point that Blanche's façade begins to crack. As she slowly comes under Stanley's scrutiny, she realizes the vulnerable position she has put herself in. By admitting to the fall of Belle Reve and to its life of dissipation and deprivation, she has in a way empowered Stanley and presented him with a ticking bomb. As there seems to be no limit to the potential damage he could create for her by simply revealing the truth of her own past behavior, he basically holds her fate in his hands. Thus the past turns out to represent the greatest threat against Blanche's attempt to find a new foothold in life.

Another example of Blanche's clinging to her genteel role of the past is her limitless emphasis on her wardrobe and façade. Her appearance constantly occupies her attention, as she takes both time and pride in perfecting her looks. To her appearance is synonymous with reality. As Schroeder puts it, her "need to preserve the attractive appearance of youth as she remembers it, however, is accompanied by her incompatible need to escape certain memories of her own rather sordid past" (Schroeder: 117). The countless hours she spends in the bath, to Stanley's aggravation, help her in repressing the past that she spends most of the play obsessing about. And since she depends on male admiration for financial security, she does her utmost to uphold the picture of her as a perfect gentlewoman. When the opportunity presents itself in the form of Mitch, she takes no chances in spoiling it regardless of her true feelings about him, saying to Stella: "I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! Yes—I *want* Mitch... *very badly!* Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone's problem..." (SND: 171). To her the security that he can provide is the most important, even though he might not be her ideal suitor. But when the tables are turned and Stanley "returns armed with revenge" (Falk: 86), Blanche does not stand a chance. As she already at the beginning of the play appears as a fragile character, her attempts to hide and deny her past are what ultimately finishes her off, as Stanley finally unleashes his hatred towards her by telling

the people around her about her former behavior. Stanley makes use of the thing she fears the most—the truth about the past—and both metaphorically and literally rapes her with his “present”. This horrendous action, which we will look further into in the last chapter, forces Blanche straight back into her past role as a Southern gentlewoman: through her escape into madness she takes hold of the doctors arm and declares that she has “ always depended on the kindness of strangers” (SND: 225). According to C.W.E Bigsby’s article “*Tennessee Williams: the theatricalising self*”, by way of this ending: “Williams acknowledges the impossibility of recovering the past” (Bigsby: 32).

Summer and Smoke

The preoccupation with the past in *Summer and Smoke* (1948) is in some ways quite similar to that of the two previous plays. *Summer and Smoke* opens with a prologue that presents the past clearly and sets the stage for what is later to come in the play. It presents Alma and John, two childhood sweethearts, whose childhood memories play a crucial role in their adult lives. Their past connection has such a hold on them that it proves almost impossible to escape and comes close to ruining them both. The momentous water fountain that stands in the middle of the square and that connotes Eternity ties them together in a bond that seems almost unbreakable. The angel of the fountain introduces the idea of spirituality which at first seems to separate them, and which later seems, in John’s eyes at least, to be the only thing keeping them together. But Alma and John are anything but kindred spirits. Their dissimilar and diverse upbringing is what sets them apart and makes their attitudes and morality differ extensively. Their backgrounds initially make them clash, something they both seem well aware of. In this play the unresolved and suppressed issues of the past once again have a devastating impact on the characters involved.

Alma Winemiller in particular is yet another of Williams’ Southern women who is rooted in the past. Alma is clearly a product of an antiquated tradition. She is the reverend’s daughter trapped by circumstances of conventional propriety, which makes her unable to seize the life of the present. Everything about her is old-fashioned and even as a child she is perceived as old, as indicated in the stage directions of the prologue: “[Alma] already has the dignity of an adult; there is a quality of extraordinary delicacy and tenderness or spirituality in her, which must set her distinctly apart from other children” (S&S: 125). Her embodiment

of past values makes her and others feel that she is different. Her virtuousness and prudence make her appear as the odd one out in Glorious Hill, and no matter how much charitable work she does, she does not escape the picture the town has of her as “affected”. The stage directions of the play describe her as “*prematurely spinsterish*” and suggest that she is regarded by people of her own age “*as rather quaintly and humorously affected*” (S&S: 135). But this is something she is unconscious of until John returns to Glorious Hill. Since she obviously does not see herself as that much different from her contemporaries, John’s confrontation comes as a shock to her. He points out that people make fun of her and use her as party entertainment: “I heard an imitation of you at a party... [of] [y]our gestures and facial expression!” (S&S: 150). This is something that baffles Alma, as she states: “I am just mystified” (S&S: 150). It is at this point that she starts to look at herself differently and defends herself against what she considers to be prejudices forced upon her:

Oh, I’m not mad. I’m just mystified and amazed as I always am by unprovoked malice in people. I don’t understand it when it’s directed at me and I don’t understand it when it’s directed at anybody else. I just don’t understand it, and perhaps it is better not to understand it. These people who call me affected and give these unkind imitations of me—I wonder if they stop to think that I have had certain difficulties and disadvantages to cope with—which may be partly the cause of these peculiarities of mine— which they find so offensive! [...] I wonder if they stop to think that my circumstances are somewhat different from theirs? My father and I have a certain—cross—to bear! (S&S: 152)

Here she gives all the valid reasons for her behavior, but what she fails to see is that her involvement with the church, her singing, and her responsibilities at home in fact force her to act twice her age or more. But her exchange with John makes her eventually realize the reclusive character of her own life. The so-called cross she has been forced to bear has suddenly become heavier than before as she becomes aware of the reactions of her present surroundings. Her amazement at people’s comments and her attempts to appear unprejudiced and virtuous make her seem naïve. A central subject of the play is consequently her maturing process as she eventually tries to change.

Alma’s need for appearances of propriety as well as her family obligations have held her back. Being a reverend’s daughter has (as indicated by the stage directions) rendered her full of “*self-consciousness*” (S&S: 135) and “*she seems to belong to a more elegant age, such as the Eighteenth Century in France*” (S&S: 139). Her role is largely determined by her father, as seen in Scene One when he objects to her singing: “You sing extremely well, Alma. But you know how I feel about this, it was contrary to my wishes and I cannot imagine why

you wanted to do it, especially since it seemed to upset you so” (S&S: 136). Mr. Winemiller evidently tries to manipulate Alma into quitting singing altogether, probably because he finds it inappropriate to have a daughter singing in a public arena. Alma, however, is not swayed into giving up one of the few things that she feels define her as an independent individual and resists her father in a collected and polite way:

I don't see how anyone could object to my singing at a patriotic occasion. If I had just sung well! But I barely got through it. At one point I thought that I wouldn't. The words flew out of my mind. Did you notice the pause? Blind panic! They really never came back, but I went on singing—I think I must have been improvising the lyric! Whew! (S&S: 136)

Here it becomes apparent just how out of touch Mr. Winemiller is with his daughter; he is unable to see that the singing brings Alma joy and ecstasy. Despite her failure to remember the lyrics and her daunting fear of standing in front of a crowd, she manages to improvise and turn a possibly bad situation into an accomplishment, all by herself. Her father takes her anxiety in favor of his own position and ultimately fails to see that his daughter in fact is stimulated by her performance. He sells her short and to a certain degree also patronizes her; both which can be seen as means of controlling her as well as restraining her from entering the social life of the present. Since Mr. Winemiller fails to have any power over his wife, he tries in his indirect fashion to control Alma and thus prevent her from becoming an embarrassment like her mother. To Alma herself, however, singing is the only context of the present in which she can play an autonomous role.

Her role as the reverend's daughter is not the only one Alma is forced to play. She also functions as the primary caretaker of her parents, which is yet another duty that prevents her from partaking in the social life of her peers. According to Signi Falk she in this respect deviates from Williams' delineation of the young Southern gentlewoman as she is seen as the caretaker in the household in contrast to Laura and Blanche who depend on others for care (cf. Falk: 168). As Alma is forced to attend to her parent's needs instead of her own, however, she becomes unable to break free and develop into a whole, independent person. She takes it upon herself to provide for them as if they were her children, instead of the other way around. This can especially be seen in Scene Nine when a broken-spirited Alma does her chores despite being visibly dejected and disconsolate after the ordeal with John. Here, however, she also challenges her father: “I have made the beds and washed the breakfast dishes and phoned the market and sent the laundry out and peeled the potatoes and shelled the peas and set the table

for lunch. What more do you want from me?" (S&S: 225). But despite her occasional resistance, her circumstances force her right back into her secluded existence.

Although John early in the play makes her aware of her predicament, she also has an additional cross to bear, namely her mother. Mrs. Winemiller seems to have had some sort of an emotional breakdown, which has rendered her in "*a state of perverse childishness*" (S&S: 132). She makes no attempts of taking care of herself, which instead falls on Alma. This makes Alma slip so far into her role that she essentially sounds more like a mother than Mrs. Winemiller herself:

Mother, you are wearing out my patience! I am expecting another music pupil and I have to make preparations for the club meeting so I suggest that you... will you go up to your room? [...] all right, stay down here then. But keep your attention on your picture puzzle or there will be no ice cream for you after supper! (S&S: 164)

This stands as a prime example of Alma's everyday trials, as she goes around bargaining with her mother instead of living her own life. Alma is thus portrayed as the responsible caregiver taking on work as a singing instructor in order to pay for her mother's upkeep. In this manner the people close to her try to prevent her from entering the present, each in their own way. The main people in her life at some point or another in the course of the play try to freeze her in time. This often results in Alma losing her temper and, strange as it may sound, reprimands her own mother, like any other parent would do when a child misbehaves:

If ever I hear you say such a thing again, if ever you dare to repeat such a thing in my presence or anybody else's—then it will be the last straw! You understand me? Yes, you understand me! You act like a child, but you have the devil in you. And God will punish you—yes! I'll punish you too. I'll take your cigarettes from you and give you no more. I'll give you no ice cream either. Because I'm tired of your malice. Yes, I'm tired of your malice and your self-indulgence. People wonder why I'm tied down here! They pity me—think of me as an old maid already! In spite of I'm young. Still young! It's you—it's you, you've taken my youth away from me! I wouldn't say that—I'd try not even to think it—if you were just kind, just simple. But I could spread my life out like a rug for you to step on and you'd step on it, and not even say "Thank you, Alma!" Which is what you've done always—and now you dare to tell a disgusting lie about me—in front of that girl! (S&S: 169)

This reprimand, however, is not simply about her mother acting up as a child. It involves sensitive personal information Alma is not comfortable with others knowing. Alma justifiably accuses her mother of depriving her of her youth, which both shows Alma's awareness of her situation, as well as her mother's selfishness and incapability of existing in the adult world. It

is not long after this that Alma's defeat and downfall begin and she disconnects herself from the world.

But the importance of Mrs. Winemiller's childish behavior is worth examining as a nightmarish mirror of Alma's own predicament. It would be safe to say that Mrs. Winemiller was a housekeeper like Alma at some point in life, which makes her sudden change into a state of perverse childishness all the more shocking. But Mrs. Winemiller's disassociation from the conventional life of a reverend's wife also gives some hope as it implies that Alma, like her mother and Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, has the ability "to reverse her life for more satisfying experiences" (Blackwell: 244). This is also something Alma discovers towards the end of the play, as she has changed noticeably after John's departure. During his absence Alma has slowly but surely began to assert herself, talking back to her father who has started to lose his hold on her just as he has lost the grip on his wife. Mrs. Winemiller's behavior therefore in a way becomes a symbol of salvation, as her behavior encourages Alma to refuse to be a sacrifice on Mr. Winemiller's altar.

Alma's relationship with John also serves to illustrate her attachment to the past. As their small childhood fancy for each other remained just that and grows in Alma's mind into a huge, unsatisfied yearning of what might have been. This creates frictions between the two main characters as they both have expectations that the other cannot live up to. The clash between Alma and John becomes more acute as the play progresses. As Roger Boxill points out in his book:

The theme of past and present overlays that of soul and body in the contrast between the minister's daughter and the doctor's son. Science in its ongoing quest for knowledge is progressive, religion in its emphasis upon lasting verities conservative. Alma Winemiller is a nineteenth-century woman with what Williams calls an eighteenth-century elegance [while] John Buchanan is a twentieth-century man. We do not [...] applaud his gain, but rather mourn her loss (Boxill: 105).

As mentioned earlier, not only do their circumstances differ, but their values do as well. Their apparent differences spring from disparate social conventions (cf. Mathur: 99). As both characters from a young age were expected to live up to their parent's expectations, it left no room for them to establish themselves as autonomous figures. While John is expected to follow in his father's medical footsteps, Alma is expected to be the responsible Southern gentlewoman. John rebels in every way possible, whereas Alma stays caught in her trap for most of the play. The two stereotypical roles imposed on them create a gap between them,

which at the end of the play eventually destroys any hope for a relationship between the two to flourish.

In contrast to Amanda and Blanche of Williams' two previous plays, Alma does not seem quite as preoccupied with the past as Williams' prior heroines. In this play however, the one most markedly incapacitated by the past turns surprisingly out to be John. He has problems with the past that Alma symbolizes, and his ways of dealing with them are not always gentle. To him she is everything that is pure and decent. The fact that he continuously, without any malice, calls her Miss Alma reveals how highly he thinks of her. Alma has been one of the few constant factors in his life, as she, in contrast to all others, never seems to change. To him she represents comfort and security and, as seen in the prologue, almost poses as a mother figure. Her innate compassion for others is something that could be part of the attraction John feels for her. Since Alma knows what social prejudice feels like, she normally does not pass judgment on anyone: "I always say that life is such a mysteriously complicated thing that no one should really presume to judge and condemn the behavior of anyone else!" (S&S: 148). This includes John; as she refuses to pass judgment on him for his lewd behavior, it somehow enables their relationship to continue and eventually to some extent progress. Although this makes her seem rather naïve, to John Alma represents something he lacks. He admits to her fairly early in the play that he likes her, but her purity is something that seems to stand—also in his own mind—in the way of the full development of their relationship.

What John wants from Alma is contradictory and unachievable. He on one hand wants her to break free from her role as a woman of purity and virtue; on the other hand he wants to freeze her into remaining the same. This, however, also proves impossible because his return creates a desire within her that changes her character from the once reliable Southern gentlewoman, into a woman hungry for love. This is something the ambivalent John has enormous problems dealing with. He clearly struggles with the fact that Alma no longer is the odd, spiritual girl he knew and liked. Despite his former encouragements for her to change, he nonetheless has no desire for her to actually do so, something that becomes quite apparent at the end of the play. As she adopts his way of thinking, he realizes that spirituality and moral values were the things he lacked and therefore appreciated the most about her. Now that she has changed he no longer needs her. This has a devastating effect on her life since he represented her hope of breaking free from the conventions of the past that have imprisoned her for so long. Like the two previous Williams heroines, she too has hopes that a man will be

her way out of the trap she calls her life and provide her with what she needs the most, namely the freedom and independence that is engendered by embracing the present. What eventually happens at the end of the play is a complete change in Alma as she goes from one extreme to the other. This reveals that she is unable to integrate her past ideals with the life of the present—like John does. Her outlook on life now involves a complete turnabout as she seems to involve herself with acquaintances with strangers and the Moon Lake Casino. John, on the other hand, is the only character in the play that is able to combine past values with the demands of the life of the present.

The (Im)possibility of Integrating Past and Present

In each of these three plays the past appears to function as a curse that has an irreparable impact on the identity of the main characters. The development of the self seems to suffer immensely due to the characters inability of letting go of the past and grasping hold of the present. In *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda's preoccupation with the past rules and ruins the lives of her children as she is unable to distinguish between what once was and the harsh reality of her present predicament. Her attempts to make the present repeat the past prevents her children from developing into autonomous and independent individuals, most notably in the case of Laura. Laura falls victim to Amanda's strategy of having her daughter realize her mother's past dreams. One could say that Amanda tries to live through Laura, but the immense difference between their personalities and needs makes it apparent that this will never work. Despite of all her good intentions, Amanda's behavior nevertheless prevents Laura's development and makes her retreat even more into her world of glass figurines and old phonograph records. While Laura stands as a beacon of Amanda's future hope for reentering the social world of the living, Tom functions as the financial security Amanda needs in the meantime. In both cases, she ignores the individual needs of her children to live a life in the present according to their own personalities and desires.

The same problem can also be seen in *Summer and Smoke*, as Alma is unable to rid herself of the past that others want to relegate her to. Like Laura, Alma falls a victim to her surroundings. Both her father and John seem to expect her to forever remain in the past, freezing her so to speak, in the same role she has always had. These expectations give little room for her to develop into an autonomous individual, and when she does so, it is with grave

consequences. Robbed of the possibility of naturally developing into the person she wants to be, Alma is forced from one extreme to its opposite, as she goes from being the chaste and virtuous genteel girl to a possibly promiscuous woman walking off with the strange salesman at the end of the play.

While the focus in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Summer and Smoke* lies on the characters' inability of letting go of the past, which renders them incapable of personal development, what becomes evident in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Blanche's inability of escaping it. Her past prevents her from evolving with time as the fear of exposure determines all her actions. In order to remain in the role as Southern belle, she makes up her own versions of the truth. Like Amanda, Blanche depends on men for both the social and financial security they can provide. Blanche's preoccupation with the past destroys her precisely because she tries to suppress it. When finally confronted with the truth, she retreats into madness rather than coming to terms with her own present circumstances.

In view of the previous analyses, the question asked in the beginning of the chapter of how many of Tennessee Williams' characters move on from their past lives to take hold of the present and their future now becomes easier to answer. It becomes apparent that there seems to be an "either or" factor in his plays, as most of his characters seem predesigned to either belong to the past or the present or (like Blanche) being tragically divided between the two. But there are in fact some (Tom and John) who try, each in their way, to integrate the two in order to move towards a future. Even though all of Williams' dramatic characters in one way or another are affected by the past, it is clear that the characters not too burdened by the past are the ones who are able to move on and create a new future for themselves. In *The Glass Menagerie* Tom is the only one to take hold of his own destiny, as he throughout the entire play has battled Amanda on almost every point. His exclusive focus on the present and the future becomes his salvation; unlike Amanda, he has no past to hold him back and is therefore able to escape the trap that is the Wingfield apartment and start anew. Even though his decision is not made lightly due to his obligations to the family and Laura, he nonetheless executes his plans and tries to move on and does so by the help of his position as the narrator of the play. This provides him just enough latitude to stay in both the past and the present.

In *Summer and Smoke* both Alma and John take hold of the present and try to move forward with varying results. For Alma this seems to require a rejection of her earlier self in exchange with a possible life of promiscuity and cheap thrills. Instead of developing into an

autonomous individual, she goes from one extreme to the other with no possibility of integrating her past with her future. John, on the other hand, despite being the one most concerned by the past, is the one who comes out of the situation with the best of prospects, as Alma states: “The tables have turned with vengeance”(S&S: 247). He is the one who at the end of the play manages to come to terms with his past, combine it with his present and move forward into a certain future as he chooses Nellie for his wife.

The struggle of Williams’ main characters to come to terms with the past affects their sense of reality in the present. The more difficult it is for them to meet the demands of their present environment, the more liable they are to seek refuge in illusions and the dreams of the past. The resultant conflict between illusion and reality is the subject for the next chapter.

Chapter 2: The Conflict between Illusion and Reality

Introduction

Some might say that illusions are necessary to enable people to get through everyday life. For some people illusions may provide a sense of comfort in what they otherwise find to be a ghastly world, a coping mechanism which diverts their attention from some horrible truth or some reality that seems too menacing. It may require embellishment and creativity to transform actual circumstances into something one wants them to be. In his introduction “Reality, Illusion, and More Abundant Life” in his book entitled *The Vital Lie: Reality and Illusion In Modern Drama*, Anthony Abbott defines illusion as a: “set of structures—games, rituals, masks, disguises, diversion, roles—that human beings use to keep themselves from facing reality, which, if viewed nakedly, would destroy them” (Abbott: 4). The need for illusion is sometimes so great that reality is completely left out of the equation. Living in illusion is for some the only way out of their present condition, something that most certainly can be seen in Tennessee Williams’ drama. Here the past, as seen in the previous chapter, poses as the major obstacle that most of the main characters have trouble in overcoming and letting go of, either because they idolize it (like Amanda) or because it embodies events that haunt them (like Blanche). In either case, they need some illusion in order to cope with the reality of the present.

Abbott argues that in order for people to live a more abundant life, they need a certain degree of illusion. He points out that the human soul needs both joy and purpose in order to stay balanced and that being deprived of one or the other results in a desperate state, as we can see in both Amanda and Blanche. According to Abbott the human soul needs to take on the “challenge [...] to develop the self in a universe that offers the self no fixed or [a] meaningful identity” (Abbott: 2). But this in turn leads to the dramatic characters’ ultimate failure in their attempts to meet this challenge. The struggles of Amanda and Blanche to mediate between reality and illusion essentially turn into a crisis that leaves them completely disillusioned and

empty at the end. But as Abbott points out, this may be seen as the purpose of these plays, as they in his opinion are “*celebration of their [characters’] failures*” (Abbott: 2).

As the plays portray human beings in their most vulnerable state, they simultaneously show Williams to be the champion of the underdog, as Walter J. Meserve argues:

Williams shows a genuine compassion for the loneliness of men. So many of his characters are losers [...]. These are the people Williams describes in romantically idealized images. The world is too much for them. In their innocence and sweet ignorance they try to escape the only reality they know, or think they know, which is the world in which they live. Because this earth brought them misery, they must fight back and condemn it (Meserve: 259).

This chapter will show that Williams’ preoccupation with illusion once again has a biographical dimension. Writing, he says, is his way of “creating imaginary worlds into which I can retreat from the real world because... I’ve never made any kind of adjustment to the real world” (quoted in Bigsby: 33). In his preoccupation with the past and with the idea of illusion, Williams’ uses his own experiences and creates characters he himself can relate to and pity. These characters make use of deception and lies in order to escape “the harsh realities of a world of crass materialism and brute strength” (Da Ponte: 264). As most of the illusions of his protagonists are based on the ability to divert the attention away from the unpleasant reality on to a subject that they feel comfortable about, deception becomes their second nature. But it is important to point out that they do this out of necessity and not malice. As they are trapped by their unpleasant past or /and present, making up lies makes their otherwise intolerable present predicament a bit easier to handle. Williams presents his characters as frightened, neurotic dreamers who, like their creator, struggle with trying to adjust to their current situation. Williams initially asks us to feel empathy with his characters like he does and, as he presents their devastating fates, he also asks us to “see *why* they have become what they are, and, finally, love them” (Abbott: 139).

The Glass Menagerie

In *The Glass Menagerie* the lines dividing illusion from reality are blurred. As this is a memory play, the task of distinguishing illusion from reality becomes that much harder. The narrator Tom gives expression to this in his opening dialogue: “Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic” (GM: 235). Since the play is based on sentiment, it must not be taken as the literal truth. Tom does not reveal where the lines between illusion and reality go, but Williams’ stage directions provide us with some

information marking those lines and enable us to distinguish, to a certain degree, between the two. According to the stage directions: “memory takes a lot of poetic licence [in the play]. It omits some details; others are exaggerated” (GM: 233). The stage directions provide descriptions of the surroundings and of the characters that make it easier to see when a certain character takes refuge in illusion. The way in which the aspect of illusion in this play becomes apparent is somewhat unusual, as Tom is both the narrator at the beginning of the play as well as a character participant. As he notes in the beginning about his role as narrator: “I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has the appearance of truth. I give truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (GM: 234). Although the play itself is an illusion in the sense that it creates the semblance of reality, Tom insists that there is truth to be found behind the illusion. However, although both Williams and his characters are illusion-makers, Williams uses illusion for the purpose of truth while the characters use it to escape from reality.

Amanda is undoubtedly the character of the play struggling the most with her illusions. She has become completely unable to keep the past apart from the present, and tends to vacillate between them. Once known as a great Southern belle, she has, as mentioned earlier, problems with adapting to her current situation. Her illusions appear to function as subconscious wish fulfillments; at times it seems as if she does not even control them or know where they start or end. Almost everything she does seems, if not uncalled for, then at least exaggerated and embellished. Her behavior is so tightly connected to her illusion about the past that she seems to lose touch with reality and even becomes oblivious to her surroundings. The illusions she struggles with start as early as in Scene One. Her disjunction from the present is vividly seen after supper when she refuses to have Laura to clear the table in order for Laura to stay fresh in case a potential gentleman caller comes by. This is something that she believes or wholeheartedly wishes to be a possibility as her reaction to Laura’s doubt reveals: “Not one gentleman caller? It can’t be true! There must be a flood, there must have been a tornado!” (GM: 239). The exaggeration could be interpreted as a playful joke, softening the blow for her daughter’s sake. But she ultimately uses this as a way to create an illusion which she is more comfortable with than the truth about their present lives. In view of Laura’s realistic response, it becomes even more apparent that Amanda in fact does believe in her illusion. Her inability to face the truth and her rejection of reality saturates the entire play.

Not only does Amanda play the overbearing mother perfectly, she almost plays God, assigning Laura the roles that she sees fit for her, whether it be a girl with a career or a potential wife. By living vicariously through her children and not having a life of her own, she becomes deeply rooted in illusion, which she uses as a way to escape the powerlessness she otherwise feels. Amanda's deepest fear is that of losing control of her precarious situation, which may explain most of her behavior. In this manner she gives priority to her own needs over those of her daughter's, thus making "the mistake of assuming that Laura is the same kind of person she [Amanda] was as a girl" (Abbott: 141). Her illusion about Laura is seen in almost every scene where she refuses to face the real facts about her daughter: "Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that world. Why, you're not crippled, you just have a slight defect—hardly noticeable, even!" (GM: 247). By refusing to accept the facts about Laura's crippled condition, she ultimately fails to see its repercussions for Laura. Thus the tragedy of the play is not so much Laura's physical handicap as her mother's desire to pretend that it hardly exists.

When Amanda receives the news of the visit of the gentleman caller she turns the apartment upside down in a frantic attempt to refurbish it for the potential suitor. She does everything from cleaning it up to stuffing Laura's bra in an attempt to lure him in. Her focus on the external appearance of their home as well as themselves is once again due to her preoccupation with her past status as a Southern belle. Accustomed to Southern hospitality she feels compelled to keep up the tradition of the past and therefore works "like a Turk in preparation for the gentleman caller" (GM: 274). In this process she seems to regress to Laura's age level by calling her "sister", thus becoming more her equal as well as her competitor. All the preparations suggest that this is an opportunity for Amanda to shine once more, as "the legend of her youth is nearly revived" (GM: 276) instead of making it into an opportunity for Laura to meet an eligible man. Just before he arrives, Amanda even puts on her old dress that she wore the day she met their father and thus steps right back into her past youth. But when the gentleman caller enters, she insists that "she dresse[d] up the faded room to catch the gentleman caller for sister" (Scanlan: 106) and gives Laura all the credit for her preparations. She thus not only creates an illusion about their home, she creates illusions about themselves as well.

Despite Amanda's rootedness in illusion she seems at other times to acknowledge reality, which may indicate that she is not completely out of touch with the world she lives in.

According to Nancy Tischler she is “a disillusioned romantic turned evangelical realist” (Tischler: 94). One of her most significant glimpses of realism appears after the argument with Tom in Scene Four. Here she acknowledges her domineering behavior towards her children: “My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children!” (GM: 257). Although she portrays herself almost as a martyr, she after all realizes that her conduct has an effect on her surroundings. In Scene Four she also listens to her son for the first time, offering encouragement and understanding:

“I—I’m not criticizing, understand *that!* I know you ambitions do no lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world—you’ve had to—make sacrifices, but Tom—Tom—life’s not easy, it calls for—Spartan endurance! There’s so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you! [...] but I—*loved* your father... (GM: 259)

This gives a whole new impression of Amanda, this time as an understanding mother instead of the overbearing nagging person Tom and Laura want to get away from. But it does not take Amanda long before she retreats into denial as she immediately goes from being lucid to being elbow-deep in illusion. With statements such as “Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!” she seems in touch with reality, followed by her refusal to accept Tom’s statement that not all fellows are the marrying kind: “Oh, talk sensibly, Tom—and don’t be sarcastic!” (GM: 268-9). This illustrates just how easy it is for Amanda to slip in and out of reality and how unaware she is of the strength of her own wish fulfillments.

In contrast to Amanda, who rarely has control over her illusions, Laura on the other hand seems more aware of her own. The illusions in Laura’s life are the ones she allows herself to have simply because of the comfort they provide. Having a mother like Amanda, Laura often retreats into illusion in order to preserve her own sanity. As Abbott points out, this is often vital for Williams’ main characters: “In order to go on living at all, the protagonist may have to adopt another set of illusions, less stifling perhaps than those that society accepts, but illusions nonetheless” (Abbott: 2). When Laura escapes from her mother and occupies herself with her glass figurines, she is seen as tranquil and engrossed in her own glass collection. Even though both are fragile, it is the only place she can run to for serenity and composure. The place of illusion that she creates is a sanctuary to escape to when the menagerie her mother has build up around her becomes too much for her to handle. It is amongst her glass animals and records she seeks refuge both from the outside world as well as her mother. She identifies herself with her glass unicorn and struggles to assert an identity as

something other than her mother's shadow. This makes her, however, step further and more frequently into illusion as the play progresses.

Regardless of the fact that Laura seeks refuge in make-believe play, we may actually see her as a realistic character as she does it consciously. Due to her physical disability she has naturally become incredibly shy and introvert, but upon further inspection she in fact comes off as quite aware of her own limitations. While others in the play treat her as a breakable, fragile thing, she on several occasions makes an effort to confront them about it: "It isn't a flood, it's not a tornado, Mother. I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain..." (GM: 239-240) she states to Amanda. She knows that she is different because of her crippled condition and that no amount of illusion about her "slight defect" can undo that. To her, the possibility of ending up alone, without a man, is not as daunting as it is to her mother. Since in contrast to her mother she has never had a following of men. To her a life with her records and figurines seems to suffice. But to Amanda this option is unheard of and is something she can never let happen. That is why Amanda continues in every way possible to force Laura out into the social world to enhance her marriage prospects.

Amanda's determination in this matter, however, has contributed to Laura's painful shyness as she has taken Laura's entire life into her own hands, controlling every aspect of it. Amanda is as Tischler points out: "both Laura's disease and her brace" (Tischler: 99). But Laura, nevertheless, is not as worried about her future as her mother is and her indifference is shown when she drops out of typing class. Here Laura in fact serves Amanda with lies of deception in order to maintain the illusion of her still attending school. And when confronted about it she serves no fabricated embellishment like Amanda does about her leg, simply stating that the choice she made was "the lesser of two evils" (GM: 244). Here Laura seems in control for once, as she presents Amanda with a *fait accompli* by dropping out of school. Laura's decision of dropping out may not be the same calculated plan like many of Amanda's plans for Laura, but it nonetheless has the same effect and proves just as disarming. It is as if Laura's behavior here pulls the rug from under Amanda's feet and leaves Amanda with a sense of hopelessness and powerlessness. This event marks a change in Laura, as she for the first time exhibits some sort of independence by making a decision on her own. She demonstrates to her mother that she prefers solitude over the kind of life her mother wants for her, which is something that Amanda completely fails to understand and accept. That is why Amanda sees no other way than to initiate a husband hunt for her daughter, disregarding her

daughter's feelings. With this she also strips Laura of the possibility of having an independent identity as she once again takes on the role of God, presiding over Laura's wishes.

Despite all the focus in the play on the female characters seeking refuge in illusion, we do see that the male characters also struggle with the same issue. Like Laura, Tom escapes into his illusionary world of movies and drinking. Due to his mother's overbearing personality and relentless demands, he finds himself with nothing other in life than what he sees in the movies. When confronted by his mother about his hobby he answers: "I go to the movies because—I like adventure. Adventure is something I don't have much of at work, so I go to the movies" (GM: 260). At this occasion Amanda actually exhibits a genuine parental concern, as she tries to understand his behavior. But she is not the only one worried about it; at the beginning of Scene Four when Tom returns from another drinking binge, Laura confronts him rather innocently with: "Did you have to stay through everything?" (GM: 255), referring to his all-night drinking binge at the movies. Her concerns are initially based more on his welfare than on anything else and are so grave that she even brings them up with her mother, as Amanda reveals to Tom: "A few days ago I came in and she was crying [...] She has an idea that you're not happy here" (GM: 259). But Laura's concern can also be interpreted as selfish; she may fear that he eventually will leave and leave her alone with Amanda. He is just as important to Laura as he is for Amanda, as he is Laura's only friend and companion, other than her mother.

But change is something Tom desperately needs, and the escape into the world of movies therefore becomes important to him. Even though it functions as a temporary fix to an increasing problem, it buys him enough time to try to make arrangements for Laura in order to secure her future, as by his mother's request. When he fails in providing a suitable gentleman caller for his sister, the need for something more from his life than just the Warehouse increases. He eventually signs up for the Merchant Marine instead of paying the electricity bill, taking the first step towards a life away from Amanda's illusions. This action is symbolized by Tom's accidental breaking of one of Laura's glass figurines during his fight with Amanda in Scene Three. As Laura screams in horror "as if wounded" (GM: 253) at the sight of the broken glass piece, it foreshadows that Tom will do this again to her and cause her unintentional pain. At the end of the scene when he falls to his knees and collects the shattered pieces, he looks up at her "as if he would speak but couldn't"(GM: 253), again foreshadowing the eventual guilt he will feel towards her when he leaves for good.

Being the narrator of the play does not absolve Tom of the many illusions found in the Wingfield household. As pointed out earlier, he uses movies and poetry to retreat from the unpleasantness that is present in the apartment, satisfying his needs for something more in life than his mother's illusions. But the desire for escape is what initially becomes the biggest illusion Tom suffers from, as Bigsby underlines:

[This] is not, however, a strategy which has brought him success or peace of mind. He narrates the play in the uniform of the Merchant Marine. He has traded a job in the warehouse for one at sea. There is no suggestion that his desertion of mother and sister has been sanctified by the liberation, or public acknowledgment, or his talent. Like his father before him he has fallen in love with long distance, mistaking movement for progress (Bigsby: 38).

Tom's illusion eventually becomes shattered towards the end of the play as he declares: "Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (GM: 313), thus confirming that his dream of freedom was a self-delusion.

All the characters in this play step willingly into the world of illusion, including the gentleman caller Jim who is "momentarily forced to confront the discrepancy between the promise of his high school years [...] and the reality of his present life" (Bigsby: 40). Despite the stage directions about him being "the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality" (GM: 235), he too nevertheless lives a life of illusions. Like Amanda, he can be seen as a fallen icon, living on his past popularity. Even though he does try to improve his current condition, he slips gladly back into the past and the happy memories of what he once was. Just like Amanda, he reminisces with Laura about his high school glory days, using her as an excuse to do so. As he takes more interest in talking about himself than being the perfect gentleman and talk about her, most of his encouragements of Laura become a stepping stone to boast about his own ego. He talks himself up in order to suppress the fact that he is a failed high school star with a dead-end job. Like Amanda he shifts the attention over to a time when he did succeed, which embodies the opposite of the reality of the present.

His self-absorbed and slightly arrogant demeanor nevertheless has, at least momentarily, a positive effect on Laura, as it takes her out of her illusionary world of glass figurines and into the illusionary world of her mother, where the gentleman callers are one of the most important features in life. As the last scene progresses and Jim and Laura rekindle their old acquaintance, it proves to be the "climax of her secret life" (GM: 291). His

nonchalant manner takes some of the pressure of the situation they are in, and he slowly lures Laura out of her shell. What is more surprising is the fact that he even manages to have Laura open up about her illusions, as he has her talk about her glass menagerie. He is in fact the only person outside her family who sees Laura for who she really is, namely a shy, timid girl, who is comfortable in her own company amongst her glass figurines, and exceedingly affected by her crippled condition. He allows her to speak frankly and express herself on her own. Finishing off her sentences he gives her a sense of finally being understood, which makes it easier for her to open up. She allows him into her world in which the unicorn glass piece has anthropomorphic characteristics and functions as a symbol of herself. She even allows him to hold the precious unicorn declaring: “I trust you with him” (GM: 300), hence trusting herself with him. But while dancing, Jim, just like Tom, breaks Laura’s figurine unintentionally, symbolizing and foreshadowing that this scene is too good to be true. When the truth about his engagement is revealed it proves one of “the last of life’s disappointments that Laura intends to let touch her,” and from this point on “she withdraws completely into her imagination and the world of her miniature glass figurines” (Corrigan: 222).

As mentioned earlier, Amanda’s illusions put a strain on her relationship with her children. Seeing through her pretences, Tom comes close to despising her for her attempts of dominating them. He recognizes that what she does for Laura—forcing her delusional world upon her—is primarily for herself. As Tom is the only member of the family who “goes out of the house into a normal world of reality” (Tischler: 101), he recognizes these symptoms much better than Laura. For him there is no other way than fighting back. As the relationship between him and his mother deteriorates, a confrontation between the two becomes inevitable. The altercation between the two in Scene Three is anything but pleasant and stands almost as his emancipation proclamation. Refusing her any more control over his life, he confronts her about her behavior: “What do you think I’m at? Aren’t I supposed to have any patience to reach the end of, Mother? I know, I know. It seems unimportant to you, what I’m *doing*—what I *want* to do—having a little *difference* between them!” (GM: 251). When she fails to understand this, he finally lashes out in attempt to break her dominance completely: “You’ll go up, up on a broomstick, over Blue Mountain with seventeen gentlemen callers! You ugly—babbling old *witch*...” (GM: 252). Resorting to immaturity and foul language, he regresses back into being the child she treats him as. But instead of understanding her son’s feelings, Amanda’s self-absorption proves to be so extreme that she simply answers: “I won’t

speak to you—until you apologize!” (GM: 253), utterly ignoring the fact that her son is suffering and that she is the source of his misery. Her lack of insight and understanding of the consequences of her actions is what ultimately drives Tom away from home and Laura into her menagerie.

Explosive as the relationship between Tom and Amanda is, the relationship between Laura and Amanda is almost the reverse. Even though the pressure from Amanda is intense on both of the children, and even though Laura is also clearly aware of her mother’s ways and intentions, she does not condemn or despise her mother like Tom does. Being more dependent on illusion than Tom, Laura seems to understand her mother’s “need to romanticize her own past and so [Laura] stands between mother and son; and it is she who suffers over the ugly wrangling that breaks out between the two” (Falk: 76). Laura’s personality does not call for the same need for adventure as Tom’s and it therefore becomes easier for Laura to forgive some of Amanda’s whims even though she too strips Laura of her own identity. The price that Laura pays for her dependence on her mother, however, is a great one. Laura’s entire identity is overshadowed by her mother’s needs which over the years have rendered her a mental cripple as well. With comments like “I understood the art of conversation”(GM: 237) Amanda hints that Laura does not and is therefore unable to speak for herself. Amanda feels that Laura must be taken care of, despite the fact that she is two years older than Tom. Her extreme mothering of Laura is everything but normal as it ultimately hinders Laura in developing her own sense of identity and deprives her of the ability to be her own person.

According to Bigsby, Amanda stands as one of Williams’ survivors: “she survives, ironically, by selling romantic myths, in the form of romance magazines, to other women” (Bigsby: 38). As far as her pragmatic attempts to ameliorate their poor circumstances, this is correct. But as the play unfolds and more is revealed, she does not come off as a survivor but rather as a failure. Her inability to see the consequences of her dominating ways over her children is what at the end of the play destroys her possibilities of stepping out into the social world again. As Bigsby notes, Tom’s desertion of them “condemns his mother and sister to something more than spiritual isolation” (Bigsby: 34). At the end of the play she remains entrapped in the St. Louis apartment with no other lifelines other than Laura who due to her mother’s pressure has permanently taken refuge in her glass menagerie. The closing scene of the play after Tom’s departure seems to suggest that the two women are utterly alone and

isolated as Laura proceeds to blow the candles out. The resulting darkness is indicative of far more than the fact that the play has reached its end.

A Streetcar Named Desire

A Streetcar Named Desire is arguably the play by Tennessee Williams most deeply concerned with the motifs of illusion versus reality. Here the conflict between the world of illusions versus the real world dominates, affecting both the characters and the outcome of the play. The conflict is most strikingly dramatized in terms of the characters of Blanche and Stanley, as “the clash between [the two] is inevitable, [as] they represent two opposite views of life” (Falk: 82). In the play there is no doubt that the two are presented as opposites, where Blanche pursues her illusions, while Stanley appears as the down-to earth realist and pragmatist. Williams presents and exposes what happens when two such different worlds collide. As previously seen, the entire play deals with the subject of class and gender difference. Social inequality seems to be the basis for most of Williams’ drama and in this play the resultant conflicts are pushed to the extreme. Making the genteel Southern belle meet with a brutish, hard-drinking wife beater illustrates the devastating effect of social and cultural forces; something that in return naturally propels Blanche’s need for illusion rather than reality.

The theme of illusion is brought up as soon as Blanche arrives in New Orleans. In order to conceal her destitution she gives the appearance of being happy and merely visiting her sister out of affection. She pretends that her stay is only meant as a short vacation but, as she even fails to convince herself of this, some parts of the truth surfaces when she admits to Stella: “I want to be *near* you, got to be *with* somebody, I *can’t* be *alone!*”(SND: 124). Her short vacation eventually turns into an extended stay, which disturbs the tight dynamic that exists between Stella and Stanley, threatening Stanley’s position in the duo. It is here that the real problems in Blanche’s life arise as she ultimately comes up against a rival she cannot beat. The battle between the two is centered around the struggle over Stella and the empowerment Stella provides when she is on their side. Blanche needs Stella in order to try to turn her bad luck around and return to the social world of which she has been deprived because of her past behavior. This in Blanche’s view can only be attained through play-acting and pretense. As she rarely lets reality come into play, almost everything in her life seems focused on creating distractions from the truth, which also involves her lying to her sister. The

lies she serves are used as tools to escape the harshness of her life, as the “image of herself cannot be accomplished in reality [...] it is her effort and practice to *accomplish it in fantasy*” (Kazan: 22). One of her first lies to Stella in Scene One concerns her work: “Mr. Graves is the high school superintendent. He suggested I take a leave of absence” (SND: 122). This is something that proves to be as far from the truth as possible as it is revealed at a later point that she in fact got fired due to an illicit relationship with a student. Her lies become so intricate that “*reality becomes fantasy*” (Kazan: 22) and she eventually begins to believe her own lies.

She lies about her past as well as about her drinking habits. She tries to best of her ability to hide the truth, but it eventually becomes painfully apparent that her past just like her drinking has rendered her unstable and high-strung. The picture she presents of herself in the beginning scenes of the play is so garbled that it eventually becomes quite pitiful to observe the unraveling of all her lies. Her behavior reveals her to be more of a drunk than a Southern belle, “chasing”(SND: 121) down one drink after the other upon her arrival. Her meticulously constructed line of “one’s my limit” (SND: 122) to Stella and her comment that she “rarely touch[es] it” to Stanley (SND: 129) eventually fools no one but perhaps herself. But being the eloquent wordsmith that she is, she always has a well-prepared explanation at hand that serves to excuse her behavior. Completely wrapped up in her own mind, but at the same time intensely sensitive to her surroundings, she talks incessantly in order to divert the attention away from herself and over to others. Rarely giving people the chance to speak functions as a perfect diversion, as seen in the following dialogue between her and Stella:

BLANCHE: Now, then, let me look at you. But don’t you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won’t be looked at in this merciless glare! Come back here now! Oh my baby! Stella! Stella for Star! I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying ! I didn’t mean to say that. I mean to be nice about it and say—Oh, what a convenient location and such—Ha-a-ha! Precious lamb! You haven’t said a *word* to me!

STELLA: You haven’t given me a chance to, honey! (SND: 120)

Blanche’s quick tongue and agitated state of mind rattles her listeners, confusing them enough for her to swiftly change the subject to her advantage. This eventually becomes her coping mechanism for getting out of situations she feels come too close for comfort. This is particularly noticeable in Scene Two, when Stanley confronts her about the plantation. Instead

of answering his questions directly, she produces an extensive rant about his attributes in an attempt to hide the truth and avoid reality:

You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. [...] I like an artist who paints in strong, bold colours, primary colours. I don't like pinks and creams and I never cared for wish-washy people. That was why, when you walked in here last night, I said to myself—"My sister has married a man!" (SND: 137)

But being precisely as she describes him, Stanley does not get distracted as easily as his wife. He cuts straight through Blanche's double-talk, demanding to know what has become of "his" money, i.e. Stella's inheritance. Eventually realizing that she has met her match, Blanche tries to squirm her way out of the confrontation by relating to him: "The poor thing [Stella] was out there listening to us, and I have an idea she doesn't understand you as well as I do..." (SND: 138). Understanding that flattery will get her nowhere, Blanche desperately tries out other strategies—even flirting—in the hope of getting him on her side. But when this also fails, Blanche has no other alternative but to be honest about the loss of Belle Reve.

Blanche's most elaborate lies are nonetheless connected with her attempts of portraying herself as a virtuous lady. Since being perceived as the Southern belle seems to be something that her whole life is based on, she strives hard to uphold that image. She takes both time and pride in perfecting her looks to the point where it almost becomes a nuisance for the other characters. To her, appearances are crucial and to present oneself in the best possible way seems as one of the key elements in her life. The countless hours she to Stanley's aggravation spends in the bath, are purification rituals to "calm down her nerves" as she puts it, but they are also indicative of her preoccupation with looks as well as her ability of staying in control. Her attempt to hide her age may similarly be seen as the physical analogy of her withholding the truth about her past life. Her calculated attempts of making herself appear more attractive in the eyes of new male suitors is another of her strategies of illusion-making. Since she depends on male admiration for financial security, she does her utmost to uphold the picture of herself as the perfect gentlewoman. When the opportunity presents itself in the form of Mitch, she takes no chances in spoiling it regardless of her true feelings about him, stating to Stella: "I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! Yes—I *want* Mitch... *very badly!* Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone's problem... (SND: 171). Finally revealing her true motives she also admits to her lack of control over her own life. To her the security that he can provide is the most important, even

though he might not be her ideal suitor. Her need for holding on to this illusion becomes crucial, as she believes that her whole life depends upon it. Since she believes that it is only through a man that she can have the possibility of restoring her self-image and some of her previous social and moral status, marriage in her case seems a matter of convenience rather than a romantic enterprise. Although her references to Shep Huntleigh are illusions engendered by despair, with regard to Mitch she is not entirely out of touch with the real world. If anything, she at times seems well aware of reality but rather chooses to playact and pretend. Admitting that she needs somebody might therefore be one of the hardest things for her to do as she is forced to acknowledge her situation for what it is. In some conversations with Stella as well as in the final confrontation scene with Mitch, she is in fact seen as both direct and truthful.

As she grows more comfortable with Mitch she even exposes her vulnerable sides a little, revealing some part of her past to him. Responding to his sense of loneliness, she informs him about her failed marriage and the tragic circumstances around it. Here she also once again confesses to her loneliness, making no attempts to hide it. She seems to willingly share it with Mitch who in return states: “You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?” (SND: 184). Hearing the words she has yearned for, she feels a moment’s happiness and thankfully falls into his arms. But as Stanley still seeks revenge over Blanche, this bliss unfortunately becomes short-lived. Their relationship quickly turns sour when Mitch is told of the secrets she has kept from him. When confronted about it she barely makes any attempts of hiding the truth. It is during this confrontation between them in Scene Nine that she for the first time is forced to truly face reality and account for her behavior. She explains to Mitch that none of her lies came from malice but that she only presented things as they ought to have been instead of how they were, declaring “I don’t want realism. I want magic” (SND: 204). This statement gives an insight into her state of mind. As Abbott points out, “she needs Mitch, and because she is not outwardly what Mitch would have her be, she changes reality by pretending to be what she needs to be in order to have him” (Abbott: 144).

After the confrontation when she is not only abandoned by Mitch but also completely torn apart by Stanley, we see her fall entirely back into her world of illusion. When confronted in such brutal manner, her only option lies according to Abbott in the ability “to adapt to another set of illusions, less stifling perhaps than those that society accepts [...] a

second set of illusions, madness, or the strategy of the truly sane for living in an insane world” (Abbott: 2). Driven to madness, she inevitably accepts this as her reality as she walks off with the doctor at the end of the play.

Blanche is not, however, alone in seeking refuge in illusion. It becomes apparent that Stella in fact too has her moments of self-delusion, particularly seen in Scene Four, when she is confronted by her sister about Stanley’s behavior. Being far away from the comfort of Belle Reve, Blanche finds herself in the midst of an abusive marital relationship to which she can only react with horror and fear and unsurprisingly urges Stella to get out before things get completely out of hand:

Pull yourself together and face the facts. [...] You’re married to a madman! [...] Yes, you are, your fix is worse than mine is! Only you’re not being sensible about it. I’m going to *do* something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life. [...] But you’ve given in. And that isn’t right, you’re not old! You can get out. (SND: 158)

Still clinging to the definition of herself as a Southern gentlewoman, superior compared to Stanley, Blanche pleads with her sister to reconsider her situation and leave. But instead of facing reality, Stella treats Blanche’s response as an overreaction due Blanche’s inability of letting go of the past. This comes as a complete surprise to Blanche and reveals how different the sisters have become in the ten years they have been apart. Stella, who has had the exact same privileges as Blanche when growing up, seems unaffected by Stanley’s violence and appears to have no problems in adapting to her current situation. As she insists to Blanche in Scene Four: “I said I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of” (SND: 158), thus pointing the finger at Blanche as the one with a problem. The exchange with Blanche nonetheless reveals that Stella also takes refuge in illusion. As Kazan points out: “she is utterly *blind* as to what’s wrong with Stanley. She’s blind to it and she doesn’t care, *until* Blanche arrives” (Kazan: 25). Blanche tries everything in her power to make Stella see that her situation is unacceptable, even using their past as an argument: “I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with” (SND: 162). But despite her best of efforts, this proves to be a lost battle as Stella ultimately returns to Stanley.

Being faced with the horrendous truth about what went on between her husband and sister in Scene Ten, Stella sees no other way but to take Stanley’s side. As Meserve argues: “knowing what she wants, she makes a decision that will allow her to believe what she wants to believe and keep that [...] world she enjoys with Stanley” (Meserve: 253). Since anything

else would jeopardize the life she has made for herself, Stella feels she has no choice but to turn her back to her sister in order to financially secure her own life with Stanley. As she says to Eunice: “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (SND: 217), justifying her decision to herself and seeking confirmation at the same time. She tries to convince herself through the entire scene that she made the right decision. Stanley ironically fuels Stella’s need for illusion when he says to her: “Stella, it’s gonna be all right after she goes and after you’ve had the baby. It’s gonna be all right again between you and me the way it was” (SND: 196). Stella’s need to believe Stanley rather than face reality makes her related to Blanche in terms of more than blood.

Stella does not only struggle with her own illusions towards the end of the play, she in fact feeds Blanche’s throughout the latter’s visit. For the sake of her sister’s peace of mind she frequently furnishes Blanche’s needs of having things in a particular way as well as pretending to go along with her illusions. She knows how important appearances are for Blanche that she even goes into several fights with her husband defending them. Accusing people of Stanley’s kind of mentality being the cause of her sister’s demise, Stella defends her the best way she can, exclaiming: “she had an experience that—killed her illusions. [...] People like you abused her, and forced her to change” (SND: 189,198). Even though Stella turns her back on Blanche in the last scene, she never turns her back on Blanche’s illusions, feeding them until the end.

Being portrayed as the epitome of a realist that despises illusion and pretences, Stanley takes pleasure in breaking the news about his sister-in-laws actual life in Laurel. It becomes obvious from the moment Blanche steps into the apartment that the two will never get on properly. Their initial meeting in Scene One clearly indicates that Blanche and Stanley will be antagonists, and that Stanley enjoys the power of intimidation he exerts over her. Even though she, as mentioned earlier, tries her best to put him down with her social arrogance, he is relentlessly intent on getting rid of the intruder. This is something he points out to her in Scene Ten during their final confrontation: “I’ve been on to you from the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes!” (SND: 213). As Kazan writes in his director’s notes to the play:

[Stanley is] the hoodlum aristocrat. He’s deeply dissatisfied, deeply hopeless, deeply cynical ... the physical immediate pleasures, if they come in a steady enough stream quiet this *as long as no one gets more* ... then his bitterness comes forth and he tears down the pretender. But Blanche he can’t seem to do anything with. (Kazan: 26)

His only option is to break her down, as Corrigan points out: “Stanley strips away Blanche’s illusion and forces her to face animal reality. In doing so, he demonstrates that reality is as brutal as she feared” (Corrigan: 90). This is seen in Scene Seven when he almost seems ecstatic about what he has discovered about Blanche’s past and shares his findings with the only two people who matter in Blanche’s life, namely Stella and Mitch. Even though this does not have the desired effect on Stella, it most certainly has on Mitch. Destroying Blanche’s possibilities of a secure life, Stanley feels he is doing everyone a favor by exposing her. Here Stanley’s abusive character almost exhibits masochistic traits; he takes too much pleasure in bringing her pain.

As previously mentioned, Stella represents the object of Blanche’s and Stanley’s power struggle. Despite his pretended disregard of social status, he—like Blanche—does in fact have some concerns about it. He too feels the need to prove himself in one way or the other. Exposing Blanche becomes his means of self-assertion. It is here Stella comes in as it is precisely her social “fall” that provides him with power to bring Blanche down. As he says to Stella:

When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down of them columns and how you loved it, having them coloured lights going. And wasn’t we happy together, wasn’t it all okay till she showed here? (SND: 199)

Blanche’s presence points out how different Stanley and Stella really are, reminding Stella of how things used to be. When Stanley returns home with the news about Blanche’s dubious behavior in Laurel, Stella encourages him to leave things alone: “you’ve got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did” (SND: 185). Since this hits him where he is the most vulnerable, namely his social inferiority, he reacts with rage, replying: “So I been told. And told and told and told!” (SND: 185). Threatened by Blanche’s position in Stella’s life, he tries by all means possible to manipulate Stella back on his side by exploiting Blanche’s weaknesses. To him Blanche is a dangerous threat that he must eliminate from their lives in order to once again restore the balance between himself and his wife.

It is important to mention that Stanley towards the end of the play also pretends, lies and hides the truth. His honesty, like that of others, has its limits and he seems to engage in some self-deception of his own. He tries to convince not only his wife but also himself that

the incident with Blanche is something that eventually will blow over. As he reassures himself that everything will be all right as soon as Blanche leaves and the baby comes, we in fact see him cling to the illusion of living happily ever after as everything is about to change. As Felicia Hardison Londré points out in her article “A Streetcar Running for Fifty Years”:

the nominal winner, Stanley, has also lost, in that the relationships he values the most—those with his wife Stella and his best friend Mitch—will never again be quite the same. Williams’s characters, though often wrongheaded, are not agents of evil intent, but victims of their own limited perceptions (Londré: 50).

And Stanley’s perspective is limited indeed. The hedonistic, self-centered brute that he is, he does not realize that his actions have consequences. His need for vengeance and his preoccupation with his own self-indulgence ruin his own life more than Blanche is able to. Instead of letting go of the grudge he has towards her, he makes it his mission in life to ruin her. What happens after the broken Blanche has been led away, we can only guess, but it would be safe to assume that the relationship with his best friend and wife is forever damaged, despite the fact that Stanley and Stella may engage, like they do at the end of the play, in their own type of escapism, that of sex, which is the subject of Chapter Three.

Summer and Smoke

The dramatization of the conflict between illusion versus reality in *Summer and Smoke* differs somewhat from that of the two previous plays, in which the need for illusion seemed primarily focused on one or two main characters only. In this play, however, Williams plays more extensively with the motif of illusion as it clearly dominates all the characters and affects the way they look at each other throughout the play. Their respective wish fulfillments involve having the other conform to their own needs, but these unreasonable expectations ultimately result in failure. Alma has for instance the illusion of how her future might change because of John’s homecoming. Because of his need of controlling Alma, her father plays on the illusion of her frailty. Alma’s mother comes across as a parody or an ironic joke from Williams’ side, of someone who has regressed into an illusionary childhood state. John, on the other hand, stands as the one struggling most with his illusions, particularly when it comes to Alma, as he expects her to remain the same despite his encouragements of her to change. The entire plot of the play evolves around the problems of illusion and reveals that none of the characters are able to look at each other from a realistic point of view.

In contrast to the previous plays where illusion seems to be a trait mainly reserved for the female protagonist, the male characters of *Summer and Smoke* are also out of touch with reality. Compared to Williams' previous heroines, Alma is less preoccupied with illusion and more aware of her surroundings. Being less self-centered, she "does not reject reality" (Mathur: 98) like Amanda and Blanche do. Nonetheless she too clings to some illusions in her life, which all seem connected with John's return to Glorious Hill. His coming back, as mentioned earlier, affects Alma's secluded life with the hope of the possibility for change. The illusions she entertains about him become quite important to her, as we see particularly in the beginning of Scene Two. Her expectations regarding John are so high that she starts the conversation by nervously accusing him of not taking her out for a ride in his automobile, something he carelessly suggested in order to calm her down during their fight at the end of Scene One. This not only shows how impressionable Alma is, but also how gullible she is, as she takes everything he says literally:

The time of our last conversation on the Fourth of July, you said you were going to take me riding in your automobile. [...] Yes indeed you did, sir! And all these hot afternoons I've been breathlessly waiting and hoping that you would remember that promise. But now I know how insincere you are. Ha-ha! Time and again the four-wheeled phenomenon flashes by the Rectory and I have yet to put my—my quaking foot in it! (S&S: 160)

Even though this is meant humorously as a conversation starter, it shows that John's small, off-hand gesture has occupied her mind, out of all proportions with its original intent. Even during her reprimand, John seems to lack interest and barely pays attention to what she says. Ironically, this makes it possible for her to revel in her illusion of him as a hardworking, upright man, when in reality he is nothing of the kind.

Another of Alma's illusions comes to light when she invites John to her club, which he mockingly refers to as "intellectual meetings" (S&S: 162). While Alma takes this invitation very seriously, John seems completely oblivious to how much it actually means to her. The expectations she has of him fitting into her life are so exceedingly high that they come close to the category of a fixation rather than normal expectations. Like Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, Alma needs to set the stage perfectly, in her case for John's entrance into her world. Her worries slowly turn into obsessions that everyone around her seems to note. Both her mother and Mrs. Basset in Scene Three accuse her of being in love with John, something Alma tries to brush off as the reality of her emotions is something she is not ready to admit to herself. Her only concern is to impress him and prove to him that her life is not as beggarly as

he has pointed out. But the expectations Alma builds up around John crumble as her other guests fail to meet the standards she has set for his visit. Her explosive reaction to the members of her club after John's attendance of the meeting expose her true feelings:

Stop it! [*She stamps her foot furiously and crushed the palm leaf fan between her clenched hands.*] I won't have malicious talk here! You drove him away from the meeting after I'd bragged so much about how bright and interesting you all were! You put your worst foot forward and simpered and chattered and carried on like idiots, idiots! What am I saying? I—I please excuse me! [*She rushes out the inner door.*] (S&S: 177)

This reaction reveals her lack of awareness of her own feelings, which come as a surprise to her as she rushes out of the room. Her temper tantrums testify to her lack of control of everything around her. It is not until the end of the tirade that she for a split second understands what she has done, namely publicly given expression to her obsession with John.

Despite her illusions about John which spring from her own emotional needs, Alma grows aware of her own situation. She, more than anyone, understands just how limited and secluded her life has become, although she tried her best to retaliate against John in Scene One: "I am not recluse. I don't fly around here and there giving imitations of other people at parties. But I am not a recluse by any manner of means. Being a minister's daughter I have to be more selective than most girls about the—society I keep" (S&S: 153). According to Mathur, Alma is "a woman who lives in the illusionary world of the impossible, [and] gradually develops into one who accepts the truth and actively seeks what she wants" (Mathur: 98). But since John is relentless on the subject of her affectedness, she tries to explain her obligations and responsibilities to him and finds it quite offensive when he patronizes her:

You threw that firecracker and started a conversation just in order to tease me as you did as a child. You came to this bench in order to embarrass me and to hurt my feelings with the report of that vicious—imitation! No, let go of my hand so I can leave, now. You've succeeded in your purpose. I *was* hurt, I *did* make a fool of myself as you intended! So let me go now! (S&S: 155)

She obviously feels the need to defend herself against his accusations. Disregarding the fact that it humiliates her to have to admit it, he finally manages to force her to admit to her own isolation. In spite of this, Alma still manages to see him as a commendable man worthy of her affection.

As the play is divided into two parts (summer and winter), it also shows two sides of Alma, namely the hot excited Alma of summer, hungry for new impulses, and the cold icy Alma of winter, rejecting the world altogether. In the first part she seems revived by John, as her hopes of living out her wish fulfillments revolve around him. But when this illusion is broken in Part Two of the play and she is faced with the inadequacies of their relationship, she quickly falls into apathy and blames the world for her setback: “as for retiring from the world... it’s more a case of the world retiring from me” (S&S: 234). As Da Ponte points out, “the experience has wrecked [her]” (Da Ponte: 269). Being rejected by John comes as a shock which paralyzes her; as she says in Scene One: “I don’t get over shock quickly” (S&S 140).

Just as Alma’s illusions are connected with John, John’s illusions are connected with Alma. Because of his own needs, he creates the illusion of how Alma is supposed to be, rather than who she really is, thus freezing her image as she existed in the past. The reason for this is that he needs her to stand as a corrective to his own dissolute life, as he has problems in doing so himself. As Adler points out, “although John may appear at first to have more balanced perspective on life [...] he actually exaggerates, rather than integrates” (Adler: 118). But just as he himself has confronted Alma earlier, she too talks back and censures him:

Most of us have no choice but to lead useless lives! But you have a gift of scientific research! You have a chance to serve humanity. Not just to go on enduring for the sake of endurance, but to serve a noble, humanitarian cause, to relieve human suffering. And what do you do about it? Everything that you can to alienate the confidence of nice people who love and respect your father. [...] You say you have seen two things through the microscope, anarchy and order? Well, obviously *order* is not the thing that impressed you... conducting yourself like some overgrown schoolboy who wants to be known as the wildest fellow in town! And you—a gifted young doctor—*magna cum laude!* You know what I call it? I call it a *desecration!* (S&S: 154).

John therefore needs Alma as she is the only one who puts up with his antics and sets him straight. Even his own father has difficulties of doing so, as seen in Scene One when Dr. Buchanan vents his frustration: “There isn’t any room in the medical profession for wasters, drunkards and lechers. And there isn’t any room in my house for wasters—drunkards—lechers!” (S&S: 134). His disappointment in his son is extreme, which helps explain his subsequent act of violence. But despite both Alma’s and Dr. Buchanan’s lectures, John continues his behavior until his debauchery leads to his father’s death by the hands of John’s prospective father-in law. It is after this point that John starts to change and eventually makes an effort at improving himself, gradually becoming the person his father

would have been proud of calling his son. But this too has its price as it results in the waning of his relationship with Alma.

When John returns for the second time, the Alma he knew is now broken-spirited and out of touch with the world around her. She has finally become all the things he previously accused her of, as she has fled into a world of her own. When John returns, however, she seeks him out in the hope that he might revive her one more time. But during his absence, Alma has not only suffered, she has also changed. She has now adapted his former *carpe diem* philosophy, expecting it to bring them together. However, as it was Alma's high morals that John was infatuated by, John refuses Alma once again, this time because she seems to have lost them. As John's illusions of Alma crumble he, in contrast to other of Williams' characters rooted in illusion, forges his own values instead of breaking down. As "marriage would complete the pattern of his new respectability" (Tischler: 154), he continues his new and improved life with the young Nellie, leaving Alma behind. Having become a new and improved version of himself, he merely sympathizes with Alma's situation. Offering only some pills in an effort to alleviate some of her pain he takes the easy way out, thus letting her down at the end. He leaves Alma to "resolve her life without the hope that John might become the completing part of her half-fulfilled life" (Tischler: 154).

As mentioned earlier, Alma's mother is the one character clearly created to portray an extreme retreat into a world which no longer is connected with reality. Her withdrawal from everyday life is clearly linked to Mr. Winemiller, as his authoritarian expectations of her as the reverend's wife prove to be something she cannot fulfill. As Tischler puts it, she "furnishes a lively contrast to her prim husband [...] [due to] her uninhibited infantilism" (Tischler: 155). But despite being an embodiment of someone taking refuge in illusion, Mrs. Winemiller paradoxically turns out to be the only totally honest and truthful character in this play. By both doing and saying everything without any bonds of decorum holding her back, she makes it hard for anyone to embellish reality or deceive themselves. Her regression to the behavior of a child allows her to speak as freely as she wants without any fear of repercussions. She uses this power to antagonize Alma and Mr. Winemiller, creating awkward and embarrassing situations for them to handle. But despite her troublesome and perverse behavior, her condition also has some positive effects. Her puerile behavior forces Alma to be more direct than she normally would have been. This can be regarded as Mrs. Winemiller's contribution to the parenting of Alma, as she forces Alma to be more conscious of the

confinement that Mr. Winemiller has imposed on both of them. Mrs. Winemiller's behavior sometimes seems intentional and spiteful, as seen from Alma's outburst in Scene Nine:

Now you may let go of my arm, if you please! She was on her worst behavior. Stopped in from of the White Star Pharmacy on Front Street and stood there like a mule; wouldn't budge till I bought her an ice cream cone. I had it wrapped in tissue paper because she had promised me that she wouldn't eat it until we got home. The moment I gave it to her she tore off the paper and walked home licking it every step of the way!—just—just to humiliate me! (S&S: 224)

As Mrs. Winemiller is unable to fight back against her husband in any other way, infantilism becomes her only weapon against him and the power he has over the family. It is an open question whether her behavior is a result of her supposed illness or if she is deliberately putting on a show to annoy Alma. Things might lean against the latter rather than the former, as she takes pleasure in behaving the way she does. She seems to have willingly regressed into a childlike state, permanently residing in the kindergarten over which her husband has no influence. Her behavior is an archetypical example of escapism, of refusing to deal with realities of the social world. Her mischievous behavior of licking the ice-cream before she is allowed to shows that she enjoys her role of a child in this trio while it simultaneously functions as her way of resisting the control of Mr. Winemiller and ultimately humiliating him.

What becomes apparent here is that, through the use of Mrs. Winemiller, Williams portrays someone retreating into the illusionary world out of free will. Also with regard to the other characters, Williams gives his well-known motif another dimension. The main characters of this play are not like Laura of *The Glass Menagerie* who is driven into her illusionary world by her mother or Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire* who by Stanley's hand finally gives in to utter madness when confronted with reality. In *Summer and Smoke* the illusions are more based on what one character expects from the other rather than taking refuge in an illusionary world. The main focus of the play is on the devastating consequences of people's expectations of each other. Here Williams shows what happens when the possibility of escape is not an option. He presents Alma and John in a situation in which they have to confront each other, take hold of what is in front of them, and do the best they can. When Alma's illusions of John and the life he could provide her crumble, Alma is left with no other option but to change. She is left with a life without any expectations and faces—what must seem to her—a grim future as she walks off with a stranger at the end. John, on the other

hand, no longer dependent on having Alma's expectations of him as a corrective, is free to take hold of his own life.

The Dependence on Illusion

Evident in all these plays is the motif of illusion versus reality. As pointed out in the previous analyses, the power of illusion is at times greater than the importance of staying in touch with and facing the reality of the character's desperate circumstances. Illusion, therefore, becomes a coping mechanism for the characters, a means by which they provide themselves with some sorely needed safety and comfort which they otherwise lack in life. When looking into these plays we discover that the dependency on illusion often involves a dependency on men, as most of the main female characters in one way or another need a man to rescue them from what they perceive as a destitute state. In *The Glass Menagerie* we see Amanda struggling to secure a gentleman caller for her daughter, as she lives with the illusion that they both will be doomed to a life of spinsterhood at the mercy of others without a man. What she fails to see is her daughter's reluctance to this scenario. But more importantly, what Amanda fails to realize is that she in fact has managed quite sufficiently without a man for more than fifteen years. It becomes evident that just as she fails to see her children as independent individuals, she does so when it comes to herself as well. Her deep rootedness in, and illusions about, the past have blurred her vision to the point where she almost overlooks the fact that she has successfully helped to provide for her children since the desertion by her husband. In this sense she in fact stands out as both a capable and a strong woman. But, being too scarred by her past as a Southern belle, she completely fails to see or appreciate this.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* we see Blanche more than any other character struggle with her illusions. Often she vacillates so swiftly between illusion and reality that she has difficulties distinguishing between them. Blanche's dependency on men is so severe that she fears for her life without a man, as her previous conduct has also shown. Her need for constant male attention lies—just as in Amanda's case—in her past as a Southern belle. Coming from a way of life where the social norms defined her as an individual only in terms of her male company, she stands at the end of the play as utterly lost when her hunt for the potential man fails.

Like the two previous heroines Alma struggles with many of the same problems in *Summer and Smoke*. As in the case of Amanda and Blanche, Alma's illusions are connected with a man and what he can do to enrich her life. Her circumstances, however, do not seem as desperate; to her John is someone who can kick-start her life rather than someone who can save her from a financially dire existence or a spinsterish lifestyle. She needs to believe in her heart that John is the one who can do this for her, as she has no other option available. Having vicariously lived through him all these years—looking at him coming and going—she is confident that he is the one who can save her from her dull and tedious life that she has been forced to live due to her father's demands and her mother's condition. She lives so long on this illusion, that when it finally breaks down she, like Laura and Blanche, completely retires from the world around her. But what is different in this play is the fact that Alma at the end confronts her illusions and takes the consequences, showing herself to be a character that might be able to handle reality no matter how dire and dreadful it might seem.

Despite the fact that most of the female protagonists' illusions are connected with the need of attaining a man, it is also possible to have a man and still struggle with illusions. This becomes fairly obvious with Stella, the only character in all of the three plays who has a husband. When Blanche arrives at the French Quarter, Stella starts struggling with distinguishing illusion from reality and right from wrong. Under Blanche's influence she starts looking critically at her own life, discovering that it might not be all roses and passionate desire. But due to her own compromising circumstances (with a baby on its way) Stella, like her sister, has no other choice but to remain in her illusion, as the alternative would be perhaps even worse in her case if she chose to believe the truth about Stanley and Blanche.

When we look into this motif, what we see is that Williams as dramatist uses illusion for the purpose of truth, but presents the latter as something that his characters desire to escape. With his extensive use of the motif of illusion versus reality he tries to show how reluctant people are about facing reality, and how a person might create an illusionary world rather than facing the real one. He also shows how easily this can backfire, resulting in more problems than solutions. As all of his characters delude themselves either into more unhappiness, destitution or even madness, Williams ultimately shows how fragile human nature can be. The next chapter deals with an extension of this notion of fragility, linking it to the themes of gender and sexuality.

Chapter 3: Gender and the Issue of Sexuality

Introduction

According to Stephanie Garrett there is “an important distinction between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’”, where the former concept refers to the biological differences between males and females, while the latter refers to the socially determined personal and psychological characteristics of being male or female, namely ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’” (Garrett: vii). In other words, the social role is either achieved or ascribed. The achieved role can be attained through personal skill or ability, while the ascribed role is often unconsciously assimilated because of social conventions and pressures. This latter part will be the main focus of this chapter since most of Williams’ main characters struggle with their socially constructed roles.

In the article “Romantic textures in Williams’ plays and short stories” Nancy M. Tischler points out that most of Williams’ dramaturgy “reflects [a] romantic/realistic duality” (Tischler: 158), which is revealed through “the male/female attraction/conflict. The masculine/feminine identity, the need to individuate the growing personality, the love/hate conflicts of the family” (Tischler: 157). All of these conflicts can be seen in the three selected plays in this thesis as all the female characters seem to be caught in a vicious circle of sexual morality where they are condemned if they do and condemned if they don’t, so to speak. Williams’ leading women all seem to suffer under the gender role forced upon them as they all at one point or another repress both their personalities and sexuality in order to be socially accepted amongst their contemporaries, as for instance Amanda and Blanche do due to their pasts as Southern belles. Arthur Ganz argues in his article “Tennessee Williams: A Desperate Morality” that Williams acts as a moralist in his plays rather than a psychologist: “Williams’ morality is a special one, but it is a consistent ethic, giving him a point of view from which he can judge the actions of people” (Ganz: 123). Ganz goes further by saying that Williams gives expression to the “theme of punishment” in his plays which is connected with “an act of sexual rejection” (Ganz: 127); his characters are forced to “endure atonement for [the] act of rejection [and their] sin in terms of Williams’ morality” (Ganz: 127). Whether it be the

suppressed crippled daughter, the hysterical high school teacher or the reverend's inexperienced daughter, their sexuality is frustrated and suppressed by the gender conventions of the time, or condemned when it takes center stage, something we are about to see in the closer analysis of the plays.

The Glass Menagerie

Gender issues are shown to play a large part in dictating the future plans of each character in *The Glass Menagerie*, influencing both their personalities as well as their behavior. The play reflects the social norms, roles and values of its time and portrays characters whose gender roles trigger fears of dependence, manipulation and subservience. Masculine and feminine roles are quite conventional and the expectations connected to each gender become important to fulfill, especially for Amanda. The women in the play, for example, seem to be dependants while the men, on the other hand, are presented as the providers who are expected to fend for the family. The entire play focuses on the division of gender and makes the sexes stand sharply apart. Gender and inequality are revealed to be inextricably connected: Amanda's entire focus is on the fact that Laura must get married because she is a woman and that Tom should get ahead in business because he is a man.

The hegemony of stereotypical gender roles is almost impossible to escape in the world of the play. Amanda's preoccupation with gender roles becomes evident fairly early in the play as she relates her personal story to her children for the hundredth time. Not only is it important for her to remember her past, but it also serves to explain her vision of how the social relationships between women and men are supposed to be. In this play they seem to arise from traditions deeply rooted in the past. Accustomed to the life of a Southern belle, Amanda often discusses what women and men should and should not do, and proper social conduct is defined according to her Southern upbringing. Her past dictates her behavior, and her well-known remark "when I was a young girl" resonates through the entire play. When Amanda begins her stories of the past she insists that women and men are judged differently and that a man is a necessity for a woman in order for her self-realization. In this connection Nancy M. Tischler argues that Amanda functions as a "abandoned wife [who] violates the code of chivalry and gynolatry [as] she casts suspicion on the immorality of romantic love and calls into doubt the validity of southern education of women" (Tischler: 500), as she is unable

to define herself as anything other than a wife. She places great importance on women's manners and demeanor and underlines how important it is for women to make themselves as appealing and enticing for men as possible: "They knew how to entertain their gentlemen callers. It wasn't enough for a girl to be possessed of a pretty face and a graceful figure—although I wasn't slighted in either respect. She also needed to have a nimble wit and a tongue to meet all occasions" (GM: 238). In other words, the life of the women of her time was defined as a competition for the best gentleman caller. Given their otherwise small prospects, all they had was their personality and their smart tongue which had to be able to talk about "things of importance going on in the world!" (GM: 238). According to Amanda this is the only way a woman could prosper in the otherwise male dominated world. Women's social abilities combined with looks and wit become quite important in order to secure their future, while the men in Amanda's stories simply needed to turn up and be entertained.

To be successful plantation owners with prominent futures and great wealth seems according to Amanda to be the only important characteristic needed for the gentleman callers. She rarely gives any description of her gentlemen suitors other than their social status, leaving personality completely out of the equation: "Among my callers were some of the most prominent young planters of the Mississippi-Delta—planters and sons of planters!" (GM: 238). And as her story progresses so does the focus on their wealth:

Hadley Stevenson who was drowned in Moon Lake and left his widow one hundred thousand in Government bonds. There were the Cutrere brothers, Wesley and Bates. [...] They shot it out on the floor of Moon Lake Casino. Bates was shot through the stomach. Died in the ambulance on his way to Memphis. His widow was also well provided for, came into eight or ten thousand acres (GM: 238).

To her the men serve as breadwinners for the family and she considers a well-provided woman to be a happy woman, making inequality inherent in the relationship between the two genders. She comes very close to suggesting that a sensible woman may be with a man simply in order to survive financially, as Tischler points out: "women who has no career plans outside of marriage must find her pride in her husband and her children" (Tischler: 500). The reason for Amanda's narrow-minded assessment is once again to be found in her own past as she points out: "I could have been Mrs. Duncan J. Fitzhugh, mind you! But—I picked your *father*" (GM: 239). Here she actually reveals the biggest regret of her life; the fact that she herself is to blame for her own downfall, as she chose with her heart instead of her common sense.

It is only towards the end of the play that Amanda finally admits that “old maids are better off than wives of drunkards!” (GM: 268). This moment of clarity shows that she has come to understand that what she thought to be most important with regard to gender roles and relationships might not necessarily always be correct. But as the fear of drunkenness in husbands is a very traditional fear in a patriarchal, gendered society, Amanda’s censure of the institution of marriage is only a slight, rare moment that passes as quickly as it arrives. She soon goes back to her old convictions that a woman depends on the superior man who can provide for her well-being. In view of their current situation, to Amanda this seems to be the only way out of the economic and social insecurities that haunt the Wingfield household. With her own regrets in mind she evades reality and opts for the only idea which she feels is completely safe, namely securing a husband that can provide for Laura. As Falk notes: “she has known firsthand what can happen to a southern girl without a home of her own”; this is why “her cry comes from experience” (Falk: 72). Amanda’s utter panic and hysteria about female destitution therefore becomes understandable and even somewhat justified. As her fear of the future takes complete hold of her, she paints a horrific picture to Laura:

I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren’t prepared to occupy a position. I’ve seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister’s husband or brother’s wife!—stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life!
Is that the future that we’ve mapped out for ourselves? (GM: 245)

By creating such a dismal picture Amanda also manages to manipulate Laura, bending her will towards the wishes Amanda herself wants to fulfill instead of respecting Laura’s own feelings and thoughts.

To Amanda there are certain conventions that must be strictly followed in order to accomplish one’s social objectives, as seen in Scene Five. When Tom informs Amanda about the gentleman caller coming, she almost goes into a frenzy when she learns that her time for preparation is scant: “Preparations! Why didn’t you phone me at once, as soon as you asked him, the minute that he accepted? Then, don’t you see, I could have been getting ready!”(GM: 267). Emphasizing the notion that the first impression is crucial in female/male relations, she places great importance on Laura’s staying “fresh and pretty” (GM: 239) at all times and constantly tries to improve her looks as well as glorify their surroundings. She understandably makes a fuss given the extreme importance of this meeting with someone of potential husband

material for her daughter. But when Tom, oblivious to the reason for Amanda's panic, tries to calm her down she frantically cries out:

You just don't know. We can't have a gentleman caller in a pigsty! All my wedding silver has to be polished, the monogrammed table linen ought to be laundered! The windows have to be washed and fresh curtains put up. And how about clothes? We have to *wear* something, don't we? (GM: 267).

To Amanda the preparations assume importance in and by themselves. Not only do they enhance Laura's prospects, they also give Amanda a chance to show what she is capable of; proving to herself that she can entertain as she once did. It also gives her the opportunity to anchor herself in the conventional role of a perfect housewife which she has sorely missed after her husband's departure, thus reestablishing "her own symbols of comfort, hospitality and style" (Tischler: 500). But despite this, she surprisingly gives Laura the credit for all her efforts, establishing her credentials as an ideal future housewife by stating to their visitor: "you know that Sister is in full charge of supper! [...] 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 as bit" (GM: 285). This exaggeration or white lie could perhaps be said to show a new side of Amanda, as a selfless giving mother. But it also creates a new illusion. This little sales pitch to the gentleman caller is designed to uphold appearances about their household. At the same time as it serves to extend Amanda's manipulation of Laura, forcing her into a role which she might not fit into or even want.

Nevertheless, Laura tries to resist the gender role her mother has prescribed for her by, among other things, refusing to open the door for the gentleman caller: "Oh, Mother, please answer the door, don't make me do it! [...] I'm *sick!*" (GM: 278-9). She makes herself—or claims to be—sick in order to escape her mother's wishes. When she fails in this, Laura opts for the second best thing: simply removing herself from the situation completely. By the help of her beloved victrola she escapes into her illusions where things are safe and familiar. According to Jeanne M. McGlenn this is "a result of her belief that since she is crippled, she is unlovely and unlovable. Feeling unattractive, Laura is frightened by a situation in which this attractiveness is directly tested [...] her self-consciousness and introversion thus reach a climax during her evening with Jim" (McGlenn: 513). Being in a place of her own creation, Laura escapes into a realm where she is completely out of Amanda's influence and designs for the gentleman caller. As this is a place where Amanda has no authority, it understandably creates a bewildered reaction from Amanda who otherwise

seems in control at all times: “Why have you chosen this moment to lose your mind?” (GM: 279). Amanda sees her daughter as someone spurning a golden opportunity rather than seizing it, as she would have done. As the visit initially seems more for Amanda’s sake than Laura’s, the withdrawal displayed by Laura is quite understandable for everyone but Amanda.

Another way in which Laura defies Amanda and tries to break away from the preordained gender roles Amanda prescribes for her is seen early in the play when Laura drops out of typing class. This becomes Laura’s ultimate stand against Amanda, as she makes a deliberate choice of *not* becoming what her mother wants her to be. For the first time in her life Laura makes a decision regarding her own life and suits her own desires. Even though she keeps it a secret for quite some time, it nevertheless becomes *her* secret to keep. The freedom it gives and the independence she gains are something she has never experienced before. Taking control over her life and risking her health seem worth it at the end: “It was the lesser of two evils” (GM: 244). So when Amanda finally finds out, it comes as a shock to her. Not only does Amanda realize that she has been lied to, she is also forced to come to terms with the fact that the control she once had over her children is threatened. This almost seems as a bigger blow to her ego than anything else and she comes across as uncertain and unsteady for the first time in the play. Slightly hysterical, she grasps onto the only thing she truly can rely on, namely her conventional gender convictions. Perplexed and anxious about their future she gets a second wind as she launches the alternative: “Girls that aren’t cut out for business careers usually wind up married to some nice man. Sister, that’s what you’ll do!” (GM:246), securing both of their futures in one fell swoop. Amanda once again fails to understand that Laura “given such a limited perception [...] cannot participate in human relationships and will continue to be unhappy in the real world” (McGlenn: 512).

Even though Amanda is consumed by her stereotypical vision of the life of a conventional woman/housewife, and her almost hysterical need of executing things in a traditional way, she nevertheless has children who exhibit the need of fulfilling very different inclinations. Her overbearing manners have consequences, and one of them becomes exceptionally visible in her son’s behavior. Due to Amanda’s “nurture” Tom has ultimately become a subservient male whose mother manipulates him to financially support the family and to suppress his own needs and dreams. His dissatisfaction with his job at the warehouse and the position he is forced into at home drives him to lead a life where he often goes out and drinks heavily just to escape his miserable existence. As he “makes a slave of himself” (GM:

250) and becomes the breadwinner of the family, he finds it nonetheless insufferable that he must commit his entire life to his mother. His breaking point comes in Scene Three, when Amanda confiscates his books and deprives him of things he feels are his own:

You think I'm crazy about the *warehouse*?[...] You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five *years* down there in that—*celotex interior*! with—*fluorescent—tubes*! Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains—than go back mornings! I *go!* Every time you come in yelling that God damn '*Rise and Shine!*' I say to myself, '*How lucky dead people are!*' But I get up. I *go!* For sixty-five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being *ever!* (GM: 251-252)

This is a clear declaration of revolt against the gender role his mother tries to force upon him and is one of the strongest protests in the play. Being forced so far into the gender stereotype of the male breadwinner, Tom reacts with a direct threat: “if self is what I thought of, Mother, I'd be where he is—GONE!” (252) and actually walks out, leaving Amanda in suspense at the end of the scene, not knowing whether he will return or stay away forever. His threats in fact become the only things in his life that he has recourse to, seeing how she controls everything else. Tom goes up against her the only way he can, by drinking and behaving more like his father. Well aware that Amanda's deepest fear has to do with him becoming an alcoholic and regardless of her plea to him to “never be a drunkard!” (GM: 258), he still chooses to behave in clear defiance of her wishes.

By this leisure-time revolt, Tom can take part in what he longs for, namely the life of an independent individual, confirming his own self-worth instead of fulfilling his mother's wishes. Talking back to Amanda is in fact the only thing he can do in order to assert himself as a man with his own standards. As Nancy M. Tischler points out in her article “A Gallery of Witches”:

Tom finally verbalizes this truth, screaming at Amanda, “You ugly...old—witch.” Though he subsequently retreats, apologizes, and finally comes to a grudging admiration of his mother, he has nonetheless recognized that she is the dragon he must battle if he is to pass the threshold of manhood. (Tischler: 499)

Tom's defiance of his mother's gender expectations runs through the play from start to finish and brings him the momentum that he needs to eventually break free. Being defiant helps him through his otherwise mundane everyday life and stops him from being completely submerged in Amanda's conception of reality. His rebellion shows that he amidst Amanda's hysteria still has hope for a future of his own making. On the basis of the outcome of the argument between Tom and Amanda towards the end of Scene Three, one could conclude that

Amanda's attempt of forcing Tom into a conventional gender role has failed. And when Tom starts for the door she anxiously demands to know where he is headed. When he serves her a tirade of vile prospects and hurtful insults as an answer, he completely breaks with the character of a supposed gentleman Amanda wants him to be. At this point his complaisant acquiescence has come to an end, shattering her illusion of him ever fulfilling her genteel requirements.

This affirmation of self which Tom at the end of the play demonstrates by actually leaving, is something Laura despite her few rebellions against Amanda's oppression, unfortunately never gets the chance to do. Being more directly the victim of Amanda's gender conventions, Laura becomes trapped in the apartment with her mother at the end, having no chance of escaping in any way other than through illusion. Blowing out the candle at the end of the play symbolically seals her destiny, leaving her without any other options than remaining with Amanda; depending on her mother in the same way as the latter depends on Laura.

Sexuality in the play is directly connected to gender as a genteel construction. Promiscuity and sexuality seem to be synonymous to Amanda and are incompatible with her need of gentlemen callers. Her ultimate choice of Mr. Wingfield nonetheless suggests some sexual innuendo, as she states that "one thing your father had *plenty of* — was *charm!*" (GM: 247), alluding to the fact that her choice of men was made more with her heart (desire) than her reason. Since this ultimately has left her fairly destitute at the end, she now does everything in her power to prevent any such thing from happening in the present. When she confiscates Tom's books by the author D.H Lawrence, best known for his sexually explicit material, she shouts: "I WON'T ALLOW SUCH FILTH BROUGHT INTO MY HOUSE!" (GM: 250). Because of her genteel upbringing and her unprecedented emphasis on the importance of being ladylike, she prefers to be, as Stein points out: "wrapped up in her own illusions [...] [and] prefers to believe not in Tom's favorite D.H Lawrence, but in Cinderella and courtly love and *Gone With the Wind*" (Stein: 37). Anything with a sexual content must be banned from the house, and she even at a later point reprimands Tom when he says that "man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter, and none of those instincts are given much play at the ware-house!" (GM: 260). To Amanda this is an unacceptable view and her reaction becomes quite explosive:

Man is by instinct! Don't quote instinct to me. Instinct is something that people have got away from! It belongs to animals! Christian adults don't want it! [...] [They want]

superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit! Only animals satisfy instincts! Surely your aims are somewhat higher than theirs! Than monkeys—and pigs—(GM: 260)

Like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* who compares her brother-in-law with brutes, sexuality to Amanda seems a shameful thing which she with every means possible tries to expel from her household. Her emphasis on instinct being animalistic shows that she sees sexual desire as something outside the social constructed realms within which she operates. Her sanctimonious and outraged behavior may reflect her own repression of sexuality. Her remark that “instinct is something that people have got away from” (GM: 260) suggests that she wants to control everything that goes in and out of the house. Tom’s nightly escapades naturally also become a problem, as Falk points out: “the conflict between body and spirit, as it reflects the southern Puritanism of the early twentieth century, is symbolized in the attitudes of these two people” (Falk: 74). The insecurity of not knowing what Tom is up to or where he is going is one of the reasons for their strained relationship.

Amanda thus holds the dominant power of definition of both gender and sexuality in the play. Due to her convictions, she dominates her children and implements her past ideas of conventional social behavior instead of adapting it to the new world. Her Southern belle past haunts her children as much as it haunts her, to the point where she condemns everything that is outside the lines of her socially accepted world. The ending of the play resonates with the repressions linked to conventional roles of femininity, as she refuses to let Laura go into the world of the present and future. This symbolizes not only the end of their social life; by blowing out the candle, Amanda also blows out the flame of any previous desire Laura might have had in her life, which briefly surfaced in the interaction with Jim, the gentleman caller. This devastating and condemning power of gender and sexuality continues in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, where its destructiveness is most prominent.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Gender and sexuality in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are the main causes of many of the conflicts in the play. As masculine and feminine gender roles in the play differ extensively, the men and women constantly clash. Much of the plot of the play revolves around gender, and the play may be seen as Williams’ critique of traditional conventions of femininity. He portrays how radically both the old and the new South restricted the lives of women. Through

the characters of Blanche and Stella, Williams shows how they strive to cope with the roles forced upon them and what eventually happens when they try to break with them. He portrays how the stereotypical gender conventions of the time enhanced male superiority. In both the old and the new South the female characters depend on the male characters for survival. In terms of prescribed social roles, it is clear in the play that gender determines the lives and the behavior of the characters. This play also brings up the topic of homosexuality, which at the time of the production of the play was a subject matter few had touched upon. Thus Williams shows how not only women were affected by roles dictated by society but also men.

As mentioned earlier, there seems to be a sexual undertone in almost every part of the play, and it can be observed as early as the first scene when Blanche arrives in the Quarter: “They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields” (SND: 117). Here Williams foreshadows what will happen in the play, allegorically presenting the trajectory of Blanche’s life. The streetcar she rides may be seen to represent her past, as it is her sexual behavior which has brought her to her current situation. It has led her to the eviction from Belle Reve, her ostracism in Laurel, and, at the end of the play, her expulsion from society at large. That the ride involved a transfer to the Cemeteries seems an ominous prospect, but it is at least figuratively borne out by the ending of the play as she is taken to a mental hospital. It is hard, however, to see the reference to Elysian Fields as anything but ironic; the street on which Stella and Stanley live is a far cry from some paradise, and its inhabitants can hardly be compared to the heroic souls in Greek mythology. Instead Blanche is surrounded by a group of men she for the most part perceives as brutish and animalistic. When she finally finds a man that at least minimally measures up to her standards, she does everything she can to keep his attention, as seen in Scene Six: “I was obeying the law of nature. [...] The one that says the lady must entertain the gentleman—or no dice!” (SND: 175-76). Here she expresses her awareness of the socially constructed expectations a woman must meet in order to keep a man’s interest. She may even be breaking one of the main principles of feminine conduct by revealing that fact to him. Since everything around her seems to revolve around her female gender, it becomes obvious that men’s expectations subsequently become very important to her as well. She uses her sexuality in order to attract a potential male suitor; there is no doubt that she is well aware of its value and that she sees this as her most likely way of survival. The way in which she relentlessly pursues marriage reveals that she hardly has any other options

in mind. But even though it might seem as a quick fix to the problems she faces, it inevitably proves to be the opposite. Trying to ensnare a man eventually becomes one of the things that actually bring her down as her play on sexuality inevitably—for women—evokes the issue of promiscuity.

When the truth about Blanche's promiscuous past is revealed, its repercussions leave her totally destitute. This can be seen when Mitch confronts her in Scene Nine and destroys all her prior fantasies of a secure married life with him. Even though Blanche has tried her hardest to convince both him and the others of her virtuous and chaste character, her pretences nonetheless come crashing down when Mitch is made aware of her past. She can no longer hide from reality. As Mitch states: "I don't think I've ever seen you in the light" (SND: 203). She has put herself on a pedestal in order to attract his attention, implying that she is sexually pure and chaste. In Scene Six she plays on her virtue, saying to Mitch:

Honey, it wasn't the kiss I objected to. I liked the kiss very much. It was the other little—familiarity—that I felt obliged to—discourage.... I didn't resent it! Not a bit in the world. In fact, I was somewhat flattered that you—desired me! But, honey, you know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost! (SND: 176).

That her conduct is a mere matter of appearances is also shown later in the same scene: "I guess it is just that I have—old-fashioned ideals! [*She rolls her eyes, knowing he cannot see her face*]" (SND: 180). The irony of her façade of respectability is that she consequently suppresses her own desires as well. As McGlinn notes: "Blanche's attempt to maintain the image of herself as a correct and genteel lady also leads her to deny her real sexual nature" (McGlinn: 513). There is no doubt that she also feels attracted to Mitch, as she even asks him in French: "voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir?" (SND: 177), but she is determined at all costs to avoid her past mistakes of submitting to her desires. She therefore simply diverts their conversation to the subject of his mother instead. But despite her attempts to deny her primal drives and her wish to remain pure and clean in Mitch's eyes, her past catches up with her with a devastating effect. Since her present virginal deceptions break so radically with the stories of her past behavior, Mitch's cruel rejection of her comes as no surprise: "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (SND: 207). Blanche's conduct is not the only example of double morality, however; Mitch's attempt to force himself on Blanche towards the end of the play shows how deeply he, too, is affected by gender roles of his time. To him, the image Blanche has tried to uphold becomes soiled and tainted. The double impact

of Stanley's revelations and her own charades of innocence turns her immediately from a Madonna figure to the providential whore in his eyes. Regardless of Blanche's promiscuous past, however, what initially seems to pain Mitch the most is the fact that she was deceptive and untruthful:

I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it—God! That pitch about your ideals being so old-fashioned and all the malarkey that you've dished out all summer. Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you were straight (SND: 204).

This more than anything seems to play a part in his newfound resentment and hostility towards her when he finally arrives at the apartment at the beginning of Scene Nine. As she has made a "crude sport of his innocence" (Da Ponte: 267), his attitude towards Blanche has now come to resemble that of Stanley. This change in Mitch, who had appeared as the only humane and sensitive male character, confines Blanche wholly within a brutish, misogynic, masculine world for the rest of the play.

When confronted by Mitch about her past, Blanche tries her hardest to defend her reasons for her deceptions, stating: "I'll tell you what I want. Magic ! Yes, yes, magic ! I try to give that to people, I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it !" (SND: 204). As she is forced to admit to her pretences she tries to explain to Mitch that none of her lies came from malice, but from her need for some feeling of enchantment, something else than the bleak truth. But as this fails to impress Mitch, she sees no other way than admitting her promiscuity:

Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allen—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection— here and there, in the most—unlikely places—even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but—somebody wrote the superintendent about it—'This woman is morally unfit for her position !' True? Yes, I suppose—unfit somehow—anyway... So I came here. There was nowhere else I could go. I was played out. You know what played out is? My youth was suddenly gone up the water-spout, and—I met you. You said you needed somebody. Well, I needed somebody, too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle—a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in. The poor man's Paradise—is a little place.... But I guess I was asking, hoping—too much! Kiefaber, Stanley and Shaw have tied an old tin can to the tail of the kite. (SND: 205)

This speech becomes her last plea and her only hope of winning him back. In the past her need for protection led to numerous affairs with strangers, but with Mitch she has opted for the opposite strategy—the role of the virtuous gentlewoman. What she hopes to get out of

relating her tragic story to Mitch is that he will eventually have pity on her and give her the protection that she needs, but he cannot get past her lies nor his own gender conventions.

Since Blanche's pretences and deceptions prove to be her downfall, she seems to have grown more conscious of the changed world around her. She has become painfully aware of her own helplessness and vulnerability as all her past relationships after her husband have failed. She tries to explain her vision of the world to Stella in Scene Five:

People don't see you—*men* don't—don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection. And so the soft people have got to shimmer and glow—put a—paper lantern over the light... but I'm scared now—awf'ly scared. I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I—I'm fading now!
(SND: 169)

Here for the first time Blanche actually makes an effort to be honest about her situation. In her view, male expectations force women to make themselves attractive, charming, and submissive. What she tries to convey to her sister is her inescapable dilemma, where a woman needs to sleep with a man in order to be seen and feel that she actually exist. In her view and experience, men judge women only on their looks. And since women both physically and socially are the weaker sex, they are forced to seek protection; women are "soft" and men are "hard". This is something that the behavior of both Stanley and eventually Mitch, too, demonstrates to be true. Blanche had been unable to hold on to the plantation, her position as teacher, and her intimate strangers. Her quality, according to Tischler, is "pathetic softness, not tragic strength" (Tischler: 146). In my view, what she eventually ends up seeking protection from is also herself—from her own past as well as from the harshness of her present life.

Blanche seems to be constantly vacillating between playing the pure and virtuous Southern belle and succumbing to sexual desire. Even here, her battle seems never-ending: no amount of make-up, bathing or other tricks can save her from the fate sealed by her past behavior, and she seems to grow aware of that fact. Stella, unable to relate to her sister's situation, merely responds: "I don't listen to you when you are being morbid!" (SND: 169). This is also something that helps drive Blanche even further towards a breakdown, as even her sister refuses or is unable to understand and help her cope with her difficult situation.

As Blanche's sexuality is perceived as promiscuity, she does everything in her power to hide it. Stella's sexual behavior, on the other hand, gets no such label. Regardless of the

fact that Stella is married, her sensuality is given much more allowances than Blanche's—even though the former also involves violence. After the brutality in Scene Three, Stella willingly returns to her abusive husband and “they come together with low, animal moans” (SND: 154), indicating that their primal sexual attraction overrides other concerns. When Blanche returns to the apartment the next day she finds Stella in a “narcotized tranquility” (SND: 156), dazed by the previous night's activities. She makes no attempts to justify her action, but excuses her husband behavior by stating: “No, it isn't all right for anybody to make such a terrible row, but—people do sometimes. Stanley's always smashed things” (SND: 157) [...] it's his pleasure, like mine is movies and bridge. People have got to tolerate each other's habits, I guess” (SND: 158). Here she justifies his violence as a “habit” like any other. As McGlinn puts it, her “life with Stanley—sex with Stanley—is her highest value” (McGlinn: 515). The life style she leads is one she has chosen for herself, and she resents her sister's criticism of it. By refusing to see anything wrong in Stanley's behavior, Stella in a sense demonstrates that she has broken away from the role expected of her, refusing to be an old-fashioned Southern belle like her sister. Instead she opts for a life of sensual pleasure, saying: “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant” (SND: 162). As Blackwell points out, Stella in other words “subordinates herself to [Stanley's] way of life because they have a satisfying sexual relationship” (Blackwell: 245). Stella's openness about sexuality shocks the “virtuous” Blanche who—her past behavior notwithstanding—immediately takes the opposite position: “What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another... [...] It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be...” (SND: 162). This statement has of course a double meaning as she clearly alludes to her own promiscuity which brought her to her current situation. Here she may also be seen to indirectly acknowledge what she did, since the affair with the student forced her into hiding in the Quarter with her sister. Her shame surfaces as she clearly regrets her actions. The sexually charged surroundings of Stanley's and Stella's apartment leave her vulnerable, as they evoke sex as something not to be hidden, which brings back memories of her past. This shakes the foundation of Blanche's world and she even says to Stella: “Then I *tremble* for you !” (SND: 162). The openness about desire is something she finds unbearable because she has suppressed the sexual side of herself and refuses to admit it. But as her desires have brought

her to her present situation, she is once again trapped, only this time in the world of the new South.

As Blanche (at least her projected public self) represents the old South, Stanley stands as the new “heterogeneous” type of the world that Blanche has difficulties fitting into. He is direct and honest, while Blanche on the other hand is neither. While Stanley by no means seems to care about his appearance and among other things eats like a pig, Blanche constantly obsesses about her own looks. She bathes almost in every scene of the play, soothing her nerves. The bathing has strong symbolic overtones, as she tries to cleanse herself of her past sins. This can be seen in Scene Seven, when she finally emerges from the bathroom: “A hot bath and a long, cold drink always gives me a brand-new outlook on life” (SND: 192) she says to Stella. Her ritual helps create the illusion in her mind that her sordid surroundings and past are kept at bay.

Stanley nevertheless seems a constant threat to her sensibility and her identity. His violent conduct has shocked her to the point that she cannot help saying to Stella: “He acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There’s even something—sub-human—something—ape-like—about him, like on of those pictures I’ve seen in —anthropological studies!” (SND: 163). His lack of manners and disregard for other people’s feelings are partly the reason why Blanche sees him the way she does. To her he represents a brutish world she has no desire of belonging to. Stanley is acutely aware of her sense of superiority to him, and as McGlinn argues: “he wishes to destroy her composure to make her recognize that she is the same as he, a sexual animal” (McGlinn: 514). This is why her reaction is just as hostile towards him, as his is towards her. Their feud and shared hostility are what finally gives Stanley the opportunity to bring her down at the end of the play, through a combination of sex and violence.

Stanley’s and Blanche’s attitudes to sexuality constitute a striking contrast in the play. While Blanche tries to cover up her promiscuous inclinations, Stanley never camouflages his sexuality but rather flaunts it, and relishes in the power it gives him. As shown in the stage directions of Scene One, he comes off as a vigorous, gaudy, and chauvinistic man, sizing up women like pieces of meat:

Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it [...] with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. [...] He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (SND: 128).

The sexual aspect is significant in the analysis of Stanley as a character, as it seems to define his entire being. He uses it to keep Stella and ultimately to destroy Blanche at the end of the play. His smugness and confidence prove to be something Blanche cannot penetrate. Since violence and sexuality are ingrained in his character, his sexual assault on Blanche at the end of the play does not come as a surprise. The rape scene eventually is what settles the entire battle between the two and as Da Ponte states in his article: “the climactic scene, in which Stanley rapes Blanche, he recognizes the inevitability of their encounter” (Da Ponte: 267). The last of a series of harrowing experiences that serve to break Blanche down, his act of domination and humiliation pushes her into insanity and makes her retreat completely into illusion from that point on. Her famous last line: “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (SND: 225) seems perfectly appropriate, as all the people closest to her have failed and rejected her.

Williams has become known for his many explorations of gender roles of his time, but in this play he pushes the envelope even further by revealing another dimension of the equation, namely homosexuality. His introduction of this controversial topic on the stage was unthought of at this time and could have legal repercussions. That is why the presentation of this motif is careful and understated. Williams never explicitly uses the word *homosexuality*, but by the help of Blanche’s character he never has to, either. As Scene Six begins, the stage directions indicate that the scene soon to be revealed will perhaps not be to everyone’s liking. Williams here introduces the renowned vaudeville actress and sex symbol, Mae West, who was also a gay rights supporter. As Mitch enters the scene holding a plaster statue of her, Williams tries to suggest that the play might evoke some controversial subjects just as Mae West did; she was censored for her sexually charged performances, as was the topic of homosexuality too at that time. Since homosexuality was illegal and regarded as a mental illness in the 1940s and 1950s, Williams carefully chooses his words regarding the topic. Blanche’s homosexual husband is of course already dead, closeted safely in the background and never appearing on stage. Williams instead focuses the attention on Blanche and the devastating effect her husband’s suicide had on her. Even though the story she tells is about her husband, the play portrays her reactions instead: “He came to me for help. I didn’t know that. I didn’t find out anything till after our marriage when we’d run away and come back and all I knew was that I’d failed him in some mysterious way” (SND: 183). According to Ganz,

Blanche is guilty of “destroying her husband” (Ganz: 128) and in order not to incriminate herself or fully take on the blame for his death, she in some way manages to shift the focus from his sexual disorientation onto her naïve innocence. But her behavior has nevertheless not only doomed another man’s life, but also shaped her into the character that she has become. Ganz continues by arguing that “Blanche [...] is [in] an exile like the homosexual” (Ganz: 128) as she behaves like a pure gentlewoman who barely takes any responsibilities for her own actions. She even uses her husband’s sexual orientation and suicide as an excuse for her promiscuous past, as seen earlier in the confrontation with Mitch. She also blames her traumatic experiences with death for her behavior: “I—lived in a house where old women remembered their dead men...” (SND: 206), showing that the line between death and desire, to her, is paper-thin. The suicide of her husband is another consequence that haunts her and helps trigger her mental breakdown. Williams shows what devastating effects repressed sexuality can have; it both drove Blanche’s husband into taking his own life and Blanche into insanity, and, as we are about to see, Alma into isolation and promiscuity.

Summer and Smoke

The theme of gender and sexuality in this play revolves mainly around Alma and her inability to come to terms with her sexual self. As she is confined to the role of the reverend’s daughter, she naturally shies away from anything sexual and instead romanticizes her relationship with John. Rather than seeing herself as a sensual being and facing the aspect of physical lust, she spiritualizes the affinity between John and herself. The play is noticeably divided into two parts in order to accentuate the change that eventually happens to Alma. As previously discussed, she is not like any of her contemporaries. Instead of exploring the social life around her like many of her peers do, she opts to stay within her familiar personal sphere, surrounding herself with elderly, awkward book club enthusiasts because of the security it provides. It is not until she starts to establish herself as an autonomous individual in the play’s final part that she begins to explore other sides of herself. Like many of her other explorations of self, this is caused by John’s homecoming to Glorious Hill. He once again stands as a contrast to her and propels her to change. Secluded by her circumstances, Alma is in a rather vulnerable and impressionable position which, combined with her reunion with John, eventually results in her changing her ways. But it quickly becomes apparent that the

pendulum swings both ways and that Alma's behavior has a comparable influence on John as well.

As mentioned, Alma in the beginning of the play appears as an asexual being, mostly devoted to her singing and the well-being of her family. The cross she bears is not simply due to her mother's behavior but her father's as well. She knows that being a reverend's daughter has its responsibilities and that she must avoid bringing any embarrassment or shame on to the family. She uses this as an excuse for her reclusiveness as she defends herself against John in Scene One: "Being a minister's daughter I have to be more selective than most girls about the—society I keep. But I do go out now and then..." (S&S: 153). Due to her circumstances and her mother's condition, Alma feels that she has no other options but to remain in the role she is forced into and behave accordingly. Since her mother clearly has failed in fulfilling the conventional role of the minister's wife, this function falls on Alma who must therefore stand as the female representative of the family. As pointed out earlier, this forces her to act far beyond her age at the same time as she undoubtedly comes across as very inexperienced and naïve. Since sexuality is connected with sin, her conception of the nature of her relationship with John evokes a picture completely different from what John has in mind. Every time John alludes to anything sexual Alma swiftly changes the subject, as if embarrassed by the suggestion, as seen in Scene Four:

JOHN: I don't like meetings. The only meetings I like are between two people.

ALMA: Such as the between yourself and the lady outside?

JOHN: Or between you and me.

ALMA [*nervously*]: Where is the . . . ? [She refers to the sedative he has prescribed]

JOHN: Oh. You've decided to take it? (S&S: 180-1)

When the issue of sexuality becomes a personal one, she reacts with discomfort. Lacking sexual experience as well as having limited insight into her own self, Alma subsumes the physical under the spiritual, something she repeatedly tries to convey to John:

There are some women who turn a possibly beautiful thing into something no better than the coupling of beasts!—but love is what you bring to it. [...] Some people bring just their bodies. But there are some people, there are some women, John—who can bring their hearts to it, also—who can bring their souls to it! (S&S: 202)

Her pious, Christian rejection of physical love for its own sake is clearly contrasted to John's sexual innuendoes. Alma like Amanda and Blanche—feels that love in the form of lust reduces people to beasts, whereas spirituality enables it. As Signi Falk puts it, "she expresses the idea that man is continually aspiring to higher things, beyond the limits of human

existence” (Falk: 91), at the same time as her outburst establishes a contrast between herself as a lady and John’s other female acquaintances. In this manner she is able to cling to her gender role as a genteel woman of moral rectitude and purity until her personal crisis in the second act.

Despite of Alma’s inexperience, naivety and somewhat strained relation to sexuality she is not completely blind to what goes on around her, especially with John. As she is unable to live out her own life to the fullest, she vicariously lives through others and more than anyone keeps herself informed of what goes on with John and the company he keeps, as seen in Scene Two:

Yes, these people who shout his name in from of his house are of such a character that the old doctor cannot permit them to come inside the door. And when they have brought him home at night, left him sprawling on the front steps, sometime at daybreak—it takes two people, his father and the old cook, one pushing and on pulling, to get him upstairs. All the gift of the gods were showered on him.... But all he cares about is indulging his senses! (S&S: 167)

Even though she tries her best to conceal her interest in John, her mother makes it impossible. Not only does Mrs. Winemiller expose Alma in front of Nellie, she also ridicules her crush on John, mockingly shouting like a five year old: “Alma’s in love! Alma’s in love!” (S&S: 168). Although this is true, Alma is yet not ready to face her feelings about John, or at least have them out in the open. But as the play progresses, Alma inadvertently exposes her feelings through her actions. It becomes very clear that her surveillance of him is not simply due to the lack of excitement in her life, but to her own emotional involvement. This seems to be obvious to everyone but Alma herself until even Mrs. Basset points out: “Miss Alma has fallen for the young doctor!” (S&S: 177).

After the “intellectual club meeting” Alma feels ill and supposedly seeks out the old doctor Buchanan, but it turns out to be John himself. She seems not at all surprised to find Rosa in the doctor’s office and pays her no respect. She tries her best to suppress her feelings in front of John, but eventually breaks down into a “state of hysteria” (S&S: 180) as he puts it. Her nervousness and hysterical behavior seem to reside after a while when John administers the aforementioned sedative to her and devotes his entire attention to her well-being. Evoking Alma’s longings, their small intimate encounter is the closest Alma has ever been to a man. Since “desire, as manifest through talking and touching, characterizes life in Williams’ plays” (Scheick: 768), it becomes evident that John’s touch revives something within Alma, as she is even too nervous to unbutton her blouse merely for a physical check-up. After listening to her

heart, John merely diagnoses her by saying: “Miss Alma is lonesome!” (S&S: 184) which almost ends their brief intimacy. As Alma, insulted, prepares to leave she is stopped by John who admits: “You know I like you and I think you’re worth a lot of consideration” (S&S: 185). This not only advances their relationship but also ignites the change that is about to take place in Alma.

During their date in Scene Six that concludes Part One, the shielded and innocent Alma that was seen in the previous scenes evolves into a straightforward and direct Alma, defending herself against the rudeness of John Buchanan. His behavior during this encounter cannot be described as anything but despicable and it becomes apparent that the things he said in Scene Five are not in his mind at any point during this scene. He obviously treats her the same way he treats all his other female companions, forgetting that Alma, as he once himself noted, is not like anyone else. His hostile and patronizing demeanor towards her creates an unpleasant atmosphere in which Alma cannot do anything other than defend herself. His rude come-ons and snide remarks perplex Alma to the point where she lets go of her own formal, lady-like behavior:

JOHN: It’s no fun holding hands with gloves on, Miss Alma.

ALMA: That’s easily remedied. I’ll just take the gloves off (S&S: 198).

John’s disregard for her feelings could be explained by the fact that he too has immense problems of seeing her as a sexual being, even though this role is what he has been pushing her to assume all along. This becomes evident when Alma in fact removes her glove and touches him, at which point he springs up lamenting: “Christ! [*He rises abruptly and lights a cigarette.*] Rosa Gonzales is dancing in the casino” (S&S: 198). He fails to seize this opportunity for closeness; instead, his reference to his mistress reveals his ambivalence and makes his behavior both callous and insensitive.

But despite this Alma at this point does not seem all that offended by his conduct; she even allows him to kiss her. Her second kiss is quickly ruined by his question: “Is it so hard to forget you’re a preacher’s daughter?” (S&S: 201) to which her answers is rather appropriate and straight to the point: “There is no reason for me to forget that I am a minister’s daughter. A minister’s daughter’s no different from any other young girl who tries to remember that she *is* a lady” (S&S: 201). This comment serves to reveal Alma’s gradual detachment from the role of the reverend’s daughter, as she herself recognizes that it is only as limiting as one wants it to be. According to Jeanne M. McGlinn this sets Alma apart from Williams’ previous

heroines: “Alma, unlike the heroines of the early plays who reject reality, develops in the course of the play from a woman who lives in illusion of impossible aspiration and idealism into a woman who accepts reality and who actively seeks what she wants” (McGlenn: 515), namely John.

But John is unable to relate to her as a complex and whole being. Sexuality to him is merely a way of receiving pleasure. In contrast to Alma John only sees the physical satisfaction that comes with sexual interaction. He constantly refers to his anatomy chart, pointing out that the soul that Alma speaks of is nowhere to be found. His convictions are so strong that he at times patronizes Alma and speaks to her as if she was Nellie, the teenage girl he lends the book of nature to. This can be seen when he, like Stella from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, points out to Alma: “There’s other things between a man and a woman besides respect. Did you know that, Miss Alma? [...] There’s such a thing as intimate relations” (S&S: 201). Despite his obvious discomfort with her emerging sexuality, he paradoxically tries to push her even further and goes as far as to suggest that they get a room upstairs—maybe because he knows she will reject such a blatant invitation. Not surprisingly Alma becomes deeply offended and her entire posture changes: “I’d heard that you made suggestions like that to girls that you go out with, but I refused to believe such stories were true. What made you think I might be amenable to such a suggestion?” (S&S: 203). To this John responds by bringing up the night at the doctor’s office, indicating that she came over to see him personally and not for medical reasons, something that forces Alma to slip right back into her hysteria as she is not ready to face her own sexuality: “*You’re not a gentleman! You’re not a gentleman!*” (S&S: 204).

Despite John’s ambivalent attitude to Alma’s sexuality, she herself is divided with regard to this change in herself. Nonetheless he continues to badger her about sexuality, even upon his father’s deathbed in Scene Eight. It is here that he forces the anatomy chart on Alma:

Now listen here to the anatomy lecture! This upper story’s the brain which is hungry for something called truth and doesn’t get much but keeps on feeling hungry! This middle’s the belly which is hungry for food. This part down here is the sex which is hungry for love because it is sometimes lonesome. I’ve fed all three, as much of all the three as I could or as much as I wanted—You’ve fed none—nothing. (S&S: 221)

Thus he tries to intimidate Alma or force some sort of reaction from her, and it is from this point on that we sense a real change in her as she fires back: “So that is your high conception of human desires. What you have here is not the anatomy of a beast, but a man. And I—I

reject your opinion of where love is, and the kind of truth you believe the brain to be seeking!—There is something not shown on the chart” (S&S: 221). Here she not only takes a stand for what she believes in, but also feel comfortable enough to link sexuality directly to love and soul: “Somewhere, not seen [...] is *that* that I loved you with—that! Not what you mention!—Yes, did love you with, John, did nearly *die* of when you hurt me! (S&S: 222). The open discussion of sexuality combined with emotions finally stops John’s attacks on her and for the first time in the play he comes off as humble. After this encounter both of them change radically.

The consequences of their confrontation can be seen after John’s departure from Glorious Hill. According to Signi Falk, this is the point when they “exchange character positions” (Falk: 92). The ceaseless battle Alma has had with John has drained her to the point where she barely functions. She has become disconnected from the world and finds it hard to function among people. Her singing and her intellectual meetings have ceased and she keeps mainly to herself, saying to her father: “Tell them I’ve changed and you’re waiting to see in what way” (S&S: 225). While Scene Eight has devastating effects on Alma, to John it seems to have been the wake-up call he needed to get his life back on track from being, in Esther Merle Jackson’s words, “a failure as a doctor, as a son, and as a human being” (Jackson: 139). In contrast to Alma, he has in fact flourished; finishing his father’s work and returning to Glorious Hill as a hero. As the stage directions indicate, he has “*new-found responsibilities*” (S&S: 227). His change of character is reflected in the fact that he manages to avoid trouble by turning down Nellie’s persistent come-on’s at the end of Scene Nine.

A month after John’s return, Alma finally steps out of the house and is met by Nellie who happily informs her of the exciting life she has attained by entering the boarding school. She goes as far as to compare herself to Alma, stating: “I’m learning to talk like you” (S&S: 233). As the scene progresses it becomes painfully clear that Nellie has somehow managed to take over Alma’s role. To everyone but Alma, it becomes obvious that Nellie also has fulfilled her role in John’s life as well. There is a sense in the play of a disaster waiting to happen, which becomes acute when Alma once again seeks out John in the doctor’s office. This meeting seems to force them into reverse roles as they both have gone through a substantial change in life. Alma has, it seems, finally become the person John seemingly wanted her to be in the beginning. She, however, now meets a completely converted John, who has assumed the higher moral ground that she once occupied. This baffles Alma to the degree that she even

throws herself at him in the hope of rekindling their relationship: “One time I said ‘no’ to something. [...] But now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said ‘no’, she doesn’t exist any more, she died last summer—suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her” (S&S: 243). But ironically John has also changed and tries to explain the situation as best he can: “I’ve come around to your way of thinking, that something else is in there, an immaterial something—as thin as smoke [...] Can’t you believe that I am sincere about it?” (S&S: 244). Evoking the play’s title, this double reference to smoke shows just how drastically life can change in the course of a summer. As Gross argues, “the ‘smoke’ of the title that asphyxiates Alma after her crisis seems not to leave a corpse behind, but a smoke-like creature of mysteriousness and flux” (Gross: 98). In Thomas Adler’s opinion, John has discovered that Alma can only be “a rarefied angel of mercy to him, a source of maternal tenderness like a ‘stone Pieta’, but never his wife” (Adler: 118). But considering John’s previous behavior, Alma naturally has reasons to doubt his new sincerity and slightly offended lays all her cards on the table:

You needn’t try to comfort me. I haven’t come here on any but equal terms. You said, let’s talk truthfully. Well, let’s do! Unsparingly, truthfully, even shamelessly, then! It’s no longer a secret that I love you. It never was. I loved you as long ago as the time I asked you to read the stone angel’s name with your finger. Yes, I remember the long afternoons of our childhood, when I had to stay indoors to practice my music—and hear your playmates calling you “Johnny, Johnny!” How it went through me, just to hear your name called! And how I—rushed to the window to watch you jump the porch railing! I stood at a distance, halfway down the block, only to keep in sight of your torn red sweater, racing about the vacant lot you played in. Yes it had begun that early, this affection of love, and has never let go of me since, but kept growing. I’ve lived next door to you all the days of my life, a weak and divided person who stood in adoring awe of your singleness, of your strength. And that is my story! Now I wish *you* would tell me—why didn’t it happen between us? Why did I fail? Why did you come almost close enough—and no closer? (S&S: 245)

Although she needs answers, what she in reality wants from him is to give them another chance. Since he is the only man she feels she has no “desert between”, she needs him not only to fulfill her desires but also to function as her guide through life, as he is the only person in her life challenging her to change and develop. But when he kindly declines the offer, she laments: “The tables have turned with a vengeance” (S&S: 247), finally facing defeat.

In this play there is also a hint of homosexuality as Williams for the first time in his plays introduces a female crush on another woman, as the character of Nellie blatantly admits to Alma in Scene Two: “Did you know that I used to have a crush on *you*, Miss Alma?”

(S&S: 164). This shows how preoccupied the author was with sexuality, but he eventually downplays the matter by portraying Nellie as a sexually confused character, giving her space to elaborate on her curiosity as she explains to Alma:

Those were the days when I had crushes on girls. Those days are over, and now I have crushes on boys. Oh, Miss Alma, you know about Mother, how I was brought up so nobody nice except you would have anything to do with us—Mother meeting the trains to pick up the traveling salesmen and bringing them home to drinking and play poker—all of them acting like pigs, pigs, pigs! [...] I thought I'd always hate men. Loath and despise them. But last night—Oh! (S&S: 165).

Here Williams not only shows Nellie's confusion, but also her mother's promiscuity, which helps downplay the issue of homosexuality on the audience. Portraying Nellie as a young, sexually confused character helps make same-sex inclinations easier to accept than Blanche's homosexual husband. Nellie being an impressionable teenage girl seeking information about sexuality as early as in the First Scene of the play shows her to be completely different from Alma, who not until later in life starts to explore hers. Sexuality seems to be something Nellie is quite comfortable with, which eventually proves to be the decisive factor for John, as Falk explains: "the play closes on an improbable and grotesque note as John marries Nellie, the girl who does not need an anatomy lesson" (Falk: 93), leaving Alma behind.

What ironically happens at the end of the play is rather a strange reversal of roles as Alma somehow almost turns into Nellie's mother as she is approached by a traveling salesman. This is an insistently open ending, leaving the audience in suspense about what actually might happen. The play seems to raise the question of whether Alma has completely lost her moral ground, something both her monologue and stage directions indicate. As according to Falk she "has rejected the purity and refinement which kept John at a distance; flesh being stronger than the spirit, she seems to have been completely converted by the anatomy lecture" (Falk: 94). When she salutes her trusted angel good-bye, Alma exits the play on a grave note as if she is waving good-bye to her past and saying hello to her promiscuous future. The last of the stage directions is: "*she turns slowly about toward the audience with her hand still raised in a gesture of wonder and finality as... the curtain falls*" (S&S: 256) indicate that there will be no turning back for Alma as "she has lost her extreme propriety" (McGlenn: 516). She is now able to face reality without the secure world of illusion that the two previous heroines—Laura and Blanche—felt compelled to enter.

The Destructive Power of Gender and Sexuality

As mentioned in the introduction there is an important distinction to be drawn between ‘sex’ and ‘gender’, between biologically and socially determined aspects. Gender as a cultural construction is central in all three plays, as all the characters fall into ascribed roles and are portrayed as victims of the social conventions of their time. To be forced to comply with social norms had an enormous significance both for the playwright and subsequently for his characters, which in turn brings up the “theme of punishment” that Williams, according to Arthur Ganz, developed. As mentioned earlier, since Williams portrays all his characters as being condemned in one way or another it could be possible to link this to his own sense of being rejected at some point in his own life.

As we look into our three plays, what becomes evident is that all the female protagonists’ pasts as Southern belles prevent them from functioning normally in the present; their conception of social conduct originates from a time long gone. This not only impedes them from becoming part of the present, it also disables them from becoming sexual beings without being condemned either by themselves or by others, or both. Due to the social conventions of the time, sexuality becomes a menacing factor with the power to destroy the lives of the characters. Blanche’s life is destroyed and Alma’s life is seriously impaired due to their inability to integrate their sexuality with their ascribed gender role. Thus they are damned if they do and damned if they don’t. In some instances sexual condemnation even transcends gender lines as some of the male characters also seem to be censured for their sexual interest or behavior as for instance Tom is in *The Glass Menagerie* and Alan in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In Tom’s case we see his mother’s controlling behavior turn into hysterics as she discovers some of his books which she characterizes as ‘filth’. To Amanda sexuality and promiscuity are one and the same for most of the play, which by any cost must be avoided.

But as Tischler points out in the introduction, there is a duality in Williams’ dramaturgy that can also be seen in his treatment of sexuality. Despite the fact that many of his characters are either reprimanded or condemned for their sexual behavior, Stanley and Stella freely engage in it and are seemingly unpunished for their behavior. Their obsession with desire proves, however, to have a devastating impact on characters surrounding them, particularly in Blanche’s case. The consequences that arise from Stella’s erotic dependency on

Stanley and believing her husband over her sister show the destructive power of sexuality in the play.

What Williams initially tries to convey with his plays is the human's desire to belong, as Jones points out: "the quest for love, for belonging, for the ability to give love to and accept love from another might be said to be the major theme in [Williams'] dramatic works [...] The fact that love is rarely achieved in them gives to Williams' plays their pathetic and often tragic overtones because the loneliness that results from being unloved makes his characters the prey for psychological and physical desire which almost inexorably leads to their own destruction" (Jones: 546-7). Many of his characters end up lonely, destitute or mad as a result of failing to fulfill their need for belonging. Failing to find human closeness except in physical encounters, his women protagonists in particular fall prey to dejection and despair.

Conclusion:

The Past is to Blame

“the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don’t plan for it”
- Amanda, *The Glass Menagerie*

My analysis of *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke* has mainly focused on the themes concerning the past, illusion versus reality and the issue of sexuality. It becomes evident that the three themes are interconnected and intertwined. The protagonists’ problems with facing reality and accepting their sexuality are all connected to and spring out from the past. Particularly the women in the world of Tennessee Williams’ drama seem conditioned by the past conventions of the Southern culture. When we examine the plays, it almost seems as if the three female heroines are “the same person, [only] at different stages of life” (Jones: 212).

The weight of the past upon the present stands as one of the main issues in Williams’ theater. The heroines of my three play all struggle with accepting the past and letting go of it. According to Da Ponte, Williams “attack[s] those disruptive forces in modern life that have shattered traditional values and have rendered obsolete the older civilized refinements” (Da Ponte: 268). On the other hand, it is in my view important to note that Williams’ depicts certain of these “older civilized refinements”, particularly as they pertain to gender roles, as inherently repressive. Williams shows the destructive power of the past since many of his characters cling to illusions of their former life rather than facing the truth about the present. One of the central points of my analysis has been that their reluctance to come to terms with their own past forms and shapes their conduct in the present—a behavior that has such a devastating impact on people around them. A prominent example of this is unquestionably Amanda from *The Glass Menagerie*. Her preoccupation with the past not only limits her own life in the present, but the lives of her children as well. Amanda’s idealization of the past has gone so far that it causes her to be almost completely out of touch with the outside world and makes her use her children as crutches in order to remain, however remotely, a part of society. The result is that Tom ultimately leaves and Laura ends up among her glass figurines.

Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* also struggles with her past in very similar ways. Her past as a Southern belle compromises her efforts to become a part of society as she is unable to detach herself from Belle Reve and the privileges and conventions it represented. Alma from *Summer and Smoke*, on the other hand, is not as limited by her own past as she is limited by the pasts of the people around her. In contrast to the two previous heroines, Alma's predicaments as a social cripple is more due to the expectations of others.

My discussion in Chapter Two, "The Conflict between Illusion and Reality", shows how the main characters' struggles with the past force them into a struggle with reality as well. Their need for illusion forces them to create a world that they can handle instead of facing the truth which will expose their dire situation. Illusion then becomes a coping mechanism when the impact of the present world becomes too menacing. As we look more deeply into the plays, it becomes evident that most of the illusions the women struggle with are in some way connected with the need of attaining a man and thus a sense of social and financial security. In my view, the most typical character in this respect is Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. As most of her illusions are followed up with an additional new lie, she seems increasingly unable to keep in touch with reality. This masquerade eventually becomes so overpowering that she loses track of her own lies. When Blanche first arrives at the French Quarter she already has lies in stock. She lies about her job, her drinking and her financial situation. When she begins her romantic affair with Mitch she lies about her age, but most importantly her virtuousness. When her genteel purity is exposed as a lie she unsurprisingly creates a new one by introducing the myth of another man, Shep Huntleigh, which Stanley shatters at the end of the play. Her long battle with illusion culminates in her breakdown and escape into madness. Like Blanche, Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* falls into her own secluded place in order to escape her mother's obsession about attaining a gentleman caller. What becomes evident in most of these plays is that due to the social conventions of the time the women in question seem unable to adapt to the coarser conditions of the present.

In the third and final chapter of my thesis I have explored the difficulties connected with gender and sexuality. The main focus here as in the two previous chapters is on how the gender conventions of the past of the characters have affected their behavior in the present. The characters most relevant in this connection are Alma from *Summer and Smoke* and Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Alma undoubtedly stands as the woman that struggles the hardest to come to terms with her sexuality. Her age and inexperience aside, she

also comes up against another hindrance, namely the social conventions and norms of her time. Having a background as a reverend's daughter, her venture into a world outside the virtuous four walls of the Winemiller house naturally proves difficult. Unable to express herself without any scrutiny from the town and the constant pressure from John, she finds it near impossible to incorporate sexuality into her prescribed role. Failing to meet everyone's expectations of her, she resigns and walks, as it were, into the promiscuous world of Blanche. When it comes to Blanche, the issues at hand seem quite similar to the ones Alma faces. Being from a once prominent plantation and a teacher to boot, Blanche stands as a beacon of morality, so to speak. Due to her attempts at maintaining the mask she creates in order to cover up her diminished moral reputation, she, like Alma, is caught in a lose-lose situation.

The main objective of my thesis has been to explore how Williams creates and shapes his characters. During this time I have come to realize that Williams is quite ethical in his portrayal of characters. As pointed out in the beginning of Chapter Three, he creates characters that he can judge, and when asked by Studs Terkel, Williams candidly admits:

I am a moralist, yes. [...] I want to discover all that is evil and all that is good. I hope that I have a chance to, I hope that the public will bear with me while I continue the exploration. I'm not a very good writer, but I seem to be a man who has this obsession to explore good and evil. (Terkel: 91)

Although one might disagree with him with regard to his qualities as a writer, there should be no doubt that Williams' depiction of life is complex, many-sided, and ambiguous. That is why— in my opinion— his work is still relevant to this day.

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