

Women as Victims in Tennessee Williams' First Three Major Plays

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## Introduction

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is one of the most highly recognized and prolific American dramatists of the twentieth century. Critics such as Roger Boxill, Lyle Leverich, and Donald Spoto maintain that Williams presents cases for the alienated, the dysfunctional, and other outcasts of society, and that his genius sparks concern for their suffering, which may account for his plays' enduring popularity. Williams' first three major plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Summer and Smoke* (1948); present the plight of sensitive, helpless women who are victims in Southern patriarchal society, either degraded or destroyed in their search for identity and security. Through these three plays, Williams makes a critical plea for society to address the predicament of marginalized women in a cruel and insensitive world.

*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Summer and Smoke* represent clearer cut examples of marginalized women than most of his other plays. Williams grows progressively more cynical in his later plays dating from the middle of the century, perhaps due to his becoming more deeply involved with alcohol and drugs in order to cope with his unresolved life issues. Some critics suggest that Williams' leaning toward greater violence relates to his unresolved anger toward his parents for allowing his sister Rose to undergo a Rose's bilateral prefrontal lobotomy in 1943 which left her devoid of her former personality. After this family tragedy, Williams took bitter steps to free himself from the ambivalent ties of home (Tischler 55). Not until 1958 was he able to poeticize this operation in *Suddenly Last Summer* (Da Ponte 266). In addition, many of Williams' later plays are laden with topics of drug

addiction, prostitution, incest, alcoholism, venereal disease, death, and racism—all of which obscure the theme of women as victims in patriarchal society.

Feminist studies contend that patriarchal societies have marginalized women for centuries and that literature provides an excellent means of exposing this situation. These studies have also brought to light various issues concerning the marginalization of women, especially during the last century. Some of the specialized feminist approaches to studying literature are socio-historical feminism, which examines literature as it represents women and culture; Marxist feminism, which studies female economic oppression; psychoanalytical feminism, which uncovers the unconscious and the repression of women's thoughts; post-colonial feminism, which relates to the psych-political "other"; and the linguistic approach that discerns gender differences displayed through the use of language. Other feminist theories are lesbian or queer, African American, Third World, and also "Gynecic criticism" led by Elaine Showalter who exposes the double standards applied to women's writing. In spite of the different emphases, feminist literary critics of all schools share several priorities: first, that we, as a society, need to expose and eradicate injustice toward women; second, that we need to redefine history and free it from androcentric biases; third, that literary critics need to re-evaluate literature that tends to be too subjective or prejudiced; and fourth, that education should promote a greater understanding of society's marginalization of women and fulfill the ultimate goal of feminism: to end patriarchy and to change the world by promoting equality toward women (Culler 102-08 and Eagleton 182-95).

One valid approach in feminist literary criticism is to study a work in order to determine how it either perpetuates or condemns the oppression of women. Another effective approach is to analyze a work in order to clearly determine how a particular society perceives women's roles as

they relate to issues of gender. A third analytical approach is to understand the social milieu of the writer and his/her perspective toward women (Moi 42-4). All of these approaches are applicable to the study of Williams' first three major plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Summer and Smoke*. Williams dramatizes the plight of women by indirectly making his audience aware of female victimization through these means.

Williams provides the social milieu of the South with its "tragic history," and skillfully intertwines circumstance with setting for the "lonely, trapped, and desperate characters" who appear in his plays (Rasky 58). According to Kenneth Holditch and Richard Freeman Leavitt, William Faulkner and Tennessee Williams are the two American writers who have never denied their southern heritage. They state: "no writer of the twentieth century more than Williams, has been as markedly southern in his choice of settings, characters, plots, and themes" (x). Williams' writing clearly exhibits a strong Southern influence derived from his formative years spent with his maternal grandparents in Mississippi and his many later years residing in New Orleans and Key West. Even though Williams opposed the ultra-conservative mindset of the South, he wrote more out of a nostalgic "regret for a South that no longer exists, and of the forces that have destroyed it" (qtd. in Londré 34). Peggy Prenshaw observes that Blanche, Alma, and even Laura, represent the last of the Southern ladies, who are "Romantic idealists undone by a graceless and callous age... moth-like, sensitive and fragile in a way that is ultimately self-destructive" (26).

The aspect of feminist literary criticism that pertains to defining women's roles in a particular society aptly applies to Williams' plays. In fact, critics such as Adler and Prenshaw maintain that the South represents a microcosm of patriarchal society. Williams' heroines are victims of a double standard observed in the society which allowed men to be degenerate but did not allow women to think about, much less enjoy, sex (Cash 3). A woman was "the pure pedestal

goddess worshipped from afar by the impure and animalistic man whose savior she was supposed to be” (Jones 213). In the South, people believed that their moral superiority ultimately depended on the sexual purity of women (Hovis 183).

Williams captures the essence of the quintessential South in its elegance, refined beauty, and romanticism. Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* yearns for the grace and elegance of this nostalgic past that is etched in her memory, a world she mythically transforms to a grander and more idyllic place, far beyond the reaches of reality. Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* embarks on a fresh start in New Orleans, but she appears out of setting and place because her Southern romantic ideals are diametrically opposed to the brave new world of crass realism that Stanley Kowalski represents. Alma Winemiller in *Summer and Smoke* is also a prisoner of her Southern heritage, and her mythical dream of an ideal relationship painfully separates her from the less appealing real world of John Buchanan (Holditch and Leavitt ix-xiii). When Williams shows how Stella Kowalski is also a victim, he is stating that America is no less chauvinistic in modern society than it was in the antebellum South, and women are still powerless and subordinate to men. Williams confronts modern society directly with the problem of female victimization, because in spite of the fact that we have made considerable progress over the last century, women still remain subordinate to men. Much of Williams’ beliefs about marginalized women are rooted in his own life story.

Williams was born on March 11, 1911, and bore his paternal grandfather’s name, Thomas Lanier Williams III. In 1939, he chose to change his name to Tennessee Williams in deference to his Tennessee heritage and Southern accent (Leverich 274). The Williams family ancestors, known as cavalier frontiersmen during pioneer days, were French Huguenots who settled in eastern Tennessee. Williams’ father, Cornelius Coffin, lost his mother to tuberculosis at the age

of five and was raised by relatives. He later served in the Spanish-American war (Spoto 4-8). Williams' maternal background was that of Southern gentility and decorum dating back to a prominent New England family (14). Williams' maternal grandfather, a distinguished but restless man, was a Quaker, a teacher, and an Episcopal minister. His maternal grandmother, whom Williams affectionately called "Grand," had German Catholic roots, and was a pious, kind, and loyal gentlewoman. His mother, Edwina Dakin, was an only child, raised with the tradition of a "deeply ingrained religious, Puritanical consciousness" (Holditch and Leavitt 9), which Williams reflects in most of his writing. The most negative facet of this conviction is a "strong Calvinistic bent or a 'Christ-haunted mentality' that has long marked the southern psyche and southern literature" (9). Williams demonstrated these Puritanical tendencies in a clear way, albeit not in an overtly religion fashion. Thus, the term "Puritanical" used in this thesis hereto forth refers to the *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* definition: "characterized by a rigid morality" (949).

Williams' parents were a mismatched couple (Williams describes himself as having Puritan-cavalier bloodlines) and they openly displayed a great deal of marital discord to the children. Rose Isabel was born in 1909; Thomas Lanier was born in 1911; and Walter Dakin, Cornelius' favorite child, was born in 1919 (Leverich 35-37, 51). The open hostility between the mother and father, as well as the abuse and insensitivity toward the two older children by their father, caused them permanent psychological damage, especially Rose. Gulshan Kataria describes her as "battle-scarred ... a fragile and sensitive girl incapable of coping with the stress and strain around her" (4). Williams, on the other hand, was able to channel his psychic pain into writing at an early age. According to his mother, he used his typewriter as a creative vehicle to stave off madness (Williams and Freeman 14). His creative genius includes twenty-five full-length plays, more than forty short plays, a dozen screenplays and an opera libretto, as well as

two novels, sixty-three short stories, a hundred poems, an autobiography, a published volume of letters, and miscellaneous entries in newspapers and journals (Kataria 1).

Williams was extremely close to Rose, and her tragic mental illness loomed heavily over him and Edwina. Most biographers and critics concur that her delicate beauty finds some expression in almost all of Williams' writing and that she represents "the moth figure crushed by a brute world" (Tischler 55). More than any other family member, she bore the scars of an abusive and alcoholic father. She loved her mother dearly and suffered every time her father abused Edwina. Dakin recounts how his father physically abused Edwina and threatened her life. Once he slapped Rose so hard she wouldn't speak to him for days afterward. He also made several inappropriate sexual gestures to Rose that made her extremely uncomfortable (Williams and Mead 35-6).

According to R. Emerson Dobash and Russell Dobash, physical violence against women is not only a means to control and oppress them, but it is also "one of the most brutal and explicit demonstrations of patriarchal domination" (ix). In a patriarchal society women learn to suffer a father's or husband's abuse silently and to blame themselves for his violence against them (1). Because wives are financially dependent on men to provide for them and their children, they allow the abuse to continue. Edwina speaks about her abuse from Cornelius which made her father weep and her mother feel desperate: "I had to write of my husband's brutality or I could not have endured it" (Williams and Freeman 59). It wasn't until Edwina gained financial independence in 1944, when Williams generously granted her half his royalties (\$1000 a week) from *The Glass Menagerie*, that she divorced her husband (Presley xi).

Many of Tennessee Williams' characters reveal traits reminiscent of people he knew (Tischler 96-100). His mother married a macho man (similar in many ways to the rough,

aggressive, and heavy-drinking Stanley Kowalski) whom Williams hated throughout his life. Cornelius was abusive toward Williams whom he ridiculed for being a “sissy” and for choosing books over sports. (Leverich 83). Although most biographers indicate the parallel between Williams’ mother and Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, Edwina failed to see their resemblance. Interestingly, she reports that the only thing they have in common is their “love of jonquils” (Williams and Mead 123). Denial is often a defining characteristic of an enabler in alcoholic families, and co-dependents become addicted to the need for control and bear the joyless burden of it (Debusscher 6). Besides Edwina and Amanda being overly possessive and solicitous, they also try very hard to cling to outdated southern customs and pass them on to their children.

Williams, as one of life’s walking wounded, had unresolved emotional issues of hatred toward his father’s abuse, resentment toward his mother’s overbearing demeanor, sorrow for the slippage of his sister’s mental health, confusion over sexuality, anger toward his male peers, and alienation from the rest of society due to his extreme shyness. Williams frequently felt betrayed and isolated, and this helped him empathize with the most visibly marginalized segment of American society: women. Although Williams does not openly champion the rights of women in his plays, he presents strong cases against their social alienation in a harsh and brutal world governed by men. Williams’ emotional leanings toward his feminine side of sensitivity and intuition enable him to see life through women’s eyes with greater appreciation than many of his male counterparts. Williams had close relationships with many women throughout his life: his sister, mother, grandmother, and agent, Audrey Wood, plus various actresses and friends. He loved and respected women, studied their personalities, captured their language and gestures, and knew that women lived in a changing world that required them to appear younger, prettier, more

innocent, and less savvy than they actually were in order to succeed. He saw them working through the strategies of the weak and the excluded, or the marginalized “Other.” Williams identified with women, and loved and admired them for their courage and their integrity (Nelson 28-30).

As a teenager, Williams was attracted to the opposite sex. He had a high school sweetheart in St. Louis, Hazel Kramer, whom he deeply loved. She permitted him to kiss her on the lips twice a year; once at Christmas and once on her birthday. For some reason, his parents disapproved of her, and Cornelius saw fit to end the relationship by sending Williams to college far away from where she planned to attend. After their break-up, Williams prophetically wrote a short story, “The Field of Blue Children,” which would haunt much of his later work. In it, two individuals search for something in the world which does not, nor can ever exist for them, but they still search for what they cannot attain through sexual experience (Leavitt 15). Williams studied journalism at the University of Missouri for three years, but after he failed ROTC in 1932, his father forced him to withdraw and work as a clerk/typist at the International Shoe Company. Williams hated his time there and called it a “season in hell,” but it helped him to become a spokesman for repressed individuals in his writing (qtd. in Hayman 33). In 1935, after learning that Hazel Kramer had married another man, he suffered a nervous breakdown which left him hospitalized for ten days. In the fall of 1937, his grandmother paid his tuition to finish college at the University of Iowa. While studying playwriting there, he became physically involved with a voluptuous female classmate. Also during this time, several of his fraternity roommates made sexual passes at him, and this confused him sexually. In 1938, his parents had Rose confined to a mental institution which left him deeply depressed, although he did graduate the same year with a B.A. It wasn’t until he went to New Orleans in 1939 that he first “came out”

and no longer desired sexual intimacy with females (Williams 18-50). He said of discovering his true nature: “And the shock of it against the Puritanism of my nature has given me a subject, a theme, which I have never ceased exploiting” (qtd. in Tischler 61). In 1940, he went to New York to study playwriting with John Gassner and soon after began his career as a playwright. By 1944, he gained fame with *The Glass Menagerie*; and again in 1947, with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. From that point onward, a new Williams play appeared on Broadway every two years: *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) (Boxill 14).

In spite of Williams’ decision to self-identify as a homosexual while in his thirties, he refers to homosexuality directly in only three of his plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*. It is interesting that the characters, Allan Grey, Skipper, and Sebastian Venable all suffer violent deaths before the action of the plays begin, perhaps as retribution for their sin of homosexuality (Auchincloss 409). Indisputably, each of the protagonists, Blanche Dubois, Maggie Pollitt, and Catharine Holly psychologically feel the homosexual characters’ presence throughout the plays. Michael Paller states that “Williams’ attitude toward sex and homosexuality varied almost as much as his address. . . sex for him was a game, a role, a play, in which he portrayed a fictional character, reserving the truth of himself for himself ” (12-13). He was never fully able to come to terms with the psychic conflict between the lure and the subsequent repulsion of sex. His sexual emancipation conflicted with his inhibitions and he frequently felt empty and lonely afterward: “He sought out sex, usually with success, but it left him unsatisfied” (13). He fell in love with the Canadian dancer, Kip Kiernan, who jilted him, and from that point when he was so deeply hurt, he chose to remain emotionally

detached from his partners. Several men sought monogamous relations with him, such as Pancho Rodriguez, Salvatore, and Frank Merlo (Kataria 11).

As mentioned earlier, many of Williams' plays are autobiographical, and his later plays, *Vieux Carré* (1977), and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), are wistful summaries of his life in New Orleans and Provincetown. *Kirche, Kutchen und Kinder* (1980) is a spoof on himself remembering his past (Boxill 19). Critics such as Adler, Paller, and Hooper maintain that Williams shares autobiographical details of his homosexuality through Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*. In fact, Paller maintains that when Tom argues with his mother that he "goes to the movies for ...adventure" (4.421), these words represent a veiled reference to homosexuality:

Williams knew quite well why so many men went to the movie houses that lined 42<sup>nd</sup> Street in New York, and in Hollywood. He also knew how men looked for adventure in the French Quarter, in Provincetown, in Mexico, on the Pacific Pallisades, even on darkened buses en route to Santa Monica. Tom, like Tennessee likes lots of adventure. (45)

Additionally, when Williams produces a rainbow-colored scarf that he obtained from Malvolio, the magician at a magic show, he is possibly alluding to the gay meaning of "rainbow," as sexual diversity and freedom (44). Critics maintain, that in spite of trying to present sex as liberating in his plays, Williams reaches impasses in almost every instance, and that his work is ridden with undertones of sex being impure and sinful (Bauer-Briski 11, Rouse 5).

Conjecture among Williams' biographers suggests that Edwina's attitude toward sex has contributed to Williams' confusion about sex, and that so much of Edwina is personified in Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* in her denial of sexuality (Leverich 61). Amanda makes it

abundantly clear to her children that in her day, couples did not go to places like Paradise Dance Hall (located across the alley from their St. Louis apartment) to move sensuously to dance rhythms and kiss in dark alleys. She lectures them about the fact that her suitors at Blue Mountain were “gentlemen,” interested in being entertained with conversation only (1.403). This indicates that physical displays of affection were improper because women could hold a man’s interest with conversation on a variety of subjects. Amanda also informs Tom that following one’s “instincts” is a bad word in her household and fit only for barnyard animals, and she chides him to pursue nobler things of the “mind and spirit” (4.421). Unlike Blanche, who makes a similar statement to Stella about animal desire in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Amanda lives the message she preaches. She has not known a man since her husband “skipped the light fantastic” some sixteen years earlier (1.401). She tries to protect Tom’s mind from animalistic input, and refers to that “horrible novel” and that “hideous book” by the “insane Mr. Lawrence” (3.412). Similarly, both Williams and his brother, Dakin, discuss Edwina’s lack of interest in sex. Williams recounts that often he heard screams coming from their parents’ bedroom as if Edwina were being raped. Perhaps his mother felt sexually repulsed by Cornelius whom she knew was having sex with other women, especially when he contracted gonorrhea from a prostitute (Spoto 19). In time, she was able to reject Cornelius entirely by insisting on separate bedrooms, because as Dakin claims, his mother was the “president of the anti-sex league” (Williams and Mead 56). Some critics speculate that Edwina’s fastidiousness toward sex influenced both of her sons to a slower sexual maturation. Tennessee said he was a virgin until age twenty-seven, and Dakin remained a virgin until he married in his thirties (Leverich 61). Rose, on the other hand, was more sexually precocious, but her family did not allow her to act on her instincts. When she once offered herself to a young man, Williams berated her forwardness, saying: “Rose, I heard you

offer yourself to Colin and I want you to know you disgusted me” (Williams and Mead 37). Blanche repeats this expression as her last lethal words to Allan Grey in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Females in Williams’ first three major plays also exhibit significant problems related to their sexuality. Amanda, who obviously had sexual relations in her past, completely denies its existence to her children in the present. Williams depicts Laura as an asexual being who is too needy and probably incapable of maintaining a relationship. Blanche uses sex to anaesthetize the pain of dealing with her relatives’ deaths and her young husband’s suicide. Stella is addicted to sex which she uses to anaesthetize the painful reality of being married to an insensitive, uncultured, and abusive husband; and Alma spends most of her youth as a repressed virgin who denies sexuality by emphasizing her spiritual nature. These women are all female victims in a society that expresses unrealistic views concerning ideal Southern womanhood. Critics who study Williams’ plays as sexual dramas claim that the Southern gentlewoman and the natural woman represent the spirit and the flesh respectively (McGlenn 510). Williams might be stating that the unrealistic code of women’s sexuality in the South was stronger, lasted longer, and caused more pain to the victims of this particular male patriarchal society (Adler 353).

Although some literary scholars shy away from Tennessee Williams’ plays (probably due to their lucrative success in theatre and film), many have ventured forth, and names such as Jacob H. Adler, Harold Bloom, Greta Heintzelman, Kenneth W. Holditch, Philip C. Kolin, Richard F. Leavitt, Brenda Murphy, and Nancy Tischler are prominent contributors to Williams scholarship. Harold Bloom praises Williams’ writing for its lyricism and maintains that Williams is the most literary of our major American dramatists. Other critics trace a link between Williams and D. H. Lawrence in whose work sex is attached to cosmic significance, and is life-affirming,

redemptive, and emotionally transporting. Ingrid Rogers and Thomas P. Adler argue that Williams' preoccupation with sex and violence is a form of perversion and godlessness. Some of the earlier criticism also focuses on female gentility and romantic idealism that contrast with a society built on masculine ideals of strength and power. More recent critics such as Michael Bibler and Kevin Ohr emphasize the raw sexuality, the grotesque, and the sensationalism that characterize Williams' later plays. Critics and biographers consistently agree that much of Williams' life experience is useful in analyzing his plays, and that although he presents the truth of both good and bad in people, his affinity lies with the displaced and isolated (Kataria 54).

The edition chosen for this thesis is the first of two volumes of the Library of America collection: *Tennessee Williams: Plays 1937-1955*. This edition includes a chronology of Williams' life, explanatory notes (including cast lists of many of the original productions), and an essay on the texts. This volume is edited by noted drama critics Mel Gussow and Kenneth Holdich.

Nancy Tischler conveys that much of *The Glass Menagerie's* success is attributed to Williams' skill of combining poetic and unrealistic stage techniques to create a gossamer effect of compassion, fragility, and frustration (15). Judith Thompson argues that the absent father creates a world "devoid of transcendent goals" in which man finds himself alienated and alone, faced with the "loss of all heroes, the death of all gods, and the disillusionment of all hope" (20, 22). Delma Presley maintains that the Wingfields are "both victims and representatives of a dark chapter in the history of America" (73), and C.W.E. Bigsby describes the play as a modern American tragedy (81), similar to Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

Scholars have offered a variety of thematic interpretations in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Elia Kazan maintains that the crude forces of violence and insensibility symbolized by Stanley

Kowalski overpower light and culture symbolized by Blanche. Kazan believes that the primary conflict in this play is between Southern gentility and a new brutal world order (364). Kenneth Holditch asserts that the play represents the destruction of a romantic protagonist (Blanche) who is living in a modern, broken world “resembling an animalistic wasteland” (147). C.W.E. Bigsby accepts the version of the New South versus the Old South, but adds that Blanche is a victim who cannot survive in either setting (64). Similarly, Jordan Miller praises Blanche’s “defiant courage, as she tries to survive with some shred of human dignity...in a hostile world” (11-12). Roger Boxill contends that this play appears to mourn the passage of an ideal world which Blanche appears to long for, more than the world into which she was born (92).

In his critique of *Summer and Smoke*, Lyle Leverich draws many parallels between the play and various elements in Williams’ life, most notably through the primary characters Reverend Winemiller, Alma Winemiller, and John Buchanan (191-2). W.D. Sievers maintains that Alma’s neurosis results from sexual repression, and that she loses John after she becomes a mother image to him. Sievers applies Freudian theory to explain how children of controlling parents develop inhibited sexuality (382). Tischler argues that *Summer and Smoke* represents a battle between “Puritanism and Lawrenceian sex” (152). Roger Boxill suggests that this play shows how the past conflicts with the present, and how illusion opposes reality (5). Esther Jackson maintains that Alma epitomizes the ideals of a Southern gentlewoman, and that John represents primitive male animal brutality and coarseness (139). Signi Falk argues that Reverend Winemiller and Dr. Buchanan represent the church and the establishment respectively, and that together they represent the mainstream of society that victimizes outcasts (292). Bigsby identifies a symbolic component wherein the stone angel (eternity) embodies the gulf between Alma and John. Possessing both heavenly oriented and earth-bound physical attributes, the statue

connects the world of the spirit (rectory) to the world of the body (the doctor's office) (70). Adler argues that neither John nor Alma can attain wholeness unless the two become integrated both physically and spiritually (116). All of these critical summaries mention women as marginalized victims in a patriarchal society.

Both Amanda and Laura are pathetic female victims in *The Glass Menagerie*. In this play Williams gradually reveals the Wingfields' dark family secret concerning alcoholism, which may have reflected his own similar family secret. Studies indicate that an alcoholic parent often contributes to a child's use of fantasy to survive the chaos and pain the alcoholic family head causes, and to a spouse's overcompensation in trying to be a perfect (and oftentimes overbearing) parent (Debusscher 5). Perhaps the saddest victim in the play is Laura, a fragile and delicate creature like one of her glass collection of animals. She retreats from reality and feels both alienated and isolated from the outside world. Laura becomes violently ill when forced to attend business school and becomes frightened when her mother and brother argue. She avoids interacting with people and feels most comfortable in solo activities, such as visiting the zoo, listening to records, or attending to her glass menagerie. She is a prisoner of her physical ailment which is really symbolic of her role in a dysfunctional family. Her mother is also an alienated and lonely victim of society. As an abandoned and disillusioned wife, Amanda too retreats into her own world. She is stuck in a time warp and refuses to change with the times. She obtains comfort through living in the past when she, a Southern belle surrounded by jonquils, received seventeen gentlemen callers. Contrary to her Southern upbringing as to how married life is supposed to be, she is unable to recover from the emotional, economic and social misfortune brought about by her husband's abandonment. Although she makes light of her husband's rejection, Williams either mentions or alludes to her missing husband's character in almost every

scene of the play. His stage directions illuminate Mr. Wingfield's larger-than-life photograph on the mantle, and Amanda stops and stares at it during significant moments throughout the play. We learn about his handsome charm, Amanda's love for him, and how their first meeting at Blue Mountain is indelibly sketched in her mind. Both Laura and Amanda become hopelessly lost and rejected victims caused through male abandonment.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Stella Kowalski and Blanche Dubois are portrayed as the weaker sex: women who are overpowered by Stanley Kowalski, the self-aggrandizing macho hero. Blanche and Stella were raised on the affluent plantation, Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi, and their primary goal in life was, according to Southern tradition, to seek the security of marriage. Unfortunately, both choose unsuitable mates. Blanche, who is five years older than her sister, marries Allan Grey for love at a tender age only to find her dreams shattered by her husband's infidelity with another man. Stella, who moves to New Orleans at a young age, chooses Stanley Kowalski, an aggressive, heterosexual man of the wrong social class, perhaps in reaction to her sister's choice of a sexually ambiguous dreamy poet-type husband. Blanche displays deep-seated psychological instability when she is unable to live up to her expectations as a properly raised Southern belle, and Stella represents the classic example of a woman's deference to an abusive husband (which occurs not only in the South during the time of this play, but also resounds throughout most of human history). We become incensed by Stanley's brutally raping Blanche to exert his animal domination over a female victim. Stanley Kowalski's personality provides insight as to how men dominate women, convince them of their inferiority, and ultimately destroy them if unchecked. Both sisters are Stanley's victims, each in different ways.

In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma Winemiller is another unfortunate maladjusted young female in a male dominated society and is the focus of study in this chapter. She too, like Laura and Blanche, is a delicate, sensitive female who has unrealistic demands placed on her that she cannot handle. She is robbed of her childhood and is forced into a role that is expected of her in a Puritanical family setting. In his stage directions to *Summer and Smoke*, Williams states:

. . . in her middle twenties there is something prematurely spinsterish about her. An excessive propriety and self-consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter; her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainment, to position of hostess in a rectory. People her own age regard her as rather quaintly and humorously affected. She has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Her true nature is hidden even from herself. (577)

Alma is a victim torn between an unnatural religious upbringing and a womanly desire for fulfillment after she meets John Buchanan. Alma means “soul” in Spanish (Latin and Italian), which signifies her spiritual nature. Because Alma has been sheltered from the outside world and her past focus has been on the infinite, the world of sexual passion is totally foreign and repulsive to her. She is a misfit who retreats into her own private world thereby further alienating herself from society. Alma’s extreme anxiety about singing in public parallels Laura Wingfield’s panic attacks when she is forced to type in business school. Alma becomes confused about her feelings for John Buchanan. She initially chides him for his sensual indulgence and lack of spiritual depth. John lacks a strong carnal attraction to Alma but becomes overpowered by her spirituality, which he later claims for himself. He confesses that she would have remained untouched at Moon Lake Casino because of the effect her purity had on him. He says: “You’d have been as safe as the angel of the fountain because I wouldn’t feel decent to touch you. . .

(2.624). Alma, who initially fears and rejects sexuality, ends up rejecting the purity and refinement that initially set her apart. She cannot handle John Buchanan's rejection when she is finally ready for intimacy with him and rejects her former spirituality by seeking a promiscuous lifestyle. In this way she resembles Blanche Dubois who is also ruined by her relationships with men. She too is a victim of a dysfunctional home and a malicious society which causes her alienation. If for Williams, a crucial societal goal is that women find fulfillment in life apart from satisfying men's sexual desires, then in Alma and Blanche's case, abstinence would be a wiser decision than promiscuity.

Chapter One will show how and why Amanda and Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* are victims of an absent alcoholic husband and father in a male patriarchal system that leaves them destitute without a male provider. Chapter Two will analyze how Williams portrays Blanche Dubois and Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* as victims of traditional Southern society where females have few choices in life for independence, and are destroyed by a brutish male of the new world order. Chapter Three will present Alma Winemiller's case as yet another maladjusted victim in a patriarchal society.

## Chapter 1

Female Victims in *The Glass Menagerie*

As indicated in the Introduction, Tennessee Williams uses many details from his own life in his plays, and many critics indicate that *The Glass Menagerie*, more than any of his other plays, is autobiographical. When asked about this, Williams replied, “All work is autobiographical if it is serious. Everything a writer produces is his inner history transposed into another time” (qtd. in Spoto 114). Williams told some of his closest friends that Amanda is a replica of his mother, Edwina Estelle Dakau; that Laura’s real-life model is his sister, Rose; and that in his own heart he is Tom (Presley 86). Leverich explains that in Williams’ mind, images of his mother, once a young and beautiful Southern belle whose venturesome husband deserted her to go on the road eventually became enmeshed with images of dismal, drab apartments, his sister’s declining mental health, and his own feelings of desperation for freedom from the web of family disarray. For years these painful reflections lingered in his imagination, until they merged into a “memory play he was to call *The Glass Menagerie*” (qtd. in Leverich 49). Most critics also concur that the tragedy of Rose’s mental illness is indelibly present in Williams’ writing. For instance, Jacqueline O’Connor maintains that the topic of madness occurs either overtly or covertly in at least one of Williams’ characters in each of his plays, as well as society’s unfair treatment of these marginalized misfits (12). In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams dramatizes his anger in not being apprised, and his guilt in not being able to fight for Rose’s cause, in order to prevent the lobotomy performed on her by the mental health profession. Williams also presents his concern about his mother’s emotional instability in a society that does nothing to help marginalized female victims. He was fully aware of his mother’s victimization by his father who was not only an alcoholic, but also an abuser (Williams and Mead 35-6 and Williams and Freeman 57, 59). Williams also empathized with his mother’s emotional suffering over Rose’s

mental illness. Edwina admits that the long road to acceptance often made her feel ill and depressed (Williams and Freeman 86).

*The Glass Menagerie* is a partly factual, partly fictional reworking of Williams' years as a teenager, living with his family in St. Louis when the International Shoe Company promoted his father from traveling salesman to district manager. Because of the difficult adjustment caused by a move to a large city and his father's continually disruptive presence, Williams referred to this period as "nine years in limbo" (Williams and Freeman 33). Both he and Rose hated the confinement and the disruption of the previous idyllic life they enjoyed at their grandparents' home in the town of Clarksdale, in rural Mississippi, where their father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, wasn't around to frighten or bully them (Spoto 12). Williams' choice of setting for *The Glass Menagerie* is the 1930s when "the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind. Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (1.400). During this time, life was bleak because jobs were scarce and upward mobility was static. It was even more dismal for women during the Great Depression, when women comprised twenty-five percent of the workforce. For women, jobs were more unstable, temporary, and seasonal than they were for men; consequently, unemployment was much higher among women. There was also a strong bias against women who worked. In fact, many women who were employed full time called themselves "homemakers" to avoid being stigmatized for assuming men's jobs. Neither men in the workforce, unions, nor the government were ready to accept the reality that women also had to work as breadwinners, and this bias caused females intense hardship, especially those who were single, divorced, or widowed (Abelson 104). Amanda seems

fully aware of the situation for working women and is resourceful in her plans for her children's success.

*The Glass Menagerie* is an American tragedy on many levels, including a father's alcoholism and desertion, a mother's unsuccessful lot in life as a single parent, and a sister's growing helplessness as a victim; but the greatest tragedy is that of a dysfunctional family: the Wingfields. The absent father haunts each family member, as his larger-than-life presence inescapably pervades the apartment: "A blown-up photograph of the father hangs on the wall of the living room, facing the audience, to the left of the archway" (1.399). Amanda, who was raised as a pampered and entitled Southern belle, is totally unequipped to handle family responsibilities and problems on her own after her husband deserts her, and she runs into resistance from one child and withdrawal from the other which besets her with anxiety. She refers to her role as a single parent as "a solitary battle" (4.419) because she has no support system in place, and the pressure of raising a family during the Great Depression leaves her on the verge of emotional ruin. Amanda's predicament mirrors Edwina's, who, through necessity, also became the primary care-giver for her children because her husband was either away or too busy pursuing his own interests. Edwina complains that Cornelius would spend lavishly on himself but would deny the children basic necessities of shoes and clothing. Obtaining money from Cornelius to buy groceries was also problematic for Edwina as she recounts, "the family fights usually reached their peak at the end of the month when bills arrived and the week-end drinking sprees began. There would be good-sized rows as Cornelius fumed over the bills and I battled for grocery money" (Williams and Freeman 37).

Other striking similarities between the Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie* and the real life Williams family, are that Tom borrows his first name (Tom Williams becomes Tom

Wingfield in the play) and that the name of a former place of employment, the International Shoe Company in St. Louis, where Williams worked with his father and where he got fired for writing poetry on the job, appear in the play. Additionally, both Tom Williams and Tom Wingfield loved to write late at night, and this incurred expensive light bills that upset their mothers. They both loathe St. Louis and their apartment with bedroom window scenery of an alley with a fire escape, and both become movie fanatics as a means of escape from difficult family situations. It is also interesting to note that Williams' often absent father in real life once worked for a telephone company in Gulfport, Mississippi, just like Mr. Wingfield, who worked for a telephone company before he "skipped the light fantastic out of town" (1.401). Williams' sister, Rose, had a collection of glass animals when they lived in St. Louis (Boxill 62), which also becomes Laura's greatest hobby.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield is both narrator and one of the cast of characters who relates elements of his past life as it was in 1937 when he shared a dingy apartment with his mother Amanda and his sister, Laura, in St. Louis. In the play, Tom's desire for adventure and independence conflicts with his guilt in deserting the helpless female members of his family who are dependent on him. Nancy Tischler has observed similarities in Williams' writer characters who find it emotionally difficult to flee family ties, such as Val in *Battle of Angels* (95). In the last poignant scene of *The Glass Menagerie* describing Tom's subsequent return, he pleads with Laura to blow out her candles, which will symbolically allow him to pursue his freedom,

"Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger—anything that can blow your candles out! . . . Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye. . ." (7.465)

Perhaps in Tom's speech, Williams is expressing the psychic pain and helplessness that he feels about losing Rose to schizophrenia, and especially about her lobotomy. Dakin reports that this was the greatest tragedy in Williams' life: "Tom's relationship with his sister Rose is so complicated psychologically, and so heartbreaking that it could almost make a book in itself" (Williams and Mead 14). Williams' attachment to Rose is very significant, and her fate left an indelible mark on him. One of his poems is dedicated to her precociousness:

My sister was quicker at every-

thing than I.

At five she could say the multipli-

cation tables

with barely a pause for breath,

while I was employed

With frames of colored beads in

Kindy Garden. (qtd. in Williams and Freeman 18)

Williams later reminisces to a friend, "She was the best of all, do you understand? More beautiful, more intelligent, sweeter and warmer than anyone. Not one of us was fit to stoop and tie her shoes" (qtd. in Williams and Mead 226).

Tom's strong attachment to Rose is well documented. They were inseparable while growing up, and even though Rose was two years older than Tom, their nurse, Ozzie, referred to them as "the couple" to convey their closeness, even to the point that when one got sick, the other also imagined illness (Williams and Freeman 19). Similarly, Laura was also two years older than Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams' brother, Dakin, relates how Rose was the only person in the world who accepted Tom without reservation and shared a secret imaginative

world with him. Together they sailed paper boats, tended to white rabbits, and cut out paper dolls from mail-order catalogues. Interestingly, one of their favorite pastimes as young children was collecting colored glass from broken bottles (Williams and Mead 15). When they moved to St Louis, their peers didn't accept them primarily because their Southern accent marginalized them, but also because they were socio-economically inferior in the number of cars their family owned, they lived in an apartment instead of a house in suburbia, and they attended a public instead of a private school (Williams and Freeman 30). Consequently, the two siblings spent even more time together, feeling like "aliens in an alien world" (Williams and Freeman 15). During this time also, Rose began her collection of glass figurines (21), a hobby which Williams transfers to Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*.

After the onset of Rose's schizophrenia and her subsequent institutionalization, Williams felt the pain of his separation from her throughout the rest of his life, and she, more than any other person or thing, represents a significant part of Williams' psyche that surfaces in his writing. Following her lobotomy, which both Edwina and Cornelius maintain the other spouse instigated, Williams is forever plagued with guilt for not having stopped the procedure, and conveys his frustration and anger for not being informed (O'Connor 3). Michael Paller states: "Everything that Williams ever writes about is really about his Rose" (88). Even his mother, Edwina, thought that Williams struggled intensely in his writing with the loss of his close relationship with his sister (Williams and Freeman 65). Williams himself indicates that Laura represents an abstraction of Rose and is most like her in her vulnerability and in being set apart as different (a marginalized "other"). Unlike Laura though, who was too shy to have a relationship with a boy, Rose did have some dates with several boys, however unsuccessfully

(Londré 28). Rose was also more outgoing when it came to seeking employment, and she held a few disastrous short-term positions over the course of eight years (Williams and Freeman 70).

According to Benjamin Nelson, Williams treats everyone except Laura objectively in *The Glass Menagerie* because he is too closely attached to her plight. He states through other characters in the play that she is beautiful, that her beauty is an anachronism in our world, and that she will be tragically destroyed. Williams replaces Rose's mental illness with a debilitating physical handicap and an inferiority complex, while maintaining the beauty and fragility of his memory of Rose (98-9). O'Connor indicates however, that a veiled form of mental illness is present in Laura, probably down-played by Williams out of respect for Rose. Laura's mental illness is a social phobia that makes her retreat from the world of reality to a world of illusion through her glass figurines and the music from her father's hand-me-down Victrola (15). Gulshan Rai states that to Williams, Rose represents a mystical symbol of love, the epitome of a sensitive soul, mutilated and destroyed by a cruel world (5). As hard as Williams tries to let go of the pain that Rose's tragedy brings to him, his thoughts of her only cripple him further. To make matters worse, Williams' greatest fear throughout his life was that he too would lose his mind (O'Connor 5). He told many people that he wrote to escape madness (Rouse 3).

Similarly, Williams' mother figures, in his own life and in his work, display signs of mental instability. Williams portrays Amanda in his opening description of characters as having ". . . great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. . . he is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia" (394). Early in the play, Amanda solaces her conflict with Tom by escaping to memories of her past life as a Southern belle surrounded by gentlemen callers. This is her escape mechanism that goes out of control and makes her appear out of touch with reality most of the time. She, like her daughter, Laura, is unable to function in the real

world. When the world of fantasy takes over one's grip with reality, it becomes pathological. Edwina also shares a neurosis that borders on hysteria, similarly evident in Amanda's behavior. There is a history of nervous breakdowns in Edwina's gene pool, (and there is also a history of mental instability in the Williams family which makes it doubly hard for Williams if he fears that mental illness is genetic), and she was once hospitalized in a St. Louis psychiatric ward due to paranoia (Hayman 167). Like Amanda, Edwina centers her life on her children because of her unfortunate relationship with her husband. Cornelius was not only an obnoxious and wild alcoholic, he was also mentally and physically abusive. Williams grew up hating his father who belittled him and called him a "sissy." Cornelius taunted him as "Miss Nancy" because he was not athletic, and denied him love and encouragement (Leverich 83). According to Edwina, all Cornelius cared about was Dakin and the family dog (Williams and Freeman 35). Both Edwina and Dakin reveal family secrets about Cornelius' use of physical violence against both Edwina and Rose and accusations of him sexually attacking Rose (Spoto 57, 59).

Williams borrows other traits from his mother, which he transfers to Amanda Wingfield, such as being obsessed by past glory days in their memory of Southern gentility. Edwina repeatedly tells stories about garden parties, cotillions, and gentlemen callers until Tom could recite them by heart (Leverich 49). Tom Wingfield frequently sighs with boredom every time Amanda relives her past which she often does to relieve stress. Edwina and Amanda also share similar Puritanical religious values. Both are ministers' daughters from Mississippi who try to raise their children to share their beliefs and ideals. Both women are similar in their marriage outcomes that turned out to be tragically different than they had originally hoped for as Southern belles. Edwina's knight in shining armor became coarse and abusive which made him diametrically opposite to Edwina. Rose and Tom were afraid of their father and preferred their

kindly grandfather as the masculine presence in their lives (Nelson 3). Because the Williams' marriage was vexed with conflict and misery there is little doubt that Edwina was a much happier and more attentive mother when Cornelius wasn't around. Due to her religious upbringing, and her economic helplessness, divorce was not an option for her, so she forced herself to stay with a man she knew was a "private drinker, an open gambler, and a covert womanizer" (Spoto 13). Similarly, Amanda has a disappointing marriage, and her husband totally abandoned his family some sixteen years earlier, well before the Great Depression, so he deserted his family primarily for adventure. Williams describes Mr. Wingfield as "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town. . ." (1.401). Tom hints that this escape represents an alluring new dance in life, because he too wants to escape confinement and seek adventure. Tischler comments that Tom Wingfield's "admiration of his father's wanderlust at the beginning of the play prepares us for Tom's departure at the end" (96).

Tischler treats Amanda rather disdainfully, calling her a "disillusioned romantic turned evangelical realist" (32). Amanda is a micro-manager who complains about Tom's table manners, his smoking, his lack of zeal for his job, his late hours, his lack of interest in his family, and his love for late-night movies. She tries to censor Tom's penchant for D. H. Lawrence (one of Williams' favorite authors), and takes it upon herself to return the books to the library, as she adamantly professes, "I WON'T ALLOW SUCH FILTH TO BE BROUGHT INTO MY HOUSE! No, no, no, no, no!" (3.412). Edwina also held D. H. Lawrence in disdain, and when she once discovered that her fifteen year-old son borrowed *Lady Chatterely's Lover*, she marched Williams back to the library, book in hand, and had a few choice words with the librarian (Williams and Freeman 33). Tischler also believes that Amanda "labors grotesquely to

mold the lives of her adult children into American success stories through nagging and moralizing, an attempt epitomized by her unendurable cheer which one may note in her annoying morning wake-up call, “Rise and shine” (101). This is apparently the same wake-up call that Edwina gave Williams, to which both Toms respond, “I’ll rise, but I won’t shine” (4.417 and qtd. in Williams and Mead 42).

Sigma Falk is also critical of Amanda, remarking that she lacks the charm that she only talks about. She is ill-equipped to raise both her son and her daughter because she is too insensitive and self-absorbed. Amanda shows immaturity when she blames Tom for their aborted efforts in trying to procure a suitable gentleman caller for Laura, especially when he initially expresses hesitation in this endeavor (74). In an attempt to manage her daughter’s life, Amanda forces Laura to attend Rubicam’s Business School in order to help her gain independence. She tells Laura that all she needs is a positive attitude to overcome her physical deformity. Amanda seems oblivious to Laura’s social and emotional maladjustment which are even more serious defects. Incidentally, Edwina also pushes Rose to attend Rubicam’s Business School in St. Louis and is concerned about Rose’s lack of social skills. She forces her to participate in social activities, such as singing in the church choir and golfing at a country club. When this proves unsuccessful, Edwina starts a “campaign” to find Rose gentleman callers in an attempt to find her the right man to marry. She persuades Tom to bring friends home from the warehouse to meet Rose. She says, “Find one that’s clean-living—doesn’t drink and —ask him out for sister.” Tom thinks of two of his coworkers: Stanley Kowalski and Jim Conner (Leverich 142).

Falk feels that Amanda’s reproach of what she feels is Laura’s lack of interest in becoming independent neutralizes any compassion that we may otherwise feel toward her (72). Amanda is also un-endearing in her over-zealous approach toward the gentleman caller, Jim

O'Conner, for she becomes so self-absorbed that one might guess that she, rather than her daughter, is receiving the visitor. This is probably the most glaring example of how Amanda's fixation with the past becomes so intense that it becomes impossible for her to distinguish it from the reality of the present. Henry Popkin theorizes that memories of the past must be beautiful if they are to compensate for the indignities of the present (53-4). Tischler reminds us that Blue Mountain is the poetic name for Clarksdale, Mississippi, which is the standard symbol in Williams' plays that serves as a memory for romantic, happy youth (8). Amanda does not want to face the reality that even the idea of a "gentleman caller" seems absurd and inappropriate when applied to a crowded, lower-class district of St. Louis during the Depression (McGlenn 511).

Williams is more sympathetic toward Amanda than many of her critics, as evident in his opening description of characters: "There is as much to be admired in Amanda and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at. . . and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person" (394). This perhaps reflects the love/hate relationship that Williams had with his mother, Edwina. All was fine between them until they moved to St. Louis in 1918, after his father received a promotion and no longer needed to travel. Williams began to resent Edwina's excessive attempts at parenting and what he felt were rigid puritanical standards that she tried to impose on her children (Paller 33). Williams' younger brother, Dakin, recounts several family incidents where Edwina's overbearing nature resembles Amanda's. For example, she would often burst into Tom's room late at night while he was typing to either chat or bring him food (Williams and Mead 40). Edwina describes how he once rebuked her interruptions with, "I did have an idea!" (Williams and Freeman 65).

Another incident that Dakin recounts which could fit right into *The Glass Menagerie* is when Edwina, with her well-rehearsed martyred look, demands to know of her son's whereabouts:

Tom: "I've been to the movies."

Edwina: "I don't believe that lie."

Tom: "Well you can go to hell then."

This causes Edwina's eyes to roll up in their sockets toward the ceiling as she staggers backwards as if struck by a physical blow. As if orchestrated, Edwina carefully falls into a chair and feigns fainting. Rose then exclaims, "O my God! . . . Tom, look what you have done to our mother, you have killed our mother." Dakin recounts that he wasn't worried over this often repeated performance by Edwina, especially in her arguments with their father, which were mostly over finances (42-4). It is remarkable that Amanda exhibits consternation about Tom's whereabouts four specific times in the play and she questions Tom specifically. In scene 3 she argues,

"Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right mind goes to the movies as often as you pretend to. People don't go to movies at nearly midnight, and movies don't let out at two A.M. Come in stumbling. Muttering to yourself like a maniac! You get three hours' sleep and then go to work. . ." (413-14)

In scene 3, almost identical to the argument between Tom and Edwina related above, Amanda asks Tom where he's going, and he replies, "I'm going to the movies!" Her response is: "I don't believe that lie!" (414). In the next scene Amanda asks, "But why—why, Tom—are you always so restless? Where do you go to, nights?" (4.420). In scene 5, the same scenario occurs again

when Amanda interjects: “Not to the movies, every night to the movies! I don’t believe you always go to the movies!” (431). This topic is more than just a coincidence and was also a major issue between Edwina and Tom (Williams and Mead 44). Several critics speculate that Williams is relating his and Tom’s clandestine homosexual activity, because few movie theatres feature films at two o’clock in the morning (Paller 41).

Amanda’s badgering Tom is probably due to her second greatest fear, that he will become an alcoholic like his father. Amanda addresses her concern to Tom during one of the rare occasions when she actually praises him, “I’m so—proud! Happy and—feel I’ve—so much to be thankful for but—Promise me one thing son. . . you’ll—never be a drunkard!” (4.419). Alcoholism was a serious concern to Edwina as well, when she relates that she would reprimand Cornelius about his drinking. She states, “I was afraid he’d lose his job and then where would we be?” (Williams and Freeman 34). Through their disappointments in marriage, both Edwina and Amanda learn to live for their children in order to obtain joy in life. It is quite fitting that Amanda tells Tom, “. . . I’ll tell you what I wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children! I wish for that whenever there’s a moon, and when there isn’t a moon, I wish for it too” (5.426). This would certainly indicate that mothering is the last thread of happiness and the most important part of these two women’s lives, perhaps even too much so, because it leads to domination and smothering. In spite of the conflicts that Williams had with his mother, he knew she loved him and he felt sorry for her. Out of respect for her high moral principles, he concealed his homosexuality from her as long as possible when he became an adult (Williams and Mead 134). Additionally, Williams demonstrates his filial obligation by bequeathing half of his royalties from *The Glass Menagerie* to her in 1945 (Boxill 15).

Delma Presley speaks of Amanda more sympathetically than many critics, viewing her as a victim of her upbringing as a Southern belle. Amanda's referral to the past expresses a worldview that she inherited from many who lived in the Deep South during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (36). She maintains that the myth of the antebellum South captured in Margaret Mitchell's novel *Gone with the Wind* is fresh on Amanda's mind because she automatically refers to it when trying to sell magazine subscriptions to a friend. Williams describes the strong impact this myth has on Amanda in the first scene of *The Glass Menagerie*: "Her eyes lift, her face glows, her voice becomes rich and elegiac (1.403). Peggy Preshaw explains that the ideal Southern woman stems from a patriarchal system in which young women were taught to shape, repress, and modify their behavior in order to be idealized by their husbands as beautiful, pious, and obedient. They expected to have their husbands provide for them and their servants wait on them so that they could be pampered and protected from the outside world (4-6). Edwina attests to being a pampered Southern woman, who has difficulty breaking with tradition when she moves to St. Louis with her husband and children. She explains, "Life for me, as well as the children changed radically. For one thing, I had to learn to cook for the first time in my life. The seven years we had lived with my parents, I was not allowed in the kitchen for we always had excellent cooks and I was quite content to give them the stove as domain" (Williams and Freeman 31). Similarly, Amanda candidly confesses to Jim that she wasn't prepared for what the future brought her,

"I never could make a thing but angel-food cake. Well, in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestige of gracious living! Gone completely! I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me. . . I assumed that I

would be married to [a planter] and raise my family on a large piece of land with plenty of servants.” (6.442)

Presley maintains that Amanda is more than a typical matron out of touch with reality but rather a more complex character who possesses what it takes to lift her above stereotype. She indicates that Amanda shows fortitude in accepting the humbling position of selling brassieres at a department store to pay for Laura’s tuition at Rubicam’s Business College. She is also enterprising when she tries to sell magazine subscriptions over the phone for extra money (37). However, Amanda is not successful at either job because she is probably too matronly for the first one, and too annoying and long-winded for the second. Durant Da Ponte attests to Amanda’s virtues, as a fascinating character, “varied, diverse, painfully real, touching, and altogether memorable” (265). He remarks that there is a certain pathetic heroism in Amanda’s efforts to provide for her children which also makes her unforgettable (264). Alice Griffin describes Amanda as a universal mother type who shows devotion to her offspring and a determination to suffer for their sakes. Her flaw is that she carries these traits to their limit and beyond (23). Some critics comment on Williams’ brilliant portrayal of Amanda in the last scene. His stage directions, “Amanda’s gestures are slow and graceful, almost dance-like as she comforts her daughter” (7.465), suggest that she will provide angelic nurturing for Laura (Adler 37-8). Bigsby observes that the symbolism of pantomime set against Tom’s narrative gives the scene a sense of timelessness (92). Nelson observes that in the last scene, “although nothing is said in her behalf, Amanda emerges as a noble and strangely tender figure with a valor that abides alongside pettiness and a tenderness which is at once intertwined with insensitivity and cruelty” (105).

Many spectators say they feel sad and empty at the end of *The Glass Menagerie* because there is no real closure, and none of the characters are ennobled in reaching their full potential. Tom returns after he breaks free because he cannot escape the memory of the people he deserts, especially his sister's which haunts him every minute, and his departure brings him greater sadness than happiness. The plight of Amanda and Laura is heartbreaking because they are now even more pathetic without Tom to provide for them. In the last scene Williams has them pose in a tableau setting which symbolizes their static situation and also disturbs our equilibrium. The fact that the setting of the play is a lower, middle-class tenement housing district of St. Louis, which Williams calls the "largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society" (1.399) has far-reaching implications for society in general, just as the Willie Lohman family is representative in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*.

In *The Glass Menagerie* the harsh reality of the fate of the remaining female victims serves as a stark contrast to the happier world of illusion that they were able to devise as a mode of self-preservation when there was some financial provision for their existence. In their previously enclosed family dysfunction, Tom's escape was in writing and movies; Amanda's was reliving her past as a Southern belle surrounded by jonquils and gentlemen callers; and Laura's was in attending to her tiny glass figurines and playing her father's phonograph records. When Tom, like his father, deserts the family, their dysfunction is made even more transparent and pathetic. No one denies Tom the moral responsibility to himself in following the romantic imperative of "self-expression" (Jackson 137), but the results are so devastating to Amanda and Laura, the female victims in the family who are left helpless and defenseless.

Biggsby maintains that Amanda bears the greatest burden in the play because she is twice abandoned by the men she loves (35). She is deeply wounded by Tom who is utterly

disrespectful of her in several of their arguments. She is not only a victim of society but also a victim within her home. Her ineffectiveness in leading her family compounds the stress of the family's bleak existence and creates a cycle of "co-dependence and spitefulness" (Gadsden 18). It is ironical that throughout the play, Tom's inevitable desertion is the main contributing factor to Amanda's neurotic and delusional tendencies. She knows that when he, like her husband, deserts her, it will prove disastrous for Laura and her. She knows that there are few social networks available for struggling single females and that when Tom leaves, she and Laura will become financially destitute. She desperately attempts to prevent the situation, or at least prolong it from occurring as long as possible. She becomes enraged when Tom tells her that he would like to try out his own wings, "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter" (4.421). She tells him that "instinct" is a dirty word in her vocabulary and appropriate only for animals, and argues that Christian adults should not follow their instincts but rather concentrate on "superior things of the mind and spirit" (4.421). Pitifully in this tirade, Amanda is merely trying to mask the reality of the inevitable: that her son will desert her. It is sad but also ironic that Amanda tries to persuade Tom to give up his selfish dreams and come to better terms with his lot in life when she herself is unable to do so. Amanda has clearly reached desperation when she expects her son to sacrifice his hopes for independence by insisting he find adventure in his job or do without it (4.421). Amanda ironically projects some of her personality traits on her children. For example, when Laura, through shyness, hesitates to open the door for her brother and Jim O'Connor, Amanda chides her by saying: "Why can't you and your brother be normal people? Fantastic whims and behavior" (6.437). (She is harping about some of her own characteristic traits.) She later chastises Tom for bringing Laura an engaged suitor: "You don't know things anywhere!

You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions” (7.463). Inventing illusions of the past is another of Amanda’s trademarks.

Although one can understand Tom’s difficult position, Williams portrays Amanda and Laura as significantly more pathetic victims, because they cannot escape their situations. Popkin indicates that Tom is a healthy man in the prime of life with prospects of starting a better life on his own, whereas Amanda, a middle-aged wounded female, and Laura, a physically disabled misfit, have no hope for a better future (46). Amanda is probably the harder hit victim of the two female family members because of her parental responsibilities. She tells Tom, “I worry so much, I don’t sleep; it makes me nervous!” (4.419). Amanda is so anxious for both of her children to be successful that she refuses to face the reality that Laura is not only physically blighted, but also socially and emotionally handicapped. She chastises Tom for his realistic portrayal of Laura: “Don’t say crippled...Don’t say peculiar” to which Tom responds: “Face the facts. She is” (5.430-1). Because of Amanda’s delusional perception of her daughter’s abilities, she is devastated when she learns that Laura did not complete her education at Rubicam’s Business School, which to Amanda, was the same as throwing money out the window. It is natural in tough times for a frugal mother to become upset if she perceives that a dependent is recklessly squandering the little bit of money in the family coffer. However, had Amanda been in better touch with reality, she would have realized how unattainable this goal was to begin with and not spent the money. Perhaps denial is another escape mechanism in Amanda’s neurosis, even though her unrealistic expectations also lead to disappointment. More importantly however, Amanda is crushed because her hopes for Laura’s financial independence are shattered. Her fears are understandably real and contribute to her being over-protective and over-bearing.

When Amanda embarks on her alternate unrealistic plan of finding Laura a husband to provide for her, she loses all grounding with reality. She slips further and further into the delusional world of her past which she uses as a coping mechanism. She appears ridiculous in her desperation and relives the past as if she were the one receiving the gentleman caller. She goes through painstaking effort and expense with very little time to prepare for this momentous occasion. She puts her telephone solicitation for the *Homemaker's Companion* into high gear in order to purchase new curtains, a new lamp, a new sofa and cover, and a new dress for Laura. She even gives Laura a lesson on how to stuff her brassiere with "Gay Deceivers!" (powder puffs wrapped in Kleenex.) When Laura protests, saying that this appears too much like setting a trap, Amanda replies: "All pretty girls are a trap, a pretty trap, and men expect them to be" (6.434). When Amanda believes that she too must dress appropriately for the occasion, she attempts to outdo Laura by donning a tight-fitting, old-fashioned gown that she once wore to the cotillion ball and the governor's ball back in the days when she was entertaining gentlemen callers. Reliving the past, she imagines that she is the center of attraction and declares to Laura, "Now look at yourself, young lady. This is the prettiest you will ever be! I've got to fix myself now! You're going to be surprised by your mother's appearance!" (6.434). Out of touch and out of control, Amanda goes into a tailspin reliving the summer when she was recovering from malaria, which was also the summer when she met her husband,

"Evenings, dances!—Afternoons, long, long rides! Picnics—lovely!—So lovely that country in May.—All lacy with dogwood, literally flooded with jonquils! — That was the spring I had the craze for jonquils. Jonquils became an absolute obsession. . . it was a joke, Amanda and her jonquils. . . No vases to hold them? All right, I'll hold them myself! And then I. . . met your father!" (6.435)

In spite of realizing too late that she made the wrong choice among all of her suitors by choosing the most handsome instead of the wealthiest, Amanda professes to Tom that she still loves her husband (4.420). She confirms this by wearing his old housecoat (3.413) and gazing at his portrait during significant moments in the play. This seems to have also been the case for Edwina, who loved another of her suitors, John Singleton better than Cornelius, and she similarly settled for an alternate husband (Leverich 31). When instructing Tom how to choose a gentleman caller for Laura, he asks her how she made her tragic mistake of choosing the wrong husband. She confesses, “He smiled— the world was enchanted! . . . No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance” (5.429). Unfortunately, many women are often taught to follow their feelings instead of reason and “marry in haste and repent in leisure” as the timeless adage goes. Amanda’s confession conveys a prime example of a woman who is not more discerning when she marries for “enchantment” instead of reality, especially when there are so few options available to women who become deserted or widowed. Edwina also relays her lack of discernment in marrying Cornelius:

Every marriage holds some measure of disillusionment which, if it can be weathered, means the marriage survives. I imagine it is a matter of the degree of disillusionment and its impact. My disillusionment was deep, and when it came I was stunned. . . he could hardly hold secret his excessive drinking, especially when he would come home emitting fumes of alcohol and be in a cross and ugly mood. (Williams and Freeman 34)

It could be argued that Amanda’s predicament in *The Glass Menagerie* is primarily driven by fear: fear for her future and for Laura’s. Amanda asks Laura after Laura’s failure at

Business School: “What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?”

(2.406). Amanda answers her own question with this grim reality,

“What is there left but dependency all our lives? 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!—struck away in some little mouse-trap of a room. . . little bird-like women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life!” (2.409)

Amanda is driven by fear and worry about what will become of them when Tom leaves. She pleads with him: “In these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is—each other. . .” (4.419), thereby confirming her feelings of helplessness. After Amanda realizes Laura’s inability to be self-sufficient, she resolves to do all in her power to prevent her daughter from following her footsteps by marrying an alcoholic. Her first question to Tom about Jim O’Connor is “Tom, he—doesn’t drink?” (5.428). She then quips: “Old maids are better off than wives of drunkards” (5.428). She reminds herself and Tom that “No girl can do worse than put herself at the mercy of a handsome appearance” (5.429). This is what she has done and it has produced her present tragedy. Amanda has a deep-seated fear that Tom is up to no good when he makes excuses that he’s out at the movies. She states, “More and more you remind me of your father! He was out all hours without explanation! —Then left! Good-bye! And me with the bag to hold” (4.422). Williams’ description of Amanda and Laura, with “their moving forms as pale and silent as moths” (5.424), suggests that they already are victims and that the gentleman caller’s visit is destined for failure. The incident where the lights go out just after their dinner is also symbolic of their doomed fate. Amanda begins to see reality more clearly (in the dark) when she makes her

self-pitying plea to Tom, “Go to the movies, go! Don’t think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who’s crippled and has no job! Don’t let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure!” (7.464). Up to this point in the play, she was in denial concerning Laura’s physical impediment. Perhaps the urgency of her pathetic plight makes her more realistic. Perhaps Amanda finally sees Laura as a fragile helpless victim, similar to her delicate glass figurines, and who will now become her full responsibility.

Williams’ choice for the title of his play is symbolic of Laura’s personality: just as glass is fragile and delicate, so is Laura’s emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. Laura shares similarities with Rose Williams as a delicate, reclusive, and tragic figure. Laura tells Jim, “I don’t have favorites much. It’s no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily” (7.457). The image of fragile glass represents both Laura and Rose. Broken glass symbolically expresses Laura’s heart when she finds out that Jim loves somebody else and will not be calling any more. Like Rose (and Amanda with her husband), Laura tries to stay connected to the memory of her father, probably with the hope of him returning and showering her with the love she was denied and so desperately longs for. She spends much of her day listening to old records on a wind-up Victrola that he left behind some sixteen years ago. The father figure was also important to Rose, who could never win her father’s affection no matter how hard she tried. Sadly, even after her lobotomy, Cornelius never paid Rose one visit (Williams and Mead 64). Falk maintains that Williams presents the most pathos in his writing about Laura than any other of his characters, and that he composes some of his most beautiful dialogue and emotional scenes involving her. Through her timid personality, her sweetness, her shyness, her suffering through Tom’s friction with their mother, and her escaping into a world of her own, she endears herself to us and evokes great sympathy as someone who must be loved and cared for (76). Laura is not a fighter like her

brother, and takes Amanda's overbearing parenting in her stride. She knows she cannot win an argument with her mother and never attempts to. Whenever Laura senses that an argument is about to erupt between Amanda and Tom, she tries to escape. It is most unfortunate that Amanda is oblivious to Laura's delicate nature and forces her to stay in the same room against her will (1.402, 404).

In spite of her mother's unkindness, Laura is more patient and more tolerant with her than Tom. She treats Amanda's repeated tales of gentlemen callers with kindness, reminding Tom, "Let her tell it. . . She loves to tell it (1.402). Laura tries to cast aside Amanda's hurtful comments and gently reminds Amanda that she will not be receiving gentlemen callers, "It isn't a flood, it's not a tornado, Mother. I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain." She then gives Tom an "apologetic smile" and speaks with "her voice catching a little," "Mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid" (1.404-5). For six weeks Laura chooses to spend entire days from 7:30-5:00 walking in the park and visiting zoos and museums rather than face the disappointment and wrath from her mother for not being able to attend business school. She tells her mother that it was the lesser of two evils, and asks her not to stare at her with a suffering look, "like the picture of Jesus' mother in the museum" (2.408).

Amanda lacks Laura's perception and sensitivity. She is extremely oblivious to Laura's insecurity when it is time to receive her gentleman caller, and chooses to ignore Laura's wilting the moment she suspects it is Jim O'Connor from high school, the boy she had a crush on and probably never got over. All of the details are still very fresh in Laura's mind, even the fact that she read about his engagement to Emily Meisenbach six years earlier. Laura tells her mother, "I couldn't sit at the table if it was him," and "Oh mother, please answer the door, don't make me do it," (6.436). Amanda also ignores Tom when he tells her that Laura feels sick and is unable to

come to the dinner table. All of the pleas and warnings fall on deaf ears. Amanda single-mindedly insists that Laura should open the door for Jim, and sit with them at the dinner table. It isn't until Laura actually stumbles and nearly faints that her mother begins to take Laura's complaints seriously.

Laura also finds it stressful to hear Amanda criticize her husband, Laura's father. When Amanda relates all of her prospects for marriage to her children, she concludes, "But—I picked your *father!*" With this announcement Laura rises to clear the table (2.404). Laura wants to remember her father fondly as the man who left her the wind-up Vitrola and phonograph records (2.407). She purposefully avoids conflict and when confronted with her mother and Tom arguing, she stands behind the portieres with clenched fists and a panicky expression (3.412). In an argument between Tom and Amanda when one of her glass ornaments is shattered by Tom's flying jacket, she lets out a cry as if wounded (4.415). Although not mentioned, this significant cry might indicate her perception of the imminence of Tom deserting them, or it may foreshadow a more shattering experience yet to come. Laura treasures her collection and treats the glass animals as if they were alive, and perhaps even views them as an extension of herself.

Another incident revealing Laura's delicate personality occurs when she drops out of school after a few days' attendance because during a typing speed test she has an anxiety attack that makes her sick to her stomach. This happened to Rose Williams in real life as well. When her parents enrolled her in a secretarial school she almost suffered a breakdown and could no longer attend. Both girls pretend to go to school to avoid their mother's wrath, and instead visit museums, the park, the zoo, or sometimes see a movie (Nelson 32).

Laura's visit with Jim is the culmination of the secret love she felt toward him since high school. Incidentally, Jim's visit is also the highlight of Amanda's boring existence. She tells him,

“Nobody, nobody’s given me this much entertainment in years—as you have!” (7.446). If this is true, it’s a very sad commentary on this family’s hapless existence. Unfortunately, Laura does not rise from the ashes with Jim’s kiss, but instead regresses from any hope of gaining self-development and autonomy. Just as the delicate glass creatures in her collection are frozen in time, she too becomes static, which is reinforced in the last tableau. Lori Leathers Single expresses the poignancy of the last scene when Laura lifts her head and smiles at her mother, as if completely resigned to her role as the identified patient in a dysfunctional family. As her mother comforts her, Laura renounces all responsibility for making a life for herself (167).

Tragically, in *The Glass Menagerie*, both Amanda and Laura are victims of a male-dominated society. Amanda, like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, has trouble adjusting to the hard knocks in life because this is not what is supposed to happen to a properly raised Southern belle. Daniel E. Lees states in “*The Glass Menagerie: A Black Cinderella*,” that Amanda clings to a “false chivalric myth,” a Southern version of the “Cinderella” story which substitutes sons of planters for princes as benefactors (30). Amanda’s fear of abandonment and her escape to her past prevent her from fulfilling the role that her family so desperately needs. Laura is the tragic heroine in the play because she is a passive and pathetic misfit. Even though alcoholism is a deep dark secret in the Wingfield family, it may be argued that it has produced its most devastating effect on the most delicate and sensitive family member. When Laura’s chances of becoming independent or finding a husband dissipate, there are no remaining options for her future. One also wonders about Amanda’s fate. Will these poor female victims’ mental stability worsen and where will they seek asylum? Both of their futures are uncertain and pathetic. Tom Wingfield, on the other hand, will try to forget his past and wipe out his family’s memory entirely, but we sense that this will probably be no more successful for him than were Williams’

attempts to forget Rose. However, in the long-run, being unhappy is no comparison with being left destitute.

## Chapter 2

Female Victims in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Tennessee Williams is a “dramatist of lost souls,” writing in the milieu of the faded antebellum South where lonely and vulnerable misfits are presented as “losers who were never meant to win” (Leavitt 3). Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are depicted as victims of their traditional Southern upbringing, struggling to find their place in a culture stuck in the middle of a stagnant past and a present to which they cannot adapt. Laura Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* is a victim of a different type, one who is helplessly suffering the throes of desertion from an irresponsible and self-centered father addicted to alcohol, and whose mother is a hopelessly maladjusted Southern belle, left abandoned and totally unprepared to assume the role as head of a household. Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* represents a more classic example of a female victim in patriarchal society where a woman accepts spousal abuse in order to be provided for, and deludes herself into thinking that she is happy in this role.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stella Kowalski and Blanche Dubois are portrayed as the weaker sex: women who are overpowered by Stanley Kowalski, the self-aggrandizing macho hero. Blanche displays deep-seated psychological instability when she is unable to live up to her expectations as a properly raised Southern belle. Stella represents the classic example of a woman’s deference to an abusive husband (which occurs not only in the South during the time of this play, but also resounds throughout most of human history). Stanley Kowalski’s personality provides insight as to how men dominate women, convince them of their inferiority, and ultimately destroy them if unchecked.

The setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire* is post World War II, when the American South was steeped in sexist views that were established during the mid-eighteenth century. In *The Mind of the South*, W. J. Cash explains that Southern society perceived the ideal woman as morally pure and innocent. Southern belles were raised as sheltered, beautiful, and chaste daughters to become idyllically protected faithful wives and devoted mothers of wealthy plantation owners. If, through necessity (usually from not having secured a husband), a Southern lady were forced to work, she had to eke out a living in the typically female occupations of teaching the young or nursing the elderly (87-89). The self-contained and self-sufficient traditional South epitomizes patriarchal society, where the mindset of plantation aristocracy prevailed, and where plantation owners behaved like powerful feudal lords who were immune from accountability (Horton 377). In the traditional South, the male/female binaries were clearly defined as “essential/nonessential, active/ passive, objective/subjective, dominant/ subordinate” (Manning 8). Male dominance was based on power and control, and society dictated that women be attractive and flirtatious in order to please and titillate men, the undisputed superior sex. Women were expected to attract and allure men, but they were also required to maintain their innocence and purity, which made their roles particularly challenging (Millett 35). Even though Southern men idealized their women, they also kept them in their place. It was believed that a woman needed to be smart enough to capture a man, but not smart enough to challenge his superiority. Simon de Beauvoir summarizes that the male patriarchal view recognizes “He” as the “Subject” and “Absolute,” and “she” as the insignificant “other,” and that women’s primary function is to fulfill the needs of their male superiors (11).

In a similar vein, William Kleb applies Foucault’s concept of “the other” to the “sick, the criminal, or the mad” in Williams’ plays and identifies Blanche as one of the outcasts in society

(32). Williams identifies himself as an outcast too, when he confesses that his spells of happiness were momentarily brief, and that he often believed himself on the verge of madness. Constantly restless, he never lived at one address for more than six months, and he had as much difficulty settling down into a relationship as a place to live. He claimed that typically 35 percent of his energy went into the perpetual struggle against lunacy that would come upon him like “blue devils” that made it feel like having wildcats under his skin, 50 percent was spent in working or worrying about his work (which he said he pursued to escape madness), and the remaining 15 percent of his energy was spent in social or leisure endeavors such as swimming (Hayman x). Because of his loneliness and isolation he was able to identify with the female victims in his plays, and unlike Flaubert, who may never have said, “Madame Bovary, c’est moi!” Williams explicitly claimed that he was Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Princess Kosmonopolis in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (Hayman xv).

Blanche and Stella are portrayed as victims of traditional Southern society in which females had few choices in life. Both sisters were raised on the affluent plantation, Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi, and their primary goal in life, commensurate with Southern tradition, was to seek the security of marriage. However, both choose unsuitable husbands. Blanche, who is five years older than her sister, marries Allan Gray for love at a tender age only to find her dreams shattered by her husband’s infidelity with another man. Stella, who moves to New Orleans at a young age, chooses Stanley Kowalski, an aggressive, heterosexual man of the wrong social class, perhaps in reaction to her sister’s choice of a sexually ambiguous dreamy poet-type husband (7.533). Typically, Williams portrays the “good boy” (Allan Gray) in the Southern home as sissified, and the crude “bad boy” (Stanley Kowalski) as the manly alternative, perhaps as a reflection of the way things were in his own family. This is also apparent in *The Seven Descents*

of *Myrtle* (Tischler 56). Through Stanley's zodiac sign, "Capricorn" (the goat)," Judith J. Thompson associates him with Dionysus, the Greek God of wine, liberation and sexual ecstasy, who represents the irresistibly attractive amoral forces of nature (39-40). Williams describes Stanley as "a richly feathered male bird among hens" and "a gaudy seed-bearer" (1.481).

Stella also reduces herself to animal "brute desire," and is irresistibly attracted to Stanley's masculine prowess. However, she is also a product of her past as Blanche reminds her: "You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just *suppose* that any part of a gentleman's in his nature!" (5.510). Blanche tells Stella that it is okay to live out a sexual fantasy with a man like Stanley, but not to build a lasting marriage with such a crude specimen of nature (4.509). Stella realizes that if she is to remain married (and protected), she must accept Stanley's crude jokes, insulting gestures, hostility, and violence, as well as his swings between brutality and sexual restitution if she wishes to retain a home and a father for her expected baby. Stella's friend, Eunice's famous line at the play's dénouement: "Life has got to go on" (11.154), suggests that Stella, a victim of male dominance, will take her friend's advice, believe her husband's lie about Blanche's rape, and stay with an abusive husband rather than risk the poverty and bleakness that life offers her as a single mother.

Blanche is a victim of her Southern upbringing and her Puritan roots. She blames herself for her husband's suicide following her vehement reaction to finding him with an older man. In the early twentieth century, homosexuality was viewed as much more perverse and sinful than it is today. Additionally, an affair with someone of the opposite sex, perhaps because it is more common, is more socially accepted than a bisexual affair. When Blanche blurts out the caustic phrase, "I saw! I know! You disgust me..." as she and Allan dance the Varsouviana at the Moon Lake Casino (6.528), she clearly displays revulsion toward her husband's homosexuality. She

may blame herself for not having been more accepting and forgiving of him, even though society's perception of homosexuality during the late 1940s was extremely negative, as evidenced in Stella labeling Allan a "degenerate" (7.533). Blanche feels betrayed in condemning Allan because she truly loved her young poet-dreamer who was also very handsome (6.527, 7.533), and cannot help reliving their last scene together. She identifies very well with the inscription on Mitch's cigarette case by Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "I shall love thee better—after—death!" (3.498). Stella tells Stanley, "I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human" (7.533). Blanche neither gets over Allan nor forgives herself for his suicide.

Williams had first-hand knowledge of Puritanical prejudice against homosexuality because he himself led a double life for many years. He apparently first "came out" during his first visit to New Orleans in 1939 at the age of 28, and he said he experienced the freedom he always needed, and that the shock of it against his Puritanism gave him the subject and theme which he never ceased exploiting (Tischler 61). By his own admission, Williams calls himself a "rebellious Puritan" (16), inherently determined for him from the Williams' Cavalier paired with the Dakin Puritan side. Tischler indicates that in Williams' era and in that culture, an admission of homosexuality would have been shocking. Hence it was his desire to keep his homosexuality a secret from his family as long as possible (7).

One could also argue that Blanche's self-blame for Allan's suicide may have led to her ensuing promiscuity. Kleb discusses Williams' treatment of sexuality from a Foucault perspective, where "abnormal" is actually quite commonplace, and the attempt to repress it only leads to an obsession with it. (33). Blanche's fixation on young lovers (9.530, 546), after her husband's suicide indicates her obsession in trying to recapture the love of her life, Allan, whose

letters she carries in her trunk. When Stanley sadistically takes her letters and besmirches them (a symbolic rape), her obsession with the letters causes her to become hysterical and nauseated (2.490). In spite of her attempts to break with the past, Blanche cannot prevent herself from trying to seduce the young paper boy, her “young Prince out of the Arabian Nights” who happens to stop by just before her date with Mitch (5.519). Thompson describes this as the psychological “transcendent soul’s ‘disgust’ with its own sexual incarnation,” where Blanche’s condemnation of Allan for the violation of her soul’s dreams and aspirations for future happiness “makes her an inheritor of sexual sin, damned to carnality” (30).

Blanche’s culpability in her husband’s suicide leaves deep marks on her psyche, which was already extremely delicate, and even a less traumatic incident would have shattered her (Bauer-Briski 47). One may argue that Blanche’s obsession with youthfulness and beauty not only relates to her hopes of attracting another man, but also results from the guilt she feels about causing her husband’s homosexuality by not being pretty enough to keep him. Whatever is happening inside her head, she is expressing guilt, either for Allan’s homosexuality, his suicide, or both, and she pays the price for her husband’s adultery, and this compounds her victimization. Nymphomania is morally reprehensible, but being godless, she becomes a victim of sin and Satan’s wiles as she tries desperately to forget her past and seek comfort and closure. This of course never happens because in the normal order of the ravages of sin, abnormal sexuality perpetuates itself, just as violence begets violence.

Blanche’s passionate love for Allan, her elopement with him at age sixteen, her discovering him with another man, and her shock at his violent response to her expression of disgust becomes an incessant plot which replays over and over in her mind. In fact, one can strongly argue that most of Blanche’s behavior from that point onward derives from the noxious

repetition of these events. Williams portrays how these images control Blanche's mind when he introduces New Orleans polka music in the background to represent the Varsouviana that she and Allan danced the fateful night of his death (1.482, 6.528, and 8.540). Williams uses this to remind her of her psychic act of cruelty (toward both Allan and herself): "the one unforgivable thing" (Scenes 1, 6, 8, 9 and 10) (Thompson 34). The scene is most vividly reenacted when Blanche relays the episode to Mitch when she decides to be forthright with him. Each statement increases the background music's intensity until she hears a distant shot and concludes: "There now, the shot! It always stops after that. Yes, now it's stopped" (9.543). Here, one can make a case for Blanche's insanity while returning to Foucault's idea of the interconnectedness between death, sexuality, and insanity (Kleb 34). For Blanche, all of the deaths devastate her emotionally and lead to sexual promiscuity which she uses as an escape mechanism. However, this only further damages her emotional and psychological stability in a descending spiral effect.

Blanche has more than her share of death and dying, first with her husband's suicide, and then in her role as a protector of the Belle Reve estate when she was not yet twenty. This situation only compounds her sense of guilt when she is unable to save her relatives from dying. She mentions four deaths: their father, mother, Margaret and old Cousin Jessie (1.479-89), and tells Stella that she has trouble dealing with "All those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard!" (1.479). Blanche describes the disturbing sounds of their dying relatives: "Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!'...You didn't dream, but I saw! *Saw! Saw!*" (1.479). Blanche resents Stella for having left her to deal with the problems alone, as evidenced in her cutting remark which makes Stella cry: "Sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go! I let the place go? Where were *you!* In bed with your—Polack" (1.480).

Blanche's role as a protector of Belle Reve (another of Williams' ironies in his play on names and places because "beautiful dream" is spelled incorrectly in French) is probably not only emotionally and psychologically damaging, but also culturally stressful because of the difficulty associated with being thrown into a masculine role through sheer necessity, where "a woman left to run a patriarchal estate is a recipe for tragedy" (Wei 104). Blanche, as a woman during that era, lacks the business acumen and experience to turn things around, because women were not expected to be skilled in anything other than looking attractive and acting coquettishly. To make matters worse, Blanche has to deal with the "sins of the fathers," which in her words were sins whereby the Dubois male ancestors "exchanged the land for their epic fornications" (2.490). Blanche's sense of failure in life mounts when her attempts at heroism in saving the family estate collapse. Belle Reve becomes a symbol of death and destruction, and its effect on her is devastating for she repeatedly reprimands Stella: "you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve...I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it" (1.478, 479).

Blanche's failure to save the estate and move beyond her sordid past in Laurel leaves her with only one last hope for the future: to begin a new life with her sister in New Orleans. Unfortunately, she arrives at her new destination as a slave to her definition of womanhood, and feels compelled to lie to herself and others in order to be accepted and secure a respectable husband. She is attracted to Mitch who appears gentlemanly, and she envisions capturing him by being a perfect Southern belle. This involves earning a man's respect by not "putting out" or moving too fast (5.517), giving the impression that she's never been touched (6.522), and adhering to old-fashioned ideals (6.525). Mitch is taken by this and tells Blanche that he's never met a woman like her before (6.522). Blanche even tries to recapture the more romanticized gender roles from the age of chivalry. This becomes evident when she requires Mitch to bow as

he presents her with flowers and become the “*Rosenkavalier*” of her affections (5.520). After Mitch learns the truth about her past, and that she is not the virgin of his dreams, he refuses to show up for her birthday party, for which Blanche later reminds him that his behavior is “utterly uncavalier” (9.542). Williams shows us another side of this knight in shining armor because the purpose of his late night visit is to get his just desserts from Blanche, the whore (instead of a kiss from Blanche the virgin), or what he tells her he was “missing all summer” (9.547). In the midst of this conversation he has the gall to tell her that she is not clean enough to meet his mother (9.547). Our patriarchal system teaches men that women need to be pure in order to marry them, but they typically adhere to a double standard when the roles are reversed (Millett 54).

Blanche is so off the mark in her narrowly defined social role of Southern belle that it becomes psychologically excruciating for her. Thompson notices parallels with mythical archetypes in the play and describes Stanley and Stella’s neighborhood of New Orleans called “Elysian Fields” (1.469) as a place not ethereally heaven-like as in original Greek mythology, but one that is now alive with sexual energy and relaxed morality. Thompson compares Stanley to Dionysus and Blanche to Pentheus in Euripides’ tragedy, *The Bacchae*, in which Dionysus drives his disapproving rival Pentheus to madness and gruesome death (37-39). Also appropriately, Stanley’s astronomical sign, “Capricorn, the Goat” (5.514), the symbol of unbridled lust, is set against Blanche’s sign, “Virgo,” which best suits her for artistic, feminine qualities, also inherent in poet-dreamer types, such as Williams (even though his birthday of March 26<sup>th</sup> places him under the sign of Aries). Stanley and Blanche’s opposite signs reinforce the binary concept of the powerful/weak in our patriarchal system, because as Moi explains, the feminine side is always seen as weak and powerless (104).

Blanche also becomes a slave to male-dominated society's perception of fading youth, which is much more difficult for women than men to combat. There was a time in western civilization when society valued wisdom and experience and respected the elderly for possessing these qualities. In the modern world, society gives inappropriate and unjust value to youth and beauty as dictated by male dominated movies, advertising, and the fashion industry (Jeffreys 5). Even during the early twentieth century, women were preoccupied with male-dominated directives of what constitutes a woman's attractiveness to the opposite sex because physical appearance means a great deal to Edwina Williams and also to Blanche. Edwina scorned Williams' taste in women because she thought they looked "downright fat" (Williams and Freeman 72). Early in their reunion in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche proudly tells Stella that she hasn't gained an ounce in ten years (1.476). She also mocks large women when inquiring about Stanley's friends' wives: "Big beefy things, I suppose" (3.496). Unfortunately, Blanche is also obsessed with youthfulness which she equates with beauty and she does everything in her power to conceal her age, and even lies about it (3.499, 5.517, 6.526, 9.545).

Williams states that Blanche's hesitancy and delicate beauty suggest "a moth" (1.471) or a fragile butterfly that avoids daylight. She always strives to appear fresh and clean, dresses in white, perhaps trying to live up to the meaning of her name: "the two together mean white woods. Like an orchard in spring" (3.499), and puts make-up on before meeting people to keep up her image as a demure Southern belle. Stella reminds Stanley that Blanche's weakness is her vanity, evidenced by her constant need for affirmation regarding her appearance (2.484, 3.494, and 10.550). Blanche is frank with Stella in her worry about losing her attractiveness: "I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick" (5.515). Blanche tells Mitch to cover the "naked light bulb" with colored paper lanterns to keep the room more subdued in order

to preserve the soft illusion of her beauty (3.499). Later in her conflict with Mitch, he lets her know disapprovingly that he has never once seen her in the daylight (9.544). Blanche's obsession with youthfulness and beauty is summarized by Ralph F. Voss: "Her pose as the fine lady is the doppelgänger of her shame and her obsession with her looks the doppelgänger of her panic that she can no longer turn the trick and that she will no longer find any comfort" (116).

Blanche's character presents many controversial binaries as both victim and villain. This probably reflects the personality of Williams, who repeatedly said that he is Blanche Dubois. Elia Kazan understood this well when he explains that only Tennessee Williams would come into a house where you know that somebody is going to kill you, and you'd be physically attracted to your murderer at the same time. He saw Blanche in Williams as an ambivalent figure, attracted to the harshness and vulgarity around him at the same time that he fears it because it threatens his life (Spoto 139). Williams transferred this duality in his writing and as his brother Dakin indicates, Williams gave up seeing a psychiatrist because he wasn't really sure if he wanted to be well-adjusted. Williams claimed that "if he got rid of his demons, he would lose his angels" (qtd. in Williams and Mead 215). Blanche's controversies include her blaming herself for her husband's suicide while seeking atonement in socially and morally unacceptable ways. She attempts to save Stella from an "apelike" cave-man (5.520) who she flirts with. Her perception of truth is "what ought to be the truth" (9.544). She hates criticism, yet she is critical. She refuses Mitch's sexual advances but is willing to accept the role of mistress to a married Shep Huntleigh, her imaginary lover. She pretends to be a virgin in New Orleans but has a reputation for loose morals in her home town. She also projects herself as being socially victimized and socially superior. From a feminist perspective, Jordan Y. Miller has a much more sympathetic approach toward Blanche as revealed in his observation: "seeking help, she

encounters hostility; seeking love, she encounters scornful rejection, and seeking refuge, she is driven to insanity” (12). Ultimately, there is some truth to all of the critical assessments of Blanche, but they nevertheless serve to support the theory that her upbringing as a Southern belle makes her totally unprepared to function in the real world.

Kleb explains how Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is aligned with Foucault, in differentiating the Same from the Other. Foucault maintains that the Other (the sick, the criminal, and the mad), help define the historical boundaries for social norms and political power by their position outside these norms. Blanche, as the Other, is the destitute sister connected to a past of death, sickness and epic fornications. She falls into madness as a result of her exclusion and isolation, revealed to her by the end of the poker night when Stella chooses to stay with Stanley. In spite of Blanche’s trying to gain acceptance and normalcy, she fails because Stanley forces her into the role of the female marginalized Other at a critical time of her life (36). Foucault’s theory is that the “individualizing mechanisms” of modern civilization focus on figures situated at the margins of society, and the marginalized Other questions the sanity of the apparently sane. This applies to Blanche because she is able to reveal the hidden mental infirmities of the apparently sane, and ultimately, as the female Other, she provokes the revelation of Otherness in everyone who has attempted to marginalize her. Through her Otherness, Stanley’s masculine tyranny is more exposed, as is Stella’s insecurity and co-dependency and Mitch’s cowardice and mother fixation (35-37).

Critics pay particular attention to Blanche’s character and much less to Stella Kowalski, who is every bit as much a victim of her gender and puts up with more than she needs or deserves to. Stella is a young, twenty-five year old pregnant housewife, probably uneducated and unskilled, who is drawn into a triangle involving her sister and her husband and takes abuse from

both. She feels torn between loyalty to a blood relative and a husband who cannot stand to have her sister around. Because Southern etiquette requires Stella to respect her older sibling, she endures verbal abuse from Blanche who is often patronizing, demanding, and insulting. Stella feels awkward when Blanche criticizes her socio-economic status which happens almost immediately upon her arrival: “What are you doing in a place like this?. . . only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!— could do it justice!” . . . Why didn’t you tell me, why didn’t you let me know. . . that you had to live in these conditions!” (1.474). Blanche also comments on Stella’s appearance: “. . . yes you’re just as plump as a little partridge. . . You just have to watch around the hips a little. . . ” (1.475), and “stand up!. . . You messy child—you’ve spilt something on that pretty white lace collar! About your hair—you ought to have it cut in a feather bob with your dainty features. . . ” (1.476).

Stella receives indirect abuse from Blanche when she repeatedly insults Stanley. This makes her feel uncomfortable, evidenced in her making excuses for his behavior (4.505-09). Stanley secretly overhears Blanche criticizing him when she tells Stella that he acts, eats, moves and talks like an animal, and that “he’s common” (5.510) because he lacks gentlemanly traits of tenderness and appreciation for the arts. Blanche ultimately tries to convince Stella to leave Stanley, chiding her not to “hang back with the brutes” (5.511). Blanche also remarks that the only type of relationship Stella will have with Stanley is a physical one (4.509). True to her puritanical upbringing as a Southern belle, Blanche tells Stella to value beauty in the arts, tenderness of the heart, and sensitivity of the spirit and over physical lust. She sadly relates that her mistake in seeking “Desire” was foolish and compares it to “casting [her] pearls before swine” (10.551).

Stella, the misplaced gentle lady, serves as a foil to Stanley, the brute. Williams' choice of names for these two characters is noteworthy in how it sets them apart. They both begin with the same two letters but have opposite meanings. Stanley's name suggests earthiness, or what derives from the stones, whereas "Stella for Star" (2.491) represents the heavens. Stella is sympathetic toward her older sister and is protective of her, especially when she observes Blanche's emotional instability. She takes painstaking efforts to make Blanche's stay comfortable, and pleads with Stanley to show kindness to her as well. He totally ignores Stella's request not to tell Blanche about the baby and overrides her feelings as he asserts his male dominance in his power struggle with Blanche (2.491). Stella, in an argument with him about Blanche defends her sister by saying, "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. No-body, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change" (8.540). True to his animal nature, insensitive Stanley just moves in closer for the kill and gives Blanche a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel, which he himself acknowledges is a ticket to nowhere (7. 534).

It is noteworthy that Stella begins to adopt Blanche's language in her criticism of Stanley, which is extremely threatening to him; a malevolent, fierce competitor. Stella says things like: "Drunk-drunk-animal thing you!" (3.500) and "Mr. Kowalski is too busy making a pig out of himself to think of anything else!" (8.537). Stanley becomes incensed with the table-talk: "Your face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy!" (8.537), and becomes enraged and aggressive after his tirade,

"Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy!'  
—them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much  
around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? Remember what

Huey Long said—‘Every man is a King!’ And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!” (8.537)

When Stella chooses Stanley over Blanche, Williams describes her embrace as “fiercely and full in the view of Blanche” which suggests an unnatural response, almost made as if some animal force of desire is compelling her. It is almost surreal when Stanley “grins” through the curtains in triumph at Blanche (4.511). At the end of the play, when Stella is faced with believing either Stanley or Blanche about the rape, she tells Eunice that she could not continue to live with Stanley if she were to believe Blanche. She follows Eunice’s advice to believe her husband because “life has got to go on” (11.557). For Stella, choosing Stanley over Blanche is following the path of least resistance at this juncture of her life. Facing tough times as a single mother is not a pleasant alternative. However, this decision will ultimately cause her bad marriage to become worse. If she remains in denial over what really happened, the question will fester over time and drive a wedge further between her and Stanley. If Stanley were more human than beast, his conscience would gnaw away at him too, negatively affecting his marriage.

Stanley repeatedly mistreats Stella, but because she has so few alternatives in obtaining security, she tolerates his abuse. Stanley ensures her dependence on him by giving her very little spending money. (Economic domination is another form of female victimization.) Stella tries to convince Blanche that because Stanley “likes to pay the bills,” he does not give her an allowance. But she quickly adds that “this morning he gave me ten dollars to smooth things over” (4.508). Stanley becomes violent whenever his authority is challenged as evidenced when he smashes a radio in rage. He also physically strikes Stella with his hand on two separate occasions (3.494, 3.500). It is apparent that Stanley’s abuse is a recurring problem when Stella wants to escape to her friend Eunice’s apartment upstairs. We also learn that Stanley’s

uncontrollable temper has warranted police intervention for spousal abuse in the past, when Eunice tells Stanley, “I hope they do haul you in and turn the hose on you, same as the last time!”(3.502). One would hope that Eunice, who is older and married longer, could potentially provide a suitable role model for Stella, but she is also in an abusive relationship with her husband, Steve. It appears that the women in Stella’s circle of friends who live in the shadow of their abusive husbands, form female bonds for moral support and security, which is quite typical of women involved in domestic violence (Adler 20).

When Stella returns home to Stanley without staying away for even one night, she seals her approval of his behavior by yielding her body to him and uses sex as a tool to appease him after his fits of rage (4.505). Blanche finds this shocking: “Your fix is worse than mine is! Only you’re not being sensible about it...you’re not old! You can get out” (4.506). Stella’s behavior is commensurate with what studies indicate about women with low self-esteem who often think that they are to blame for their husband’s abuse. It is ironic that the perpetrator of violence isn’t the one who is making up, but rather the victim. Studies in spousal abuse indicate that these are typical traits in abuse victims, and professionals label it as “codependent” behavior. Men who assault their wives believe that their behavior is justifiable and appropriate, and abused wives learn to share this belief. Additionally, due to our patriarchal heritage, men feel entitled to exert power and control over what they believe is their property (Frank and Golden 1-2). Blanche is appalled at Stella’s groveling and says: “How could you come back in this place last night? “Why, you must have slept with him!” (4.505). Fittingly, Williams indicates that Stella finds Stanley’s animal behavior of baying and bellowing her name seductive, and that they reunite making “low animal moans” (3.503).

Stella is clearly a sad victim in a relationship that she thinks is within the boundaries of normalcy. She excuses her husband's behavior by stating that he's not really responsible for his actions: "In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's always a powder-keg. He didn't know what he was doing. . . ." (4.505). Stella gives a typical response in the pathology of codependency where a wife learns patterns of distorted thinking and helplessness and excuses the abuse that she is experiencing. The devaluing of self results in a "societal form of oppression," where the wife becomes re-victimized to somehow feel responsible for her abuse (Hammons 276, 282). Perhaps the most disgusting element in the play occurs at the end when mental health professionals take Blanche away and Stanley puts his hand in Stella's blouse to console her (11.564). This chauvinistic act is the ultimate degradation of a woman in the midst of a devastating family trauma and reduces her to a mindless animal. It indicates just how far Stella has fallen from lofty Southern ideals of purity and decorum, and serves as a sad commentary of how well Stanley has succeeded in pulling her down from the columns of Belle Reve (9.540). She is reduced to being a sex slave to the "gaudy seed-bearer" (1.481).

Stella becomes Stanley's sex slave as a result of her codependent relationship with an abusive husband. Not once in the play does she express love for him. When Stanley's work as travelling salesman requires him to be away (like Cornelius Coffin Williams'), Stella mentions missing his presence only at night. She tells Blanche: "I can hardly stand it when he's away for a night. . . . When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!" (1.478). Stella describes her moments of intimacy with Stanley that govern her life: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" (4.509). Blanche chides her that brutal desire is not enough with which to make a marriage work and have a child

(4.509). She reminds Stella that there are things such as art and music and tender feelings which need to be cultivated and “held as our flag. . . Don’t—don’t hang back with the brutes” (4.511). Blanche, who is desperately trying to come clean, admits that her obsession with Desire is what caused her demise in the first place: “It brought me here. —Where I’m not wanted and where I’m ashamed to be. . . ” (4.509). It is of note that Blanche states later that the opposite of death is desire; because these are the two areas that so drastically affect her psyche (9.547).

Stanley Kowalski is a nemesis for both Blanche and Stella. His primary concern is to satisfy his animal instincts, to be “King” of his household, and have Stella answer to his beck and call. He is the typical, boorish, new American working class male (as opposed to the Southern traditionalist) who feels he must compensate his inadequacy as a thinking-caring-feeling human being by asserting his masculinity and bullying weaker victims. At the very beginning of the play he throws a package of meat at Stella to catch as a symbolic gesture of his dominance and animal instinct. He also “bellows” at Stella who “mildly” talks back to him, revealing his sub-human qualities and his primitive male ego need for domination (1.10). He expects his meals to be prepared for him at all times (2.32) and finds security in his circle of buddies in their rituals of bowling, beer-drinking and poker games. Coincidentally, Williams was all too familiar with his father’s wild poker parties, which were a major source of friction in his parents’ marriage (Williams and Freeman 34). Stanley shows no respect for Stella and uses his masculinity to secure their physical bond, which is the only thing that keeps their relationship intact. Williams describes Stanley as enjoying pleasure with women, rough humor, drink, game playing, and everything that bears his emblem of the “gaudy seed-bearer” (1.28). This is a most unflattering portrayal of masculinity which might represent the image that Williams had of his

own father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, “a frightening, powerful and swaggering bully, an alien male presence in their home” (Tischler 2).

When Blanche comes into the picture, she disturbs Stanley’s comfort zone. He feels threatened because he has been able to mold Stella to his liking and is afraid that Blanche might undo his years of conditioning. Blanche is totally right-brain hemisphere dominant and Stanley is left: the world of “idealized romance versus the world of brute reality” (Thompson 25). Kernan indicates that Stella balances the two perspectives—“born kin to the 'romantic' and married to the 'realistic'” (2). Blanche’s criticism and ridicule of Stanley infuriate him because macho men do not like to be reminded of their intellectual, social, or economical inferiority. Stanley absolutely loathes Blanche, and even though he is intellectually inferior to her, he is smart enough to realize that psychological destruction will cause her the most pain. It is also ironic that he, the epitome of the uneducated and uncouth, is able to unearth the truth about Blanche’s past because one would not suspect he would know what Kolin reveals: that the question of a woman’s identity is often locked in stories dealing with her sexuality (61). It is also noteworthy how Stanley uses animal imagery to express his ability to see through Blanche’s façade in their last scene alone together when he says: “I guess we are both entitled to put on the dog” (10.551). He also calls her “Tiger—tiger” when she puts up a fight against his aggressive advances (10.555).

Interestingly, Blanche also speaks his language and refers to “casting pearls before swine” when she bemoans the fact that men cannot appreciate her for “beauty of the mind, richness of the spirit, and tenderness of the heart” (10.551). When Stanley cannot muster up the tiniest spark of sympathy for Blanche at her unraveling, his sense of revenge is so intense that he even feels compelled to physically restrain Mitch from getting up from the poker table to comfort Blanche (11.563). Eunice’s insight in this scene is also significant: “I always did say that men are callous

things with no feeling, but this does beat anything. Making pigs of yourselves” (11.556). Philip Kolin posits that Eunice is central to the feminist issues of the play in that she (in her interaction with Steve), foreshadows the Kowalskis’ outcome and acts in counterpoint to Blanche’s tragedy. He also sees parallels between Eunice’s role and some of Shakespeare’s secondary female characters, such as Emelia in *Othello* who was also “a witness and critic against women caught in a male trap” (60-69).

Stanley is aware of his sexual control over Stella, and Williams uses imagery of colored lights (which is opposite to Blanche’s preference for subdued light) to convey this. After Blanche tries to get Stella to leave Stanley by reminding her of her life at Belle Reve (4.78), he prompts his wife to recall their intimate moments, and tells her how he’s looking forward to getting the “colored lights” going again “with nobody’s sister behind the curtains” (8.125). He reminds Stella that he pulled her down from the columns of the Belle Reve estate and that she loved “having them colored lights going! And wasn’t we happy together, wasn’t it all okay until she showed here” (8.129).

The ultimate act of violent male domination occurs when Stanley rapes Blanche. Rape is a very difficult problem to decipher, and most feminists agree that it represents the ultimate outrage of men’s abusiveness toward women because women are particularly vulnerable to the invasion of their bodies. Anca Vlasopolos shows insight into Blanche’s rape, stating that Blanche becomes further victimized when the act “becomes public and the woman is punished” by everyone else’s gaze (333). Stanley feels compelled to violate Blanche to settle a score because Blanche has flirted with him, engaged him in verbal combat, belittled him and challenged his self-image; therefore, he feels he needs this type of victory to vindicate his masculinity. Stanley, like many perpetrators of rape, suggests Blanche’s complicity when he blurts out: “We’ve had

this date with each other from the beginning!” (10.555). Blanche tries to defend herself as a worthy adversary by smashing a bottle and threatening to twist it into his face, but as typical in the case in rape, the man’s physical strength overpowers a woman’s. Mary Ann Corrigan characterizes Stanley’s conquest as “the oft-told tale of the defeat of the weak by the strong” (128).

Adler offers Andrea Dworkin’s feminist interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, claiming that the ultimate marginalization of a woman occurs when Blanche is denied socially sanctioned sexual expression, and she becomes by male definition: “irrational, neurotic, and hysterical” (78). When she is forcefully institutionalized by a male-dominated system of psychiatry which defines insanity as lacking that which is man’s by nature, or displaying “otherness” in the patriarchal system, she is further marginalized. Jacqueline O’Conner indicates that Blanche represents the supreme example of how women and madness intersect in Williams’ plays, where culpability and vulnerability are perfectly balanced (6). Williams was well aware of problems in the mental health profession, having suffered a nervous break-down in 1935 at the age of 34, and then having been hospitalized once again in a mental ward in 1969 at the age of 58. He also witnessed the mental decline of his beloved sister, Rose, whose unsuccessful lobotomy left her a tragic shadow of her true self. On many occasions Williams expresses regret that he was unable to intercede on her behalf to prevent the controversial operation. He never recovered from his loss and wrote of having lost belief in everything but loss (Nelson 35). He erected a shrine in Rose’s memory in his home in Key West Florida and dedicated it to St. Jude, the patron Saint of lost causes (Boxill 13).

Tennessee Williams acknowledges his sensitivity to the status of women as powerless and defined as the “Other” because he himself experienced sexual abuse and received his share

of the marginalization as a homosexual. Frequently, Williams' female characters become his mouthpiece, because both psychologically and thematically women better expressed his romantic and poetic style. As mentioned earlier, Blanche is sometimes viewed as a spokesperson for Williams. Williams is sometimes viewed as an "androgynous artist leaning more towards feminine sensibilities" (Adler 77), because he presents women as more sensitive, feeling, and humane than their male counterparts. Williams was especially sensitive to Rose's struggle to conform to the role of "Southern belle" that their mother, Edwina, expected, and knew how cruel this role could be. He also held close ties to other women in his life, such as his grandmother, his agent, actresses, and friends. He studied women's personalities, captured their language and their gestures, and knew that they lived in a society that required them to appear younger, prettier, more innocent, and less savvy than they actually were in order to succeed. He saw them working through the strategies of the weak and the excluded, or the Other. Williams identified with women, and loved and admired them for their courage and their integrity (Nelson 28-30).

Tischler asserts that much of Williams' use of sex and violence in his writing occurs as a reaction to his sister's tragedy, and also expresses rebellion against his strict religious upbringing. She maintains that Williams had a problem accepting a faith-based asceticism in which humans are taught to deny their bodily desires in order to save their souls. Williams held that the two conflicting strains in his nature; the "Puritan" and the "Cavalier," are also present in every human being (50). Harold Bloom indicates this dualism in Blanche who yearns for the values of the aesthetic but scarcely embodies them, might represent a "masochistic self-parody" on the part of Williams himself (6). Also, like Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche (and Williams) symbolically long for a lost era of "Southern comfort" (9.543) when life in nostalgic memories is so much more pleasant than the realities of the present.

Tennessee Williams masterfully presents women's oppression in male patriarchal society in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He relates to the female Other through his own experience as a marginalized segment of society as a homosexual. Williams also shows sensitivity toward the mentally ill, another victimized minority in a male-dominated world.

## Chapter 3

Female Victims in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*

The Broadway debut of Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke* in the fall of 1948 was disappointing, not only because of the play being overshadowed by the mammoth triumph of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but also because some critics felt that Williams' emphasized theme and symbol to the detriment of character development. Nancy M. Tischler maintains that the play's symbolism, which revolves around the conflict between flesh and spirit, gives the spectator little pleasure when it is too transparent (155). Another major criticism of *Summer and Smoke* is the radical and unexpected character transformation made by Alma Winemiller, the play's protagonist, who chooses sexual freedom over her formerly held high moral principles. Esther Merle Jackson draws the parallel of Alma's changing from a Corneillian heroine, devoted to love, duty, honor, and chastity, to become a Racinian one, torn by insatiable desires and inner longings (137). Even though much of *Summer and Smoke*'s criticism has been since refuted, most critics miss the point that Alma's character, however symbolic, epitomizes a female victim in a patriarchal society.

Williams fully develops his characters as symbols in the allegorical drama through Alma Winemiller, who is governed by her soul, and set in opposition to the flesh, portrayed by John Buchanan. Alma and John are incomplete characters who unconsciously desire to possess a little of what the other person represents. Alma, who has been in love with John since childhood, cannot get him to view life through her eyes (of the soul), and John cannot get her to view life as merely gratifying one's basic sexual instincts. The fact that Williams divides the play into two, Part One: A Summer (without Alma's fire), and Part Two: A Winter (with the kindling of Alma's fire) reinforces the conflict between spirit and flesh. The two critical occasions in the two

seasons also reinforce the duality between flesh and spirit: Independence Day which heralds Alma and John's reuniting as young adults, and Christmas, which represents their parting of ways.

Williams exposes society's double standard where men are expected to sow their wild oats, but if women, the pillars of society, choose this path, it is viewed as scandalous. Donald Spoto indicates that duality is part of everyone's inner nature, and extreme character transformation in *Summer and Smoke* should not be viewed as contrived. He also reminds us that Williams' own personality is rife with dual aspects of the wild and sensitive, and that Williams repeatedly confesses inner conflict between his Puritan leanings (which he inherited from his maternal side) and his Cavalier penchant (stemming from his paternal heritage). Spoto also conveys that the two main characters in the play, Alma and John, are doomed to estrangement because of the feature that is very typical in Williams' writing, where ". . . balanced unions between the right mates are very rare indeed" (151-2). Leonard Berkman argues that criticism about Alma's drastic character change from spirit to flesh is unfounded because it was not uncommon for puritanical white Southern women of the twentieth century to go through a transformation similar to Alma's by being promiscuous to demonstrate their emancipation from patriarchy (53).

Robert F. Gross demonstrates how Williams works to both create and dissolve the binaries in *Summer and Smoke*. Through post-modern analysis, Gross also challenges and dismisses previously held concepts of the play's naiveté and symmetry (92-8). Jacob H. Adler suggests that *Summer and Smoke* gains significantly greater depth as it moves beyond conflict between body and soul and extends its boundaries to represent the cultural allegory of the South. Williams, as a southern writer, is fully aware that the South has experienced great difficulty in

bringing its body and soul into harmony. He presents the soul of the South that has retreated to an impotent past which avoids reality and responsibility through Alma. He contrasts the soul of the South with the strong and attractive, yet purposeless body of the South through John, who is attracted to adventure, scientific progress, and freedom from the restraints of traditional moral codes (353-58). This interpretation presents the victim/perpetrator concept in a broader societal context.

Delma E. Presley maintains that Williams, like his predecessor, D.H. Lawrence, may have used the theme of spirit versus flesh to decipher the conflict within his own soul because *Summer and Smoke* is reminiscent of Lawrence's "The Virgin and the Gypsy" (93). Nada Zeineddine states that Williams' handling of the flesh versus spirit duality runs throughout his plays and characterizes his vision of life (136). Robert Siegel reminds us how Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* chastises Tom for wanting to follow his instincts (which only pigs and monkeys do), and instructs him to follow Christian ideals of mind and spirit. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche reprimands Stella for wanting to hang back with the brutes and turn her back on art and tender feelings (112). In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma, who spends almost all her time in the rectory of a rigid and controlling Episcopal minister, is totally spiritual and represses her sensual side until the end of the play. Her counterpart, John, who is a physician's son and an embarrassment to the profession for which he too has prepared, indulges in a hedonistic lifestyle and totally denies the existence of man's soul. Williams said that he identifies with Alma because they both went through the same transformation: ". . . from puritanical shackles to, well, complete profligacy" (Gaines 215).

Much of Williams' writing indicates his preoccupation with sexuality and a repressed feeling of guilt over immorality. For example, John appears disgusted with his irresponsible and degenerate life-style which he confesses to Rosa Gonzales,

“Did anyone ever slide downhill as fast as I have this summer? Ha-ha! Like a greased pig. And yet every evening I put on a clean white suit. I have a dozen... And there isn't a sign of depravity in my face. And yet all summer I've sat around here like *this*, remembering last night, anticipating the next one. The trouble with me is I should have been castrated.” (2.618-619)

Williams may have been writing in response to his own spiritual battle over his sexual orientation. In the late 1940s homosexuality was not only condemned within the Church, it was also viewed as outside the law, and a homosexual was “branded a pervert by conventional society” (Hale 21). Williams admits he indulged in sexual freedom while living in New Orleans in the late 1930s (50). When *Summer and Smoke* was written, he was a closeted homosexual, having relationships with an undisclosed number of men. He had a one-bedroom apartment in New York, and his younger brother, Dakin, relates: “It was not stated how many young men slept in the bed that was slightly smaller than a double” (Williams and Mead 134). Dakin once confronted Williams in a letter, reminding him how much the family suffered from the stigma of Rose's mental illness, and that public knowledge about Williams' homosexuality would make the family's plight even worse, especially when Dakin had political ambitions. Williams wrote a blistering note back to Dakin, telling him to mind his own business, but the episode, according to Dakin, caused a rift in their relationship that lasted many years (142). Like so many other people who achieve fame, Williams turned to alcohol and drugs to ease the pain of loneliness. By his own admission, he called the 1960s his “stoned age” (Williams 212). He was given to fits of

paranoia, became quarrelsome with his agent, Audrey Wood, and his relationship with his quasi-monogamous lover, Frank Merlo, grew more tumultuous (Boxill 18-20). In addition, his greatest fear was that he would lose his mind and become like his sister. He became obsessed over his failing physical health, and thought he was on the verge of death (Williams 100). He ended up asking Dakin to rescue him in 1966. Williams suffered his second mental collapse in 1969 and was committed to an institution in St. Louis, but he recovered and continued to produce plays until his death in 1983 (Boxill 16-19). His severe loneliness and search for meaning in life can be traced throughout his wanderings from St. Louis to New Orleans, New York, Los Angeles, Key West, and Rome; but these qualities are also the basis for much of his art (Kramer 663).

Williams interweaves elements of autobiographical fact with fiction in *Summer and Smoke* as is typical in all his writing. The town which is the setting of the play, Glorious Hill, Mississippi, was previously known as Clarksdale, where Edwina's parents lived, and where Williams, his sister and mother took refuge before their move to St. Louis in 1918 (Leverich 54). Williams' grandfather, Walter Dakin's occupation as an Episcopal minister in Clarksdale, is transferred to Mr. Winemiller in the town of Glorious Hill. Alma, like Williams, spent a great deal of time in their respective Episcopalian rectories. In addition, Williams' great-grandfather was a physician and his grandmother, Rose Otte Dakin, was a music teacher; these family traits are transferred to Dr. Buchanan and Alma (Leverich 17, 20). Certain characteristics in Alma mirror those found in Rose, especially her coping skills with stress and illness. Alma is also similar to Edwina in her singing ability, her Southern fastidiousness, and her puritanical stance on sexuality. Spoto observes that to Edwina, "aristocratic manners were equated with profound virtue; delicacy of diction and a studied poise had almost religious significance...and sex...was a man's mysterious reward and a woman's grim obligation" (12). There are also several hints that

make Alma Southern and similar to Edwina (and Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*), such as her unrealistic expectation of others, and her insulation from the outside world (Adler 31). Alma's label of "Nightingale of the Delta" was borrowed from Williams' grandmother (Spoto 178). When Williams rewrote *Summer and Smoke* in 1964, he renamed it *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, perhaps in remembrance of the nightingale which is known as one of the most gifted songbirds, although Kolin indicates that the nightingale can also symbolize sexual ecstasy (83). In addition, John Buchanan shares similarities with Williams' father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, who had a predilection for riotous living, manifested by sexual misconduct, drinking, and gambling. In *Summer and Smoke* John gets stabbed in a drunken fight while gambling (1.602), which echoes Cornelius Williams' trouble when he lost an ear in a card game brawl (Falk 47). There were also stories of Cornelius and a coworker contracting venereal disease from a prostitute at a "sex party of some kind among some employees of International Shoe" (qtd. in Williams and Mead 62).

Alma Winemiller, the female victim in *Summer and Smoke*, is a young woman reared in a dysfunctional home by a mentally and emotionally incapacitated mother, and a father who is too cold-hearted, busy, and indifferent to be an effective parent. When we first encounter Alma, she is a girl of ten, although her clothes and deportment suggest a miniature adult. It is clear from this description that she is robbed of a normal childhood. Williams also indicates that her mannerisms indicate a saintly and superior human being, which suggests that the joy and capriciousness of a happy-go-lucky child are missing:

Alma, as a child of ten... wears a middy blouse and has ribboned braids. She 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. She has a habit of holding her hands, one cupped under the other in a way similar to that of receiving the wafer at Holy Communion. (Prologue 571)

As a result of Alma's unnatural upbringing and her multiple adult responsibilities, which include being the female head of the household and acting as a substitute minister's wife, she becomes maladjusted. She realizes that her family obligations have robbed her of her childhood and normal social development when she admits to John that her duties may have "in a way. . . —deprived me of—my youth. . ." (1.587). Due to her sheltered and religious upbringing, she becomes a rigid and repressed young woman who formulates strict standards of conduct and moral fastidiousness. Alma's name, meaning "soul" in Spanish (1.573), implies that she stands in opposition to the flesh, which John symbolically represents. At one point, Williams describes Alma as a lady having the grace and mannerisms more suited for eighteenth-century France than twentieth-century Mississippi where she would be accused of snobbishness and affectation (1.580). Williams further describes her:

. . . Alma had an adult quality as a child and now, in her middle twenties, there is something prematurely spinsterish about her. An excessive propriety and self-consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter; her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainment, to the position of hostess in a rectory. People her own age regard her as rather quaintly and humorously affected. She has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Her true nature is still hidden even from herself. (1.577)

In one of their talks, John shows concern that Alma is frequently in need of medical attention. When he asks her if she has "fits," she replies: "Why no, but I do have attacks! —of nervous heart trouble. Which can be so alarming that I run straight to your father!" (1.581).

Alma's symptoms of hysteria, heart palpitations, breathlessness, nervous laughter, and swallowing air suggest anxiety or panic disorder; probably caused by insecurity and self-consciousness, stemming from restraint, repression, and excessive family responsibilities (Adler 117). Panic disorders had not been diagnosed during the time of the play's setting in the early twentieth century, but the medical profession now recognizes them as bona fide mental disorders with symptoms that appear very real to the patient (Nydegger 70-72). Alma's lack of coping skills coupled with her insecurity, trigger panic attacks which escalate to the point where she feels she may be on the verge of a heart attack. One outward sign of her inner turmoil is the habit of twisting her ring to the point of it making her finger bleed (1.613). Alma also finds singing in public extremely stressful. She says that it causes her heart to beat so fast that she can feel it in her throat (I.578). She is particularly disturbed by displays of fireworks and firecrackers, and states that there should be a town ordinance to ban their use (1.179). Other physical symptoms of her nervousness cause her fingers to freeze up due to lack of proper circulation (another symptom of panic disorder) (Nydegger 70). This occurs when she sings and also when Dr. John gives her a medical examination and her fingers cannot move to open the buttons on her blouse (I.605). Williams adds a touch of humor when Alma tells John that she has "a touch of malaria lingering on" (1.585), which makes her either confused or mistaken. (She probably meant to say "a touch of pneumonia.") When John examines Alma, he observes that she swallows air when she laughs or talks, which he says is a symptom of hysteria (1.582). He tells her that this indicates a larger problem, and that she suffers from "Doppelganger," which she later discovers is the inability to assimilate one's sensual with one's spiritual self. However, John doesn't press the point about how he believes she needs sexual fulfillment to solve her problem. This incidentally, was one of the recommendations given to Rose by one of her psychiatrists for a

diagnosis of repressed sexuality (Williams and Mead 36). John reverts to prescribing sedatives for Alma's ailment, just as his father did on numerous occasions and at various times during the day or night. After Alma learns that John is dating the voluptuous Mexican, Rosa Gonzales, whose father owns Moon Lake Casino, where all the "disorderly, discontinuous, and volatile impulses of unrestrained men and women occur" (Gross 96), she needs to increase her dosage, which causes her to become desensitized until she feel like "a lily on a Chinese lagoon" (1.606). This prevents her from facing the reality of the sexual union between the man she loves and a woman whom she cannot imitate because she is sexually repressed.

Williams presents Rosa Gonzales as a striking contrast to Alma in both appearance and behavior. She represents a morally loose woman who wears a lustrously feathered hat and diamond and emerald earrings that make her stand out in a crowd. Williams describes her as walking indolently, producing "a sound and atmosphere like the Gulf wind on the palmettos, a whispering of silk and a slight rattle of metallic ornaments" (1.583). Rosa lacks moral scruples when it comes to satisfying her physical desires and she even leaves her trademark of drawing blood from John during their sexual encounters. He tells her, "You never make love without scratching or biting or something. Whenever I leave you I have a little blood on me" (1.618). According to Nellie Ewell, she is a "loud, tacky thing" (1.595), and the whole town except Alma is well aware of her lewd behavior with John. Mrs. Bassett exclaims: "He knows her, all right. In the Biblical sense of the word, if you'll excuse me!" (1.601). Alma, on the other hand, is in denial and defends John's character. She tells her father that John "has been grossly misjudged and misrepresented by old busybodies who are envious of his youth and brilliance and charm" (1.608). Rosa is opposite to Alma in that she is oblivious to the town's gossip and willingly participates in activities at the Blue Moon Casino with John. She is also a foil to Alma in

claiming John for her own and in expressing her fear of losing him. She laughs hysterically, embraces him convulsively, and pleads with him sobbingly: “I want you—I, I want you!”

(2.619). By contrast, Alma is so prim and proper that she never even removes her gloves when she is alone with John.

Alma, however, has not adopted her conservatism from her mother. On the contrary, Mrs. Winemiller’s “devil-may-care” attitude is a constant source of embarrassment for both Alma and her father (1.575). Mrs. Winemiller’s shallow life centers on ice-cream cones (that symbolize indulgence), plumed hats (which she steals) and cigarettes, which symbolize liberation from societal taboos (Londré 98). Mrs. Winemiller actually has a detrimental influence on the parent-child relationship, and in their strange household the mother-daughter roles become reversed. Instead of receiving affirmation and nurturing from her mother, Alma must act as mother to the child, who in this case is Mrs. Winemiller. Alma’s mother is so out of touch with reality that one wonders how a person can be so far removed from the realms of normal thinking. She behaves more like a parrot than a human because she mimics more than she communicates. Perhaps Mrs. Winemiller’s behavior is typical of someone who has had a lobotomy, which Edwina describes as “the death of a mind” (12). However, most critics feel that Mrs. Winemiller’s behavior is indicative of a mind that has regressed through her lack of coping skills, and rather than face failure in the demanding role as a clergyman’s wife, she feigns insanity to avoid her responsibilities. Bauer-Briski asserts that this probably includes sexual responsibility as well (113). The mother, not the child, is immature and selfish, and Alma must assume the role of a mature and reassuring adult, which she does most of the time. At one point, Alma reveals her displeasure with her mother, exclaiming,

"You act like a child but have the devil in you. . . 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!" (1.596)

Alma's father, Reverend Winemiller, is neither a kindly father nor husband as one might expect a minister to be. Instead of nurturing his family, he is a rigid and self-righteous Rhodes Scholar (1.586). Signi Lenea Falk labels him as "a representative of the mainstream who victimizes outcasts" (92). This is most obvious in his relationship with his mentally ill wife, toward whom he is neither compassionate nor pleasant. He tolerates her existence the same way he would a barnacle, views her as an obstruction to his role in society, and talks about her as repeatedly as his "cross" to bear (1.575, 587, 590), knowing full well that it would be socially unacceptable and the end of his career as a minister to abandon his mentally ill wife. Both father and daughter are repeatedly embarrassed in public by Mrs. Winemiller's foolish and "perverse childishness," (1.575) as well as her rude and thoughtless remarks. For example, she informs Nellie that Alma spies on John through a particular window in the rectory (1.595); she mocks Alma's speech and laughter (1.591-93); she fights with Alma until the stolen plumed hat is destroyed (1.596); and she ridicules her husband's accusing her of being his "cross" in life to bear: "Insufferable cross yourself, you old — windbag. . ." (1.609). Mr. Winemiller also uses physical force to direct and firmly restrain his wife, treating her no better than he would an animal (1.579). He also threatens Alma that he will use physical force to remove the ring from her finger that she twists, because it irritates him so (2.626). Incidentally, Cornelius Williams physically abused both Rose and Edwina, so Williams had firsthand experience dealing with female family abuse from father and husband, Cornelius (Williams and Mead 16, 35-6).

Reverend Winemiller reveals his insensitivity toward Alma and shows a lack of understanding in handling her anxiety over singing in public. He tells her that the townspeople want her to sing again, and pays little heed to the physical signs of her discomfort, as she touches her throat and chest while protesting: “. . . Never, never again, it isn’t worth it—the tortures that I go through!” (1.578). Instead of getting help for her, or encouraging her by telling her that nervousness will subside with increased experience and confidence, he just casually says that her singing is contrary to his wishes anyway (1.578). One is reminded of another insensitive parent, Amanda, who ignores Laura’s obvious signs of psychic pain when forced to entertain her gentleman caller. Mr. Winemiller is also controlling, especially when Alma, a young adult, is instructed to keep him apprised of her activities and do as she is told (2.626). He disapproves of her seeing John, telling her that she must go upstairs if he should stop by for a visit (1.608). When Alma challenges his orders, he plays the martyred parent role: “If you’re not out of your senses then I’m out of mine. . . I have had one almost insufferable cross to bear and perhaps I can bear another” (1.608).

There is very little meaningful communication between the members of the Winemiller family, and because the parents are not concerned with meeting the personal needs of each other, they show little interest in attending to Alma’s need for parental love and assurance. It is no wonder that Williams describes Alma as “spinsterish” for lack of appropriate parental role models (1.577), because she has never recognized any signs of a healthy relationship within her family. In this sense, she very nearly approaches Laura’s social maladjustment in *The Glass Menagerie*. Louise Blackwell indicates that rash action often results from inadequate communication within the family unit, and that plenty of warning signs are present in Alma’s case (10). We may observe this when Alma tries to escape from her father’s control to go out

with John, but he still manages to call out for her after she leaves the house. The problem especially manifests itself at the end of the play when she turns to strangers to help mend her broken heart. Like Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Alma turns to sex to combat her loneliness.

The fact that Alma is set apart as “spinsterish” is primarily due to her lack of socialization, especially with people her own age, which makes her a misfit or marginalized other. Most of the people in town avoid her because they feel she has an affected manner that makes her appear to have an air of superiority. Only her singing is highly esteemed, especially by the elder Dr. Buchanan who asks her to sing for him during his dying moments, and by her singing student, Nellie Ewell. But for the most part, people cannot relate to her and shun her. Alma feels hurt when John relates that people ridicule her mannerisms: “. . . for putting on airs a little —for gilding the lily a bit” (1.585). She explains that she must have picked up her accent from her father without realizing it (1.586). Alma has few friends apart from her childhood companion, John, and the people in a small pseudo-intellectual group to which she belongs and which meets sporadically. Williams describes the members rather unflatteringly, as if they represent the fringe of mainstream society. He may also have intended to emphasize their dramatic contrast with the ideal “Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society” (1.575), the virile and handsome Dr. John. Williams describes Mr. Roger Doremus as a small man who resembles “a sparrow” (1.589), and Vernon as a willowy younger man with an open collar and Byronic looks. The other women in the group consist of the hypercritical, meddling widow, Mrs. Bassett, and Rosemary, a wistful older girl with a long neck and thick-lensed glasses (1.597).

Alma's lack of socialization and inadequate parental nurturing cause her to appear emotionally and psychologically unstable (which is another cause for her being marginalized). Her sensitivity and her sheltered upbringing cause her to burst into tears (1.588, 1.603, 2.639). If she were more self-assured this would probably not occur as frequently. Alma's instability also affects her perception of sex, which she fears and rejects. She has conflicting emotions toward John, and while she rejects a sexual relationship with him, she finds herself physically attracted to him. She is fearful to act on her feelings because of her upbringing, and also because she, like Amanda and Blanche, favors higher ideals of moral conduct that reject the way of the brutes. She uses the image of a Gothic cathedral to explain to John that we should be looking upwards beyond our human reach: "All of us are in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars" (1.612). Alma is frustrated that John looks only for sexual fulfillment, and that she cannot convince him of the importance of spiritual love in a relationship, or her ideals in a relationship. She repeatedly spurns his advances and reminds him of the proper behavior of an ideal Southern lady on their date at the Moon Lake Casino (which has shades of Amanda's lecturing style in *The Glass Menagerie*),

"The woman you selected to be your wife, and not only your wife but — the mother of your children...Wouldn't you want that woman to be a lady? Wouldn't you want her to be somebody that you, as her husband, and they as her precious children— could look up to with very deep respect?" (1.614)

In John's anatomy lecture of feeding the brain, the stomach, and the reproductive organs, he voices his negative attitude toward her prudishness: "I've fed all three, as much of all three as I could or as much as I wanted—You've fed none—nothing. Well—maybe your belly a little—

watery subsistence—But love or truth, nothing but—hand-me-down notions! —attitudes! —poses. . .” (2.624).

Corresponding to her prudishness, much about Alma exemplifies strength of character. Jackson indicates that she appears fastidious in areas of propriety, loyalty, honesty, self control, respect for tradition, and humanitarian duty (139), qualities valued and idealized by the Southern gentility of previous generations. Early in her friendship with John, when they visit at the fountain in the town center after school, she shares with him an awareness of her spirituality through the meaning of her name. Some critics believe that Williams intends her to represent symbolically the angel of eternity; stone-cold and frigid (Griffin 91). When Alma asks John to read the inscription by feeling the letters carved in the base of the angel at the fountain, John asks what the inscription, “Eternity,” means. Alma gives an exceptionally precise definition for a ten year old: “It’s something that goes on and on when life and death and time and everything else is all through with” (1.573). Her saintly persona continues in her subsequent meetings with John, when she always appears fully gloved as if to protect and shield her from the sensual experience of physical touch.

Alma remains true to her convictions when she shows compassion toward outcasts, probably because she is one herself. She accepts Nellie into her home as a voice student, in spite of the fact that Nellie’s mother is labeled “the merry widow of Glorious Hill who goes to the depot to meet every train in order to make acquaintances of traveling salesmen” (1.584). Her display of kindness opposes the puritanical rejection of the townspeople, including her father. She tells John,

“Father didn’t want me to take her as a pupil because of her mother’s reputation, but I feel that one has a duty to perform toward children in such. . .

circumstances. . . And 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!” (1.584)

Alma is further marginalized by the townspeople who consider her eccentric, and laugh about her affected diction and convoluted vocabulary (such as her using the term “pyrotechnical display” for fireworks) (1.583). However, they show inconsistency in their interpretation of proper Christian behavior, and instead of reaching out in love to the immoral and the eccentric “other,” they shun or ridicule those who don’t conform to the norms of human behavior. When John tells Alma about the townspeople, she takes it in her stride, which indicates that in spite of her eccentricities, she seems more magnanimous than her father and the rest of her small Mississippi town. John recognizes the goodness in Alma when he tells her: “. . . you have a lot of feeling in your heart, and that’s a rare thing. It makes you too easily hurt” (1.605). Alma is either naïve or blinded by love when she tells her father that she doesn’t judge character on the basis of gossip. She says, “I happen to know that he has been grossly misjudged and misrepresented by old busybodies who’re envious of his youth and brilliance and charm” (1.608).

Alma alienates herself from John by appearing more like a mother-figure than a lover to him (his mother died when he was very little) when she reprimands him for not honoring his father. She lectures him for wasting his time, training, and calling into the medical profession,

“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 doctor—*Magna cum Laude!* You know what I call it? I call it desecration!” (1.588)

Alma is not impressed with John's anatomy lesson when he shouts at her: "This part down here is the sex—which is hungry for love because it is sometimes lonesome" (2.623). She believes that sex without emotion reduces man to the level of animals, and tries to impress upon him that humans also have souls that need nurturing.

When Alma rejects John on their date at the Blue Lake Casino, we see a similarity to Blanche's fate when she rejects Allan Grey. At this significant moment, the only moment available in the play for Alma to win John's affection, she is not ready to accept him on his terms, and when she runs away from this one and only opportunity it leads to disaster. Arthur Ganz states that "Alma, like Blanche Dubois, is guilty of the sin of rejection in Williams' perceived morality, and is condemned to torture by the very urges that she had fled from, leading her to choose promiscuity" (129).

Alma and Blanche share many other characteristics as well. They both have delicate personalities, and share an affinity with cultural activities such as music and poetry. Both are teachers: Alma teaches music, and Blanche, English. They are also women robbed of their childhood through the necessity of assuming responsibilities of their previous generation (Alma), or generations (Blanche). They both rely on medicinal substances to calm their nerves: Alma prescription drugs, and Blanche alcohol. According to Boxill, the delicate, fluttery handkerchief is the theatrical metaphor for Alma's personality (103). The symbol of Alma's handkerchief in *Summer and Smoke* evolves into the moth that symbolizes Blanche, a delicate, fragile, and easily destroyed creature in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Alma and Blanche are also similar when they reach the end of their tether and turn to "the kindness of strangers."

Alma also shares traits with Laura Wingfield, evidenced in their isolation and loneliness and in their crying out for love. They both are given only one chance at finding love, which is

denied them. Blanche, Laura, and Alma are also similar in their preference for candle-light or faded light to “a world lit by lights” such as by fireworks (1.580). Alma bears a likeness to Amanda and Blanche in their striving for higher ideals. Alma reminds John of the “everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have places in our reach” (1.612). Alma adopts some of Nellie’s mother, Mrs. Ewell’s traits, when she goes to the train station to meet traveling salesmen to escape loneliness (2.640), and then proceeds to entertain them at Blue Lake Casino where moral abandonment reigns supreme. Boxill maintains that *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* form a “diptych” on the subject of the fading Southern belle. The first play presents her background, the second her demise. The dividing line between the restraint of Alma’s early phase and the promiscuity of her late one is the loss of her hopes and aspirations of a love relationship with John. Where Alma leaves off Blanche begins (102).

John who represents the flesh devoid of the soul is both the object of Alma’s desires and her executioner, and just as a moth is drawn to the flame that will destroy it, Alma is drawn to John. There is not much to admire in his behavior toward Alma (or toward anyone else for that matter), but for some reason she is drawn to him and has loved him since childhood. Williams presents John as a foil to the introverted, otherworldly, delicate, and artistic Alma. Williams describes John as:

. . . a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society. The excess of his power has not yet found a channel. If it remains without one, it will burn him up. At present he is unmarked by the dissipations in which he relieves his demoniac unrest; he has the fresh and shining look of an epic hero. . . (1.575)

Jackson signifies that Williams’ portrayal of John represents a throwback to the primal condition of males like that of Homeric heroes in the areas of “survival and sensual gratification” (138). In

this regard, he represents the Stanley Kowalski prototype in physical attraction and masculinity. John looks to Alma to subdue the “Promethean” elements in his soul when he lays his head on her lap: “But my head’s on fire. . . I will go in a minute, but first I want you to put your hands on my face...Eternity and Alma have such cool hands” (1.621).

In the prologue when we are first introduced to them as children in grade school, he appears unrefined and neglected, probably due to his being a motherless child and having a father too busy pursuing altruistic goals as a physician to care for his son. John resents Alma for giving him a handkerchief in school to wipe his runny nose, even though she took pains not to embarrass him. He spends very little time with Alma, makes an attempt to anger her by trying to steal a kiss from her, and then runs away mocking her. There are several indications that John is uncomfortable with death (perhaps reflecting Williams’ feelings). John tells Alma he was repulsed by his dying mother and even hit her outstretched hand (Prologue 573). He later tells Alma that he is disgusted with his profession that has to deal with “sickness, misery, and death” and wants to move away to South America (1.611).

When Alma and John reappear at the fountain as young adults in the first scene of the play, he is still lacking in maturity. His father speaks to him disparagingly for his lecherous, wanton behavior. John taunts Alma, makes a half-hearted attempt at asking her for a date, and then abruptly leaves in a hot pursuit of Rosa Gonzales. When Alma invites him to her literary club meeting, he arrives late and leaves early, clearly displaying his dislike for her reserved tea-toting group in preference for company with wild revelers at the casino where uninhibited sex, drinking, and gambling is standard behavior. In their only date together at the Moon Lake Casino Alma “hysterically” demands a taxi to take her home when their date turns sour and she reproaches his advances with “You’re not a gentleman” (2.615). He soon further proves this

accusation after he discovers that Alma made the phone call to warn his father about the wild party that John was throwing at his house, and blaming her for his father's return and subsequent murder by his future father-in-law, Mr. Gonzales, John rebukes Alma with the scathing name-calling of "white-blooded spinster" (2.623).

When Alma tells John how he hurt her by not considering love as she viewed it and merely seeking their physical union, John hurts her further by stating that he now realizes that it was not Alma's physical body he desired, but her spirituality. He tells her that all along he was seeking her purity; the spiritual nature that he lacked. He adds insult to injury when he confesses that he was mistaken when he thought he desired her body at the Blue Lake Casino: "I'm more afraid of your soul than you're afraid of my body. You'd have been as safe as the angel of the fountain—because I wouldn't feel decent enough to touch you" (2.624). When Alma comes to reveal her self-discovery of her sensual longing for John, he responds with insensitivity to her emotions and neglect toward her needs. She tells him: "But now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said "no," she doesn't exist anymore, she died last summer— suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her" (2.635).

John is too self-absorbed to recognize Alma's pain through his rejection of her, and he ignores how she has totally revised her position toward his anatomy lesson. He is too consumed with his own realization that he's come to appreciate what her character stands for, the soul, and realizes that we are more than just body parts on an anatomy chart. He confesses: "I've come around to your way of thinking, that something also is in there, an immaterial something—as thin as smoke—which all of these ugly machines combine to produce and that's their whole reason for being" (2.636). The closest John can come to an apology is: "You couldn't name it

and I couldn't recognize it. I thought it was just a Puritanical ice that glittered like flame. But now I believe that it was flame, mistaken for ice. . ." (2.637).

Instead of fusing together, John and Alma ultimately reverse roles and remain dichotomous. The ironic twist in the play is that Alma becomes ruined when she accepts physical indulgence over spiritual purity, and that John, the person who once advocated hedonism and denial of the spiritual, is the wrong person rewarded in the long run. He becomes an altruistic doctor and marries Alma's much younger and better-adjusted student, Nellie, even though Alma makes it abundantly clear that Nellie lacks her musical talent (1.584, 2.638). The collapse of moral order in Alma's world is perhaps best explained when she tells John that her stance was never stable to begin with: "Oh, I suppose I am sick, one of those weak and divided people, who slip like shadows among you solid strong ones. But sometimes, out of necessity, we shadowy people take on a strength of our own" (2.636).

Alma soon realizes the irony of their relationship, where each of them was trying to glean the other's essence:

"You've come around to my old way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time, and each one finding the other gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer the bell. . . you're telling me I've got to remain a lady. . . the tables have turned with a vengeance."  
(2.638)

Ironically, at the play's outset, Alma gives John a handkerchief for his runny nose, and near the play's conclusion she receives a gift of handkerchiefs as a token of appreciation from Nellie and John for being his "angel of mercy" (2.632). Another ironic twist occurs when John asks Alma to wear a plumed hat when planning her ride with him in his fast car, which she says

she doesn't own, but after her revised stance on morality, she dons a russet dress and plumed hat to suggest her vitality and freedom when she meets with John for the last time and her travelling salesman for the first time (2.636). They go to Moon Lake Casino on their first date, which now under new ownership, might symbolize her new beginning as a liberated woman.

John and Alma reverse roles out of admiration for the principles which the other upholds. John's conversion for the better is easier to accept than Alma's, especially when she appears so fastidious in her moral convictions. However, if one takes a Freudian approach, the expression "sex comes too violently after too long a period of suppression" holds true (Sievers 376). Like most archetypal women, Alma is destroyed by a callous lover and a malevolent society which alienates her and causes her destruction. Falk maintains that many of Williams' women reflect the conflict between Puritan idealism and instinctual drives, which according to Williams is incompatible, and led his ladies to immorality and prostitution (168). This could mirror what is occurring in Williams' own psyche, where conflict between Puritan upbringing and sensuality leads him to choose debauchery and hedonistic excess. In his *Playboy* interview, Williams acknowledges that he was extremely shy and sexually stunted until his late twenties (Jennings 224). Tischler, in *Rebellious Puritan*, reminds us that many of Williams' characters struggle between their human need of warmth from another person and their Puritan horror of the physical (120). Williams says that the character that he most identifies with in all of his plays is Alma. He states in the *Playboy* interview: "Alma of *Summer and Smoke* is my favorite because I came out so late and so did Alma, and she had the greatest struggle, you know? . . . But Miss Alma grew up in the shadow of the rectory, and so did I . . . Her man fell in love with someone else and Miss Alma turned to a life of profligacy" (qtd. in Jennings 227).

Alma is a frail, maladjusted Southern girl with repressed sensuality caused by an extremely rigid and Puritanical upbringing. She, like many other Williams' heroines, is a victim of her southern heritage where woman was viewed as either sexless or fallen. A woman is scorned if she chooses a hedonistic path, whereas a man is not subjected to the same standards. As a victim of society, Alma is overpowered by a man who values only sexual gratification in a relationship. Alma believes that she must make a complete transformation and succumb to John's way of thinking in order to gain his love. This makes her a slave to patriarchal superiority.

Unfortunately, Alma's transformation comes too late, and ironically, John adopts a blend of the physical and spiritual, which he rejected earlier. But instead of Alma, he chooses to marry Nellie, who represents a blend of Alma's purity and Rosa's sensuality. Alma's tragedy is that she does not reach a compromise as an individual like John does, which makes her a victim. Alma is like so many of Williams' other tragic characters that transition "from integration to degradation, illusion to disillusion, or sexual certainty to confusion" (Timpane 174). She as the marginalized "other" becomes lost and incomplete, while her male counterpart achieves society's forgiveness and completion.

## Conclusion

### Women as Victims in Tennessee Williams First Three Major Plays

Most feminists agree that gender differences are culturally determined and that literature provides a record of male dominance in male-female interaction (Showalter 127). Using feminist theory, this thesis reviews and analyzes Tennessee Williams' first three major plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Summer and Smoke* in light of Williams' portrayal of women as victims. Of particular significance is the social milieu in which female oppression occurs in these three plays, and Williams' perception of women as a marginalized segment of society. Williams pairs his "delicate," marginalized females with contrasting powerful male counterparts to emphasize their insignificance in the social setting in which they live. In *Streetcar named Desire*, Stanley Kowalski's vulgarity and sensuality sets Blanche's romantic sensitivity and gentility apart; in *Glass Menagerie*, Jim O'Conner's tenacity and ambition accentuate Laura's fragility and delicate beauty; and in *Summer and Smoke*, John Buchanan's carnality expressed in his anatomy lesson contrasts with Alma's spirituality. Williams is sensitive to the plight of the delicate, weak, and romantic outcast women in these plays, and empathizes with their victimization in an aggressive male dominant society.

Amanda and Laura are victims of a Southern patriarchal system which traditionally teaches women to be attractive and beguiling in order to receive a husband's care and protection. Such systems are oppressive because all humans naturally seek autonomy and desire individual freedom as opposed to being controlled and possessed by another individual. In order to ensure women's dependency on men, patriarchal society does little to educate women and help them achieve autonomy. Amanda and Laura break with tradition, not through choice, but because an alcoholic husband and father abandons them and leaves them destitute. They are the by-products of a broken, dysfunctional home, and as a result, become isolated outcasts. Amanda suffers a

bitter blow when her husband deserts her and leaves her responsible for her children in an era when society viewed women suspiciously if they were breadwinners. She shelters herself from the outside world and manufactures her own illusionary world by clinging to her past, surrounded by jonquils and gentlemen callers. She tries desperately to convince Tom to stay and provide for her and Laura, and in the process becomes controlling and over-compensating. Her daughter learns how to create an illusionary world from her mother and attends to her fragile collection of glass animals and outdated music which she plays on an old Victrola left by her father sixteen years earlier. Laura is marginalized in a cruel society not only because of her physical impediment, but also because she suffers emotionally from a severe social phobia. Because of her extreme sensitivity, she suffers the most from her father abandoning the family. Her feelings of failure and insecurity cause her to lose any chance of finding a job in the working world or in finding a husband to care for her. This is not the way things are supposed to happen according to Southern tradition, and Williams is quite aware how his mother and sister suffer in a cruel world that holds them hostage by a husband and father who abuses and neglects them.

Similarly, Blanche Dubois and Stella Kowalski are victims in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The two Southern sisters, Blanche and Stella, are incompatible with the new American immigrant, Stanley Kowalski, the self-aggrandizing macho hero, who represents the brave new world of realism, and who tramples over them. Both women are overpowered by Stanley, because they were raised in a society where, according to Adler, young women “are treated as ornaments rather than trained for economic independence,” and face major difficulties when trying to cope with modern times (79). Blanche displays deep-seated psychological instability when she is unable to live up to her self-imposed expectations as a properly raised Southern belle. Stella represents the classic example of a woman’s deference to an abusive husband, which

occurs not only in the South during the time of this play, but also resounds throughout most of human history. Stanley Kowalski's personality provides insight into how men dominate women, convince them of their inferiority, and ultimately destroy them if unchecked. Blanche and Stella become prisoners of the Southern patriarchal system and traditional notions about women that dictate their economic dependency on men. According to Southern tradition, women are ill-equipped to survive in a changing world by any means other than their physical attractiveness. The concept that youth and beauty are the only sources of feminine power is deeply etched in their psyches. Blanche is frantic about her fading good looks which she needs in order to win the hand of a charming suitor, even if only through the realm of fantasy (Adler 40). Stella becomes a helpless creature under Stanley's physical domination, whose favors she accepts "with tears of gratitude" (Bauer-Briski 69). Williams presents Blanche and Stella as helpless victims who cannot break from their traditional roles in a society that empowers males and victimizes females.

Alma Winemiller, like Laura Wingfield, is a product of a dysfunctional home. Alma is forced to assume an unnatural role as a female servant in a rector's household at a very young age. She is the offspring of a mentally incapacitated mother (who also is denied proper care and treatment in a male-dominated world), and a father who is too detached and insensitive to be a good parent and caring husband. Alma's story is one of social isolation and a total lack of preparation for life in the real world. Her ultimate decision is to self-destruct as a victim of male oppression because she is unable to cope with rejection from the dominant male whom she admits to loving too late. Alma is also similar to Blanche, in that she is attracted to unwholesome sex which will ultimately destroy her, just as a moth is drawn to and destroyed by a flame. Both women are misfits, set apart by their antiquated elaborate speech and affected behavior, and

appear to belong to a different era and place. Sadly, in her formative years, Alma is robbed of a normal childhood, and like Amanda and Blanche, must assume a role for which she is totally unprepared. According to Southern tradition, women are not expected to fend for themselves because men provide for, and protect them, and servants perform all of the menial, everyday tasks.

The five women in Williams' first three major plays—Amanda Wingfield, Laura Wingfield, Blanche Dubois, Stella Kowalski, and Alma Winemaker—are tragic examples of victimized women. Each has a distinctly unique and unforgettable story. Amanda and Laura withdraw into further isolation and alienation; Blanche becomes insane; Stella returns to her world of sexual addiction; and Alma embarks on her personal journey to sexual destruction.

Because of writers like Williams who compel a greater awareness of the victimization of women through literature, pathetic figures like Amanda, Laura, Blanche, Stella, and Alma will strengthen women's struggle to obtain equality and recognition as worthy human beings and to end the helplessness and tyranny caused by male domination. The tragedy of these women is the tragedy of the civilization "which bore them, nourished them, and then cast them out...they are social fossils in an age of commercialism and tawdriness" (Jones 219).

Williams' writing displays his sensitivity to the powerless status of women, or the insignificant "Other" because of his own marginalization as a homosexual, but more importantly because of his giftedness in presenting the plight of misfits and losers. Williams' female characters are some of his best, because both psychologically and thematically, they express his romantic and poetic style (Adler 77). Women and romantics are losers in an aggressive society, crushed and trampled on by the wheels of change and ugly realism. Misfits are those who are socially ignored and rejected in a male-dominated, insensitive world, like his mentally ill sister,

Rose, who was involuntarily stripped of all her personhood. Blanche too, was taken away by a patriarchal mental health system like a lamb to the slaughter. Mental illness is a crushing blow to family members, as Miss Edwina relates:

Just before the [lobotomy] operation I felt ill, seized by a deep depression, and Mother came to stay with me. I didn't think I could ever get out of bed again...It is sad to see a loved one die physically. But I think it even sadder to see a loved one die spiritually and mentally. I had to watch this in Rose. (Williams and Freeman 86-7)

Both Edwina and Rose were disempowered to withstand a male dominant system that treats mentally ill victims inhumanely: "The psychiatrists convinced Cornelius the only answer was lobotomy" (85). Williams felt betrayed that he could not represent Rose in this tragic decision.

Williams' own life ended tragically because he let his drug and alcohol abuse ruin him (which often happens when people attempt to euthanize psychic pain without God's help). Had he resolved his life issues, he may not have been the playwright that he became, because great writers often transfer their anguish into great literature. Just as his heroines in *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Summer and Smoke* descended in a spiral of hopelessness, Williams apparently did, too. His love for his sister and his grief over her tragedy consumed him to the point where everything he wrote about was indirectly related to her tragedy. Rose was Williams' extension of himself, and perhaps the only person he loved as much over the course of his entire life. As hard as Williams tried to fill the void that the loss of Rose left on him, he was never able to do so. Further research could profitably trace Williams' love and loss of Rose throughout his writing. The theme of marginalization through mental illness in Williams' plays is also a valid research topic.

Williams' plays, in their broadest context, represent the conflict between flesh and spirit. Williams confesses to a lifelong struggle between his Puritan and Cavalier nature, and his characters struggle spiritually as well. For Blanche, the struggle is her unresolved guilt caused by her husband's suicide and her use of sex to numb the pain. She breaks with the traditional values of her upbringing and ritualistically cleanses herself by bathing to atone for her sins. Stella anaesthetizes her pain when she disavows the protocol of her traditional upbringing by marrying below her social class, and not even her sister's rape can break her addiction to sex. Amanda's struggle occurs because she feels responsible for being abandoned by the two men in her life. Laura's curse is that she will become a spinster because of her extreme shyness and physical deformity. Alma's struggle between flesh and spirit is very apparent throughout the play, and her punishment is that she doesn't seize the opportunity to capture the man of her dreams, and consequently she condemns herself to a life of immorality. Patriarchal society clearly devalues women in a world where God created all humans equally.

Williams' plays are relevant to the predicament of women in western society today and will remain timeless in their portrayal of women as victims until we put an end to patriarchy. We need to pursue more active means of presenting worthwhile themes found in literature, and one way would be through a modern revival of Williams' first three major plays in movie and musical theatre productions. Inspired screenwriters, motion picture directors, and composers need to pick up the challenge that Williams has sparked and continue his efforts to put an end to the victimization of women through greater public awareness.

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