Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh Study Guide

Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh by John Lahr

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The story of Tennessee Williams' life is the story of a genuine artist who struggled to emerge with his authentic visions despite the many obstacles placed in his path. If there can be a "plot" in a biography, it would rest on Williams' many achievements—personal and professional, in his 70-odd years on earth. Universally acclaimed as a dramatic and poetic genius, Williams' plays are woven from the language of poetry, but the poetry of everyday people caught in the many traps of human life, mostly set by other humans.

His professional life was marked by great success and ignominious failure. The author of The Glass Menagerie, with its heartbreaking sensitivity and iconoclastic honesty, is the same writer who saw other of his plays open and close within a week or less. The high-energy gay man who had a seemingly unending string of lovers suffered from extreme loneliness and depression. By his 30s, Williams had started on his other career as alcoholic and addict. As is often the case with addicts, it is difficult to separate the actual pain in his life from the pain worsened by his drinking and drug use.

Williams' life is everywhere woven into his art, so that it is virtually impossible to consider one without the other. And many of his dramatic characters are quite clearly drawn from his own life. Wounded and often misunderstood by the world, the larger question of Williams' life is whether he succeeded in creating the kind of alternative reality in his work that he so desperately sought to escape in his life.

Although Williams had a long relationship with Frank Merlo—fraught with melodrama and plenty of ups and downs—the only person it seems Williams ever loved completely unselfishly was his sister, Rose. Williams was outraged that his parents gave their permission for Rose to have a frontal lobotomy because she was a difficult and disturbed teenager. She appears as Laura in The Glass Menagerie.

Rose obviously idolized her brother, too. In the various mental institutions where she lived during much of her life, Rose had a collection of press clippings and other trappings of Tennessee's career. He made it a point to stay in touch with Rose and visit whenever he could. In his estate worth millions, Tennessee left the bulk of his assets to a trust for the care and comfort of his sister for the rest of her life.

Like any great dramatist, Williams stood at arm's length from his characters although he obviously had compassion and strong identification with them. In the same way, Williams could hold other people at a distance whether because of fear or reticence. The more acquainted we become with Tennessee's work, the easier it is to recognize in his characters the basics of human life that are the same for everyone: the need for love, the need for validation, the need for security, and the need for companionship.

Even if Tennessee could not satisfy all of these needs throughout his lifetime, he could and did know them through his work that deals with universal themes of human life. This, then. is the "plot" of Tennessee Williams' life: a constant struggle to celebrate the

humanity of mankind, to laugh at his failures and foibles and to communicate that the way of love is the only way.

Blood — Hot and Personal

Summary

Tennessee Williams was a virtually unknown in the American theater when his play, "The Glass Menagerie," opened in 1945 at the Playhouse Theatre on Broadway in New York City. His full-length Broadway-bound play, "Battle of Angels," had been a critical and commercial failure in Boston but never reached the stage in New York. "The Glass Menagerie," despite its sold-out opening night, faced an uncertain future. The pivotal role of Amanda Wingfield had been cast to Laurette Taylor, a fading stage actress whose alcoholism was at an advanced stage. Nevertheless, many came to see Taylor because of her long and visible stage presence. In his ill-fitting and frumpy suit, the 34-year-old playwright was described by one observer as appearing like "a farm boy in his Sunday best."

By this time, Williams had secured Audrey Wood as his literary agent. Some of the other writers and actors in her stable included Carson McCullers, William Inge, Marlon Brando, Elizabeth Taylor and Audrey Hepburn.

It was exceedingly tricky to lure the fragile Laurette Taylor from her Manhattan apartment where she had been on a 12-year drunk during which she'd had no acting roles. When Williams' play opened on Broadway, there were buckets placed at strategic locations just offstage into which she could vomit when she became ill. Other actors improvised lines to give her stage orientation and prompted her with their body language. The lead actress was herself as fragile and vulnerable as the heart-breakingly shy Laura Wingfield, awaiting a gentleman caller who never calls. But the audience exploded with enthusiasm when the play ended, partly because of the return of Laurette Taylor.

Later in 1945, "The Glass Menagerie" won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play of the year. Two other Williams' plays, "Stairs to the Roof" and "You Touched Me!" premiered that year in California and on Broadway. "The Glass Menagerie" also was published by Random House.

In December 1944, "The Glass Menagerie" opened for a tryout in Chicago on a cold, snowy evening without any prior publicity or marketing campaign. The agent Audrey Wood called the opening night audience "respectful but hardly ecstatic." However, the drama critics—especially Claudia Cassidy of the Chicago Tribune—gave the play a warm reception and Laurette Taylor a ringing endorsement. Before long, big names in theater such as Katherine Hepburn, Gregory Peck, Raymond Massey and Spencer Tracy, showed up in Chicago to see the play that was generating such a buzz in the entertainment world.

Williams' apprehensions about "The Glass Menagerie" probably were sown by the disastrous failure of "Battle of Angels" four years earlier, in 1940, when it premiered in

Boston after only one day's rehearsal. The play closed after two weeks and didn't make it to Broadway. Williams had hoped "Battle of Angels" would fuse realism and lyricism and point toward a new direction in the American theater. It tells the story of Val Xavier, a young southern man who seeks to escape his roots for a kinder, gentler world where he is accepted for himself. Val is Tennessee Williams' alter ego who seeks something beyond the "welter of broken pieces, wreckage, that floats on the surface of life." The playwright recalled the death rattle of his play, signaled by the sound of seats flipping up and loud whispers in the audience. In this instance, the Boston bluestocking critics branded his work as "improper and indecent" as well as "dirty."

Williams was so shaken by the hostile reception for "Battle of Angels" that he was rendered speechless and, as his friend, poet William Jay Smith observed, suicidal. Smith read Tennessee poems by John Donne in his hotel room to calm him down. After a critic called the play "dirty," other newspapers quickly picked up on the theme and formed an echo chamber where the cries of outrage could be heard across the nation. Producers (investors) demanded that Williams cut out portions of the play and rewrite the last scene. The Boston City Council branded the play "putrid" and the Boston police commissioner also demanded changes in the play.

After two weeks, the play closed. Williams had expected to make at least $800 for his efforts but came away with only $200.

"If ever the professional debut of a major playwright was a greater fiasco, history does not record it," the author observes. "'Battle of Angels' set a kind of high-water mark for disaster." Playwright Arthur Miller praised the play, proclaiming that "In one stroke, The Glass Menagerie lifted lyricism to its highest level in our theater's history."

Analysis

The episodes and incidents described above demonstrate how Tennessee Williams earned a second cognomen: Tenacity Williams. Although his earliest plays did not meet with success, he still believed in himself and in his artistic vision. For Williams, beauty and sensation in the service of redemption became his guiding artistic principle. At one point, Williams pawned his typewriter and had no more than $5 in his pocket at any one time. He identified with the romantic poets of an earlier generation such as John Keats, Percy Shelley and Lord Byron and clung to contemporary artists such as Vincent Van Gogh, D. H. Lawrence and Katherine Mansfield as living exemplars of the same ideal of romantic idealism.

He wrote to his agent Audrey Wood that he had chosen a "one-way street" artistically and had to "follow it through with all the confidence and courage that necessity gives you." In his diary, Williams wrote that his avid pursuit of his gay sexuality and travel both soothed and stimulated him in the face of these early setbacks. Nevertheless, he could see the shallowness of his efforts and admitted, "I wasn't happy—neither was I unhappy."

In this way, WIlliams' homosexuality seems to have provided him with an escape from his frustrations and disappointments in the same way that another man might, for example, find in golf or in the pursuit of many girlfriends. His adjustment to this period of his life also was not devoid of a certain compulsiveness, or even addiction, that numbed his bitter feelings and helped to sustain his will to live and create.

There is a certain protean quality to both Williams and his work, as short stories become plays, poems become inserted into plays, and certain character types reappear such as Big Daddy, who was obviously and indelibly the dramatic equivalent of his father, C.C. WIlliams. Tom Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie" is transparently the young dreamer who became Tennessee Williams, and the figure of the strong, manipulative family matriarch appears and reappears. It is as if Williams concentrated on a certain set of themes and a certain cast of character stereotypes that he continually worked over and over in his mind and in his art.

Williams told the drama critic of The New York Times that his frenzied work habits derived from desperation, "that thing that makes me write like a screaming banshee when under this impulse to scream all the time is a deep, deep longing to call out softly with love."

Discussion Question 1

How is "The Glass Menagerie" different from previous dramatic works on the American stage?

Discussion Question 2

What was Tennessee Williams' reaction when his play, "Battle of Angels," received bad reviews in Boston?

Discussion Question 3

Who is the ostensible model for Laura Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie?"

Vocabulary

matriarch, genteel, balk, harridan, incalculable, cognoscenti, promiscuity, autoerotic, protean, raffish, hedonist, petulant, apocalyptic, conflagration, ineluctable, impecunious, microcosm, lobotomy, fractious, hidebound, palpable, draconian, limpid, histrionics, mantelpiece, balmy, exhilaration

The Heart Can't Wait

Summary

After the spectacular success of "The Glass Menagerie" Williams decided to return to New Orleans and get back to work, but the solitude and peace he sought could not so easily be found. Even his landlord knew of his fame and began treating him like royalty. At least one drama dilettante from New York named Sylvia pursued him relentlessly, which the gay playwright found amusing since he'd never even been noticed by beautiful women before his triumph. Nevertheless, Williams wrote to his agent that he found New Orleans "more restful" than New York. Williams also settled into something like a regular domestic routine with Pancho Gonzales, a good-looking Mexican who worked as a receptionist at the Pontchartrain Hotel.

In letters to Audrey Wood, the playwright expressed both gratitude for the fact he was making money at last and consternation at the disintegration of his own family. His father had retired from the shoe company in St. Louis and drank all day alone in his room while his grandfather, The Reverend Dakin, cowered in his room to avoid conflict with Tennessee's father. His lobotomized sister, Rose, seemed to exist in a netherworld, oblivious to the daily tension and drama within the family. Williams came to regard sexual repression, the kind demanded by Christian preachers such as his grandfather as the root of his family's dysfunction and unhappiness.

Instead of recoiling from the sensuous aspect of life, which the devout Christian identifies as the path to moral decay, Williams saw that for him embracing Freud's "pleasure principle" was the path to his personal sanity as well as the key to his artistic development. The theme of Christian loathing for the body as the antithesis of the soul and the confusion and madness that conflict produces is the subject of another of Williams' plays from this era, "You Touched Me!" In his own family, Williams sees sexual repression as the rocky shore upon which that vessel is wrecked: "Rose had been driven mad by the taboo around sex and by its disruptive power," the author writes. "Edwina had become a frigid virago; CC a drunken, furious absence forced to carouse with whores; and even the Reverend Dakin made a stranger to himself."

Williams struggled as a young man within his repressed family to find some balance in his sexuality. At the age of 11 he had a girlfriend, Hazel Kramer, who heaped more repression on his adolescent urges by making him count to 10 before he could kiss her. The playwright reported a spontaneous orgasm when he put his arm around her on a river boat in St, Louis. They remained fiends through college, but as a student at the University of Iowa he fell in love with his male roommate although there was no sex involved. His first reported heterosexual encounter was with a coed at the same college, although Williams succeeded only in vomiting. The next night, he consummated the relationship and bragged about it to his fraternity brothers.

At the same time, Williams wrote in his diary of a growing loneliness that nothing could assuage. He described his aversion at getting entangled in "cheap, filthy personalities" and his need to accept solitude as his preferred "decent" way of life. He wrote: "All my deep loves and friendships have hurt me finally. I mean have caused me pain because I have felt so much more than the other person could feel." So Williams sought release from loneliness in a string of gay one-night stands that served mostly to aggravate his sense of isolation. But he broke free of that prison by using alcohol to disinhibit himself and become more assertive in his homosexual prowlings.

In 1942, in what the author calls Williams' "sexual delirium," the playwright even described in detail his idea of the perfect gay coupling: "You should cover the bed with a large white piece of oilcloth; the bodies of the sexual partners ought to be rubbed over with mineral oil or cold cream. It should be in the afternoon."

In New Orleans Williams struck up a relationship with Pancho Rodriguez, whose neediness and lack of emotional or physical roots were even more pronounced than his own. With a partner to care for, Williams' promiscuity faded. Both had serious abandonment issues but their different personalities meshed well. Williams was drawn out of his isolation by the colorful, unconventional antics of his friend; Rodriguez perhaps found something of a father figure in Williams, the disciplined, hard-working artist.

To escape the humidity and heat of New Orleans, Williams bought a Packard convertible and planned to head west, stopping in St. Louis to visit his family. Pancho, who planned to quit his job and catch up with Williams in Taos, N.M, sent a letter to Tennessee at the St. Louis address, which raised the family's suspicions about his homosexuality. Edwina scurried to answer the phone ahead of her son so she could eavesdrop whenever Pancho called. Before long, "the cat was out of the bag," Williams remarked.

By the time he reached Taos, Williams was hospitalized for emergency surgery because of an attack of diverticulitis. As he slowly recovered, he decided that what he needed was a summer in Nantucket. There he rented a house and invited several friends to visit. One was Carson McCullers, whose novel "The Member of the Wedding" Williams had praised highly. Although it was their first face-to-face meeting, both writers reported it was like encountering an old and trusted friend. They became very close that summer, and collaborated on a stage adaptation of her novel. They also used the same long table to write, sitting at opposite ends. The only fly in the ointment was Pancho who became a rude and offensive drunk, causing a great amount of distress and distraction for Williams and McCullers.

When the playwright returned to New York, Pancho insinuated himself into meetings between Williams and his agent, Audrey Wood, sometimes asking blunt business questions about her handling of Williams, which angered her and damaged their relationship considerably. Williams somehow ignored his partner's offenses and focused on his work, "Chart of Anatomy." When the play was finished, he read it to a friend who yawned and told Williams it was not his best work.

Putting "The Chart of Anatomy" temporarily on the shelf, Williams turned his energies to a new play, "The Poker Night." He drew on the testosterone-fueled antics of Pancho to animate the character of Stanley Kowalski in the play. When the final version reached Wood, she crossed out the title and wrote: "A Streetcar Named Desire." Tennessee expressed a preference for, and got, Elia Kazan as director of the new play. And a brilliant new actor named Marlon Brando was signed to portray Stanley.

"Brando's acting style was the performing equivalent of jazz," according to the author. "The notes were there but Brando played them in a way that was uniquely personal to him."

"When an actor has as good a play under him as Streetcar," Brando said, "he doesn't have to do much. His job is to get out of the way and let the part play itself."

For Williams' part, "Brando was just about the best-looking young man I've ever seen."

The play opened Dec. 3, 1947 in New York to "tumultuous approval," Williams later wrote. In May 1948, Williams won the Pulitzer Prize.

Analysis

In this chapter, Tennessee gets his bearings, sexually and artistically. He convinced himself that living alone, without any commitments or responsibilities to another person is his correct path. He likened his situation to the early Christian mystics who rejected the world so they could better embrace the spiritual dimension. At about the same time (late 1940s), his literary agent, Audrey Wood, unwittingly became something of a mother figure for Williams because of his own fractious relationship to Miss Edwina, whose answer to every difficult situation was emotional repression.

Williams also became unafraid to assert his homosexuality as a way to heal the great burden of shame he felt both in society but especially within his own family. His parents, however, did get some clue when Tennessee bought a Packard convertible and made plans to meet his current boyfriend, Pancho Rodriguez in New Mexico. But Tennessee fell gravely ill in St. Louis and was hospitalized. Always the gypsy, Williams realized in Taos that he really wanted to be with writer friends in Nantucket. One of those was Cason McCullers, who shared a large writing desk with Tennessee.

Williams' restlessness is expressed in "The Glass Menagerie" in a soliloquy by Tom Wingfield in which he describers his loneliness in coming to a new place, until he finds new friends. This autobiographical passage has been interpreted to describe the rootless wandering in search of homosexual lovers that characterized much of Williams' life. But when he was living with Frank Merlo, the great love of his life, in Key West, Williams became "domesticated" and settled into a stable routine typical of any couple.

After his initial success with "The Glass Menagerie," WIlliams' career became supercharged when the talented director Elia Kazan and the brilliant new actor Marlon Brando signed onto the upcoming production of "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." His association

with Kazan would provide the collaborative backbone for a long string of successes by Tennessee Williams; Brando seemed the perfect fit for the role of Stanley Kowalski—a character based on and bearing the same name as someone Williams knew while working in a shoe store in St. Louis.

Discussion Question 1

What was Williams' relationship to Carson McCullers when they shared a house in Nantucket?

Discussion Question 2

What did director Elia Kazan bring to his working partnership with Tennessee Williams that enhanced the playwright's success?

Discussion Question 3

How did Tennessee Williams overcome his narrow Christian upbringing to transcend its strictures and embrace a larger, fuller view of life?

Vocabulary

capitulation, fecund, tenacity, propinquity, hemorrhage, homage, virulent, lobotomy, pilgrimage, deprivation, aridity, androgynous, callipygian, gargantuan, braggadocio, deracinated, chivalry, aggrandizement, libido, regression, impediment, psychosomatic, anomie, cauterize, nabob.

The Erotics of Absence

Summary

Flush with the rush of fame and riches that blanketed him in the wake of "The Glass Menagerie," Williams set sail for Europe on the SS America in December 1947. He fussed about Paris for a while, in advance of the opening of" Menagerie" there, found it too cold, rainy and unfriendly then headed for Rome and sunshine that re-energized him despite its semi-devastation from World War II bombings. Along the way—from Paris to Rome—Williams befriended and socialized with other writers such as Gore Vidal and Frederic Prokosh, as well as thespians such as Greta Garbo, Lawrence Olivier and Jean Cocteau. After years on the outside of the world of the famous and glamorous, his position at the center was a bit disorienting, although in Rome he resumed his familiar, voracious pursuit of boys.

In London Williams became friends with the artistically inclined Maria Bretneva, a vivacious and audacious 26-year-old fellow traveler of the rich and accomplished. The Russian-born dilettante fancied herself an actress, although her scrapbook was nonexistent. But Britneva was a cultured woman of good family who became Williams' companionable friend and cheerful sidekick as he fought off the London fog and gloom.

Refugees from war-damaged Russia, Britneva and her mother were desperately poor; Williams said he felt sorry for her and fed her, drank with her and became a sugar daddy-like support. She eventually became the model for Maggie in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Britneva, in return, was "variously friend, court jester, dogsbody, confidante, cheer leader, keeper of the flame" and eventually legal guardian of Rose, Williams's sister. After his death, she became the unofficial but implacable literary executor of his estate.

Williams returned to New York in September 1948 for rehearsals for his new play, "Summer and Smoke," which he'd agreed to let Margo Jones direct based on her successful presentation of the play at a theater-in-the-round in Dallas. But it soon became apparent Jones could neither communicate with, nor direct, the actors effectively. In his frustration, Williams jumped up on the stage to show the actors what he expected. His premonitions of a disaster proved accurate. The play was panned by New York critics as "pretentious, amateurish, mawkish, mediocre, monotonous." Williams sorely wished he'd had Elia Kazan as director.

Disappointment over the reception of Williams' play was softened somewhat by the reappearance of his former lover, Frank Merlo. The two practically bumped into each other at a delicatessen in New York and were reunited. Merlo had returned to New Jersey after the conclusion of the war and was working in construction, although the literate and bisexual Merlo longed for adventure and a place in the cultural world. Williams and Merlo traveled to California in 1949 so Tennessee could meet with Jack

Warner of Warner Brothers studio about a screen version of "The Glass Menagerie." When Warner asked Merlo: "What do you do?" he replied: "I sleep with Mr. Williams."

In other ways, Merlo provided an anchor for Williams in the day-to-day realities of life, while he tried to shield him from intrusions that might upset him or disrupt his work. Williams, Merlo, and the writer Paul Bowles took a steamship in 1948 for Gibralter, where they would stay for a two-week vacation with Jane Bowles, Paul's novelist wife. Despite good company and good weather, Williams brooded, depressed, over a comment Maria Bretneva had made that Tennessee was burned out, "finit." He also felt that he'd wasted too much time in the social whirl that followed his success. Williams brooded that perhaps his work, focused narrowly but deeply on "freaks," had isolated him from contact with the greater mass of humanity.

Upon reflection, Williams wrote what he identified as the core of his problem: "I am being bullied and intimidated by my own success and the fame that surrounds it and what people expect of me and their demands on me." To his general anxiety about being written out, he could add the fear of being out-written by someone like Arthur Miller. With five complete sets of Arthur Miller notices for "Death of a Salesman" on his desk., Williams lamented to agent Audrey Wood: "Everybody seems most anxious that I should know how thoroughly great was his triumph."

With the disappointment of "Summer and Smoke" on Broadway and the looming prospect of "The Glass Menagerie" being eviscerated by Warner Brothers' screenwriters whom Tennessee called "the cornball department," his depression returned and relations with Merlo began to deteriorate. In his journal, Williams wondered in writing if he was basically unlovable. "For both Williams and his fictional alter ego [Mrs. Stone in 'The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone'] a world without love was a dark, vacant place but also a probability," the author writes. In that play, the relationship of Mrs. Stone to her would-be stalker parallels Williams' relationship to Merlo.

Warner Brothers summoned Williams from Rome to help with the filming of The Glass Menagerie. Before leaving, he had dinner with the actress Ingrid Bergman and her husband [Alberto] Rossellini and delighted in their "'fuck you attitude' toward American "infantile moralists" who scorned them for adultery and divorce of their spouses, and who made it hard for an artist "to do honest work and live honestly in the States," he wrote in his diary.

When Williams and Merlo got to Hollywood, they were treated like royalty—a posh hotel suite next to a swimming pool, a rented Buick at his disposal and an A-list black tie party at a swank Hollywood hotel. Williams commented to Elia Kazan that the glitterati are "very nice, like children, but the games they are playing do not seem to make any sense." But the game the studios were playing with Williams were about revising the ending of "The Glass Menagerie" to a more upbeat tone instead of the melancholy destitution of Laura Wingfield when a favorite glass figurine is broken. The script writers wanted to revise the story to depict Laura as a sadder-but-wiser person as a result of the experience.

They even proposed a second ending to the story with a second gentleman with a muscular build who charms Laura right off her feet. Williams tolerated the revision and even agreed to give Warner Brothers a statement endorsing the film. "Bored and soured" by their Hollywood excursion, Tennessee and Frank returned to Key West where the playwright bought a quaint beach cabin. Soon The Reverend Dakin came to live with them; he and Merlo got along well and Merlo drove the aged clergyman all around Key West in a protracted sightseeing tour.

Williams poured his love for Italians into a new play, "The Rose Tattoo," with some of its inspiration coming from the stories of Frank Merlo of his Sicilian childhood. Its setting is a Sicilian-American community "somewhere along the Gulf Coast." He sent his work off to Audrey Woods in late 1949 but the silence thereafter was deafening. Williams read into her telegraphed words some ambivalence that he took for lack of enthusiasm. But Elia Kazan, having read a copy of "The Rose Tattoo," wrote Williams that he loved the play and wanted to direct it—but also said it needed reorganization. Kazan offered a structure for rewriting the play that Williams followed closely.

After six months of work on the play, Williams sent it to producer Irene Selznik, who pronounced the play dead on arrival. She told Williams it was not a play, rather a "libretto" or a ballet. "It cries out to be danced or sung—or both," Selznick wrote to Williams. Pressed, Kazan told the playwright that he couldn't get to serious consideration of "The Rose Tattoo" for a while because of prior commitments to, among others, Arthur Miller. With both agent, potential producer and director all ambivalent, Tennessee went on a cruise to Europe with Merlo. Thy returned to Key West and couldn't find a decent apartment to rent. Williams couldn't get in touch with actress Anna Magnani to play a key role, then Kazan finally wrote to say he absolutely would not be able to work on "The Rose Tattoo" with him.

Finally, Maureen Stapleton was cast in the role that Anna Magnani would have filled and the young Danny Mann was hired as director. The play opened for a month of tryouts in Chicago in December 1949 and opened on Broadway in February 1950, as the nervous playwright fretted and worried about its reception.

Analysis

In this chapter, the conflicting currents that would shape, then undermine Williams' life, emerge. The first of these was the realization that, despite his hit play "The Glass Menagerie," there were no guarantees of anything. Williams couldn't get the director or actors that he wanted for "Summer and Smoke," and the play was a flop in New York. The inherent instability in his relationship with his lover, Frank Merlo, was clear from their on-again, off-again domesticity. If anything, it appears that Williams himself was the source of some of this soap opera as he pursued other lovers and young boys, while leaving Merlo on the sidelines. Perhaps yearning for a home and a settled domestic life, Williams purchased a cabin in Key West where the two could nest, but this was no guarantor of happiness either.

Another destabilizing factor in WIlliams' life was his sudden thrust to fame and into the world of the rich, famous and glamorous. Along with this intoxicating advance, Williams' alcoholism and drug addiction also blossomed. His work routines remained intact but they were becoming steadily reinforced with chemical substances. In this haze of success, Williams not only met celebrities but also some borderline "groupies" whose primary interest in him was parasitic. These included the mercurial Maria Bretneva, a Russian expatriate wanna-be who feigned friendship with Williams because he basically took care of her. Another was the Italian actress Anna Magnani, a third-rate thespian who became Tennessee's drinking and carousing buddy.

There were those who genuinely cared about Williams, including his literary agent Audrey Wood; his brother Dakin, a lawyer in Chicago; and the director Elia Kazan and his wife. It seems Williams eventually took these people for granted while he drove himself and others mad in pursuit of new and often-destructive relationships. With the possible exception of Dakin, Tennessee came eventually to a bitter parting of the ways with all of these. As desperately as Williams needed love and approval, in many ways he could not accept it when he had it but continued to pursue empty, loveless sexual encounters that ultimately only fueled his loneliness.

Discussion Question 1

What was the personal compensation for Tennessee Williams after he returned from Europe to see his play, "Summer and Smoke," go up in smoke when it was staged in New York?

Discussion Question 2

What did Warner Brothers script writers propose regarding the filming of "The Glass Menagerie" that infuriated its author?

Discussion Question 3

How did director Elia Kazan betray an agreement with Tennessee WIlliams regarding production of "The Rose Tattoo?"

Vocabulary

grandees, cruising, recumbent, insolence, adamant, petit-bourgeois, dogsbody, badinage, proscenium, mawkish, factotum, inordinate, intimation, blandishment, phalanx, glitterati, bumptious, stereotype, imperious, nihilistic, dissimulate, petulant, pantomimic, transcendence, volatility

Fugitive Mind

Summary

"The Rose Tattoo" opened in New York with somewhat mixed reviews. However, a ringing endorsement came from critic Brooks Atkinson of The New York Times who called it "original, imaginative and tender." Relieved, Williams withdrew to Key West and to Merlo and his family, who were vacationing there. But his disquiet about actress Maureen Stapleton continued to worry him. He wrote her several letters gently urging her to make a few "adjustments" in her presentation. Unbeknownst to the playwright, Stapleton was earning her own following because of her gutsy, down-to-earth portrayal of Serafina.

The success of "The Rose Tattoo" drew attention to Williams as a gay artist at a time in 1950s America when waves of political paranoia about communism crashed at the feet of anyone who dared to be even a bit nonconformist. The despotic anti-communist crusader Sen. Joseph McCarthy and his House UnAmerican Activities Committee were busy stoking witch hunts against artists, writers, and actors who earned a spot on the "blacklist" of suspected subversives. By not depicting gay life directly and only by inference, Tennessee Williams avoided the ostracism that some of his friends, such as Arthur Miller and Gore Vidal, suffered. Nevertheless, he was still summoned to appear before the committee.

Williams described his own life at this time as "a never-ending contest with the squares of the world, the squares who have such a virulent rage at everything not in their book."

The effects of the age of paranoia were huge in Hollywood, where filming of "A Streetcar Named Desire" ran into production snags because of the rape scene involving Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois. These questions were resolved by clever use of film editing to suggest and imply a rape without actually showing it. Williams was incensed and angered by these cuts that caused "disastrous alterations to [its] central truth." Tricky negotiations with the Production Code Administration, the Legion of Decency and Warner Brothers reached an uncomfortable compromise and the film was completed.

To escape what he saw as the suffocating tendrils of "decency" and normality, Williams planned another trip to Rome at a time when his relationship with Merlo had once again cooled. Once in Rome, Williams went cruising in his new Jaguar clutching a thermos filled with martinis and crashed his car into a tree at 70 m.p.h. Miraculously, Williams sustained only minor injuries although his typewriter hit him in the back of the head. After the accident, Williams' drinking and drug-taking accelerated.

Buoyed by the success of "A Streetcar Named Desire," Elia Kazan contacted Tennessee Williams to suggest creation of a stage presentation of his one-act plays. The playwright was pleased and flattered by Kazan's proposal; both acknowledged how well and happily their collaboration had worked in the past. The author speculates that

one reason Kazan and Williams worked so well together was a certain similarity in their histories. Both had rebelled against their hidebound, unimaginative middle class families to pursue their course as artists and innovators who sought not to burn down the theater but to strip away middle class tribal "wisdom" and thought patterns to allow the truth to breathe onstage.

"Kazan and Williams grew up in household atmospheres of danger. Distrust and insecurity were the legacy of their feared fathers," who both ridiculed and mocked their sons, according to the author. Both men were encouraged in their artistic careers by their mothers. Both men viewed sexuality as "the pathway to knowledge," and Kazan believed "promiscuity for an artist is an education. For Kazan, the author observes, "every woman was an adventure and an inspiration; for Williams, it was every man."

In early 1952, Kazan was summoned to testify before the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). He admitted to once being a member of the communist party but said he'd given up politics. Nevertheless, his appearance cast a shadow over his work and slowed projects underway with Tennessee Williams nearly to a halt. Strangely, Williams contacted Kazan to ask if the director knew of any women friends who would consent to be artificially inseminated. Williams thought that if he and Merlo had a child to raise, it would stabilize their relationship. But Williams never pursued the idea further.

As his relationship with Merlo disintegrated once again, Williams found companionship with Maria Britneva, whom he took to calling his "five-o'clock angel." In exchange for financial support, Britneva gave Williams her allegiance and "a kind of emotional home." At one point, Britneva went to a psychotherapist because of her delusion that she would marry Williams.

Two days after his appearance before the Congressional committee, Williams sent Kazan an expanded script for his play "Camino Real." But Kazan had hit the wall in Hollywood and calls for his services were few. At about the same time, Williams seemed to suffer a kind of "writer's block" in which he wrote little and without much enthusiasm. "I have not made a success of life or of love," the self-pitying poet wrote.

But despite his growing despair about aging and losing his gifts, Williams was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the movie of A Streetcar Named Desire was a big hit and "Summer and Smoke" was enjoying an off-Broadway revival. And Kazan' optimism about the revised "Camino Real" script. Tennessee gradually began to experience a resurgence of confidence.

On the second day of its opening in January 1953, Williams rewrote the script furiously, deleting whole passages and replacing them with new material. During rehearsals, WIlliams and Kazan buzzed about the set like bees, moving actors about and improvising lines. Still, the playwright despaired of the finished work. But it was Kazan's intention to push "Camino Real" toward dance by using choreography to "lift the everyday into the ritualistic, the author writes. At the play's out-of-town tryout in New Haven, Conn. Williams' spirits rose.

When the play opened in New York, it was met with what Williams called "militant incomprehension" as critics broadly panned and lambasted it. Merlo and Williams shunned an opening night party and went instead to their 58th Street digs. At around 1 a.m. Kazan showed up at Williams' apartment with John Steinbeck and his wife, Elaine. Steinbeck had been a longtime backer of Williams' work, and when it was attacked by the critics the novelist waged a personal campaign The first wave of counterattacks was followed by large newspaper ads against the critics signed by Gore Vidal, Lotte Lenya, Oscar Hammerstein, William Inge, Clifford Odets, Gypsy Rose Lee and others.

Just after the opening, Williams went by train to Key West to lick his wounds. After only 60 performances and a loss of $115,000, Camino Real closed May 9.

Analysis

It was Tennessee Williams' fate to become a world figure in the theater because of his shocking and unconventional works at a time when anti-communist paranoia cast a pall over anything viewed as "un-American." And the fact he was a homosexual made him even more suspect in the eyes of those self-appointed guardians of decency and the American way who in the 1950s sought political and artistic power.

Williams hid much of his powerful messages about homosexuality, personal sexual liberty, kindness and bigotry by somehow mixing cartoonish characters with the plainly disturbed and/or perverted characters who struggle to free themselves from their self-imposed hell. Big Daddy is a caricature, not a character; Sebastian Venable is a predatory homosexual disguised as a wealthy traveler; Catherine Holly is an innocent victim of familial intrigue that nearly drives her mad, not a perpetrator of evil. Reading or witnessing Williams' plays in this light requires of the audience a skeptical, inquiring attitude to get the full force of the playwright's message. Reading personalities and hidden motives is one bi-product of experiencing and grasping Williams' drama.

It was in the 1950s when Tennessee was near the zenith of his career and everything seemed to be going right for him that he faced serious self-doubt and self-recrimination. Even the public support of people like John Steinbeck for his maligned play "Camino Real" did not seem to effect a better mood in Williams. A psychiatrist who treated him during this time diagnosed him as a deeply disturbed personality. Once again, Tennessee sought relief from his suffering by fleeing—this time to Key West. It seems that despite whatever cathartic relief Williams may have experienced by the performance and recognition of his work, his psychic pain did not relent.

This suggests that his primal psychic wounds from childhood had not been healed and that they continued to cause him suffering throughout his adult life, as evidenced by his steadily increasing consumption of drugs and alcohol.

Discussion Question 1

How did Tennessee Williams maneuver through the anti-communist paranoia of the 1950s and early 60s without becoming "blacklisted" by the self-appointed censors of popular culture?

Discussion Question 2

How did Tennessee characterize the primary struggle in his life?

Discussion Question 3

What was the direct primary effect of the House Un-American Activities Committee on Tennessee Williams' work?

Vocabulary

fearmongering, subversive, bohemianism, strata, epigram, brinksmanship, voluptuous, truculence, limpid, hirsute, oeillade, depredation, carnality, luminous, pariah, ructions, putative, purgation, phantasmagoria, gallimaufry, pugnacious, trenchant

Thunder of Disintegration

Summary

In an in unexpected turn of events, Williams went into the hospital for emergency surgery to correct "thrombosed hemorrhoids" and sank deeper into depression. The failure of "Camino Real" as well as his continued frustrations in his relationship with Frank Merlo had worn him down; he was exhausted and claimed his plight was "retribution for all my misdoings and the things undone." The usual combination of leisure and travel in Europe failed to work their magic and Williams remained in a funk. He was completely open about his dependency on alcohol and Seconal. Even Williams' religious immersion in his work wasn't adequate to scare away the blue devils.

Williams dusted off his manuscript of "Battle of Angels," reworked and rewrote it, and renamed it "Orpheus Descending." When he sent it to his agent, Audrey Wood, her reaction was very negative. The playwright complained to Maria Britneva of physical and mental exhaustion, and she called him "Forty Winks" for his habit of falling asleep during dinner. He estimated that he had only three good writing days a month. He also noticed a degree of mental confusion, "an inability to think clearly and consecutively." After his fear and loathing of having to undergo surgery, Williams got a reprieve when the doctors decided not to operate.

In 1954, Williams began to rework a short play he'd started in Europe called "A Place of Stone." Not long after beginning, Williams realized that he'd found a new means of dramatic expression. He worked feverishly, mostly on hotel stationery, and handed her his "work script" when she as visiting in Rome. Wood was exhilarated by the writing and believed Williams didn't know quite what he'd done. The play was renamed "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," and in it Williams "projected the war inside himself between self-destruction and creativity, and his desire to reclaim his literary inheritance," the author claims.

Brick, the son of Big Daddy Pollitt, is an alcoholic who is stuck in a repeating pattern of trying to relive his glory days of youth but always remaining inert—not unlike Williams himself. He's married to Maggie, who is charged with the electricity of a wild cat and a strong sex drive that alienates her from Brick, who is indifferent to her subtle and direct calls to bed. The underlying sexual tension fuels dramatic tension.

By the time Williams returned to New York, both Kazan and Wood were making production plans for "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," but Kazan cautioned Williams against too hasty a rush to stage. His old friend said the script was the insurmountable problem with "Camino Real," and he pleaded with Williams to be completely certain of the "Cat" script before the play was produced.

In the character of Big Daddy, Williams projected much of his own rough-edged father as the Pollitt family gathers to celebrate his 65th birthday and, subliminally, to jockey for

position in his 15,000-acre estate. But Big Daddy is no fool; he rails against “mendacity! mendacity!” when he realizes the plotting that surrounds him. After reading the play Kazan told Williams it is probably one of his best, and vowed he “sure wants” to do it but suggested revisions, which Williams made so that “you get what you want without losing what I want.”

Kazan pleaded with Williams to make Brick’s character the center of the narrative beginning in the second act; the director worried that the audience would lose interest in the story if Brick came off as a directionless alcoholic unable to father a child, an heir, with Maggie. In the closing scene, though, it looks as if Maggie has lured Brick back to their marital bed. Hope is rekindled.

In the character of Maggie, the playwright borrowed traits liberally from Maria Britneva whose “tenacity, flirtatiousness, rapaciousness, humiliated heart [and] grandiose sense of entitlement” were central, the author observes.

“Cat on a Hot Tin Roof” won every major drama prize in 1955, including the Pulitzer Prize. Williams remained grateful to Kazan for prodding him toward his best work, but could not publicly declaim his utter dependence on Kazan. Williams’ sense of guilt gnawed at him and eventually led to estrangement from Britneva, Anna Magnani, Kazan and eventually Audrey Wood who finagled a $500,000 contract for the work with MGM pictures.

In 1954, Britneva’s engagement to the wealthy James Laughlin had broken off and she, Merlo and Williams spent most of the summer traveling around Europe together. Eventually, Williams grew weary of her freeloading combined with her condescending attitude and told her, in so many words, that she needed to get a life. She sadly admitted that she had no life. Eventually, she married Lord St. Just and had two children.

By November 1955, Kazan was in Mississippi filming "Baby Doll," the new title for one of Williams' earlier plays called "Hide and Seek." The director tried to lure Tennessee away from Key West for the filming, but Williams refused to return to the South that had rejected him because of his homosexuality. But Kazan wasn't satisfied with the ending of "Baby Doll" and, in the absence of the author, in effect wrote his own ending. The film was promoted with block-long billboards of a thumb-sucking Carroll Baker and condemned by the Catholic Church.

But the greater the controversy and the louder the protests, the higher Tennessee WIlliams' literary stock rose. MGM then offered him another $500,000 for his next play, still being written. By 1956, Williams' high-octane career had pushed him close to some kind of breakdown and he said, "I believe my writing career is finished." In a letter to poet Christopher Isherwood, Williams admitted to "living on Miltowns, seconals and double shots of vodka with a splash of orange juice. That summer came Florida tryouts for his new play originally titled "The Enemy: Time," but re-named "Sweet Bird of Youth."

Williams went to St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands alone where, by his own account, he "didn't feel the presence of God. I haven't felt it for a long time now. Something's awfully gone away from here, meaning me." Also gone away were Williams' love relationships. His estrangement from Merlo was all but absolute, and it seemed "he could surrender himself completely to the page but never completely to a person," the author observes.

In "Orpheus Descending," the lead character, Val, faces a spiritual dilemma: what to do in order to rid himself of his corruption and return to his earlier purity. It is precisely Williams' challenge as he seeks to find something important missing from his life—his soul. Val seeks his redemption by playing his guitar, Williams by writing. Like an illegitimate child, "Orpheus Descending" bounced around Broadway for a couple of years before finally opening March 21, 1957.

Three years later, Marlon Brando signed a $1 million contract to play Val, and Anna Magnani contracted to play Lady in the film version of "Opheus Descending." Williams was upset about the dearth of his father two days before the play opened. The play received mixed reviews and closed after 68 performances. Williams wrote to Kazan that if he had directed "Orpheus" it would have been "one of our greatest successes."

Analysis

The symbiotic relationship between Williams and Elia Kazan emerged once more in the production of "Cart on a Hot Tin Roof" as Kazan suggested revisions to the script to make it more effective——changes that Williams was pleased to make. By this point in his life, the playwright was heavily sedated with drugs and alcohol most of the time which made him more malleable. With success, fame and wealth, Williams seem to lose his way. His personal relationships, especially with Frank Merlo, were a mess. And Tennessee's theatrical work seemed both personal exorcism of his inner demons as well as high art. Regardless of what happened in the externals of his world, Williams kept digging deeper and deeper into his own soul and own experiences for the truth.

There is an approximate parallel between Williams' progress from typewriter to stage, involving the editing skills of Kazan, and the work of another prolific southerner, Thomas Wolfe. The North Carolinian novelist delivered the MS of his first novel, "Look Homeward, Angel" to editor Maxwell Perkins at Scribners in a foot locker. The urbane Perkins worked closely with Wolfe to trim whole passages and sections, for the purpose of producing a more marketable book. But always his instinct as a writer, like Williams, was to put more more words, more narrative and more characters into the work.

Kazan, an excellent writer, definitely helped Williams wrestle his sometimes-chaotic early drafts into tightly-woven dramatic narratives that moved quickly but retained the poetic language of the playwright. In some quarters, Tennessee Williams is thought of as the last "literary" playwright in the American theater because of his compelling use of language.

Discussion Question 1

Why did Tennessee Williams proclaim that his career as a playwright was finished after production of "Baby Doll?"

Discussion Question 2

Did the pressures of success drive Williams to drugs and alcohol as an escape, or was he the victim of a disease called addiction?

Discussion Question 3

Why would Tennessee Williams think his career was near an end just after being offered $500,000 for movie rights?

Vocabulary

umbrage, talisman, parlous, Seconal, nadir, refusenik, catalyst, inveigle, retrospective, prefigure, simulacrum, mesmerize, belvedere, ultimatum, mendacity, sycophancy, immutable, reverberation, nubile, interloper, lackluster, craven, wunderkind, calcification, trifecta, penultimate

ultimatum, mendacity,

Beanstalk Country

Summary

Aware in 1957 that his drinking and drug use were out of control, Williams became a patient of Dr. Lawrence Kubie, a New York-based Freudian psychoanalyst who treated a number of luminaries in the arts world. These included conductor Leonard Bernstein, writers William Inge and Charles Jackson, musicians Moss Hart and Kurt Weill. Initially, Kubie determined that Williams was "too disturbed" to begin analysis immediately and needed to be free of his addictions—alcohol, drugs, men, travel and writing—before psychoanalysis could be effective. He proposed that Williams go to the Harkness Pavilion, a branch of Presbyterian/Columbia University Hospital in New York City.

The therapy was based on a theory that Williams' drinking and drug use were a form of "acting out" inner conflicts that, in the absence of the addictive substances, would have to be faced squarely. Williams complied with all of Kubie's suggestions—except writing. He walked, painted, acted and tried to fill the time but confided in friends that he was bored to tears. Faced with the choice of confronting his devils or fleeing, Williams left the hospital and flew to Havana, Cuba. He wrote to a friend that he arrived in Cuba after eight drinks and three Seconals. Later, in a letter to Kazan, Williams prided himself that he "rarely [took] more than one goofball a day." He not only continued to drink but also continued to write, against doctor's orders.

Upon his return, Williams decided to commit himself to Austen Riggs psychiatric hospital in Stockbridge, N.Y. and was chauffeured there by Frank Merlo. He marched into the building, took a look at the patients, then marched out again and returned to New York City. The playwright said he decided that he didn't need to live with other people "more disturbed than myself" in order to recover. Dr. Kubie responded by prescribing five sessions of analysis a week, plus separation from Merlo. Williams agreed with his doctor that he would follow that plan for a year and if he didn't feel that he was "unmistakably better" he would end the treatment and summon Merlo back from Key West.

But domestic tranquility was not at hand. "We're like a couple of fighting cocks here lately, all but pecking each other's eyes out," he wrote to his writer friend Paul Bowles. Williams turned his West Side flat into a "chop-suey honky-tonk joint" on weekends and threw regular drinking parties, sometimes with invited friends and sometimes with people off the streets. His psychoanalytic work with Dr. Kubie progressed so that his fear and hatred of his father gradually softened into acceptance, then love.

With his new reconsideration of his father, Williams was impelled to reexamine his mother and entire family. His perception of those relationships became more "nuanced," according to the author, and informed both the characters and story line of his next play, "Suddenly, Last Summer." Williams explained to Kazan that his mother, Edwina, barely five feet tall, cowed her six-foot husband and drove him out of the house when she

received half the royalties of "The Glass Menagerie." Edwina "allowed the state hospital to perform one of the earliest lobotomies on Rose [and] unconsciously managed to turn both her sons gay."

In "Suddenly Last Summer," Mrs. Venable—played by Katherine Hepburn—threatens her daughter Catherine—played by Elizabeth Taylor—with a lobotomy. In reality, Rose accused her parents of sexual immorality and her mother Edwina of leading a sin-filled double life. After Rose's lobotomy, Edwina tried to mislead Tennessee into believing his father had actually arranged the procedure. When he discovered the truth, Tennessee never forgave his mother. During hospitalization before the lobotomy, Rose was described by a staff physician as "frequently mildly euphoric, but for the most part bizarre, indifferent and show[ing] no normal concern about her family, usually condemning them."

Williams told the Paris Review that Edwina, who signed her name "Edwin" and believed a horse lived in her room, "was essentially more psychotic than my sister Rose." During her 19 years of hospitalization, Rose endured the lobotomy plus 65 electroshock convulsive therapy (ECT) treatments. Williams eventually had Rose transferred to a residential care facility in upstate New York. He visited her often and was pleased when she began to show signs of improvement.

In "The Glass Menagerie" Laura's brother Tom invites a co-worker, Jim, also known as the "gentleman caller," to his house for dinner—an apparent effort to find a suitor for his beautiful but retiring sister. An initial flirtation is shattered when Jim reveals that he's engaged; Laura is heart-broken but it becomes evident that Tom has used Laura as bait for Jim, who he loves. But the underlying homosexual theme was initially "inadmissible and un-stageable" in 1943, according to the author. But that theme did find expression in "Suddenly Last Summer" in 1957. Dr. Kubie said he was "emotionally stirred" by "Summer and Smoke"" and especially struck with the theme of cannibalism as a metaphor for human society.

"Life is cannibalistic," Williams remarked to a drama critic for The Philadelphia Inquirer.

After another unhappy trip to Rome with Merlo, Williams began to think of himself as a monster. Occasionally, he used the term to describe another—including Anna Magnani. After more therapy with Dr. Kubie, Williams came to understand that his sense of himself as a monster arose from disapproval of himself. Therapy had unearthed some unpleasant truths about his own character. "Williams had become a stranger to himself," the author observes. "He could live successfully in his art but not his life. By cultivating his literary persona, he had starved his private one."

"Sweet Bird of Youth" reflects this period in Williams' life when he realized that nothing in the past could be changed, or re-lived differently. "The simple and dreadful facts of the attritions of time can't be painted out of the picture," he said to Brooke Atkinson. "We double the pressure on ourselves to make up for them, but can we?" When Audrey Wood balked at Kazan's asking price to direct "Sweet Bird of Youth," Williams defended his favorite collaborator: "Blackmail, liquor, dope, an ovariectomy, a woman raping a

boy, a crazy southern demagogue, the negro problem, a beating, etc. Who but Kazan could hold these elements in control and make dramatic use of them?" he wrote to Wood.

At the first reading of the play, Williams leaped out of his seat and stormed out of the theater shouting, "Stop it, stop it! It can't go on, it's too awful!" Then he returned home and knocked himself out with liquor and pills. Later that day, he opened the door for the Kazans and only agreed to allow the play to proceed because of his faith in Kazan. Despite lukewarm notices in The New Yorker and Time magazines, other critics praised "Sweet Bird of Youth" and the playwright at last had his Broadway Blockbuster. WIlliams responded by working feverishly on two more films, "Night of the Iguana" and "Period of Adjustment."

Kazan urged Tennessee to take a break, to restore his energies and mind his health. "I don't feel ready for the Sixties," Williams declared.

Analysis

Psychoanalysis revealed that the scars of Williams' childhood, and especially the lobotomy treatment administered to his sister Rose, became deep resentments that had warped his character. Through his work with Dr. Kubie, Williams was eventually able to forgive his parents, then to embrace them. At the same time, though, the realization that nothing could ever be done to change the past haunted him and fed his recurrent depression as did his self-loathing because of his homosexuality. Because work was the only thing that gave him some real relief, Williams once again returned to his workaholic ways despite doctor's orders and the advice of friends.

Regardless of how he presented himself to friends and the outside words, Williams' behavior shows that he felt besieged by life, that he must battle on against all odds for survival. These battles, played out inside his own soul, became the dramatic fabric from which he fashioned his work. So the overall profile of Tennessee Williams is that of a desperate man, driven to the edge of madness by his own demons—demons that appear onstage or in film with names such as "Big Daddy," "Blanche Dubois," and "Sebastian Venable."

The shock of seeing these demons/characters for many people is comparable to the shock patients feel in psychoanalysis when their eyes are opened to their true nature and motivations. It is the shock of seeing the ape wearing a human suit.

The theme of cannibalism, as evidenced in "Suddenly, Last Summer," was taboo when the play and film were produced and remains so today. Through his dramatic genius, Williams took the cannibalistic behavior he observed just beneath the surface of acceptable society and made it palpable in a way that many have found shocking. And yet, all through his works runs a sense of the weak being preyed upon by the strong whether in the game of marriage, the game of property, the game of sanity and the

game of cruelty/kindness. Williams' distinction is in bringing these forces into the light of day so they are visible to all.

Discussion Question 1

How did Williams' new view of his family, through psychoanalysis, influence the characters in "Suddenly, Last Summer?"

Discussion Question 2

Why did Tennessee not follow his doctor's proscription against writing, drinking and relationships?

Discussion Question 3

What sort of primitive ritual did Williams use to define and describe life?

Vocabulary

quixotic, salubrious, deprivation, incoherent, anodyne, capriciousness, sublimation, diktat, halcyon, somatic, denigration, patrician, necromancy, rapacious, purgatory, disingenuous, cohabitation, centrifugal, demagogue, consanguinity, brusque, callow, predilection

Kookhood

Summary

Tennessee Williams' long and convoluted friendship with the actress Diana Barrymore ended with her death from a heart attack at age 38 in January 1960. She had ruined "the early promise of her film career and lost many years to alcohol and drug addictions and three turbulent marriages," according to the author. Nevertheless, along the way she'd acted in several of Tennessee's plays, including "The Glass Menagerie" and "Suddenly Last Summer." Barrymore developed an obsession with Williams, imagining herself as his loving wife. She insinuated herself into Williams' family, too; Dakin Williams and Diana Barrymore began referring to each other as brother and sister. She loved to show off a gold pendant Tennessee had given her with the inscription "10."

"Period of Adjustment," a light romantic comedy, signaled for Williams a change of direction away from his darker, more violent works. He hoped to show himself as more than "the nightmare merchant of Broadway," as dubbed by Time magazine. Williams acknowledged the help of his analyst, Dr. Kubie, in helping him to find a more positive, life-affirmative vein in his works. As his work changed, so did his relationship with Frank Merlo—for the better. Williams reported finding a new depth of feeling for Merlo he hadn't been aware of, and it was reciprocal.

But unexpectedly, Kazan notified Williams he would quit as director of "Period of Adjustment," thereby violating a promise he'd made to Williams to direct anything he wrote and delivering "a seismic blow that ended the most important theatrical collaboration of 20th Century American theater," the author writes. The blow was augmented in its sting by the fact Kazan was quitting to direct a film by William Inge, a friend and theatrical rival. Kazan told Williams he had to quit because he had encouraged Inge to write the play and felt obligated.

The two—writer and director—had an angry exchange of words that left both men emotionally wounded.Thereafter, they exchanged kind letters of reconciliation expressing their undying respect and love for each other, and holding open the door for further collaborations which never occurred. Some critics had decried the influence over Williams that Kazan exerted; they wanted more Williams and less Kazan who some felt commercialized and cheapened Williams' work. But the truth, according to the author, was that Kazan helped provide a scaffold for Williams to work through obstacles in his plays.

"The valid pressure on Williams' characters comes from within," wrote Chicago Tribune critic Claudia Cassidy. "Kazan's pressure often bears down from the outside, crushing the victim like a contracting cage. Compared with the inner violence of a Williams play the outer fringes of superimposed fury can be anticlimactic, even cheap." Kazan later wrote in his autobiography that he wanted a break from Williams and also from directing other people's work; his ambition to establish himself as an artist in his own right

eventually led his becoming a best-selling novelist. "Period of Adjustment," directed by George Roy Hill, opened well in Philadelphia but bombed in New Haven and New York.

"I figure that I have had my day in the Broadway theater," the playwright told his friend St. Just. By the time his next play, "Night of the Iguana," was ready to be staged there was a question whether the name Tennessee Williams was sufficient to guarantee a theater. Williams had sent a 21-page scenario of a short story called "Night of the Iguana" in 1959 to the director Frank Corsaro for inclusion in a film festival in Italy. The story was written in 1946, after a painful breakup with Frank Merlo, based on his excursion to Mexico. Many of the same characters of the play are also in the movie version—the defrocked Episcopal priest Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon, the old poet Nanno. the traveling sketch artist Miss Hannah Jelkes and Maxine, the widowed hotel owner. The theme of the resuscitated "Iguana," according to Williams, is "how to live beyond despair and still live."

Having parted company with Kazan, Williams became suspicious of Audrey Wood in his "rumble of paranoia," as the author calls it. This feeling was only aggravated by his loss of a relationship with Frank Merlo. Williams took the pose of wronged lover, although in truth it was he who had been unfaithful to Merlo when Frank went to New York for medical tests and Tennessee began a relationship with a Key West painter. Having gotten wind of the affair through mutual friends, Merlo appeared unannounced at their Key West cottage and attacked the painter. Williams called the police and fled with the painter to a Miami motel. The playwright incorporated much of this emotional melodrama into his rewrite of "Night of the Iguana" where the parting of The Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon and Miss Hannah Jelkes becomes a proxy for his separation from Merlo.

In the reworking of the play, the helter-skelter nature of Williams' private life was reflected in his chronic discontinuity of scenes and episodes, perhaps reflecting the chaos of his inner world. Williams referred to this as his "methodless method of work, my not reading over yesterday's work, just going on, on like a madman spooked, chased by a spook."

Although Williams wrote the part of Hannah Jelkes with Katherine Hepburn specifically in mind, the actress at first demurred but then said she would consider a six-month contract. The director refused that arrangement, but Williams was able to interest Bette Davis in the role. Her backstage drunkenness and abrasive demeanor almost scuttled the play, but "Iguana" did open in Rochester, N.Y. in October 1961. Although it was evident the play needed to be cut by a half-hour, Williams would not make the cuts because of his fear that Davis would walk out.

Merlo's Belgian Shepherd dog, Satan, attacked Williams one night and bit through to bone on both of his ankles. Williams was hospitalized under heavy sedation; he believed Merlo had sicced Satan on him to get his money. He also believed Merlo had put ground glass in his vodka bottle and was trying to poison him. Williams became a patient of Dr. Max ("Feelgood") Jacobsen, who concocted special formulae for the rich and famous—John F. Kennedy, Truman Capote, Marlene Dietrich. Whenever he

injected himself with the doctor's nostrum, Williams followed with a 500 mg injection of Mellaril—an antipsychotic with terrible side effects.

Williams' mental health was not bolstered when Claudia Cassidy of the Chicago Tribune, who had swooned over "The Glass Menagerie," panned "Iguana" by declaring that "even for a man of less talent, this would be a bankrupt play." Davis left the play after 128 performances; Shelley Winters replaced her and stayed with the show for 316 performances until it closed.

Elia Kazan wrote his old friend a letter of support and encouragement reminding him that "Iguana" had turned out to be a success, despite its rocky road. Kazan told Williams he should relax and learn how to enjoy any amount of success, even if the play was not what he'd hoped it would be. "You really do accomplish, you know," Kazan wrote. But Williams sensed a new direction in the theater toward tighter, terser, starker dramatics. His somewhat florid literary style of writing for the theater, it seemed, was fast becoming an anachronism. Edward Albee, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter were the leading apostles of this post-Beat sensibility.

Williams struggled to write "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore," a play loaded with symbolism, particularly related to the drying up of the "milk of human kindness" as well as Williams' own fears about his declining creative capacity. The lead character is Flora Goforth, a "swamp bitch" who, like Williams, struggles to write her "demented memoirs," according to Williams' own description. In the person of Christopher Flanders, a sweet-tongued sometime poet who endears himself to Mrs. Goforth, Williams represents his own vital, creative energy that seemed to be flagging with age.

"Milk Train" opened on Broadway in January 1963 and closed after only 69 performances. Its death knell was sounded by a 114-day newspaper strike and bad reviews. One critic suggested that Williams should stop writing "and just think."

Analysis

In the early 60s, it became transparent how Williams benefited and suffered because of his inner demons. He benefited by having access to his deepest fears and joys, which he could transfer to characters in his dramas. He suffered because those same feelings literally drove him to drink and drugs, with their attendant negative impacts on his life. In a classic profile of addiction, drugs and alcohol opened doors in his consciousness that pointed the way to greater achievement and growth as an artist while, at the same time, robbing him of the ability to actualize those new potentials. This impasse in his creativity coincided with the loss of important relationships either through death or estrangement.

Williams felt betrayed when Elia Kazan, who had promised to direct his next play, walked out in order to direct a play by William Inge, a rival, essentially terminating one of the longest and most productive associations in Williams' career. At least one drama critic took the view that Kazan's departure was good for Williams who had grown too dependent on Kazan. The death of his old friend, Diana Barrymore, was another loss

that saddened him greatly. Ongoing conflicts with Frank Merlo also meant that Tennessee's partner wasn't available to provide much support.

The result of these emotional blows was a marked tendency toward paranoia on Williams' part, which he fixated on Audrey Wood and falsely accused her of disloyalty, thereby undermining another long-term, supportive relationship. As always, Williams used work as his salvation during this turbulent period, and produced both "Night of the Iguana" and "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More."

Discussion Question 1

How did Tennessee Williams react when director Elia Kazan quit work on "Period of Adjustment?"

Discussion Question 2

How did Williams' relationship with Audrey Wood change in the wake of Kazan's departure?

Discussion Question 3

How did Williams's work change to reflect the chaotic lifestyle he led in the 1960s?

Vocabulary

louche, amulet, disingenuous, triumvirate, vilification, superimpose, immiscible, civility, stonewall, amalgam, coterie, unctuous, perfidy, gargantuan, incommunicado, unabashed, deracinating, vector, trope, allusive, mantra, ministration, votary, beleaguered

Waving and Drowning

Summary

Tennessee visited Frank Merlo in Memorial Hospital in New York after attempted surgery for lung cancer in September 1963. The initial symptom had been coughing up blood while dining with friends in Key West. Since that time, Merlo had been in and out of the hospital several times. Following attempted surgery, the physicians told Williams they could not operate to remove the cancer because it was too close to his heart. Merlo was allowed to believe that he'd had a successful surgery and was on the road to recovery. He bustled about the house in Key West, prepared meals, danced in night clubs.

Charlie Nicklaus, Williams' latest lover, joined him and Merlo in Key West before they were to depart to Europe. The awkward situation became unmanageable when Williams and Merlo again became lovers. The pair departed for Europe for a couple of months, but Williams was worried about Merlo's deteriorating condition and flew back to Key West to be with him. And Williams was with him when he died Sept. 20, 1963 in Memorial Hospital at the age of 40. Off and on, he and Williams had been together for 15 years. After his death, Williams went on a round of gay bars and returned home very drunk.

A few days later, the Kazans with John and Elaine Steinbeck came by the apartment to console WIlliams, who was pacing the floor and repeating, "How am I ever going to live without Frank?" When a visitor came to discuss business with Tennessee, he noticed that Merlo's pet monkey, Creature, seemed to be moving about in his cage strangely. Then the monkey lay down and was motionless. The visitor opined that the simian was ill. Tennessee reassured him Creature was "just fine." The visitor noticed the monkey wasn't breathing. "Tenn, I think your monkey is dead," the visitor said. Williams slowly looked at the cage, then back to his visitor. "Why, so he is," he said. "So he is."

The intrepid Broadway producer David Merrick approached Williams with an idea to re-stage "Milk Train" with the notorious Tallulah Bankhead in the role of Mrs. Goforth. The raspy-voiced, limp-lidded southerner with a taste for alcohol seemed a perfect fit—if she could be managed to work with the other actors. Merrick launched a charm campaign by telling Williams he was the best playwright ever who was misunderstood and sometimes mistreated. Vulnerable because of his profound grief over the loss of Merlo, WIlliams agreed and Tallulah started telling people that Williams had written the part of Flora Goforth with her in mind.

In exchange for hiring Tallulah Bankhead, director Tony Richardson demanded that pop singer Tab Hunter be hired to play the hustler Chris Flanders. Williams considered the request, but finally told Audrey Wood that he could not tolerate Tab Hunter in his play. "It would be a catastrophic injustice not only to the play, but to Tallulah and Tony and Merrick," Williams wrote Wood. Williams even consulted his brother Dakin, an attorney,

to see if there was some way to break the contract with Hunter. Ironically, it was Hunter who turned in a credible performance in rehearsals and Tallulah who fell short of the mark. And Richardson, the British director, loathed Bankhead; their toxic relationship was on display at a cast dinner she gave before final rehearsal.

"Milk Train" opened Jan. 1, 1964 on Broadway and closed three nights later after only five performances. The New Yorker said Bankhead's role was not a performance, rather "an appearance," and Tab Hunter was "about as stimulating as the greasy kid stuff addict in that television commercial." Devastated, Williams flew back to Key West and left his mother and brother without explanation; they had come in from St. Louis for the opening. Williams became seriously depressed and talked of taking his own life. He went with a friend to Barcelona for three weeks, followed by a month in Tangiers. Upon his return, he began seeing his therapist, Ralph Harris, again and suffered insomnia, loss of curiosity and loss of a sex drive which caused Harris to follow him closely on weekends to give support.

By the 1960s, the revolutionary post-Freudian approach of Williams' art toward outlining deeper unconscious motives for behavior had been superseded by the chaotic emergence of the New Left in politics and such theatrical phenomena as absurdism, existentialism and alienation. Presciently, Williams had realized by the 1940s—ahead of his fame—that World War II had brought a hardness to the American psyche that meant his "confessional style didn't play well; his solipsistic Southern voice sounded both familiar and trivial," according to the author.

By 1964, however, Williams searched for "a freer, more surreal form of storytelling that 'fits people and societies going a bit mad,'" the author observes. This search resulted in "Slapstick Tragedy, The Gnadiges Fraulein," a one-act clown play written under the influence of amphetamines prescribed by "Doctor Feelgood." In this one-act play, Williams parodies himself and his florid southern rhetoric. The author calls this work "an underrated surrealist romp that also pokes fun at some of the newer manifestations of the theater, such as the then-popular theater of the absurd. William Inge, one of Tennessee's rivals, called the play "marvelous," but New York theater critic sacked it. Williams said: "The press hit me with all the ammo in their considerable and rather ruthless possession." The play closed after seven performances.

Williams produced two plays and one movie in the next two years—all of which were categorically rejected. He withdrew into alcohol and drugs, then seemingly disappeared in 1968. The death of his close friend, Carson McCullers, did nothing to elevate his spirits. The director John Hancock observed that Williams was stuck in his own childhood and could not be in the present or form new relationships. To those who knew him, Tennessee spoke often of death and suicide. He told friends he was working on a new play, slowly. "I drink much less, but sometimes I fall out of my chair in a restaurant. Do I have brain cancer?" he asked.

In January 1969, Dakin WIlliams flew to Key West to rescue his haggard and spiritually bankrupt brother through "a deathbed conversion" to Christianity. A defeated Tennessee agreed to meet a Jesuit priest and be baptized. He also received the last rites of the

Catholic church. Father Joseph LeRoy gave Williams a copy of Thomas Merton's "No Man Is an Island;" Williams gave the priest a book of his plays. The playwright told the press he'd converted "to get my goodness back."

"In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel" lasted for 25 performances at the Eastside Playhouse in New York but Williams won the gold medal for drama from the American Academy of Arts and Letters in June. Life magazine ran a photo of Williams under the headline: "Played Out?" and reported that "Tennessee Williams has suffered an infantile regression from which there seems no exit. Nothing about In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel deserves its production." Wounded again, Williams went to Japan with a friend and his bulldog. He also took up with a bisexual named Bill Glavin, who reportedly could not and did not care for Williams but merely used him parasitically. But Dakin, Tennessee's brother, later said that it would have been impossible for anyone to have a healthy relationship with him because of his paranoia.

Dakin convinced Tennessee he should come to St. Louis to enter Barnes Hospital where a cousin, Dr. Carl Harford, would treat him. Williams and his brother stayed overnight at their mother's house and the playwright was to be admitted to the hospital the next day. But when the time came, Tennessee balked and he was finally admitted for 10 days under an involuntary commitment. Wiliiams alleged violent abuse at the hands of hospital staff. Once he was released, Williams broke off with Glavin and blamed him for the problems he encountered with his work. Tennessee told Audrey Wood that when he read anything he'd recently written, it read as if he'd been "tired" when he wrote it.

Analysis

Some unflattering aspects of Tennessee Williams' character are revealed in this chapter. One is his tendency to run from problems, disappointments or conflicts. In this case, the re-staging of "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More" provided the forum for display of Williams' "mad pilgrimage." After disagreements with the director over casting, Tennessee hired an old friend, Takullah Bankhead, in a key role. But he was obliged to let director Tony Richardson hire Tab Hunter, a vacuous, pretty boy singer/actor of the 1950s for another role. The entire production had become bedlam by the time it closed after only five performances.

Certainly, Williams' grief over the death at 40 of Frank Merlo played a big part in his seeming withdrawal from the actual production of "Milk Train," and his longstanding alcohol and drug addictions without doubt affected his ability to become engaged and stay that way.

But, on a more personal basis, Tennessee effectively abandoned his mother and brother who had come to New York for the opening of the play when he took off for Key West after the play got terrible reviews and then flopped. Evidently, he left them in New York and went to Key West without informing them or explaining why. This behavior seems

infantile and narcissistic in the extreme. It may have occurred to him later what he'd done when he became seriously suicidal.

His "mad pilgrimage" took him to Spain and then to Tangiers accompanied by a friend, with barely a pause in Key West. The rather compulsive nature of this behavior seems like a dog chasing his tail; Williams could not, no matter how hard or fast he ran, run away from himself or his life. Then the death of his friend Carson McCullers added to his tragic self-narrative and enabled him to continue drinking and using drugs with the result that his world grew smaller and smaller until he was the only one in it. Once again, Tennessee's loving brother Dakin intervened by taking him to a specialist at a hospital in St. Louis.

Discussion Question 1

How long did "The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More" remain on Broadway when it opened in 1964?

Discussion Question 2

What was the fate of much of Williams' works produced in 1968?

Discussion Question 3

What criticism was leveled against Williams' by the gay liberationists of the late 60s?

Vocabulary

psychosomatic, cohabit, requiem, emollient, loggerheads, opaque, incessant, vociferous, precipitate, elegiac, slipstream, surreal, eponymous, chanteuse, derisory, hermetic, symbiotic, synonymous, regression, emollient,

The Long Farewell

Summary

Tennessee Williams' long swan song began with the kind of protracted melodrama that characterizes some of his plays. Except in this case, the players were real people with real ties to the playwright. Behind most of his deteriorating relationships—personal and professional—was the tightening grip of his alcoholism and drug addiction. Although his stint at Barnes Hospital provided him with an initial start toward sobriety, Williams had progressed in his disease until July 1971 when, during the opening of his newly-rewritten play "Out Cry" in Chicago, Tennessee "was managing his panic with liberal cocktails of Ritalin and Nembutal, a downer that counteracted Ritalin's amphetamine-like rush," according to the author. Director George Keathley said "he would come in giggling in a high-pitched voice, his eyes bulging and looking off to the side while he opened his mouth as wide as he could—as if to stretch the skin. He truly looked like a spastic. It bordered on the grotesque."

To Keathley and Audrey Wood, his agent, it appeared Williams was greatly influenced by the opinions of Dotson Rader, Tennessee's new writer friend and antiwar activist. This made working with him on rehearsals very tense and difficult because no one could be certain how he would react to people and situations. When Keathley suggested that he make some cuts to pare down the the excessive running time of "Out Cry," Williams reacted angrily and abusively. He swooped down on Audrey Wood in a predatory state of paranoia and accused her of secretly working to harm his career. After a cool audience reception to the play, Williams screamed at Wood:

"You must have been pleased by the audience reaction tonight, You've wanted me dead for 10 years. But I'm not going to die! And you, you bitch, you've been against me from the beginning. I'm through with you. You're fired!"

Word quickly spread of the breach between Wood and Williams. She returned to New York to nurse her wounds, and became convinced that Maria St. Just had been the cause by her "subversive double-dealing." Williams sent a telegram to Wood telling her that their relationship was long-term and that he hoped it would "have a long way to go." He signed it, "Love, Tom."

Apprehensive about progress on "Out Cry," Williams became suspicious of his agent once again, and interpreted the fact she could not always respond immediately to him as lack of support while overlooking the fact that he was not her only client as a literary agent. St. Just played on his suspicions and convinced Williams that she alone held his best interests at heart. In September 1970, he designated St. Just to be his European agent with no prior notice or discussion with Audrey Wood.

Williams suspected Wood of making plans to construct a Tennessee Williams theme park populated by his characters, and of selling the rights to those characters to a

television network. These fears are not supported by any paper evidence in the form of legal agreements in the estates of either Williams or Wood.

Months later, Williams ran into Wood at the Algonquin Hotel where he was having brunch with his novelist friend Sidney Shelton. She heard a voice say, "Hello, Audrey," and a hand extended in her direction. She reached out for it, but then withdrew her hand and ran into the lobby to calm herself with tranquilizers. Williams stormed away angrily. It was evident that their mutually beneficial relationship of more than 30 years was beyond repair. "No playwright-agent relationship in American theater history had had a longer or more glorious story than WIlliams' partnership with Wood," the author states. Because of the end of his relationship with Wood, as well as his brother Dakin and other close people estranged or dead, the playwright lost hs bearings on reality and became easy prey for the drifters, parasites and sycophants of his circle in Key West—the "weird tribe," as one of Williams' poet pals called them.

By December 1971 Williams had completed another play called "Small Craft Warnings," that he himself soft-pedaled as a "minor" work. In it, a collection of misfit characters gathers in a California seaside bar to drink boisterously as they look for answers to the eternal questions of life and love. Williams had already come out as gay in a television interview but was not sought out by the leaders of the new gay liberation movement, even though his work had begun to deal with homosexuality openly rather than cryptically. But Williams aligned himself with the left-wing politics of young people who protested the Vietnam War and pushed in every direction for more freedom.

Through his friendship with Dotson Rader, a gay writer for the New Republic, WIlliams was introduced to Andy Warhol and his collection of artists/actors at The Factory. Williams told Rader he found being involved in the movement "quite fresh and exhilarating as mountain air." Williams met and befriended the likes of feminist Kate Millett, photographer Robert Mapplethorpe, editor/writer George Plimpton, political activists Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin. Of Tennessee's leftward political drift, Rader remarked: "It is impossible to overstate how morally repugnant the system was in his eyes."

As he identified more with the political left and its struggles, Williams wrote to Rader on the importance of hope, "all that we've got to give meaning to our lives. The bright side is the strength of our moral leadership: the blacks." Williams wrote of his feeling that Abbie Hoffman was "a holy man...and all our true caring for each other. It really is, for me, a religious conversion, my first one that is humanly meaningful."

To show his support for the movement, Williams wrote a poem, "Ripping off the Mother," for Evergreen Review as well as an advocacy piece for Harper's Bazaar titles, "We Are Dissenters Now" and donated his payment for both to the People's Coalition for Truth and Justice. Rader pressed Williams to make an appearance at the Dec. 6, 1971 benefit at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where prominent writers, artists and thinkers congregated. After Norman Mailer's protest play, "Why Are We in Vietnam?" was staged with its profanity and desecration, an offended Williams left the scene because of the

drugs, the decadence, the spitefulness and finally by the hideous blasphemies of the play."

The event signaled not only Tennessee's return to his former political neutrality but also the beginning of the end of his relationship with Rader, who had included Williams' name on a coalition letterhead without his permission.

"Small Craft Warnings" was greeted with enthusiasm by drama critics to the extent that Williams began to hope that the downward trend of his recent years had changed. "A five-finger exercise from the man who is the greatest living playwright in the western world," chirped Time magazine. "'Small Craft Warnings' may survive better than some of the much-touted products of [William'] salad years," wrote Clive Barnes of The New York Times. The play was performed 200 times in approximately six months. At one point, because of the absence of one actor, Williams himself went onstage as the character Doc. "I am a ham and I loved it," Williams wrote to St. Just.

Some in the gay liberation movement began to characterize Williams as an outmoded figure. In 1972, a pseudonymous article in The New York Times asked rhetorically, "Why do homosexual playwrights hide their homosexuality?" The piece argued that an honest depiction of gay life had yet to be produced in the American theater. Williams responded with a piece in the Village Voice: "Homosexuality isn't the theme of my plays. They're all about human relationships. I've never faked it."

Since purchasing his cottage in Key West, Williams had been the target of homophobic anger and by the 1970s, it seemed to be increasing or at least Williams was losing his resistance to scorn—whether from friends, professional associates, the press or neighbors. These outbursts included gunshots, garbage dumped on his property, obscenities shouted from the street, late night obscene phone calls and public staring. He told one reporter: "I feel so OLD!" and he worried about his health. Truman Capote, in a thinly-disguised portrait in Esquire magazine, described Williams as a "chunky, paunchy, booze-puffed runt."

Perhaps to relive his youth. Williams began work on his autobiography. He also began cohabiting with Robert Carroll, a West Virginian 25-year-old veteran of Southeast Asia wars who was writing a novel about Vietnam. Carroll was street-wise, bright and feisty. He was a cool character who seemed unimpressed with Williams' fame. Their first domestic clash came when Carroll brought his 20-year-old male friend home and they cavorted in Williams' studio. Their relationship, like all of Tennessee's relationships, became volatile and remained so partly because of Carroll's wild mood swings. Although the struggle for control in his relationship with Carroll left him emotionally paralyzed and unable to work effectively, Williams did not end the relationship because of guilt feelings about his "silent complicity" in his sister's lobotomy and his treatment of Frank Merlo, according to Rader.

Even after their breakup, Williams provided for a yearly sum of $7,500 to be paid to Carroll and gave him the deed to a farm in West Virginia. Williams' advice to Carroll: "Take care and spit in the face of depression."

Because of his declining public visibility and professional stall, his new literary agent Bill Barnes suggested that Tennessee go on television, do magazine interviews and write his autobiography. In a TV interview with David Frost, Williams soft-pedaled his homosexuality but his autobiography "brought him spectacularly out of the closet and answered his critics within the gay community, if not the heterosexual one," the author observes.Williams felt he'd been double-crossed when he agreed to a small-volume publication off his letters to Donald Windham, who signed a contract with a major publisher and a received a $25,000 advance.

Comparison of Tennessee's early letters with his later memoirs revealed "an internal sea change: at the start of his career Williams had survived to write; now he wrote to survive."

Broadway producer David Merrick and Williams struggled to bring "The Red Devil Battery Sign" to the stage without much luck. Its conspiratorial setting is Dallas just after the assassination of President Kennedy. During early stages of their collaboration, Merrick "treated Williams like a dead man," according to the author. Some critics referred to Williams as just "a ghost of his former self," others rhetorically referred to the playwright as "dead." In fact, though, Tennessee's artistic method had shifted from his earlier work in which he projected the ghosts and spectres of his past onto the stage; now his focus became his own contemporary demons. "Red Devil" opened in June 1976 in Boston and ran for four hours. Director Ed Sherin called the play "amateurish, ponderous, inaccurate and incomplete." The Boston Globe called it "a mess." After one week, producer David Merrick posted closing notices at the theater. Williams seemed resigned when he received the news, but actor Anthony Quinn raged: "Tennessee Williams, one of the great talents of all time, has been treated like an assembly-line butcher."

In "Clothes for a Summer Hotel: A Ghost Play," Williams resurrects Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald as disembodied ghosts, free to move back and forth in time and share their insights with each other and the audience. Some critics claimed that Williams had failed to get across to audiences why there was a need to re-tell the oft-repeated story of that Jazz Age beautiful couple. Williams answered that by taking liberties with times and places it was possible "to explore in more depth what we believe is truth of character." The director, José Quintero, explained that Scott Fitzgerald, like Tennessee Williams, had been told in the later part of his young life that he was finished, washed up as a writer and yet, like Williams, one of his most important books, "Tender is the Night," came during that period.

And in the same way that Fitzgerald had used Zelda as the model for Nicole Diver in "Tender Is the Night," Tennessee had used his sister, Rose, as the model for Laura Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie." In "Clothes for Summer Hotel," set in Highland Hospital in Asheville, N.C. where Zelda was a mental patient, She asks Scott why he had used her in his fiction and why it was so hard for him to accept and understand reality for what it is. As Zelda returns to the hospital and the iron gates close, she shouts at her husband: "I'm not your book anymore. I can't be your book anymore."

Here and there, WIlliams dropped inferences that he felt death closing in on him. The thinness of his later plays, like his handwriting, became less energetic, less daring although Williams was still driven by the need to write. The author ascribes this process of creative and personal attrition to Williams' inability to stop flogging himself. He observes: "The activity that had given him life also gave him death."

"A House Not Meant to Stand," one of these later plays, gives the audience Cornelius and Bella McCorkle, an elderly couple hard-pressed to keep up with the demands of their dilapidated house. Its condition of collapse is a metaphor for what Williams saw as society's dismantling because of the threat of nuclear war, inflation, overpopulation and some of the themes from Williams' own life—including family trauma—are reenacted in a different setting.

His body was found Feb. 25, 1983 on the 13th floor of the Hotel Elysée in New York.

Analysis

Alone, withdrawn, all but forgotten, Tennessee Williams by the time of his death had become one, or a collection of, of his own characters. Like Blanche DuBois, he'd relied on the kindness of strangers that had somehow run out; like Laura Wingfield, his most treasured possessions were his plays, beautiful but fragile like his own soul; and like The Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon, he'd discovered a god among the dispossessed of the world, not in a glistening house of worship. These, then, were the fruits of his Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh.

Discussion Question 1

What was the impact on Audrey Wood of Tennessee Williams firing her after years of working together?

Discussion Question 2

What sort of abnormal mental state did Williams exhibit toward the end of his life?

Discussion Question 3

Did Tennessee Williams finally succumb to depression in the end?

Vocabulary

Ritalin, jubilant, recalcitrant, incredulous, culpability, cannibalize, chicanery, disequilibrium, peroration, jejune, pseudonym, impudent, ruction, lobotomy, garrulous, ostensible, draconian, synergy, truculence, adamantine

The Sudden Subway

Summary

Evidently, Williams had barricaded himself for three days inside his hotel room with a "Do Not Disturb" sign on the door when police arrived. He'd not allowed anyone in his room—including hotel housekeeping staff—and refused long distance calls from his friend, Maria St. Just. Williams had imagined his own death in his last piece of writing, a one-act called "The One Exception," in which the heroine Kyra withdraws to her room and refuses any human contact. Fearful of an imminent visit to the hospital, Kyra paces around her room, finally sits down in a chair and closes her eyes. Williams himself had a mortal fear of institutions and did not want to die in one.

John Uecker, who occupied a room next to Williams, said that Tennessee had asked him to "pull the plug" if he were ever dying a slow death in a hospital, and had refused. When he visited Williams, Uecker said, Williams' eyes followed him around the room warily, "worried if I was going to turn him in or not, if I was going to betray him. He didn't want a public death."

Williams had stopped swimming (his favorite form of exercise), thrown away his artist's paints and sold the cottage in Key West. He'd told Uecker he could no longer write, and therefore had no desire to live. He said he wanted to get some barbiturates. Distraught over Williams' condition, Uecker had asked Vass Voglis—another friend—to help get Tennessee to the hospital on Thursday evening, the day before his death. When they finally entered WIlliams' room, they found "the curtains were drawn; the place was a sour, pill-strewn mess." They found Williams on the floor between the bed and the night table in his underwear, still wearing glasses. A half-empty glass of wine was on the night table, and an empty bottle of Seconal under the table.

The medical examiner said Williams had died of asphyxia because of a plastic bottle top in his airway. A later toxicology report indicated he'd ingested a lethal dose of barbiturates.

Tennessee's brother Dakin had him buried in St. Louis next to his mother, instead of at sea near the spot where the poet Hart Crane had died, as Tennessee had requested. There was a requiem mass at St. Louis Cathedral on March 5. Rose Williams, Tennessee's sister, was named beneficiary of his estate, while the literary residue was left to a trust, over which Maria St. Just claimed governance.

"Out of the sad little wish to be loved, Williams made characters so large that they became part of American folklore," the author writes. "Blanche, Stanley, Big Daddy, Brick, Amanda and Laura transcend their stories—sensational ghosts who haunt us through the ages with their fierce, flawed lives."

Analysis

Tennessee Williams referred to death as "the sudden subway," although in his case there were plenty of signals that his demise was approaching. Most of these related to his prodigious consumption of drugs and alcohol. The toxicology report indicates Williams died from a plastic bottle cap lodged in his throat but does not draw a connection between asphyxia and his drugged condition due to alcohol and barbiturates.The third possibility is that Williams—consciously or unconsciously—took his own life as he'd threatened to do on many other occasions. Whether or not he took his own life, Williams gave us many more lives in his characters who are among the immortals of literature.

Discussion Question 1

What was one of Tennessee Williams'' greatest fears as he approached the end of his life?

Discussion Question 2

What did the coroner rule was th actual cause of death?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Tennessee refer to death as "the sudden subway?"

Vocabulary

prescient, abdication, epigram, scrum, asphyxia, greensward, stipend, codicil, remonstrate, clamorous, ineffable.

Characters

Thomas Lanier (Tennessee) WIlliams

Thomas Lanier Williams is the subject of this biography, and a moving force on most of the secondary characters. A shy, slightly-built boy with somewhat effeminate features, Tom was picked on and ridiculed by his father, a traveling salesman who was frequently not at home and when he was present, became an out-of-control drunk.

Edwina, Tennessee's mother, was a God-fearing southern woman who had trouble understanding Tom (who became Tennessee) and particularly his homosexuality. She seems to have been the negotiator in the family who tried to temper her husband's alcoholic behavior.

Rose Williams, Tennessee's sister, was a precariously-balanced girl who withdrew from her family and the world into fantasy. Eventually, her withdrawal was seen as a sign of serious mental illness. Her parents decided to have their daughter undergo a frontal lobotomy, a brutal and archaic procedure that separates the cerebral cortex from the lining of the skull. Lobotomies often turned patients into human vegetables and Rose was institutionalized her entire adult life.

Williams was enraged at his parents for giving their consent to the lobotomy, and bore a burden of guilt his entire life for not somehow intervening to prevent the procedure. Tennessee and Rose remained close; he often visited her whenever possible and left the bulk of his considerable estate to provide care for Rose until her death.

As the arc of Tennessee's dramatic career ascended, so did his homosexuality and his dependence on drugs and alcohol. Tennessee's brother, Dakin, intervened several times in an effort to get his brother off the treadmill of self-destruction. He arranged for a a drying out at a Prestigious St. Louis hospital and oversaw Tennessee's conversion to Catholicism.

Williams' career seemed to follow a pattern of smash success followed by mediocre plays or outright flops, followed by another hit. Because of his poetic language and deep understanding of human nature, Williams has been called one of the last literary dramatists before the emergence of new wave playwrights such as Eugene Ianesco, Jean Genet and Samuel Beckett.

Williams' impact on the dramatic arts is hard to measure, but it's clear to many people quoted in the book that they think Williams was the greatest of all American playwrights.

Frank Merlo

Frank Merlo was Tennessee's longtime lover who died at 40. They met when Merlo returned from service in the Navy during World War II. In his homosexual relationship

with Williams, Merlo played more the role of wife and homemaker while Tennessee was the workaholic, absent husband/father figure. When Tennessee was summoned to the offices of Jack Warner of Warner Brothers to discuss movie prospects for one of his plays, he brought Merlo along.

After introductions and small talk, Warner asked Merlo what his connection was with Tennessee and his play. "I sleep with Mr. Williams," came his deadpan reply.

Like many newlywed couples, Williams and Merlo had emotional outbursts, periods of silence and finally reconciliation. They shared a cottage in Key West, Florida as well as an apartment in New York.

Although Merlo made an effort to fit into Tennessee's world of the theater, it wasn't his natural environment and the schism in their worlds gradually produced an estrangement to the extent that Merlo said he felt that when Williams was writing he didn't even seem to know Merlo was around.

When Merlo was diagnosed with lung cancer, He and Williams were in a state of reconciliation and the death sentence struck the playwright squarely between the eyes. His grief for his handsome Italian-American lover was profound and long-lasting. To a large extent, Williams withdrew from the romantic rumble after Frank died.

Audrey Wood

Tennessee Williams signed on with Audrey Wood as his literary agent early in his career. She was a tremendous support and facilitator for his success, although Tennessee and the world have given her little credit for her role in bringing the work of this genius to the world. A small, gnome-like woman, Wood was well-connected in the theater world with several high-profile clients when Williams his alliance with her. Audrey Wood was editor, surrogate mother, artistic collaborator, one-woman cheering squad and shrewd businesswoman for Williams. He grew more reliant on her experience, judgment and counsel through the years—even remaining loyal to Tennessee when his addictions made him at times incoherent.

Toward the end of his life, as Williams' alcoholism advanced, many of his close relationships disintegrated. His public humiliation and firing of Audrey Wood was extremely hurtful to her, so much so that she left the business. And Tennessee's other friends who were present recalled vividly how the playwright, already well into his cups, turned on Wood, calling her "bitch" and accusing her of plotting for his downfall. His paranoia spilled into other relationships that ended.

Elia Kazan

Elia Kazan was the movie director with whom Tennessee worked on many of his most successful productions. Kazan was already in great demand because of his long string of successful movies. The two forged a close working relationship in which Kazan

pledged that he would always work on one of Williams' projects to the exclusion of others. Their relationship ended after Kazan promised Tennessee he would direct one of his films, then quit and went to work on a different movie.

In many of Williams' films Kazan also performed the role of script doctor and made specific suggestions for revisions to every aspect of Williams' creative work. Kazan exerted such a strong influence over Williams at the time his life and work began to decline that his departure may have felt like a threat to Tennessee's survival.

Although they agreed to remain friends and work together again, that never happened and their breach became permanent.

Rose Williams

Rose Williams was Tennessee's younger sister and someone very close to the writer. During her teen years, Rose was subjected to a frontal lobotomy—a brutal procedure in which the cortex of the brain is separated from the inside of the skull. It was a procedure, now abandoned, that was thought to help the insane. Instead, it turned Rose more into a vegetable than anything else. Tennessee always felt guilty that he didn't do something to prevent the lobotomy. He left the bulk of his estate for the care and keeping of his sister. Laura Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie" is modeled on Rose Williams.

Edwina Williams

Edwina Williams was Tennessee's mother. She came from an ecclesiastical family: her father was The Reverend Dakin, an Episcopal priest who was the model for the poet Nanno in "Night of the Iguana." Edwina provided some balance against the alcoholic violence of her husband but Tennessee evidently never felt a strong bond with her. Toward the end of her life, she also experienced mental problems in the form of delusional thinking, tinged with paranoia. She provided what support she could for Williams' writing career and attended the openings of several plays in New York.

Cornelius C. WIlliams

Cornelius C. Williams was Tennessee's father. A traveling salesman and mid-level manager at a shoe company in St. Louis, C.C. Williams was a violent alcoholic who terrorized Edwina, his wife, and ridiculed his son, Thomas. He is the primary model for the character Big Daddy in "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof." Evidently, Cornelius was also an alcoholic. After leaving his job at the shoe company in St. Louis he apparently barricaded himself in his bedroom, only coming out to replenish his drinks.

Dakin WIlliams

Dakin Williams was Tennessee's brother who became an attorney in St. Louis. Dakin went out of his way on numerous occasions to help his brother when he had personal or professional crises. Dakin secured Tennessee a bed in a psychiatric hospital in St. Louis to treat his addictions and was on hand whenever needed to help Tennessee. Dakin even arranged to convert his brother to Roman Catholicism.

Gore Vidal

Gore Vidal was a close friend of Tennessee and also a homosexual author, although they were never lovers. Vidal's primary genre was historical novels although he wrote extensive essays for many years published in mass circulation magazines and later in book form. Vidal was also a playwright of less renown than Williams. His "Myra Breckenridge" explored the words of homosexuality and transgender sexuality; its stage performance was followed by a successful movie.

Where Tennessee Williams eschewed the world of politics, Gore Vidal remained immersed in politics until he died. Besides his presidential and political biographies, his "United States of Amnesia" pokes sarcastic fun at the seemingly mindless repetition of mistakes, large and small, by American politicians.

Vidal had familial connections with Eleanor Roosevelt (who he visited often in upstate New York's Hudson Valley) and with Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy. As a schoolboy, Vidal sometimes read to his nearly-blind grandfather, Sen. Thomas Gore of Oklahoma.

James Laughlin

James Laughlin was publisher of New Directions paperbacks and the first press to offer print versions of Williams' plays for general consumption, Laughlin himself was a venturesome liberal who saw the potential in WIlliams' work. Laughlin remained a steadfast supporter of Tennessee and they remained lifelong friends.

Symbols and Symbolism

The iguana

In "Night of the Iguana," the lizard represents both the life force, or animalistic freedom, as well as imprisonment. The iguana then is a symbol for all humans who must somehow balance their need for freedom with their need for attachment, as in love relationships. In the play, the iguana becomes a creature for compassion and pity through which the playwright suggests that we humans can find some degree of peace even as we move through the constraints of society to find and nurture our true natures. The iguana also can symbolize the creative urge of the artist for expression against the norms and mores of conventional society. As a homosexual artist, Williams could understand and identify with the plight of the captive iguana.

The glass menagerie

Laura Wingfield's collection of delicate glass figurines symbolize her own spiritual and emotional fragility. As her domineering mother pushes her introverted daughter to attend secretarial school and learn some marketable skills, she also pushes her in the direction of dating and finding the correct "gentleman caller." Mr. Wingfield recalls her days as a southern belle when suitors seemed in endless supply. But Laura, Tom and Mrs. Wingfield have moved to the city (St. Louis) where the folkways are very different than in the rural south, where often family name and rank were sufficient to ensure survival. In the city, though, competition suffuses everything and Laura's mother fears her shy daughter will be left in the darkness of isolation with her glass menagerie. The figures, like Laura, are beautiful in an otherworldly way and very fragile, as demonstrated when the gentleman caller knocks one to the floor where it shatters.

Miss Fellowes

The slyly-named Miss Fellowes in "Night of the Iguana" is leader of a group of women teachers from the United States who take a bus tour of Mexico. Included in the collection of old maids and widows is the stunningly beautiful and sexy young Charlotte, who teases The Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon to a condition of frustrated madness. Miss Fellowes' angst derives from her not-so-cryptic lesbianism. The budding sexual relationship between the defrocked priest and the nymphet drives Miss Fellowes, also, to a state of near-madness. Thus, her name is symbolic of the frustrations of closeted gay people who try to avoid society's rejection by assuming a fake heterosexual identity. The name itself and her behavior combine to demonstrate the futility of that kind of sexual masquerade.

Big Daddy

Big Daddy Pollitt ("The delta's biggest cotton-planter") in "Cat on a hot Tin Roof" is a symbol of blind male insensitivity and "good ole boy" bluster, modeled closely on Tennessee Williams' own father, Cornelius C. Williams. Big Daddy offends nearly everyone ho crosses his path.

Nanno the poet

The Rev. Dakin, Tennessee's grandfather, was a literate and well-educated clergyman who could recite great passages of poetry. His nickname was also "Nanno." In "Night of the Iguana," Nanno is a 90-something-year-old traveling poet who travels around the world with his artist daughter, reciting poems and painting portraits in exchange for room and board. The completion of his epic poem and sudden death is a dramatic highlight of "Iguana."

Rope handcuffs on Shannon

At one point in "Night of the Iguana," The Rev. T. Larwence Shannon's hands are tied together with rope as he sleeps off a violent drunk. The handcuffs symbolize convention, propriety, expectations, societal restraints.

Cat on hot tin roof

The "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" figuratively symbolizes sexual desire, cupidity, sexual tension. Tennessee got the phrase from his father.

Charlotte

Charlotte in "Night of the Iguana" symbolizes youthful abandon, sexual freedom, and a child-like view of the world.

Gentleman caller

The young man that Tom Wingfield brings home for supper in an attempt at a setup with his withdrawn sister Laura is referred to as the "gentleman caller" by Laura Wingfield. This was the socially appropriate term for southern ladies of her generation, but it seems oddly out of place in the time of the play. In reality, the gentleman caller is an example of the brashness and insensitivity of the success-oriented, Dale Carnegie, two-dimensional generation of the 30s and 40s.

Carniverous plants

In the greenhouse solarium of Mrs. Venable's New Orleans home in "Suddenly Last Summer," there are a number of carnivorous plants that eat flies and other insects. The plants symbolize cannibalism, a central theme in "Suddenly, Last Summer."

Settings

St. Louis

St. Louis was where Tennessee Williams spent much of his adolescence, having moved there with his family from Memphis. It was in St. Louis that Williams worked nights in the warehouse of the shoe company where his father worked. Much of the atmospherics of "The Glass Menagerie" derived from his experiences in St. Louis.

New Orleans

Tennessee lived for a considerable portion of his adult life in New Orleans, by choice, because he liked its freedom and vitality. "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" owe their locale to New Orleans.

New York

New York City is where Williams had his first big success with "The Glass Menagerie." It is also the city often thought of as the cultural capitol of America and is the home of Broadway, where stage productions live or die. Williams lived intermittently in New York while he had his cabin in Key West, so he could meet with his agent Audrey Wood and with producers and directors of his plays.

Key West

Key West is practically the most southern of all the islands in the Florida keys. It is far enough south from the mainland that it has its own distinct culture, which mimics the Caribbean. For Williams, his cabin in Key West was a sanctuary where he could write and live freely with his lover Frank Merlo. Although there was a more-or-less steady stream of homophobia directed at Williams in Key West, it remained his sanctuary for many years as it did to another American writer, Ernest Hemingway.

Puerto Vallarta

Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, is where "Night of the Iguana" was filmed in the mid-60s. Before the movie crew came to town, Puerto Vallarta was a sleepy Mexican fishing village. After the film version of "Iguana" had been seen worldwide and gained recognition, Puerto Vallarta quickly developed into an American tourist resort. It was still small when Tennessee Williams, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Ava Gardner walked its beaches.

Themes and Motifs

The tragedy of genius

Tennessee Williams started life with two strikes against him: he was born into a dysfunctional, alcoholic and sometimes violent home, and he was a homosexual at a time in America when this was a cause for real shame. Through his native gifts for language, his expansive soul and persistent work, he not only created beautiful works of art that amaze, amuse and enlighten the human condition but also suffered the kind of cruel fate that seems reserved for those among us with extraordinary gifts. According to his biographer, Williams really never found the love he deeply needed—we all need—and died alone, a heartbroken alcoholic and addict.

His gifts lifted him from the conditions of his birth and childhood to international fame and fortune but this was not enough to save him from eventual suicide despite the many, and loving, attempts to intervene in his personal life by his brother and others who did, in fact, love him. Throughout his life Tennessee retained a crushing shame, a sense of inadequacy that no amount of fame, drugs or lovers could erase. This was only rarely visible in his self-deprecating quips thrown out like soap bubbles to the wind.

The number of people—critics, actors, playwrights and the public—who hailed his genius was inestimable. But the gap between his own feelings about himself and the outward success he enjoyed seemed to never heal. This torment is probably the origin of the haunted, otherworldly currents that drive his characters—from the fragile Laura Wingfield in "The Glass Menagerie" to the crazed Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon in "Night of the Iguana."

These characters are all pieces and projections of Williams himself. His art is more than exorcism; it is a pathway to healing and redemption by sharing a common wound that the playwright uncovers in all of us and displays. There is more than a little compassion in his observation: "Mankind is crucified on the twin arms of cupidity and stupidity." The deeper tragedy is that Williams could, through his art, heal some of our self-inflicted spiritual wounds, but could never heal himself.

Closeted homosexuality

Most of Williams' plays and movies were created before the gay rights movement made closeted homosexuality a symptom of cultural abuse, and encouraged gays to "come out" to everyone about their sexual orientation. This transition to some extent mirrored the shift in the black power movement from the earlier stereotype of the shuffling Uncle Tom, eager with a "yas suh" to demonstrate complicity with a negative stereotype. Just as the black power movement of the 19670s hated the old stereotype, the gay movement sought to claim its own, true identity.

However, Tennessee Williams wrote at a time when such stereotypes were prevalent. Most of the gays who appear in his works are only cryptically homosexual. That is, the audience must discern for themselves to what extent a character's sexual identity is their true character, however well concealed it may be. Williams never made homosexuality, per se, an issue in his work except by inference; he never publicly made an issue of his own homosexuality, although he never denied it.

But in the slyly-named Miss Fellows, director of a church tour group in Mexico, we encounter a closeted lesbian whose rages at Charlotte and The Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon for their perceived sexual flirtation in Night of the Iguana. It is soon evident that her rage stems from her own carnal desire for the nubile young woman.

In Suddenly Last Summer, Sebastian is killed by a mob of Mexican youths who take revenge on him for his purchase of sexual favors by exploiting their poverty. In The Glass Menagerie, Tom's motives for inviting the Gentleman Caller to his house for dinner appear, on the surface, to be an attempt to find a suitor for Laura. But there are hints that Tom himself is the one with erotic feelings for his co-worker.

A strong sexual charge courses through all of Williams' work. Part of his genius was in bringing sexuality to the fore without pushing the cultural taboo buttons of his time. He does not display homosexuality like a carnival barker; rather, he places it close enough to the edge of our subconscious as the only answer to many questions about character and motivation.

It is ironic, then, that Williams as a transitional cultural figure was scorned and disregarded by other younger homosexuals as too old fashioned, not radical enough.

Kindness

The only real comfort Tennessee Williams offers his struggling characters in a host of plays is kindness. In "A Streetcar Named Desire," Blanche DuBois forlornly intones "I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers." With Williams, kindness is the best we humans are capable of showing to others. The opposite of kindness, cruelty, is often portrayed in contrast to kindness. In this universe, it is human cruelty that creates the need for kindness. This message appears often, either explicitly or implicitly, in Williams' oeuvre.

For example, in "Night of the Iguana," a moment of dramatic tension climaxes in a conversation between The Rev. T. Lawrence Shannon and [Deborah Kerr] when the badly hungover clergyman seizes a machete and cuts a piece of rope that holds an iguana captive. "I hereby free one of God's creatures at the end of his rope," Shannon says. The parallel between the cruelty of tying up a wild creature and defrocking a priest because of a sexual indiscretion is apparent.

Kindness seems to have been a core value for Williams, and he demonstrated it towards others in several significant ways. One of these was leaving a provision in his will for his lover, Frank Merlo, to receive an annual income. Another was in leaving the

bulk of his considerable estate for the care, lodging and medical attention of his sister, Rose, who had been given a lobotomy in her youth with her parents' consent.

In many ways, Tennessee displayed southern chivalry and open-hearted generosity toward family and friends. Despite the crust that developed around his personality as he aged, Williams seemed to hold onto some of the basic Christian values he learned from his grandfather, The Reverend Dakin, in his youth.

The importance of work

Time and again, Williams returned to his creative work for both sustenance and spiritual survival earning for himself the nickname "Tenacity Williams." He could survive anything, it seemed, if he could immerse himself in his work. One of the real crises in his life was when Tennessee—because of domestic difficulties with his lover Frank Merlo—became so distracted that he could no longer work. Bad reviews from critics, homophobic harassment, devaluation by the gay rights movement. chronic alcoholism and drug addiction caused his creative ship of state to roll in turbulent waters, but never to sink.

As his work progressed, it became clear that his career was divided into three periods: a) his early and sensationally famous plays that transformed his life experiences and many of the people he knew into highly dramatic and emotionally raw theater, such as "The Glass Menagerie" and "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," b) work created out of the depths of his own tormented soul, such as "Suddenly, Last Summer" and " Streetcar Named Desire," This period coincided with his lengthy psychoanalysis, and 3) an experimental, more abstract creative orientation that sought a new approach to the theater. In this final period, Williams seems to answer critics who said he'd run out of ideas—including progressive gays who embodied a new self-awareness and personal freedom.

Examples of the third, final stage of his career include "Small Craft Warnings," "Something Cloudy, Something Clear," and "The Red Devil Battery Sign."

Sanity/insanity

Perhaps better than any other American playwright, Tennessee Williams understood the precarious balance between sanity and insanity that can drive people mad. A type of madness coursed through the Williams family, affecting Edwina, Rose and Tom (Tennessee) most conspicuously. For much of his working adult years, Williams questioned his own sanity and, in fact, received medical and psychoanalytic help for his addictions and depression.

The madness (probably bipolar illness, in today's parlance) that affected Rose surfaces in "The Glass Menagerie," as Laura clings desperately to her collection of glass figurines as her contact with reality. The play leaves Laura's fate unresolved after the devastating encounter with the gentleman caller that leaves one of her glass objects broken. Rose Williams, the model for Laura, was given a prefrontal lobotomy as a youth

because of her family's impatience with her strange behavior. Since the 50s and early 60s, lobotomies have not been performed, and bipolar illness is treated with prescription medications.

Tennessee Williams was hospitalized at least twice because of his chronic alcoholism and addictions. In one instance, his treatment was procured by his brother Dakin. Williams wrote several times to his agent, Audrey Wood, and described how his constitutionally determined nervousness could not be exorcised through anything but work. In Williams' mind there was a connection between his work and his sanity. In June 1954, Williams wrote in his notebook:

"Liquor and Seconal are my only refuge and they are not unfailing. Am I worthy of it [love]? Is anybody ever? We're all such pigs, I am one of the biggest. My soul, if I still have one, sighs. And shudders and sickens."

In "Suddenly, Last Summer" WIlliams confronted his anger and grief over his mother, Edwina's, allowing a prefrontal lobotomy on his sister, Rose, without informing him or asking his permission. In the play, Mrs. Venable is the stand-in for Edwina and Catherine Holly the dramatic persona of Rose Williams.

According to the author, the violence of his father and the repression of his mother were "at the root of Williams' various physical complaint and of his breakdown in 1935. The horrible family atmosphere was a recipe for madness." Williams observed that "Rose had the same precarious balance of nerves that I have to live with."

Styles

Point of View

The point of view is that of the objective observer/narrator, as appropriate for a nonfiction biography. The author communicates clearly how the narrative of Tennessee Williams' life affected him and those with whom he was connected but the story always remains Williams' life.

Language and Meaning

The language is contemporary American English, with a plethora of slang terms that makes the dialogue seem realistic. There is no single meaning to this book, but rather an entire spectrum of experiences, emotions, triumphs and losses that make up most lives. Beyond whatever "meaning" can be found in Williams' plays, one valid observation of Tennessee Williams' life and work concerns the all-too-common intersection between genius and tragedy. While the play writing genius of Williams can not be denied, neither can the obvious tragedy that despite his talent and accomplishments, Williams ended his days on earth as a broken alcoholic and addicted man who never found or developed the lasting love he sought.

Structure

Except for a flashback at the beginning of the book at the point when Williams had just burst forth on the stage with "The Glass Menagerie," the narrative proceeds in a linear fashion from beginning to end. The author makes abundant use of primary source materials such as newspaper reviews, direct interviews with Williams, family and friends a well as television appearances. These enlarge and enrich the narrative without disturbing its basic chronological order of events. This straightforward approach helps the reader keep track of the many people, directions and stages of Williams' life.

Quotes

If ever the professional debut of a major playwright was a greater fiasco, history does not record it. Battle of Angels set a kind of high-water mark for disaster. 'The bright angels were pretty badly beaten in Boston,' Williams wrote to a friend.
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 3)

Importance: The opening of Tennessee Williams' first play and its reception serve as a marker for the progress of his development as an artist. His work and its public esteem rose from this dark nadir to a bright zenith of public acclaim and success that eventually labeled him a genius and the greatest of all American playwrights. On opening night, Williams left the theater "stunned, speechless and suicidal," according to the author.

At the time of his conversion to drama in his early 20s, Williams had never been backstage and had not seen more than two or three professional productions. For two decades, however he'd had a ringside seat at some unforgettable and indigestible family scenes. Williams' childhood was not happy, but it was noisy.
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: That Tennessee Williams drew on his own experiences to create characters, scenes and story lines is evident in this observation that points directly to his family as the source for most of his dramatic material. With the resounding success of The Glass Menagerie, for example, came speculation that Amanda Wingfield is the dramatic persona of his sister, the fragile and lovable Rose Williams. The characters and scenes of most of his plays are the transmutation of real people and situations from Williams' own life.

When the final curtain came down on the Broadway opening of The Glass Menagerie, the audience knew that some kind of theater history had been made. The cast took 24 curtain calls. 'All the people backstage were crying,' recalled the actress Betsy Blair. For the first time that year, a Broadway audience rose to its feet shouting, 'author, author!' The number of people who came backstage to see the actors was so large that the safety curtain had to allow the euphoric crowd to loiter onstage.
-- Narrator (chapter 1 paragraph 2)

Importance: Tennessee Williams' unique ability as a playwright to dramatize the tender heart and its fragility reaches audiences powerfully with the appearance of The Glass Menagerie. It is this ability that largely characterizes his work, and it was something new and compelling in the American theater when it appeared. In one form or another, in varying scenes and situations, this element is deeply embedded in his plays and works effectively because of the authenticity of its message.

By being desired, Williams was emptied of need; the stranger became the needy one. In that sense, Williams' [gay] cruising held the promise of another kind of emotional relief—each time it succeeded, he had been chosen, he had been taken in, he knew he was real. Having rejected his mother's puritanical strictures, his Christian faith, his 'normal'

self, he embraced homosexuality's 'rebellious hell,' and with it he claimed his animality.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Almost simultaneously, Tom Williams became Tennessee Williams, had a successful play, moved to New Orleans and took up the life of a gay man. All of these events were interrelated in a psychic coming of age that enabled Williams to know and accept himself just as he learned to know and accept the larger world on its own terms. Thus stripped of illusions, Williams could embrace the deeper truths of his own nature as well as those of others. These developments lent his drama a realism and honesty that became his trademark.

Williams went on a sexual binge. In Mexico, he was raped by a handsome, powerful Mexican beach boy who swam out to his raft and later ravished him in his beach shack. On his sexual rounds that year (1943), Williams was beaten up by sailors he'd taken to his room at the Hotel St. George. Williams wrote in his diary, 'I hated it, but the keenness of the emotional situation, the material for art.' Sexuality brought Williams down to earth and into life.
-- Narrator, Williams (chapter 2 paragraph 3)

Importance: In his New Orleans exploits, Williams discovered the transformative power of sex along with its brutality not only as an emotional experience but also as fuel to create his art. Indeed, as the playwright explained to his agent Audrey Wood in 1945, fear and panic underlie the kind of promiscuity that appears so often in his characters—and in his own life. It is the outgrowth of a primitive need for protection, Williams told her in a letter about The Glass Menagerie.

She (Carson McCullers) was southern; she had battled ill health, alcoholism, insecurity and her own wayward sexual desires. Williams called McCullers his 'sister.' In later years, she would keep a writing room in her Nyac house for Williams. 'I feel that once I can be with you nothing will frighten me and I can rest safe,' she wrote him.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Carson McCullers, in many ways, was a mirror image of Tennessee Williams, and their first period of time together in Nantrucket during summer 1946 was important for both artists. Williams had written to her in praise of her novel, The Member of the Wedding. Gore Vidal, a friend of Williams, called McCullers "a crashing bore" whom Tennessee found "sort of tragic and interesting."

Blanche is attracted to a murderer, Stanley. That's the source of ambivalence in the play [Streetcar Named Desire], [Elia] Kazan said. Blanche wants the very thing that's going to crush her. The only way she can deal with the threatening force is to give in to it. That's the way Williams was. He was attracted to trash—rough, male homosexuals who were threatening him. Part of the sexuality he wrote into the play is the menace of it.
-- Narrator (chapter 2 paragraph 1)

Importance: Director Elia Kazan demonstrates uncanny insight into the motivations of the characters in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, another of Williams' huge dramatic successes.

The ambivalence that accompanies a sense of danger in the play mirrors the emotional state of the playwright. But beneath that surface observation is the stark reality that debasement of the ego is necessary for the sexual appetite of both. And beneath that awareness is the reality that both playwright and performer are already badly damaged characters for whom destruction of the ego is a familiar kind of negative affirmation.

Being successful and famous makes such demands! I wanted it and still want it, with one part of me, but that isn't the part of me that is important or creative. The public Somebody you are when you 'have a name' is a fiction created with mirrors and the only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath and which is the sum of your actions and so is constantly in a state of becoming.
-- Tennessee Williams (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: These words, from an essay Williams wrote called "On a Streetcar Named Success," describe what the playwright called his "spiritual dislocation" after his two big hits—The Glass Menagerie" and "A Streetcar Named Desire." Williams lamented the trappings of success that threatened to foreclose his artist's access directly into his soul, the source of his creativity. Williams joined a long line of artists and writers whose celebrity posed clear risks to his survival—drink, visitors, parasitic relationships, ego inflation.

In time, Williams would find Hollywood anathema to his freedom of expression; in the glamour and the glory of the moment, however, he looked on the glitterati with benign detachment. 'They are all very nice, like children, but the games that they are playing do not seem to make any sense,' he said. 'I think [Clifford] Odets must have approached them from the wrong angle. That is the trouble with an angry social attitude, an outraged premise, you see all the ugly things but not the often-delightful humor and fantasy of it, and the pathos.
-- Narrator, Williams (chapter 3 paragraph 2)

Importance: Tennessee rode into Hollywood for the filming of The Glass Menagerie like an emperor riding high on a plumed unicorn. He was wined, dined, toasted and shown around Los Angeles by Warner Brothers "like the goose who had laid a Fabergé egg," the author notes. But the charm offensive worked for a while: Williams rewrote the entire play along lines suggested by the movie house, but he is kept in the dark about a change in the story drafted by a Warner Brothers script writer that sought to blunt the play's tragic outline. There is a suggestion of a second Gentleman Caller who comes to court Laura Wingfield after her glass unicorn is shattered by the first visitor. When he saw how the story had been mangled, Williams was "outraged."

Williams, in his romantic rebellion, was always pitched against the restrictions of conformity: like that of the promiscuous characters in his story, "Two on a Party," his existence was 'a never-ending contest with the squares of the world, the squares who have such a virulent rage at everything not in their book.' Williams, who had known rejection as a child, styled himself an outcast, a fox pursued by Philistine hounds. In his work and in his life, he embraced the eccentric; tolerance was the flip side of his detachment.

-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: During the period of Williams' ascendancy, the early 1950s, American society and culture reacted to the Cold War and its paranoia with a rigidity stifling to artistic freedom. The so-called McCarthy Era was a time of political witch hunts, oppressive conformity and a rising middle class obsessed with "fitting in" and not rocking the sociocultural boat. In his quest for dramatic honesty, Williams sought and created characters at the margins—strongly individualized and eccentric people, like himself—to depict the full spectrum of human experience including that of the outsider. Although Williams himself was never labelled a "beat" writer, his work in many ways opened the door for divergent expression of and by those outside the mainstream.

Various theatricals lined up to offer praise for Camino Real in ads: Oscar Hammerstein, William Inge, Clifford Odets, Jean Arthur, Frederic March, Arthur Schwartz, Harold Rome, Gypsy Rose Lee, Valerie Bettis, and Libby Holman among them. 'A Statement in Behalf of a Poet" was published. Its signatories included Willem de Kooning, Paul Bowles, Lotte Lenya, Gore Vidal and John La Touche. The statement read: "'The reviews which appeared in the daily press gave no conception of the strength and perceptiveness of Mr. Williams' play. It is a work of the imagination—romantic, intensely poetic and modern.
-- Narrator (chapter 4 paragraph 4)

Importance: Camino Real, Tennessee Williams' major effort to find a new aesthetic for modern drama, was the result of months of rewrites, rehearsals, budget shortfalls, casting obstacles and directorial fatigue. After its opening in 1953, the play was broadly panned by critics, with a few exceptions. Williams' friends and artistic associates bought large newspaper ads defending the play and the playwright, but nevertheless it closed after 60 performances with a loss of $115,000. Although a commercial failure, the play did open the eyes of those in the theatrical community that changes were coming. For supporters of Williams, the fate of Camino Real was attributed to the fact it was too advanced for audiences and critics alike.

Williams' drinking was no laughing matter. 'It has gotten so bad,' he admitted, 'I don't dare to turn down a street unless I can sight a bar not more than a block and a half down it. Sometimes I have to stop and lean against a wall and ask somebody with me to run ahead and bring me a glass of cognac from the bar.' Williams was becoming simultaneously an actor and a voyeur, an exhibitionist and a spectator of his own suffering. He was scaring himself into a new literary life.
-- Narrator (chapter 5 paragraph 3)

Importance: In 1953, Williams was in a New Orleans hospital facing emergency surgery for "thrombosed hemorrhoids." It seemed a fitting consequence of the fatigue, spiritual and physical, he felt dragging him down and draining his creative energy after the disaster of Camino Real. By that time, alcohol had become a central pillar in his life the he used to ease the pain of his professional career as well as his failing romantic connection with Frank Merlo. By 1953, the playwright complained of a "physical deterioration and a mental fatigue that makes me downright stupid."