Tennessee Williams' treatment of women in his major plays

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' TREATMENT
OF WOMEN IN HIS MAJOR PLAYS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF ARTS

BY

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This thesis was undertaken to determine the impact that the females in Tennessee Williams' family had on his portrayal of female characters in his major plays and to determine the extent that these characters were actually reflections of Williams himself.

Williams' female characters fall into three categories: the Southern genteel lady, female aggressor/mother-figure, and the survivors of corrupt societies. Williams' depiction of the women in each of these categories reflected his association with the females in his family. Rose, his sister, represented the fragile, sexually repressed Southern genteel lady. On the other hand, Williams' mother Edwina could be placed in all three categories of Williams' women since she possessed characteristics common to each category. She represented the fragile, genteel lady who lived in her own illusions despite the drastic alteration of her life-style when her family made the move from Mississippi to Missouri. Like Amanda Wingfield, Edwina was determined to keep her family going by any available means, and this characteristic was exemplary of a mother figure. Lastly, we may think of Edwina as having been a survivor who knew that life had to go on despite the fact that her daughter had to have a lobotomy and later
was institutionalized.

The three categories of Williams' women can also be said to be indicative of the phases of Williams' homosexuality. The Southern genteel lady represented the early sexually repressed years of Williams' life. The female aggressor/mother-figure delineated his "coming out of the closet" or the public expression of his sexual preference despite criticism or ostracism. Lastly, the survivors in corrupt societies can be identified with Williams' final accommodation with the homosexual life-style.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams was obsessed with women. The desertion of the family by his father resulted in his growing up in an intense emotionally charged feminine household. His own homosexuality undoubtedly heightened his sensitivity to, and preoccupation with, themes of sexual identity. Williams' pivotal characters, consequently, are women. Tischler says that although "certain male characters approach the complexity and power of Williams' female, for a number of reasons—both biographical and psychological— the most memorable characters created by Tennessee Williams are women."¹ Williams himself remarks: "Women have always been my deepest emotional root. Anyone who reads my writing knows that."² It seems clear that Williams' perception of women in his writing was based on his associations with his mother and sister. Therefore, before discussing Williams' treatment of his female characters we need to look briefly at the main facts of his family background.

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911. The son of a traveling salesman, Williams, his mother Edwina, and sister Rose lived with their Grandfather Dakin, an


Episcopalian Priest. In Mississippi the Williams were a part of the Southern gentry, having attained their status through the Dakin family. However, changes in the lives of the Williams family occurred when they decided to move to St. Louis, Missouri, where Mr. Williams had received a promotion from salesman to sales manager of the International Shoe Company in St. Louis. Although their first place of residence was average, it was the second move to an apartment on South Taylor which Williams found depressing. This was the place to which he possibly referred in The Glass Menagerie when he wrote the following:

The Wingfield Apartment is in the rear of the building, one of those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living units that flower as warty growths in over-crowded urban centers of lower middle-class population and are symptomatic of the impulses of this largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society to avoid fluidity and differentiation and to exist and function as one interfused mass of automation.

Mr. Williams' relocation to St. Louis appeared to have been the beginning of Williams' unhappy childhood since he, as well as the other members of his family, was dissatisfied in St. Louis. Not only did Williams find his surroundings depressing, but he was unhappy with the first public school which he and his sister Rose attended. The children there ridiculed Williams and Rose, and even one teacher

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mocked their Southern drawl. Since in Mississippi, the children had friends from distinguished families and had attended school with these children. At the time, the children felt that they should have been able to attend private schools like some of the children from more affluent homes in St. Louis. However, the children soon accepted the fact that the Southern genteel style of living no longer existed for them. Mrs. Williams, however, experienced great difficulty in accepting this fact. Brought up in a very respectable home, she found the Southern genteel style of living the only one conceivable to her. She had enjoyed the respectability that she received from being Edwina Dakin Williams and found it very depressing when she was no longer given that respectability in St. Louis. As Mrs. Williams grew more discontented, arguments arose between her and Mr. Williams over his drinking and poker-playing, which she considered reckless behavior in the home of a Southern belle. Owing to Mrs. Williams' constant nagging and arguing with her husband, life was difficult for the family. Williams reflects in his Memoirs that he still looks on the move to St. Louis with bitterness.  

Williams' interest in female characters and his ability to relate well to women doubtless stem from the deep attachment that he developed as a child to his sister Rose and his mother Edwina. Williams had suffered from diptheria at an early age, an illness which weakened his legs, making it difficult for him to run and play with

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6 Edwina Dakin, Remember me to Tom (New York: Putnams, 1963), p. 15.
7 Williams, Tennessee Williams' Memoirs, pp. 11-13.
other boys his age. He spent a great deal of time around the house with Rose, his companion. He and Rose cut paper dolls from catalogues and played indoor games. Although Williams' illness contributed to his inability to cultivate male friends, it was also difficult for him to make friends because his mother never seemed to approve of his or Rose's friends. He states, "... the boys were too rough for her delicate son, Tom, and the girls were, of course too common." As a result of spending so much time with females, Williams developed feminine mannerisms, but he also grew to understand and relate to women.

Williams' perception of women is often said to relate to the fact that he was a known homosexual. Although one cannot rationalize Williams' sexual preference, his homosexuality can at least be partly attributed to the fact that during his childhood he was isolated from masculine figures and surrounded and sheltered by female figures such as his domineering and overprotective mother, his grandmother, and his sister. Thus, the females in Williams' family had more influence on him than his father, who never really took the time to develop a father-son rapport. Although during his earlier years Williams had felt contempt for his father, those contemptuous feelings seemed to have vanished in later years; however, "Williams acknowledges that with steadier and earlier doses of his father's obtrusively masculine personality, he might have even become less delicate and sissified."  

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8 Dakin, Remember Me to Tom, p. 20.
9 Williams, Memoirs, p. 15.
10 Ibid.
Rose and Edwina became the basis for many of Williams' female characters; Edwina's personality was revealed through Williams' character Amanda Wingfield. Although certain aspects of Amanda's personality were reflected in all three categories of Williams' women, she does not entirely fit into each category. Rose's personality was reflected through Laura Wingfield, Alma Winemiller, and Blanche DuBois. Williams felt that his mother's overprotectiveness and puritanical teachings had contributed heavily to his sister's nervous breakdown. In The Glass Menagerie Amanda's overprotectiveness and possessiveness lead to Laura's withdrawal. Through the characterization of Alma and Blanche, Williams deals with the topic of sexual repression, which he believes was the root of his sister's problem.

Williams deals with a conflict within certain of his female characters which can be called "the battle between the flesh and the spirit," or the conflict between ethical standards and sexual drive. His concern with this issue possibly resulted from his belief that Rose's mental instability stemmed from sexual repression. Williams wrote the following concerning his sister's mental state:

Obviously old Doc Alexander had hit upon the true seat of Rose's afflictions. She was a very normal but highly sexed girl who was tearing herself apart mentally and physically by those repressions imposed upon her by Miss Edwina's monolithic puritanism.

Part of Rose's character was revealed through Blanche DuBois of A Streetcar Named Desire and Laura Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., p. 8.
Williams said that although Laura was like Rose, more of Rose's personality can be seen through "A Portrait of a Girl in Glass."

Blanche was like Rose in that they both had a passion for fine clothing, but, more to the point, Blanche had suffered emotionally from repressed sex. "Blanche's attempt to maintain the image of herself as a correct and genteel lady also led her to deny her real sexual nature." Little wonder, then, that much of Rose's character was found in the other female characters portrayed by Williams or that many other female characters were presented by him afflicted with sexual repression. This tendency could possibly have become an obsession with Williams, concerned as he was with his sister's mental state.

Another female figure whose character was revealed through Williams' writing was his mother, Edwina Dakin Williams. Much of Edwina's character was revealed through Williams' portrayal of Amanda Wingfield. Amanda was a domineering mother who was said to have inflicted the fantasies of a lost past upon her children. However, there was as much to admire in Amanda as to dislike. She possessed a realistic understanding of her family and wanted the best for Tom and Laura; however, she did not seem to know how to express this genuine family concern except in a domineering manner. Edwina had been in a similar position. She was thrust into a city where she was no

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12 Ibid., p. 125.


longer regarded as a genteel woman; yet, she tried to uphold the Southern genteel dignity within her family, though she sometimes made the other family members uncomfortable and caused them to resent her.

In presenting Tennessee Williams' female characters, I will discuss the three following categories of women figures: the Southern genteel ladies, the female aggressor/mother-figures, and the survivors in corrupt societies. In describing the Southern genteel lady figure, Williams is concerned with the conflict which often occurs between the flesh and the spirit when the inherent sexual drive overpowers the will to uphold behavioral standards such as are found in the puritan code of ethics. Women who are assertive in pursuing and fulfilling their needs, whether sexual or other, are labeled as female aggressors; consequently, some of these ladies make strong mother-figures. The last category of women are actually Williams heroines or survivors. They are part of the carnal reality which the Southern genteel lady is not able to accept. This thesis will be comprised of female characters from the following Williams' plays: A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie, The Rose Tattoo, Summer and Smoke, Orpheus Descending, and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. In the subsequent three chapters of the thesis, the categories assigned to Williams' women will be discussed. The last chapter will be a summary of Williams' treatment of his female characters.

Chapter II deals with the idea of Southern gentility as it relates to Williams' women. The Southern genteel lady is understood by Williams to be a woman who represents "the conflict between normal emotions and the repressive ideas of the Puritan tradition-- a highly tensioned lady unable to harmonize the world of her dreams with
“...she is incapable of finding her way in a world which contradicts her moral standards as they concern sex. She is also rooted in the tradition of the genteel Southerner. Without her husband or some masculine figure in her environment, she does not function well in life. Amanda of *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Alma of *Summer and Smoke*, and Lady of *Orpheus Descending* can be classified as Southern genteel ladies.

The second category of female figures which will be discussed in Chapter III is the female aggressor/mother figure, the understanding being that women who are perceived as being aggressive or assertive offer security and comfort to the men in their lives who are generally passive individuals or victims of aggression. Maggie of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* strives for financial stability and sexual fulfillment. While in pursuit of these needs, she coaxes her husband into sleeping with her, by hiding his liquor, in an attempt to become pregnant in hopes of being able to conceive an heir to the family's fortune. However, she also gets her physical needs satisfied in the process. On the other hand, Lady of *Orpheus Descending* is financially established but seeks sexual gratification, which she finds with Val, who is employed at her store. Lady is sexually aggressive, but she gives to Val the comfort and security exemplary of a mother-figure. Although Amanda is the mother of two, she does not fit previously implied definition of a mother-figure. However, she is very assertive, and she strives for financial security for her offspring, Tom and Laura. Serafina of *The Rose Tattoo* leads her lover, Alvaro,
into her bedroom after she has discovered that her deceased husband had been unfaithful to her. Even though Alvaro can give Serafina nothing but his love, she offers the security of a home as well as love; thus, she becomes a mother figure for him. Technically speaking, these women are fighters. They pursue their goals or needs with attempts of achieving end results, sometimes regardless of the consequences. However, one unique characteristic of the women in this category, with the exception of Amanda, is that they need the stimulation and fulfillment from a meaningful relationship. Maggie loves Brick, and even though he appears to have lost interest in her she continues to stay with him. Serafina finds emotional security and mental stability in her relationship with Alvaro after she has become a recluse and been classified as a "wild woman" after her husband's death. Lady will risk everything she has struggled so hard to attain for happiness with Val. Thus, what these three fighters have in common is their need for an exalting, sexual and emotional relationship.

The last category of women to be discussed in Chapter IV are Williams' survivors in corrupt societies. Rosa Gonzales of Summer and Smoke, Carol Cutrere of Orpheus Descending, Maggie Pollitt of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Stella Kowalski of A Streetcar Named Desire, and Amanda Wingfield fall into this last category. These women appear to be emotionally stronger than the women in the other two categories, because they are not obsessed with conformity and conventionality. They are outcasts and nonconformists to the Southern genteel tradition whose main objective is that of survival in any capacity in life. They are passive individuals who desire the warmth and love of another
individual, but are willing to settle for less if that is what is
required to survive.

Chapter V will be an overview of Williams three categories of
women and a discussion of how his dramatic views of women relate to
his personal life as a homosexual.
Tennessee Williams defines his Southern genteel lady "as a woman who represents the conflict between repressive ideals of the Puritan tradition--a highly tensioned woman unable to harmonize the world of her dreams with reality."\(^1\) Cash says that the women in this category are relics of the moribund tradition of gentility and are unable to accept reality because they prefer to live in an illusive and legendary world evocative of something that never really was--the mythical, Cavalier Old South.\(^2\) Many of these women refuse to accept the reality that the idea of the Southern genteel woman was a myth perpetrated by white Southern men. However, the inability to accept reality is typical of Williams' Southern genteel ladies.

According to Cash, the inability to accept reality in fact characterizes white Southerners generally. Cash's perspective does provide an illuminating background to Williams' plays. The first great characteristic of a Southerner, says Cash, is individualism; the second, the tendency toward unreality, toward romanticism, and toward hedonism strangely combined with Puritanism:

His Puritanism was no mere mask put on from cold calculation, but as essential a part of him as his hedonism. And his combination of the two was without conscious imposture. One might say that it

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The description above certainly goes a good way toward defining the psychological particularities of Williams' female characters. Blanche DuBois of A Streetcar Named Desire, Amanda and Laura Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie, and Alma Winemiller of Summer and Smoke are Williams' Southern genteel ladies. Blanche and Alma are obsessed with the conflict between the Puritan, celibate ethnics and their instinctual or carnal desires. Amanda fluctuates between reality and the legendary past world of gentlemen callers and Southern belles. Her daughter Laura remains in a world which is as fragile as the glass animals and phonograph records that she possesses. For Blanche, Alma, and Amanda, the world of their dreams is one which vindicates their self-image. In all cases, these ladies cling to an imaginative vision of what life was or should be while ignoring what life is. We will now look at them individually.

Amanda's world fluctuates between illusion and reality. When convenient for her, she simply closes her eyes to the brutal reality that she has been deserted by her husband and has a son and daughter to raise in the lower class section of St. Louis, Missouri. The illusions or myths that she creates are escape mechanisms which help her endure her present position. The most dramatically pointed illusion is her comic-pathetic memory of the "seventeen gentlemen callers" who came to visit her one Sunday afternoon in her hometown of

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3Ibid., p. 58.
4Falk, Tennessee Williams, p. 168.
Blue Mountain, Mississippi. Amanda's obsession with this obviously exaggerated memory is the mark of her penchant for self-deception. However, despite the illusion that Amanda created about her past, she is the most practical of William's Southern genteel ladies. Cate and Presley indicate the following about her:

Granted she become loquacious and silly when she begins her spiel about Blue Mountain, but she lives in the present enough to know that one must prepare for the future if he intends to be a meaningful part of it.

Amanda is determined to find a suitable mate for Laura before Tom leaves. She want the security for her daughter (and possibly herself) that a good man can give. Although she will not openly admit that her daughter is crippled or any different from any other young lady, Amanda knows that is will be difficult for Laura, her shy, introverted daughter, to meet men. For this reason, Amanda asks Tom to bring a young man home from the warehouse where Tom works to meet Laura. Amanda's motives here are typically mixed, because in addition to looking ahead for the welfare of her daughter there is also a subconscious longing to be entertained again by a gentleman caller. By inflicting her dreams and desires upon Laura, Amanda relives her past.

However, Laura is not receptive to Amanda's wishes. She has built her own dismal world, which is as fragile as her collection of glass animals. Her physical handicap has become the basis of a

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5 Hollis C. Cate and Delma E. Presley, "Beyond Stereotype: Ambiguity in Amanda Wingfield," Notes on Mississippi Writers (September, 1977) : 93.
psychological withdrawal that approaches agoraphobia. 6

When Amanda tries to force the role of the Southern belle receiving her gentlemen callers on Laura, the young woman fall apart. "Feeling unattractive, Laura is frightened by a situation in which this attractiveness is directly tested, entertaining a man. 7 When Jim O'Connor, the gentleman caller, arrives, Laura is terribly frightened, but Jim's charm relaxes her. Just when Laura is starting to feel comfortable with Jim, he senses that she may be falling in love with him and tells her that he is engaged to be married. As protection from the hurt that she feels, she immediately slips back into her highly introverted and fragile world. McGlinn analyzes this in the following way:

Her distorted sense of reality prevents the realization that Jim's actions have nothing to do with her attractiveness. Self-centered for too long, she seems incapable of realizing that what comes into her world does not necessarily reflect on her. Given such a limited perception, Laura cannot participate in human relationships and will continue to be unhappy in the real world. 8

Alma Winemiller, the Summer and Smoke, is in a situation similar to Laura's, because she too must face rejection from the man that she loves. However, Alma is stronger and more secure about herself than Laura; thus, she survives the disappointment without retreating from reality. On the other hand, Alma is a very idealistic

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8Ibid.
person but is incapable of transforming her idealistic philosophy into positive acts; therefore, her idealism becomes illusory. In essence, as is typical of Williams' Southern genteel lady, Alma cannot transform the world of her dreams into reality.

Alma Winemiller is stereotypical of the Southern genteel lady in three important ways. First, Alma seems pretentious in her efforts to carry herself as a Southern lady. The "over-elaborate vocabulary, the overgreat expectations from others, the living of life as though it were a work of fiction, and the insulation from the world" are all part of her efforts to be the poised, refined Southern genteel lady. Secondly, as a result of her superficial yet graceful behavior, Alma is an anachronism in twentieth-century Southern society. Williams indicates the following about her: "Her gestures and mannerisms are a bit exaggerated but in a graceful way... She seems to belong to a more elegant age such as the Eighteenth Century in France." Lastly, Alma reflects the subconscious conflict between puritan ethics and instinctual desire, or, as it is more commonly referred to by Williams, "the battle between flesh and spirit." Initially Alma is not aware of this internal conflict, because she suppresses whatever carnal desires she has which are not in keeping with her religious upbringing. Later the conflict becomes apparent to Alma when the man she loves rejects her chaste idealism and insists upon the


Alma has been in love with John Buchanan, a medical intern and son of a prominent doctor, since their childhood in Glorious Hills, Mississippi. Although Alma is strongly attracted to John, Alma and John appear to be incompatible. John is an irresponsible and nonchalant person. He drinks, gambles, and runs after disreputable women. John has no respect for the medical profession or for his father’s reputation as an outstanding doctor in Glorious Hills. On the other hand, Alma is pious and responsible and devoted to her family. The daughter of an Episcopalian minister, Alma had to assume the responsibilities of the rectory after her mother had a nervous breakdown which left her virtually mentally incompetent. Williams describes Alma as follows:

Alma had an adult quality as a child and now in her middle twenties, there is something prematurely spinsterish about her. An excessive propriety and self-consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter; her voice and gestures belong to years of church entertainments, to the position of hostess in a rectory.

Alma is very mature; therefore, she cannot accept the childish, irresponsible behavior of John Buchanan, who in turn finds her quaintly and humorously eccentric. Thus it is clear to see that the two do not have the foundation necessary to establish a meaningful relationship.

Alma and John meet and talk on several occasions, and very significantly on one occasion she shares with him her belief concerning the soul and body. Alma believes that the soul or the spirit is the most important part of an individual; therefore,

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12 Williams, *Summer and Smoke*, part 1, p. 127.
spiritual relationships are far more important than the physical
relationship. John, of course, does not share her belief, and
indicates later to Alma, as they are dining outside a casino, that he
wants to be physically intimate with her. She refuses him; though she
remains in love with him, her principles and ethics are more important
to her than gaining his love. McGlinn indicates:

The crisis that leads to this change in Alma is her complete
feelings about herself and her life during the summer of her
middle twenties. She feels that her youth is passing and knows
that she is already considered an old maid. She resents the need
to care for a senile and selfish mother and a self-pitying father;
"I have had certain difficulties and disadvantages to cope with...
which may be partly the cause of these peculiarities of mine...."

Feeling that she may permanently lose the man whom she loves, Alma
decides that she wants a physical relationship with John. She
confronts John: "But now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said
'no,' she doesn't exist anymore, she died last summer-- suffocated in
smoke from something on fire inside her."14 Deeply embedded in Alma's
subconscious is the desire to fulfill, and perhaps even to exploit,
her physical nature. Her idealistic puritanical determination to be
spiritual has been suppressed by the erotic side of her nature,
"suffocated by smoke from something on fire inside;" now she has no
restraints.

John has also changed, paradoxically, in the direction of
Alma's initial beliefs. After the murder of his father, Dr. Buchanan,
Sr., by John's fiancee's father, John has reevaluated his life. In
doing this, he has found that there is a feasibility to

14 Williams, Summer and Smoke, part 2, p. 243.
"Alma's view of the primacy of the soul. John explains:

But I've come around to your way of thinking, that something is in there, an Immaterial something— as thick as smoke— which all of those ugly machines combine to produce and that's their whole reason for being.

Thus, when Alma approaches John, he turns her down both because he is already engaged again to be married to Nellie Ewell, one of Alma's former music students, and because, further (and most ironically), he does not feel clean enough to touch Alma. He does, however, express his gratitude to her for helping him change his life. He feels spiritually bonded to her.

Alma does not handle the news of John's engagement or his rejection of her very well. For many days she (like Laura) has not gone beyond the premises of her house or even dressed properly. There is clearly a passional void in her life that she wants to fill, and, like Laura, she takes her fate in hand. She leaves her home and goes to the "sacred fountain," a landmark in Glorious Hills. It is here that she meets a traveling salesman and, after talking with him, asks him if he would like to go to the casino. It is important to note that some critics perceive Alma's symbolic departure from the fountain as an indication of her future promiscuous behavior. However, McGunn seems to be more on target in maintaining the following idea:

"Unencumbered by false ideas of what love should be, she is ready to accept another for what he is and make the most of this human relationship."

Therefore, McGunn seems to be more on target in maintaining the following idea:

"Unencumbered by false ideas of what love should be, she is ready to accept another for what he is and make the most of this human relationship."

Her life through a meaningful relationship.

Ib1d., p. 230.

Up to this point, the characters that have been discussed have learned to deal with their problems, even if in unusual and somewhat erratic ways. In other words, whether these women are living introverted and seclusive lives, building illusions of grandeur about their past, or fulfilling their subconscious sexual fantasies, they are nonetheless sane individuals who are attempting to cope with life's situations. However, we must shift the focus of discussion somewhat in order to deal with the most complex and tragic of Williams' Southern genteel ladies, Blanche DeBois of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

The play begins with Blanche's visit to her sister Stella in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Blanche has been asked to resign from a high school teaching position in Laurel, Mississippi, for seducing one of her male students. From the beginning of the play, Blanche is patently hypocritical and self-deceptive. She pretends not to indulge in drinking liquor, but she has already taken the liberty before Stella arrives home. Stanley Kowalski, Stella's strong, gaudy, animalistic husband, is a natural antagonist of Blanche and does not like the idea of her staying with him and Stella. Stanley sees through Blanche's phony behavior immediately, and his crude, cynical perception represents, at least in part, the reader's too. Blanche's flamboyant Southern mannerisms, her out-of-date clothes, and her cheap jewelry are all part of her comic-pathetic efforts to carry herself as a Southern belle, and it is these ironic, complex forms of self-deception that lie at the center of Williams' vision in this play.
Like Williams' other Southern genteel ladies, Blanche is both a representative and victim of a tradition that teaches that attractiveness, virtue, and gentility lead automatically to happiness, while ignoring the dictates of a sometimes adverse reality. Blanche develops an internal conflict when she tries to separate her real self from her cultured, refined self. Mary Ann Corrigan, in a very perceptive analysis of the play, defines the conflict thusly:

The illusion sustaining her is her image of herself as a Southern belle, a fine, cultured, young lady. The reality is a lonely woman desperately seeking human contact, indulging "brutal desire" an affirmation of life.  

Blanche's sexuality is, paradoxically, a product of her delicate moth nature, a neurotically defensive reaction to the suicide of her husband, for which she feels partially responsible, and the loss of her aristocratic family's fortune and social position. Blanche discovers her adolescent husband had been intimate with another man and confronts him with this situation during a public dance. Disgusted with himself and Blanche's awareness of his homosexuality, Allan, her husband, flees from the dance and commits suicide. After the death of her husband, nothing but intimacies with strangers seem to have any meaning for Blanche. Blanche's promiscuous behavior with adolescent servicemen in her hometown of Laurel, Mississippi, was said to arise from the fact that she wants to deny her own sexual inadequacy, which was the failure to satisfy Allan, her

17Mary Ann Corrigan, "Realism and Theatricalism in A Streetcar Named Desire" Modern Drama, 19 (September 1969) : 92.
late husband. Afterwards, Blanche is subjected to a series of other deaths in her family that lead to the loss of the ancestral Belle Reeve plantation. Blanche's agony is revealed later in discussion with her sister, Stella Kowalski:

I, I, I, took the blows in my face and body! All of the deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, Mother, Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths.

This very dramatic scene between Stella and Blanche exemplifies Blanche's obsession with death, which in turn is obscurely, but powerfully, linked with her compulsive sexual promiscuity.

Despite her efforts to maintain the self-image of a Southern genteel lady, Blanche cannot forget her past more than she can repress her deep-seated sexuality. The polka tune played on the night of Allan's death that Blanche continues to hear and the painful moans of her deceased parents are hallucinations. Brutal sexual desire is her escape. Not only does Blanche flirt with an adolescent delivery boy, but also with Stanley. However, when Blanche meets Mitch, one of Stanley's poker buddies, Blanche feels that she can live the respectable life with him that she has always envisioned, and Mitch feels that Blanche just might be the lady for him. However, upset by the news of the loss of the family's fortune, Stanley does some checking and learns the details of Blanche's sordid past. Stanley

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tells Mitch and destroys all hopes of a future marriage between Blanche and Mitch. Stanley does not hesitate to tell Stella about Blanche, who, Stanley feels, has degraded him to his wife by referring to his behavior as animalistic and primitive. Stanley seeks revenge through his ultimate rape of Blanche while Stella is in the hospital delivering his baby. This rape is said to be the point of Blanche's downfall and the physical incarnation of her defeat. The realization that she is a disreputable woman is too much for Blanche to bear and drives her to insanity. There is an assertion of T. S. Eliot to which Williams firmly and sorrowfully assents and is most appropriate here in explaining Blanche's downfall: "Humankind cannot bear very much reality." The play ends with Blanche being led away by asylum attendants.

Despite her insanity, Blanche is, paradoxically, the strongest of Williams' female characters. She is idealism debauched. William writes:

She knows she is an anachronism in an alien world, and yet she will not surrender the dream she has of herself, even though she wants desperately not to be lonely, it is precisely the clinging to this dream, the airs, mannerisms, and sense of herself which alienates her further. She is trapped in a terrifying contradiction. Her need to be special, to adhere to codes and a tradition no longer valid, creates an intense isolation, while simultaneously her desire not to be alone, to be loved, threatens to break her isolation. Not only threatens but does so.

Blanche hold on to the illusion of herself and life, but she is

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21 Ibid.

destroyed by the brutal, animalistic force of sexual desire, by which she exploits her physical being and which is personified in the figure of Stanley. Nonetheless, there is still a certain amount of dignity and character in her downfall. Tischler quotes Kazan:

This play is a poetic tragedy. We are shown the final dissolution of a person of worth, who once had great potential, and even as she goes down, has worth exceeding that of the healthy, coarse-grained figures who kill her.

Through Blanche, Williams symbolically depicts most forcefully the downfall of a decayed yet elegant Southern gentility. It is indeed out of a special sympathy for the old South and its decayed gentility that Williams writes. Through his Southern genteel ladies he especially portrays the pathos of weak, illusive individuals who find it difficult to adjust to modern informal societies which are insensitive to romantic quests and the self's need for a private mythology. Benjamin Nelson's view of the pathetic grandeur of these flawed heroines sums up the whole issue of Williams' portrayal of genteel Southern women very well.

They are cloying, often foolish, they put on airs, live in illusions, cannot make adjustments— and yet I cannot help but believe these individuals, these tainted relics who are trapped by themselves, their gentility, and a tradition which has become anachronistic are the people who speak forthrightly and honestly for Tennessee Williams. They are the moths needed in the world by mammoth figures haunted, for they in their illusions carry the truth and beauty which is the only light in an otherwise bleak universe. 24

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23 Ibid., p. 138.
CHAPTER III

FEMALE AGGRESSOR/MOTHER-Figure

Williams' Southern genteel lady represents the old South, with its decaying values and distorted realities. However, his women characters of the new South are emotionally stronger and develop a more realistic outlook on life. The "genteel ladies" are not able to distinguish reality from illusion, and this flaw in character leads to their downfall. They want wholesome male/female relationships but think that by being gracious, refined Southern ladies, they will gain happiness inevitably; however, when their sought-after relationships do not materialize—Alma with John, Laura with Jim, and Blanche with Mitch—they cannot handle the disappointment and retreat from reality. The women of the new South have learned to accept disappointment, but not without first having struggled to reach their goals. These women act more aggressively in relationships, and in addition to a satisfactory sexual relationship they seek psychological dominance as well.

The female aggressor/mother-figure is also sexually motivated, but, unlike the Southern genteel lady, she is very aggressive. If she strives for a fulfilling sexual relationship, she is usually the pursuer. Generally, she is in a position to offer financial security, comfort, and love to the passive individual in her life. For this reason, she is a mother-figure. Robert Jones reinforces the idea of the mother-figure and the man whom she dominates in the following way: "Williams presents a dominant person and one less strong who
either aspires to dominance or is content to be dominated as long as he or she is provided with the material things in life."\(^1\) Thus, the female aggressor/mother-figure seeks a loving relationship but desires psychological dominance as well.

Serafina delle Rose of *The Rose Tattoo*, Maggie Pollitt of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Myra Torrance of *Orpheus Descending*, and Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* are Williams' main female aggressor/mother-figures. In *The Rose Tattoo*, Serafina seduces a man whom she has recently met after she discovers that her dead husband had been unfaithful to her. Maggie Pollitt is determined to consummate her marriage to her husband Brick in whatever manner she can. Myra Torrance seeks sexual fulfillment and love with Val, her employee. Amanda Wingfield wants the best for her daughter, and thus acts as a vicarious sexual predator in an effort to accomplish this.

In three of the plays presented thus far—*The Rose Tattoo*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Orpheus Descending*—Williams presents women who are basically guided by their desire for exalting, fulfilling relationships, as Jones indicates:

In *The Rose Tattoo*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Williams portrays women with little sexual ambivalence... Serafina, Myra, and Maggie are strong, loving earth mothers, who know and appreciate, and they are strong "modern" women who find salvation, even when it is only temporary, in their sexuality. Yet, like the latter heroines, they are basically stronger than the men with whom they come into contact, and they essentially

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direct the action of the plays.\textsuperscript{2}

Maggie Pollitt must act aggressively in order to protect her husband's interest in the family estate. Maggie's father-in-law, Big Daddy Pollitt, is a millionaire plantation owner in the fertile Mississippi Delta. Big Daddy and Big Mamma have two sons: Gooper, who has a corporation law practice in Memphis, Tennessee, and Brick, an ex-football player who is becoming an alcoholic. Gooper is married to Mae, and they have five children, but Maggie and Brick do not have children. Both sons and their wives know that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, but they have concealed this information from Big Mamma and Big Daddy. After Big Mamma discovers the truth about Big Daddy's condition, she reveals his wish for Maggie and Brick to have a child. Maggie speculates that if she has a child, Big Daddy, who is not fond of Gooper's children, will give her and Brick a larger part of the inheritance. Having a baby will also bring her and Brick closer together. However, because Brick is unwilling to sleep with Maggie, she must act quickly and aggressively. Therefore, she tells the family that she is pregnant and proceeds with her plan to seduce Brick.

Brick is not willing to sleep with Maggie because he blames her for the death of his friend Skipper, who committed suicide. Skipper had admitted to Maggie that he was a homosexual and was in love with Brick. When Maggie tells Brick about Skipper, he at first does not believe her, but when she tells him also that she and Skipper had slept together in an awkward attempt to express their love for him,

\textsuperscript{2}Ibid.
Brick is infuriated. Maggie pleads with Brick to forget the past and join with her in building their future:

---I'm not trying to whitewash my behavior, Christ, no! Brick, I'm not good, I don't know why people have to pretend to be good, nobody's good. The rich or the well-to-do can afford to respect moral patterns, conventional moral patterns, but I could never afford to, yeah but--I'm honest! Give me credit for just that, will you please? ---Born poor, raised poor, expect to die poor unless I manage to get us something out of what Big Daddy leaves us when he dies of cancer! But Brick! Skipper is dead! I'm alive! Maggie the cat is---alive!³

Brick knows now that the idea of Skipper's homosexuality had not been mere speculation on Maggie's part. Unable to deal with the impurity of Skipper's friendship and Maggie's betrayal, Brick isolates himself from everyone, especially Maggie, and becomes an alcoholic. He blames Maggie for Skipper's admission of guilt and for sleeping with Skipper, but now that she has threatened to hide his liquor if he does not resume their intimacy, Brick is too weak to resist and surrenders.

Maggie's position as a female aggressor/mother-figure can be expressed in the following way:

Maggie desires more than dominance of Brick, she has a lust for life, for love, for children, and for money. She is a scrappy little fighter, spitting at the enemy, purring for the master, clawing for survival. She combines the motherly attention of Big Mamma and sexuality and aggressiveness of Big Daddy. Her youth and her determination will clearly make her the sexual victor, though it is unlikely that Brick will never do much more than talk and drink. Her very strength will serve to replace Big Daddy's as an excuse for his diminishment. In her nurturing, protective role as mother to Brick, Maggie seeks to give Brick back his life.⁴

It is important to note that although Maggie strives for dominance in her relationship with Brick, she is not the dominant


person of the Pollitt household. Maggie takes control of her immediate control of her family in a desperate attempt to help Brick regain Big Daddy's respect and affection and consequently to inherit a large percentage of the family's fortune. Big Daddy is the head of the household, not Maggie; therefore, it is not power or control over men that Maggie seeks, but the comfort and security for her family, which can only be attained through the psychological dominance of her husband.

Unlike Maggie, Serafina is in a position to offer the security of a home as well as compassionate love to Alvaro, her lover. For three years now, after the death of her husband, who was killed in a trucking accident, Serafina has been a hermit. She has been protective and possessive of her daughter Rose. She has little concern for her appearance and practically abandons her job as a seamstress. Not only is Serafina miserable but forces Rose to feel the same anguish. Rose comments:

I'm so ashamed I could die. This is the way she goes around all the time. She hasn't put on clothes since my father was killed. For three years she sits at the sewing machine and never put a dress on or goes out of the house, and now she has locked my clothes up so I can't go out. She wants me to be like her, a freak of the neighborhood, the way she is! Next time, I won't cut my wrist but my throat! I don't want to live locked up with a bottle of ashes.5

Initially, when she meets Alvaro, Serafina has many doubts about him. The stranger desires the love, stability, and motherly attention that Serafina can offer:

I'm hoping to meet some sensible older lady. Maybe a lady a little bit older than me. I don't care if she's a little too plump or not such a stylish dresser. The important thing in a

lady is understanding. Good sense. And I want her to have a well-furnished house and profitable little business of some kind.

However, Serafina does not feel that any man can compare to her dead husband who had been a great lover, provider, and parent:

Nobody knew my rose of the world but me and now they can't lie because the rose ain't living. They want the marble urn broken; they want me to smash it. They want the rose ashes shattered because I had too much glory. They don't want glory like that in nobody's heart.

Consequently, she rejects Alvaro. Afterwards, when Serafina discovers that her husband had been killed while smuggling drugs instead of delivering fruit and had been unfaithful to her, she seduces Alvaro and the two establish a compassionate relationship.

For Williams the rose symbolizes passionate, earthly love. For Williams the rose symbolizes passionate, earthly love.

Serafina speaks of such love when she refers to her husband:

When I think of men I think about my husband... a Sicilian. We had love together every night of the week. We never skipped from the night we were married till the night he was killed in his fruit truck on that road there!

After her husband's death, Serafina suppresses this desire for carnal love, but relinquishes her sensual bonds to him upon news of her husband's infidelity.

Like Maggie and Serafina, Myra (also known as Lady) Torrance wants sexual fulfillment with a desirable mate, but circumstances make it difficult for her to achieve happiness. Lady is married to Jabe Torrance, who is older than she and is dying of cancer. Since the

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6Ibid., p. 93.
7Ibid., p. 73.
9Tennessee Williams, The Rose Tattoo, p. 70.
development of Jabe's terminal condition, their marriage has been basically without sex. Hostility and frustration develop between them, and Lady turns to another.

Val Xavier comes to town wearing a snakeskin jacket, carrying a guitar and looking for work. He is to become the solution for Lady's loneliness. After Lady hires him to work at the Torrance store, she arranges for him to sleep in a back room. She makes a seductive move by coming to Val's room one night:

Lady picks up the linen and crosses to the alcove like a spell-bound child. Just outside it she stops, frozen with uncertainty, a conflict of feelings, but then begins to whisper the words of a song so tenderly that she is able to draw the curtain open and enter the alcove.

After this, there are many other nights. Val gives Lady the attention and fulfillment that she has found lacking in her own marriage, and in turn she gives to him love, affection, and security—qualities which are mandatory for a mother-figure to possess and give.

Lady not only possesses the characteristics of a mother-figure, but she is to become a mother. Jabe's nurse, Miss Porter, reveals the secret of Lady's pregnancy when she confronts Lady with this discovery. The vindictive woman also knows that Val is the father of the unborn child. Val, whom Sheriff Talbott has given until sunset to evacuate the county, overhears their conversation. He questions Lady, and she replies: "I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body, has burst in flower! You've given me life, you can go!"

11 Ibid., p. 113.
her, because Jabe suddenly appears carrying a gun which he uses to kill Lady. He then runs outside, screaming that Val, in an attempt to rob the store, has shot Lady. A lynch mob gathers, finds Val, and murders him with a blow-torch.

Although Lady's happiness ends abruptly and her fate becomes tragic, the female aggressors/mother-figures thus far are able to attain happiness, even if it is only temporary. However, Amanda Wingfield does not even gain temporary happiness.

Like Maggie, Amanda seek psychological dominance in order to achieve her goals, but she requires dominance over her children. She wants financial security and happiness for her family, but she wants something more too—a vicarious, sexual activity through her daughter, and perhaps, the continuing control of her son. Tom, especially, despises Amanda, because he perceives her as a threat to his manhood.

Tom is tired of his mother's constant meddling and nagging. He resents Amanda because she damages his masculine ego by causing him to feel threatened and victimized by her. She does this by berating, what she calls, his "selfish illusionism," which is his uncanny love for movies and his compulsion to write. She also derogates his warehouse job. Tom sees his mother as "the dragon that he must pass if he is to pass the threshold of manhood."12 Perhaps Tom would like to assume his father's position as head of the family since his father's desertion, but Amanda makes his assuming this role impossible. Amanda questions Tom's ability to show responsible

behavior, especially when concerning his sister.

Amanda is a strong mother-figure who fights for happiness and financial stability for her family, but her aggressiveness and insensitivity shatter her son's self-image. He cannot comprehend that she nags him and wants him to be a better person. Amanda remarks: "You are the only man I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it." Even when Tom deserts her and Laura and it is apparent that her efforts toward him have failed, Amanda continues to strive for the security of her family.

Although the flesh versus the spirit dichotomy is apparent in the female aggressor/mother-figure, it is certainly not as important with her as with the Southern genteel lady. The female aggressor/mother-figures are not pulled apart by this conflict. As a result, Maggie, Lady, and Serafina are able to overcome repressive puritanical ideals regarding sex under justifiable conditions.

The women in this category have acquired ambivalent attitudes regarding their sexuality. Lady, Serafina, and Maggie become involved in intimate relationships—Lady with Val, Maggie with Skipper, and Serafina with Alvaro. Respect for the bond of matrimony prevents Serafina from responding initially to Alvaro, and only when the despicable nature of her husband is revealed does she feel free to unite sexually with her lover. Although matrimony did not prevent

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Maggie's and Lady's infidelities, they have other reasons. Lady isolates herself from her husband due to his terminal illness; therefore, her initial attraction to Val is purely sexual. Maggie, on the other hand, perceives her affair with Skipper as a symbolic expression of her unaltered love for her husband. Thus, once puritanical idealists, Maggie, Serafina, and Lady are able to come to grips with their sexuality.

The strength and assertiveness of the female aggressor/mother-figures are delineated through their relationships with the men in their lives. Robert Jones declares the following about these men:

Alvaro, despite his masculine mien, seems like an awkward adolescent in comparison to Serafina. Brick, one of the "mutilated," has become an alcoholic and has lost his sexual drive and will power, though not his masculine attractiveness. Val, one of the fugitives, is a poet as well as a virile young stud, but Lady is more confident and therefore more powerful than he.

Amanda is the dominant person in her family. Tom would like to assume the role as head of the household and take care of his family, but he is neither a realist nor a provider. When he discovers that he cannot handle the pressure of taking care of his mother and sister, he abandons them leaving Amanda to manage alone. Hence in each play the strength and assertiveness of the female aggressor/mother-figures are delineated through their relationships with the men in their lives. Their strength and value to the play rest upon the passiveness and weaknesses of their male counterparts.

Amanda, Lady, Maggie, and Serafina are women, who, in fulfilling their own needs, are prepared to meet reality on its own

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terms. Despite their struggles, they will achieve their goals.

With Williams' last group of women, we shall see women who, although they have no nerve left for a fight, survive only for mere existence. Although all of Williams' women can be said to be survivors to a certain extent, his survivors in corrupt societies are different. Unlike the former groups, these women do not center their lives around one specific relationship. As seen with the female aggressor/mother-figure, Lady affirms in her remark to Val: "No, no, don't go...I need you! ! ! to live...to go on living." The survivors are willing to do whatever is necessary for peace of mind and existence.

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CHAPTER IV
SURVIVORS IN CORRUPT SOCIETIES

We have examined two prevalent female character types in Williams' plays: the Southern genteel ladies who tend to be the victims of their illusions and the female aggressor/mother-figures who rise above them. It is possible to distinguish yet a third character type in these plays: the women who display a strong, inherent need to survive despite the decadence, corruptness, or evil of their environment.

Survival may be defined as the process of remaining alive or enduring despite obstacles or disappointments. Although the instinct to survive is common to many of Williams' characters, the survivors possess a much stronger will to prevail, because for the sake of a successful existence they may sacrifice relationships, deny the truth, if it jeopardizes their means of survival, or even undergo a complete personality transformation. A primary factor that distinguishes Williams' survivors from other characters is their attitudes regarding sex.

Williams' survivors endure because they do not possess those restraints which would hinder a healthy existence, in contrast to those who are enslaved by what society dictates and manipulated by their emotions. Many of the problems that the previous groups of women had faced had stemmed from their dealings with sexuality. The genteel ladies show signs of sexual repression which hinders their ability to function effectively in life. On the other hand,
the female aggressor/mother-figures may become entrapped in monogamous, debilitating relationships, because they may be bound by some form of commitment. In contrast, Williams' survivors will not condone or adhere to values which endanger their emotional and physical stability.

Carol Cutrere of Orpheus Descending, Stella Kowalski of A Streetcar Named Desire, Rosa Gonzales of Summer and Smoke, Maggie Pollitt of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, and Amanda Wingfield of The Glass Menagerie are Williams' survivors. Although their means or methods for existence may be different, they all possess a strong, inherent need to endure despite the hardships or corruption that they face, as we shall see. The first of these women to be discussed is Carol Cutrere.

Carol is a decayed Southern conservative aristocrat who has been transformed into a depraved, liberal vagabond. Norman Fedder describes her as follows: "A once moth-like creature, who, in an hysterical attempt to escape the bitter reality of Southern racial injustices has metamorphosed into a degenerate Fox." Carol cannot conform to the norms of her community, which supports racial inequality and other forms of discrimination. Therefore, she rebels and assumes a more liberal lifestyle.

Carol struggles single-handedly against the town's cruelties and injustices but is only chided and ostracized. She delivers speeches, write letters, and protests against the injustices done to the black people by the white majority. Thus, when a black man

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was executed for "having improper relations" with a white lady, Carol protests by setting out for the state capitol on foot, in winter, dressed in a potato sack. Although she considers her exhibition an expression of freedom, the reaction of her town was to hoot, jeer, spit at her, and, finally, to arrest her for lewd vagrancy.

Labeled by the society as a radical and moral degenerate, Carol assumes those roles but uses sex as a means of escape. In a conversation with Val Xavier, Carol admits that she is an exhibitionist. She asserts:

I used to be what they call a Christ-bitten reformer. You know what that is? A kind of benign exhibitionist... I delivered stump speeches, wrote letters of protests about the gradual massacre of the colored majority in the country. I thought it was strong for pellagra and slow starvation to cut them down when the cotton crop failed from army worm or boll weevil or too much rain in summer. I wanted to, tried to, put up free clinics; I squandered the money my mother left me on... Well, all that was a pretty long time ago, and now I'm showing the "S.O.B.'s" how lewd a lewd vagrant can be if she puts her whole heart in it like I do mine!

Once a sincere reformer, Carol now has transformed her personality. She has become cynical after having been disillusioned about her rigidified, self-righteous society, which has ostracized her by referring to her as a lewd vagrant because of the changes she has tried to bring about. In an attempt to rebel against the corruptness of her society, she has become almost hedonistic, using sexual

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4 Ibid.
gratification as her highest goal. Fedder adds: "Gradually, the reforming zeal vanished, and only the exhibitionist remained. Labeled an outcast, she soon became determined to play the part in earnest. Now she cannot stop even if she wants to; sexual gratification has become confused in her mind with life itself"\(^5\)

Consequently, unrestrained sex becomes Carol's escape from evils such as bigotry, loneliness, and hatred in her small Southern town. She flaunts her promiscuous behavior in front of the hypocritical, puritanical townspeople, who detest her, and it is for this reason that her brother pays her to stay out of the county. Being of aristocratic lineage, he perceives Carol's actions as a public disgrace to the Cutrere family. Thus, out of loneliness for family and friends, Carol uses sex to fill the emptiness that she feels. "For Carol sexuality is not equated with love and tenderness and mutual feeling between men and women. Sexuality is a kind of opiate, like liquor or dope, which she uses to fill emptiness of her life."\(^6\) Once the emptiness is filled, she has the stamina to exist.

Carol believes that she now embodies a sexual awareness which has given her control over her own life and freedom from those sexual restraints which she believes to be the problem with some societies. She further states: "The trouble with the conventional community is that it is suffering from sexual malnutrition...who ever has too much passion, we're going to be burned like witches because we know too

\(^5\) Fedder, The Influence of D. H. Lawrence, p. 65.

much." By refusing all bounds or limitations, whether sexual or otherwise, Carol does not fall captive to what society thinks or does, not does she allow narrow-minded puritanical idealists to dictate to her what they consider a proper mode of behavior. Consequently, she knows that she cannot be accepted by the majority of people in the bourgeois community, but she accepts this as a challenge for survival. Consequently, she knows that she cannot be accepted by the majority of people in the bourgeois community, but she accepts this as a challenge for survival. Consequently, she knows that she cannot be accepted by the majority of people in the bourgeois community, but she accepts this as a challenge for survival.

Like Carol in Orpheus Descending, Stella Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire used sex too as a means of self-realization. In contrast to Carol, she is strictly monogamous. However, the deeply carnal aspect of her relationship with her animalistic husband, Stanley-- the only tie that totally binds them together-- suggest a similar psychology.

Stella, a representative of the decadent South, adapts to the crude New Orleans environment of her husband, but her sister Blanche disturbs the balance between Stella and Stanley when she arrives as a semi-permanent guest. Immediately after her arrival, Blanche starts to criticize Stanley for his unrefined behavior. Stanley is a vulgar hedonist whose code is a devout obedience to self-indulgence. He operates essentially on one dimension-- the sensual. Animal force is his delight. Blanche appears to be on one level at least, a cultivated, gracious genteel lady who will not condone Stanley's actions, but she is also a repressed nymphomaniac who was forced to leave her hometown for seducing young boys. Stanley (who for all his crudity has a street-smart perceptiveness) perceives Blanche to be garishly dressed, overly pretentious, and flirtatious. Since Stanley

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Fedder, The Influence of D. H. Lawrence, p. 66.
sees apart of Blanche's personality that she strives to repress, Blanche finds Stanley repugnant. Blanche tells Stella in a conversation with her that she cannot understand her marriage to Stanley, seeing that the environment that Stella has created for herself is so different from the Mississippi home which she had been exposed to prior to her marriage. Blanche remarks to Stella about Stanley:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, talks like one! There's even something-- subhuman -- something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there is Stanley Kowalski-- survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you-you-here-- waiting for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! that is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in front of the cave, all grunting like him and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night! you call this party of apes! Somebody grows-- some creature snatches at something-- the fight is on! God! Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image but Stella-- such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching..Don't-- don't hang back with the brutes.

Stanley overhears Blanche's conversation with Stella. He had resented Blanche's presence initially, and now he resents it even more. Stanley feels that his marriage is threatened by Blanche's presence, because he is afraid that she will cause Stella to lose respect for him or to see him for the degenerate, bestial person that he is. Therefore, he feels that he must use drastic measures, as he does when he exposes Blanche's past. The final blow by Stanley is his rape of Blanche.

Stella, who has been unaware of Stanley's rape of Blanche,

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must now face the truth. When Blanche tells Stella about the rape, Stella is stunned. Up until now, Stella's marriage has been fulfilling for her. She no longer desires a noble, genteel life, but a gratifying emotional and sexual relationship with Stanley. However, Blanche, whose own marriage was a castrophe, will destroy Stella's marriage with this revolting news; therefore, Stella ignores reality by simply choosing to disregard Blanche's account of the rape.

Stella's denial of the truth is a defense mechanism used by Williams' survivors. By ignoring Stanley's sexual offense, Stella saves her marriage. A sensuous yet secure life with Stanley is the only thing that Stella has left, and if she loses Stanley she will lose a father for her newborn child as well as her personal security. Therefore, Stella's decision to ignore and disbelieve in the rape is for the benefit of survival for her and her child.

Although one may empathize with Blanche and feel that she has been treated unfairly, one should also respect Stella's decision to hold on to her marriage for the sake of her and her baby's future.

Berkowitz's support of Stella's decision is seen in the following statements:

And though we may regret that Blanche must be destroyed at the end of the play, we do not object. By attempting to impose the outside world on the Kowalski home, she was threatening its existence, stealing from Stanley and Stella the island of security that Williams takes such pains to give the "misfits" in his plays... We can grieve for Blanche and see that she is as tormented as Tom Wingfield, but when she poses a threat to the survival of others we must allow her to be destroyed and rejoice in the narrow escape.

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Nelson's view of the parallel between Blanche and Stella supports the inclusion of Stella as a survivor, but he also sees her as a conformist and a realist who surrenders her anachronistic ideals in an attempt to survive. Nelson writes:

Blanche is committed to a tradition and a way of life that has become anachronistic in the world of Stanley Kowalski. She is committed to a code of civilization that died with her ancestral home, Belle Reeve. Stella recognizes this tradition and her sister's commitment to it, but she has chosen to relinquish the concept of herself as a lady belonging to a cultured and cultivated tradition, even though that tradition is all but dissipated. Stella, on the other hand, is the conformist who has allowed herself to be pulled from the pillars of Belle Reeve and has adapted to her new existence with the vital amoral uncouth Stanley. But Stella has had to pay a high price for salvation: the submerging of every element in her character which makes her similar to Blanche—personal dignity, gentility, and the sense of herself as a lady... Stella will thrive because she has paid a price Blanche could never pay: Capitulation. Stella has chosen life, but life bereft of everything that, according to Blanche, makes it meaningful.  

Nelson's pictures of Blanche and Stella show a contrast of the Southern genteel lady and the survivor in corrupt societies. The Southern genteel ladies are destroyed by false hopes and values, while the survivors are able to deal with the present by adaptation and conformity, as can be seen with Stella.

Stella is, therefore, the stronger of the two women because she has chosen self-preservation over self-destruction. Finally Stella accepts the advice of her neighbor Eunice, which may be the philosophy of Williams' survivors: "Life has got on go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going." 


11 Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, p. 133.
In *Summer and Smoke* Rosa Gonzales must embody this determination to keep on going after a tragedy ruins her chance for happiness. Dating Dr. John Buchanan, the son of the prominent Dr. John Buchanan, Sr., Rosa strives for prosperity and happiness, as opposed to the poverty and deprivation that she had known as a child. Rosa believes that, in order to ascend above her present state, she needs a person like John. John's background and position attract her, and she envisions him as her means of escape from the destitute, indigent life that she has seen. Although Rosa's father now owns a popular nightclub, he lacks respectability, and this is something that Rosa foresees she can attain through John also. When John asks Rosa why she wants him for a husband, she proclaims:

Maybe because--I was born in Piedras Negras, and grew up in a one-room house with a dirt floor, and all of us had to sleep in that one room, five Mexicans and three geese and a little game-cock named Pepe! Ha-ha! We all slept in that one room. And in the night, I would hear love-making. Papa would grunt like a pig to show his passion. I thought to myself how dirty it was, love-making, and how dirty it was to be Mexicans and all have to sleep in one room with a dirt floor and not smell good because there was not any bathtub... Me want you? You're tall! You smell good! And, oh, I'm so glad that you never grunt like a pig to show your passion! Oh, but quien sabe! Something might happen tonight and I'll wind up with some dark little friend of Papa's.

After the murder of Dr. John Buchanan, Sr., it is quite obvious that Rosa will not have a meaningful future with the younger John. After this incident John leaves town for a while, but returns; however, Williams does not mention Rosa again. In writing Rosa out of the play at this point Williams may be implying a couple of ideas. First, Rosa is a part of John's past which encompasses the carnal

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reality of brutal desire and animalistic force which John now has relinquished. Secondly, perhaps, through not mentioning Rosa again Williams wants us to assume that she will never rise above the amoral, sensuous living that she has known. In either case, Rosa will have to adjust to and accept a life without John in order to survive. Since Williams does not tell us otherwise, Rosa will probably find carnal love and desire with someone else.

The latter two survivors are different from the previous women in this category for two reasons: first, we have seen them already in other categories. Maggie serves as a female aggressor/mother figure who also reveals characteristics of the survivor, while Amanda falls into all three categories. Secondly, according to Nielsen the plays in which Maggie and Amanda appear are also different from the rest. He states: "The Glass Menagerie and Cat on a Hot Tin Roof represent Williams' successful resolution of his soft line, wherein the protagonist survives and presumably goes on to create something from the ruins of the past."¹³ Such is the situation with Maggie.

One may perceive Maggie as a survivor, although she is better characterized as a female aggressor/mother figure. Despite the total rejection that she receives from her husband, Maggie is determined to make her marriage work. She is very assertive, but she is also patient. Maggie loves Brick and desires his love, but she realizes that it will take more than love to hold her family together. After deceiving the family with a false pregnancy, she tries using sexual seduction to revitalize her marriage, and when this effort fails she

resorts to blackmail. It is her strong inclination to exist for life, wealth, and love which makes Maggie a survivor, but she is also a fighter who desires the love and passion of one man, and she will not surrender until he resumes that burning passion for her.

The message of this play is very much the same as that in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Maggie tells Brick: "My only point, the only point that I'm making, is life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is-- all --over..." Regardless of how Brick feels about her, they must exist as a family or, if it comes to that, as separate individuals. Maggie is aware of the need to survive, and she plans for their future.

In *The Glass Menagerie* Amanda creates a future for her children out of the ruins of her past, and in this way she too is a survivor. Amanda has played a very versatile role. She has been the delicate, moth-like creature whom Williams portrays through this Southern genteel lady, and even though she is delicate, she is also aggressive. She fights for the happiness and security of her family, and in this way she becomes a female aggressor/mother figure. Even now when it is apparent that Amanda's dreams are shattered for her children, for the daughter retires to a world of illusion and her son deserts them both, Amanda does not despair, but continues to struggle for the welfare and security of her family.

Amanda possesses, in fact, characteristics common to the women in each category. A combination of all three categories, she is

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perhaps the archetypal center of Williams' vision of women. Her role as a survivor stems from the fact that she is a decayed Southern belle whose fantasies and illusions gave her hope. With this hope she fights for security and comfort for her family, and even though her efforts have failed she continues to exist because she has an instinctual need to survive despite the obstacles posed by her children, by her environment, and by her own complex psychology.

As for the others—Carol, Stella, Rosa, and Maggie—survival becomes a liberation from sexual restraints and a delight in sensualism. Carol uses sex to fill the emptiness in her life. Stella forgets about the cultural, genteel environment in which she is raised and settles for the more sensual pleasures that she receives in her marriage to Stanley. She states in a conversation with Blanche: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark that sort of makes everything else seem unimportant."¹⁵ As for Rosa, who had detested the animalistic grunts she heard from her parents' cohabitation, she now finds the relationship with John involves nothing more than carnal pleasure. John tells her: "You'll never make love without scratching or biting or something."¹⁶ Rosa delights in animal force; it is the part of her life that gives her the stamina to survive. Maggie uses sex as a means to consummate her marriage with Brick. Simultaneously, she satisfies her physical needs and builds a future with her husband. The ability to use their sexuality to their advantage characterizes these women.

¹⁵Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, p. 70.
¹⁶Williams, Summer and Smoke, p. 211.
Although these women may be criticized or ostracized in self-righteous societies, they are Williams' strongest characters. Despite the plays' cruelties, and overall bleak world-view, Williams' survivors in corrupt societies manage to come to grips with their world and function well enough in it to remain alive. Nielsen adds: "Tennessee Williams is telling us all how to survive. He insists that both horror and beauty surround us and that we must learn how to relate to them."¹⁷

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

We have observed the development of Williams' female characters, from women who hide behind their illusions in an attempt to face disappointments and cruelties inflicted by society, later to those who aggressively strive for happiness and healthy relationships with the men they love and, finally, to those who have as a final goal personal survival. As is well known, Williams' homosexuality is a primary fact of his creative life. It is reasonable, in fact almost necessary, to suppose that his deep identification with his female characters is a consequence of his sexual identity.

Because of that identification, and also owing to his close rapport with his sister and mother during his earlier years, it is beyond doubt that Williams felt a very close rapport with the operation of the female personality. Therefore, in his writing he concentrates mainly on the portrayal of women. Inevitably, in doing so he also reveals information about his own personality.

Robert Jones indicates that many of Williams' female characters have bisexual roles.¹ Their personalities could as easily reflect the character traits of men as of women. An example of this may be revealed through one character in particular, Alma

Winemiller. Williams has said, in fact, that he can best identify with his favorite character, Alma, because she is a reflection of himself.

Like Williams, Alma goes from puritanical obsession to complete profligacy. Williams refers to profligacy as "freedom or liberation from taboos." Like Alma, Williams spent the earlier years of his life in an Episcopalian rectory. Perhaps, like Alma, he had also been obsessed with the battle of flesh against the spirit. As we watch Alma transform from a heroine devoted to love, duty, honor, and chastity to a woman torn by insatiable desire and inner longing, we are actually watching a paradigm of Williams' transformation from a sexually-confused youth to a liberated, homosexual adult. Williams, as does Alma, rejects his upbringing and assumes a lifestyle comfortable for him; this lifestyle happens to be that of a homosexual. Jackson further remarks: "Alma, then, contained many of the elements of the character of Williams himself, but a Williams successfully transposed into a female." As Alma flees to profligacy, Williams establishes for himself a bohemian existence.

Not only does Alma reflect Williams' life, but each category of women reflected a phase in Williams' life. For instance, the Southern genteel lady represented his youth or the earlier stage of Williams' homosexuality, when he was confused about his sexual

\(^2\)Ibid.

\(^3\)Ester Jackson, The Broken World of Tennessee Williams (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p. 137.

identity. Then, after attempting to fulfill his needs as a homosexual while at the same time being careful to conceal the fact of his preference, he became a female aggressor. Finally, by declaring publicly that he was a homosexual, despite any harassment this announcement might have caused, he became a survivor. These inferences are speculative, but taken into consideration they certainly explain Williams' obsession with women and female sexuality.

In reviewing the three categories under which I have discussed Williams' female characters, I find that there is a common trait--the need for fulfilling, sexual relationships. Whether sexuality is repressed or satisfied. The Southern genteel ladies suppress their sexual desires in an attempt to honor their moral ideals. The aggressor/mother-figures engage in sexual relationships with desirable mates with whom they aggressively pursue their sexual fulfillment despite the consequences. However, the survivors in corrupt societies have no biases or mental blocks concerning their sexual natures, whether monogamous or promiscuous. Therefore, they indulge in relationships without restraints or later regrets. They enjoy sex and are not ashamed to admit it.

One may wonder why Amanda Wingfield, who possesses certain traits that are common to the women in all three categories, is not concerned with the issue of sex as are the other characters. Possibly this is because Williams uses Amanda as a portrayal of his mother. Although Amanda is not a sexual predator, she is certainly aggressive. She also exhibits the traits of a Southern genteel lady, and, by reason of endurance, is a survivor. Perhaps out of maternal love
and respect, Williams does not portray Amanda as being sexually repressed or promiscuous but, rather as possessing traits of the women in all three categories.

Williams openly acknowledges that some of his own weaknesses are revealed through some of his characters. His characters are a reflection of himself and his perceptions of mankind. Jackson quotes Williams in this regard in his "Forward" to Sweet Bird of Youth:

> Since I am a member of the human race, when I attack behavior toward fellow members I am obviously including myself in the same attack, unless I regard myself as not human but superior to humanity. I don't. In fact, I can't expose a human weakness on stage unless I know it through having it myself. I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities, and consequently I have them.

Many of the weaknesses and faults within Williams' characters stem from sexual delinquency. Williams is indeed obsessed with the subject of sexual delinquency. Falk writes: "There has always been in Williams a quaint absorption in the old-time Puritan preoccupation with sex."6

Jackson says that, although Williams used the subjects of sexual delinquency extensively in his works, the use of it is not unusual or novel in Western drama, since it was the main theme in Oedipus Rex, became a persistent element of content in the theater of Shakespeare, and had been employed by modern dramatists such as Ibsen, Strindberg, and O'Neill. However, Williams employed the theme as a symbol for a rational image of man. As Jackson so well puts it,
"The playwright seems to suggest that the spectacle to which he gives shape is the normative image of man; that is, Williams posits his delinquent anti-hero as the true image of the moral and spiritual life a modern man."\textsuperscript{7}
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