

# Tennessee Williams: ‘Poet of Poor Souls’

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It is quiet common we come across the epithet ‘poet of poor souls’ being applied to Tennessee Williams. There is even lesser dissent among the critics that Williams in his entire playwriting career was strongly inclined towards exploring the lives of the people who for various reasons were ill-adjusted to the world in which they come to inhabit. However, there also is another view, perhaps debatable, that no other dramatist’s life has had a strong bearing on his plays than Tennessee Williams’. No other writer’s works are as impacted by the events in their lives as Williams was. Williams’ most successful plays contains very strong echoes of his life.

The characters of Laura Wingfield, Amanda Wingfield from *Glass Menagerie* (1944), Blanche Dubois from *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947), Brick Pollitt from *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), Val Xavier from *Orpheus Descending* (1957), Sebastian Venable from *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) and Chance Wayne from *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). Stella Kowalski, Violet Venable, Lady Torrance, Margaret Pollitt, Big Daddy, Skipper. These characters are representative types that are typical of Williams’ characterization and obsession with such characters that are variously termed ‘the fugitives’, ‘the misfits’ and ‘the outcasts’. As can be seen, the plays from which characters are chosen were written at different periods in Williams’ writing career when he was at the peak of his dramatic powers. Moreover, all these plays drew a lot of critical attention at the time that they were performed first. In fact, these plays still draw a fair amount of critical scrutiny even in the present time from theatre aficionados and scholars. Some of these are prescribed as text books in American literature courses all over the world. The fact that more than half a century has elapsed since they first came to light has neither diminished nor dimmed their dramatic power or relevance or appeal to audiences and scholars all over the world.

Williams has confessed that his outlook on life and writing practices was greatly impacted by the works of the great Russian dramatist, Anton Chekov, the British writer, D H Lawrence and his close friend, the well-known American poet Hart Crane.

The second telling influence on Williams’ writing was his early childhood. The experiences of this period of Williams’ life left such an indelible impression on his mind that most characters that he created may be seen as being related to or arising out of it. For, instance his sister Rose surfaces as Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. As much of Williams’ early childhood was spent in the South, it comes as no surprise that the distinct values of the South were firmly entrenched in him.

The outcasts in Williams are trapped individuals who are brittle and extremely sensitive. Williams’ characters rarely ever wish to counter the real world in which they exist. In fact, they make an effort to flee the insensitive world that they are forced to transact with and for which they lack the necessary skills, nature and wherewithal. What is intriguing is that these characters rarely, if ever, hold the ambient society responsible for their plight. They do not want to have anything to do with it and attempt to take flight from it. A good example is *The Glass Menagerie*. Laura has no worldly use or need for anything else apart from her glass animals and observes that the animals have no problems in living with each other and that there’s rarely a quarrel among them (Williams 1999: 32). Laura hardly leaves her house and cannot go to school. She withdraws into herself. Clearly, she is not a realist.

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flight from it. A good example is *The Glass Menagerie*. Laura has no worldly use or need for anything else apart from her glass animals and observes that the animals have no problems in living with each other and that there's rarely a quarrel among them (Williams 1999: 32). Laura hardly leaves her house and cannot go to school. She withdraws into herself. Clearly, she is not a realist. Kowalski, in *A Street Car Named Desire* is one such character which is a representative of the contemporary America that is totally at ease with the capitalist induced commercialism resulting in a dog-eat-dog condition.

In Williams' plays there are some characters who are pitted against a world which is strange and inimical to them, they can no longer relate to or recognize. Consequently, they are forced to withdraw into a private make believe world. Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* and Brick Pollitt in *Cat in a Hat on a Tin Roof* are not only very well-known characters but are also typical representatives of the alienated people in Williams' oeuvre. Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending* (1957), Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959) and Sebastian Venable of *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). These have been seen as the 'three martyrs' who are punished for transgressing their functions in a male-dominated system. (Clum 1997: 128)

The opposing natures wrought by the parental predilections produced a strange combination that resulted in conflicting impulses that may be detected in the characters that he created in his plays. This was further aggravated by his father's frequent violent behaviour arising out of his heavy dependence on alcohol and which led to a severe domestic turbulence that had a deleterious effect on the sensitive Williams that was to impact the creation of his characters, that is clearly and palpably evident in one of his major and highly acclaimed plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).

The human loneliness surfaces his characterization very frequently in his works, especially his plays. People, in his plays, go out of their way to seek an outlet, an escape from this doomed predicament, but find that all roads lead to dead-ends. Some of his characters, try bizarre means, attempt to find a release from loneliness through conventional modes, for instance Laura and Miss Dubious seek it desperately in love, but fail to find any succour or

fulfilment. Williams, as the creator of these characters, ensures that these characters fail as he attaches the element of destruction with love. Both Laura who seeks an ideal type of love and Blanche who seeks physical love come to tragic ends precisely because of this. In Williams' world view, the fundamental trust is in loss and the only guaranteed end is death. Death may come soon or later, but it is an inescapable reality.

However, it must also be noted that Williams' understanding of human beings is entirely that of unfruitful and condemned to despair. There is very strong will in his character's to break the shackles and this desire is what powers them to look for means and methods to launch resistances, sometimes through unconventional and at other times, unconventional as observed above, to those inimical forces that threaten to overwhelm and engulf them. But even as remark is made like this, it must be noted that Williams' understanding of human universe imagines it as being warped in a perennially chaotic state. In Williams' views human beings are social beings and thus need and crave for human relationships. It has often been pointed out that Williams shares a strong sense of attachment with people who are out of the ordinary, the weird, lonely and outcast people (Dimrott 1988: 47). His fictional universe holds in it two forces that are in eternal conflict with each other: the body and the spirit; real world that is unforgiving and brutal and the perfect world carved out of dreams and imagination. Williams' puritan imagination fashions a naive transactive mode through the dense overgrowth of the world. Retreating more and more into themselves, they appear to be pathological cases to the world around them (Blanche illustrates this too well). His characters endure violence, rape and despair.

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