

CHAPTER - I

INTRODUCTION

A writer's art is always more than his life. One cannot, therefore, postulate a causal relationship between Tennessee Williams' life and the world of his plays. However, it is possible to take into account some biographical details which seem to be relevant to his artistic world. These brief biographical details help us to understand some aspects of his artistic psychology as well as his literary influences.

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911. He spent his childhood with his maternal grandfather as his father used to travel for his job of a salesman for shoe company. Childhood illness gave Tennessee Williams extra time to read intensively. Their family moved to St. Louis when he was about twelve. He seemed to be aware of ugliness. His slightly crippled sister's life left a deep impact upon him.

He was educated at Missouri for three years where he joined fraternity, flunked by ROTC, where he received small prizes for poetry and prose. He was depressed by commercial life, which developed in him a hypochondria. Once again in 1936 he joined Washington University, where he won first prize in a one-act play contest, from which we see, his career as a playwright began. In 1939, he published his first story under the nickname, Tennessee Williams. This pseudonym he accepted because of southern accent. 1940 was the year of

innovation for his dramatic career when he published Battle of Angels at Chicago. He continued tramp life. But at the same time he met Audrey Wood, literary agent and a valuable associate. In these years he was much influenced by Anton Chekov. In his Memoirs Tennessee Williams says :

That summer I fell in love with the writing of Anton Chekov - at least with many short stories. They introduced me to a literary responsibility to which I felt a very close affinity at that time. Now I find that he holds too much in reserve. I still am in love with the delicate poetry of his writing and The Sea Gull is still, I think the greatest of modern plays with the possible exception of Brecht's 'Mother Courage'.¹

The ^{strong} ~~story~~ influences on the first seven years of Williams' life came from his mother, grandparents and the devoted sister Rose. In the later years Chekov, William Saroyan, Lorca, Strindberg made him aware of the deeper levels of human mind. But the major figure who obsessed Williams in and out was D.H.Lawrence. He says about Lawrence :

It has often been said that Lawrence was my major literary influence. Well, Lawrence was, indeed, a highly 'sympatico' in my literary upbringing, but Chekov takes precedence as an influence - that is, if there has been any particular influence beside my own solitary bent - toward what I am not yet sure and probably never will be ...²

He wrote I Rise in Flame Cried the phoenix, in memory of D.H.Lawrence in 1941. At the same time his Battle of Angels was accepted by the theatre Guild and produced in Boston. In 1944, he got the American Academy of Arts and Letters award. Thus the professional career of Tennessee Williams, playwright began with great promise.

The Glass Menagerie opened on December 26, 1944 at Chicago's Civic theatre to uniformly enthusiastic critical reception, which established Williams as a playwright of national importance. It won the New York Critic's Award for 1944-45 and its box office appeal made Tennessee affluent beyond his wildest imagination. In this phase of his literary career Williams admired Lawrence's themes and viewpoints. He wrote many one act plays like Twentyseven Wagons Full of Cotton which brought him great success.

With the December 3, 1927 production of A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams - slight, shy, now half blind, an acute hypochondriac, essentially homeless, a most unobtrusive and unprepossessing young man of thirty six became a world figure. A second New York Drama Critic's Award and Pulitzer prize followed at once, and he became an international figure in drama - The 'Streetcar' set in a New Orleans slum and bringing into violent contrast, a neurotic woman's dream world and the animalistic realism of Stanley; gave him more than anything in his life.

To continue an account of his life beyond this point seems unnecessary. Never one to make headlines, never marrying, an artist dominated by the powerful forces of tragic spirit, Williams continued to pour forth - from Key West, Mexico, Europe, or wherever - an impressive accumulation of work.

II

Tennessee Williams is a major American playwright who tries to remain close to the 'south' where he spent more of the ~~his~~ earlier years ^{of} his life.

The earliest literature of the permanent English settlements came from the southern colonies. These south writers turned their attention to the world outside their doors. There is a tradition of scientific, descriptive and promotional literature unequalled in the colonies to the North. These southern writers had patriotic zeal. Political, social and economic issues were the main things they handled in their works.

The significant phenomena in American culture has been the emergence in the middle decades of the twentieth century of a rich and varied literature about the south. The southern myth is a rich source for the writer. These southern people have a kind of loyalty to tradition, a nostalgia for a pattern of aristocratic, non-urban life that was rich in

promises. They were aware of their distinctive character, mores and beliefs which were peculiar to the southern areas, and which all have provided inexhaustible resources. And this literary flowering began among writers from Kentucky and Tennessee. These southern writers portrayed their people with a major change. These changes were varied and far reaching with sociological and psychological consequences. It was a different turn. William Faulkner, was a great figure of the southern renaissance. The territory, theme, material he used is not even to the south, but it also shows the tragic condition of modern man. He presented the fragmentation and corruption of society, its materialism, religious and moral codes in his novels. Faulkner's aristocratic southerners, ~~th~~ are themselves responsible for the decay and sterility of the south.

Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Truman Capote - these southern writers represent the tradition of " southern gothic gone to seed " . The Negro novelists like, Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison portrayed the ugly vengeance not only of the whites but the Negroes against Negro, Tennessee Williams is a part of this rich and varied literary Tradition. He deplored southern myth, loss of old aristocratic culture replaced by gross mercantile values. He is sympathetic towards decaying aristocrats. His characters are types, representing southern epoch. As Falk says about him :

He has emphasized the idea, fostered by the New critics as well as inherited from a long romantic and classical tradition, that only the poet-blessed or marked at birth - can show modern man the way out of his confusion³.

His themes, characters have a special significance. He is a literary writer whose work shows an increasingly clever manipulation of words for their emotional impact. It is true that Williams represents the real south like Erskine Cladwell, but his subject matter is different from Cladwell; he has from the beginning veered toward the sensational and almost pornographic to create 'something wild'. Falk says:

Williams represents the southern towns and the men from south though they are not legendary.⁴

He represents characters from all the social strata and portrays a cross section of the southern life. His family shifted from place to place in the southern part of America where he could see the real life of the south, their feelings, their beliefs and ideals of life. He took his own themes and characters strictly from southern society. He, like any other writer, portrays his experience in his works - Gould observes:

The first experience that Williams could remember as significant in the light of his eventual choice of career was the weekly visit to the poor and ailing. He discovered more than one trait of human nature of those rounds with his grandfather, more than one personality that impressed itself on his mind and later came to people through his plays.⁵

Since his childhood, he had an idea of his future themes. He handled the characters with his vision, which was necessarily tragic one. As Nelson says :

Williams is not a realist or a naturalist but his best works represent a tenuous but taut alliance between harsh realism and a poetic - even lyric - expressionism.⁶

He represented sensational tendency with violence in his early plays but sobered down in the latter ones. In his major plays, there is cry of the lonely, the frightened and the outcast. They illuminate the dominant theme in Williams' work : the loneliness of human existence. The universe is the great antagonist in Tennessee Williams. It is malignant as it is implacable. His best work is marked by this important juxtaposition of beliefs. Thus, his entire world in his works is southern and he tries to portray it. He says :

I had a feeling that I am black, southern.⁷

III

Tennessee Williams projects his southern heritage in terms of a tragic vision. More specifically, this tragic vision is the propellent force behind his explorations of human relationships. Considering the wide network of human relations which Tennessee Williams' tragic vision explores, he can be described as a tragic dramatist of human relationships par excellence.

While explaining the moral dilemma of man Williams says :

For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for.⁸

Man can turn, through imagination, to dreams and art, alone or groups as nations, he can turn to violence as a compensation. This principle of atonement through violence Williams illustrates in his plays. In all his plays Tennessee Williams explores the problem of the moral downfall of man, by which he meets his tragic end. As a result, in most of his plays we find that his men and women are victims of excessive passion, moral guilt and internal conflict within self. Williams is obsessed with this peculiar moral downfall. He says :

All my life I have been haunted by the obsession that to desire a thing or to love a thing intensely is to place yourself in a vulnerable position.⁹

One major aspect of Tennessee Williams' artistic concern is this human vulnerability. It is this theme which is prominent in Williams' plays. His plays have a wide network of human relations. These human relationships constitute a fairly wide spectrum. This spectrum includes husband-wife relationship, mother - son and father - daughter relationships,

man - woman relationship, in the context of love and lesbian relationship. These men suffer from either loneliness or sexual appetite or economic backwardness. This stark and lonely condition of man is to obsess Williams in all his work. It is his most valid and dramatic theme. Perhaps it evolves directly out of the morass of his life, which from its earliest days was marked by this vulnerable position, inability to communicate with the people who should have been his closest communicants. Williams calls it, "A tragedy of incomprehensions".¹⁰ Benjamin Nelson rightly observes :

The universe is the great antagonist in Williams. It is malignant as it is implacable. It has evolved a society that is grasping, repressive and destructive. Everything that governs human action emanates from this broken condition which is the root condition of the universe. Man's life is a constant attempt to compensate for this lack of wholeness which he feels in himself. In his work, human action is defined by universal incompleteness. He has created a stunning work of art in which, theme, imagery and presentation are almost flawlessly blended into unified whole.¹¹

The network of human relations is always in his mind. Nelson further says :

If the human condition is marked by fragmentation, if like on earth holds no hope for any sort of redemption, if corruption is so inherent in the universe that time itself becomes the great enemy of man, for what can man hope ?¹²

His characters always ask themselves why have they come in this world? What have they to do? Where do they go ultimately? This moral dilemma of his characters is the source of Tennessee Williams with tragic vision. Jordon Miller calls him more versatile than O'Neill and says :

Williams maintained essentially the same tragic view, calling down upon himself much of the praise and much of the condemnation directed at his predecessor or a generation earlier. The violence of brutal sex, the hate, the suffering, the frustrations were always there - even the comedies seemed constantly on the "dark" side but evident as well, were great compassion and sympathy for those caught in the web of tragic destiny.¹³

The stamp of Williams is distinctively his own on every play, theme and character. Like Picasso, Williams seems to restate his creative experiences to subject his poetic vision to continual reconsideration. His vision is necessarily tragic as he creates a world fragmented, broken. Jackson says:

Like Hart Crane, Williams is concerned with reality of a 'broken world'. Form in his drama is the imitation of the individual search for a way of redeeming a shattered universe.¹⁴

Thus he may not be properly described as a realist. Moreover much of Williams' exploration of human relationships is romantic in quality, especially in its preoccupation with hallucinatory levels of experience. He is concerned with light

in dark, good within evil, body against soul, God and satan. He shows man's dramatic struggle to come to terms with his own self.

In his exploration of human relationships Williams projects an anti-classic vision of the moral universe. He interprets the human dilemma in the twentieth century as a crisis of conscience, as growing conflict within human consciousness, individual and collective. Jackson estimates his moral dilemma as :

Williams is committed to an ethic which regards man as a sinner, as a transgressor whose salvation is dependant on his personal recognition of his condition. He proposes to shock the spectator into recognition of his moral condition by exposing both his public and private sins. Williams posits his delingent anti-hero as the true image of the moral and spiritual life of modern man Williams' early universe is fundamentally that of primeval man. In early plays he attempted to delve beneath the successive masks of civilisations and to examine man's primitive state of consciousness.¹⁵

A study of whole fabric of Williams' work seems to show a conscious pattern of moral development. In early plays his attitude may be of romantics, but in later plays he turned to the existence of man in the universe. He regards art as a kind of 'transmorality', the only salvation for an insensitive and unseeing humanity.

He turns his attention in his longer works to the causes of suffering in the modern world. The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on A Hot Tin Roof, The Rose Tattoo, Summer and Smoke, are concerned with the effect of social, political and cultural transition upon the individual.

There is a gradual development of a comprehensive moral structure in his plays. The integrity of self-expression is balanced throughout. His later plays are concerned with the exploration of moral problems which are more comprehensive in nature.

Tennessee Williams' tragic exploration of human relationship is marked by three phases. These phases reflect changes in his moral outlook also. His early plays are concerned with the 'struggle of the individual for self realization'. In the middle period of his works, he equates his accounts of individual crisis with more universal phenomena, especially to trace their effect on society at large. In the last phase he turns from personal crisis to the timeless progress of mankind in the moral universe. Williams tries to account for human transgression and attempts. Jackson comments :

His drama is the perception of reality. His attempt is not only to eliminate creative power but also moral function and its ritual power of catharsis. He attempts to create new realities, that is to fashion images more coherent and more meaningful than the life which they present. Inner conflict between experience and meaning poetry and logic, appearance and reality. govern his exploration of human relationships.

It is because of Williams' keen perception of the range of possibilities governing human relationships. His image of man and his concept of human crisis his mythic apprehension of human transgression have already become a prominent part of the theatrical tradition.¹⁶

An analysis of Tennessee Williams' exploration of human relationship shows that in all his works he portrays people suffering from inner conflict. Either they are lonely or frustrated, sexually flawed or financially affected, maniac or affected by death of a relation in the family. He is obsessed with the theme of death. In memoirs he writes :

Death is the unavoidable eventuality which in most cases we avoid as long as we can, but which finally, when all the possible options have expired, we must accept with as much grace as there remains in our command.¹⁷

To Williams death is oblivion, and the only way to cheat oblivion is to leave a body of artistic work behind. He believes that writers are obsessed with death because they must undergo two deaths - their own and that of their creative flow.

All these facts help us in analysing Tennessee Williams' tragic exploration of human relationships.

IV

According to the Aristotelian concept Williams' plays may not be tragedies, but it is beyond doubt that he presents a dark sombre picture of life. It has already been noted that Tennessee Williams is a tragic playwright of human relationships par excellence. It is possible to place this view of Tennessee Williams as a tragic dramatist of human relationships in the context of modern theories of tragic vision.

Kruger is right in defining the modern tragic vision in the following terms :

The tragic is not only vision projected by our serious literature and philosophy, nor it is necessarily the profoundest vision. But it is surely the most spectacular and the most expressive of the crisis mentality of our time. Consequently it has won for those works obsessed with it the excited attention of our most stimulating critical mind. The most obvious difference between the Aristotelian and modern tragedy is that 'tragedy' refers to an object's literary form, 'the tragic vision' to a subject's psychology, his view and versions of reality. The tragic vision was born inside tragedy as a part of it : as a possession of the tragic hero, the vision was a reflection in the realm of thematics of the fully fashioned aesthetic totality which was tragedy.¹⁸

In traditional classical tragedy the hero always arises from his exclusive identification with single claim, a moral claim. In the classical tragedies this moral or formal order was observed strictly. The Romantic tragic vision bursts forth

unencumbered often in merely " melodramatic splendour ".

Kruger quotes kirkegard as :

If there were no eternal consciousness in a man, it at the foundation of all these lay only a wildly seething power which writhing with obscure passions produced everything that is great and everything that is insignificant, if a bottomless void never satiated lay hidden beneath all - what then would life be but dispair! 19

For kirkegard 'dispair' is hopeful and wretched. But in the modern times human behaviour is submoral, below ideal - religious level. But these modern heroes are self conscious moralists. In modern tragedies we are shown ambiguous nature of the values at stake in this struggle. The dramatic conflict is balanced by tragic and universal weaknesses. And in this conflict they create a tension. The tragic vision is an expression of man only in an extreme situation, never in a normal or routine one. Kruger defines tragic vision as :

The tragic vision is a vision of extreme cases, a distillate of the rebellion, the godlessness which once induced by crisis, purifies itself by the stark austerity of his ontological position and of his dramatic position in the fable, is the extremist who despite his rich intermingling with the stuff of experience - finds himself transformed from character to parable.²⁰

Kireger's account of tragic vision is applicable to the world of Tennessee Williamg. In his tragic projection of

a whole spectrum of human relationships, Tennessee William offers a kind of " melodramatic splendour ". This "melodramatic splendour" of the outcome human being trapped in their loneliness, in their inability to communicate and finally in their desperate effort to establish a meaningful dialogue with others. This leads Tennessee William explore in depth human relationships and to ask radical questions about their nature and function in man's life. Tennessee Williams has, therefore, a special view of life on the outcasts, crippled, weak- mentally or physically.

The cardinal part of drama is conflict as all drama arises out of conflict. In tragedy there is ever a clash between two forces (which may be characters) or between two minds, or between a person and a force beyond a person. Tragedy engages us not merely as connoisseurs but as men who must face problems that so long as we are human beings can only be called moral. It may speak to us of a life as well as its areas of radical and stunning decision. But when it touches upon small things, it will intimate their connection with a way of life chosen and susceptible of judgement.

In this general context of tragedy, it is possible to spell out the specific implications of Tennessee Williams' concerns with human relationships. Tragedy represents the life of man on the environment of catastrophe. The tragic characters are conscious agents who thus responsible for their actions. Our awareness, inner life is unique, and cannot be equated with

something else. When man is fully human, his consciousness attends to the everchanging relationships of the external world to that which is always internal; the self. Only a fully human being can be tragic. With his identity, the tragic hero must be sensitive to his environment. If they lack to achieve awareness they fail to attain tragic significance. Their ignorance, blind behaviour becomes stereotyped and they become incapable of tragic vision.

The tragic dramatist feels deeply the meaningfulness of the terms "good" and "evil", "right" and "wrong". The hero has his standard values and he himself, later, overrules the values he had once treasured. The ordeal becomes symbol of man's quest for the meaning of life.

Tragedy presents a poetic cosmology and is committed to a metaphysical attitude. It is a moving record of man's involvement in a world that is beautiful, painful and strange. Men are thrown in critical dilemmas from which they are unable to escape. Life is lived at a peak of intensity.

The tragic dramatist may suggest that good and evil attain some sort of balance in the world of structure. The conflict reflects the cultural and historical crisis in which the writer lives. The metaphysical element in tragedy is always to be found in the relation between the self transcending mind of man and his half recognized but recognizably persisting cosmos. Tragedy has little use for universals bereft of instances.

Peacock says about morality in tragedy :

The vision must appear implicit in a convincing situation. When situations are visioned with sensibility and imagination they are transparent to human feelings and values - Drama is derived, not from social or external moral conflicts, but from the depth of passion, appetite and the unconscious.²¹

The romantic mind finds it difficult to be satisfied with generic qualities; it inclines toward exaggeration. Supernaturalism is the denial of the need or worth of human activities and probings : the former area merges with the tragic vision but escapes into its own realm when restlessness and violence overweight the balance and calm achieved in tragedy. Evil forces disrupt moral order. In old tragedies these forces were hatred between families, ambition and malice, disrupt moral order and bring suffering and death. Evil feeds on goodness, this is the tragic fact. Awareness of evil is the major thing in tragedy.

Through suffering one attains reflective self consciousness, an awareness of human limitations Tragedy is not concerned with the pain or suffering, but with the dignity with which they are endured. There are no retreats for the tragic protagonist. Neither in madness nor in the self absolution of confusion may be retreat. And, at this height he is alone, unique and sufficient. This is tragic dignity. As the suffering increases, his awareness also increases and his only forte is spiritual strength.

In general, the tragic vision is not a systematic view of life. It admits wide variations and degree. It is a sum of insights, intuitions, feelings, to which the word "vision" or 'view' or 'sense of life' are most readily applicable. It is an attitude toward life with which some individual seem to be endowed to high degree, other less.

The tragic vision is in its first place primal or primitive in that it calls out of the depths the first and last of all question of existence : what does it mean to be? Sewall defines it :

It recalls original terror, harking back to a world that antedates the conceptions of philosophy. It recalls the original un-reason, the terror of the irrational. It seems man questioner, naked, unaccommodated, alone, feeling mysterious, demonic forces in his own nature and outside, and the irreducible facts of suffering and death. Thus it is not for those who cannot live with unsolved questions or unresolved doubts, whose bent of mind would reduce the fact of evil into something else or resolve it into some larger whole. Though no one is exempt from moments of tragic doubt or insight the vision of life peculiar to the mystic, the pious, the propagandist, the confirmed optimist or pessimist - anything - is not tragic.²²

The tragic vision is not for those who admit questions, reality of guilt, anxiety and suffering. Mere sensitivity is not enough. The tragic vision impels the man of action to fight against destiny, state his case before God or his fellows. It

impels the artists in his fictions to create what is called, " boundary situations".

Each age has different tensions and terrors, but they open on the same abyss. The tradition guides the new vision, the vision tests it, alters its focus and directions or expands its compass. Direction and focus may change but the vision is constant. How vision forged a form, some major modes the form has taken, and some meanings it has revealed are the concerns of tragedy.

V

The various aspects of Tennessee Williams such as his biography, his southern tradition have been discussed in order to provide general framework within which it is possible to offer a comprehensive critical statement on Tennessee Williams' tragic vision in relation to his exploration of human relationships. This dissertation thus seeks to provide a critical focus on Tennessee Williams' tragic exploration of human relationships. Accordingly all his plays have been grouped thematically in terms of the dominant human relationships they explore.

The basis used for grouping is obviously not chronological but thematic and to some extent at least typological. Thus the first group of plays deals with man- woman relationship in the context of marriage. The plays included in this group

are, Battle of Angels, Orpheus Descending, The Rose Tattoo, 27 Wagons full of cotton, In a Bar of Tokyo Hotel, A Streetcar Named Desire, Kingdom of Earth and Period of Adjustment.

The second group deals with man- woman relationship in the context of love. The plays included in this group are, Summer and Smoke, The Eccentricities of Nightingale, The Camino Real, Sweet Bird of Youth, The Milk Train Does Not Stop Here Anymore and The Night of Eguana.

The third group deals with the tragic implications of two kinds of human relations, homosexual and ^{those between} ~~institution~~ ^{women.} The plays included in this group are, Cat on A Hot, Tin Roof, Something Unspoken, The Mutilated and Small Craft Warning.

The last group of plays predominantly deals with the relationship between children and parents. The plays included are, The Glass Menagerie and Suddenly last Summer.

The plays of Tennessee Williams which project a broken world are thus grouped for the sake of critical convenience so as to provide a pointer to the thematic complexity of his dramatic world. This world offers a rich, varied range of human relationships.

Tennessee Williams projects a major relationship- husband-wife relationship in the first group of his plays. Theme in Battle of Angels, his first representation come out with more mature handling in Orpheus Descending. The Rose

Tattoo brings out the tragedy of a woman who tries to play the role of an ideal wife. A Streetcar Named Desire, his outstanding work, deals with the problematics of married life in the context of nymphomaniac. His short plays, 27 Wagons full of cotton and In A Bar of Tokyo Hotel deal with wives who forget their marital bonds for materialistic things. Kingdom of Earth is a play about a wife who tries to survive in this world and takes another man, even right under the nose of her weak husband. Period of Adjustment is a fine play by Williams wherein he shows the adjustment of an artist with the demands of marriage.

Williams portrays man- woman relationship in the context of love in some plays. Camino Real represents a free society on the island. Summer and Smoke and The Eccentricities of Nightingale have the same theme and characters. Sweet Bird of Youth is a play about lovers and represents a fine picture of their ideal expectations of marital relations. Williams was deeply influenced by D.H.Lawrence and in memory of Lawrence he wrote I Rise in Flame, Cried the phoenix which describes hatred for women. The Milk Train and The Night of Iguana are altogether different in their themes. But the major relationship found in them is the man-woman relationship in the context of love. Both the plays have spinster heroines, suffering sexual dissatisfaction.

Something Unspoken and The Mutilated deal with lesbian relationships. Cat on A Hot Tin Roof, which brought a Pulitzer prize for Tennessee Williams, deals with the theme of homosexuality. The Glass Menagerie and Suddenly Last Summer describe the relationship between mother- son and mother- daughter respectively. Both these plays are Tennessee Williams' masterpieces.