

CHAPTER III

TENNESSE WILLIAMS AND HIS WORKS

Tennessee Williams is hardly immune to charges of sentimentality. His plays deal in violence, in sexual tensions, in violation of the body and spirit. For his best, his personal life and experiences have been the direct subject matter for his works. His favourite setting is Southern, with southern characters. In Stanley Kowalski, the antagonist in Streetcar Named Desire, we can see many the rough, poker - playing, the qualities his own father possessed. In Amanda and Laura in The Glass Menagerie, we find very close echoes to his own mother and sister. In Tom Wingfield, The Glass Menagerie, we see the struggles and aspirations of the writer himself re-echoed in literary form.

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, a child of the "Gothic South" of Faulkner, the second of three children. Family life was far from happy. His mother was a puritan, shocked by anything to be with sex and alcohol. She used to read aloud to them from Dickens. She was gentle and protective. She was from a New England background. She was rather quiet and possessive, demonstrating a tremendous attachment to her children. While his father was a traveling salesman, violent and aggressive, frequently away from the family

home. He came from Southern cavalier stock. These two types persist in his writing representing two poles of experiences and two responses to the pressures of the private and public world. He loved but pitied his mother. He feared but was awed by his father.

The happiness of his childhood was disturbed by two incidents which left deep psychological scars on him. In a fit petulance he called their affectionate Negro nurse Ozzie a derogatory name. She left home and never to return. He was haunted by a feeling of guilt for many years. Then, he caught diphtheria when he was five. It left him paralysed in both legs and with a weak constitution.

By the age of ten he had read most of his grandfather's library and began to write stories at the age of twelve, prompted by the success of a school essay on The Lady of Shallott.

When he was thirteen, the family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis into "perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structures". He felt alien. It suggests that Williams' sense of alienation was partly the product of a social world unresponsive his sensibility and partly a willed act. He found it is difficult to adjust the ugliness of urban life with its glaring differences between the rich and the poor.

In the South we had never been conscious of the fact that we were economically less fortunate than others. We lived as well as anyone else. But in St. Louis we suddenly discovered that there were two kinds of people the rich and the poor and we belonged to the latter...If I had been born to this situation I might not have resented it deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and a rebellion that has grown into an inherent part of my work' (Nelson in Bigsby).

His drama sustains this division, sometimes, as in his earliest work, externalised as social and political conflict, sometimes internalised as a battle within the sensibility will and imagination, the lure of the material and social. It operates at the level of fact and symbol.

At the age of eighteen, he first became aware of his homosexuality, but he repressed it. For two years he attended the university of Missouri, wrote some poetry and won some prizes. The depression forced him to leave his study. His father withdrew him and forced him to work for a while in a shoe factory. After work he wrote unsaleable short stories and poetry.

He continued his study at Washington University in St. Louis for a year, and he completed it at the University of Iowa, receiving his B.A in 1938 as a drama major. He joined the Works Progress Administration Writer's Project, firstly in Chicago then in New Orleans, but failed to qualify. He changed his name to Tennessee and worked as a writer. The name Tennessee recalled the Williams family expe -

rience fighting Indians

He began his career with the pities of the age, believing that the world could be re-made by the moral sensibility and the political change could shape an environment in which innocence and survive and the spiritually delicate be protected. He confessed that in his early reading he was drawn to the romances of Walter Scott and the more violent plays of Shakespeare - Titus Adrinus being a particular favourite. He himself recognized "an atmosphere of hysteria and violent" in his work but tended to see it as a product of his own fear of the fragility and danger personal relationship. He discovered writing as an escape from a world of reality in which he felt acutely uncomfortable. It became his place of retreat, his cave, his refuge.

His first sign of his talent was recognised came with a story called Can a wife Be a Good Sport? that won the third prize in a Smat Set competition when he was sixteen, and the publication of a gothic story in weird Tales Magazine. Yeats and Rilke were his favourite writers. He also recognised something in Chekhov's study of a culture caught at a moment of change that reflected his own ambiguous response to Southern society. His favourite poem was Keats Ode to a Nightingale.

His first play was produced when he was twenty

four and staying with his grandfather in Memphis. Cairo ! Shanghai ! Bombay!, a comedy about two sailors on shore leave, was produced by the Rose Arbor. His second produced play was The Magic Tower, performed late in 1936. It gave way to the politically engaged material which he wrote for the Mummies. His first piece for them was a brief pacific drama entitled Headlines, designed to accompany their production of Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead. Perhaps the most substantial of these was Candles to the Sun written between 1936 and 1937.

In January, 1940, two associates of the Theatre Guild, Theresa Helburn and John Gassner, gave him a scholarship to their advanced playwright's seminar where he wrote Battle of Angles. The play proved to be a failure. It reappeared in revised form about twelve years later entitled Orpheus Descending.

In 1943, Awards from the American Academy, the Rockefeller Fellowship, and a six - month Hollywood contract gave him the opportunity to write The Glass Menagerie. The performance of Ms Taylor as the mother and Julie Haydon as the daughter made the play one of the highest achievements of the twentieth - century American theatre. It had run of 561 performance and won the Drama Critics Award.

Even more successful was his Streetcar Named Desi-

re in 1947. Performed by Vivien Leigh in England and by Jessica Tandy and Marlon Brando in America, won the prize Pulitzer Prize and many other awards. Others plays by Tennessee Williams that gave him an international reputation are Summer and Smoke, The Rose Tattoo, Camino Real, Sweet Bird of Youth, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof and The Night of the Iguana. He also published a novel The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone, which was presented as a film by Vivien Leigh in 1961, some poetry such as Lament for Moths, Beanstalk Country, Intimations, two volumes of short stories, A Portrait of a Girl in Glass and The Resemblance of a Case and a Coffin, a volume of one -act plays, Potrait of a Madonna.

The most important literary influences upon him - for the better or the worse - have been D.H. Lawrence and Anton Chekhov. From Lawrence he acquired an obsessive interest in the part of sex plays in human lives and a regard for the spiritual significance of trivial events and the importance of mood in a play. From Chekhov he appears to have derived his concern with "the tragedy of incomprehension" - that is, with the inability of people to understand one another.

Tennessee Williams died on 25 February 1983, in an ironic accident which all too accurately summed up a quarter of a century of self - inflicted suffering.

CHAPTER IV

AN ANALYSIS OF AMANDA'S CHARACTER AND HER ILLUSION