5-1974

An Analysis of the Themes of Guilt and Atonement in the Writings of Tennessee Williams

James Curry

Curry,

James D.

1974

AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES OF GUILT AND ATONEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of Speech and Theatre

Western Kentucky University

Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

James D. Curry

May, 1974

AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES OF GUILT AND ATONEMENT IN
THE WRITINGS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Recommended by 4-24-74
(Date)

Mildred Howard
Director of Thesis

William E. Leonard

Landrum Lipsco

Lee Mitchell

Approved 5-7-74
(Date)

Elmer Gray
Dean of the Graduate College

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest appreciation is extended to Dr. Mildred Howard for her assistance and guidance in this study. Also I appreciate greatly the help and cooperation received from Dr. William Leonard, Dr. Randall Capps and Dr. Lee Mitchell.

J.D.C.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

AN ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES OF GUILT AND ATONEMENT IN THE WRITINGS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

James D. Curry May 1972 116 pages

Directed by: Mildred Howard, William Leonard, Randall Capps, and Lee Mitchell

Department of Speech and Theatre Western Kentucky University

The themes of guilt and atonement have been analyzed in selected writings of Tennessee Williams. Research concerning these two themes has been developed simultaneously with Williams's concept of the universe and man. Many of Williams's characters seek a form of atonement or purification for their guilt which has arisen due to their "incompletions and unnatural desires." Williams's basic concept concerning the universe is that it is fragmented, a universe not completed by its Creator. Consequently, Williams envisions man and his nature to be likewise incomplete. It is this incompletion in man which causes him to have "unnatural desires," labeled as such, according to Williams, because society has made them so. Many of Williams's characters seek atonement for their desires and sins by one of two forms: (1)violent death, (2)mental laceration. Williams's characters who choose violent death generally do so because they feel their lives are so corrupted that only something as tormenting as death can cleanse them. The second form of atonement is the open confrontation of one's sins and true nature to the world with the hope of cleansing one's conscience. This second form of atonement is the one Williams himself seems to be presently undergoing. He is openly admitting his past

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams, now recognized as one of the most talented of contemporary American playwrights, has nevertheless, always aroused a great deal of discussion from literary critics. Williams's dramatic writings have earned for him many awards such as the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Award, and The American Academy of Arts and Letters' Gold Medal Award for Drama, in the United States, and his reputation as a dramatist has been recognized throughout the world. Since his earliest endeavors Williams has written vivid portraits of life as he sees it. The styles of writing in his works range from stark realism to detailed symbolism, from simple narrative to highly involved stylistic writing, in which he presents diverse characters, settings, and themes: characters ranging from Southern aristocrats to sadistic and masochistic misfits; settings, some located in small Mississippi towns, some in the countryside of New Mexico, others along the coast of Sicily; and themes extending from loneliness and mendacity to cannibalism.

It is with thematic concern that this research is to evolve. Direct, traceable themes such as man's

search for his idenity, his search for truth, appearance versus reality, sexual inadequacy, guilt, and man's search for salvation are apparent throughout Williams's writings, in his short stories as well as in his plays. The specific purpose of this thesis will be to trace two of his themes, those of guilt and atonement. Williams's conception of life and mankind includes the belief that man is less than perfect, less than whole or "complete;" "complete" is used in the sense that man neither lacks nor desires more in life than that which he already possesses; to be "incomplete" implies just the opposite. This lack may be physical, as in the case of the crippled Laura in The Glass Menagerie, or emotional as with Sebastian Venable in Suddenly Last Summer. Williams's Judge in The Purification states this idea quite specifically: "It is the lack of what he desires most keenly that twists a man out of nature."[1] The attention Williams gives to individual incompleteness is focused primarily, as is his attention in the bulk of his writing, on the sexual aspects of this lack.

In further explicating the theory of incompleteness, Williams maintains that all people who are incomplete, whatever the area, suffer from guilt; this guilt is manifested because of the hesitancy of these individuals to reveal their incompetencies to others. Hypocrisy is

---

[1]Tennessee Williams, The Purification, in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton(New York: New Directions, Inc., 1945), p. 56.

the basic underlying cause of this incompleteness; people live dual lives, knowing their true feelings and desires, yet at the same time wearing masks in order to hide and conceal their inadequacies, which may be because society or religious movements have made them do so.

The theme of guilt is tied closely to that of atonement, the means by which man may sacrifice himself in some way and cleanse himself from the guilt feelings he has developed. Not all of Williams's characters choose to seek such atonement; only those who truly seek tranquility will risk purification. The atonement theme is clearly expressed or defined by Williams in "Desire and the Black Masseur" as "the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby clearing one's self of his guilt."[2] This idea is not original with Williams; over two thousand years ago Sophocles had Oedipus seek atonement for his sins or inadequacies by violence, by stabbing out his eyes.

The purpose of this study will be to provide a detailed analysis of the themes of guilt and atonement as found in the literary works, both short stories and dramas, of Tennessee Williams. This will be dealt with in separate sections and chapters devoted to (1)Williams's

---

[2]Tennessee Williams, "Desire and the Black Masseur," in One Arm and Other Stories (New York: New Directions, 1948), p. 85.

short stories, (2) his one-act plays, (3) his full-length plays. The first section of this study will focus on Williams's shorter works which have not been given a great deal of attention by critics and scholars, but are fundamental in that they serve as precedents for his later works and are necessary for fully understanding Williams's thematic development. The idea that man is not complete and is compelled to conceal this incompletion is established early in Williams's writings. Many of his short stories and one-act plays clearly incorporate the themes of guilt and atonement; these themes are most explicitly set forth in the story, "Desire and the Black Masseur" from One Arm and Other Stories. A separate chapter will concentrate on this short story because it serves as a manifesto, establishing Williams's concept of the nature of man. Examined closely in the first part of this study will be specific works dealing with guilt and atonement which come from three collections: Hard Candy, a short story collection; 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, a collection of thirteen one-act plays; and American Blues, a collection of five one-act plays.

Williams's major writings continue to show man's struggle to atone for the imperfections in the world and in himself. The Wingfields in The Glass Menagerie, Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, Alma in Summer and Smoke, Brick in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, and Sebastian in Suddenly

Last Summer are a few of the characters who exhibit desire, guilt feelings, and atonement, and therefore warrant considerable examination. More attention is given to these themes in Williams's later writings, specifically Sweet Bird of Youth, The Night of the Iguana, and Suddenly Last Summer. In these works Williams tends to stress most emphatically his belief that atonement is tremendously difficult to achieve and that it calls for painful sacrifice. Hannah Jelkes in The Night of the Iguana best expresses this point:

> Who wouldn't like to suffer and atone for the sins of himself and the world if it could be done in a hammock with ropes instead of nails, on a hill that's so much lovelier than Golgotha, the place of the Skull, Mr. Shannon? There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in that hammock---no nails no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon?[3]

This explication of the guilt and atonement themes will undoubtedly call for detail character study; the characters' incompletions and the reasons for them will necessitate close analysis. Their past and present experiences will need to be studied thoroughly in order to understand their feelings of guilt and their consequent search for atonement. Man's guilt exists, according to Williams, because the universe is incomplete and man is part of this fragmented universe; likewise, it is man's nature to devise "makeshift arrangements"

---

[3]Tennessee Williams, The Night of the Iguana (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 96.

to cover his incompletions. Williams has said: "People erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by having to live lies."[4] It is this concealing of inner desires that brings about guilt, and this can only be removed by some form of atonement. Atonement for incompletions must always involve suffering. Williams's characters suffer in different ways: by violence, as in the case of Anthony Burns in "Desire and the Black Masseur;" by death as in the case of Eloi in Auto-Da-Fe and Sebastian in Suddenly Last Summer; and by mental laceration, as in the case of Brick Pollictt in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, who admits openly that his disgust with his wife and with the mendacity in the world is really disgust with himself and his true nature. His atonement was to come to terms with his incompletions, to admit that his relationship with a friend was something much less than ideal, and to cast off his "makeshift" masks of lies and alcohol. This latter form of atonement involves suffering but not as much as atonement by violence and death. It is this writer's contention that Williams himself is presently undergoing the latter method of atonement, mental atonement. He, too, is admitting his incompletions, suffering society's estrangements, and cleansing himself of guilt, personal guilt that is synonymous with the guilt of many of his characters. Consequently, this study will investigate Williams's use of the themes of

---

[4]Anonymous, "Tennessee Williams," New York Herald Tribune, March 3, 1957, p. 9.

guilt and atonement, will attempt to analyze his characters who are enmeshed in guilt, and will attempt to show a relationship between Williams's own guilt and atonement and that of his characters.

CHAPTER I
BACKGROUND

"The child is father of the man..."

Wordsworth
"My Heart Leaps Up When I Behold"

There seems to necessitate, always, an understanding of any writer's past and present life in order to grasp the dimension of his or her work. This is certainly so in the case of Tennessee Williams for he is without question a writer who uses his own experiences. His identification with certain characters in his writings is easily recognizable and Williams himself comments upon it. In regard to his latest acting effort in Small Craft Warnings, he says: "It wasn't Doc, the part I played, but Quentin, the homosexual, with whom I identified. Quentin's long speech was the very heart of my life, you know."[5] In the speech previously mentioned Williams speaks of his personal life through the character, Quentin:

> There's a coarseness, a deadening coarseness in the experience of most homosexuals. Their act of love is like the jabbing of a hypodermic needle to which they're addicted but which is more and more empty of real interest and surprise...Yes, once, quite a long while ago, I was often startled by the sense of being alive, of being myself, living! Present on earth, in the flesh, yes, for some completely mysterious reason, a single, separate, intensely conscious being, myself: living! Whenever I would feel

---

[5]C. Robert Jennings, "Tennessee Williams," Playboy, March, 1973, p. 73.

> this feeling, this shock of what?...self-realization? ...I would be stunned, I would be thunderstruck by it...I suppose it was like an epileptic seizure, except that I didn't fall to the ground in convulsions. One time I drove into the mountains and smashed the car into the tree; in a forest you'll sometimes see a giant tree several hundred years old, that's scarred, that's blazed by lightning, and the wound is almost obscured by the obstinately still living and growing bark. I wonder if such a tree has learned the same lesson that I have, not to feel astonishment any more but just go on, continue for two or three hundred years more?[6]

Identification with certain people and beliefs comes primarily from the influence of childhood. We become in later life a product of the experiences we have had and the relationships we have encountered in childhood.

Since Williams's early childhood he has been plagued by those who would have him be something more than he is or can be. In spite of these attacks he has continually transplanted his personal travels and childhood experiences into drama filled with sympathy and emotion for those who share with him a "broken world."

Most of Williams's writings, this writer contends, are autobiographical. His themes such as loneliness, guilt, incompletion, atonement, and search for idenity are as much a part of his life as the places and people of whom he writes. Persons close to Williams agree. The late playwright, William Inge, once said in an interview with Mike Steen:

---

[6]Tennessee Williams, Small Craft Warnings (New York: New Directions, 1972), pp. 46-47.

> All art comes out of life. We know that. Even fantasy comes out of life. The surrealistic comes out of life too. But yes, I think that I have seen in just about all of Tennessee's plays some connection, remote or otherwise, between the work and his life.[7]

Irving Rapper, a well known film director and friend of Tennessee Williams has spoken similarly:

> I have always felt everything he has written is autobiographical. I think there is as much of Blanche DuBois in his personality as there is Stanley Kowalski. I think he can be refined and sensitive like Blanche DuBois and I think Tennessee can be just as vulgar, and gauche and insensitive as Stanley Kowalski, on occasion.[8]

One of the people closest to Williams, his mother, Edwina Williams, has explained his childhood influences in this way:

> Tom's youth does explain, I feel his deep interest in and sympathy with people trapped in emotional tragedy, like Blanche in Streetcar and Brick in Cat. I am sure Tom felt at his wit's end many a time, hemmed in by disaster, just like the characters he created.[9]

In scanning Williams's childhood we find that he was born in a small hospital in Columbus, Mississippi, on Palm Sunday, March 26, 1911; this is contrary to many reports of his birth as being in the rectory of St. Paul's Church of that city. He was the second child born to

---

[7]Mike Steen, A Look At Tennessee Williams (New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1969), p. 98.

[8]Ibid., p. 38.

[9]Edwina D. Williams, Remember Me To Tom (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1963), p. 13.

Cornelius and Edwina Dakin Williams. Although christened Thomas Lanier Williams, he later changed his name to Tennessee Williams. He gave several reasons for doing so, one of which was because his ancestors fought successfully in military battles in Tennessee. "Tennessee" was also the name his friends at the University of Iowa gave him. They knew that he was from the South, but when they could not remember Mississippi, they settled on Tennessee. Still another reason Williams has given is that Thomas Lanier Williams sounds too much like William Lyon Phelps and no one could be successful with a name such as that.[10]

The first eight years of childhood were rather pleasant for Tom Williams, at least in comparison to his later years. Williams has one sister, Rose, who is a few years older than he, and a younger brother, Dakin. Williams,his mother, and his sister lived with his mother's parents in various parsonages throughout the South. The most important people in Williams's early life were his mother, his grandfather, his sister, and Ozzie, a Negro servant.[11]

Williams was very fond of his grandfather, Reverend Edwin Dakin, with whom he traveled, visiting the sick and lonely in and around Columbus, Mississippi. Many of the people Williams and his grandfather visited made

---

[10] Ibid., p. 16.

[11] Ibid.

lasting impressions on Williams and they appear in his writing, most often as lonely and pathetic misfits.[12] Williams loved and cared for his grandfather all of his life. He kept in touch through letters while in school, and after he became a successful playwright he had his grandfather visit him often, especially at Key West, a place which both he and Reverend Dakin enjoyed. The two traveled extensively together, even after Reverend Dakin was ninety years of age.[13] It was their early travel however, that influenced Williams's writing. Edwina Williams recalls that her son based his heroine in his first professional play, Battle of Angels, on a young lady he and his grandfather visited. This lady was a thin, sickly woman who always managed to smile despite her anemic condition. She was like many Southerners Williams and his grandfather chanced to meet on their daily visits.[14]

Tennessee Williams's sister, Rose, was and is one of the most cherished people in his life. Her influence on Williams is evident in his personal life as well as in his writings. She has proven to be the inspiration for Laura in The Glass Menagerie and resemblances of her appear again in Williams's other characters, such as Elena in The Purification and Holly in Suddenly Last Summer. When Williams was born, Rose resented her baby brother for a time and

---

[12]Jean Gould, Modern American Playwrights(New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1966), p. 225.

[13]Edwina Williams, p. 21.

[14]Ibid., p. 16.

would say to her mother, "how could you do this to me?"[15] However, this attitude soon passed and she and her brother became exceedingly close. Rose was always faster in acquiring knowledge than her brother, a fact Tom Williams could not accept at the time. He would pull her hair and scream "she's too proud of herself." He wrote a poem some years later about this:

> My sister was quicker at everything than I.
> At five she could say the multiplication
> tables with barely a pause for breath, while I
> employed with frames of colored beads in
> kindy garten.[16]

Williams attended kindergarten at the age of three, shortly after the family had moved to Nashville, Tennessee. He refused to stay at school without his mother, a dependency which started early in life and continued throughout childhood. Williams, in comparison to his sister, was very stable. Rose became overdramatic about most everything, distorting reality at every chance. This overdramatization was to prove disastrous to her in later life.[17] Every childhood sickness which Williams caught he passed on to Rose; when the doctor came to call Williams would say,"I'm fine, Doctor," but Rose would groan and play the actress, "I'm dying, Doctor! Do something, I'm dying."[18] His mother has said: "What saved Tom, perhaps, was his humor, always

---

[15] Ibid., p. 20.

[16] Ibid., pp. 17-18.

[17] Ibid., p. 21.

[18] Ibid., p. 22.

a part of him. Rose never possessed a sense of humor and she could not save herself."[19] Rose displayed plenty of temper and spirit while her brother was most always quiet and calm, which certainly does not help to explain the violence in his plays. Tennessee Williams recalls these years:

> My sister and I were gloriously happy. We sailed boats in wash-tubs of water, cut lovely paper dolls out of huge mail-order catalogs, kept two white rabbits under the back porch, baked mud pies in the sun upon the front walk, climbed up and slid down the big wood pile, collected from neighboring alleys and trash piles bits of colored glass...And in the evenings, when the moonlight streamed over our beds, before we were asleep, our Negro nurse Ozzie, as warm and black as the moonless Mississippi night, would lean over our beds, telling in a low, rich voice her amazing tales about foxes and bears and rabbits and wolves that behaved like human beings.[20]

Williams and his sister's relationship was ideal in his eyes until one day something happened to change it. He explains the change that took place in a short story, "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin:"

> My sister moved before me into that country of mysterious differences where children grow up. Either there was no explanation or none was permitted between one departing and the one left behind; one day she was escorted to the kitchen table for breakfast as though she were in danger of toppling over on either side... She was addressed in hushed and solicitous voices...I was baffled and a little disgusted; I received no attention at all, and the one or two glances given me by my sister had a peculiar look of resentment in them...I spoke several

---

[19] Ibid., p. 19.

[20] Ibid.

> times, but for some reason she ignored all my remarks.[21]

Rose's moving from childhood into adolescence was terrifying for Tom Williams because he had no friends outside the family. He always played alone with Rose because other children frightened him with their harsh looks and their name calling. Williams later said that his mother and grandmother did not seem to realize what this change in Rose had done to him. Her withdrawal from his life led indirectly to Williams's career; he started writing as a means of escape.[22]

Another influential childhood acquaintance was a Negro servant, Ozzie, whom Williams adored. Ozzie played with Rose and him as if she too were a child. She would sit and tell stories in her own style, but similar in some aspects to those of Joel Chandler Harris's hero, Uncle Remus. Ozzie disappeared one day, and when she returned a few days later she was badly beaten. She left again soon thereafter and was never seen again by any of the Williamses. This must have made a strong impression on Tom, the child. He said that she left because he had been rude to her and in a moment of anger called her a "nigger."[23] This close friendship with Ozzie may well have influenced his later relationships with blacks. He said recently, "Key West once

---

[21] Ibid., p. 19.

[22] Tennessee Williams, "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," in Hard Candy (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 82.

[23] Edwina Williams, p. 19.

had the most beautiful people I've ever met in my life, mostly blacks. When the two races intergrate, we shall have the most physically and spiritually beautiful race in the world."[24]

Mrs. Williams and her children moved from Nashville, Tennessee, to Clarksdale, Mississippi, where Tom came down with diptheria, a disease which caused him trouble throughout his childhood. He was five at the time and there were no drugs, few hospitals, and a scarcity of children's doctors. The disease affected his kidneys, and his legs were paralyzed which hindered him from running and playing normally. The next three years that followed were spent indoors, playing with the girls in the neighborhood.[25]

Another person who strongly influenced Tennessee Williams was his father. This influence however, was somewhat indirect, and anything but favorable. Tom Williams's father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, was a telephone employee in his early life, and later a shoe salesman. He was not a pleasant man, at least not to Tom and Rose; he never seemed to understand their feelings and their needs. The first eight years of Tom Williams's life were spent mostly without his father. Cornelius Williams traveled a great deal during these years; consequently, Tom and Rose saw little of him, only once every two or three weeks, and then for only a few hours.

---

[24]Jennings, p. 76.

[25]Edwina Williams, p. 23.

Tennessee Williams has described his father in this way:

> He was a big man. Beside the slight, gentle figure of my grandfather, he looked awfully big. And it was not a benign bigness. You wanted to shrink away from it, to hide yourself.[26]

Cornelius Williams resented the fact that his son was not like other boys. Mr. Williams could not accept his son's sensitive nature nor his failure to be an athlete. Mrs. Williams, afraid to permit her son to play with neighboring children, also contributed to her son's personality, one which became "sissified" and "delicate."[27] His illness intensified his introspection and his amusements became more private and isolated, except for his relationship with Rose. He seldom saw anyone other than his immediate family, each of whom represented to him an imaginative personage: his grandfather and grandmother represented "kindness" and "aristocracy;" his sister represented ideal beauty and fragility; his mother was seen as his protector and provider; and his father represented the enemy or foe who was to be avoided. Cornelius Williams scoffed at his son's preference for reading and going to the movies with Rose. Mr. Williams only increased his son's sense of guilt and frustration over his failures by calling him an effeminate name, "Miss Nancy."[28] Friction mounted little by little

---

[26] Ibid., pp. 24-26.

[27] Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Works (New York: Oblensky, 1961), p. 5.

[28] Ibid.

between the two; Mrs. Williams always sided with her son against his father which only made their relationship worse. Tennessee Williams once said that the only time during his early childhood that he heard his mother sing was when his father left on a two or three weeks' sales trip.[29] Cornelius Williams was most unkind to his family during Tom and Rose's childhood. He drank excessively, gambled a great deal, was mean-tempered, and extremely stingy in providing essential household money. He was equally reluctant to buy clothes and shoes for Tom and his sister. Recently Tennessee Williams, recalling his thoughts and feelings for his father at that time, said simply, "I hated him."[30]

Most of the turmoil of Tom Williams's childhood occurred after his father moved the family from the South to St. Louis. Tom Williams was eight years old at the time and the sudden change of having his father around everyday was too much for him and his sister. The two had been accustomed to only one man around the house and that was the Reverend Dakin who was just the opposite of Cornelius Williams. Tennessee Williams writes about this period of change in his life:

> Home is where you hang your childhood.
> My grandfather was a clergyman; he was
> a kind man. He was soft spoken and gentle.
> Somehow he created about the whole house
> an atmosphere of sweetness and light.

---

[29] Ibid., p. 6.

[30] Ibid., p. 8.

> Everyone in the house seemed to be under his spell. It was a spell of perfect peace. There were no angry scenes, no hard words spoken. But when my father came to the house things were different. Then the spell was broken. A loud voice was heard, and heavy footsteps. Doors were slammed. Furniture was kicked and banged...[31]

Cornelius Williams soon came to taunt Rose as much as he did Tom which eventually led to Rose's breakdown.[32] A few years later, while discussing violence with her psychiatrist, Rose said: "A common truck driver is more of a gentleman than my father."[33] Mr. Williams was upset that Rose was clinging to and accumulating glass animals in adolescence, a hobby she had not discarded from childhood and a useless one her father thought.[34]

After Cornelius Williams moved his family to St. Louis, and took a non-traveling position in a shoe factory, conditions became almost unbearable for Tom, his sister, and his mother. Tom Williams spent the first years in St. Louis clinging to his mother and his sister, avoiding his father whenever possible. His father's coarse presence frightened him and he came to regard him with fear and disgust. He was trapped in a city which was horrid in comparison to the South:

---

[31]Edwina Williams, p. 26.

[32]Gould, p. 228.

[33]Edwina Williams, p. 58.

[34]Gould, p. 228.

> In the South we had never been conscious of the fact that we were economically less fortunate than others. But in St. Louis we suddenly discovered 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 have not resented it deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and a rebellion that has grown into an inherent part of my work.[35]

The Williams's home in St. Louis was similar to the one depicted in The Glass Menagerie, though in actuality it was probably not as somber and depressing as the fictional Wingfield apartment. Tom Williams and his sister painted the walls and the furniture of the rooms white, added white curtains and shelves and displayed a collection of glass animals---all in an attempt to make the sunless room which overlooked a dead-end alley not quite as mournful and somber. Williams recalls the importance of their glass menagerie, important in what it represented to sensitive people like Rose and him:

> Those little glass animals came to represent in my memory all the softest emotions that belong to recollections of things past. They stood for all the small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive. The area where the cats were torn to pieces was one thing---my sister's white curtains and tiny menagerie of glass were another. Somewhere between them was the world that we lived in.[36]

---

[35]Nelson, p. 7.

[36]Lincoln Barnett, "Tennessee Williams," Life (February 16, 1949), p. 118.

Childhood experiences at Eugene Field Public School had a marked influence on Tennessee Williams. There he became even more bitter toward St. Louis and its people. Even today Williams says he can not say one pleasant thing about the city. Children in grade school were most cruel to him. They made fun of his Southern accent and manners, and called him names, one of which was "sissy;" he was sensitive and would not take part in games. He pleaded to quit school because of this unpleasantness but was not allowed to do so. As a result of his early school encounters, and also because of his father's criticism, Williams became afraid of boys, and men in general. Williams has said: "I was scared to death of everyone on earth and particularly of public school boys and public school principals...public school kept stabbing at my guts till I wanted, as old as I was, to sit down and cry."[37] Williams's early autobiographical story, "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," depicts his childhood as one plagued by rough boys who were always hitting, kicking, and abusing him, referring to him as a preacher and delighting in asking him obscene questions, which Williams contends embarrassed him "to the point of nausea."[38] The result of such opposition was fear which has been a dominant feature in many of Williams's characters. He creates characters who are afraid to face the terror

---

[37]Edwina Williams, p. 30.

[38]Tennessee Williams, "Resemblance," p. 82.

of reality--as he was--compensating for their fear by retreating to make-believe worlds of illusion. For Williams this retreat in childhood was to paper dolls, books, and movies; later it was to writing, the one escape which still gives Williams his release from fear and frustration. "Having always to contend with this adversary of fear...gave me a certain tendency toward an atmosphere of hysteria and violence in my writing, an atmosphere that has existed in it since the beginning."[39] Fear, to this day, dominates Williams and his writing. In his recent two-character play, Out Cry, his characters discuss the fear within themselves and its impact on their moment-by-moment reactions to life. At one point the sister exclaims: "To play with fear is to play with fire..." The brother replies: "No, fear is worse...[40] Williams has said that Out Cry is a history of his own predicament, a desire to "cry out" for understanding and help.[41]

At the age of twelve, Tennessee Williams launched his writing career. His first efforts were poems, vignettes, sketches and short stories. Not until several years later did he embark upon playwrighting. His first effort was an essay on the subject "Can a Good Wife Be A Good Sport?" which appeared in the magazine, Smart Set. Williams wrote

---

[39]Tennessee Williams, "Foreword" to Sweet Bird of Youth (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. viii.

[40]Jennings, p.80.

[41]Ibid.

the essay in first person, using the woman as author. He concluded that "yes" a wife definitely could be a good sport. His father, Cornelius Williams, thought the essay disgusting, and considered it just another effeminate gesture on the part of "Miss. Nancy."[42]

High School experiences fared little better than those of grade school for Williams. The only meaningful relationship from those years was with Hazel Kramer, a young girl whom Williams considers his great female love. She proved to be the inspiration for Williams's short story, "The Field of Blue Children." However, he describes her as being frigid and puritanical; these things kept their relationship from developing into a lasting one. Their relationship was further inhibited due to Cornelius Williams's influence. Tennessee Williams and Hazel Kramer had planned to attend the University of Missouri in the spring of 1930; however, Cornelius Williams disapproved of the developing romance and, despite his personal opinions of his son, he felt the girl not good enough for him. Hazel Kramer lived with her grandfather, an employee at the International Shoe Company, who was subordinate to Cornelius Williams. Mr. Williams took advantage of his position and informed Hazel's grandfather that unless he persuaded his granddaughter to attend another school, his own job would be in jeopardy. As a result of this demand Hazel's grand-

---

[42]Nelson, p. 15.

father enrolled her at the University of Wisconsin. Tom Williams was furious, but he could do nothing to remedy the situation; his father had once again succeeded in destroying him as an individual. This action appeared somewhat contradictory in view of Cornelius Williams's previous protest about his son's effeminate actions; however, Mr. Williams saw the relationship as nothing but another instance of his son's sissiness. He saw the relationship as one similar to many he had seen earlier between Tom and his childhood girlfriends or playfriends, and not a mature romance. Frustrated and angry, Tennessee Williams attended the University of Missouri for two years, until 1932, when his father withdrew him. His father did so for economic reasons, fearing that he might be engulfed in poverty if economic conditions continued to worsen. The underlying reason for withdrawing his son from school was his displeasure with him for failing courses in military science. Mr. Williams saw these failures as a disgrace to the Williams family, who had in the past produced several military leaders and heroes. Tennessee Williams was virtually forced to accept a position working at the shoe company where his father worked. He looked upon his new position in the business world as a "living death" and this traumatic experience influenced him to write about people trapped in similar day-to-day meaningless existences, like Tom in The Glass Menagerie. Once more Cornelius Williams had terminated

a meaningful experience for his son and had placed him into still another "season of hell" as Tennessee Williams now refers to it.[43] The influence of Cornelius Coffin Williams undoubtedly has been the strongest of all influences on his son. In totality, it seems that a combination of abnormal childhood experiences and his father's hatred for him, led Tennessee Williams to become guilt-ridden, emotionally unstable, and sexually frustrated.

In 1934 Williams escaped the horrors of his father and the International Shoe Company by both physically and mentally collapsing. His doctor insisted that he take ample time from work to recuperate; so he journeyed to the South, to Memphis, Tennessee, where he lived again with his grandparents in the rectory. There he began to experiment with his writing and as a result turned out his first play, a one-act drama entitled, Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay! In Memphis he became friends with Dorothy Shapiro, who was active in a little theatre called the Rose Arbor where his first play was produced. The thrill of seeing people react favorably to his writing was monumentally rewarding for him.[44]

After Williams's recuperation in Memphis, he returned to college, this time at Washington University in St. Louis.

---

[43]Donahue, pp. 7-8.

[44]Tom Buckley, "Tennessee Williams Survives," Atlantic Monthly, November, 1970, p. 102.

His grandmother now financed his education because his father still refused to help him. Tom Williams became friends with a group of student poets, and with their help and insistence he continued his playwrighting in which he became totally involved, giving little attention to his family. It was during this time that his sister was faced with a terrifying confusion, both mental and emotional, which Tennessee Williams ignored; consequently, he has always had guilt feelings about Rose and her predicament. In 1936, the parents made the big decision to allow the psychiatrists to perform a prefrontal lobotomy on Rose. Psychiatrists convinced Cornelius Williams that the only answer for Rose's condition was a lobotomy. They offered few alternatives, indicating that unless a lobotomy was performed Rose would probably spend the rest of her days a raving maniac in a padded cell. Mr. Williams was told that his daughter would never be well again but that with the operation she could, at least, be relatively calm and non-violent. The decision for this operation came, in part, because people, such as Cornelius Williams, did not accept nor understand mental illness and looked upon it as shameful. Tom Williams was not included in the decision, and to this day he feels that he failed his sister when she needed him most.[45] Mrs. Williams has speculated that without her brother Rose could not continue. "It was as though Tom's slight breakdown had

---

[45]Edwina Williams, p. 85.

destroyed the slender thread by which she had been hanging on to, a reality she could no longer grasp."[46] Rose is presently a patient in a sanitarium in Ossening, New York, where she is visited often by the playwright.[47]

There was undoubtedly more between Williams and his sister than that of a normal brother-sister relationship. Williams has devoted considerable attention to brother-sister relationships in his works. His mild treatment of a brother's love for his sister is seen in the playwright's most autobiographical play, The Glass Menagerie. The character Tom, suffers guilt from his inability to discard his love and affections for his sister:

> Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger--anything that can blow your candles out...[48]

Strong depictions of incestuous relationships are seen in The Purification, a play which centers around trial proceedings of a man who has had incestuous relations with his sister. Also in You Touched Me, Williams deals with a brother-sister romance, only in this particular play they are step-brother and step-sister, which, according to Williams, makes the big difference to society. Williams's latest

---

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid.

[48] Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 68.

play, Out Cry, involves an incestuous relationship between a brother and sister. Williams has said very little about the initial years of his sister's mental deterioration. He has recently made one statement, however, which leads one to speculate that Rose's lobotomy may have been encouraged because of her sexual feelings, but for whom he does not say: "I guess it was in 1936; it was a terrible operation. My mother gave permission to have it done while I was away. I think she was frightened by Rose's sexual fantasies, but y'know I think that's all they were--fantasies."[49]

Another major influence on Williams's writing has come from his extensive travels. Because he is a writer who uses his own experiences, he has drawn heavily from his early sojourns. The most significant have been his visits to the French Quarter in New Orleans in 1939, shortly after his graduation from college. He was virtually penniless at this time in his life and was forced to hock everything he had in order to survive. He had become a confirmed Bohemian by this time, and he went to work in a beanery where he rubbed shoulders with all kinds of people. New Orleans was filled with drink, sex, and revelry, and companions such as prostitutes, procurers, homosexuals, landladies, hoboes, sailors, gamblers, poets, and box car travelers--all fighting something in their natures which caused them to become twisted and broken.[50]

---

[49]Buckley, p. 98.

[50]Nelson, p. 39.

"There was a sampling of all who were too brave or too frightened, too pure or too corrupt, too angry or too gentle, too clear or too confused, to accept the peace and comfort of respectability."[51] Williams lived among these "night" people and developed for the first time in his life a true means of release. He gave way to his passions, desires, and frustrations. He rejected his past teachings and blended into this new world. He says, "I found the kind of freedom I had always needed, and the shock of it against the puritanism of my nature has given me a subject, a theme, which I have never ceased exploiting."[52]

Consequently, society's lower class became a major subject of Williams's writing. He has constantly proclaimed the needs and desires of the world's outcasts in his writing and he has shown explicitly the harm society has done to them. Williams depicts these early companions as human beings caught in quick sand, struggling hopelessly for some form of freedom. In his short play, Ten Blocks on The Camino Real, he writes of his purpose in specifying a scene, which is represenative not only of that one scene but for most of his writing:

> In this scene I am trying to catch the quality of really "tough" Americana of the comic sheets, the skid-row bars, cathouses, grade B movies, street-arabs, vagrants, drunks, pitch-men, gamblers,

---

[51] Donahue, p. 12.

[52] Ibid.

> whores, all the rootless, unstable and highly spirited life beneath the middle-class social level in the states.[53]

Many of the plays in American Blues and 27 Wagons Full of Cotton were written during his stay in the French Quarter and deal with his personal experiences there. Five of these plays were sent to a Group Theatre contest in New York just before he left New Orleans.

After a few months stay in New Orleans Williams journeyed West. He did so primarily because he felt his life was in danger if he remained in New Orleans. He had offended, unintentionally, some of the tenants who lived above him in his boardinghouse and one tenant in particular had taken to pouring boiling water through cracks in the floor with the hope of scalding Williams to death. He traveled West, joining forces with an itinerant musician who convinced Williams that his uncle owned a beautiful ranch in Southern California. The ranch, however, turned out to be nothing more than a run-down squab farm and Williams, with no other means of employment, took a job at the ranch as a feather picker. He was paid according to the number of feathers he dropped into a milk bottle, one for each squab picked. While Williams was at this occupation he received a notice from Harold Clurman, Irwin Shaw, and Molly Thacker Kazan of the Group Theatre telling him that he had been awarded one hundred dollars for his five one-act plays, American Blues. He immediately

---

[53]Tennessee Williams, Ten Blocks on the Camino Real in American Blues (New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1948), p. 58.

bought a used bicycle and with his musician friend journeyed South on a highway called the Camino Real, down to and across the Mexican border. There, for a few weeks, he lived with Mexican "cantinas" and their "clientele," until his funds were exhausted. Then he and his friend started back north, again traveling on the Camino Real. These adventures among Spanish speaking people have provided him with insight for characters and settings seen in later plays, especially Camino Real.[54]

In the summer of 1939, while returning from Mexico, Williams spent ten days without basic food. He had no money, not even postage money to write his grandmother for help. He managed to obtain an avacodo occasionally during this time which kept him functioning. In autumn of that year while at his mother's, he received a phone call from the agent, Audrey Wood, informing him that he had received a thousand-dollar grant in playwrighting from the Rockefeller Foundation. Immediately he went to New York and began rewriting a play, Battle of Angels, which was to be his first professionally produced play. It was presented in Boston by the Theatre Guild in 1940 but the production proved to be disastrous. Williams recalls that the critics and police censors regarded the play as equivalent to an invasion of the bubonic plague. He continued to rewrite the play but the idea of producing it again for the time being faded.

---

[54]Tennessee Williams, "Survival Notes: A Journal, Esquire, September, 1972, p. 131.

For the next three years Williams continued to write but with little success. He was sent to MGM studios in Hollywood where he wrote a script for Lana Turner, but it was rejected. He wrote one other script for the studio, The Gentleman Caller, and it, too, was refused. It was this latter script, however, which became The Glass Menagerie, that skyrocketed Williams to fame. Tennessee Williams's successful career was officially launched with the production of The Glass Menagerie which opened in Chicago, in 1944, and in New York the following year.[55]

In the years prior to Williams's success he became familiar with the writings of many playwrights. Among those writers who have had significant influence on Williams are D.H. Lawrence, Hart Crane, Anton Chekhov, and August Strindberg. Early in Williams's life he fell under the influence of Hart Crane, a nineteenth century American poet. Williams identified with the Bohemian aspects in Crane and he saw greatness in Crane's poetry, especially in its content and message. Williams acquired further identification with Crane because of the tragedy in Crane's family life; Williams's life was similarly tragic. Both Crane and Williams are artists in rebellion; both are writers who draw from their own experiences. Closely related to Crane's influence is that of the English writer, D.H. Lawrence. Lawrence lived more fully the life of an artist in revolt, rebelling

---

[55] Ibid.

primarily against the dictatorial rule of society, which has been Williams's foremost concern. Williams has borrowed heavily from Lawrence's concern with the sexually suppressed and from his use of uninhibited sexual relationships. Williams has recreated the last days of Lawrence's life in a short play, I Rise in Flame, Cried The Phoenix.[56] In responding to questions asked him about his influences, Williams has said: "D.H. Lawrence was influential, I think, but it was merely that I felt an identification with his view of life. I just felt we were getting at the same thing--a belief in the purity of sensual life...[57]

In contrast to Lawrence, Anton Chekhov, A Russian dramatist, influenced Williams's style of writing. Early in his writing career Williams read and carefully studied Chekhov's short stories and dramas. In Chekhov's works he saw unhappy, weak, and somewhat defeated characters depicted as both comic and tragic. In their unpleasant experiences these troubled characters come forth with human qualities that solicit the reader's sympathy. From Chekhov, Williams learned the importance of depicting the inner experiences and feelings of characters. He also learned the importance of atmosphere surrounding characters. Williams, like Chekhov, acquired a tolerance for human beings and a genuine concern for humanity, and he is indebted to Chekhov in the

---

[56]Donahue, pp. 213-214.

[57]Jim Gaines, "A Talk About Life and Style with Tennessee Williams," Saturday Review, April, 1972, p. 29.

subtle building of mood. The Glass Menagerie is considered by many scholars to be more than a little Chekhovian. It combines rather naturalistic detail with a hazy atmosphere, and depicts characters who are both comic and pathetic.[58]

Looking beyond Chekhov's influence one can see traces of Strindberg in Williams's writing. Strindberg's concern with psychological drama has also become Williams's concern. In Strindberg's plays, The Father and Miss Julie, he presents sharp psychological conflicts and allows his characters to be destroyed by their neuroses. Williams pursues similar conflicts; for example, Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire and Eloi in Auto-Da-Fe fall prey to destruction because of their magnified neurotic tendencies. Strindberg and Williams also share a common concern with pessimism, and both writers depict human existence as miserable.[59]

One further influence on Williams, which is worthy of consideration, is his religious background. Williams has referred to himself for several years now as a "rebellious" puritan. He grew up in the shadows of Episcopalian rectories in the South. Since early manhood, he has rebelled against religious conventions which, by that time, had become too much for him to bear. Episcopalian Christianity is forever attacked in Williams's works. His preachers and ministers are always viewed as rather silly or grotesque, never

---

[58]Donahue, p. 216.

[59]Ibid.

assuming any real stature and dignity. Williams has recently said that although he has, without question, a reputation for being immoral, that within he is the most puritanical of persons, and he insists that being such a puritan has caused him to exaggerate guilt.[60] Williams's guilt, in part, arises from his lack of reverence and concern for the religious beliefs of his family, especially those of his grandfather, the Reverend Dakin, one of the few people who ever really attempted to understand him. The fact that he worshipped his grandfather has not helped Williams to resolve his own psychological dilemma.

D.H. Lawrence has commented that guilt is the residue of a puritan heritage, and because of the influential puritan movement in America guilt has become one of the most persistent themes in American literature. Lawrence further states that few Americans have grown up without feeling the pain and pressures which the American Puritan and Victorian Heritage have exerted on them.[61] Williams's characters vividly attest to this premise; his women are tormented and deeply ambivalent, and his men are emotionally, if not literally castrated, by their guilt. These inhibitions have arisen from a failure to conform to the unescapable standards of a society which has its roots in puritanism.[62] Many of

---

[60]Jennings, p. 72.

[61]Jackson, p. 80.

[62]William Taylor, ed., Modern American Drama: Essays in Criticism (Deland Florida: Edwards Inc., 1968), p. 75.

Williams's puritanical pressures center around sexual repressions which cause his characters to suspect that the flesh is the basic cause of evil behavior. Williams states in an autobiographical story: "I came to associate the sensual with the impure..."[63] American character is made up of a psychological repression of forces, which make people live uncomfortably.[64] These forces fail to resolve themselves because man continually suppresses his true and recognizable desires, and clutches to society's social and religious standards.

Williams expresses well his revolt against his religious background through Big Daddy in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof: "I let many chances slip by because of scruples about it[sexual desire-ed.], scruples, conventions--crap--all that stuff is bull, bull, bull!"[65] Williams visualizes Big Daddy as a man who, facing death, now looks back on life and sees all the things he could have enjoyed if he had not clung to conventions and standards that were expected of him. Williams, today, has expressed similar thoughts concerning his own life. In discussing his early sexual relationships he maintains that his "coming out" was too late in life; he repressed too many opportunities for relationships which might well have developed into lasting

---

[63]Tennessee Williams, "Resemblance," p. 93.

[64]Jackson, p. 80.

[65]Tennessee Williams, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (New York: New Directions, 1954), p. 93.

and meaningful experiences if it had not been for his puritanical upbringing.[66]

Williams and his characters, for the most part, are torn between the "godseeking impulse" and the pull of physical desire. Desire is generally connected with the carnal and thus, according to society, is corrupt. His characters are destroyed by poison which pours from this desire. They suffer from lacerations which are the result of the desires of their souls and bodies being in conflict. Williams's characters, like Williams himself, are struggling between two forces, one which tells them to rebel and accept their desires as normal, and another which pressures them to hold strong to the moral and religious values they have inherited.[67]

Consequently, the works of Tennessee Williams have become, most decidedly, a product of personal experiences and influences, some pleasant, some bitter, with an unfortunate majority of the latter. Williams, like many playwrights, expresses his personal likes and dislikes through his characters. His works are highly autobiographical. With close observation one finds a vast amount of material in Williams's drama which can be traced to some direct influence, influence primarily from youthful experiences, religious background, and other writers. Williams's total dramatic scope reveals the fears, sorrows, and burdens of a world closely allied to Williams's

---

[66] Jennings, p. 72.

[67] Harold Clurman, "Tennessee Williams: Poet and Puritan," New York Times, March 29, 1970, p. 11.

own life. In his drama Williams incorporates the influences on his childhood, a domineering father-son relationship, his strange travels, his love for his sister, and his revolt from a conventional religious background; only through careful analysis of these influences in Williams's life can a real understanding of his work and his aims be acquired.

CHAPTER II

AN ANALYSIS OF "DESIRE AND THE BLACK MASSEUR"

> I think for some uncertain reason,
> mercy will be shown this season
> to the lovely and misfit,
> to the brilliant and deformed.
>
> I think they will be housed and warmed
> and fed and comforted awhile
> before, with such a tender smile,
> the earth destroys her crooked child.
>
> Tennessee Williams
> In The Winter of Cities

Williams's most obvious establishment of his theory of human guilt and atonement is in one of his earliest works, "Desire and the Black Masseur," a short story in a collection of stories under the title, One Arm. The importance of this one writing to the understanding of Williams's concept of the universe and man's relationship to it is so great that it merits special individual attention. Williams embodies within this one story the basic ideas and theories which flow throughout his works. The most important principle expressed is that of atonement. Williams believes that man acquires from his existence and his desires, guilt, which must be expiated by some means of atonement. The atonement principle establishes itself in three steps: desire, both latent and overt,

surfaces in an individual, causing guilt, which in turn must be purged by means of sacrifice and suffering in order to acquire purification.

In "Desire and the Black Masseur" Williams traces a cycle throughout Anthony Burns's life, starting with Burns's initial desire and leading to his final atonement. Williams clearly establishes each step of this cycle, pointing out specifically Burns's desire, his moment of truth, his awareness of guilt, and finally his means of atonement. "Desire and the Black Masseur" is the only work of Williams's which explains this step-by-step procedure. However, Williams's other works are filled with instances similar to those in "Desire and the Black Masseur" but without the interpretation of each step leading to the final atonement. Perhaps Williams felt he should just once clearly establish and carry through his explanation of a principle so important to his view of the universe and so important to the understanding of his future works. Williams's other works which deal with the principles of guilt and atonement depict equally well the dilemma of characters seeking and finding atonement but without any attempt by Williams to explain and discuss directly the motives and results of the characters' actions.

In "Desire and the Black Masseur" Williams establishes a "manifesto" containing his views about man in the universe. This manifesto is so important that it warrants sentence by sentence analysis:

> For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for. A wall that has been omitted from a house because the stones were exhausted, a room in a house left unfurnished because the householder's funds were not sufficient--these sorts of incompletions were usually covered up or glossed over by some kind of makeshift arrangement. The nature of man is full of makeshift arrangements, devised by himself to cover his incompletion. He feels a part of himself to be like a missing wall or a room left unfurnished and he tries as well as he can to make up for it. The use of imagination, resorting to dreams or the loftier purpose of art, is a mask he devises to cover his incompletion. Or violence among a number of nations, is a blind and senseless compensation of that which is not yet formed in human nature. Then there is still another compensation. This one is found in the principle of atonement, the surrender of self to violent treatment by others and thereby clearing one's self of his guilt...[68]

"For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for" is Williams's most concise statement on his view of the human condition. He believes that man is by nature incomplete because his universe is fragmented. Williams insists there is nothing that can be done about this condition. Human guilt parallels universal guilt and man's life is an atonement for human conditions. The world is filled with broken, fragmented people because the sins of the world are nothing more than its own fragmentations. Human beings are not in any way responsible for their condition and have no way to remedy their situation. They are trapped

---

[68]Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 85. Future references in chapter two from this quoted passage will be placed in quotations marks but not footnoted.

in a universe, lacking the completeness to cope with their dilemma. They can only delay the inevitable. Williams's characters fight a losing battle against the world, in a futile attempt to transcend their hopeless situations. Many characters are allowed to struggle for awhile, displaying courage, beauty, and gallantry, but in the end they succumb to failure. They become poisoned from desires which have been emitted from their incomplete and imperfect nature.[69] The only thing absolute in Williams's universe is incompletion; it is the original sin into which man is born and is the power governing his every move. If, in Williams's view of the universe, there is a nature, a reality, a truth, or a God, it is "derealized." For Williams, reality lies shattered. In the fragmentary world of his theatre, new images are pieced together from partialities: They are composed from splinters of broken truths."[70]

Williams compares the incompletion in both man and the universe to "a wall that has been omitted from a house because the stones were exhausted..." The world, according to Williams, was only partially built and perfected, like a house which lacks some of its stones, containing only enough to provide partial shelter. Similarly, man is not a complete entity; he has enough in his make up to exist

---

[69]Nelson, p. 248.

[70]Jackson, p. 68.

and to function, but is not complete enough to avoid the sins of the world. Williams further parallels man's condition with that of "a room in a house left unfurnished because the householder's funds were not sufficient." The Creator of the universe had to leave certain parts of His creation "unfurnished" and man was no exception. Just as a room is left incomplete, so is man; his incompletion or imperfection is the cause for man's nature, one which has the potential to become twisted and crooked. "These sorts of incompletions are usually covered up or glossed over by some kind of makeshift arrangements. The nature of man is full of make-shift arrangements, devised by himself to cover his incompletion." Human beings escape what is true about themselves, their desires, by covering them up with lies, hoping to continue to appease society rather than be submissive to their true feelings. They escape into worlds of illusion, seeking to blot out painful truths. Man conforms to society by devising makeshift arrangements, but in doing so he only compounds his error because he cuts himself off from society. Futhermore, he allows his own style and freedom to be abandoned, sacrificing all individuality. Williams's characters are constantly formulating makeshift arrangements to compensate for their inadequacies. Williams has said one purpose of his writing is to help audiences see "...how people erect false values by not facing what is true in their natures, by living lies. I hope they

would feel the thwarted desire of people to reach each other through the fog."[71]

"The use of imagination, resorting to dreams or the loftier purpose of art, is a mask he devises to cover his incompletions." Many of Williams's characters mask themselves in dreams, in movies, and in illusions in an attempt to protect their egos, to conceal some aspect of their real nature. Incompletions are further masked by "violence, a blind and senseless compensation..." This is the mask of Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire who must be rough and violent in order to maintain his established image.[72] Williams sees this means of compensation as "senseless" and insists that it provides no true satisfaction, and only brings about unhappiness.

The last principle of this "manifesto," and most important to this study, is the principle of atonement. Williams defines it as "the surrender of self to violent treatment by others and thereby clearing one's self of his guilt." This principle then becomes the formula by which man may find relief from his guilt, through sacrifice and suffering. Williams believes this cleansing may be acquired by "physical violence," giving one's self to brutal treatment as Anthony Burns does in "Desire and the Black Masseur." However, Williams also permits his characters

---

[71] "Tennessee Williams," New York Herald Tribune, March 3, 1957, p. 6.

[72] Nelson, p. 191.

to find atonement by another means, by mental laceration, which is the open confrontation of one's nature, one's desires, and one's sins. Through this process a person may relieve all his guilt, and cleanse himself of his sin which has arisen from his imperfections. Williams insists that any atonement must be painful; it requires real suffering, either physical or mental, if it is to bring about true purification. All masks and lies must be discarded no matter how recriminating it is for the individual and for others. True suffering must be endured before complete atonement can be acquired. Williams feels that a major function of his drama is to reveal man's hidden nature and imperfections, to search out his motives, and to help him find a form of "salvation" and means of atonement. Since man is imperfect through no fault of his own, human beings must help one another to confront their incompletions openly and assist them in their search for "salvation."[73]

The story of "Desire and the Black Masseur" centers around the personal struggles of Anthony Burns, a timid, thirty-year-old factory worker who finds himself all alone in a big city. He is the fifteenth child of a family who cares little for him and his feelings. He escapes from his home and seeks work in the unsympathetic, meaningless workday world. Everything seems to absorb him and "swallow him up;" he is most insecure, finding his only reality and

---

[73]Jackson, p. 89.

identification in the back row of dark movie houses. He allows himself to be absorbed by the darkness. Burns is not an inquiring person; he has learned few things about life and has learned nothing about himself. He has no conception of what his real desires are. However, when his one basic desire does surface, it becomes too much for him, and it engulfs him.

One afternoon he goes from his work to a Turkish bath and massage parlor to find relief from an ache which has lodged itself near the base of his spine. Burns's nature and fear are overpowered by his desire to relieve his suffering and thus he permits himself, shy and timid as he is, to be thrust into the hands of a masseur. The massage parlor is in the basement of a hotel; the place possesses an atmosphere of secrecy and contains numerous partitions, corridors and cubicles--all providing an air of concealment. Burns enters a cubicle, pays his two-fifty, removes all his clothes, and submits himself to a Negro Masseur, and from that moment forward willingly succumbs to the power of the black giant. The Negro immediately senses something unusual about Anthony Burns; he sees that Burns is captivated by his movements and treatment. Burns comes to the realization that his hidden desire has, for the first time, seeped to the surface, and he becomes aware that he is sexually aroused by the masseur. He makes no effort to suppress his desires. The excitement of the masseur's beating of his limbs brings

a feeling of ecstasy that he never knew possible. The more violent the Masseur becomes the greater the pain, but also the greater the satisfaction. An unspoken agreement soon develops between Burns and the Masseur. Burns soon makes apparent to the masseur what he really desires from him. The masseur then continues steadily to increase the violence with each session. Burns loses all concern for his factory work and thinks only of his next treatment. He leaves the bath one day with two broken ribs, the next day with a fractured leg. On the final day of Burns's treatment at the parlor, the masseur renders a blow so terrific that it breaks a limb and causes Burns to unintentionally cry out. The manager hears the scream and comes into the cubicle. When he witnesses Burns's vomiting and sees the body mired with bruises, he immediately evicts the two from his premises.

The masseur carries Burns to his house in the town's Negro section. For a week the passion between them continues, and the masseur completes his purpose with Burns. Burns tells the masseur what he must do--that which is inevitable. He instructs the masseur to kill him and rid him of his guilt. The giant begins to devour Burns's body, taking twenty-four hours to eat the bones clean. When the masseur finishes his assignment he places the bones of Burns's body into a sack and deposits them into a lake. The masseur then moves to another city, seeks employment, and waits for his next patient.

Anthony Burns and the black masseur enact the rite of sacrifice and atonement which symbolizes the overpowering influx of guilt and atonement of the universe. A small, timid man, Anthony Burns, whose name alone suggests martyrdom, becomes aware that his body finds pleasure and satisfaction by being punished. Burns, from his beginning, has an "instinct" for being included in things, happenings which "swallow him up." However, he felt no security in being absorbed by the world. His security came in make-shift arrangements. For Burns the movies were his security; he found this security in the dark interior of the theatres. He did not go there to hear what the actors said or to see what they did. He cared only about the "figures" who warmed him as if they were cuddled next to him in the darkness. For years Burns was content to live a life filled with dream world companions. He had never felt the urge to do anything else. Burns's life was innocent of passion because he had never experienced desire. But finally one day his true desire developed as the negro masseur awakened his latent masochistic passions. Burns had been living mechanically in a society he had never dared question, but he had suffered inextricably from the feelings of loneliness and frustration and from an insecurity brought on by conformity.[74]

Burns represented to Williams an individual who had

---

[74]Paul Hurley, "Williams' "Desire and the Black Masseur: An Analysis," Saturday Review, January 8, 1964, p. 56.

been consumed by society. Once Burns's true sexual desire was aroused he found he had no place to conceal it. "Desire is something that is made to occupy a larger space than that which is afforded by the individual being..."[75] His basic desire became so big that it, too, "swallowed him up." Burns's unnatural desire was his incompletion, which is an "inescapable manifestation of the human condition."[76]

Anthony Burns discovered his desire by accident. Desire manifests itself only when an individual's fear is caught off guard:

> When desire lives constantly with fear and no partition between them, desire becomes very tricky; it has to become as sly as the adversary... desire outwits the enemy. At the very mention of the word "massage" the desire woke up... catching fear off guard. So by surprise is a man's desire discovered, and once discovered the only need is surrender, to take what comes and ask no questions about it.[77]

However, for Burns, fulfillment of desire brought guilt as well as pleasure. Burns's visits and treatment continued for several months. He knew that somehow he must eventually find a means of atonement if he were to rid himself of his guilt and find purification. Atonement for Burns came in its most crucial form, death. In the masseur's home in the Negro section of the city, Burns gave the final orders which would complete his atonement. Burns whispered

---

[75] Ibid., p. 54.

[76] Ibid.

[77] Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 90.

to the masseur: "You know what you have to do now? The black nodded."[78] Within twenty-four hours Burns's atonement was completed and with its completion came a serenely blue sky--Williams's symbol of purity and cleansing, a symbol often used to denote the removal of sin from some one or some area.

Williams presents the symbolic significance of Anthony Burns's atonement in his description of a revival service which takes place in a church across the street from the masseur's room in which Burns symbolically finds his eventual atonement. Williams equates Burns's search for atonement with the search for salvation by the churchgoers. Williams expresses his message symbolically:

> Suffer, suffer, suffer! the preacher shouted. Our Lord was nailed on a cross for the sins of the world! They led him above the town to a place of the skull, they moistened his lips with vinegar on a sponge, they drove five nails through his body, and He was the Rose of the world as He bled on the cross! The congregation could not remain in the building but tumbled out on the street in a crazed procession with clothes torn open. The sins of the world are all forgiven! they shouted.[79]

The tone of the passage suggests that Williams is interested in presenting more than mere religious fanaticism. He is equating Burns's atonement for guilt by masochism with the preacher's doctrine of salvation through suffering. Anthony Burns is a member in spirit, if not in reality, of

---

[78] Ibid., p. 93.

[79] Ibid., p. 92.

the church congregation across the street. He is a sinner like those in the church, facing an angry but "beneficient" God. He must suffer to appease his God's anger. Williams suggests that God's kingdom may not be of this world, but society's most assuredly is, and society is now God. The church service is an attempt to show the destructive power of "abstract intangible forces."[80] As the church services finish, Burns's atonement is completed. The congregation runs out to view a clearing sky.

Williams uses the masseur as the natural instrument of atonement. The black man hated white-skinned bodies because they reminded him of the prejudice he had to cope with daily. He loved his profession because occasionally he could inflict pain to his patients' white skin. "He had barely been able to hold his love in restraint, to control the wish that he felt to pound more fiercely and use the full of his power."[81] Burns provided him with the means by which he could release his full power. While the masseur waited for Burns's visits, an image would appear before his mind, a nude white body with angry red marks on it. Burns loved the giant and the masseur loved Burns, but for entirely different reasons. Burns loved the sexual gratification the masseur gave him and the masseur loved the opportunity Burns gave him to release his hatred and

---

[80]Hurley, p. 55.

[81]Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 90.

frustration.

The Negro is not a fully developed character. But he is undoubtedly Williams himself paralleled to the unquestioned force in the universe. He has a powerful presence like that of God, Society, and Religion. He is entirely abstract but at the same time, real. He influences Burns's life just as God, Society, and Religion influence the lives of most people. Burns, literally and symbolically, is destroyed by this vague power, a force similar to the one which sends the churchgoers running wildly into the streets, tearing at their clothes and begging to be made to suffer.[82]

Williams has made great use of symbols in "Desire and the Black Masseur," most of which are clear. However, his decision to make the masseur a negro is puzzling. He may have intended to allude to blackness as that which swallows all colors. The masseur would thus be opposed to Burns as the color black is opposed to the color white, in addition to the opposition of the black and white races. Further speculation of Williams's use of a black masseur has come from Paul Hurley who suggests that Williams used a member of a race for whom cannibalism existed in a not-to-distant past.[83]

The last paragraphs of "Desire and the Black Masseur" point out the relationship between Burns's sexual perversion

---

[82]Hurley, p. 55.

[83]Ibid.

and subtle perversion:

> The Negro moved to another city, obtained employment once more as an expert masseur. And there in a white-curtained place, he was serenely conscious of fate bringing him another to suffer atonement as it had been suffered by Burns; he stood impassively waiting inside a milky white door for the next to arrive. And meantime, slowly, with barely a thought of doing so, the earth's whole population twisted and writhed beneath the manipulation of night fingers and the white ones of day with skeletons splintered and flesh reduced to pulp, as if out of this unlikely problem, the answer, perfection, was slowly evolved through torture.[84]

The story symbolizes the reality of the contemporary world. Reality, as depicted by Williams, is far more horrifying than the physical cannibalism of the story. Williams is strongly convinced that the perversion of values in which modern man has subjected himself is deeply embedded. He feels that only something as shocking and terrifying and as evil and grotesque as masochism and cannibalism can awaken and expose contemporary attitudes. Despite "Desire's" ugliness and unrealistic situations it does have considerable merit; primary is its message, which Williams clearly hopes will prove effective in ridding the world of unjust and previously unquestioned standards.

---

[84]Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 94.

CHAPTER III

AN ANALYSIS OF THE PURIFICATION AND AUTO-DA-FE

> A thing so persistently whispered in our kitchens
> is better spoken out in the presence of all.
>
> Tennessee Williams
> The Purification

The Purification and Auto-Da-Fe are two of Williams's works, like "Desire and the Black Masseur," which show his concentrated effort to depict characters struggling with guilt and atonement. Williams gives a clear and distinct portrayal of these characters as victims of guilt and seekers of atonement. The characters and their actions are so relevant to the basic premise of this study that they are worthy of detailed analysis. Little scholarly research has been done on these two short works in comparison to Williams's major writings. However, both of these short selections have embodied in them themes very important to the understanding of Williams and his philosophy.

Williams's one-act play, The Purification, written in 1943, and dedicated to Margo Jones, shows characters completing a cycle from initial desire to ultimate atonement. Williams's characters in this play find the only relief from their evil doings through death,

the most severe and violent means for retribution from sin and guilt. The Purification is written in verse and has musical accompaniment by guitar. The action takes place in the Western ranchlands in the country around Taos, New Mexico. Williams describes the country as a "clear breath-taking" sort of country whose inhabitants have caused a stagnant, unclean air to hover above because of their sordid and unclean deeds.[85]

The play involves the slow and dramatic unfolding of truth--a technique as ancient as that which Sophocles used in Oedipus the King. These truths are unravelled in unrealistic actions, with great attention given to color and costume; to tableaux, pagentry, and pantomine; and to mood, music, and dance rhythm--all of which are, according to Williams, vital means of communication. Williams believes a combination of these are very necessary to modern theatre if it is to truly depict all aspects of life. This culmination of music, pantomine, tableaux, dance, etc. with dialogue is the basic aim of Williams's "plastic theatre."[86] This term is one he uses to describe this type of drama which he has filled with more than the orthodox realism of Ibsen and Chekhov; instead it is drama which he has made eclectic by borrowing

---

[85]Tennessee Williams, Purification, p. 29.

[86]Jackson, pp. 93-95.

and incorporating a multitude of styles and means of expression. Williams intends for his drama to go beyond the limits of accepted realism and embody other means of communication and human experiences not so commonly seen in drama, but nevertheless existing in man's life and in his everyday expression.[87] No better example of this culmination of dramatic techniques and styles can be seen than The Purification and Camino Real.

The Purification is a play about sexual indulgence, frigidity, and incest. It is a play which has considerable bird imagery, along with Williams's favorite symbol of the "clearing sky," an obvious symbol denoting purification and cleansing of evil. The play follows a cycle somewhat similar to the one previously seen in "Desire and the Black Masseur"--of incest, murder, retribution and purification.

The action of The Purification evolves around a Judge who is presiding over an informal trial for the murder of Elena, the wife of the Rancher from Casa Rojo; she is the daughter of characters referred to only as Mother and Father and the sister of the Son, with whom she has had incestuous relations. Williams begins his play with the Judge, speaking undoubtedly as the playwright's mouthpiece, echoing philosophical statements about people who should punish the guilty. The Judge exclaims:

---

[87] Ibid.

> I do not believe in one man judging another. I'd rather that those who stand in need of judgment would judge themselves. Honor being more than a word amongst us, I have no doubt that this is the kind of judgment which will prevail.[88]

The Judge establishes the play's exposition by saying that something evil has happened which has caused a season of drought, evil which must be atoned for, and soon:

> This much we know: The rains are long delayed. The season is parched. Rain is needed. Rain's the treatment for a forest fire. For violent deeds likewise the rain is needed. The rain I speak of is the rain of truth, for truth between men is the only purification.[89]

Through symbols and symbolic language the Judge calls for rain to drench the forest fire in Casa Lobo's inhabitants, calling likewise for truth which, like the rain, is long delayed and can with its presence clear the stagnant air and bring forth once again a clear and pure countryside. Williams implies at this point in the play that truth and truth only will bring the rains, and thus relieve the drought and guilt within man's soul. However, Williams later indirectly implies that in such cases of deep burden and sin, atonement by death is the only means of true purification.

The Judge informally asks the Mother, Father, and Son

---

[88]Tennessee Williams, Purification, p. 31.

[89]Ibid., p. 32.

to talk about Elena, the girl referred to by Williams in his character descriptions as "Elena of the Springs," the symbol of life, and "The Desert Elena," the symbol of love.[88] "It is not easy to tell you about our daughter," says the Father. To this the Son responds:

> I mean to say she went beyond all fences.
> The meadow grasses continued entirely
> too far beyond where the gate was broken--
> in several--places.[89]

As testimony is given from Elena's family concerning her life and her cause of death, an Indian servant, Luisa, continually murmurs "the tainted spring--is bubbling."[90] Undoubtedly, Williams has the Indian woman speak for and represent people in society who are onlookers and who express their disapproval of other people's affairs. Williams attempts, as he does so often, to show how society too much dominates men's decisions and actions.

Williams has dealt with incestuous relationships between brother and sister in several plays; consequently, this preoccupation has led critics to believe that he is writing about an incident in his own life. As previously discussed, Williams's relationship with his sister was a special one which he holds dear, even today. In The Purification Williams is questioning the power of a society or a "judge" to condemn a pure relationship between brother

---

[88] Ibid., p. 29.

[89] Ibid., p. 33.

[90] Ibid., p. 41.

and sister, possibly one as pure as that shared between Williams and his sister. In one of Williams's latest plays, Out Cry, he again reverts to this ancient moral question and once more shows the beauty of a brother's love for his sister. John Clayton contends that Williams's relationship with his sister is projected in The Purification, The Glass Menagerie, and in You Touched Me; the latter, however, involves a love affair between a half-brother and half-sister.[91]

Early in Williams's writing career, in The Purification he touched on a belief which he is still resounding, the belief that man needs to expose all, openly, rather than endure the secret whispers of friends and society. In this play the Judge reflects Williams's personal ideas concerning incest: "A thing so persistently whispered in our kitchens is better spoken in the presence of all."[92] The Father in The Purification insists that his son is demented. This father-son relationship may well be an autobiographical reference, since Williams seems to be describing himself in the character of the Son and since Williams has stated openly that his father cared little for him and called him names. Williams further expresses the true nature of Elena through the eyes of her brother:

---

[91]John Clayton, Themes in Tennessee Williams, unpublished dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 36.

[92]Tennessee Williams, Purification, p. 39.

> Not even noon's thundering statement
> crescendo of distance knocking down
> walls with two blue brutal bare fists
> clenched over quicksilver could ever--
> could certainly never--enclose such
> longing as was my sister's.[93]

Williams is totally sympathetic with the brother and the Rancher-husband, both of whom shared a love so clean and pure, at least according to the playwright. He is indirectly expressing to the reader his belief that no one has the right to condemn a relationship which two people feel is good and right.

Explanation is given by the Indian servant in The Purification as to why she feels the son's desire is abnormal and why he is "incomplete and fragmented:"

> You know how it is in August. In August
> the heavens take on more brilliance,
> more fire. They become unstable. This
> one lacked prudence, however. He rode at
> night, bare-back through the Sangre de
> Cristo shouting aloud and making ridiculous
> gestures. You know how it is in August?
> The stars make sudden excursions. The moon's
> lopsided. The dogs go howling like demons
> about the ranches...But this one here, this
> youth from Casa Blanca, pastured his pony some
> nights at Casa Rojo. His visits were unannounced.
> I went alone through the meadow...and sudden-
> ly through the window of the loft, that was
> lit with the wavering radiance of a candle--
> two naked figures appeared in a kind of--
> dance.[94]

The playwright parallels the abnormal aspects in nature--the howling dogs, the lopsided moon, the star's excursions, and the unstableness of August--to those in the Son--his

---

[93] Ibid., p. 35.

[94] Ibid., pp. 37-38.

loud shouts in August, his lack of prudence, his bare-back riding at night, and his ridiculous gestures. Williams reiteriates his belief that the incompleteness in man and his abnormal desires are present in the universe because the universe itself is incomplete and fragmented. As soon as Luisa utters her statements about the brother and sister's naked figures in the loft, she is stopped by the Rancher. Luisa's reply to the Rancher's protest is that someone must speak the truth.

Before the son admits his evil doings, at least considered so by inhabitants of Casa Blanca, his mother insists that her son's actions are heriditary and are her fault:

> My son is the victim of an innocent rapture. His ways are derived of me. I also rode on horseback through the mountains in August...If this imputes some dark guilt on the doer, then I, his mother must share in the public censure.[95]

The trial proceedings gain excitement at this point when the Son admits his nature and his affair. In doing so, he lashes out against his mother, implying that she realized his growing desire but created ways to conceal it. The Son, facing his mother exclaims:

> The truth? Why ask me for that? For the truth is sometimes alluded to in music. But words are too loosely woven to catch it in...[96]

---

[95] Ibid., p. 39.

[96] Ibid., p. 40.

Williams further presents the Son's message in poetic language and imagery:

> A bird can be snared at its rising,
> or torn to earth by the falcon.
> His song, which is truth, is not
> to be captured ever. It is an
> image, a dream, it is the link to
> the mother...[97]

The Son further describes the effect a song, sung by ranch boys, had on his sexual desire while he was surrounded by fences:

> How shall I describe the effect that
> a song had on us? Our genitals were
> too eager...You, Mother, could wash
> the delicate, white lace curtains, sweep
> down the long stairs and scent the alcoves
> with lemon.[98]

John Clayton asserts that the son's lashing out at his mother in The Purification is because she was determined to house him behind fences, to keep his true nature concealed, and to keep him from the ranch-boys who rode in August. Clayton parallels the son's situation to Williams's own family environment, one also made up of "fences" built by his mother to conceal and hide the truth of his nature. In Williams's case the rectory provided the fences surrounding him.[99] The Mother in The Purification asks:

> Isn't it strange how things grow up
> in a life? Like trees--then all of
> a sudden--crowding the backyard with
> shadows...So what can we do but contend

---

[97] Ibid.

[98] Ibid., p. 41.

[99] Clayton, p. 36.

> with our own queer shadows. We poured
> our blood in the desert to make it
> flower. The flowers were not good
> flowers.[100]

Williams expresses strong identification with the Son and his innocence. The Son admits his actions but questions whether or not they are wrong:

> Yes, I am shameless--the loft of the
> barn was occupied by lovers not once,
> not twice, but time and time again...
> Resistless it was, this coming of birds
> together in heaven's center.[101]

The Son's guilt is surfaced only because his family, the townspeople, and society insist that what he has done is evil and that he must be punished for having indulged in such a vile and contemptible act. With the Son's admission of his incestuous affair the Judge states poetically that the court is thirsty and the clouds are darkening still. The Son's incompletion was similar to that of Anthony Burns in "Desire and the Black Masseur;" both Burns and the Son allowed their inward desires to become overt and both were made to suffer guilt brought forth by society.

The Rancher is the second lover of Elena; however, his love is only spiritual. Elena never allowed their love to be physically consummated. The Rancher continued with his strange marriage because his love for her was so intense. Often the Rancher would become disgusted with his predicament and would ask her:

---

[100]Tennessee Williams, Purification, pp. 42-43.

[101]Ibid., p. 45.

> Woman, what keeps you alive--you make-believe fountain? You and the desert you are sisters--sisters beneath the skin! But even the desert is sometimes pregnant with something; but you--you, woman, bear nothing...[102]

Elena's husband saw her as sterile, similar to the desert; but she too, like the desert, occasionally sprang forth with something--with love. But Elena's love was not for her husband, but for her brother. Elena is depicted as one who is brave and fearless, one not afraid of the truth, and one who does not cover herself with "makeshift" arrangements. She openly admits to the Rancher her desire to "run like wild birds home to Sangre de Cristo when August crazes the sky."[103] After further discussing his wife's infidelity with the Judge, the Rancher admits murdering his wife. "I found the two together and clove them apart with that--the axe."[104] The Judge again exclaims that the rain has not yet been given, and further truth or action is needed. The Rancher continues; he admits his guilt, saying that he must seek retribution for killing one so beautiful, but declares that he would have killed her brother also had he the strength at the time.

The play's climax approaches as the Son sees Elena appear in a vision at the courtroom door. He stumbles toward her and calls her name. She shakes her head with

---

[102] Ibid., p. 51.

[103] Ibid., p. 52.

[104] Ibid., p. 58.

a sorrowful smile. As he approaches her, he takes a knife from his belt, holds it above him, and as he plunges it into his breast speaks: "Witness--in this thrust--our purification."[105] He atones in violent death for the guilt that both he and Elena bore. As the Son falls to his death the sky begins to darken even more and suddenly a rumble of thunder is heard. A voice in the distance, outside the courtroom, cries "Rain!" The rain can be heard falling steadily and gently on the roof. The sky begins to clear as the rain continues. Then the Rancher speaks:

> I also came prepared for--purification.
> As one who has suffered over-long from
> drought, I'd like the cooling taste of
> rain on my lips.[106]

Thus the Rancher frees himself of his guilt in the same manner as the Son.

Williams touches closest to the play's meaning and to his own personal relationship to it when the Judge explains to those in the courtroom how he, the Judge, envisions the cause of the Son's nature and his desire:

> When you were a boy, my friend, from
> Casa Rojo, you were gentle--withdrew
> too much from the world. This reticence,
> almost noble, persisted through youth,
> but later, as you grew older, an
> emptiness, still unfilled, became a
> cellar, a cellar into which blackness
> dripped and trickled, a slow, corrosive
> seepage.[107]

Williams has said that he has always exposed himself

---

[105] Ibid., p. 60.

[106] Ibid., p. 61.

[107] Ibid., p. 56.

through his writings. If this is true, then the above passage describing the Son seems to show a marked resemblance to Williams's own youth and situation, for he, too, was gentle and withdrew too much from the world.

The play ends with the guilty atoning for their sins and bringing a feeling of honor back to Casa Blanca, a feeling deeper than law. The Judge's desire at the beginning of the play came about--those that stood in need of judgment judged themselves. Thus Williams's cycle of desire, which leads to guilt, which in turn causes a seeking of atonement, is established.

Auto-Da-Fe, Williams's one-act play, written in 1945, is another attempt to delve into a mother-son relationship. Williams again centers his attention on a man seeking relief from his guilt, and r[illegible] from his mother and other people around him. The man [illegible]o-Da-Fe seeks the most violent means of atonement, that of death. Williams displays guilt as being the dominant characteristic of the major character, Eloi. The play centers around Eloi and his mother, both religious fanatics. Eloi encounters a lewd photograph which has been sent to him by a young man. This obscene picture awakens certain desires within Eloi and he is made aware of his true nature. With this awareness comes a deep sense of guilt, and a desire to remove not only the guilt and sickness in him but that same sickness which he sees in other people around him--in the same house with him.

Early in the play, as Eloi and his mother sit on the porch talking, hints about filth and corruption are presented. Eloi berates his mother for rummaging in his room. She responds by saying that she could not possibly allow filth to accummulate in her house and thus she must enter the room and clean. Williams's language is highly symbolic and suggestive, paralleling the physical dirt and filth in the room to the filth in Eloi and in his pocketbook where he hides his obscene picture of sexual deviants.

Eloi is troubled by his unnatural desire, which manifests itself immediately upon seeing the photograph of the two naked figures. His reactions were intense: "I felt as though something exploded, blew up in my hands, and scalded my face with acid."[108] The picture was sent to Eloi by a nineteen-year-old university student whom Eloi sought out:

> Eloi: I called on the sender; I went to the dormitory. We talked in private and everything was discussed...I had to explain that I was a federal employee and that it was excessively fair on my part to even delay the action that ought to be taken...And then the sender began to be ugly. Abusive. I can't repeat the charges, the evil suggestions! I ran from the room.[109]

Eloi tells his encounter to his mother who immediately insists that he go to confession and seek forgiveness

---

[108] Tennessee Williams, Auto-Da-Fe in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton (New York: New Directions, 1945), p. 116.

[109] Ibid., p. 117.

for his sins. To which he replies:

> Eloi: You just don't know. You rock on the porch and talk about clean, white curtains. While I'm all flame, all burning...Intolerable burden! The conscience of all dirty men!
>
> Mme. Duvenet: I don't understand you. You go to confession.
>
> Eloi: The Priest is a cripple in skirts... It's worn out magic; it doesn't burn any more.
>
> Mme. Duvenet: Burn any more?
>
> Elio: Because there's need to be burning. For the sake of burning, for God, for the purification.[110]

Eloi starts to burn his obscene picture but in doing so burns his finger and then stops, having instantly received an inspiration as to the means of seeking true purification, and consequently relieving himself of his sin and guilt. He immediately turns from his mother, who is seated on the porch, and locks himself inside the house. His act of purification is suicide by burning himself and all the filth and sin the house contains. Since his guilt is so strong, he feels fire is the only means by which it can be removed.

Williams undoubtedly gives significance to the son's name; the word, "Eloi," is Hebrew for "Lord," and "Auto-Da-Fe" translated means "act of faith." Thus Eloi's act of faith is to burn down the house which contains sin.[111]

---

[110] Ibid., p. 113.

[111] Ruby Cohn, Dialogue in American Drama (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. 115.

Auto-Da-Fe shows the nature of infection within one's mind and the drastic solution and remedy for the infection.[112] Williams depicts his protagonist as being infected both physically and emotionally; he suffers severely from asthma which Williams equates to his mental suffering--suffering from unnatural sexual desire.[113] Williams depicts as well the corruption and infection in an entire area--the French Quarter of New Orleans.[114] Enmeshed in all this corruption is Eloi's mother, a frail, sixty-seven-year-old fanatic, religiously and otherwise. She ironically condemns all who are not pure and virtuous, never seeing the corruption in the people in her house. The entire city is full of corruption, Williams points out, just as her boarders and her son. However, she remains blind to all this degeneracy, decay, crime, and mutilation mentioned to her by her son. Williams describes the infection which is manifested in the people in the French Quarter:

> This is the primary lesion, the focal infection, the--chancre! In medical language, it spreads by--metastasis! It creeps through the capillaries and into the main blood vessels. From there it is spread all through the surrounding tissue. Finally nothing is left outside the decay.[115]

Williams shows once again the horrors of being trapped

---

[112] Donahue, p. 116.

[113] Ibid., p. 171.

[114] Cohn, p. 115.

[115] Tennessee Williams, Auto-Da-Fe, p. 110.

in a world where there is no one to turn to for understanding. Eloi can talk to no one. The people around him are as corrupted with decay as he. He has only a pietous mother who is too far above the sins of the world to understand and help.

CHAPTER IV

AN ANALYSIS OF THEMES IN SELECTED MAJOR WRITINGS

For you must learn, even you, what we have learned,
that some things are marked by their nature to be not completed
but only longed for and sought for a while and abandoned.

Tennessee Williams
"Orpheus Descending"
In The Winter of Cities

An awareness of sin, guilt, and atonement is most apparent in one of Williams's later plays, Sweet Bird of Youth. Williams's major character in this work, Chance Wayne, is portrayed as an individual so filled with guilt he refuses to escape from violent punishment. He remains in the town knowing he will encounter his end.

Sweet Bird of Youth is a study of corruption. It depicts a man who has been relentlessly pursuing success and fortune, but in doing so has led a life filled with moral decay and corruption.[116] Chance Wayne returns to his hometown with Alexandra Del Lago, a famous movie star. Both Chance and Alexandra are losing their youth and are possibly "has beens." He has brought her to his hometown because he wants to pick up his childhood sweetheart,

---

[116] Paula Langsam, A Study of the Major Character in Selected Plays of Tennessee Williams, unpublished dissertation (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), p. 231.

Heavenly Finley, and take her to Hollywood to star with him. He is surprised to find the town estranged to him and shortly receives warnings to get out of town. He is told that if he does not he will be castrated. Chance Wayne learns about two events which have come to pass since his last visit to St. Cloud. Heavenly has undergone a hysterectomy as a result of a venereal disease she contracted from him. His mother has died, and he becomes aware of his past indifference toward his mother and to her welfare. She had died two weeks before his return to St. Cloud and the town had to collect money to pay for her burial expenses and buy a headstone for her grave.

Alexandra discovers that she has acquired immense success with her latest movie, which she thought would be a failure, and with this success, Alexandra no longer needs Chance for solace. She offers to take him with her as a chaffeur, but Chance refuses. He realizes slowly, step by step as the play evolves, how he has hurt others and how corrupted he, himself, actually is. As the play ends, he is solemnly awaiting a mob which is coming to castrate him.

Sweet Bird of Youth begins with the sounds of Church bells as the chorus sings the alleluia chorus on an Easter Sunday. Williams's play symbolically presents a chronicle of Chance Wayne's own road to crucifixion.[117] This

---

[117] Ibid., p. 225.

crucifixion comes to Chance Wayne as he reacts to guilt and inner corruption, both of which have kept his early promise of glory and success from coming true. Chance Wayne knows that he must pay for his sins as he is overcome by a feeling of guilt about the depths to which he has sunk. He realizes that his attempt to acquire success came at the expense of others. Chance Wayne's fate is his acceptance of his guilt, the guilt which Williams believes is borne by all men. He accepts the fact that he has lived in total corruption and the he will succumb to both mental and physical castration.[118] Williams shows an individual who has failed to see the beginnings of his corruption and who has continued so far and for so long that the hope for retribution comes only by violent punishment.

As Chance Wayne realizes the truth, he abandons all plans and dreams for his future. At the play's end, he has lost all hope of being successful and is content to await his doom. Benjamin Nelson describes Chance's awareness of his corruption in this way:

> Chance's final realization is that he has sunk to rock bottom...with this knowledge the last vestiges of his dream are shattered. As the play closes, he awaits literal and figurative castration with a stoic... serenity.[119]

Chance Wayne had for years operated on a nonrealistic level. He refused to see himself as he actually was, and

---

[118] Ibid., p. 227.

[119] Nelson, p. 235.

to admit that his youth and his beauty were fading. There is no escape from the "malignancy" of time. Chance was fighting his enemy, time--"It goes tick-tick, it's quieter than your heartbeat, but it's slow dynamite, a gradual explosion, blasting the world we live in to burnt-out pieces. Time--who could beat it, who could defeat it ever?"[120]

When Chance's confrontation with the truth finally came, he saw that he was immersed in his own guilt and sin so deeply that he could not possibly escape from it nor could he continue his life without removing his guilt from his conscience. Atonement came for Chance Wayne, as it does with so many of Williams's characters, through violence--castration. Williams intends for castration to symbolically represent the act which would prohibit the development of any further guilt caused by sexual desire. Williams tends to place sexual desire as the foremost reason for his characters' guilt.

Most all of Williams's male characters carry to some degree a measure of guilt that must in some way be atoned for. In his "Foreword" to Sweet Bird of Youth, Williams gives a brief summary of his ideas concerning guilt and explains to some extent how he envisions guilt in Chance Wayne's life. He gives some explanation why Chance must end the way he does and why he is suddenly willing to accept

---

[120]Tennessee Williams, Sweet Bird of Youth (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 113.

justice for the way he has lived. He writes concerning guilt:

> Guilt is universal. I mean a strong sense of guilt. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his social condition, imposed upon him at birth and long before birth, by nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him, and I think that at least below the conscious level, we all face it.[121]

Williams, in his "Foreword," seems to imply that Chance's fate was inevitable and that it was his nature to be as he was. Likewise, Williams is saying that it is one's nature to seek out the truth. In Chance's particular case the truth was too much to live with and he sought the only way he knew to relieve himself from his situation--atonement by violence.

Similar to Chance Wayne in many respects is Brick Pollictt, a principal character in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof; both are, in their youth, determined to be a success in life. However, the big difference between the two, and an all important one, is Brick's ability to finally see the truth, to finally examine his past, to see his possible shortcomings and sins, and to openly admit his failures. Brick Pollictt is able to find satisfactory atonement by openly admitting the truth in his past and continuing life by living with the truth. His atonement also involved suffering and anguish, but mentally, and not by physical

---

[121] Ibid., p. xii.

violence as Chance Wayne's.

Williams interprets the crisis of Cat On A Hot Tin Roof as Brick's failure to understand the nature of his own existence, a failure which Williams calls "latent homosexuality."[122] Williams's play is a study of mendacity or the falseness in life, and his protagonist suffers from despair which has arisen out of "transgression, guilt, and alienation."[123] Jackson contends that Williams corresponds his story in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof to the Greek horror of crime against life. Williams's protagonist, Brick, is paralleled to Sophocles's protagonist, Oedipus, who killed his father and married his mother. Both men are guilty of crimes so great that neither they nor their family can bring themselves to speak of them. Williams equates homosexuality to the Greek equilivant, incest.[124] Williams shows modern men and ancient men faced with the problem of communicating with those closest to them. Williams explains his intentions for Cat On A Hot Tin Roof as being those which show live human beings trying to communicate in crises:

> The bird that I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem. I am trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent--fiercely charged!--interplay

---

[122] Jackson, p. 63.

[123] Ibid.

[124] Ibid.

> of live human beings in the thunder-cloud of a common crisis.[125]

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof is the story of the uncovering of Brick Pollictt's guilt and his means of atonement. Brick has withdrawn from everyone, and from any realistic look at his future since the suicide of his best friend, Skipper. He is disgusted with the world and especially with his wife, Maggie, whom he blames for Skipper's death. Brick's refusal to talk to anyone about anything makes it evident and necessary that someone other than he take over the enormous estate soon to be left by Big Daddy, who is dying of cancer. Brick's only brother, Gooper, a lawyer and father of five children, is the obvious choice, being both physically and mentally able to continue management of the estate. Maggie is determined that she and Brick receive their deserved share of the estate. She was reared in poverty and does not want to go back to that type of life. Maggie, alone, must fight for both her and her husband's claim to the estate since Brick refuses to be involved in any way. Brick has, since Skipper's suicide, withdrawn to his room, seeking solace only in alcohol. Brick depends on alcohol as his escape from the world, saying he wants nothing to do with anyone because of the "mendacity" he sees in everyone around him. Brick continually explains that he hides behind the bottle to escape the lies and hypocrisy in his family. Likewise, he insists that only by means of alcohol can he

---

[125]Tennessee Williams, Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (New York: New Directions, 1952), pp. 98-99.

escape the ugliness of the world and find a "click" which makes everything peaceful:

> This click that I get in my head makes me peaceful. I got to drink till I get it. It's just a mechanical thing, something like a switch clicking off in my head, turning the hot light off and the cool night on and--all of a sudden there's peace.[126]

Brick and his friend, Skipper, had been teammates on a football team for years. Their close association seemed unnatural to Maggie. Consequently, she accused Skipper of nuturing a homosexual love for Brick, and in an effort to prove her wrong Skipper attempted to make love to Maggie but was unsuccessful, proving himself impotent. Brick believes that Maggie caused Skipper to take an overdose of drugs by suggesting to Skipper that he was homosexual; thus causing the destruction of their marriage. His only means of revenge is to refuse to have sexual contact with Maggie.

Only when Big Daddy insists that Brick tell him what he actually means by "mendacity and disgust," and only when Big Daddy confronts Brick openly about his relationship with Skipper, is Brick able to let go and face the possible truth. Brick's attitude toward homosexuality is made clear, and he reacts strongly to the suggestion that anything unclean was in his relationship with Skipper:

> You think so too? You think so too?
> You think me an' Skipper did, did, did---
> sodomy! together...queers? Is that what

---

[126] Ibid., p. 98.

> you...You think that Skipper and me were a pair of dirty old men? Big Daddy, you shock me...shock me! Talkin' so casually about a--thing like that... Don't you know how people feel about things like that. How, how disgusted they are by things like that?...[127]

It was this open discussion of homosexuality which allowed Brick to see, though painfully, the truth that there may have been more to his and Skipper's relationship than he had thought. Big Daddy is able to convey that it was Brick and not Maggie who let Skipper down when he most desperately needed help:

> Big Daddy: Somethin's left out of that story. What did you leave out?
>
> Brick: Yes! I left out a long-distance call which I had from Skipper, in which he made a drunken confession to me and on which I hung up!...last time we spoke to each other in our lives.
>
> Big Daddy: You hung up?
>
> Brick: Hung up.
>
> Big Daddy: You have been passin' the buck... You...dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it!...before you'd face the truth with him!
>
> Brick: His truth, not mine!
>
> Big Daddy: His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!
>
> Brick: Who can face truth? Can you?[128]

Once Brick was able to discuss the truths in his life

---

[127] Ibid., pp. 102-103.

[128] Ibid., p. 104.

he was able to tell Big Daddy that he would soon die of cancer, a truth that the rest of the family wanted concealed from Big Daddy. Also Brick's realization of the truths in his life allowed him to return to normal relations with his wife and to return to life in the world around him. Thus, atonement for Brick Pollictt came less violently and in a different form than that of characters previously discussed. Brick's atonement came through mental laceration. Brick was able to confront openly his possible desires, his sins, and his guilt, and continue living.

Williams depicts yet another male, Sebastian Venable, an artist-poet in Suddenly Last Summer, who is also running from reality and who is finally faced with the fact that he, too, has lost his youth and beauty. Sebastian Venable is able to see the horrible truth, the corruption and decay within himself the moment his mother lets go of him. Sebastian Venable is not an actual character in Suddenly Last Summer but he is the primary focus around which the play evolves. The play's plot and its crises depend on the past actions of this one man. Also Suddenly Last Summer is a one-act play, but it has been acclaimed by critics to be one of Williams's best works and has become so popular that it is usually discussed as a major work and will be in this research also.

Williams again reveals the horror which overtakes one's existence when reality is faced, when truth is met straightforwardly for the first time. Catherine Holly,

Sebastian's cousin, speaks of the viciousness and unpleasantness of the truth, but nevertheless, contends that it is present in the world and must be dealt with: "I know it's a hideous story but it's a true story of our time and the world we live in."[129] Williams has Catherine describe the horror she personally witnessed, the devouring of Sebastian by the boys of Cabeza de Lobo just as Anthony Burns in "Desire and the Black Masseur" was physically devoured. This truthful description is Williams's means of establishing his belief that human beings are but animals who prey on one another, some more than others, as Sebastian. Williams parallels Sebastian's preying on the children of Cabeza de Lobo to the sea turtle, which Sebastian talks about, falling prey to the giant birds.

Williams comments on cannibalism in an interview with Whitney Bolton in the New York newspaper, The Morning Telegraph:

> I remember: you were appalled at the cannibalism suggestion in Suddenly Last Summer. But life is cannibalistic. Truly. Egos eat egos, personalities eat personalities. Someone is always eating at someone else for position, gain, triumph, cannibal in the worst way. In Suddenly Last Summer it is more symbolic than actual, but many persons felt I meant it actually.[130]

Suddenly Last Summer has as its setting the Garden District of New Orleans. The action of the play

---

[129]Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, Volume III(New York: New Directions), p. 382.

[130]Whitney Bolton, The Morning Telegraph in Donahue, p. 105.

centers around the stories and denials of Catherine Holly and her aunt, Violet Venable. The setting suggests that of a jungle; Williams adds to his setting symbolic paintings and symbolic decor--paintings which give a surrealistic impression of some kind of hell, and room decorations consisting of exotic flowers, symbolically compared to human entrails dripping with blood.[131] Again, Williams depicts another Southern aristocrat, Violet Venable, and her forty-year-old son, Sebastian, who writes one poem per year, one each summer when he and his mother visit the city of Cabeza de Lobo. Mrs. Venable describes herself and her son as a well-known couple who were simply referred to as Sebastian and Violet by hundreds of well bred people.[132] Mrs. Venable tells how her son "always had a little entourage of the beautiful and the talented and the young."[133] Both Mrs. Venable and Sebastian constructed each day of their lives in a manner which would allow them to escape from the truth, the truth that they both were growing old and were both losing their beauty. Mrs. Venable firmly insists that her son possessed purity at the age of forty, the age of his death.[134]

Catherine Holly denies Mrs. Venable's assertion and proceeds to explain the truth surrounding Sebastian's

---

[131]Falk, p. 149.

[132]Ibid., p. 150.

[133]Tennessee Williams, Suddenly, p. 359.

[134]Falk, p. 150.

death. Sebastian's death came the summer when he went to Cabeza de Lobo with Catherine. For the first time he was not protected by his mother. Williams shows how Sebastian was able for the first time to see the truth about himself when his mother was apart from him. Mrs. Venable managed to keep Sebastian in his world of illusion and keep him from seeing the decay in his actions. Separated from his dominating mother, he lost control as he saw the truth about himself.

Further development of Suddenly Last Summer comes when Violet Venable attempts to have Catherine placed in a mental institution and given a lobotomy because of the filthy accusations she was making about Sebastian. The lobotomy would render Catherine incapable of remembering the incident at Cabeza de Lobo.[134] Mrs. Venable pushes forcefully for Catherine's lobotomy, saying that Catherine has made up all of her sordid stories to ruin Sebastian's reputation. Catherine insists that Sebastian was a homosexual who used his mother in the past to procure for him. During the "last summer" Sebastian has Catherine wear a transparent bathing suit so that she appears to be nude and thus attract men for him:

Catherine: I didn't want to swim
but he'd grab my hand and drag

---

[135]This reference to lobotomy is undoubtedly autobiographical on the part of the playwright since his sister was given one of the first prefrontal lobotomies in the United States and since Williams has a deep sense of guilt for having allowed this operation to have occurred.

> me into the water. All the way in and I'd come out looking naked.[136]

Catherine forcefully exclaims to her aunt and to others: "Don't you understand! I was PROCURING for him.(pointing to Violet) She used to do it, too.[137] Mrs. Venable cries out in denial, but Catherine boldly continues:

> Catherine: Not consciously! She didn't know that she was procuring for him in the smart, the fashionable places they used to go before last summer! Sebastian was shy with people. She wasn't. Neither was I. We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him, but she did it in nice places and in decent ways and I had to do it the way that I just told you! I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District.[138]

Violet Venable, who so wanted to possess her son, was only used by him, just as he used Catherine the "last summer," the summer when he was awaken to the fact that he was no longer young and beautiful. He discovered, like Anthony Burns in "Desire and the Black Masseur," that his desire had surfaced overtly and he became aware of his sins and guilt; both of which he knew must be atoned for. "By surprise is a man's desire discovered and the only need is surrender."[139] Sebastian, for the first time that summer

---

[136] Tennessee Williams, Suddenly, p. 412.

[137] Ibid.

[138] Ibid.

[139] Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 90.

fully recognized his "weaknesses, perversity, and incompletion.[140] Sebastian Venable may have previously sensed his true nature and his corrupt use of other people to acquire his needs, but only in that "last summer" did all of his sins manifest themselves boldly before him and create guilt. All past latent desires had become overt. Sebastian Venable saw the truth in the jungle garden of his home and in the beach of the Encantadas where he watched carnivorous birds devour newly hatched sea turtles. He watched the birds tear the sea turtles' sides open and eat their flesh. He saw how he had in some way, similarly devoured the starved and naked boys on the beach of Cabeza de Lobo. He likewise, felt a newly acquired guilt for the life he had lived, guilt he had to purge. "For the sins of the world are really only its partialities and these are the sufferings men must atone for."[141] Sebastian sought one of Williams's principles of atonement, "...the surrender of self to violent treatment by others with the idea of thereby cleansing one's self of his guilt."[142]

Sebastian Venable's final act at Cabezo de Lobo must, he realizes, be his purification. Sebastian and Holly become suddenly surrounded by hundreds of starving, naked boys who are playing for him on home-made musical

---

[140] Nelson, p. 258.

[141] Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 85.

[142] Ibid.

instruments, acting as savage beasts and animals who are entranced in a ritual. Sebastian makes no attempt to escape the children. His self-destruction is his means of purification; his sacrifice of himself is his personal atonement for the incompletions in the universe and in man. Benjamin Nelson states that Sebastian was:

> ...sacrificing himself to another human being in a ritual of violent atonement for the simple and terrifying reason that he recognized his own incompleteness and disorder beneath all his attempts to live a most ordered life.[143]

Devouring destruction is the theme that Williams expresses in three images: one woman(Violet) attempting to destroy another(Catherine), just as the Venus flytrap in the "jungle" destroys the insect; the birds, as they destroy the newly hatched turtles; and a group of hungry, naked children destroy a man(Sebastian).[144]

Catherine gives a vivid account of Sebastian's final act, his purification or atonement:

> It was all white outside. White hot, a blazing white hot, hot blazing white, at five o'clock in the afternoon in the city of Cabeza de Lobo. It looked as if--as if a huge white bone had caught on fire in the sky and everything under the sky white with it...The band of naked children pursued us up the steep white street in the sun that was like a great white bone of a giant beast that had caught on fire in the sky!...I screamed. I heard Sebastian scream; he

---

[143] Nelson, p. 254.

[144] Ibid., p. 252.

> screamed just once before this flock that pursued him overtook him halfway up the white hill...I don't blame them! They devoured parts of him. Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives... They had torn bits of him away and stuffed him into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs.[145]

Williams probes into the true nature of atonement in another of his acclaimed plays, The Night of the Iguana. He has his characters speak of the enormous suffering that must occur before true atonement can be acquired. Atonement becomes the main concern of Reverend T. Lawerence Shannon, a defrocked member of the clergy, who has strayed far from his original calling. Williams introduces one of his few truly good characters, Hannah Jelkes, a strong individual who is able to resist Shannon's immoral accusations about people and life. She is able to extend understanding and compassion to one in such dire need as Reverend Shannon. Miss Jelkes immediately sees his sense of guilt and his desire for atonement; however, she also sees his desire for a painless atonement, one which Williams contends can not exist. She straightforwardly tells him how difficult it really is to atone for the "sins of the world," as well as his own sins. She insists that such atonement will not come by relaxing and reclining in a hammock:

> Who wouldn't like to suffer and atone for the sins of himself and the world if it could be done in a hammock with

---

[145]Williams, Suddenly, p. 419.

> ropes, instead of nails, on a hill that's so much lovelier than Golgotha, the place of the Skull, Mr. Shannon? There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in that hammock--no nails, no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon?[146]

The Night of the Iguana delves into the innermost ideas behind Reverend T. Lawerence Shannon, and exhibits openly his deep sense of guilt for which he must inevitably be punished. Shannon is seen at the first of the play as a man on the brink of a mental collapse. He is meeting opposition from a group of ladies in a tour he is conducting. This estrangement and opposition has arisen because Reverend Shannon has failed to follow the prescribed route and foremost because he has seduced the youngest member of the group. He brings the tour to the hotel of an old friend, Maxine Faulk. Mrs. Faulk is a widow who offers Shannon a solution to his problem: he can stay with her as her lover and live a life of leisure. At the time of this proposition, he vehemently refuses.

As the play progresses, Shannon meets Hannah Jelkes, who is interested only in imparting friendship and help to everyone, and especially to Reverend Shannon. He confides in her that he is a "man in search of divine forgiveness."[147] He proceeds to tell her that he is a rebel thrown out of

---

[146] Tennessee Williams, Iguana, p. 96.

[147] Jackson, p. 152.

the church for his unorthodox beliefs, and that he is "haunted" by a sense of guilt. Throughout the play, his burden causes him to become violent and at times he has to be physically contained. He makes, through his conversations with Miss Jelkes, his full confession of the "transgressions" which have "alienated" him from inner peace.[148] Hannah Jelkes suggests that he throw away violence and "embrace the quiet virtue of compassion."[149] Miss Jelkes, through her strength and compassion, is able to force Shannon to realize that his true cause of guilt is his desire to achieve revenge against his mother and against God for his birth. Shannon undergoes a change as a result of his talks with Hannah. He begins to see himself more clearly and realizes that he must come to terms with what he has done with his past life. He must accept the fate and punishment due him. Hannah Jelkes leaves Reverend Shannon at the end of the play, and Williams shows a form of atonement more unusual than any previously discussed. Shannon's atonement and punishment is to live with Maxine Faulk, the dominating hotel keeper. He is to place himself in her hands entirely. He realizes after talking to Hannah that suicide is not the answer; true atonement will come to him only if he accepts his failures and accepts whatever life brings him.[150] Henry Hewes in Saturday Review refers to Shannon's future

---

[148] Jackson, p. 152.

[149] Ibid.

[150] Langsam, p. 272.

and atonement as "an extended purgatorial servitude to Maxine Faulk."[151]

The conclusion of The Night of the Iguana shows Shannon continuing his immoral life but doing so without guilt. He is no longer hiding or making "makeshift" arrangements to conceal his desires. Just as the final curtain is about to drop, Shannon's future is made known through Maxine's plans for both her and him at her hotel in the years to come:

> Maxine: Come on down to the beach.
>
> Shannon: I can make it down the hill but not back up.
>
> Maxine: I'll get you back up the hill. You know something! I've got five more years, here, maybe ten, to make this place attractive to the male clientele--and you know what you can do? You can take care of the women with them, that's what you can do, you know that, Shannon...[152]

Despite a bleak future, Shannon has faced reality, and much like Brick Pollictt in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof, has tossed aside the guilt from past encounters and relationships, and is content to continue living, facing openly, his true nature and desires. Shannon, at the end of the play, has ended his long search for the truth in his life and has given up his long pursuit for revenge.

A means of atonement somewhat similar to that of

---

[151]Henry Hewes, "El Purgatorio," Saturday Review of Literature, January 20, 1962, p. 36.

[152]Tennessee Williams, Iguana, p. 126.

Reverend Shannon is the atonement which Benjamin Nelson suggests Tom Wingfield experiences in The Glass Menagerie. Nelson contends that Tom Wingfield's atonement is to continue living and to be constantly plagued by his past and by the people he deserted while selfishly seeking adventure and pleasure.[153]

In The Glass Menagerie, Tom Wingfield forsakes his mother, Amanda Wingfield, and his sister, Laura, at a time when they need him most. The time of The Glass Menagerie is the 1930's and the situation centers around a mother and her son and daughter who are totally dependent on the son for financial support. Having been deserted by her husband several years earlier, Mrs. Wingfield is faced with a plight which basically involves her and her daughter's inability to acquire steady jobs and thus to be self-supporting. The depression adds to this inability, plus the fact that Laura is a terribly shy and withdrawn individual who, like her mother and brother, refuses to face reality. She lives in a dream world filled with glass animals. Mrs. Wingfield's plight is manifested greatly when she learns of her son's plans to join the Merchant Marine. It is further heightened by the news that her plans for Laura in business school have proven unsuccessful. Amanda Wingfield pathetically analyzes her and her daughter's situation and faces the awesome fact that they may soon be helpless and deeply engulfed

---

[153]Nelson, p. 112.

in poverty:

> Amanda: What are we going to do, what is going to become of us, what is the future?...So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? ...We won't have a business career--we've given that up because it just gave us nervous indigestion! What is there left but dependency all our lives? I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position in life. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South--barely tolerated spinsters living upon some sister's husband or brother's wife...encouraged by one in-law to visit another--little birdlike people without any nest--eating the crust of humility all their life! Is that the future that we've mapped out for ourselves? I swear it's the only alternative I can think of! It isn't a very pleasant alternative, is it? [154]

Adding more difficulty to Amanda Wingfield's situation is the fact that she meets utter disaster in attempting to find her daughter a husband. This is due primarily to Laura's inferiority complex, which is brought about because of her crippled leg. The idea of her handicap manifests itself into great proportions in Laura's mind. Her slight physical handicap has become a gigantic, emotional one.

Tom Wingfield is seen as both a character who deserves understanding and scorn. He is virtually forced to provide a living for his mother and sister. This living, sadly enough, has to be made by working in a warehouse, a position which is almost intolerable for him due to his interests in other things, primarily in writing poetry, traveling, and

---

[154] Tennessee Williams, Glass Menagerie, p. 19.

adventure. After several years of work and after having seen that his situation is not going to get any better, he makes the big step in his life. He enlists in the Merchant Marine and leaves his mother and sister helpless, without any means of support. Williams insists that there are great bonds between Tom Wingfield and his sister and the desertion of his sister causes Tom guilt which he is never able to shake loose. Autobiographically, Williams shares his life's experiences and his own guilt concerning his sister, Rose. Williams has said that he personally feels guilty for having virtually deserted his sister at a time when she needed him, a time when Rose was undergoing mental disorders. Williams, himself, was too busy with his own career and college education to devote to Rose his care and understanding. Williams is showing very vividly a portrait of himself through Tom Wingfield. The situation is different but the guilt is primarily the same. Williams depicts Tom, at the play's conclusion, as a lost soul plagued by the past, guilty of desertion and searching for atonement:

> I left Saint Louis. I descended the steps of this fire-escape for the last time and followed, from then on, in my father's foot-steps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space. I traveled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves that were brightly colored but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass a lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window

> is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow. I turn around and look into her eyes...Oh Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies, or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger--anything that can blow your candles out![155]

Nelson states that the underlying belief in The Glass Menagerie is that there is very little, if any, reason for living. Man is by nature incomplete because the universe is fragmented. There is nothing to be done about this condition because nothing can be done. "Human guilt becomes a correlary of universal guilt and man's life is an atonement for the human condition."[156]

In each character in The Glass Menagerie there is a part "like a missing wall or a room left unfurnished, and he tries as well as he can to make up for it."[157] All three principal characters, Amanda, Tom, and Laura use the mask of imagination and dreams to try to compensate for their incompletion. Thus, the Wingfields are broken, "fragmented" people because "the sins of the world are really only its partialities..."[158] They are hopeless people, not responsible for their situation, people who are not able to cope with reality. They are trapped in a universe which is itself

---

[155] Ibid., pp. 123-124.

[156] Nelson, p. 112.

[157] Tennessee Williams, "Desire," p. 85.

[158] Ibid.

incomplete and they are its incomplete products. Williams pictures the Wingfields as being doomed the moment they were born. At best he sees them as people who will survive only for a time. They are people who will never be allowed to triumph. Williams beautifully describes the three Wingfields as possessing courage, beauty, and gallantry, but even so, not possessing enough of these to ever triumph above their situations. Thus, all the Wingfields, according to Nelson, atone for their incompletions as individuals by continuing to live and continuing to face their shortcomings and sins.[159]

In The Glass Menagerie most guilt seems to be directed at Tom. His incompletion is a combination of his inability to accept reality, his sensitive nature, and his failure to accept the father role cast upon him by circumstance. Tom's failure to accept reality is emphasized most by Williams; Tom seeks escape from what the world has brought him by constantly going to movies and magic shows, and by dreaming of exciting adventures at sea. He also escapes his work world by hiding in rest rooms writing poems. This sensitive human being is seen fighting against what seems to him to be a cold and cruel reality, a reality which demands that he take on the father role which he is unable to do. His incompletion is made more obvious by his running from place to place, searching for something that can never be found.

---

[159]Nelson, p. 112.

Apparently, a great deal of time has elapsed before Tom Wingfield concludes the play, and in this conclusion he establishes the burden and guilt he has faced daily while traveling. His guilt seems to have been created not as much from deserting his mother but more from deserting his sister. No indication is given that Tom is suffering because he left his mother but the guilt concerning his sister is bringing about enough pain and suffering to provide true atonement.

Esther Jackson has concluded that "The Glass Menagerie is the growth of understanding. Through his poet-figure, the dramatist invites the spectator to share his fragmentary vision, to re-create his incomplete understanding and to reflect upon a partial truth about the nature of human experience."[160]

Blanche DuBois is still another of Williams's pathetic characters running from the past, attempting to start life again. Blanche DuBois, in A Streetcar Named Desire, is one of Williams's well-known literary characters, primarily becsuse she is presented as being so pathetic and hopeless. A Streetcar Named Desire is the history of a fragile, young lady who initially was reared in Southern aristocracy but as fate would have it, has found herself unable to hold on to this fading institution. Blanche DuBois is portrayed as an ever-so-gentle, young woman who has been engulfed by situations which call for training and skill in

---

[160]Jackson, p. 42.

business and management. She was reared to be a refined, southern lady like others in her family had been reared in the past. When Blanche inherited the family's estate she found it to be heavily mortgaged and economic conditions not being good, she found herself unable to keep control of it; thus, she was soon alone, fighting poverty. Blanche found that she must adjust to her lost aristocratic life and make her own way in the world. She becomes a woman who "invents an artificial world to mask the hideousness of the world she has to inhabit."[161] A Streetcar Named Desire shows the disintergration of a single human being. The play centers around the crucial time when Blanche begins to enter entirely into a dream world and is breaking from reality completely. Williams symbolically has Blanche travel from Belle Reve to Elysian Fields on streetcars named Desire and Cemeteries. From the time Blanche is brought to Elysian Fields the process of disintergration, which began in her late youth, is rapidly concluded until "all that remains is a long vibrating nerve which emits one last discordant shriek, before vanishing into shadow and tinsel."[162]

Blanche is thirty years old and is seen in a very emotional state as she comes to New Orleans to live with her sister, Stella, and her brother-in-law, Stanley. Blanche

---

[161] Brooks Atkinson, "Streetcar Named Desire," New York Times, December 14, 1947, second section, p. 1.

[162] Nelson, p. 122.

is virtually forced to leave her past home because of charges of immorality. However, Blanche is unable to face the truth about herself and the truth in these charges. She wears a "mask" and lives in a make-believe world, lying constantly to Stella and Stanley about her past years. She has let herself become a very loose and degrading individual but refuses to admit that she is still not the dainty, well-bred, sensitive person always used to elegance and the finer things of life. Apparently her last hope is to find shelter and comfort with Stella and Stanley.

She soon finds that there is no safety at Stanley's house. He is a vulgar, coarse, human being who thinks of eating, sleeping, and having sex. Blanche seeks refuge and protection in Mitch, a poker-playing friend of Stanley's. However, her hope for salvation from her emotional state is destroyed by Stanley who discovers the truth about Blanche and exposes her to Mitch. Mitch confronts Blanche about her past sins and immoral affairs and then leaves her. Blanche immediately turns to drink and while intoxicated is sexually attacked by Stanley while Stella is away at a nearby hospital giving birth to his child. Blanche tells Stella about the incident, but Stella is unable to force herself to believe Blanche. Stella and Stanley make arrangements to have Blanche confined to a state mental institution. Thus, Blanche is driven physically and mentally until she is totally lost in a dream world of madness. Blanche, much like Amanda Wingfield,

has been trapped by her environment, both having been brought up in luxury and thus, not "prepared for what the world brought..."[163] Williams brings out this idea when Stella defends Blanche to Stanley: "You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody was as tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change."[164]

Blanche's sojourn to New Orleans was promoted by a need to leave the town where she lived, but primarily to escape the guilt she had within her, that she alone knew about and continued to hide within her "makeshift" arrangements. Blanche must convince and deceive new people in a new place; she insists she is still a lady--refined, delicate, and good. Blanche's guilt comes from several sources. It is manifested greatly because of her loose sexual behavior with many men and especially with a young student whom she taught English in high school. Blanche's guilt and emotional turmoil is further heightened by the experience of marriage to a young, sensitive boy, Alan, whom she found to be homosexual. Guilt instilled itself even deeper in Blanche because she proved to be the indirect cause of Alan's suicide. She confronted him with her knowledge of his homosexual activities. Blanche relates this excruciating

---

[163] Tennessee Williams, Glass Menagerie, p. 80.

[164] Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire (New York: New Directions, 1947), p. 128.

incident to Mitch:

> He was a boy, just a boy when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery--love. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's; although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking--still that thing was there. He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when he'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me, but I wasn't holding him out; I was slipping in with him!...Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty--which wasn't empty, but had two people in it--the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years. Afterward we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way. We danced the Varsouviana. Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few minutes later a shot!...It was because on the dance floor--unable to stop myself--I'd suddenly said--"I saw! I know! You disgust me."[165]

Blanche's continued desire for young men is brought out in part by the guilt she feels for the death of her husband. After his death she says:

> Intimacies with strangers was all I seemed to fill my empty heart with...I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection--even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy...[166]

Blanche's atonement seems not to be found in the death of her physical being but her spiritual and mental

---

[165] Ibid., pp. 108-109.

[166] Ibid., p. 136.

destruction as a human being. She is completely alienated from reality and is totally dependent on illusion by the time the doctors take her to the asylum. Williams, again, is saying that Blanche, too, is an individual without the ability to complete her life successfully because of her incompletion or fragmentation. Her fragmentation, like that of many of Williams's characters, is paralleled to the greater and encompassing incompleteness of the universe itself. "Blanche is doomed from the outset not because she can not find something in the universe to which to cling, but precisely because there is nothing in the universe to which she can appeal."[167] Williams contends that the only absolute thing in the universe is incompletion. It is the original sin in which man is borne and which governs his actions till he dies. Blanche DuBois can do nothing to prevent her destruction.[168]

Blanche finally reaches a moment of truth but this realization is too much for her. She can not continue life and face her sins and incompletions; instead, she escapes into illusions and dreams. She finds her situation intolerable and by failing to adjust and accept her predicament she is destroyed as a human being. Time magazine has poignantly described Blanche and her life:

> Massed behind Blanche are the genteel decay of her small-town forebearers, the sudden suicide

---

[167] Nelson, p. 153.

[168] Ibid., p. 168.

> of her homosexual husband, the soiled annals of her nymphomaniac-whoring, the loss of her reputation, her job, and her home. Unable to face the truth she fashions a dream world in which she is high-bred, sought after, and straight-laced.[169]

Summer and Smoke touches on the theme of guilt. Guilt is directed primarily to John Buchanan, a principal character who is aware of his guilt and sins but makes no effort to relieve himself of them by atonement. He continues to live life without purification. Williams contrasts John Buchanan to Alma Winemiller, a minister's daughter. Williams has said that Alma is the closest character to him, primarily because both she and he were reared in minister's homes and both were instilled with the idea that the flesh is corrupt.[179] Summer and Smoke deals with a sensitive and delicate young woman whose code of life is dominated by her father and whose expected behavior prevents her from being able to adjust to the world in which she lives. Summer and Smoke shows a reversal in the ideas and beliefs of its two major characters, John and Alma. Both are destined to be far apart. John is seen as a wild, worldly and sensual being caught up in the pleasures of the flesh; whereas, Alma is presented as a meek, genteel, and respectable young lady whose interests are far from worldly and are of the spirit. By the play's conclusion, John has begun to settle down and cast aside his youthful extravagances and sinful ways. His

---

[169] Anonymous, "New Play in Manhattan," Time, December 15, 1947, p. 85.

[170] Jennings, P. 72.

thoughts tend more on establishing a family and becoming a respectable physician. Alma, having gone through years of terrifying heartbreak and disallusionment, decides to pull away from all she has stood for and seek the pleasures that she may find, be they sinful or not. Esther Jackson has described Alma's change in this manner: "We watch her transformed--from a Corneillian heroine devoted to love, duty, honor, and chastity, to a Racinian woman torn by insatiable desires and longings."[171] At the beginning of the play, Alma accepts her way of life and thinks only in terms of an eternal life of the spirit. Slowly, she begins to see her desires change to sensual ones when she comes closer to John. Her shyness gradually disappears and she finally pictures herself as the wife of this rebellious young man. Alma hesitates too long, however, before she displays openly to John her affection for him. By the time she actually decides to do so, it is too late. John has found another love and will soon be married. Alma is no longer influenced by her father or her friends and becomes totally apathetic to what her former friends might think of her as she plans to live a life of pleasure. She has changed from a puritan to a cavalier just as John has changed from a cavalier to a puritan.

As the play concludes John and Alma discuss the differences in their lives and both see how they have passed one another by and how they have reversed roles:

---

[171] Jackson, p. 137.

John: You couldn't name it and I couldn't recognize it. I thought it was just a puritanical ice that glittered like flame. But now I believe that it was flame, mistaken for ice. I still don't understand it, but I know it was there, just as I know that your eyes and your voice are the two most beautiful things I've ever known--and also the warmest, althought they don't seem to be set in your body at all...

Alma: You talk as if my body had ceased to exist for you, John, in spite of the fact that you've just counted my pulse. Yet, that's it! You tried to avoid it, but you've told me plainly. The tables have turned with a vengeance! You've come around to my way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call on each other at the same time, and each finding the other one gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer the bell! I came here to tell you that being a gentleman doesn't seem so important to me any more, but you're telling me I've got to remain a lady. The tables have turned with a vengeance![172]

Guilt is apparent in John for the life he has lived and for the cruel ways he has treated Alma in past years. He inwardly feels that he has treated his father as well as Alma with uncalled for cruelty. John feels that he is not decent enough to touch Alma, one so pure and good. He speaks of his wasted life and implies that he is the cause of Alma's decay:

Did anyone ever slide downhill as fast as I have this summer? Ha-ha! Like a greased pig. And yet every evening I put on a clean white suit. I have a dozen. Six in the closet and six in the wash. And there isn't a sign of depravity in my face. And yet all summer I've sat around here like this, remembering last night, and anticipating the next one! The

---

[172]Tennessee Williams, Summer and Smoke (New York: New Directions, 1948), p. 52.

> trouble with me is, I should have been castrated.[173]

Castration has been a form of atonement for Chance Wayne in Sweet Bird of Youth, but if this form is to be taken by John, the author does not indicate it. John Buchanan is one of Williams's characters who seems to indicate that he deserves atonement and punishment for his sins, but makes no attempt to find such atonement. Williams leaves the character without retribution and shows him continuing to live with his guilt.

Signi Falk attempts to explain Williams's characters according to his(Williams's) own prejudices and neuroses. His characters preoccupied with guilt and atonement are often people fighting against two polarities, such as the conflict between flesh and spirit, the cavalier and the puritan, the sensitive and the barbaric, and the innocent child and corrupted adult. Falk contends that these are some of the many polarities struggling within Williams himself. The playwright shows strong identification with the corrupted derelict and the fugitive. He identifies with men who are corrupted by their environment. Williams's blessings are seemingly directed to those who have something lacking in their nature and to those who have been contaminated by the world.[174]

Atonement is the end product sought by many of Williams's characters both directly and indirectly. This

---

[173] Ibid., pp. 119-120.

[174] Falk, p. 159.

atonement is the easing of pain or inflamation that slowly rises within the human mind. Williams, himself, must undoubtedly have sought or is still seeking a means of relieving guilt which arises from incompletion since his writing voices such concern for this predicament. Williams offers no real hope for those who are incomplete; moreover, he contends that the best of all possible solutions to human incompletion and unnatural desire is to face directly the situation and live with it. Hypocrisy seems to be one thing Williams detests most in people and his characters reveal explicitly the ineffective outcomes of those who seek to be something they are not and to conceal something that is in their nature. Williams sums up his beliefs concerning the things that are to be when he addresses Orpheus in his poem, "Orpheus Descending." He tells Orpheus that there are things that can never be completed in this life and some people are marked by their nature, and will never mend their "broken wall:"

> And you must learn, even you, what
> we have learned, the passion there is
> for declivity in this world, the impulse
> to fall that follows a rising fountain.
>
> Now Orpheus, crawl, O shamefaced fugitive
> crawl back under the crumbling broken wall
> of yourself, for you are not stars, sky-set
> in the shape of a lyre, but the dust of those
> who have been dismembered by Furies.[175]

---

175 Tennessee Williams, In The Winter of Cities: Poems (New York: New Directions, Inc., 1956), p. 28.

CHAPTER V
CONCLUSION

> "Writing is a purification of that which is sick in the person. It's been the only cure for me!"
>
> Tennessee Williams

The themes of guilt and atonement are intergrated throughout Williams's works. Often these themes are very direct, but in some works they are more underlying. Guilt haunts most of Williams's characters in some measure, but does not drive all of his characters to make sincere efforts to cleanse themselves. Only those that feel deeply that they can no longer exist with such burden seek true atonement. Williams's characters who have sought atonement have done so primarily in one of two ways: (1)by violent death; (2)by an open admission of guilt--a continuation of life with an awareness of one's weaknesses and incompletions. Williams is much like his guilt-ridden characters. He struggles with his own incompletions, as he has in the past, but is presently seeking a form of atonement. Williams has said on occasion that he is burdened with a great sense of guilt which has arisen for many reasons.[178] The most obvious reasons which one could speculate are: (1)his guilt at having

---

[176]Jennings, p. 72.

deserted his sister at a time when she was undergoing mental instability; (2)guilt for forsaking the puritan beliefs he had been taught, especially those adhered to by his grandfather, the Reverend Dakin, whom he idolized; (3) guilt at never having achieved any meaningful relationship with his father; and (4)guilt from having sexual relationships with men; consequently, guilt from having made "makeshift" arrangements to conceal his true nature.

It appears that Williams has made an ongoing effort to expose himself more candidly to the public since the late 1960's, a striking phenomenon since he has for so many years preferred to remain silent about the very personal and private experiences in his life. He has made himself more available to people(critics, scholars, columnists, etc.) who want to know more about him and his life. The concluding premise of this thesis is that Williams, himself, is deliberately and sincerely seeking atonement for the sins and incompletions in his own life. The form of atonement which Williams has chosen is similar to that which he has Brick Pollictt in Cat On A Hot Tin Roof choose--mental laceration, an open confession of all that is in his nature and a willingness to accept the suffering and pain that accompanies society's estrangement in order to be cleansed and "purified."

Saturday Review's columnist, Jim Gaines, has stated in his recent interview with Williams that he admires Williams most because he is "one of those literary artist whose

works spring from a passionate desire to 'tell all' about himself and his work."[177] Williams's personal purification and atonement would seem to come from his writings and from his interviews with various members of the press. In two recent interviews Williams has said: "Writing is a confessional, and I feel that I confess everything in these interviews."[178] "I believe that writing is a purification of that which is sick in a person. I've always found a total release in writing, and it's always been the only cure for me."[179]

Many of Williams's intimate relationships with both women and men have been recently related to the public by him in an attempt to expose all and forsake the hypocrisy of the world. An overbearing sense of guilt is the reason for his exposing such personal feelings. Williams, in 1973, spoke candidly about some of the events in his life which have caused him guilt:

> I've been profligate, but being a puritan I naturally tend to exaggerate guilt. I'm not a typical homosexual...I understand the tenderness of women and the lust and libido of the male, which are, unfortunately, too seldom combined in women. That's why I seek out the androgynous so I can get both...[180]

---

[177] Gaines, p. 25.

[178] Jennings, p. 84.

[179] Gaines, p. 29.

[180] Jennings, p. 72.

> In college I was deeply in love with my roommate, "Green Eyes," but neither of us knew what to do about it. If he came to my bed, I'd say, "what do you want?" I was so puritanical. But my first real encounter was in New Orleans at a new year's eve party during World War Two. A very handsome paratrooper climbed up to my grilled veranda and said,"come down to my place," and I did. That was my coming out and I enjoyed it.[181]

Similar personal experiences have recently been released by Williams which lead to greater insight to the understanding of his past life. Until 1970, Williams never openly talked about his homosexuality.[182]

Previously, scholars have discussed Williams's works and have posed questions as to whether there were strong autobiographical relationships between Williams and his characters. Since Williams is presently revealing fully his past encounters and his intimate experiences, scholars are more easily analyzing his works and understanding them more clearly. Greater understanding can now be achieved especially in regard to some of Williams's short works which are written in the first person. In these he has related his physical attraction to various men, even as a child; these now seem less puzzling and more understandable.

Williams's atonement is like his characters' in that it is not a painless one. He relates the awkwardness and pressure society has placed on him since his "exposure." "I became ostracized in Key West. People drove past my house

---

[181] Ibid., p. 74.

[182] Ibid.

screaming, "faggot!"[183] However, with this suffering has come a new freedom in Williams, a freedom that has released the guilt and frustration which have festered inside him for so many years.

Williams realizes he is like Anthony Burns in "Desire and the Black Masseur" and Sebastian Venable in Suddenly Last Summer and many other characters, in that they are by their natures incomplete, just as Williams likewise feels the universe is incomplete. His nature has a "missing wall" which will never be built. But, unlike Burns and Sebastian Venable, Williams has not chosen violent death as his form of atonement; instead, he has sought atonement in the same manner as Reverend Shannon and Brick Pollictt--a continuation of life, recognizing and facing the past, and thus, casting aside guilt. "Williams believes that a man's heart is his own; he believes in facing the tough words--hate, loss, sickness, failure, death; but he also believes that a man must continue to be, to act, and to go!"[184] Williams has expressed his belief that false masks are of no real value in life; they must eventually be discarded if true peace is to be acquired. In one of Williams's earliest works, "The Mysteries of the Joy Rio," he states this belief:

> the soul becomes intolerably burdened with lies that have to be told to the world, and unless this burden is relieved by entire honesty with some one person who is trusted

---

[183] Ibid.

[184] Clayton, p. 207.

> and adored the soul will finally collapse
> beneath its weight of falsity.[185]

Hypocrisy seems to be the one thing Williams is most recently attacking. Primarily so at this time because he has made his break with illusion and wants to see his friends do the same. Williams has recently disclosed in an interview with Tom Buckley in Esquire his attempt to convince others, especially his close friends, of the reward and freedom in admitting one's true nature and living with it. Williams speaks of his conversation with his friend, David Loovis, also a writer:

> The truth is all that's important.
> Tell the truth. You were the first one
> to mark me as a homosexual in print, but
> you concealed your own homosexuality.
> You're never gonna amount to anything as
> a novelist until you learn to tell the
> truth.[186]

In response to a question asked him by Buckley about what his feelings were concerning the emotional turmoil he has undergone prior to 1970, Williams answered by quoting a passage from a play, a passage he apparently felt summed up well his sentiments. This passage was from John Colton's 1920 melodrama, The Shanghai Gesture:

> Yes--yes--yes--all--all I survived--whippings
> with hippo hide when I was stubborn--hot
> dung thrust into my nostrils and stinging
> leeches in my ears so I could not sleep--
> I survived!--sulphur burned on my naked back

---

[185] Tennessee Williams, "The Mysteries of Joy Rio," in Hard Candy, p. 108.

[186] Buckley, p. 108.

> to make my tired body gay...soles of my feet cut open and pebbles sewn inside so I could not run away--I survived! I survived![187]

Williams has, since the beginning of his writing career dealt with desire, incompletion in human nature, fragmentation in the universe, guilt, and atonement. He has for years written about people seeking atonement and now has decided to do the same. He best establishes the premise that he is undergoing atonement with this recent statement: "But I don't care what anyone says about me anymore which gives me a new sense of freedom...I've never enjoyed life as much as I'm enjoyin' it now."[188] This new "sense of freedom" is in essence Williams's purification and atonement.

---

[187] John Colton, The Shanghai Gesture in Buckley, p. 100.

[188] Jennings, p. 74.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Atkinson, Brooks. "Streetcar Named Desire." New York Times, December 14, 1947.

Barnett, Lincoln. "Tennessee Williams." Life, February 16, 1949, pp. 117-118.

Buckley, Tom. "Tennessee Williams Survives." Atlantic Monthly, November, 1970, pp. 100-108.

Clayton, John. Themes in Tennessee Williams, Published Dissertation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960.

Clurman, Harold. "Tennessee Williams: Poet and Puritan." New York Times, March 29, 1970, pp. 5-11.

Cohn, Ruby. Dialogues in American Drama. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.

Donahue, Francis. The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams. New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Company, 1964.

Falk, Signi. Tennessee Williams. New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1961.

Gaines, Jim. "A Talk About Life and Style With Tennessee Williams." Saturday Review of Literature, April, 1972, pp. 24-31.

Gould, Jean. Modern American Playwrights. New York: Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1966.

Hewes, Henry. "El Purgatorio." Saturday Review of Literature, January 20, 1962, pp. 34-37.

Hurley, Paul. "Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur: An Analysis." Saturday Review, January, 1964, pp. 54-58.

Jackson, Esther Merle. The Broken World of Tennessee Williams. The University of Wisconsin Press, 1966.

Jennings, Robert C. "Tennessee Williams." Playboy, March, 1973, pp. 70-84.

Langsam, Paula. A Study of the Major Character in Selected Plays, Published Dissertation. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1967.

Maxwell, Gilbert. Tennessee Williams and Friends. Cleveland: World Publications, 1965.

Moor, Paul. "A Mississippian Named Tennessee." Harper's Magazine, July, 1948, pp. 63-71.

Nelson, Benjamin. Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Works. New York: Oblensky, 1961.

Peden, William H. "Mad Pilgrimage: The Short Stories of Tennessee Williams." Studies in Short Fiction, Summer, 1964, pp. 243-250.

Rice, Robert. "Tennessee Williams." Time, December 15, 1947, pp. 83-85.

Steen, Mike. A Look At Tennessee Williams. New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1969.

Taylor, William, ed. Modern American Drama: Essays in Criticism. Deland Florida: Edwards, Inc., 1960.

"Tennessee Williams." New York Herald Tribune, March 3, 1957.

Weales, Gerald C. Tennessee Williams. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1965.

Williams, Edwina Dakin. Remember Me To Tom. New York: G. Putnam's and Son, 1963.

Williams, Tennessee. Auto-Da-Fe in American Blues. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1948.

_____. "Desire and the Black Masseur." One Arm and Other Stories. New York: New Directions, 1948.

_____. "Foreward." essay in Sweet Bird of Youth. New York: Signet Books, 1962, pp. ix-xii.

_____. Cat On A Hot Tin Roof. New York: New Directionns, 1952.

_____. The Glass Menagerie. New York: New Directions, 1945.

_____. In the Winter of Cities: Poems. New York: New Directions, 1956.

_____. "The Mysteries of Joy Rio," in Hard Candy. New York: New Directions, 1954.

_____. The Purification, in 27 Wagons Full of Cotton. New York: New Directions, 1945.

_____. The Night of the Iguana. New York: New Directions, 1961.

_____. "The Resemblance Between a Violin Case and a Coffin," in Hard Candy. New York: New Directions, 1954.

_____. Small Craft Warnings. New York: New Directions, 1972.

_____. A Streetcar Named Desire. New York: New Directions, 1947.

_____. Sweet Bird of Youth. New York: Signet Books, 1962.

_____. Suddenly Last Summer in The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, Volume III. New York: New Directions, 1971.

_____. Summer and Smoke. New York: New Directions, 1948.

_____. "Survival Notes: A Journal." Esquire, September, 1972, pp. 130-134.

_____. Ten Blocks on the Camino Real, in American Blues. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1948.