

A Writer's Role in Social, Cultural and Political Awakening

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Abstract

Literature is the reflection of human history and human civilization. Literature evolved as man did. A writer writes can choose to create their art for art's sake or they can write as the representative of their society and works through writing for the betterment of the society they write in. A writer cannot create without observing the environment and consciously or unconsciously they include society and its norms in their writing. The more sensitive a writer is, the more likely he is to deal with the problems in society or the country. A sensitive writer cannot be blind to the vices he or she sees around and is compelled to bring about the change through their pen and history has seen it. Tennessee Williams was a conscious presenter of such issues in families like domination of women, their sensibilities, their weaknesses and strengths which he saw around him growing up. Family and society as well as the question of individual freedom of action and thoughts have been the themes in his plays.

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Every writer needs to write for or against what he/she sees while imbibing the images in his or her society and consequently the writer must be consciously or subconsciously desirous of the change they want to bring about in the social, cultural and political phenomena visible around them. In American drama, the dramatists have attempted to give vent to the frustration and fury they felt watching various problems in society and political panorama. One such writer was Tennessee who, having seen a harsh childhood as his father had aversion to him for being a little different from others of his age or effeminate, rarely wrote the plays when he failed to include autobiographical elements. Socialism Critics disagree as to what extent Tennessee Williams may be considered a social critic.

John Gassner says, "There is no particular social passion in his work." Nancy Tischler, one of Williams' critics and biographers, says that he is "no social critic" to some extent because of his uncertainty about world affairs. Nevertheless, it is true that a great deal of the dramatic tension Williams' plays is derived from the conflict between society and the individual. In the majority of Williams' plays, we

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can observe a common characteristic: at least one of the major characters finds that he is unable to remain in the position which society allotted him or her. Williams' characters are representatives of the society they live in and at the same time they seem to be against it because they find it not up to the standards they have inside their own world. Taken individually, each of his plays has a special claim for inclusion in presenting a picture of society that is at the point of dissolution. One of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda, looks backwards to the past social order. Her son, Tom, remembers this as a time when the world was about to be shaken by total war and thus he is more connected with the UNNECESSARY WARS caused by the fads of the unthinking politicians and their ego and that have been a massive factor in the disillusionment of the contemporary generations. The focal character, Laura, is hopelessly trapped in the DISSOLVING SOCIETY of the present.

'*A Streetcar Named Desire*' develops the CONFLICT between the past and the present social orders. The destruction of Blanche, a victim of the fake values of the fake society, signifies an end to the past of gracious virtues, a final destruction of the old order. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* exhibits a family and a society in which every relationship is in some way corrupted by mendacity, a society in 'which each man is cut off from those most closely related to him, each line of communication blocked. Suddenly 'Last Summer' marks a transition in Williams' views in that the corrupt world has evolved into a devouring universe. '*The Night of the Iguana*' examines further the problem of man alienated from a god he considers to be a "senile delinquent," While the play focuses on man's frustrations in trying to communicate with his fellow men, it also explores the conflict between organised religion and the individual's need for an acceptable god. Shallow amusements and vicarious experiences offer a dream-like escape for this segment of society. Like Tom, in *The Glass Menagerie*, many find escape in the movies: "People go to the movies instead of moving! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them." While the majority of the world watches the Spanish Civil War and the approach of the Second World War, the American middle class sinks deeper into escape "through "hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, movies, and sex.

Unlike her mother who can still face the threatening aspects of society, Laura Wingfield has given up and loses herself into the world of glass animals and old phonograph records. By contemporary standards her life has a series of defeating encounters with reality; that is to say, she is NOT PRODUCTIVE. How education system can be destructive to an adolescent's growth and her psychological health can be seen when Lora chooses to quit school rather than to attempt them and risk failure. For six years she attempted nothing productive except a course in business college, which ended in dismal failure. These activities, like her glass collection, call for appreciation rather than production. But Williams makes it evident that SOCIETY HAS NO PLACE FOR PASSIVE APPRECIATORS.

Laura's DILLEMA—marriage or a career—becomes the focal problem for all other characters in the play and this problem is still to be seen in our Indian youth. As the other characters react to Laura's lostness, they reflect their own concerns. Laura, herself, steadily retreats. The PRESSURES OF SOCIETY are no longer something for her to contend with—her battles are all over and lost. The

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demands of her society that she become productive, that she fit into the traditional pattern of career or marriage become increasingly less important to Laura, as she slips into her world of glass figures. A frustrated young poet, Tom feels that his life is becoming a "nailed-up coffin" from which escape becomes more difficult with every passing day. In a confrontation with his mother, Tom tells her that "Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter!" This is a statement of one of Williams' most persistent themes: that *man must not surrender himself to the drudgery*. For Amanda, the present reality is an intolerable state of insecurity which can only be resolved by planning for the future. When she finds that Laura has stopped attending courses at the business school, she flings at her daughter those very questions which trouble her so much. As a deserted wife and a single parent Amanda understands better than most other the demands the society makes on the unmarried or deserted woman. 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' is about the *problems of mendacity*—the effects of lies and lying on the family. It also is concerned with the *problem of acceptance of homosexuality, the use of alcoholism, inheritance, the decay of family relationship and the dichotomy* between a man's conformity to society and his conformity to his own inner sensibilities. Men of science, business, and religion are characterized; and the familiar topics of poverty, the unproductive woman, the destructive force of illusion, and survival of the fittest are also present in this play. In *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof*, we see family relationships at the point of total collapse. The mendacity against which Brick has armed himself with liquor is glorified within his own family. Brick and Big Daddy can't communicate until each has touched the ultimate point of mendacity within the other. Brick and Maggie are living in a marriage without nuptial love although Maggie wants it.

Tennessee's own familial conflicts brought his bitter experience in his themes in his plays. When the family moved to Missouri, Williams worked in an environment from which he drew many of his themes and characters. Once again, in observing Williams' life, we find that there is a kind of dissonance between his upbringing and his environment: drawn suddenly from a rural area of Southern traditions, and then placed into an urban center of industry, Williams seems to have developed a reaction toward disillusionment and injustice, and these emotions often appear to serve as the engines of his artwork. Elia Kazan, who later directed Williams' work both on stage and on film, described how Williams used his own experience to generate artistic masterpieces: "Everything in his life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life." In this respect, Williams' familial and residential background would seem an important aspect of his work.

'*A Streetcar Named Desire*' presents the way women were treated in the post-war American society. They were treated as men's inferiors. Society imposed many restrictions on them, which disabled them to live fully. They couldn't decide what their lives should look like. Through all the women characters of the play, we see the roles they were supposed to accept without complaint, but also through all men characters we see that they also had to fulfill some roles imposed on them. This play gives us an insight into the lives of Blanche DuBois, Stella and Stanley Kowalski and we will see how gender roles controlled and spoilt their lives.

According to *Encyclopedia of Sex and Gender*, a stereotype is "a mental picture or attitude that is an oversimplified opinion or a prejudiced attitude. That oversimplification or prejudgment is often

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connected with a person's previous experience with people. **It is much easier to categorize somebody into a group than actually think of them as a unique, individual person.** It is in a person's nature that, when we meet someone new, we tend to immediately connect them with someone similar in behavior or appearance. Stereotypes help us predict other people's behavior, but they also fail to recognize individual differences and overlap between groups. Because women are physically smaller and weaker and men are stronger and tougher, they take on different kinds of jobs – women often do more domestic things while men do more physical labor. Yet, that does not mean that these jobs and duties should be ascribed to all women and all men. In addition, even though biological factors may impose predispositions and restrictions on development, socio-cultural factors have important effects. Culture prescribes how babies are delivered, how children are socialized and dressed, what tasks children are taught, and what roles adult men and women adopt. The scope and progression of children's behaviors, even behaviors considered to be biologically determined, are governed by culture. (Ember and Ember 19) One form of keeping stereotypes alive and spread is literature – it is often used to create many different belief systems. What is also important about stereotypes, particularly gender stereotypes, is that the majority of them were created by men throughout history.

It is a well-known fact that the most of literary works about women was written by men and it was men who created the world-known stereotypes about women such as the character of a sacrificial mother, the wife, the Southern belle, angel in the house, a wicked stepmother, the mammy, etc. It should also be mentioned that women were not the only subjects of stereotyping. Men, actually, also have to bear the burden of stereotypes as they are often represented in literature as strong, macho warriors. For decades, that image was the only acceptable image of what is known as a "real man." Stereotypes are used to support traditional sex roles which include women being the nurturers of the family and men being breadwinners. Even today when the world seems to be a much more tolerant place and when many countries are, or are in the process of, accepting democracy, women and men still face prejudice that has been asserted in our culture centuries ago. Feminists started the fight for equality of sexes and, despite the fact that they have achieved much there is still a lot to be done. "As a playwright Tennessee Williams has chosen to feature women as major characters more often than men. This choice in view of his unusual perception has enabled him to display his talent in a remarkable succession of plays." By writing more on women than men Tennessee has shown his sensitivity towards the womenfolk and has been successful in his presentation of the women characters.

In his plays Williams has shown society to be a source of growing frustration to humanity in its struggle for survival. In depicting the problems with society, Williams has chosen the character of the "alien" or the "fugitive" to symbolize the thoughtful and sensitive elements in humanity. Although all of Williams' aliens have much more significance than mere symbols of resistance to society, Eric Bentley observes that. Not only are Williams' alienated characters afraid of society, they have already broken some—if not all—of their social ties. Because of their unique position as outsiders, they can

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make meaningful judgments about the world from which they are withdrawing; in fact, they are the only ones who can, for, as James Roberts points out, "if one depends entirely upon the society in which one lives for a sense of reality and identity, it is impossible to take a stand against that society without reducing oneself to nothingness in the process." Williams' characters have depended on society, but they have found it lacking, even threatening. If his characters are not taking a stand against their society, they are at least withdrawing from it. These disillusioned idealists are finally forced to see the world as Williams sees it, and his is a bleak view. Seeing that Tennessee has experienced what he shows his characters the victims of we can be of the view that Tennessee desired to change the social and cultural milieu through his plays and he understood his task to be as important as his writing was.

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