

Theme of time and past of youth in a couple of distinct ways in Summer and Smoke

Syed Afshan

Research scholar, Department of Comparative Language & Culture
Barkatullah University Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh
Syedafrayeem[at]gmail[dot]com

Abstract- The phrase 'Summer and Smoke' comes from the Hart Crane's Poem "Emblems of Conduct". It is a two part, thirteen scene 1948 play by Tennessee Williams, originally titled "Chart of Anatomy". The play centers on a highly-strung, unmarried minister's daughter, Alma Wine Miller, and the spiritual sexual romance that nearly blossoms between her and the wild, undisciplined young doctor who grew up next door, John Buchanan. Williams makes clear during the play that Alma means 'Soul' in Spanish whereas John represents the 'Earth'. The play's end is tragic because both have traded places philosophically. The thing that makes this play so tragic is that John is not a bad guy. John is a damaged Soul, and he is determined to live up to everyone's horrible opinions of him. Williams focuses on a Stagnant Society that is hostile and unaccommodating to the young. In his play, women who attempt to talk of a higher love or spirituality are often knocked off their self-erected pedestals into the arms of a dominant man. He exposes Society's double standard where men are expected to sow their wild oats, but if women, the pillars of Society, choose this path, it is viewed as scandalous. As a victim of Society, Alma is overpowered by a man who values only sexual gratification in a relationship.

Keywords- Sexual Jealousy; Victim; Society; Tragic ending; Theme; Lost of Youth

1. INTRODUCTION

Summer and Smoke is a play about appetites, the sexual appetites of a group of young misfits over one hot summer. Williams focuses on a stagnant Society that is hostile and unaccommodating to the young. All five of the central characters have been catastrophically let down by their parents, and are looking for ways to patch up that void. Lacking in the most part a language of love, they seek to replace this with sex. All, that is, apart from my character, Alma. All her life she has been desperately in love with the son of the local doctor, and she believes that she craves his mind, unable to acknowledge that what is really feeling is lust. The hysterical symptoms she displays – "nervous heart trouble", Panic attacks, a tendency towards mental breakdown – were all, Williams believed, indicative of suppressed desires. He recognized these things, and he wrote brilliant female characters because he felt particularly close to them. Like Alma, Williams worried about his heart his whole life. Like her, he grew up in an environment of religious prudery, where sex came as a shattering experience. Alma is a very idealistic person but is incapable of transforming her idealistic philosophy into positive acts; therefore her idealism becomes illusory. In essence, as is typical of William's Southern genteel lady, Alma can not transform the world of her dreams into reality. Alma reflects the subconscious conflict between puritan ethics and instinctual desire, or as it is more commonly referred to by Williams, "the bottle between flesh and spirit". Initially Alma is not aware of this internal conflict, because she suppresses whatever carnal desires

she has which are not in keeping with her religious upbringing. Later the conflict becomes apparent to Alma when the man she loves rejects her chaste idealism and insists upon the physical nature of relationships between men and women. Alma does not handle the news of John's engagement or his rejection of very well. For many days she (like Laura) has not gone beyond the premises of her house or even dressed properly. There is clearly a passionate void in her life that she wants to fill, and, like Laura, she takes her fate in hand. She leaves her home and goes to the "sacred fountain", a land mark in Glorious Hills. It is here that she meets a traveling salesman and, after talking with him, asks him if he would like to go to the Casino. It is important to note that some critics perceive Alma's symbolic departure from the fountain as an indication of her future promiscuous behaviour. Mc Glinn seems to be more an target in maintaining the following idea:

"Unnumbered by false Idea of what love should be, she is ready to accept another for what he is and make the most of this human contact".

The characters that have been discussed have learned to deal with their problems, even if in usual and somewhat erratic ways. In other words, whether these women are living introverted and reclusive lives, building illusions of grandeur about their past, or fulfilling their sub-conscious sexual fantasies, they are nonetheless sane individuals who are attempting to Cope with life's situations. Williams may have been writing in response to his own spiritual battle over his sexual orientation. Alma's

parents are not concerned with meeting the personal needs of each other, they show little interest in attending to Alma's need for parental love and assurance. It is no wonder that Williams describes Alma as "Spinsterish" for lack of appropriate parental role models (1.557), because she has never recognized any signs of a healthy relationship within her family. In this sense, she very nearly approaches Laura's Social maladjustment in the Glass Menagerie.

2. DISCUSSION

The play gives serious treatment of the Puritan – Cavalier Conflict. Williams divides the issue by developing two parallel lines, the separate stories about the two main characters: Alma Wine-miller and Dr. John Buchanan. In the prologue, she and John are shown as children at a fountain of Eternity in the town in the early years of the twentieth century. The scene shows their pattern as adults: attracted to each other but unable to achieve true communication because she is sensitive and primarily spiritual and he, though capable of a degree of sensitivity, is primarily physical. He is thus representative, in sense, of the anatomy chart that he shows Alma near the end of the play. As an adult Alma is given to panic attacks and frequently goes to John's father for help, even in the middle of the night. John, the son of a physician, frequently at odds with his father. The Buchanans and Wine-millers are next-door neighbours. In the end, John achieves an understanding of 'soul' and will be a successful and empathic physician and husband. Alma has been transformed beyond modesty. She throws herself at him, saying, "Now I have changed my mind, or the girl who said 'no', – suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her". But he has change, he is engaged to settle down with a respectable, younger girl; and, as he tries to convince Alma that what they had between them was indeed a "spiritual bond", she realizes, in any event, that it is too late. Alma accosts a young traveling salesman at dusk in the town park; and as the curtain falls, she follows him off to enjoy the "after – dark entertainment" at Moon lake casino, where she had resisted Buchanan's attempt to reduce her the summer before I will excerpt the killer last scene between the two of them Alma comes to John-Unaware that he has become engaged. . . . And basically offers her to him sexually. It is an enormous sacrifice to someone like her. . . .it represents a betrayal of all her deepest held convictions but she is now desperate and completely broken. She laughs hysterically for no reason. She is always on the verge of Panic. Dr. John then must inform her that there is no hope.....he has promised himself to another woman. The key here – something that most actors who play forget – is that it is wrenching for him to let her go as it is for her to let him go. He just has better coping skills. But he too is saying goodbye to his last chance at real happiness.

Alma was a Reverend's daughter and she live up to that responsibility. She was polite and respectful of

other. She dressed neatly and modestly. She had almost British Sounding accent. She was also described as having the voice and mannerism that "belong to years of church entertainments, to the position of hostess in a rectory" [Williams P. 127-131]

Williams exposes Society's double Standard where men are expected to sow their wild Oats, but if women, the pillars of Society, choose this path, it is viewed as scandalous. Donald Spoto indicates that duality is part of everyone's inner nature, and extreme character transformation in *Summer and Smoke* should be viewed as contrived. Spoto also conveys that the two main characters in the play John and Alma, are doomed to estrangement because of the feature that is very typical William's writing where. . . . balanced union between the right mates are very rare indeed". [Adler and Thomas, p.2]. Williams contrasts the soul of the south with the strong and attractive, yet purposeless body of the South through John, who is attracted to adventure, scientific progress, and freedom from the restraints of traditional moral code [Millette, Kate, p. 58]. This interpretation presents the victim/ perpetrator concept in a broader Social Context.

Delma F. Presley maintains that Williams, like his predecessor, D.H. Lawrence, may have used the theme of spirit versus flesh to decipher the conflict with in his own soul because *Summer and Smoke* is reminiscent of Lawrence's 'The virgin and the Gypsy [R; Emerson, p. 93] Williams admits, he indulged in Sexual freedom while living in New Orleans in the late 1930's (Lori, p. 59] Alma's sensitivity and her sheltered upbringing cause her to bust into tears [1.588, 1.603, 2.639]. Alma's instability also affects her perception of sex, which she fears and rejects. She has conflicting emotions toward John, and while she rejects a sexual relationship with him, she finds herself physically attracted to him. Alma, like many other Williams heroines, is a victim of her Southern heritage where woman was viewed as either sexless or fallen. John adopt a blend of the physical and spiritual. Instead of Alma, he chooses to marry Nellie, who represents a blend of Alma's purity and Rosa's sensuality.

3. CONCLUSION

At the end it is to be concluded that Williams interweaves elements of autobiographical fact fiction in *Summer and Smoke* as is typically in all his writing. The town which is the setting of the play. Glorious Hill, Mississippi, was previously known as Clarks dale, where Edwina's parents lived, and where Williams, his sister and mother took refuge before their move to St. Laws in 1918 [Leverich, p. 54] Alma's lack of Socialization and inadequate parental nurturing cause her to appear emotionally and psychologically unstable which is another cause for her being marginalized. Alma is like so many of William's other tragic characters that transition from integration to degradation, illusion to disillusion, or sexual certainty to confusion" [Timpane, p. 174]. She as the Marginalized "other" becomes lost and incomplete, while

her male counterpart achieves society's forgiveness and completion.

WORKS CITATION

- [1] Adler, Thomas P. A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern: Boston: Twayne, 1990.
- [2] Dobosh, R. Emerson: Violence Against Wives: A case Against patriarchy. New York: Macmillan, 1979.
- [3] Leathers Singh, Lori, "Flying the Jally. Tennessee Williams The Glass Menagerie" Tennessee Williams: Critical Insights. Ed. Brenda. Dasadema, Pasadena, CA: Salem, 2011, 148-170.
- [4] Leverich, Lyle. Tam: The unknown Tennessee Williams, New York: Crown, 1995.
- [5] Millette, Kate. Sexual Politics. New York:Avan, 1970.
- [6] Spota, Donald. The Kindness of strangers: The Life of T.W. New York: Da Tappo
- [7] Timbane, Hohn, Weak and Divided people: Tennessee Williams and the written women.
- [8] Williams Tennessee. "The Eccentricities of Nightingale and Summer and Smoke: Two plays by Tennessee Williams" New York, NY: New Directions Books, 1948.