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## **Impact of Commercialisation and Lack of Social Values in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire***

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### **Abstract:**

Tennessee Williams is one of the three great American playwrights of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the other two being O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Tennessee Williams has written many world famous plays, novels and short stories. Tennessee Williams has explored the various themes like incest, homosexuality, cannibalism, impotency, drug-addiction, madness and sexual frenzy in his plays. Besides these themes he has also documented the social values like love, friendship, fraternity, mutual cooperation, affection, sympathy etc in his plays. He has delineated how the modern industrial society has abolished the feelings of love, sympathy, friendship, fraternity, the meaningful relationship, and the beauty of life. The industrial society has turned people into islands. The frustrated people cannot face that society which doesn't fulfil their ambitions and longings. *The Glass Menagerie* was written in 1944 and was filmed in 1950 and *A Streetcar Named Desire* published in 1947 and was screened in 1951 under the same titles. In my paper I shall try to analyse how the commercial society has turned all the individuals into islands, self-centred and subhuman. Only solution to revive these social values is to conceive respect, dignity, affection fraternity, communication in society.

**Keywords: commercialisation, ambition, memory, communication, materialism, self-centred, commercialisation.**

Tennessee Williams has delved deep into the themes of incest, homosexuality, cannibalism, impotency, drug-addiction, cancer, madness and sexual frenzy. His characters are defeated, frustrated and beaten people who are unable grapple with the adverse circumstances of life. Some scholars believe that Williams considered art as a kind of X-ray machine that exposes the unexpected, hidden, dark spots on the plates. He often hides, according to him, the healthy aspect of human personality and discloses what is abnormal,

unhealthy and tormented. This is an aspect of his drama that seems to hurt the aesthetic sensibility of some of the critics and appears to be a cheap trick to gain popularity. However, it would be pertinent to point out that sensationalism, violence and sex have not been introduced by Williams in his plays for their own sake. It is, we believe, the inevitable result of the suppression of the human spirit by the industrial society, which for Williams is the symbol of evil. The earth dominated by the industrial society is for Williams a corrupting place and the characters of Williams are unable to cope with the current that sweeps them down. They do not check the current nor swim upstream. They are defeated and their defeats torture them. Flight seems to be only way out of this corrupting earth. Regarding this Stephen S. Stanton in his edited book titled *Tennessee William: A Collection of Critical Essays* has observed: "To surrender to the evil is, to Williams, man's major sin; to continue the fugitive flight is what Williams asks. The classic Williams plea: Continue the quest." (Stanton, 110)

The paths which the protagonists of Williams take up in order to avoid the corruption of the earth or in order to carry on their struggle are violence, sex and illusions. The struggle of these characters against the harsh realities is desperate and pathetic. Therefore, it would be proper to keep the violence and sex in its proper perspective and not treat it as the main object of representation by Tennessee Williams. Most of Williams' characters are dreamers, fugitives and outcasts. They suffer from loneliness and tensions brought about by violence and intolerance. Social values in this society are love, friendship, fraternity, mutual-cooperation, affection etc. All these values have a great place in society. Without these values, we cannot run a family in a disciplined way, nor a nation because the progress of a nation depends on its citizens. But with the passage of time, these values have been degenerating because we have become materialistic, money-minded and self-centered. We are all caught up in hopeless circumstances. We have become escapist and can't face the reality. When a society loses these values, the result is clash between a family and a nation.

Through the examples of Tennessee Williams' world famous plays *The Glass Menagerie* I am trying to show how the modern industrial society has destroyed the human feelings of love, sympathy, friendship, fraternity, the meaningful relationship, the beauty of the life that turned people into islands, with lack of communication and consequently the role of the artist. The defeated people can't face that society which doesn't fulfill their dreams, and aspirations. Tennessee Williams shows in his play *The Glass Menagerie*, where Amanda, Tom's mother, tries to suppress Tom's longing to join Merchant Navy and wants him to work

in warehouse, because he is the bread-winner of the family, creates a clash between the two and the result is lack of communication because both these characters can't understand each other's passions. This also happen with Laura and Jim O'Connor. Similarly in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley tries to suppress Blanche's desires because he does not have any human feelings. His only aim in life is "money and power".

Tennessee Williams records the struggles and unfulfilled dreams of lower-middle class people caught up in hopeless circumstances. He primarily deals with the suppression of human spirit by the harsh and dehumanizing commercial and industrial society. This modern society according to Williams is a corrupting place and the sensitive characters in his plays are unable to cope with the society that defeats and destroys them. He truthfully reflects the tension area of a fast changing society. He was deeply preoccupied with the Southern people, the dilemma of their sufferings, loneliness and their frustrations. The treatment of illusions, sex and violence in the plays of Tennessee Williams is not an aim in itself but a powerful tool to convey to the readers how the sensitive souls in this modern society are tortured, defeated and destroyed. It is indeed a terrifying picture that Williams has painted that shows the impossibility of the soul to survive in this commercial society which is harsh and dehumanizing.

Both the plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* have dealt with the failure of the success myth. It is only the purely materialistic and insensitive people who continue to believe in this myth even without much prosperity. In *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, Jim is the chief representative of this myth. He has all the attributes that have been associated with success. But the author through Tom points out the failure of the success myth when he points out that six years after Jim left high school, his situation was not much better than that of Tom himself. However, Jim is quite contented with himself and thinks that the course he is taking in public speaking is the key to success. He does not realize that he has missed not only the material success but also the spiritual aspirations that are associated with Tom. Similarly the plans and provisions of Amanda fail to achieve anything positive for Tom and Laura. Similarly in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, too, we find Stanley Kowalski is the representative of this success myth. The loss of Belle Reve is for him not a loss of some spiritual dreams but a loss of his share in the property to which he was entitled according to the Napoleonic code whereby the husband is equally the partner of a property that belongs to his wife.

That's why he distrusts the story of Blanche about the loss of Belle Reve, searches her trunk and scrutinizes her papers. All these efforts have failed and he is quite contented with his animal existence just as Jim has an implicit faith in the success myth.

Both the plays insist that the modern commercial society with the values of 'money and power' as Jim puts it, has deeply destroyed the values of human relationships, with the result that the individuals are like 'islands' as described by Matthew Arnold in his poem "To Marguerite". In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom hates the warehouse, where he is expected to be an automaton. The beauty of the pre-industrial society as represented by American South has been eroded by the dehumanizing, urban society and sensitive individuals fail to fit in the modern mechanical society as they refuse to be cogs in the machine. Tom therefore spends his evenings in writing poems or going to the movies and Laura lives in her private world of glass animals and old phonographic records. Amanda, too, lives in the memories of the old American South. She has a wistful longing for a period when she was young and beautiful, surrounded by gentlemen-callers: "One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received—*seventeen!* – gentlemen - callers! Why, sometimes there weren't chairs enough to accommodate them all. We had to send, the nigger over to bring in folding chairs from the parish house." (TW , 237)

True to the values of American South she struggles hard to ensure the success and happiness of her children instead of being the self-centered individual of the modern commercial society. This loneliness of the individual is responsible for the lack of communication. For example, Amanda cannot understand Tom's passion for writing poetry or going to the movies or his love for adventure. She can't understand Laura's obsession with the glass animals and refusal to work for her material welfare. Tom hits Laura's glass menagerie by throwing his coat in anger and realizes immediately that he has hurt Laura but is powerless to communicate and apologize to her. Amanda finds it impossible to communicate to Tom and Tom is equally unable to communicate with his mother: " you say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me, too. There's so much in my heart that I can't describe to *you*." (TW , 259)

Again, Tom can't understand his mother. He thinks Amanda is being selfish and she wants him to work in the warehouse to provide for the family just as she thinks that he is being selfish in seeking the happiness of his adventure. Both Tom and Laura can't understand

Amanda's obsession about gentlemen-callers and her passion to retreat in the past. Even Jim and Tom fail to communicate with each other as Jim asks Tom to take a course in public speaking but Tom wishes to go abroad for adventure that Jim fails to understand. Laura spends most of her time in her private world of glass menagerie. There is a unicorn in the collection. She compares herself to that unicorn because this unicorn is totally different from other animals. By doing this, she parts herself from the outside world, thinking herself to be a stranger creature like unicorn. When Tom tells that he is going to the movies and when Amanda scolds him, he declares his decision to desert the family and go:

Tom : All right, I will! The more you shout about my selfishness  
to me the quicker I'll go, and I won't go to the movies ! (TW, 312)

It is only later that Tom realizes that true art is pursuit, not by running away from life but by entering into human relationships which is suggested by his realization that he shouldn't have deserted Laura; "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!" (TW, 313)

In the dull, subhuman commercial society, Williams seems to suggest that meaningful human relationships are impossible in modern society. That's perhaps why all the characters in the play live in a world of their own and can't understand the world of others. This inability to communicate is a major theme in the play. For example, Amanda wishes Tom to hold on to his job and to go to a night school to learn accountancy, to improve himself by the social graces and suppressing animals' instincts. She can't understand his passion of writing poetry. She complains of his movie-going and freaking out in the night. She thinks Tom's love for adventure is for his selfish happiness and reflects the bad effects of his father. She completely misunderstands Tom. Tom in anger throws his coat that hits Laura's glass menagerie. He realizes immediately that he has hurt Laura by his thoughtless acts but is powerless to communicate and apologizes to her. He simply "*drops awkwardly on his knees to collect the fallen glass, glancing at LAURA as if he would speak but couldn't.*" (TW, 253) Amanda chides him for bringing Lawrence's novels into the house. She can't believe that he goes every night to the movies: "I don't believe that you go every night to the movies. Nobody goes to the movies night after night. Nobody in their right mind goes to the movies as often as you pretend to. People don't go to the movies at

nearly midnight, and movies don't let out at two a.m...." (TW, 251) In scene 4<sup>th</sup>, Amanda says that she knows his ambitions "...do not lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world— you've had to – make sacrifices, but —Tom— Tom— life's not easy, it calls for –Spartan endurance! There's so many things in my heart that I can not describe to you!" (TW, 259)

Just as Amanda can't understand Tom's passion for adventure and for writing poetry, Tom too can't understand his mother. He thinks Amanda is being selfish and she wants him to work in the warehouse to provide for the family just as she thinks that he is being selfish in seeking the happiness of his adventures. That's why when Amanda says that she wouldn't allow the horrible novels in her house, he says: "House, house! Who pays rent on it, who makes a slave of himself to -." (TW, 250) When Amanda asks him how they would manage if he loses the job, Tom angrily remarks: "You think I want to spend fifty-five *years* down there in that- *celotex interior* !with *-fluorescent - tubes* ! Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains - than go back mornings! I *go*! Every time you come in yelling that, God damn '*Rise, and Shine!* '*Rise and Shine!*' I say to myself' '*How lucky dead people are!*' But I get up. I *go*! For sixty- five dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being *ever*." (TW, 251-52) This shows a complete break-up between the two as they fail to communicate with each other. Again both Tom and Laura can't understand Amanda's obsession about gentlemen-callers. They can't understand her passion to retreat in the past and she can't understand Laura's refusal to face the reality and her retreat in the private world of glass menagerie.

Jim and Tom fail to communicate with each other. Though Jim is the only one that Tom can talk to in the warehouse and the same is true of Tom too. In scene 6<sup>th</sup>, Jim appreciates himself for the course he is taking in public speaking, saying that the key to success is social poise. Jim wishes Tom to take a course in public speaking and says that the two of them aren't the warehouse type. Tom asks him what has public speaking to do with it, Jim's answer is that: "it fits you for - executive positions!" (TW, 281) Jim, the optimistic American extrovert, is trying to convert Tom and tells him to make up to avoid dismal reality that surrounds them. Tom says that he is making up but not as Jim has suggested to him. While Jim wishes to move up the ladder of success in the warehouse or some such business organization, Tom instead of moving up is about to move: "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!...I'm tired of *movies* and I am *about to move*.”(TW, 282, 83) Jim doesn't understand Tom just as Tom doesn't understand Jim and there is a complete lack of communication between the two. The use of candles in Scene 7<sup>th</sup>, points to a return in time and underlines the fact that Amanda, Tom and Laura are living in a world, isolated from that of their neighbours. Jim tries to communicate his dreams to Laura but she simply wonders and doesn't understand and similarly Laura tries to explain herself to Jim but Jim fails to understand her.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* like *The Glass Menagerie* presents a clash between a pre-industrial society and the modern commercial or industrial society. In the pre-industrial society men could look beyond the self and have mutual understanding, sympathy and love for the others, but the harsh reality of the modern commercial society has debased man, depriving him of love and compassion, and the modern man seeks an escape in some kind of dream world of the past or escape into sex or degenerate into animalism, looking only to his own self or alienation from society leading to a complete lack of mutual understanding and lack of communication. Francis Donahue in his book titled *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* has pointed out about the play that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is, “an unequal contest between the decadence of a self-conscious civilization and the vitality of animal aimlessness.” It was the drama of a gentlewoman's “panicky flight from the catastrophe of a genteel way of life that can no longer sustain her in an animalized world.” (Donahue, 36)

The general pattern in these plays seems to be to present a woman at a moment when frustration has led to a crisis. There are two possible alternatives — to face reality or to retreat and escape. The ability to respond to the needs of another human being is a higher value. Human contact may be physical or spiritual. More important is the attempt to love, based on an understanding of one's self and another. Amanda and Laura both refuse to face the reality. Amanda escapes into the past and Laura in her private world. However, Amanda at least tries to keep the family together by her plans and provisions but she couldn't hold her husband's love and hangs on to the memories of seventeen gentleman-callers. Amanda is, “a little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place” who “having failed to establish contact with reality, continues to live vitally in her illusions.”(TTTW, 129)

Blanche represents the values of the old South waging a hopeless struggle against the world of harsh realities represented by Stanley. The whole play, in fact, is a conflict between two civilizations — the dying aristocracy and tradition and the vital modern but cynical and shabby democracy. Nancy M. Tischler in her book titled *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* has remarked: “Blanche represents tradition and idealism, seeking herself as she would like to be, denying what she is, trying to appear special and different. She is in the tradition of heroines of medieval romances as revived in the pale images of the English ‘Pre-Raphaelites.’”(Tischer,138) The clash between Blanche and Stanley becomes unavoidable because they represent two different and opposite views of life. They are two figures in strong contrast to each other. They are made of absolutely different stuffs. The conflict between these two constitutes the main action of the drama. Signi Lenea Falk in her book titled *Tennessee Williams* writes: “The play, however, is not simple, clear cut conflict between two equally strong forces but a subtle and sometimes rather confused study of character; rich in overtones, the play is sometimes weighted with significance implied rather than expressed.”(Falk, 82) When the play begins, Blanche has already lost the Belle Reve — the beautiful dream, which signifies that the old South now is only a tale and can't be reality. Again she has already lost Allan, the possibility of love, and despite numerous sexual affairs she can't hope to achieve true love in life. In other words, the old South is doomed before the beginning of the play and Blanche is keeping up the dream only through lies and pretensions. For example, in the beginning of the play, she pretends shock and disbelief at Stella's living in a humble, run-down apartment while she herself has no place to live. She expresses her shock that Stella doesn't have a maid while her financial condition is worse than that of a maid.

On the other hand, we find Stella, coming from the same background, having adjusted to the harsh realities. This only shows that in this modern commercial society the majority of the people can't have a refined, civilized life, based on the values of the old South except in dreams or pretensions or the only other option is to lead an existence on the animal level as Stella and Stanley do. In her attraction for Stanley, Stella is not blinded by any romantic charm: “But of course there were things to adjust myself to later on” (TW, 125). She admits that Stanley does not belong to the world of refinement and asks Blanche not to: “compare him with men that we went out with at home,” because he belongs to “a different species” (TW, 124). While for Blanche and Stella, the loss of Belle Reve is the loss of a finer world, for Stanley it means only the loss of money that he

was entitled to because of, “the Napoleonic code, according to which whatever belongs to my wife is also mine — and vice versa...” (TW, 138) This gap between the two worlds of the old South and the modern harsh realities is admitted by Stanley when he observes: “The Kowalskis and the Dubois have different notions.” (TW, 135) When Blanche asks Stanley to help with “some buttons in back” or when she wishes to “have a drag on your cig.” (TW, 136) She is only trying to arouse the gallant in him while he only thinks that she is provoking him to sex: “If I didn’t know that you was my wife’s sister I’d get ideas about you!” (TW, 138) While Blanche is “*daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district*” (TW, 117) There is an animal joy implicit in all the movements and attitudes of Stanley. The center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens.

Blanche seems to arouse a streak of sympathy in Stella and she wants her husband to be sensitive, sympathetic to Blanche thereby arousing a feeling in Stanley that Blanche is creating a wedge between him and his wife. This is symbolized by Stanley losing in poker game in the 3<sup>rd</sup> scene, or when Stella wishes to take Blanche out during the poker game at their house or when Stella tells him to, “try to understand her and be nice to her” (Streetcar, 132) and further tells him that: “Blanche is sensitive and you’ve got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did.” (TW, 185) Blanche believes that Stanley is a;

...survivor of the Stone Age ! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you — *you* here — *waiting* for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night! — you call it — this party of apes! Somebody growls —some creature snatches at something — the fight is on! *God!* Maybe we are a long way from being made in God’s image, but Stella — my sister— there has been *some* progress since then! Such things are art — as poetry and music — such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! (TW, 163-64)

The harsh realities of the modern commercial society alienate the sensitive individuals and lead to a lack of communication with others. Blanche in this play is completely alienated from all other characters when she comes to Elysian Fields in New Orleans: "*Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district*" (TW, 117). She can not understand how Stella has accepted her miserable condition and Stella can't understand what Blanche is fussing about.

BLANCHE: No, now seriously, putting joking aside. Why didn't you tell me, why didn't you write me, honey, why didn't you let me know?

STELLA [*carefully, pouring herself a drink*]: Tell you what, Blanche?

BLANCHE: Why, that you had to live in these conditions!

STELLA: Aren't you being a little intense about it? It's not that bad at all! New Orleans isn't like other cities. (TW, 121)

Blanche has a terrible fear of loneliness and all her efforts to establish relationship through sex have failed because sex was just an act of desperation and was not combined with love. It has satisfied neither emotions nor instincts. She tells about her fear of loneliness to Stella; "I guess you're hoping I'll say I'll put up at a hotel, but I'm not going to put up at a hotel. I want to be *near* you, go to be *with* somebody, *I can't be alone*" (TW, 124)

Though Stella has sympathy for Blanche's values of life, she has settled for a different kind of world, Blanche seems to be totally out of tune with most of the characters including Stella. For example, when Stanley hits Stella and she leaves the apartment and goes upstairs, it appears to Blanche that Stella would follow her advice and would never make up with Stanley. She hopes to establish relationship with Stella on the basis of shared values but to her utter shock and surprise, Stella embraces Stanley at the first opportunity, dashing all her hopes of establishing a relationship with Stella. Again at the end of the play, Blanche thinks that her story of rape will turn Stella against Stanley and that she would establish a meaningful relationship with Stella. She fails because Stella doesn't want to be alienated from the adopted society of New Orleans. Blanche is, of

course, unable to establish any meaningful relationship with Stanley because they belong to two different worlds. Stanley ignorant, insensitive and cruel, destroys Blanche's hope of a meaningful relationship. He sees through her pose without understanding why she needs the pose. He only thinks that she feels superior and he seeks to destroy her calm to make her a sexual animal. He takes her teasing as a sign of real sexuality and concludes that they had, "this date with each other from the beginning!" (TW, 215) The rape shatters her desperate pose for dignity and also forces on her what she can't endure, a raw sexual passion. Both Blanche and Stanley are poles apart and none is able to understand the other and the result is Blanche's insanity.

Similarly in *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche's spiritual aspirations are destroyed with the loss of Belle Reve and total dependence on Stanley and Stella. The loss of her husband and her sense of guilt for her husband's suicide has made her utterly lonely and she desperately struggles to seek some kind of relationship with somebody or the other in the play. Her sexual escapades with young people indiscriminately are only a frantic struggle in that direction. But she does not realize that sex without love is only an animal act and cannot help in establishing any meaningful contact. Her effort to attract the attention of Stanley through her provocations and the effort to win over Mitch through her lies is doomed to failure. The play clearly shows that spiritual loneliness is the fate of man in the modern commercial society and that the only relation possible is on the animal level as between Stanley and Stella or between Eunice and Steve who are glued to each other by nothing but sex. Obviously there is no spiritual element in their relationship. Blanche has been a total failure in truly communicating with any of her sexual partners or even with Stanley and Stella though Stella has initially some kind of sympathy for her. Again Stanley betrays the trust of Stella when despite making promise to her, he quarrels with Blanche and tells her about Stella's pregnancy. Blanche and Mitch fail to communicate with each other because of the barrier of lies created by Blanche herself.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* also represents a direct clash between the values of the old South represented by Blanche and the harsh modern reality represented by Stanley which is not so sharply brought out in *The Glass Menagerie*. The whole play, in fact is a conflict between two civilizations — the dying aristocracy and tradition, and the vital modern but cynical tradition. Various names in the play have a symbolic significance. That also helps in presenting the social concerns in the play. For example the names of the street

car — 'Desire' and 'Cemeteries' — and Elysian Fields have a symbolic significance. Blanche is described as a moth which is traditionally a symbol of the soul. In this way the play seems to present disastrous journey of the soul through life. Just as a soul cannot transcend and escape the body, here Blanche yearns for Stella, which means a star and for rest in the Elysian Fields which is a place for the happy dead. The moth-soul travels through Desire—life and Cemeteries—death to Elysian Fields—the world of the happy dead but instead the moth-soul finds the flaming, red hot environment of the primitive black myth suggested by the name of Stanley Kowalski because the word Stanley suggests the stone age man while Kowalski is a Polish word meaning myth.

In this way, it is clear that Williams, in his plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* has shown how the harsh commercial society has destroyed the pre-industrial society represented by the American South. In the same way, here we are facing these problems day-by-day. Only solution to protect these values is, to create feelings of love, mutual-cooperation, and fraternity otherwise we will all become cogs in the machines. We will become mechanical without these values, only emotionless persons like barren lands

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