

Alma and Laura: Tennessee Williams' Delicate and Sensitive Women

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Abstract:

*A close reading of Tennessee Williams' plays reveal a baring pattern of women characterisation in the different stages of his dramatic career. The paper attempts to study the real facets of Alma Wilnemiller in **Summer and Smoke** and Laura Wingfield in **The Glass Menagerie** as they are different from other women characters of Williams. Alma and Laura are frail and forlorn women whose natural endowments are unsuited to cope with tragic disparity within inner dreams and external reality. They are analysed as women who are in need for a warm and meaningful relationship.*

Key words: fantasy, reality, soul, flesh, sensitive, delicate.

Alma Wilnemiller of **Summer and Smoke** (1948) and Laura Wingfield of **The Glass Menagerie** (1945) are idealistic women and live in a secluded world which is hardly in conformity with other women characters such as Maggie, Serafina or Mrs. Venable of Tennessee Williams. In this paper, an attempt has been made to show that Alma and Laura are the symbols of all those sensitive and delicate women for whom Tennessee Williams had the greatest compassion. They epitomise spiritual and divine love. In fact, there is a fragile and haunting beauty

about these two women characters which is appreciated by critics and readers. In this regard, Benjamin Nelson said:

Both [Alma and Laura] cry out in their loneliness for love and both are eventually denied and broken. Both possess the beauty of the ideal which is a pitiful anachronism in a "world lit by lightning", and both suffer intensely from the inability to communicate their innermost feeling with another human beings. (120)

Alma Winemiller and Laura Wingfield are more or less the portraits of the same woman observed at different angles by Tennessee Williams. This is to say that Alma's predicament is similar to Laura's in that she sees the only man she loves truly engaged to another. John Buchanan and Jim O'Conner are intruders who enter the inner circle of their ideals only to leave it destroyed. Both Alma and Laura believe in the divinity of love and consider their lovers as Gods or Saviours. Alma also resembles Laura as both are escapist. Laura escapes into her glass menagerie while Alma turns to her sleeping tablets. They are unable to adapt to the harsh reality of the modern world and live in their world of candle light and fantasy. They are like fugitives who have given up all the ideas of struggle and are frightened by the unfriendliness of the outside world.

The theme of *Summer and Smoke* is focussed on spirit-flesh conflict symbolised by Alma Winemiller, the champion of the soul; and John Buchanan, the standard bearer of the flesh. In the play, Tennessee Williams describes her as an "extraordinary delicacy and tenderness or spirituality" (*Summer and Smoke*, 101). Alma's excessive awareness of spirituality is expressed further when she tells John: "My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul" (*Summer and Smoke*, 103). Alma being the daughter of a puritanical minister regards that the physical and sexual nature of man is tinged with an animality. According to her, all human being must overcome such passion.

In the household of Alma, she has multiple roles to play.

Alma becomes the disciplined daughter to her puritanical father and she also plays the part of mother and sister to her mentally disturbed mother. Not only these, Alma also acts as the social head of the household for her father. In trying to fit herself to all these parts, Alma as a young woman has no role that she desire for herself. In such a household there is a complete failing of meaningful communication and it is obvious that the private needs of the daughter are never considered by the parents. This kind of upbringing has made Alma excessively sensitive and repressed. Tennessee Williams describes:

Alma had an adult quality as child, and now, in her middle twenties, there is something presently spinsterish about her. An excessive propriety and self consciousness is apparent in her nervous laughter; her voice and gesture belong to years of church entertainments, to the positive of hostess in a rectory. People her own age regard her as rather quaintly and humorously affected. She has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Her true nature is still hidden even from herself. (*Summer and Smoke*, 107)

According to Alma Winemiller, life is the everlasting struggle and aspiration far more than our human limits have placed in our reach. She perceives that “all men live in the gutter”, but it is because of some who are “looking at the stars” that the world is balanced and could go on. She thinks that woman must bring her heart and soul to marriage; and she also rejects sexuality as no better than bestiality. Although Alma has this beautiful notion about love and human relationship, she admits to John that her attempt to have relationship with men have failed because of “a desert between us”. But it is clear that the one Alma loves is John who is full of sensuality and she has loved him with her soul. So, Alma is a confused character who has a bundle of contradictions in herself. Here, it is pertinent to say that through the character of Alma, Williams gives a picture of the Southern dilemma most explicitly. In most of his plays, the

mythical South becomes synonymous with the era of faded elegance inhabited by gentle dreamers and misfits; and losers who are not meant to win. Alma Winemiller, in this respect, like other Williams' women characters, is a true representative of the South. Her loneliness is the outcome of an inability to communicate with others and, thus, it becomes a major factor which prevents the reconciliation between the flesh and spirit.

In the play, it is John Buchanan who disregards Alma's idealistic concept of human soul and tries to pull her away from such ideal eternity. Only John realises the true self of Alma; that beneath the iceberg of Alma's spirituality she is possessed with a deeply sexual nature which threatens to overwhelm her. Her split personality is first reflected when John tells her that she has palpitation because she has a "doppelganger" and the "doppelganger is badly irritated" (*Summer and Smoke*, 113). In this manner, continued argument of John and Alma over the Spiritual and physical life has reached the climax in an anatomy lecture. John shows her the anatomy chart and points to what he feels are the three essential parts of human body, i.e. the brain, the belly and the sex. He also tells her that these three essential parts must be fed, the latter no less than the others. The anatomy lecture is one of the amusing scenes in the play. As John says:

Hold still! Now listen to the anatomy lecture. You see this chart? It's a picture of a – a picture of a – tree with three birds in it, This top bird is the brain. The bird is hungry. He's hungry for something called truth. He doesn't get much, he's never satisfied with it, he keeps on shaking with it, he keeps on smoking his cold and weak little wings and saying: 'cheep! cheep' – this bird underneath is the belly. He is hungry, too, but he's the practical bird, just hungry for food! – And down here's the lowest bird... he's hungry, too, hungry as both the other and twice as lonesome! – what's he hungry for? Love!... I've fed all three of those birds as much as I was able. You've fed none of them nothing! – well – may be the middle bird, the practical one, the belly, a little – watery substance. But love? or truth? Nothing – and two of the birds in your tree are going

to die of starvation before the tree falls down... now you can go! The anatomy lecture is over. (*Summer and Smoke, 154-155*)

But, on the contrary and very firmly, Alma replies that there is something not shown in the chart, i.e., the soul. She says:

Yes, that's not shown on the anatomy chart! But it's there just the same, yes, there! Something, not seen, but there. And it's that I loved you with – that! Not what you mention! Yes, did love you with, John, did nearly die of when you hurt me! (*Summer and Smoke, 155*)

The sexual and the religious approach to life and their conflict is clearly hinted in the arguments of John and Alma. In Alma, this conflict has a dire consequence. Even though she loves John, her sanctified approach to life could not put up with John's sexual drive. She appears as an anachronism in the world of John.

However, there is a sudden twist in scene seven and eight of the play. After the traumatic experience of his father's death, John goes to a neighbouring town where an epidemic is occurring and where his father had organised the medical services. John's work is a success and he returns as idol of the town. In still another sudden reversal, Alma and John exchange character position. Alma becomes the advocate of the physical life and John of the spiritual. Alma now chooses action and feels that she must offer herself to him. After the long period of agony and an internal crisis with the "doppelganger", she succumbs to it. She goes to John and tells him:

I've thought many times of something you told me last summer, that I have a doppelganger. I looked that up and I found that it means another self ... now I have change my mind, on the girl who said 'no', she doesn't exist any more, she died last summer – suffocated in smoke from something on fire inside her. (*Summer and Smoke, 166-167*)

But the new person in John Buchanan does not need her as her

body ceased to exist for him. John, in this scene, now realises that he never wanted Alma's body and Alma also realises that she has lost the man she loves. In this scene, from the moment of John's refusal Alma, no doubt, grows in strength and depth. Relaxed and calm she takes a sleeping tablets and is now left to resolve her life without the hope that John might become the completing part of her half-fulfilled life. However, it can be said that it is because of her over-sensitiveness that she appears as a misfit to the world of John.

The Glass Menagerie is a memory play in which the narrator regards his unhappy mother and crippled sister with a mixture of guilt and sentimentality. In this play, Tennessee Williams created the unforgettable Laura Wingfield who is unsullied, noble and delicate. Unlike other women, Laura withdraws from the normal course of life because of her crippled state and sensitive nature. Laura has refused to accept the harsh reality of her life and has withdrawn into the world of glass figurines she has collected till she is like a piece of her own glass collection which is too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf. In fact, Laura is like Alma who stands for spirituality and divinity in a world rendered by materiality.

In the play, Laura Wingfield is a fragile delicate beauty; and she has evanescent loveliness which readily touches the heart of the reader. Whenever she appears in the play, she evokes genuine sympathy. She has nothing of her mother's traits and on the contrary she has turned extremely self-conscious. She spends most of her time in the park, the zoo and the art museum. At home, Laura cannot get consolation from the family as both her mother and brother are immersed in their own problems. Signi L. Falk describes Laura as:

... the morbidly shy, overduplicate sister who is as fragile as the little glass ornaments and phonograph records which are her escape. (76)

However, Laura confesses about her secret love of Jim O'Connor, her childhood friend, when her mother asks her. Jim

had been in the centre of the limelight during his school years while Laura had remained hidden unnoticed in the same social circle. Yet Jim O'Connor was the only one in the school who tended to overlook Laura's physical disability and the only one to whom she offered her friendship. In course of time, Laura's devotion to Jim increased and ultimately it left an indelible mark to her memory. Not surprisingly even after six years of school life, Laura can recollect minutely all about Jim's life in high school for he was the only friend she had. The happy thoughts of Jim which she cherishes in the secret chamber of her heart are the anodyne that assuage her physical defect and makes her long for a normal happy life. As the play progresses, Jim serves as an important figure to Laura. He replaces Laura's monotonous life, though for a few moments, with colour of excitement. When alone with Laura, Jim begins to persuade that her limp is only a minor disability and she is pretty and lovable. In trying to console her, he reveals that her inferiority complex is the root of all problems. He also urges her to forget her crippled leg and the brace she wears, and tells her that it is only her imagination that has magnified her trouble when she ought to forget it and think of herself as superior to other in some way. As Jim rightly says to Laura:

People are not so dreadful when you know them. That's what you have to remember! And everybody has problems, not just you, but practically everybody has got some problems. You think of yourself as having the only problems, as being the only one who is disappointed. But just look around you and you will see lots of people as disappointed as you are ... A little physical defect is what you have. Hardly noticeable even! Magnified thousand times by imagination! You know what my strong advice to you is? Think of yourself as superior in some way! (*The Glass Menagerie*, 295-298)

Laura eventually responds to the encouragement of Jim, and shows him her precious glass collection. As a token of confidence in him, she gives him her dearest treasure, the

Unicorn. She says that she loves it dearly as it is extinct and is quite lonely among other animals of her collection. The Unicorn is obviously a symbol for Laura who is also a delicate translucent being and out of place in the contemporary world. And when the horn of the glass unicorn is broken, Laura simply comments:

I don't have favourites much. It's no tragedy, Freckles. Glass breaks so easily ... I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed to make him feel less – freakish! [they both laugh] Now he will feel more at home with other horses, the ones that don't have horns... (*The Glass Menagerie*, 302 - 303)

From the above comment of Laura, it can be said that there is a marked change in her behaviour when she is alone with Jim. It seems to the reader that she begins to shed her morbid shyness. The incident of the “broken horn” is symbolic of Jim’s ability to rid Laura of her sensitiveness. In fact, his continued attentions can turn Laura into a normal healthy girl. But at the end, Jim confesses that he is already engaged to a girl. This confession shatters her only hope and leaves her more broken and secluded than ever. And being a delicate and sensitive woman, this confession leaves Laura to retreat into her glass world. Her brief joy is “snuffed” out and her loveliness is only intensified. The scene, in fact, when Laura gives the broken unicorn as a souvenir to Jim is pathetic because he has not only broken her unicorn but also her heart. As Tennessee Williams writes:

She [Laura] bites her lip which was trembling and then bravely smiles. She opens her hand again on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes his hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it. (*The Glass Menagerie*, 307)

Tennessee Williams, thus, in these two plays clearly reveals that delicate and sensitive woman like Alma Winemiller and Laura Wingfield are doomed to heartbreak, and pain, and they

are lost in a struggle against a reality they do not comprehend as they are idealistic women who live in a world away from reality. The world of Alma and Laura is soft, delicate, melodious and haunting and it is a far cry from the modern scene of “electrodynamics”. They are too ethereal, sensitive and delicate to live in the world which is “lit by lightning”.

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