

# The Garden of Earthly Delights:<sup>1)</sup>

Tennessee Williams's *Suddenly Last Summer*

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## I

As in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams's plays show the internal conflict between the characters' idealistic tendencies and their physical nature as well as the struggle of the individual against the rapacity of the world. When the playwright locates his characters in the marginal area of consciousness in which the world is perverted into a Rappaccini-like garden, they are at the mercy of forces that they cannot control. Thus, the savage world Williams presents in his plays ironically becomes an expression of his longing for a more healthy climate in a society which has lost its sense of direction in its restless drive for material wealth.

Dramatizing society and man's role in it, Williams's early plays can be seen as a form of moral exploration. In these plays, He attempts to discover what are right actions in society which is constantly changing. The emphasis in these plays is placed on the idealistic person's ability to adapt to society. But, beginning with the middle plays and particularly *Suddenly Last Summer*, the playwright begins to change his point of view, and, instead of seeing man as a product of society, he now sees society as a product of man. For example, the society of *Suddenly Last Summer* seems to have been formed and ruled by brutal people, such as Mrs. Venable, Sebastian, and Catharine's mother and brother. As he focuses his attention on the individual in this society and the responsibilities of that individual to himself and others, Williams's moral vision has been sharpened. Evidence of such a sharpening is clear in *Suddenly Last Summer* when Dr. Cukrowicz decides to save Catharine and reject Mrs. Venable's funds, a dramatic choice in sharp contrast to the sacrificing of Blanche.

Further evidence of Williams's changing point of view is that, even though an ever-escalating violence and brutality, both physical and emotional, assumes dominance in the

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1) I got this title from Hieronymous Bosch's painting, *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, which depicts a myriad of degrading pleasure, mostly surreal.

middle plays, these plays carry with them the possibility of a positive view of life. Unlike the protagonist victims of the earlier plays, Williams's later characters have the ability and the opportunity to change their lives. They can make moral choices. No longer are they pushed about on the waves of society unable to control their fate. To be sure, they are still pushed about, but now they are invested with the dignity of at least an attempt at free will. Even though swept by a brutal world, they are at least able to attempt positive acts, and, in some cases, they are able to accomplish something good—not only for themselves but for others.

These new characters change during the course of their plays. They arrive at self-knowledge, and they are then able to make moral decisions based on this knowledge. No longer is there a Stanley who remains static from the beginning of the play to the end. No longer is there a "Maggie the Cat" who must adopt the despised tactics of others to survive. Even though the society of these plays appear much more brutal and dark than that of *The Glass Menagerie*, it is this change, this increased dignity, that supports the contention that this period in Williams's life represents a conversion or, perhaps more accurately, an advance on the continuum of attempting to achieve some romantic ideals in the existential work.

Yet, despite this progression, Williams continues to struggle in the plays of his middle period with the place of man. Confronted with the atomic advances of the late 40's and early 50's and with his own life experience, Williams began to re-evaluate Darwin's survivalist view of human being. In addition, this is a period of great psychological stress for the playwright—his so-called "Inferno crisis," during which Williams had professional help from a psychoanalyst.<sup>2)</sup> The work of this middle period tends to be melodramatic, filled with sensational materials and depictions of sex and violence, and informed by a darker view than any other former works. During this period, he had heart attacks and lost his long-time love, Frank Merlo to cancer.

Williams, however, produces major dramas during this period, such as *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. While the backgrounds in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* do show decadent and animalistic qualities, this tendency is increased in the later plays which are totally barren of positive possibility and full of disease and death. In these plays, Williams explores the idea that the dominating principle of the universe is selfishness: everybody struggles for his own

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2) Tennessee Williams, "The Angel of the Odd," *Time*, March 9, 1962, p. 54.

interest without any humanistic concern. The Preface to *Camino Real* quotes from the opening of Dante's *Inferno*— "In the middle of the journey of our life /I came to myself in a dark wood where the/ straight way was lost."<sup>3)</sup> This implies that a way out of the Cartesian dilemma for these divided souls is now "lost." Human degradation and exploitation are well expressed in the Gypsy's appraisal: "Don't kid yourself. We're all of us guinea pigs in the laboratory of God. Humanity is just a work in progress."<sup>4)</sup>

When humanity is lost in society, the society turns into a soulless and Darwinian jungle. Just as Val Xavier's fate illustrates vicious humanity and absence of hope of regeneration, *Orpheus Descending* depicts yet another fallen garden where impotent but brutal materialists arise victorious against the innocent. As Esther Merle Jackson says, this play presents "the ruthless savagery still extant in modern man" using the dominant images of death and disease.<sup>5)</sup> As Lady comments in Act One, scene two, such a legless bird cannot exist; Val's and Lady's romantic dream cannot but be destroyed by an intolerant society.

Williams is equally contemptuous of the hypocritical society and its power in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. As suggested in the epigraph from Hart Crane's poem—"Relentless caper for all those who step/ The legend of their youth into the passage of time"<sup>6)</sup>—at the heart of the writer's concern is the passage of time and the collapse of values, ideals, relationships, and of the social structures. Here, the evil of the unjust and selfish society turns men like Chance Wayne into pariahs. Boss Finley, a representative of the society, pushes Chance out into the harsh rat-race of corruption. Boss Finley's corruption, represented by his political racism, lust for power, and unconscious desire for his own daughter, reveals that in this society every human relationship—from the political to the familial—have been destroyed. Characters, such as Maggie, Flora Goforth, Chicken, and the street people of *Camino Real*, fight for possession, sexual satisfaction, and power. Killing, stealing, lying, and fighting are justifiable for them. In this Darwinian world, man is an animal struggling for supremacy without any pang of conscience.

Violence and the grotesque are used in the later plays as artistic devices for portraying

3) Tennessee Williams, "Epigraph to *Camino Real*," *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams II* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p.417.

4) *ibid.*, p.543.

5) Esther M. Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (Madison: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1965), p.36.

6) Williams, Epigraph to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams IV* (New York: New Directions, 1972), p.1.

certain facets of experience. Here, Williams joins his contemporaries, such as Flannery O'Connor and Carson McCullers, in an emphasis on physical abnormalities in order to suggest the inner nature of a disturbed character. Against criticism about his use of sensationalism and violence for their own sake, Williams presents the following defense: "The nervous system of any age or nation is creative workers, its artists. And if that nervous system is profoundly disturbed by its environment, the work it produces will inescapably reflect the disturbances, sometimes obliquely and sometimes with violent directness, depending upon the nature and control of the artist."<sup>7)</sup> Williams frequently emphasizes his characters' loneliness and their need for compassion by some bizarre distinction. For this reason, Ruby Cohn labels Williams's characterization as "garrulous grotesque."<sup>8)</sup> Thus, for the protagonists of Williams's later plays, grotesquerie and violence are linked consequences derived from the confusion of living in a savage society.

## II

*Suddenly Last Summer* is the most violent of the "cycle of violent plays."<sup>9)</sup> Although many critics criticize this play as one merely of horror or gratuitous violence, Williams weaves the play full of microcosmic details. S. Allan Chesler assesses the main critical response to *Suddenly Last Summer*; "whether they praised or disparaged *Suddenly Last Summer*, their criticism generally indicated a failure to understand the symbolic nature and the multilayered dimensions."<sup>10)</sup> This play dramatizes an unrelenting vision of a world in which humans can find no moral home as well as the playwright's persistent preoccupation with the warring elements in the human individual. *Suddenly Last Summer* has a cluster of images of concentrated horror, an intensification of this dark Darwinian vision, which *Sweet Bird of Youth* or *Orpheus Descending* lacks. A series of analogies or parallels, images, and dialogue, all coalesce to form the sort of concentrated tension that underlies *Suddenly Last Summer*.

7) Williams, "Tennessee Williams Presents His POV," *New York Times Magazine*, 12 June 1960, p.78.

8) Ruby Cohn, *Dialogue of American Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), pp.97 ~129.

9) Williams, *Where I Live* (New York: New Directions, 1978), p.109. His plays, such as *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *Orpheus Descending*, and *Suddenly Last Summer*, belong to this cycle. They are full of physical violences, such as cannibalism, rape, lynch, and incest.

10) S. Allan Chesler, "Tennessee Williams: Reassessment and Assessment," in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute* ed. J. Tharpe (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1977), p.869.

This play presents a tropical jungle in the middle of urban civilization as a commanding image for the savage universe. The jungle is a reflection of a brutal universe unrelenting in its testing of human endurance. The perverted garden and its cannibalistic activity serve as an allegory of the cutthroat competition and the ruthless savagery of modern society. As Benjamin Nelson claims, Sebastian's garden "sets the tone for the play and the universe which it images."<sup>11</sup> Here, Williams has made as a major theme, one of the fundamental laws of nature—the prey of one organism upon another.

With the bird songs—sometimes, harsh and sometimes, clear—which underline and emphasize the thematic concern, the distortion and symbols of decay in the garden approach surrealist device. The interpolation of the bird songs with the speech of the characters provides an ironic counterpart to our understanding of the dialogue and ultimately serves as an aid to the audience who must sift the truth between these two narratives. Violet's ominous ideas are thus accompanied by "a sound of harsh birdcries,"<sup>12</sup> whereas when Catharine tells her story, the stage direction changes to "a single bird song" (p. 398). The bird sounds in *Suddenly Last Summer* are perhaps a further experiment in surrealist theater. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the "screen devices" promoted a surreal atmosphere; in contrast to this earlier attempt, the auditory signaling of *Suddenly Last Summer* seems a more controlled and mature attempt at bringing the elements of surrealist theater to Williams's drama.

As a visual metaphor for the play, this jungle garden is Williams's microcosm for the savage universe in which instincts and egotism ravage other humans. Sebastian's tropical garden is filled with exotic plants, and at its core is the Venus Fly-Trap, at once a symbol both of an urban jungle and of the hostile world of nature. This plant is an analogue to action in the play, for Williams's characters in their urban jungle behave as predatory beasts, not as moral beings. Here, they grasp after an inheritance, violate the human brain, abuse and cannibalize the human body. Through the carefully chosen setting and imagery, Williams presents a ghastly place whose rule is unnatural violence, decimation, and the throes of death.

According to Williams's stage direction, garden, "more like a tropical jungle, or forest"

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11) Benjamin Nelson, *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work* (New York: Obolensky, 1961), p. 157.

12) Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams* (New York: New Directions, 1971), p. 355. All the subsequent references to this play will be only to its page number (s).

(p. 349), is so designed as to evoke "the prehistoric age of giant fernforests when living creatures had flippers turning to limbs and scales to skin" (p. 349). As Eden's demonic inversion, the garden's "massive" flowers are made to suggest "organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood" (p. 349), thus serving as immediate visual analogues to the several instances of animal and human dismemberment enumerated throughout the play: the vulnerable turtles torn apart by the carnivorous birds; the remains of Sebastian's similarly rent body, described by Catharine as resembling just such flowers, "a bunch of red roses... *torn, thrown, crushed!*" (p. 422); and the imagined mutilation of Catharine's own proposed lobotomy, which would "bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain" (p. 389). Just as Achilles' shield in Homer's epic *Iliad* pictorially represented the view of the Greek world, so is the garden an icon of the God who has revealed Himself in the Galapagos Islands.

From the garden can be heard "harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds... as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of a savage nature" (p. 349). This "jungle music" is surrealistically interpolated throughout the play to reinforce the parallels between a primal savagery, the predatory spectacle on the Galapagos Islands, and the play's instances of human savagery. The corollaries to these auditory symbols are the "harsh cries," discordant playing, and "gobbling noises" (p. 415) of the "flock of plucked birds," the Venus Fly-Traps, the insectivorous flowers which Sebastian feeds with living fruit flies obtained, significantly, from a scientific laboratory engaged in genetic experiments. This image suggests a further parallel between the predatory instincts of both the plant and human species, between savagery of primitive and savagery of civilization. The garden is not just a metaphor of the wasteland, but like Rappaccini's garden it is a poison garden signifying corrupted and blighted existence. We recall Henry James's references to America as "a huge Rappaccini-garden, rank with every variety of the poison-plant of the money-passion."<sup>13</sup>

The garden operates to reveal what is normally hidden from human eyes. One of Williams's major aims is to convince the audience that there is not much to separate them as supposedly civilized Westerners from the savages, animals, and plants. The garden becomes a living mirror of the universe, as Emerson in *Nature* says: "A leaf, a drop, a crystal, a moment of time, is related to the whole, and partakes of the whole. Each

13) Henry James, *The American Scene* introd. Leon Edel (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), p. 57.

particle is a microcosm, and faithfully renders the likeness of the world."<sup>14</sup> Thus, this garden, the central symbol cluster of the play, becomes synonymous with Sebastian and Mrs. Venable. And through Sebastian and Mrs. Venable, Williams indicts his own baser instincts as well as those of his audience and through them society as a whole.

Williams creates clusters of images which by correspondences, reflections, and resonances not only knit together the different worlds but connect with an array of parts in the larger macrocosm of the text. With representative symbols of a corrupt universe, such as the Venus Fly-Trap and the garden, the horror on the Galapagos Islands, and Sebastian's cannibalization by the native children, images of consumption, predatoriness, and, in particular, cannibalism are repeatedly used as correspondences to a variety of psychological processes of the characters throughout the play. Thus, the universe becomes a vast net of correspondences which unite the whole multiplicity of being: things symbolized and their symbols cannot be separated. The world of *Suddenly Last Summer* is made up of living mirrors and what they reflect is a universal activity of parts consuming and being consumed by the other parts.

This play is mainly composed of two women's reports on Sebastian Venable's life in a seemingly confessional narrative. The first half, narrated by Mrs. Violet Venable, focuses on her son, Sebastian, and his experience in the Galapagos Islands, islands first made famous, we may recall, by Darwin. The second half, confessed by Catharine Holly, concentrates on relating the circumstances surrounding Sebastian's death. The nature of the characters is revealed largely through these two narratives, which form the thesis and the antithesis of the play. Bringing together the opposites—animal nature and human nature—the play seeks to generate understanding, education, sharing, and love from Dr. Cukrowicz and the audience.

Sebastian's story is begun by his mother, whose version elevates Sebastian's character to the status of devoted son, poet-priest, and visionary saint. It is completed by his cousin and final companion, Catharine Holly, whose antithetical characterization of Sebastian deflates Mrs. Venable's sanctification of her son, repeating the pattern of an ironic reversion we have seen as in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Mrs. Venable and Catharine narrate their antithetical versions of Sebastian's life and death respectively. While the narratives center on Sebastian, the drama itself focuses on

14) Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Selections from Ralph Waldo Emerson* (A River Side Edition), ed. E. Whicher (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1957), p. 40.

Catharine, who is herself threatened with an analogous version of Sebastian's savage fate. Functioning as *deus ex machina*, Dr. Cukrowicz, chief surgeon of the state asylum, plays the role of an ultimate judge of the "truth" of both women's stories and a final arbiter of Catharine's fate.

In the first half of the play, Mrs. Venable recounts the major event which structures Sebastian's well-designed life: a pilgrimage to the Galapagos Islands, undertaken by Sebastian and his mother after he had read Herman Melville's description of them as sterile wastelands in his ironically titled "The Encantadas or Enchanted Isles." There, Sebastian witnesses the devouring of the newly-hatched sea turtles by flesh-eating birds, an annual naturalistic rite which Sebastian concludes reflects the image of God. According to Mrs. Venable, "when he [Sebastian] came back down the rigging [from the crow's nest of the schooner], he said, Well, now I've seen Him!— and he meant God" (p. 375). Sebastian sees his own hidden identity, that which he hides beneath the thin shell of his "civilized" behavior, mirrored in the massacre on the Galapagos. Williams builds up suspense throughout the first half of the play for the successive, climactic revelations in the second half.

In the last half of the play, Catharine adds her version of Sebastian's story, which exposes the underside of his nature and of the seemingly idealistic lives of the Venables; his homosexual victimization of young boys for which, until she was no longer "necessary to him," Violet had been made to act as lure or bait; and his self-consuming quest to sacrifice his own corrupt flesh to the rapacious life-force he had envisioned, completing "a sort of!— image!—he had of himself as a sort of!—*sacrifice* to a!— *terrible* sort of a...God" (p. 397).

Yet, *Suddenly Last Summer* is not simply a condemnation of Sebastian's world view; Williams attempts to show that Sebastian's interpretation of the universe as inherently rapacious and exploitative is not wholly solipsistic, deranged, and morbid. Sebastian's view is supported by the multiple analogues of nature's savagery throughout the play, in all its events, characterizations, relationships, allusions, and imagery. When Sebastian associates the instinctual predatory impulse in nature with a governing principle of the universe, numerous examples in the play give credence to his view as a dark but viable version of a universal truth.

Violet and Catharine employ similar imagery to describe, respectively, the devouring of the turtles by the flesh-eating birds and the cannibalizing of Sebastian; Williams thereby



aims at the analogy between these events. Mrs. Venable describes the scene in the Encantadas as occurring on a "blazing sand-beach" (p. 355), made black with the motion of flesh-eating birds, whose harsh cries signal their slaughter of sea turtles by "tearing the underside open rendering and eating their flesh" (p. 356). Catharine also narrates in analogous terms the cannibalizing of Sebastian: the native children commit the cannibalization on the "blazing white hot" street of a beach, darkened by Sebastian's attackers; those "frightfully thin and dark naked children" attack Sebastian like "a flock of black plucked little birds," who "screamed...and seemed to fly in the air" in pursuit of him, and, finally, like the flesh-eating birds in destroying the turtles, tear "bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs" (pp. 421-22). Sebastian was murdered by a group of people who lived "like scavenger dogs" (p. 413): "...what was left of him, that looked like a big-white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed!...against that blazing white wall..." (p. 422).

The devouring of the sea turtles by the flesh-eating birds further corresponds to the loveless sexual "communion" between Sebastian and the young boys he exploits. Here Sebastian assumes the role of the "cruel" (p. 397) God, a demonic "Son of God," which he sees reflected in that predatory spectacle. The subsequent cannibalizing of Sebastian by the young boys represents a modern existential version of his own ironic martyrdom, for his name is derived from the Christian martyr, St. Sebastian.

In a world bereft of those religious myths, symbols, and rituals which once permitted hope of regenerations as well as of reconciliation between body and soul, flesh and spirit, man is rendered by his divided self. Without any hope of transcendence, modern man is condemned to an inherently corrupt "corporeal existence." In such an existential "hell," carnal passion is viewed as a device to cope with the sordid and unchangeable reality, implying ultimately a total collapse or subjugation to the rapacity of the world.

Sebastian's self-willed death has always been a controversial issue for the Williams's critics. Benjamin Nelson contends that Sebastian's death came after he "fully recognized his weakness, perversity and incompleteness."<sup>15</sup> Sebastian's death, Nelson explains, was an act of purification from the imperfections that attend mortality, was the poet's expression of his vision of the cannibalistic nature of the universe, and was finally, a manifestation of the principle of creation through destruction. George Niesen, on the other hand, calls our attention to the significance of the way in which Sebastian died:

15) B. Nelson, p. 204.

For the first time in his life he attempts to correct a human situation—perhaps his fatal error. He runs up the hill, away from safety, with the burden of a bad heart, to die and be devoured....to leave his mark on the frightening tabula rasa of the universe.<sup>16)</sup>

Niesen concludes that Sebastian consciously willed and sealed his fate with his death. But this still does not give a full picture of Sebastian's death.

When we see through his life, we realize that Sebastian is incapable of bearing the burden of being an autonomous self, not just in his predatory dependence on Violet and Catharine, but in his absolute inability to live in any moral and responsible and non-egocentric way. Sebastian comes to know that his past life was detached from the life cycle of the real world. The garden with its Venus-Fly Trap bespeaks his spiritual state. Like the Venus-Fly Trap, that displaced tropical flower which, in order to survive in a hostile environment, "has to be kept under glass from early fall to late spring" (p. 350), Sebastian is similarly incubated in the over-protective womb of Mrs. Venable for "nine months of the year" (p. 354), preparing for the birth of his annual "Poem of Summer." As his dependency on his mother indicates, he was an egocentric infant without enough capability to be self-reliant.

Raised in such a "Well-groomed jungle" and "in the morally poisonous atmosphere of infancy" (p. 351), Sebastian develops an attitude toward life which is at once decadent, elitist, and savage—"An attitude toward life that's hardly been known in the world since the great Renaissance princes were crowded out of their palaces and gardens by successful shopkeepers!" (p. 362). Yet, even though he has been brought up in the very heart of moral darkness—exploitation and egocentric elitism, he is not completely swept away by the exploitation and victimization; he remains a watcher and observer.

Sebastian's life was one of immaculate order and discipline; he "would never go to a dirty public beach... would go out a mile in a boat to find water fit to swim in" (p. 410). So successful was he ordering time and his life that, at the age of forty, he looked no older than he had at twenty. The playwright evolves a descriptive portrait of a poet who tries to arrange his life in a well-established pattern—"well-groomed jungle." As Mrs. Venable says, "That's how he meant it to be, nothing was accidental, everything was planned and designed in Sebastian's life and his work" (p. 351). Just as the meticulous design of the jungle garden (analogous to that part of Sebastian's life that is well-designed

16) George Niesen, "The Artist against the Reality in the Plays of Tennessee Williams," in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, p. 480.

and appears well-ordered) has at its secret center the Venus-Fly Trap, a symbol of rapacity and displaced dependence, Sebastian's own rapacity and lack of commitment are inherent and well hidden.

Mrs. Venable explains the ideal around which she and Sebastian structured their lives. They have sought to change the very nature of human existence from a condition of mutability to one of permanent fulfillment.

Mrs. Venable: My son, Sebastian, and I construed our days... we would—carve out each day of our lives like a piece of sculpture!" (p. 363)

Her metaphor for a perfect life, days like pieces of sculpture, captures her desire for beauty, purity, order, and permanence. Sebastian's rage for order was so perfect that "nothing was accidental, everything was planned and designed in Sebastian's life and his...work" (p. 351). She hopes that Sebastian will be regarded as an eternal youth. Comparing two photographs of Sebastian "taken twenty years apart," she says: "The photograph looks older but not the subject. It takes character to refuse to grow old" (pp. 359—360).

Mrs. Venable attempts to attain non-human timelessness and order against the mutability of this disordered universe. George Niesen observes:

Violet presents herself quite clearly as a woman afraid of mortality, mutability, and death... Violet's violent attempt to stop time, to preserve youth... keeps him [Sebastian] alive and functioning and sterile in his brilliant white suit.<sup>17)</sup>

Sebastian's egocentric elitism also makes decadent his self-conception as poet, a perversion of the function of the artist which Williams has elsewhere defined as the attempt to reach out for that "embrace" with one's fellow-man which ameliorates, at least temporarily, our existential condemnation to "solitary confinement inside our own skins."<sup>18)</sup>

Even though they thought they participated in life, the Venables remained detached as observers of life. They were never touched by the experience or by the pains of others. By never becoming involved with others, they were able to maintain their mutual vampire relationship; they were a closed circle and thus impervious to the problems and difficulties caused by life's reality.

Even Sebastian's affairs were brief liaisons and then he moved on to other young men

17) *ibid.*, p. 479.

18) Williams, *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams III*, p. 3.

who had been attracted by his mother or Catharine. The only time in his travels when he considered making a long-lasting commitment to anything else (Sebastian "almost entered a Buddhist monastery"), his mother broke him away from it ("got him through that crisis..."). They made no firm commitments to anything other than themselves. Theirs were egoistic lives. Sebastian died as soon as he broke this pattern. Because he has become totally unaware of life despite his close observation of it, Sebastian is unable to survive it when he wants to.

Sebastian realized that truth had manifested itself all along in his jungle garden, in the sea turtles and carnivorous birds of the Encantadas. Having discovered the true nature of his self, he wants to be free from it, but cannot be. His dilemma is a modern parable of alienated man beset with insoluble ambiguities. However, Sebastian does attempt to escape the symbiotic relationship with his mother. According to Catharine, during Sebastian's final trip without his mother, it was as if "something had broken, that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a...sort of—umbilical cord, long—after..." (p. 409). Thus, "suddenly last summer," like the newly-hatched turtles, vulnerable and psychologically defenseless, Sebastian belatedly attempts independence, which results only in his final destruction. As his mother says, "Without me he died last summer" (p. 354). It is Sebastian's belated attempt to find his identity that kills him.

His acquisition of independence demands him self-judgment, but this is an unbearable burden for him because he has lived a protected life like a child. Thus, he must pay a terrible price for his attempted independence. Because of his egocentric elitism and infantile omnipotence, his attempt at independence does not end in any sense of atonement for his corruption. Of the starving children whom his own rapaciousness had corrupted, he says to Catharine: "Don't look at those little monsters. Beggars are a social disease in this country. If you look at them, you get sick of the country, it spoils the whole country for you" (p. 415). People remain to Sebastian "items on a menu," things to be exploited, devoured, and, afterwards, discarded. Believing in the brutal God and confirming this brutal truth, Sebastian is ironically a victim as well as a victimizer; a cannibal who eats and is eaten alive.

R. D. Laing's idea of "ontological insecurity" provides a useful guide to approach Sebastian's fate. Because of the absence of his Galapagos experience's shattering of his sense of superiority, he experiences the "ontological insecurity," an insecurity that entails the "partial loss of the systematic unity of self, concurrently with partial loss of the

relatedness with the other."<sup>19</sup>) Because of his dependency, he cannot exist alone. Such dependence on others for his identity threatens the self with engulfment and annihilation by others. He may fall to a "complete loss of being or absorption into the other."<sup>20</sup>) This, both his divorce from his true self as a result of ontological insecurity and the schism between his public self and his hidden corrupt nature, result in Sebastian's existence as a divided self—a sundering which subtly both prefigures and leads to his end.

The paradoxical nature of truth and the unconscious primitive impulses that lie beneath even the most consciously civilized behavior emerge as a more complex dimension of the play's theme. Truth is essentially paradoxical, and its surface appearances are deceptive. Thus, the love intended to save may ultimately destroy; the embrace may devour; and what seems to be insane and obscene babbling may be but "a true story of our time and the world we live in" (p. 382). Dr. Cukrowicz's lobotomy, for example, is another instance of discrepancy between appearance and reality, a symbol of the victimization of society's rational order without any concern for morality or humanity. The pursuit of an enlightened ideal of rational conduct ironically can be conducted in a manner extremely opposite to its intentions.

As we clearly become aware of Violet's hidden intention for her contribution to the state asylum— "setting up the Sebastian Venable Memorial Foundation" (p. 365), our perception of distance between fact and value is fundamental to our understanding of Williams's assault on prevailing social conventions. Mrs. Venable is a product of the fashionable society of New Orleans, in which reputation and appearance are vital. Social rumors are crucial for her reputation, thus, she attempts to preserve the reputation of herself and her son. Mrs. Venable correspondingly attempts to violate Dr. Cukrowicz's ethical and moral integrity by bribing him to perform the lobotomy on Catharine in exchange for her subsidizing his medical research; and she similarly preys on the economic "hunger" of the members of Catharine Holly's own family, by threatening to cut them out of Sebastian's inheritance unless they succeed in persuading Catharine to "forget that story" (p. 380).

In turn, Catharine's mother and her brother George confirm Mrs. Venable's cynical belief in the predatory essence of human nature by showing their willingness to sacrifice

19) R.D. Laing, *Self and Others: Further Studies in Sanity and Madness* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1962), p. 51.

20) R.D. Laing, *Divided Self: A Study of Sanity and Madness* (London: Tavistock, 1960), p. 44.

both Catharine and truth to satisfy their selfish interest and greed. Finally, in the dog-cat-dog world she inhabits, Violet Venable is herself like Sebastian both exploiter and exploited. She is exploited in her role of wealthy benefactor, the “sacrificial victim” of others’ avaricious natures, of all those who “want your blood on the altar steps of their *outraged, outrageous egos*” (p. 364).

This is the world of victims and victimizer, of manipulation and exploitation. Sebastian’s victimization of his mother, who before her stroke and the loss of her looks, served the same function of solicitor or pimp subsequently assumed by Catharine: “*Not consciously!* She didn’t *know* that she was procuring for him... [but] We both did the same thing for him, made contacts for him” (p. 412).

Mrs. Venable, however, seems to have seen the truth: “My son, Sebastian, was chaste. Not c-h-a-s-e-d! Oh, he was chased in that way of spelling it, too, we had to be very fleet-footed I can tell you...” (p. 361). Here, we suspect that Violet knows but cannot accept the sexual nature of her son. Her actions are an attempt to hide from the outside world this shameful fact. She is the victim of her own deceptions—to hide her incestuous relationship with her son and his son’s rapacity and homosexuality.

For the Venables, human relationship means not relationship or mutuality, but exploitation. Mrs. Venable psychologically exploits her son by her unnatural enthusiasm for their acknowledgment as a “famous couple,” her affirmation of the almost incestuous unity as the two cavorted around the world—a complete, intimate symbiosis of mind and body between mother and son: “They called, ‘Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian’ (p. 362); “without me, [the poem was] impossible, Doctor” (p. 354); “[he] was mine” (p. 408). This relationship accounts for Mrs. Venable’s preference to stay with her son during his “Buddhist” retreat to the Himalayas over returning to her critically-ill husband. She has here become herself a victim of moral paralysis.

Against this demonic vision of life are set several images and embodiments of a vestigial beauty, goodness, and humanity struggling to survive or evolve in an otherwise atavistic world. Thus, interpolated into the environment of the primeval jungle-garden with its harsh cries of “savage” creatures is the occasional clear, sweet sound of a songbird: the transcendent symbol of a spiritual yearning to rise above the corrupt, corporeal world, representing a nostalgia for a return to Edenic innocence. As a symbol of such “wistful thinking”, however, the bird’s song serves simultaneously to elicit sympathy for the characters whose transcendent longings it evokes and ironically to render those desires

futile and ironic.

In her insistence on telling the true story, Catharine's behavior is similar to the self-destructive tendencies that led to Sebastian's death; and her commitment to the mental institution because of this insistence on truth is similar to the fate of the Student's father in Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata*. To Catharine, who insists that her narrative of cannibalization represents but "a true story of our time and the world we live in" (p. 382), Violet Venable acts as the flesh-rending victimizer, seeking to "cut this hideous story out of her brain!" (p. 423). The fierce Mrs. Venable is an intensification of Mrs. Buchanan in *Eccentricities of a Nightingale*. The intelligent Mrs. Venable is, like the natives in Cabeza de Lobo, a savage. Here, Williams shows man as the prisoner of a corrupt intelligence. The analogy between the projected fate of Catharine and the savage mutilation of Sebastian is further reinforced by the phonological similarity between *lobotomy* and Cabeza de Lobo, or "Wolf's Head," the name of the site of Sebastian's cannibalization. The association between both terms serves to emphasize the inherent savagery beneath Mrs. Venable's (and by extension, humankind's) ostensible civilized behavior, reminding us of society's savagery to individuals.

The characterization of Catharine Holly testifies to the play's thematic insistence on a universal yearning for love and goodness that still exists in the midst of this existential hell. Like Sebastian, Mrs. Venable, and Catharine's mother and brother, Catharine shares the dual nature of victim and victimizer; as such, she is rendered existentially complex versions of her allegorical, mythical, and fairy-tale prototypes. Ultimately, however, it is her humanity not her superhuman, legendary, or fairy-tale dimensions—which elevates her from the animalistic level of those who devour or are devoured.

Playing the roles of participant, observer, and reporter, Catharine Holly is depicted as both innocent victim of Mrs. Venable and experienced accomplice of Sebastian's victimization of the young boys she helps lure to him. Feeling loneliness more acutely than death as a "fallen woman," she needs somebody. In that sense, Catharine resembles Williams's Blanche DuBois. Although Catharine's similar dependence on "the kindness of strangers" leads at first to her psychological derangement, it ultimately proves her salvation.

Catharine Holly's own aggressive, sexual tendencies are evidenced by her voluntary liaison with the married stranger at the Mardi Gras ball; by her attempted seduction of Dr. Cukrowicz—"crushes her mouth to his violently... presses her lips to his fiercely,

clutching his body against her" (p. 403); and by her admission that she knowingly acted as pimp for Sebastian, which is accompanied by a veiled allusion to her own early promiscuity: "I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District" (p. 413). But, unlike Sebastian, Catharine has experienced the disappointments of life and has been deeply touched by them. Becoming aware of the need for humanity through her fallen past, she comes to see herself in the third person and wants to have some control over her situation, thereby transcending the Darwinian road of the world. Moreover, she knows that she must face the truth, she must understand the reality of her situation. Her unselfish elevation to holiness is thus ironically accompanied by her existential debasement and humanistic awareness.

The validity of Catharine's story is reinforced by the use of such terms as "vision" by the playwright. The term is used by Dr. Cukrowicz to describe Catharine's own "Satanic" story of Sebastian. Catharine herself, while under the trance induced by the truth drug, insists that her telling the events of Sebastian's fate cannot be willed, but come to her as involuntary or inspired images of truth: "Under the drug it has to be a vision, or nothing comes" (p. 416). We are asked to accept the complete validity of her confession. Just as Williams believes in the therapeutic effect of confession through writing, Catharine hopes to be free from the nightmare through story-telling.

The unconsciously compulsive nature of Catharine's "vision" is similar to that of "automatic writing." Since her talking comes not from her will but automatically, it is similar to the technique of spontaneous association called "automatic writing." In order to generate a rapprochement between Catharine and Dr. Cukrowicz, the confession is made with a form of response similar to that of a priest, using the catechism of the church. Here, Williams seems to be giving us to understand that Catharine is speaking with the authority of one that has access to the truths of the unconsciousness. By juxtaposing what Catharine speaks about with her need to speak the truth, Williams affirms that the act of confession and the need to confess are what is important and real. Through her private confession in the public, Catharine asks to be understood by others; through being understood, she hopes to be absolved.

The dramatic conflict of the play, in fact, rests on determining whether Catharine's "visions" are true or false. Catharine Holly is in danger of succumbing to the Darwinistic view of the world held by Mrs. Venable and Sebastian. The playwright deplores mankind's inability to transcend an inherently exploitative universe: "We all use each other



and that's what we think of as love, and not being able to use each other is what's—*hate*" (p. 396). Williams contrives to win the audience's approval about Catharine's "vision." The doctor asks if she hates Mrs. venable.

Catharine: A ship struck an iceberg at sea—everyone sinking—

Catharine: But that's no reason for everyone drowning for hating everyone drowning! (pp. 396-397)

This metaphor suggests the loneliness and fear induced hatred of human beings who, although they band together in ships, nevertheless are destined to drown individually. It suggests their vulnerability before the damning universal forces of multiplicity—time, chance, and death figured in the iceberg. It also implies that evil may arise from within the social group as well—everyone drowning hates everyone drowning.

Using a ship and the people aboard as metaphors for human life and community, Catharine's idea of hatred is simple: "How can you hate anybody and still be sane?" (p. 396). Catharine has the kindness of affection. As the story of her seduction by a married man on the night of a Mardi Grass ball illustrates, she knows the need for humanistic possibility by the vulnerable individuals who struggle with animalistic instinct and existential paradox. This is similar to Jack Burden's learning in Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*. He learns that the human is an imperfect being who must accept imperfection in himself and others and that men cannot be separated from other fellows. All are entangled in the web: "We were bound together forever and I could never hate him without hating myself or love myself without loving him."<sup>21</sup> Rational order, Williams seems to say in *Suddenly Last Summer*, when it becomes an end in itself, may disguise or even produce evil. The real key to our moral survival seems to be in recognizing the existence of evil in the world and in ourselves. Then, knowing that our flaws stem from our attempts to overcome our existential loneliness and fear, we can treat each other with compassion.

Williams seems to be saying that if the world is, just as Sebastian saw it, an evil and corrupting place, "everyone drowning," we need to form a community in which we can help each other live through compassion. Our condition is no reason to hate each other, quite the opposite. Catharine affirms a positive life of community in which people accept each other even though they all share the common fate of death. Williams inculcates in

21) Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1946), p. 442.

us an attitude of non-judgmental tenderness towards our fellows and ourselves because we are made to realize that most of us need to be treated as patients in a hospital or as children.

It is important to examine carefully why Williams allows the Doctor to save Catharine and what the playwright intends for the audience to believe. The Doctor demonstrates that both truth and compassion are crucial to our survival. He remains objective even in the face of the bribe offered him by Mrs. Venable to "cut this hideous story out of her brain!" (p. 432). The Doctor's attitude is in stark contrast to Sebastian's self-indulgent subjectivity, Mrs. Venable's malicious slander, and the Hollys' vested interest in the distortion of truth.

At the play's beginning, Dr. Cukrowicz appears a possible victim of this nasty manipulation; he is characterized as essentially innocent: a "naif" among the play's cynical figures, a "sweet" thrown to the wolves (His Polish name "Cukrowicz" is translated as "Sugar."). He believes at first that Mrs. Venable is truly concerned for Catharine's emotional well-being, and his conscience compels him to warn her about the "risks" of the operation he has been asked to perform on Catharine. He is in danger of being a victim either by the temptation of Mrs. Venable's money or later of Catharine's sexual assault.

That the ostensibly "innocent" (p. 368) Dr. Cukrowicz has a "shadow" side is amply documented in the play. he is not only the potential victim of Mrs. Venable's bribe, but also the potential victimizer of Catharine, whose mental and emotional life or death is dependent on whether or not he decides "to bore a hole in my skull and turn a knife in my brain" (p. 389). Within "Dr. Sugar" (p. 351), then, lies the "shadow" of Sebastian's own cannibalistic nature. As the "skilled surgeon" (p. 366) who mutilates and dismembers his patients, he also reflects the powers of a "savage" God. His headquarters, the state asylum, is significantly named "Lion's View," an obvious parallel to the site of Sebastian's bestial murder "Wolf's Head." While, Dr. Cukrowicz represents the allegorical antithesis to Sebastian, he also serves to validate Sebastian's vision of a universally "savage" world by his own medically sanctioned participation in its cannibalism.

The lobotomy performed by the Doctor also has the effect of calmness in appearance. Here, we are again faced by the problem of appearance and reality in this society: what had appeared to be his first patient's redemptive apprehension of a "blue sky" may have actually represented not a clarified state of mind but a forever "limited" perception of a

world inherently black. By juxtaposing the girl's reference to a "blue...sky" with Dr. Cukrowicz's observation that the weather of that day was indeed "nice" and "fair," Williams attempts to suggest that the girl's perception was strictly in accord with the surface reality. Thus, what Dr. Cukrowicz had thought to be his finest social and moral achievement may have been, in reality, a tragically "savage" act at the expense of humanity. Realizing himself an apparent victimizer, he is stung by the recognition that beneath all the seemingly harmonious acts of society may lie a savage exploitation. Yet, unlike Sebastian, by recognizing his own shadow (his own complicity in the world's savagery), Dr. Cukrowicz is able to arrest the cycle of victimization, thereby truly creating some light in an otherwise dark and destructive world. Even though the operation of lobotomy means money and reputation for him and the director at the hospital urges him to perform for the fund, he decides not to perform the operation, which is important step toward humanistic concern for others in our society.

At the end of the play, Dr. Cukrowicz's tacit decision that Catharine be spared the mutilation of lobotomy seems to suggest that the doctor has himself undertaken a psychological journey from innocence to experience. His recognition is much like that of Quentin in Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*. Quentin realizes that the greatest threat to mankind is an illusion of innocence: "Who can be innocent again on this mountain of skulls?...What burning cities taught her and the death of love taught me—that we are very dangerous?"<sup>22)</sup> The recognition of the human evil within is necessary for life to continue. Only by realizing this truth can individuals enter their own self and find compassion and forgiveness, for both themselves and others. Even though he gained a measure of self-understanding, the Doctor's statement is couched in qualifications: "think," "at least," "consider," "possibility," and "could." Despite these qualifications, the play suggests that Williams's world does not always have to end in ruin and his characters may grow from their experience in their plays. It is still "possible" for the truth to be heard. By his admission that "I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true" (p. 423), the Doctor shows that he himself is experiencing an existentialist awakening through seeing dark aspects of the world and his ignorance about them.

Although his own moral journey from the idealistic surgeon who proudly tells his story

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22) Arthur Miller, *After the Fall*. in *Collected Plays* vol. II (New York: Viking Press, 1981). p.241.

of lobotomy's redemptive powers to the quietly reflective man who saves Catharine from the "savage" world cannot be clearly traced, Dr. Cukrowicz remains Catharine's existential savior. To be sure, the doctor's final musing, "reflectively, into space" (p. 423), reveals his recognition of the world's savagery, as recounted in Catharine's story and as demonstrated by Mrs. Venable and the Hollys. Dr. Cukrowicz emerges deeply changed by his dealings with this journey. He has experienced a glimpse of the horror at the heart of darkness.

Sebastian, his mother, the Hollys, and perhaps the doctor as well, are the cruel egotists, the emotionally obtuse who cannot recognize the human suffering all around them. In order to conceal the moral depravity which exploits other humans like the devouring sea turtles, all of the characters except for Catharine fear the truth, because truth will force them to confront themselves and face their own possible destruction.

### III

In his "Foreword" to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, the play produced directly after *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams tells of an "unmailed letter" in which he had written: "We are all civilized people, which means that we are all savages at heart but observing a few amenities of civilized behavior."<sup>23</sup> It is just this "all savages at heart" beneath man's civilized veneer that Williams explores in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Acknowledging the "impenetrable darkness" at the heart of the human psyche and an undeniably inherent violence which links man with nature, Dr. Cukrowicz understands but refuses to perpetuate the savage impulses which he discovers may lie beneath his healing efforts. Instead, Dr. Cukrowicz ensures and affirms the survival of compassion and redemption even as he realizes their rare and vulnerable existence.

Most people, Williams says, refuse to hear Sebastian's message that the world is evil. And so nobody wants Catharine to tell her story. George tells his sister that Sebastian's horrible tale is not relevant to society: "You got to drop it, Sister, you can't tell such a story to civilized people in a civilized up-to-date country!" (p. 381). The voices of people, like the chorus in Greek tragedy, do not want the truth; comfort and appearance are the motto of these people.

Williams dramatizes the confusion of living in the brutal world when he has Catharine

23) Williams, "Forward" to *Sweet Bird of Youth*, in *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams IV*, p. 3.

say, "We're all of us children in a vast kindergarten trying to spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks!" (p. 375). In his dramatic world, humans respond irrationally to their fundamental condition of loneliness, declivity, and fear of death by doing violence to their fellows. In this play, Williams is not writing merely about the savage world of humans—a Melvillean universe: Williams is dramatizing the possible humanistic/existential growth patterns of humankind, combining the animalistic and the humanistic into a new whole—existential recognition of human darkness and the need for compassion and love.

〈국문요약〉

왜곡된 지상낙원 :

Tennessee Williams의 *Suddenly Last Summer*

변 창 구

Tennessee Williams의 극작품들은 인간의 이상적 성향과 현실, 개인과 세계간의 내적 갈등을 보여준다. 작가가 인물들을 굴절된 탐욕의 세계속에서의 극단적 의식상황에 위치시킬 때, 그들은 비이성적인 행태를 지닐 수 밖에 없다. 하지만 Williams의 이러한 비정상적이고 야만적인 세계의 극화는 방향감각을 상실한 현대인의 보다 건전한 환경에 대한 염원을 아이러니하게 그린 것이다.

Williams의 초기극들이 주인공의 희생양화를 방지하는 반면 *Suddenly Last Summer*를 기점으로 그 이후의 작품들은 삶의 긍정적인, 하지만 최선책은 못되는 면들을 모색하려 한다. Williams 극세계의 지배원리는 주로 인간의 이기심이다. 사회에서 휴머니즘이 사라질 때, 사회는 다아윈식의 정글로 화하고 만다. 이런 세계에서의 인물들은 자신의 이상적 낭만을 성취할 수 없다.

폭력과 비정상적 행태가, Flannery O'Connor나 Carson McCullers에서 처럼, 인물의 내면문제와 비정상 심리를 나타내는 객관적 상관물로 사용된다. 이들에게 필요한 것은 Williams가 누누이 강조하는 사랑·이해·포용이다.

이 작품이 불필요한 폭력과 sensationalism에 의해 예술적 가치가 손상된다고 비평되기도 하지만, 작가는 정교한 시각·청각의 상징체계들과 심상들의 배합을 통해 작품의 통일된 효과를 노리고 있다. 작가는 무자비한 현대사회의 왜곡된 비인간적 모습을 Sebastian의 정원을 초현실적으로 왜곡시켜 상징적으로 보여준다. 극의 시각적 메타포로써 이 외면적으로 잘 정돈된 정원은 본능과 이기주의가 만연하는 이 세상의 microcosm이다.

Williams의 작품세계에서 인간은 타인에게 폭력을 행사하여 자신의 외로움·공포·타락에 비이성적으로 반응한다. *Suddenly Last Summer*의 경우, 작가는 다만 냉혹한 인간세계를 보여주는 것이 아니다. 그는 인간의 실존적·인간적 성장의 가능성을 인간의 동물적 속성 및 어두운 면에 대한 인식과 사랑·포용의 필요성을 덧붙여 극화한다.