

Conflict of Flesh And The Spirit In Tennessee Williams' Summer And Smoke

Suksham Ahluwalia

Associate Professor, Arya College Ludhiana

ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 15 April 2019

Keywords

Conflict, Flesh, Spirit and Southern Womanhood

ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams' Summer And Smoke brings into limelight the unhealthy impact of social restrictions on the personality of an individual, as result of which the individual is forced to lead a life of divided selves, torn between refinement and rapacity that ultimately leads to the total disintegration of one's personality. In this respect it would not be advisable to interpret the character of Alma as an embodiment in of soul because it is not she who speaks in favour of spirit, rather she only falls a prey to those strings of her social upbringing which make her dance accordingly. The play, thus is not Just a spectacle of the age old conflict between soul and body rather it is a compassionate presentation of a troublesome moment in the life of a fading Southern Belle. After her life long training in the puritan renunciation, Alma becomes a puppet in her social world and is forced to bear its consequences like a victimized innocent.

Introduction

SUMMER AND SMOKE, which was earlier entitled chart of Anatomy grew out of a short story " The Yellow Bird." Like The Glass Managerie, the play is the story of sensitive individual who is a misfit in the a society. No doubt, Laura and Amanda Wingfield in the previous play represent culture and refinement associated with the old South, the credit goes to Summer and Smoke (as it was written earlier though published later than A Streetcar Named Desire) for being the first major presentation about frustrated Southern womanhood. However since its first presentation on stage, to most of the contemporary Drama critics, it has appeared to be a simple allegory of good and evil or the age long story of the conflict of the flesh and the spirit.

The play might appear to be allegory or a morality play on the surface level because of its heroine, Alma, preaching in favour of soul and her very name being spanish for soul, yet it is impossible to ignore its socio-historical dimensions. In other words the reference here to the socio-historical background is not made explicit at the very outset of the play as in the case of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire, yet the following analysis would suggest that the tragedy is the outcome of the working of some hostile social forces against a fragile individual. In this respect the play can be interpreted as a "chilling spectacle to which Mr. Williams treats us - much more, actually than a simple a case history of Incipient nymphomania-a study rather of the collapse of a whole system of ideals, of an entire way of life- an allegory perhaps, of the South, its ruin and debasement, its " decline and fall."¹ In other words, Alma is representative figure and through her tragedy, williams intends to underline the root-cause of the frustration of Southern womanhood in the contemporary society.

Alma Winemiller, the main protagonist of the play, is the daughter of a Mississippi minister. Having a moth-like quality, she happens to be a victim of her circumstances. It is because of her mother's collapse into psychotic state that she is forced to act maturely quite early in her girlhood. In her own words:

She had her breakdown while I was still in high school. manage the Rectory and take over the social and household duties that would ordinarily belong to a minister's wife, not daughter. And that may have made me seen strange to some of my more critical contemporaries.²

Apparently, she is in love with Dr. John Buohanan, "a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society" (P 670), The only thing which keeps Alma away from the young doctor is his bad reputation. Being a preacher's daughter, she has been brought up in a different manner and her mind is stuffed with certain ideas about life which do not coincide with John's way of life. The conflict between their antithetical attitudes to life takes the most terrible shape in eighth scene, with both of them presenting their own arguments. Afterwards the conflict of puritanism versus lawrentian sex within Alma gains momentum and Alma, thoroughly changed, goes to John. However, to her utter discomfiture, it is too late as John is already engaged to Nellie-a young girl of eighteen. Thus Alma takes long to throw away the unworthy mask of society and loses her love forever.

In order to understand the fuller implications of her tragedy, it would be useful to get acquainted with social set up of the period Alma belongs to. The action of the play takes place in the Glorious Hill, Mississippi and the period is that of the beginning of twentieth century. Accordingly, one can smell the decadence of the old aristocracy giving way to a new way of life. Yet it is only beginning of the 'Fall'. In other words, unlike in Elysian Fields in Streetcar Named Desire, here at Glorious Hill, the hymns and the sentimental favourites Alma sings are not submerged in the flamenco and blues john prefers."³ Also " neither the songs of the plaintive spirit nor those of the restless flesh can subdue the martial airs of triumph and commemoration."⁴ In other words, commemoration." though there signs of new thinking, new way are of life as represented by John, yet the puritanical atmosphere dominates the world.

It is noticeable that in the beginning of the twentieth century, the influence of the transcendentalists and the unitarians had extended over to the whole of North. But in the South America, the movement going on was quite opposed to it, due to a number of reasons. To begin with, since the period of civil war and the following reconstruction years had, been full of unbearable sufferings, the people once more turned to reaffirm this faith in the religion. Secondly, in these decades, the level of education and information fell tragically and there was no way left to gain new ideas. Thirdly and above all, the most important factor was that in this era, when the whole world was falling away from the old beliefs, the Southerners found it a right time to show once again their being distinguished from the others. In simple words by returning more vigorously to the puritanical way of life they intended to show this superiority by assuming the role of "the last great Champion of the true faith in the world which, with this Yankee in the van, was plainly deserting to Satan."⁵ At such a time, Southern ministers rose swiftly towards the zenith of their Power. As W.J. Cash points out in his historical account of the Southern society, that in this hour :

What the ministers proclaimed as the divine desire must be obeyed without question and without hesitancy, ... and it must be so obeyed not alone by way of profession but also by way of public conduct. In these decades the power of evangelical ministers, waxing conclusively prescriptive for opinion, made the official code of the South ever more puritanical and repressive.⁶

Obviously these endless restrictions resulted in secret outlets of basic human instincts for love and play. In other words, "the Southerner's primary love of play, of the convivial, nevertheless, still lived in own more or less innocent right, to send him sneaking into the woods with his cards, for gathering with his cronies over a jug behind the barn, slipping away over the river in the nighttime to a cock fight, or a breakdown; to bind him to his flesh pots behind the arras and to break forth in queer feverish fits of defiance and abandon."⁷ The presence of Moon-lake casino in the Mississippi town, here, is an illustration of above mentioned secret outlets of human appetites.

In fact, both kinds of people suffered the consequences of social bars. Those who indulged in such secret outlets, suffered from a sense of sin throughout their lives while those who could not revolt against the set traditions suffered from inner conflicts. Alma Winemiller belongs to the second group of individuals one who was deprived of the right of leading a normal healthy life.

It so happens that while living in a puritanical society, she has developed certain habits and attitudes which create hinderances in the way of her long-cherished love. One part of her self is developed to such an extent that it dominates over the rest of her being. This imbalance in her personality proves disastrous for her. In fact, a close look at her behaviour suggests that the Southern way of life has come in her blood and each action of hers reflects the sophisticated and refined Southern tradition.

In the play, she is introduced as a girl in her mid-twenties having "something prematurely spinsterish about her" (P. 670). As soon as she enters the stage in scene 1st, Williams hurriedly refers to her personality in the stage direction, "... her voice and gestures belong to years of Church entertainment, to the position of hostess in a rectory , she has grown up mostly in the company of her elders. Her true nature is still hidden even from herself..." (P. 670). Here, she at once reminds us of another typical Southern Belle like Blanche DuBois and Amanda Wingfield. Who take a lot of pains to keep their outward appearance intact. Even her childhood, Alma is quite conscious of her appearance. She presents a box of handkerchiefs to her friend, John, whose bleeding nose spoils his 'appearance' One can easily recall, here, Amanda Wingfield asking her son time and again to chew the food slowly and observe the table manner. Quite seriously he Alma tells John :

I was only thinking how handsome you'd be if your face wasn't dirty. You know why your face is dirty ? Because you don't use a handkerchief and you wipe your nose on that dirty old sweater. (P. 668).

Being a minister's daughter, she has developed taste only for finer things of the world, such as literary association of ladies and gentlemen and faith in the primacy of soul. Her mind is set towards one direction only and that is, the infinite. Again her speech mannerism smacks of the super refinement of her society, John complains that she 'swallows air' whenever she laughs or talks. In fact she goes after a 'polished' form of language, and particular kind of accent which makes her stand distinguished. For instance she uses the term 'pyrotechnical' instead of fire works . However quite innocently, Alma defends her case saying,

I have sometimes been accused of having a put on accent by people who disapprove of good diction. My father was Rhodes' Scholar at Oxford, and while over there he fell into a natural habit of using this long A where it is correct to use it. I suppose I must have picked it up from him, but it's entirely unconscious...' (P. 675)

Whatever the case may be it remains a fact that she, as C.W.E. Bigsby observes, uses language " as a way of distorting and controlling experience. Her Latinate vocabulary is a defence against the vulgar and the vital alike."⁸

Thus Alma is leading a life of typical Southern gentlewoman endowed with extra ordinary fragility. Deeply influenced by the social norms, she finds life to be an "everlasting struggle and aspiration for more than our human limits have placed in our reach." (P. 676). Not finding herself acceptable in the present world, she keeps herself busy with her own cultural world full of the stories about Gothic cathedrals.

It is often believed that Alma's family life plays major role in her destruction. As G.R Kataria points out that in Alma's case "it is not just the sick schizophrenic mother but the passive preacher father who combines with the mother to spell disaster in Alma's life."⁹ No doubt, she is deprived of her youth because of her illness and even in her childhood, she

possesses an 'adult like quality. Accordingly, when she is grown up, it is not easy for her to find a comfortable company amongst people of her age and it makes her find refuge in the company of old people. Secondly, her thinking is modified to a great extent by the powerful influence of her father.

However, if we extend this term influence little further, it covers the social sensibility of the whole society as her father, being a minister represents the puritanical society. Under his influence, she is forced to wear the mask of spirituality underneath which keeps fluttering like a butterfly her love starved passionate self. Everybody, except Alma is aware of this 'other-self'. John tells her :

Under the surface You have a lot of excitement, great deal more than any other woman I have met So much that you have to carry these sleeping pills with you. The question is why? (P. 687).

Again he tells her that she suffering from doppelganger and its meaning as Alma herself explains in the play is the presence of another self inside her. But due to the ideals imposed by puritan culture. she is forced to suppress it and this proven disastrous for her. It is noticeable that Alma is not the only Southern Belle being victim of this aspect of American society. Blanche DuBois looks down upon stella's act of making love to her husband, Stanley. She smells vulgarity in their affair. Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* unable to have contact with another person is forced take- to shelter in her own narrow fragile world. And Amanda throws out the books of Lawrence being read by her son, Tom. Similarly Alma, forever preaching in favour of the soul, rejects the needs of body.

Consequently, she stands torn between natural instincts and mask of superficial refinement. It leads not only to her mental turmoil, but also to a number of physical diseases. Time and again she " relies on pills and handkerchiefs. Indeed her constant handkerchief- delicate, fluttery, ladylike-is both an essential part of costume and theatrical metaphor of her spirit."¹¹

The struggle to recognize this repressed self of hers begins with Alma when she comes in contact with John Buchanan, the young doctor who has just returned back here after studying the principles of Darwin. For all these years, he has been away from the shackles of puritan culture. He is the same boy Alma had developed a liking for during her childhood. Finding him back, she is overwhelmed with Joy and her liking for him changes into a strong urge to get hold of him. But she keeps on repressing her feelings as it is indecent on the part of a lady to verbalize her love. Suffering from inner conflicts, she weaves around her a circle of primness and affectation and never allows anybody or even herself to peep inside that net. In fact being a minister's daughter, Alma can't shrink away from the mores and responsibilities of American society and therefore concludes that John is not the gentleman of her dreams. Quite contrary to her expectations, he is a drunkard and lecher spending his nights at the Gonzales'place on the lake. She tells John:

I'm afraid that you and I move in different circles. If I Wished to be as outspoken as you are, which is sometimes just an excuse for being rude-I might say that I've yet to see you in the Company of a-well, a-reputable young woman. You have heard unfavourable talk about me in your circle of acquaintances and I've heard equally unfavourable talk about you in mine... (P. 675)

Hence Alma can't accept John because he is not acceptable in her society and Alma herself is a laughing stock in John's social circle.

The clash between the anti-thetical views of the two comes into limelight most clearly in the eighth scene. Whereas John insists that human body is " a tree inhabited by three birds the brain, the belly and the genitals"¹¹ Alma keeps on telling that the thing she has been told to be most important in life is missing in that anatomy chart. In fact one can only pity these two individuals - victims of their society - striving hard to make each other understand their respective view points. Neither of them realizes that it is not their true selves speaking but they are giving vent to what they have been taught in their respective social worlds, and all this leads to their confusion. Whereas the only thing John longs for is the love of Alma and she, on the other hand, is afraid to confess her love believing that its mere description would destroy it. Unconsciously John states the truth quite early in the play, ... Many the times I've looked across at the Reatory and wondered if it would be worth trying, you and me..." (P. 684)

However, both return to their respective worlds after the clash. John takes up his father's incomplete work and returns home with laurels for having stamped out herself the epidemic. On the contrary Alma retires herself not only from her family obligations but also social responsibilities. "The irony of the play lies in the fact that "Alma comes to be convinced of the need to complete her life by conceding the existence of a physical sexuality at precisely the same time that Buchanan learns the insufficiency of the merely physical. They pass one another in their separate developments."¹²

The play acquires tragic dimensions with Alma presenting herself whole heartedly to John and John refusing to accept her. It is for the first time that after throwing away the shackles of puritanism, Alma speaks without any inhibition :

... It's no longer a secret that I love you as long ago as the time I asked you to read the stone angle's name with your fingers. Yes, I remember. Yes, it had begun that early, this affliction of love and has never let go of me since, but kept on growing Now I wish you would tell me - why didn't it happen between us? Why did I feel ? Why did you come almost close enough - and no closer ? (P . 698).

It is noticeable that this cry of Alma is not a personal one It represents the anguish of all those members of puritan society. who even after following the set rules of behaviour fail to make out what exactly lacks in their lives. Since, in most of Williams' plays. the characters belong to Southern background, this

conflict between the puritanism and cavalier lurks in their lives. In this respect Alma is "the full scale treatment of the most famous Williams' archetype the flighty, sexually frustrated eccentric matron"¹³. In his Memoirs Williams' admits that she is his favourite character:

I think the character I like the most is miss Alma .. she really had the greatest struggle...so you see , Alma went through the same thing I went through-from puritanical shackles to well complete profligacy.. Freedom, liberation from taboos¹⁴.

However, Alma takes long to gather courage to revolt against the social norms. she tells John, "I came here to tell you that being a gentleman does not seem so important to me but you are telling me I've got to remain a lady (P. 699). Helpless to get her love back she "moves from longing for the bohemian life to actual participation in it."¹⁵ In the end of the play we find that Alma turns to promiscuity and one can easily trace out the future of Alma in the loveless pursuits of Blanche DuBois.

Conclusion

Thus, we can say that Alma is "an unhappy woman, passionate by nature but loyal in her conscious mind to the ideals of an anemic gentility"¹⁶ she is not responsible for her promiscuities, but only a victim of a corrupt society which prevents the healthy development of her life. The farewell salute she pays to the Anglo at the end could have been avoided, if and only if her inner self were allowed to develop freely. With the passage of time, she realizes that she has taken a wrong direction. But now, even if she takes a right one, she can't revolt against ever moving time. In the play she tells John that " sometimes it takes a tragedy like this to make a weak person strong." (P. 672) without knowing that she, too will have to pay heavily in order to unite her two selves together -to be a strong person with enough courage to go against society. Indeed, first society makes Alma leave her long cherished love and afterwards, leads her to promiscuity where she is to depend upon the "kindness of strangers"¹⁷. The play, thus illustrates the isolating effects of particular socio-historical conditions in the life of an individual. It is indeed tragic to find Alma-one time symbol for eternity and spirituality-undergoing a drastic change which ultimately leads her to the path of nothing but all carnality and hence a 'Southern wench'.

References

1. Durant DA Ponte , "Tennessee Williams" Gallery of Feminine characters, "In Tennessee studies in literature, Vol. X, 1965. P. 19.
2. Tennessee Williams, *Summer and Smoke Best American Plays Third Series-1945 - 1951* (1952; rpt. New York : Crown Publishers, Inc., 1970); P 675. All other references are taken from the same edition and page numbers are incorporated within the text itself.
3. Roger Boxill, *Tennessee Williams* (New York : St. Martin's Press, 1987), P.114.
4. Roger Boxill, P 104.
5. W.J. Cash, *The Mind of The South* (1941; rpt. New York : Alfred A Knopf Inc., 1970), P 132.
6. W.J. Cash, P. 133.
7. W.J. Cash, P. 133.
8. C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction to twentieth Century American Drama vol II* (London to Cambridge University Press, 1984),P. 69
9. Gulshan Rai Kataria, " Sick Mothers' Suf Children : Three families of Tennessee Williams, * In *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol 17. (winter and Summer 1987, P. 60 .
10. Roger Boxill, P. 103.
11. Kenneth Tynan, "American Blues : The Plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller ", in *The Modern American Theatre*, ed. Alvin B. Kernan (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1967), P . 41.
12. CWE Bigsby, P. 69.
13. Hirsch Foster. *A Portrait of The Artist : the Plays of Tennessee Williams* (1979 ; rpt. Now York : National University Publications, 1983), P 28.
14. Quoted in *Saturday Review* (April 29, 1972), P. 27.
15. Hirsch Foster, P. 28.
16. Quoted by Roger Boxill in *Tennessee Williams*, P. 101.
17. Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird of Youth A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie*, ed. E. Martin Browne, (1959; rpt. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), P. 225.