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COMIC ELEMENTS IN THE PLAYS OF
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

by

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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is not popularly considered a comic writer. Quite the contrary, among the adjectives most frequently applied to his work are ones like "morbid," "violent" or "sensual."¹ And the subject matter and characters one finds in his plays seem to justify the descriptions: pathetic transvestites, menacing sadists and, as one critic put it, a set of protagonists suffering from acute "gonad imbalance"² work out their destinies in plots which include rape, castration, cannibalism, death by blowtorch and assorted other horrors of the Grand Guignol. Williams's own public and private statements about his works and the world view presented in them would also indicate that he is not a man naturally given to comedy. In reply to a letter from Cheryl Crawford requesting that he attempt a comedy Williams writes:

You asked me, last Spring, why I didn't write a comedy - as if you didn't know that I only write for self-expression and that what I have to express is not, alas, a highly risible concept of the mysteries we live in --³

More recently, in an interview with Time magazine, Williams outlined his vaguely existential philosophy in these terms:

There is a horror in things, a horror at heart of the meaninglessness of existence. Some people cling to a certain philosophy that is handed down to them and which they accept. Life has a meaning if you're bucking for heaven. But if heaven is a fantasy,

we are in this jungle with whatever we can work out for ourselves. It seems to me that the cards are stacked against us. The only victory is how we take it.⁴

Nevertheless, despite Williams's avowed bleak conception of the human condition, and the plethora of critical responses hailing him as a "poet of the damned," a significant amount of comic writing does appear in his work. There is nothing really unusual about the yoking together of a grim world view ("the cards are stacked against us") and a sense of comedy in modern dramatic literature; this combination has in fact characterized the majority of significant post World War II plays.⁵ What is unusual is the fact that most critics have overlooked the integral nature of the comic writing in Tennessee Williams's work. Those critics who have treated Williams's comedy have done little more than mention its presence.⁶ According to Eric Bentley:

Williams has often been admired for other, supposedly profounder elements, and when he has been condemned it has been on the grounds that the profundity was spurious. Those who do the condemning should, however, hasten to add that Williams has a fine comic sense and knows how to use it.⁷

William Inge, the playwright and close friend of Williams, adds a personal note to the observation of humor in both Williams the man and in his plays:

And he does have his own very special brand of humor that I don't always get, that I don't always get immediately. I usually get it on the second beat. But I know it's always there. He is never without humor. I don't know of any of his plays that are without humor. And I know that nothing repels him like a production of one of his plays in which the humor has not been seen.⁸

As Inge suggests, the humor in Williams's plays is often elusive, but always present. The purpose of this thesis will be first to investigate the comic elements of Tennessee Williams's major plays and secondly to determine the nature and function of comedy in both Williams's dramaturgy and in the expression of his vision of life.

To facilitate this study the plays will be analyzed in roughly chronological order and the comic elements dealt with will be broken into three categories: first, comic elements in the characterization of the major characters; second, comic satire as it appears in all of the plays; and third, the technical use of comic elements in the plays as they relate to Williams's dramaturgy. It must be understood at the outset that none of these categories is exclusive of the others in any sense. For instance, the comic satire which one finds in Williams's work very often relates directly to the comic elements used in characterization, and similarly the technical use of comedy in the construction of given scenes (dramaturgy) overlaps with the comic satire and comic characterization. The plays will be studied primarily from the point of view of the comic elements used in characterization, for it is only here that Williams shows any form of change or development in his employment of the comic. Each segment of the thesis will treat those plays in which comic elements are used in a distinctive way to characterize the central figures. Included in the analysis of each play will be references to the "comic satire" and "comic elements in dramaturgy"

categories. An overlap of material, though limited wherever possible, is necessary because of the basic similarity in much of Williams's comic writing from the earliest one act plays written prior to his first Broadway success in 1945 to the plays in the 1970 Dragon Country collection.

The first and most important category of Williams's comic writing, the comic elements of his major characterizations, falls roughly into three phases: the early "tragicomic" figures in The Glass Menagerie (1945), A Streetcar Named Desire (1947), Summer and Smoke (1948) and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale (1964), and The Rose Tattoo (1951); the "ironic-comic" figure in The Night of The Iguana (1961), and to a lesser degree in Period of Adjustment (1960); and the "grotesque-comic" figures of Baby Doll (1955), The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore (1964), Slapstick Tragedy (1966) and Kingdom of Earth (1967).

The essential ambiguity Williams perceives in human character leads to a form of tragicomedy in the early portraits.⁹ Karl S. Guthke in his book on tragicomedy describes the nature of one kind of tragicomic character as it appears in modern drama:

To be more specific: this device of internal character dichotomy realizes its tragicomic effect by exploiting the two sides of the dramatis persona in such a way that they not only offset each other, but impart their aesthetic quality (comic and tragic, respectively) to each other.¹⁰

This "internal character dichotomy" defines the essential quality of Williams's earliest heroines, Blanche DuBois,

Alma Winemiller, Serafina Delle Rosa, and in another respect (to be defined in the chapter on The Glass Menagerie) Amanda Wingfield. In these characters, conflicting psychological drives lead either to mental breakdown (Blanche DuBois) or some form of resolution (Serafina Delle Rosa), but regardless of their ultimate fates the portraits depend heavily on comical elements. In the last of these plays, The Rose Tattoo, Williams constructs his only true comedy in traditional terms.¹¹

Williams shifts to another type of major character, unique in his full length plays, in the person of Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon of The Night of The Iguana (1961). Here comedy is used in a double sense in the characterization. Unlike the earlier characters, Shannon is completely aware of the dichotomy which exists within him, and whereas one is expected to be amused by his predicament and his postures, Shannon himself is equally amused by them. Williams attributes to Shannon an appreciation of the ironies of human existence, an appreciation expressed in a sense of humor. No other character is as completely realized as Shannon, whose sense of humor and appreciation of life's absurdities comes closest to Williams's personal comic sense as one finds it throughout his work.

In describing the latest character creations in the Williams canon one can take a cue from the title of his double bill of one-act plays produced in 1965, Slapstick Tragedy. "The style of the plays," Williams says, "is kin

to vaudeville, burlesque and slapstick, with a dash of pop art thrown in."¹² The nature of the characters is completely removed from realism, and the comic aspects of characterization can be described as grotesque. In place of real human beings suffering from psychological unbalance one finds caricatures of the earlier heroines, monstrous human beings comically obsessed with sex, fame, and the fear of death. The best examples of this type of character are Flora Goforth of The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, and Molly and Polly of The Gnädiges Fräulein (1965). A type of grotesque character, an "obsessed" character, which harks back to a more realistic phase of Williams's writing, appears in the film script Baby Doll (1955) and in Kingdom of Earth (1967).

The second major category of Williams's comic writing is the satire evident in practically all of his plays. In its simplest form the comic satire appears in the minor characters, usually caricatures of American types as Williams perceives them. The tone of the satire varies from the mild treatment of eccentric characters like the effete intellectual Southerners in Summer and Smoke (1948)¹³ to the more bitter portraits of the greedy townsfolk in Orpheus Descending (1957) or the middle class monstrosities (the McGillicuddy's) of Period of Adjustment (1960). A deeper form of satire in Williams's plays digs below the surface of American life "to turn up the avariciousness and fear that presumably motivate those who want to find and hold their place in the 'good life.'"¹⁴

The deeper satire is evident in works like Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1956), Baby Doll (1955) and Kingdom of Earth (1967).

A prototype of the character who displays a deep "avariciousness and fear" is the cuckolded "poor white trash," Jake Meighan (later called Archie Lee Meighan in Baby Doll) of Twenty Seven Wagons Full of Cotton (1945). Unlike the basically harmless eccentric characters Williams sometimes satirizes, Jake can and does become destructive, burning down a rival cotton gin and torturing his plump wife into complicity with him. One of Williams's most brilliant comic portraits, Stanley Kowalski of A Streetcar Named Desire (1947) fits this category. Again it should be noted that the treatment of comic satire in the plays will often overlap with the general analyses of the major characters.

The third major category of comic elements in Williams's plays--the technical use of comedy--is the most difficult to define.

The man in the street's definition of comedies is "plays that are funny." I was taught in school that this was a very poor definition. But I have remembered it. I have not remembered what they taught me was a good definition.¹⁵

The broadest meaning of "comic elements" is borrowed from Eric Bentley's "man in the street"; instead of "plays that are funny" the phrase "elements of scenes that are funny" will be used--that is, elements written by the playwright calculated to get a laugh. This is a technical matter: in the craft of constructing his scenes Tennessee Williams regularly includes scraps of comedy for different purposes. Assuming that the

craft of constructing a scene (or a play) involves the arrangement of emotional content in such a way to best create a desired total effect, the question to be asked is how and where does Williams place the comical elements of his scenes, and does any regular pattern of the uses of comical material emerge in his work? The answer to this involves first the physical placement of bits of comedy and second the overall tonal quality of the scenes.

The most obvious use of comic elements in a technical sense usually takes the form of comic counterpoint or incongruity. In A Streetcar Named Desire the strains of "It's Only a Paper Moon" sung by Blanche in the bathtub at first clash with Stanley's sinister machinations in the next room. His frustration is comically heightened by her incongruous melody. In The Night of The Iguana ancient Nonno's deafness causes him to misinterpret loud noises as requests for poetry recitals. At the most inopportune but thematically significant moments the old man leaps up, like some bizarre jack-in-the-box, and alters the mood of the play. Similarly, in Cat On a Hot Tin Roof the "no-neck monsters" (Gooper's brood) affect abrupt alterations in mood in comical form.

Williams also employs comedy in such a way within scenes that he often rescues them from becoming "unbearably sentimental"¹⁶ or "from descending quite to the level of melodrama."¹⁷ In A Streetcar Named Desire when the conversation between Blanche and Mitch begins to get syrupy Williams carefully injects a scrap of comedy: Blanche spills a drink and turns

on her flighty Southern Belle routine or Mitch strikes one of his "dancing bear" poses. In The Rose Tattoo when Serafina Delle Rosa starts to indulge in maudlin self-pity she fortuitously steps on a sharp object and reverts to her image as a clown.

The final technical use of comedy in Williams's plays is closely related to characterization but is included here because it relates to overall emotional patterns used in the construction of individual scenes and entire plays. The patterns apply to the treatment of minor characters as well as major characters and exist in some form in the majority of Williams's work. One pattern--the "comic-pathetic"--presents characters as thoroughly ludicrous at the outset of a play and, by manipulating emotional content, changes the audience's reaction to one of sympathetic laughter and finally to a feeling of sheer pity. The other common pattern--the "comic-censure"--a variation of the first, provides a character who strikes us as comical until the point at which it becomes clear that the very features of the character's personality which make him funny also make him either cruel (a cardinal sin in the Williams code) or a threat to the happiness or freedom of another human being. Two examples from the early collection of one act plays Twenty Seven Wagons Full of Cotton should illustrate these patterns.¹⁸

Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore, the Lady of Larkspur Lotion (so named because as her landlady points out she has a habit of drinking the solution for its alcoholic content), keeps a

framed coat of arms suspended on her wall and fastidiously complains to anyone who will listen about the flying cockroaches and other demeaning features of her apartment. Early in the play she "puts her foot down" and tells the landlady, Mrs. Wire, that she will vacate the premises if steps are not taken to eliminate the roaches. Mrs. Wire bids her an abrupt "good-riddance" and Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore quickly returns with: "You must be out of your mind, I can't get out right now." (p. 67) The landlady's candor has apparently caught the Lady by surprise, and her flustered response is comical. Her pretensions continue as she explains that she cannot pay her rent because "the quarterly payments I receive from the man who is taking care of the rubber plantation have not been forwarded yet." (p. 68) The simple incongruity between Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore's affectations and the truth of her situation (she is a prostitute) provides the source of laughter. But our mild indulgent laughter gives way to pity when it becomes clear that the Lady of Larkspur lotion is obviously a suffering broken creature, one of the many in Tennessee Williams's plays. Mrs. Hardwicke-Moore's characterization is an early version of Blanche DuBois of A Street-car Named Desire.

A prototype of the "comic-censurable" character appears in the one act play, Portrait of a Madonna. A similarly "faded lady," Miss Lucretia Collins, suffers from the delusion that a mysterious lover enters her room nightly to "violate" her. The "comic-censurable" character in the play, the elevator boy, jokes about the nocturnal visitations by telling

the obviously deranged Lucretia: "I seen a guy that could do that once. He crawled straight up the side of the building. They called him the Human Fly! Gosh, that's a wonderful publicity angle, Miss Collins--'Beautiful Young Society Lady Raped by the Human Fly!'" (pp. 94-95) Though some comedy does exist in the cruel joke, the obvious response Williams wants by the end of the play is a condemnation of the boy. "Cut that," warns another character, "or git back in your cage!" (p. 96) Perhaps the single most important use of this pattern is in the presentation of Stanley Kowalski in A Streetcar Named Desire.

These patterns are mentioned in the introduction merely to give some referent for the analysis of comic techniques in each of the plays; it does not follow that within each chapter the treatment of these patterns or any of the technical uses of comedy will be made separate and distinct from the treatment of characterization generally or of the comic satire.

An immediate problem in making this study stems from the method of composition employed by the playwright. It is difficult to discuss the comedy in Tennessee Williams's plays in terms of development or growth when one can never be certain of the exact date of composition of many of the plays. For instance, The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, a rewrite of Summer and Smoke (1948), first appeared in published form in 1964, though the evidence available indicates that it was probably written sometime before 1951.¹⁹ Similarly, The Night of The Iguana, as J. William Miller points out, had a

long history of composition beginning with a trip Williams took to Mexico in 1940 and growing through the form of a short story, a short play, several versions of a full length play and culminating with a Broadway production in 1961.²⁰ Williams himself admits that he keeps "revising and revising" his work, never really willing to let it assume completed form.²¹ All one can hope to do in appraising the changing shape of Williams's vision is to approximate the point at which any given play reached its significant completed form. The great difference between the material in the early short story version of The Night of The Iguana and the final play allows one to accept the play in its published 1961 form as a statement of Williams's vision in 1961, whereas the similarity between Summer and Smoke (1948) and The Eccentricities of a Nightingale (1964) indicates that Eccentricities essentially belongs to a period when Williams was still preoccupied with heroines suffering from inner psychological turmoil, and not to the 1964 phase of fantastic grotesques. Nevertheless, as early as 1953 in Camino Real Williams was experimenting with "fantastic" characters, and as late as 1967 with Kingdom of Earth he was reverting to a tone of writing apparent in his work during the fifties. The general rule to be followed in this thesis will be to treat Williams's work as a whole, describing the forms of comedy which appear in his plays as they relate to his total vision, only generalizing about development in his comic writing when, as was discussed above, marked changes from one phase to another are certain. It makes sense to discuss the difference between Amanda

Wingfield and Blanche DuBois on the one hand and Flora Goforth and Molly and Polly of Slapstick Tragedy on the other, but to contrast the comic satire, say, in Baby Doll (1955) and Kingdom of Earth (1967) would be pointless.

Aspects of each play in which a distinctive form of comedy is used (e.g. the "traditional" structure of comedy in The Rose Tattoo) or in which the usual comic elements are utilized in a distinctive way (e.g. the comic satire combined with a grotesque portrait in Baby Doll), will be treated in detail and passing mention will be made of other comedy present. The first part of the study includes an analysis of The Glass Menagerie, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke (with Eccentricities of a Nightingale), and The Rose Tattoo. In these plays all of the patterns of comic writing previously mentioned are present and the significant form of "tragicomic" characterization of Williams's early figures emerges. The section on The Rose Tattoo will be followed by brief treatments of the two other plays Williams labelled comedies: Baby Doll and Period of Adjustment. The second part of the study will involve an analysis of The Night of The Iguana as an example of the "ironic" comic characterization. The last chapter treats The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, Slapstick Tragedy and Kingdom of Earth. The grotesque comic characters of these plays represent a decline in Williams's talent; the earlier themes and character types are present but in highly exaggerated form.

FOOTNOTES

¹A random sampling of articles written about Tennessee Williams will corroborate this statement. Several studies which suggest the tone of Williams scholarship are: Marya Mannes, "The Morbid Magic of Tennessee Williams," The Reporter Reader, ed. Max Ascoli (New York, 1956), pp. 145-150; Arthur Ganz, "The Desperate Morality of the Plays of Tennessee Williams," in American Drama and Its Critics, ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago, 1965), pp. 203-217.

In an anonymous article in Esquire, LIX (April, 1963), 58-59, collected excerpts from Time magazine reviews of Williams's plays from 1945 to 1962 are reprinted. Descriptions of the "perfumed decay" of "decadently primitive" characters combined with "noisomely misanthropic" symbols indicates the tone of Time's reaction to Williams's work.

²Warren Coffey, "Tennessee Williams: The Playwright as Analyst," Ramparts, I (November, 1962), 51.

³Tennessee Williams, Letter addressed to Cheryl [Crawford], August 23, 1954, University of Texas Ms. (Austin, Texas). The Williams collection was uncatalogued at the time of this study.

⁴Tennessee Williams, quoted in "The Angel of the Odd," Time, March 9, 1962, p. 53.

⁵There is no shortage of books and articles which attempt to define the relationship between the "tragic" and "comic" senses of life in recent drama. Neither is there a shortage of playwrights' opinions on the subject. Typically, when asked for a definition of the comic which would be entirely his own, Eugene Ionesco responded "Yes . . . I think it is another aspect of the tragic." Notes and Counter-Notes, Writing on The Theatre, trans. Donald Watson (New York, 1964), p. 118.

Tennessee Williams's pronouncements on the mixed genre of tragicomedy remain vague. In the preface to The Rose Tattoo (1951) he writes of the necessity to adapt his plays to peculiarly modern conditions. He suggests a form of comic writing--"a certain foolery, a certain distortion toward the grotesque"--to accomplish this in his "tragic" plays. Three Plays of Tennessee Williams (New York, 1964), pp. 7-8. In the preface to his pair of one act plays, Slapstick Tragedy (1965), Williams uses the word "tragicomic": "I think, in production, they may seem to be a pair of fantastic allegories on the tragicomic subject of human existence on this risky planet." Esquire (August, 1966), p. 95.

Among the best studies of the mixed form sometimes known as "tragicomedy" in the twentieth century are the following: Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (New York, 1961); Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation into

the Nature of the Genre (New York, 1966). This book perhaps gives the best historical account of tragicomedy. A helpful bibliography is printed with it. Walter Kerr, Tragedy and Comedy (New York, 1967). Kerr's study has the added interest of treating popular comic figures like Charlie Chaplin and the Marx Brothers. J. L. Styan, The Dark Comedy, The Development of Modern Comic Tragedy (Cambridge, 1962).

For a recent survey of books and articles on the tragicomic in modern drama see Ruby Cohn, "The Terms of Tragicomic Mixture," Drama Survey, V (Summer, 1966), 186-191.

⁶The one article devoted entirely to Williams's comedy is Charles Brooks, "The Comic Tennessee Williams," QJS, XLIV (October 1958), 275-281. Brooks misses the point in Williams's comic technique when he says "Williams shifts from comic exposure to sympathy, with the result that his plays tend to fall apart" (p. 280). The mixture of comic exposure and sympathy is one of the most attractive features of Williams's comedy. In its greatest form it approaches what Karl S. Guthke (op. cit.) terms tragicomedy.

Several other critics who have noted Williams's comedy are: Harold Clurman, "Tennessee Williams: Poet and Puritan," New York Times, March 29, 1970, Sec. 2, p. 11. Clurman says the "salutary humor" is "quizzical and given to grassroots laughter." Benjamin Nelson, Tennessee Williams, The Man and His Work (New York, 1961), p. 150. Nelson notes the author's "genuine comedic ability," especially evident "because of its contrast with the serious situation out of which it arises." Gordon Rogoff, "The Restless Intelligence of Tennessee Williams," TDR, X (Summer 1966), 91. For Rogoff, Williams's "gift of humor" manifests itself in "a stinging laughter never very far from even his darkest visions."

⁷Eric Bentley, "Comedy and the Comic Spirit in America" in The American Theater Today, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York, 1967), p. 58.

⁸William Inge, interviewed in Mike Steen, A Look at Tennessee Williams (New York, 1969), p. 117.

George Cukor tells an anecdote about Williams which gives an indication of the ambiguous comedy that the playwright sees in his own work. Speaking of Jessica Tandy in a performance of Portrait of a Madonna (c. 1946) Cukor says: "And the audience was sitting absolutely seriously and watching this thing, which was rather dramatic. And Irene (Selznick) said there was one person in the audience who was screaming with laughter. And much to her surprise it was Tennessee. Screaming with laughter. And she looked at him and he said, 'But don't you think it's funny? It's so funny. It's so terribly funny.' Other people would have taken this very seriously. It was rather tragic. But he saw the comic possibilities of it." George Cukor, interviewed by Mike Steen, p. 46.

⁹Though some critics fault Williams for the ambiguity of his characters, the playwright himself has often stated that

he intentionally writes them that way. "It is not the essential dignity but the essential ambiguity of man that I think needs to be stated." "Tennessee Williams Presents His POV," New York Times Magazine, June 12, 1960, p. 78.

"If you write a character that isn't ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one." "Williams on Williams," an interview by Lewis Funke and John E. Booth, Theatre Arts, XLVI (January 1962), 18.

¹⁰ Karl S. Guthke, Modern Tragicomedy: An Investigation Into The Nature of The Genre (New York, 1966), p. 84.

¹¹ The "traditional" nature of the comedy in The Rose Tattoo will be treated at length in the chapter on that play. To put it simply, The Rose Tattoo conforms to several of the accepted theories of comedy and comic structure, including Northrop Frye's and Susanne Langer's.

Williams has written several other plays which he labels comedies but which will not be studied at length in this thesis. You Touched Me! (1945), a play based on a D. H. Lawrence short story of the same name, was written in collaboration with Donald Windham and is therefore not entirely Williams's work. Period of Adjustment (1960) bears the subtitle, "a serious comedy," but it is not a "traditional" form of comedy in the sense that The Rose Tattoo is.

A more important reason for the omission of major analyses of the comedies You Touched Me! and Period of Adjustment is that the most significant comic writing in Williams's plays is not in the ones labeled comedies as such. See Eric Bentley, The Playwright as Thinker (New York, 1946). The chapter on "Varieties of Comic Experience" treats this idea of comic talent in non-comic plays on the modern stage.

¹² Tennessee Williams, "Preface" to Slapstick Tragedy, Esquire (August, 1966), p. 95.

¹³ In his mild treatment of eccentrics Williams is truly the romantic he claims to be: the laughter he asks for is "an overflow of sympathy, an amiable feeling of identity with what is disreputably human, a relish for the whimsical, the odd, the private blunder."

Wylie Sypher, "The Meanings of Comedy," in Comedy, Wylie Sypher, ed. (New York, 1956); reprinted in Robert W. Corrigan, ed., Comedy, Meaning and Form (San Francisco, 1956), p. 25. Sypher describes forms of laughter which have been common during different periods of history. The one quoted above refers to the early "genial" romantics. Williams satirizes the "odd" people in his plays by showing how ridiculously they act, but the comic exposure of their foibles is mixed with an honest appreciation of their eccentricity. Though Williams's general attitude is not always genial, his attitude towards the legions of misfits and eccentrics in his plays very often is.

¹⁴Gerald Weales, "Tennessee Williams," University of Minnesota Pamphlets on American Writers (52); University of Minnesota, 1965, p. 25.

¹⁵Bentley, p. 59.

¹⁶Bentley, p. 58.

¹⁷R. H. Gardner, The Splintered Stage: The Decline of the American Theater (New York, 1965), p. 111.

¹⁸Tennessee Williams, Twenty Seven Wagons Full of Cotton and Other Plays (New York: 1945, 1953). All references to The Lady of Larkspur Lotion and Portrait of a Madonna will be to this edition.

¹⁹Tennessee Williams, The Eccentricities of a Nightingale and Summer and Smoke (New York, 1964), p. 4. In an author's note Williams explains that Eccentricities was written in the fall when Summer and Smoke was about to be produced in England, making the date of completion 1951.

²⁰J. William Miller, Ph. D., Modern Playwrights at Work, Vol. I (New York, 1968), pp. 335-385. Miller treats the question of Williams's revisions in some detail in the section entitled "Writing-Rewriting," pp. 371-377. Also see Lester A. Beaurline, "The Glass Menagerie: From Story to Play," Modern Drama, vii (September 1965), 142-150.

²¹Tennessee Williams, interviewed by Joanne Stang, "Williams: Twenty Years After 'Glass Menagerie'," New York Times, March 28, 1965, Sec. 2, p. 3.

Chapter 2

THE GLASS MENAGERIE

In the production note on music for The Glass Menagerie Tennessee Williams briefly describes the mood he wishes to evoke in his play. When heard from a distance, he says, circus music

. . . is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow. When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken. Both of those ideas should be woven into the recurring tune, which dips in and out of the play as if it were carried on a wind that changes (xi).¹

A kind of fragile pathos in the lives of the characters of The Glass Menagerie, and in human affairs at large, seems to be the basic appeal and the keynote for the tone of any production of the play.² At its weakest this mood degenerates into the trembling voices and tear-swollen eyes accompanied by weeping violins which one finds in the script for the curtain of Act I (p. 60), but somehow in the original and in numerous subsequent productions of The Glass Menagerie this pitfall has been avoided.³ Naturally, the first and greatest responsibility in preserving a genuine quality of deeply felt sentiment in The Glass Menagerie rests with the director of the production, but there is a safeguard against mawkishness

which the attentive reader of Williams ought to recognize as written into the text of the play. Primarily, Williams has created Amanda Wingfield in such a way that the comical aspects of her person are essential to the characterization; to fail to see Amanda, in one sense at least, as comical is to misunderstand the play.⁴ The second use of comedy is in the form of mild satire directed against the gentleman caller, Jim O'Connor, and the middle-class American zeal he represents. The lighter moments of his scene with Laura attenuate the deep pity inherent in the situation. Finally, in a manner important in the context of Williams's total work Tom, the somewhat autobiographical narrator of the play, is infused with a sense of humor which results from his perception of the ironies of human existence and which most often manifests itself as sarcasm towards his mother. These three uses of comedy, though minor in light of the overwhelming pathos of the play, are extremely important technically in the very weaving of that pathetic effect and in Williams's expression of his view of human character and the human condition.

At the end of The Glass Menagerie there is no doubt what one is expected to feel about Amanda Wingfield: "Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty. (p. 123)." But the spirit in which she is created through the seven scenes of the play must look to Williams's headnote on the characters for its cue: "There is much to admire in Amanda, and as much to love and pity as there is to laugh at (p. vii)." Williams's

attitude is mixed: Amanda is to be laughed at for her mad obsessions and affected flighty manner but there is something in the desperate situation in the St. Louis apartment that tempers the laughter. As one critic at the Broadway opening in 1945 expressed it: "Some of (the) most comical lines are spoken out of the deepest misery of (the) characters."⁵ Because, as Amanda says, "Things have a way of turning out so badly (p. 120)," Williams cannot laugh too hard at her. If in the sense outlined above, Amanda Wingfield conforms to the pattern of "laughter to pity" one finds in Williams's plays, in another sense the comic aspects of her characterization function according to the pattern of "laughter to censure." Amanda is comical in her obsessive interest in trying to secure her children's future happiness, yet this makes her "unwittingly cruel at times (p. vii)" and at these moments the laughter directed at her alters to censure. The two basic patterns are combined in Amanda's characterization.

Karl S. Guthke in his book on modern tragicomedy cites Amanda Wingfield as a clear example of one device based on character structure through which a tragicomic effect can be achieved. He claims that one type of tragicomic character is the sort "who is distinguished by just one dominant trait." Though this sounds like a traditional definition of a "humours" comedy or "comedy of manners" character, Guthke explains that to be tragicomic the dominant character feature must, in itself, be a virtue. And the character must be created of the human worth and substance that makes dramatic figures