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# Some Observations of Modern Drama as Exemplified by Tennessee Williams in *The Glass Menagerie* and *Suddenly Last Summer*

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SOME OBSERVATIONS OF MODERN DRAMA  
AS EXEMPLIFIED BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS IN  
THE GLASS MENAGERIE AND SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER

A Paper  
Presented to  
Mr Dennis Holt Jr.  
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by  
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Some Observations of Modern Drama  
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The Glass Menagerie and Suddenly Last Summer

The purpose of this Honors Special Studies project was to acquaint the author with a facet of literature of which he had not come into contact. This area of literature was the area of modern drama. As an example of the modern playwright's style and method, the author chose to concentrate on Tennessee Williams. Thus several Tennessee Williams works were read,--and these, The Glass Menagerie and Suddenly Last Summer form the basis from which some conclusions were drawn.

Tennessee Williams was born in 1914 in Columbus, Mississippi, but most of his later boyhood years were spent near St. Louis Missouri. He received his B.A. from the University of Iowa in 1938. The first public recognition of his talents came in 1945 with the Broadway production of The Glass Menagerie.

William's characters take the form of the varied spectra of society, but underneath this veneer is found the violent beast driving man to destroy his fellow man

and himself. His characters are all psychologically sick; they can only react to the world.<sup>1</sup>

There are probably many methods available to accomplish the task for which we have set ourselves, but the one the author has chosen is to give a brief summary of the two works at the onset, and to continue from that point.

Briefly, Suddenly Last Summer is the story a young woman, Catherine, who had witnessed a traumatic experience. This experience was seeing her cousin, Sebastian, attacked and devoured by a gang of young children. The conflict in the story is that Sebastian's mother does not want to believe the truth of what Catherine says. The experience of what she has witnessed was too much for Catherine who became emotionally overwrought and has been placed in a hospital. It is here that Williams began the action of his play.

In the opening lines we meet Sebastian's mother and a specialist who has been summoned to their house. We learn soon that the goal of Sebastian's mother is to get the doctor to attempt experimental surgery on the girl to stop her from "babbling" the truth.

In the second scene we meet Catherine, who has been brought from the hospital to talk to Sebastian's mother

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<sup>1</sup>Tennessee Williams, Encyclopedia Britannica (Chicago, Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc, 1965) Volume 23, p. 631.

and the doctor. As this scene opens, we become immediately aware of how completely Catherine's life is dominated by the rules and restrictions of the hospital, even while away on a visit. The Sister who accompanies Catherine will not even let her smoke. As this second scene closes, Catherine is beginning to become overwrought by memories of what happened "Suddenly Last Summer."

Scene III introduces Catherine's mother and brother. One can soon sense that the only thing they *want* is the inheritance from Sebastian's estate. To insure this, they want Catherine to change her story, which not even they believe. To them, it is too fantastic to believe.

Scene IV is the concluding scene, with the participants confronting each other. After one explosive situation at the onset, the doctor gives Catherine a drug to make her tell the truth. Then the doctor begins to draw the events of the previous summer from her. She recounts the entire summer, including the observation that Sebastian had used her to procure for him. This is a hint that Sebastian was homosexual. Catherine concludes the story with <sup>the</sup> same hideous statements that Sebastian was destroyed by those children to whom he had given tips, and probably to whom he had made advances.

The only ray of hope that Williams leaves one with is the concluding line by the doctor. All the others

have evidently disbelieved the story. However, the doctor says "I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl's story could be true."<sup>2</sup>

To the casual reader, The Glass Menagerie might seem deficient from Suddenly Last Summer; yet there are similarities. The Glass Menagerie is also the story of a young woman whose emotions have become frayed. Laura Wingfield, the girl in The Glass Menagerie has failed to establish contact with reality, partly because of a crippled leg. This shorter leg causes her to become like a piece of her glass collection (The Glass Menagerie). The form of this second play is quite different from that found in Suddenly Last Summer. In this play, the narrator is also Laura's brother Tom. Tom in his second role as narrator begins the action and also sums up the action and ends the play.

The plot of this story is concerned with the attempts of Laura's mother to get Laura some gentleman callers. The mother is quite bewildered because no gentleman callers ever come to call on Laura. She is extremely concerned that Laura only liked one boy, Jim O' Conner, who had been the high school hero. By chance, O' Conner works at the same factory as Tom. Because the mother has begged for so long for Tom to help Laura get some gentleman callers, Tom asks Jim to come to dinner, unaware that Laura and Jim once knew each other slightly.

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<sup>2</sup> Tennessee Williams, Suddenly Last Summer p. 88.

After dinner, Jim captures Laura's heart and makes her forget that she is crippled. She even begins to dance. As they dance, one of the glass figures, the only one of its kind, is knocked to the floor and its horn is broken. After this happens, he kisses her and she gives herself to the moment. As soon as the kiss is over, Jim begins to apologize, not realizing the effect that the kiss has had. Then he brutally, at least so it must seem to Laura, tells her that he is spoken for. He leaves, and the story ends with <sup>Tom</sup> telling the audience that he ran off to join the merchant marine.

The goal which we have set is to find if there are significant similarities between these two plays. This author feels that there are some similarities. The first similarity is quite apparent. This is that the main focal character is a girl with psychological and emotional problems. Both these girls have had significant, and to them, destructive experiences in their lives which have altered their lives. In both plays there is one experience which has overshadowed all else in their existence. In Suddenly Last Summer, Catherine has allowed the experience of the destruction of her cousin Sebastian to cripple her emotionally. In The Glass Menagerie Laura has let the fact that one leg is shorter than the other cripple her emotionally as well as physically. The sad fact of Laura's condition is that the crippled leg is not that

noticable to anyone else but Laura.

In both plays, the girls have something sexual happen just before the impending act occurs which shatters her. In Suddenly Last Summer, Catherine allows herself to be "picked-up" by a man who makes love to her and then tells her that he is married. In The Glass Menagerie, Laura allows herself to be kissed and to be carried away by the kiss just before Jim tells her that he is promised to another.

Both plays have an overbearing sense of perversion. In Suddenly Last Summer this more apparant, especially with the scene of the devouring of Sebastian. The Glass Menagerie has a more subtle tone to its perversion, but this author feels that Tom's passion to attend movies is somewhat perverted.

Mr. Williams uses his memories of his original home, Mississippi, to color the actions of both these plays. The confrontation in Suddenly Last Summer seems to be set in a plantation type house, probably in New Orleans. In The Glass Menagerie, while the action of the present is centered in St. Louis, there are references to the mother's memories of gentleman callers back home in Mississippi.



One last observation concerns Mr. Williams' portrayal of a search for truth or wisdom. The way that he does this has some similarities in both stories. In Suddenly Last Summer, it is Sebastian who was the searcher for wisdom. Sebastian is only obliquely referred to and only in the past, since his demise presents the reason for the confrontation. In The Glass Menagerie it is Tom, who is not the one about which the play is about, that is portrayed as a searcher for truth. Tom has to flee the home to find the truth he longs to find.

What then have we found in these two Williams' plays? We have found characters which cannot cope with life. These characters have allowed their circumstances to cloud their future. I believe this portrayal of characters who leave psychological problems is an outgrowth and a realistic portrayal of life as it really is.