

CHAPTER XI
CONCLUSION

Among the major themes in modern American drama which motivate the plot and the characters, the theme of loneliness is one that appears in the works of many authors. Among contemporary playwrights, none has made use of the theme more frequently than Tennessee Williams. In nine plays, written over a period of fifteen years, this distinguished playwright presented his ideas to a theatre-going public - including the millions who saw the motion-picture versions - which must have recognized a subject, a theme, that was important to them. In a Time cover story on Williams, the magazine's drama critic wrote:

. . . Williams' special compassion is for "the people who are not meant to win," the lost, the odd, the strange, the difficult people - fragile spirits, who lack talons for the jungle.* If Williams wins an audience's sympathy for these people, it may be because he speaks to a common condition: loneliness. All his characters yearn to break out of the cell of the lonely self, to touch and reach another person. "Hell is yourself," says Williams. "When you ignore other people completely, that is hell." The revelation towards which all of Williams' plays aspire is the moment of self-transcendence - "when a person puts himself aside to feel deeply for another person."¹¹⁸

The distinguished American critic, Brooks Atkinson, writing on the use of the theme in a number of recent plays, concludes, "In the mystique of today, loneliness is a relevant subject."¹¹⁹ One of America's leading playwrights, Elmer Rice, lists loneliness first among common themes in modern

American drama. "The recurrent themes of our plays are loneliness, rebellion against parental authority, incest-longings, emotional starvation, escape mechanisms, juvenile delinquency, crimes of violence, homosexuality, terror fantasies, sadism, and schizophrenia."¹²⁰ Atkinson and Rice are quoted in Professor Winifred L. Dusenbury's book, The Theme of Loneliness in Modern American Drama.¹²¹ Dr. Dusenbury writes that the fact that the theme of loneliness is frequently interpreted by contemporary dramatists makes significant a detailed consideration of it, for, as Edmond Gagey claims, "American drama of the past thirty years . . . has done far more than reflect passing fads and frivolities; . . . it has portrayed the manners, voiced the creeds, and unveiled the psyche of a brilliant and erratic age."¹²²

As a motivating theme affecting the forward movement of a drama, loneliness generally impels the lonely characters to strive to belong. They suffer because of their awareness of their separation, and they try to find companionship with other people, to communicate with each other in a meaningful way. In Williams' dramas, the effort is rarely successful, and therefore few of his plays have a happy ending. Laura and Amanda Wingfield are more lonely at the end of The Glass Menagerie than at the start, for Tom has followed his father's example and gone off to distant places. Blanche DuBois is removed from contact with normal people when, at the end of

A Streetcar Named Desire, she is taken off to a mental asylum. Alma Winemiller goes off with her first travelling salesman at the end of Summer and Smoke, but if she follows Blanche's pattern, she will not be happy for long in temporary romantic encounters. Lady Torrance and Val Xavier are both dead at the end of Orpheus Descending, their search to belong ended on earth. Maggie Pollitt's determination may win back her husband's love, according to the ending of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Alexandra Del Lago may have a few good years left, but Chance Wayne's search for recognition is ended by his death at the hands of a mob when Sweet Bird of Youth closes. Celeste and Trinket are reconciled to each other, for good or ill, at the end of The Mutilated. Serafina finds happiness in The Rose Tattoo when she replaces her memories of her first husband with a live lover. The ending of Camino Real is inconclusive, but it can be said that the characters will continue to endure, without self-pity, their miserable lives.

Tennessee Williams' vision of life is dark. He says:

. . . 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.¹²³

In the nine plays covered in this study, man's effort to reach out for union with his fellow man is more often doomed to fail than to succeed. "We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins."

NOTES

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- ² Tennessee Williams, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (New York: The New American Library, 1958), p. vii.
- ³ Ibid., p. ix.
- ⁴ Tennessee Williams, The Glass Menagerie in Sweet Bird of Youth and Other Plays (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1961), p. 228.
- ⁵ The Theatre Book of the Year 1944-1945 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., n.d.), p. 327.
- ⁶ The Glass Menagerie, p. 301.
- ⁷ Man for Himself: an Inquiry into the Psychology of Ethics (New York: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1947), p. 58.
- ⁸ Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire in



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