

Flesh vs Spirit is the theme in Tennessee Williams' *Summer and Smoke*

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Williams became a major figure in the second period of the theatre's growth and continued to remain a leading playwright till his death in Feb. 1983. He influenced the work of great playwrights like William Inge and Edward Albee. He won many prestigious awards for his plays like Reckfeller Fellowship, four New York Dramas Critics Circle Award, two Pulitzer Prizes and membership in the National institute of Arts and letters. He is perhaps the first American playwright to earn the title of 'popular dramatist. His major plays have been widely performed by educational community and professional theatre companies and have been adapted into films. His pre-occupation into the problems of confrontation between flesh and spirit and its variations has enriched our knowledge of not only human nature but as wells of modern civilization which has produced it.

Tennessee Williams is one of those rare artists whose work springs from a passionate desire to tell all about himself and his world. Identifying with his characters Williams observed it in an interview with Robert Jennings: "All of them – that in my gift. Alma of *Summer and Smoke* is my favorite"¹ Williams believes that greatest happiness is felt in moments of great tenderness between two people. The plays of Williams help him to achieve cathartic purity. As they deal with human problems, they produce catharsis in the readers as well.

Summer and Smoke is such a play with which Williams shows a great intimacy with his personal life. The play opened at New York's Music Box Theatre on October 6, 1948. The play was widely acclaimed by critics and reviewers for its sentimentality and sensitivity of characterization. According to Joseph Wood Crutch the play is, "more like the fable on allegory."² As observed by Harold Clurman, "In *Summer and Smoke* too much time is given to conscious exposition of theatre that Williams loses specific sense of his people."³ According to Brooks Atkinson, "*Summer and Smoke*

demonstrates the artist's insight in to the character that is almost unbearable and lucid."⁴

Williams in this play presents a theme arising from puritanic repression of natural desire. Alma is a Southern lady with a puritanic background that prevents her from being a lady of her own. Her personality is deformed and morally degraded with the repression of her sexual desires. She fails in her love affair with John who represents flesh in the play. He gives her an anatomy lecture explaining the necessity of physical hunger that is not fed by Alma but she rather tells him about the hidden soul with which she loves him. But ultimately realizes her mistake when John is to marry another girl and in her hysteric mood she picks up a travelling salesman to spend a night with him.

Alma Winemiller who is the daughter of a clergyman is a spinsterish frigid young lady. She feels deep love for John who is her childhood lover. But her strong subconscious sexual desires seeking fulfillment gets frustrated because of her social and moral conditioning as the daughter of a clergyman. Her mother is not able to perform her duty of the church so that Alma has to perform all those things. Her puritanic background fitted in her mind a strong severe of morality. She is rather proud of her name that means soul in Spanish.

Alma : My name is Alma and Alma is Spanish for soul.⁵

Hence the conflict between flesh and spirit takes place. Alma represents spirit whereas John represents flesh in the play. Alma goes to John seeking love in its spiritual form but John always seeks love in physical contact. He represents himself in the play as a sex profligate whose ultimate goal was to satisfy the down part of the belly that is hungry for love. Alma is a spinsters who has a delicacy and elegance, a kind of 'airiness' which is really natural to her as it is in a less marked degree to many Southern girls. Her gesture and mannerism

are a bit exaggerated but in a graceful way. She seems to belong to a more elegant age such as the eighteenth century in the France. When John asks for her love that gives a kind of self-satisfaction, she replies rather in a cool way –

Alma : Have you ever seen or looked at, a picture of a Gothic Cathedral?⁶

Alma is dual in personality and bears delicacy in herself. On the other hand John's principal approach is violent with a physical force.

John : There are other things between a man and a woman beside respect.

Alma : Yes.....

John : There is such a thing as intimate relations.⁷

But Alma, unable to achieve that point of lightened sensuality dreams of Gothic Cathedrals and expresses her views of puritanic repression :-

Alma : There are some women who turn in something better than the coupling of a beast ! – but love is what you bring to it.⁸

These statements clearly indicate the conflict between flesh and spirit going on in Alma in which no one is going to win over the other. John, still pleads for love to her which she at once refuses.

Alma : Some people bring just their bodies But there are some people, there

are some women, John-who can bring their hearts to it also who can bring their souls to it.⁹

The abnormal behavior of Alma was the result of her Spinster background in which she had to take care of her weak mother and at the same time she had to perform the duties of her mother in a church. From her early age she was engaged in church activities that made her a lady with spirituality. She always tried to extend her feelings of love to John but her repressed sexuality and puritanic training were obstacles in her way. John on the other hand has nothing to do with her spirituality but longs for the satisfaction of his passion He develops a feeling of bitter hatred for her. He is in physical love with Rosa who too badly needs him for proper protection. She is a dancing girl in the Casino who never makes, "love without biting or scratching a little on the face of John."¹⁰

After the father of John is shot by Rosa's father in a quarrel, Alma goes to console young John and calls him a weak person. John is outraged and shouts at her.

John : You-white- blooded spinster You so right people, pious, preacher's daughter, all muffled up in a lot of worn-out magic and I was supposed to minister to your neurosis, give you tablets for sleeping and tonics to give you the strength to go on mumbling you worn-out mumbo-jumbo.¹¹

Alma, to the anatomy chart where John gives her lesson about the human insides with that, Alma is scared--

John : It's a picture of a-free-with three birds in it, This top bird is the brain. The bird is hungry. He's hungry for something called truth. He does not get much. He is never satisfied with it. He keeps on shaking his cold and weak little wings and saying : cheap! Cheap - This bird underneath is the belly. He's hungry, too, but he's the practical bird, just hungry for food. And down here's the lowest bird- or may be, the highest, who knows?-Yes, take a look at him, too; he's hungry, too, hungry as both the others and twice as lone some-what's he hungry for Love.¹²

Alma rejects John's idea of love. She praises the dignity of soul that is not shown on the chart and with that she loves him. John, unable to cope with the opinion of Alma is angry and decides to break relation with her.

It is too late when Alma decides after a great conflict to go to John for reconciliation. John has decided to marry Nellie and most surprisingly is leading towards the spiritual path of Alma. It is the sexual desire of Alma, repressed by Puritanism that arises from the very depth of unconscious being. She becomes a poor victim of her own surroundings for which she can't be said responsible. All the responsibilities carried away by Alma, leave no place for her own self.

There is also communication gap in the family. The personal needs of the daughter have been always ignored by parents. The only way Alma can get out of the house for a date with John is to take her purse and rush out of the door, leaving her father, calling after her. Her mother's break with mature behavior presages a reversal in Alma's character. She does not, like her mother, negate sexual relations, but she

abandons her previous moralistic approach to life for a profligate sex experience. In her desperation she goes to John for adjustment on equal terms.

Alma : You needn't try to comfort me. I have not come here on any but equal terms.¹³

After the death of old Alma, her sexuality revives and from a frozen frigid girl she is transformed into a sexually and emotionally awakened girl. She feels suffocated in the smoke of sexual fire that is burning in side her. She receives a blow from John who doesn't need her any more. Ironically the table has turned as Alma says herself:

Alma : The tables have turned, yes, the tables have turned with a vengeance. You've come around to my old way of thinking and I to yours like two people exchanging a call

on each other at the same time, and each one finding the other one gone out, the door locked against him and no one to answer to bell.¹⁴

Finally Alma goes to that travelling salesman near the fountain-angel and picks him to spend a night as a sex-profligate.

The play presents the universal allegory that souls are crippled without bodies; bodies are violent without souls. One without the other takes part in seriously flamed rituals. But whatsoever allegory the play presents it makes clear that sex is very vital in human life. Williams is critical of social and religious pressures which obstruct the natural flow of sexuality and spoil man's efforts to live in sincerity to his deepest drives. He is full of praise for man's aspiration to live authentically.

REFERENCE

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4. Brooks Atkinson quoted in Nancy M. Tischler, *Tennessee Williams*, p. 49.
5. Tennessee Williams, *Summer and Smoke*, (London : Penguin Books Ltd. 1961), p.103.
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