



---

## The Synthetic Embodiment Of Female Images In The Plays Of O'neill And Tennessee Williams

**Dr. H. SUBRATA SINGH** Associate Professor, Deptt. Of English  
D.M. College Of Arts, Imphal , Dmu.

**DR.DHANAMANJURI** Lourembam, Associate Professor, Deptt.Of English  
,D.M.College Of Arts, Imphal Dmu.

---

**ABSTRACT:** O'Neill and Tennessee Williams display a remarkable understanding of the feminine psyche. Their women sometime appear to have been torn by the forces of society or by the conflicts in their minds, and at other time they appear as a domineering character. In them, one can see life in all its complexity and inconsistency. The present paper tries to give a comparative study of the women characters of these two playwrights; and tries to analyze that these playwrights explicitly deviate from the conventional stereotyped portrayal of women, and also shows a comprehensive sensitiveness towards the female psyche and the dilemmas faced by women.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminine psyche, domineering character, comprehensive sensitiveness.

### Introduction

O'Neill and Tennessee Williams have been widely acclaimed for their portrayal of women in the realms of American dramatic literature. In fact, both of them display in their plays a remarkable understanding of the feminine psyche. Their women characters sometime appear to have been torn by the forces of society or by the conflicts in their minds, and at other time they appear as a domineering force trying to master or outsmart the society. They sought to create women characters whose behaviour and directions are determined by inevitable circumstances. They seldom change their pattern of behaviour, even in the face of disaster. They unconsciously face these disasters because of some inherent weakness or abnormality. But their greatest achievement as playwrights lie in the presentation of such 'unhinged' women characters though defeated in their own way. In them we see life in all is complexity and inconsistency.

It is also pertinent to note here that unlike Aristotelian concept of the protagonist, their female characters engage themselves to suffer the agony of conscience, to confront hidden truth, and to accept the heavy burden of guilt.

Williams' female characters are more given to undefined feeling than to thought, and a troubles originate more often in faulty neurological mechanisms whereas in O'Neill's plays female characters are self-conscious, striving, attuned to problems and ideas.

According to many critics, both of them chiefly write about maladjustments. Their women are unable to adapt to the new world of materialism. Even though they fight bravely, these characters are often seen on the verge of psychosis. However, the fault lies not only with the system which destroys them but also with their own individual self that clings to myths and dreams. These women have become maladjusted as a result of adjusting to abnormal relationships and therefore try hard to break through their bondage by finding a mate.

Both O'Neill and Tennessee Williams show a comprehensive study of the human nature, especially of women in their plays. The women characters of these playwrights are made up of the usual stuff of virtues and weaknesses. Though they struggle hard to exist in their own ways, their reactions to the external pressures are typically feminine. These playwrights also try to romanticise women in their plays. Their portraits are marked by a combination of excessive adoration or dislike. This is in accordance to the woman's conformity or non-conformity to her image.

The character of mother in most of O'Neill's plays remains a domineering force. Thus, in most of his plays, his search for the surrogate mother reduces the protagonist to a childlike state. Nurture attributes became the primary desirable aspect of a woman's personality. The inability of woman to satisfy this need brings forth a series of failed mothers. Mary Tyrone in **Long Days Journey into Night**, Rosa Parrit in **The Iceman Cometh** and Christine in **Mourning Becomes Electra** are some of the examples.

In the plays of Tennessee Williams, the mother characters are women with dynamic personalities who are so involved with their own concept of the life that they turn insensitive to the needs of their children. Like O'Neill's mothers they have been unable to take a proper step towards total commitment to their posterity. This is a trait that held negative connotations for these writers. Amanda in **The Glass Menagerie** and Mrs. Venable in **Suddenly Last Summer** belong to this type. Mothers like Serafina of **The Rose Tattoo** and Big Mamma of **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof** are less condemned because of their greater adaptability. Like O'Neill, Williams' vision of the mother figure is formed through association with his own mother, Edwina Williams. Tennessee Williams' mother characters are vulnerable, yet full of self-confidence and they are never presented as a conscious betrayer in the plays. The O'Neill

mother consciously turns a blind eye to her children's needs and thus becomes more a betrayer than the betrayed one.

Again, in the plays of O'Neill and Williams, the character of prostitute is never depicted as the coarse whore of popular literature. In the plays of O'Neill, she is a woman who can fulfil a man's need for both sexual satisfaction and mothering without evoking guilt in the process. These playwrights always compassionately depict the so called "fallen woman". The prostitute is portrayed as a tender and sensitive woman who tries to cope with an unsympathetic world. O'Neill's Anna and Williams' Blanche belong to this type. Though these portrayals, the playwrights also made an attempt to expose the hypocrisy inherent in the society. The plight of women who become victims of men like O'Neill's Mat Burke and Williams' Stanley are exhaustively probed in their plays. Thus both Anna and Blanche unconsciously freed themselves from their past exploits of men and desperately strive to impress the men of their helplessness in the face of circumstances.

In both O'Neill and Williams, we also find a high reverence for the feminine on account of her sensitivity. In the portraits of Josie in **A Moon for the Misbegotten** and Hannah in **The Night of the Iguana**, these playwrights emphasise woman's special role as a mediator. The difference between the male and female sensibility is highlighted by attributing woman with a morally and spiritually superior position with respect to man. Woman is portrayed with a refined sensibility so that she can become a spiritual guide to man. In some of the later plays of Tennessee Williams, the women can even be regarded as "Female Christ(s)".

In conclusion, O'Neill and Tennessee Williams tear the mask of shallow idealism in order to create realistic images of women; and show an overall sensitiveness towards the female psyche and the problems faced by women. Their women embody the psychological anxieties of a society confronted by the changing order. These female protagonists have a tendency to indulge in morbid introspection and in involvement with the self. These women are shown to cope with emotional pressures not only from the society but also from within themselves whenever they try to make a new life. Such is the effect of tradition and culture on the individual. Both O'Neill and Williams also sincerely examine the prevalent images of women in their works and succeed to some extent in transcending the accepted norms. Their sympathetic portrayal of feminine frustrations awakens the society to re-evaluate its defunct double standards.

#### **References:**

Elmer Rice. *The Living Theatre* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

Francis Donahue. *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1964).

Joseph W. Krutch. *Modernism in Modern Drama* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1953).

Raymond Williams. *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (London: Penguin Books, 1978).

Richard Vowels. *Tennessee Williams and Strindberg. Modern Drama* (Dec. 1988)

Thomas E. Potter. *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Michigan: Wayne State University Press, 1969).