

THE WRITER AND HIS ROSE:  
THE RELATIONSHIP OF TENNESEE WILLIAMS' AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL ARTIST AND  
FRAGILE FEMALE CHARACTER, AND ITS PRESENCE IN THE LIFE AND WORK OF A  
TROUBLED GENIUS

by

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The Writer and his Rose: the relationship of Tennessee Williams' autobiographical artist and fragile female character, and its presence in the life and work of a troubled genius

Thesis directed by Assistant Professor Beth Osnes

The two most influential forces in the life of Tennessee Williams were his writing and his sister Rose. By no accident, many of his male characters are artists, and many of his female characters, like Rose, suffer from some condition that makes them alienated from the world and emotionally ill-equipped to deal with its hardships. This investigation is an examination of the relationship between Williams' male artist and fragile female characters in each of the plays in which the two are found. This study reveals that through these two characters and the progress of their relationship, Williams expressed the inner emotional turmoil of his own life. By the end of his work, Tennessee created an untenable bond between his writer and fragile female, allowing them to live, flourish, and care for one another in a way that he and Rose never could.

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## CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

*Goodnight my dear little sister—I think of you dear, and wish, oh, so much that I could help! –Be brave, dear little girl—God must remember and have pity some day on one who loved as much as her little heart could hold --&more! Why should you be there, little Rose? And me, here?—No reason—no reason—anywhere—why? Why?—*

*-Tennessee Williams, Notebooks*

The two greatest forces in the life of Tennessee Williams were his writing and his sister Rose. Tennessee's relationship with Rose was the closest in his life (Devlin 16). He and his sister shared a traumatic childhood, having grown up with an abusive, alcoholic father and a compliant, depressed mother, but they found solace in each other (See Edwina Williams, *Remember Me to Tom*). Rose was a schizophrenic who underwent a bilateral frontal lobotomy in 1943 to treat her condition. After the operation, Williams, watched his sister fall into an inescapable madness. He never forgave himself for what happened to her, and it was his greatest fear that he, too, would be overtaken by what he referred to as the "little blue devils" that had taken his sister away from him (See Williams, *Notebooks*). Though he provided for Rose and remained close to her until his death in 1983, regarding her as "the living presence of truth and faith in his life" (*Notebooks* 747), Tennessee

could never share reality with her after the lobotomy, for Rose was forever trapped in an emotionless and incomplete world (*Remember Me* 88).

Tennessee Williams found it imperative to constantly improve his writing craft. To him, getting up in the morning and sitting at his typewriter with a cup of coffee was as natural as brushing his teeth. He said once in an interview that he “couldn’t face a day without writing. The day would seem so completely empty to me that by the time the evening came I would feel like shooting myself” (quoted in Devlin 112). He was a perfectionist, continually reworking and rewriting plays, even after they had already been produced, and sometimes decades after he had begun working on them. He believed that there was nothing he could do *but* write (quoted in Devlin 112). His life was not an easy one, but in his work Williams’ found salvation. In one of his last diary entries before his death, Williams wrote that:

In my life, extra-familial, what has happiness been but little fractions of experience, encompassing not much time. But yes, there was work, and if I ran before death to perform it, this saying of truth as I felt it, then—whatever it comes to when completed—whatever was discarded on the way—friendship or love sanity or that which is so regarded, I may deeply regret but would not wish to choose otherwise. (*Notebooks* 751)

Many scholars have noted, and it is impossible to deny, that Williams’ fictional work is heavily laden with remnants of his own life. Williams admitted that this was true. However he stated many times that actual situations and characters in his plays were not taken from his life, but rather the “dynamics of the characters, the tensions,” corresponded with what was going on with him at the time (Devlin 125).

His work, he said, was “emotionally autobiographical,” dealing with the rich emotional currents of his dynamic and tragic personal story (Devlin 342).

These two centripetal forces, Rose and writing, are subsequently two of the major themes in Tennessee Williams’ fictional work. A number of scholars have recognized the personal traits of Williams’ sister Rose in Williams’ female protagonists. Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* (1943), Catherine in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), and Clare in *The Two-Character Play* (1975) are a few. Each of these women, like Williams’ sister, suffers from some condition that makes her alienated from the world, frightened of life, and emotionally ill-equipped to deal with its hardships.

Also significant in Williams’ work are his “writer-figures,” those male artist characters that Williams himself categorized as autobiographical: Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* (1943), Felice in *The Two-Character Play* (1975), and August in *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981) are a few. Each of these men, like Williams himself, struggles with dissatisfaction in life and work, is in search of escape, and is driven by an inner-demon of creation.

In several pieces of the Williams’ canon there is interaction between these two recurring characters: the fragile female and the writer. In *The Long Good-Bye* (1940), there are Joe and Myra; in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), Tom and Laura; in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) Catherine and Sebastian, in *The Two-Character Play* (1973) Felice and Claire. In these works, a writer-figure is involved in a complicated

relationship with a “fragile female.” Common, more obvious traits of their relationship include: the writer being older than the female, the writer feeling a brotherly protectiveness over the female, the writer drawing inspiration from the female, the writer seeing something of himself in the female, and the female having a lasting and profound impact on the writer.

Significantly, it is in this pool of works that Williams said his most autobiographical plays reside. It is also this grouping of plays that contain, according to the playwright, the most truth, the most reality, and the most important work of Williams’ life (See Devlin, *Conversations*).

Williams’ scholars often take a biographical approach in examining the playwrights’ work. The motivations behind this form of investigation are apparent, since Williams’ work is so heavily autobiographical in nature, and because he led such a rich and interesting life. However, it is my belief that these biographical investigations often fail to come to any significant conclusion. *Why* did Williams’ include so much of his own life in his plays? What methods did he use to do write the “currents of his personal life” into fiction? Why is his evocation of emotional autobiography significant? True, people have been explaining how Laura of *Glass Menagerie* is a portrait Williams’ sister, Rose, for over fifty years, but what does it mean that they are similar, if indeed they are?

In the recently published collection of Williams’ essays titled *New Selected Essays: Where I Live* (2002), the playwright asks the question, “Is it or is it not right



or wrong for a playwright to put his persona into his work?" And leaves us with this answer:

What else can he do?—I mean the very root-necessity of all creative work is to express those things most involved in one's particular experience. Otherwise, is the work, however well executed, not a manufactured, a synthetic thing? I've said, perhaps repeatedly, that I have two major classifications for writing: that which is organic and that which is not. And this opinion still holds.

[ . . . ] It is the responsibility of the writer to put his experience as a being into work that refines it and elevates it and that makes of it an essence that a wide audience can somehow manage to feel in themselves: "This is true.

In all human experience, there are parallels which permit common understanding in the telling and hearing, and it is the frightening responsibility of an artist to make what is directly or allusively close to his own being communicable and understandable, however disturbingly, to the hearts and minds of all whom he addresses. (166)

Clearly, there were experiences in Williams' life that he felt necessary to make communicable to the hearts and minds of his audiences. The greatest of these parallels perhaps, were, evidently, his feelings about his sister Rose, and his personal struggle as an artist. Still, Williams cautions his readers against a superficial understanding of the persons in his life or art. "You don't know Miss Rose," he writes, "and you never will unless you come to know her through this 'thing,' for Laura of *The Glass Menagerie* was like Miss Rose only in her inescapable 'difference'" (*Memoirs* 125). This "inescapable difference" could be used to describe Rose's condition, but also the dissimilarities that separate Williams' protagonists from other characters, and the disparity from others that Williams himself felt throughout his life.

Though many scholars have identified the connection of Williams' personal life to his work, few have analyzed his work as "emotionally autobiographical." None to my knowledge have attempted to trace this specific relationship between the writer character and the fragile female character through the entire Williams' cannon. This type of analysis could significantly contribute to the field of Williams' research, for it investigates the knowable, emotional currents, and the "inescapable difference" of which Williams felt so strong a presence in his life and work. It is the purpose of this thesis to increase our understanding of the life and work of Tennessee Williams, more specifically the relationship between his elusive female characters and his writer-figures, through an investigation of their dramatic relationship in each of the dramatic works in which they are present. These works are as follows:

*The Long Good-Bye* (1940)

*The Glass Menagerie* (1943)

*Camino Real* (1953)

*Suddenly Last Summer* (1958)

*Night of the Iguana* (1964)

*Small Craft Warnings* (1972)

*The Two-Character Play* (1967, 1973) and its alternate draft, *Outcry* (1971)

*Vieux Carré* (1977)

*Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980)

*The Notebook of Trigorin* (1981)

*Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981)

This project was guided by the following questions: what is this “inescapable difference,” which Williams assigns his sister, and what does it suggest about the nature of his fragile female protagonist and his writer-figure? What about these plays could be “emotionally autobiographical?” What techniques does Williams use to create the relationship between these two characters? What are the common threads running through this grouping of plays? Can anything be drawn about the Williams’ cannon as a whole from this grouping of plays? What do these plays suggest about the relationship of Tennessee Williams’ life and work?

The methods of research included close critical readings of Williams’ work, and of autobiographical, biographical, and critical sources on his life. Each of the writer/fragile female relationships in the plays was held up to Williams’ personal life with his sister Rose at the time that the plays were written. Additionally, each relationship was also compared to the cannon as a whole to see what part it played in Williams’ life’s work. Every time I analyzed a relationship, I dissected the two separate identities of it (the writer and the fragile female), their personal motivations, the interactions of the two characters, and their feelings about each other.

Chapter 2 of this study, titled “The Cut,” explores the relationship between the writer character and his sister in *The Long Goodbye* (1940) and *The Glass*

*Menagerie* (1944). In these plays, the first written before Rose Williams' lobotomy and the second written directly after, Tennessee creates highly contrasting figures in the writer and sister characters, which meet dissimilar fates. Williams' guilt over his sister's condition and operation fueled him to place the autobiographical characters representative of himself and Rose on two sides of a binary opposition. Chapter 3, titled "After the Break," is an investigation of two plays written after Williams realized the long-term effects of Rose's lobotomy: *Camino Real* (1953) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). These plays are much darker in nature than the previous two. Their female protagonists are heroic and capable, unlike those of the earlier plays. The writer characters and the female protagonists in this chapter still meet different fates, but their traits and actions parallel each other, as the two personas become situated on either side of a binary mirror. Chapter 4, "The Mourning and the Magic," analyzes the plays *Night of the Iguana* (1964), *Small Craft Warnings* (1972), and *Two Character Play* (1967/1973)/*Out Cry* (1971), in which we see the writer and the fragile female develop (especially in *Two Character Play/Outcry*) a reversibility of traits and an increased emotional intimacy in which they form a singular totality, finally sharing the same fate. Chapter 5, "Memories and the Muse," analyzes four of Williams' last plays, *Vieux Carre* (1977), *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), *The Notebook of Trigorin* (1981), and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), surmising that in the actually autobiographical memory plays of this group, and most fully in his last produces play, *Something Cloudy,*

Williams created a writer and fragile female that share a solidity, an awareness of the past and present, and an existence in a two-frame world. Finally, in this last significant work, Williams succeeded in creating a resting place for his aging artist and long-lost fragile female—a playground for Rose’s fictional self and Tennessee’s writer identity in which the two would never be alone.

As we move chronologically through the plays in which these two characters appear, we see that they become more and more similar. We also see that as the lives of Williams and his sister progress in opposite ways, the paths of the writer and the female diverge. Though Williams and Rose could not share a real life together in this world, in Williams’ fictional world, they have a relationship as rich and as deep as any in real life. By the end of the Williams cannon, these two characters have evolved into magnificent creations and powerful creators of their own accord, who can, unlike Williams’ and Rose in real life, create memory and magic together. These findings could contribute greatly to the field of Williams’ research because they realize new unions between Williams’ emotion inner life and his life’s work, revealing significant discoveries about one of America’s greatest storytellers and the stories he told.

## CHAPTER 2

## THE CUT

*I think the strange, the crazed, the queer  
Will have their holiday this year,  
I think for just a little while  
There will be pity for the wild.*

*I think in places known as gay  
In secret clubs and private bars,  
The damned will serenade the damned  
With frantic drums and wild guitars.*

*I think for some uncertain reason  
Mercy will be shown this season  
To the lonely and misfit,  
To the brilliant and deformed—*

*I think they will be housed and warmed  
And fed and comforted for a while  
Before, with such a tender smile,  
The earth destroys her crooked child.*

*-Tennessee Williams, The Collected Poems of Tennessee Williams*

In their younger years, Tom (who would later be dubbed “Tennessee”) and Rose Williams were as close as a brother and sister could be. Though Rose was two years his senior, Tennessee recalled that his “little sister” was an ideal playmate. “My sister was very charming,” he said in an interview with Jean Evans in 1945, “very beautiful. She had an incredible imagination. We were so close to each other,

we had no need of others” (quoted in Devlin 16). Tennessee’s mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, recalls their “wild intimacy of childhood” as being a relationship so close that when one would fall ill, so would the other (*Remember Me* 69).

However, Edwina remembers that as Rose grew up, the relationship between sister and brother changed. Rose was very social and outgoing, showing “plenty of temper and temperament,” while Tom was usually “quiet and calm” (*Remember Me* 22). As Rose grew into society, Tom stood by observing. Rose began to develop small hysterias, and was often terrified that someone was trying to kill her (See *Memoirs*). She was sent to many doctors to try to find the root cause of her condition, and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. In March 1937, she was institutionalized in a mental ward in Missouri, and would remain institutionalized or in medically assisted living for the rest of her life (See Leverich and Spoto). On the day that she was taken to the sanitarium, Williams remarked, “I belong in one myself” (*Notebooks* 83).

At that time, Tom Williams was developing into a talented young writer. In 1937, two of his earliest plays, *The Fugitive Kind* and *Candles to the Sun*, were produced in St. Louis. In 1938, Tom graduated from the University of Iowa with a Bachelor of Arts degree, and in 1939, he moved to New Orleans. It was here that Tom adopted the name “Tennessee,” and wrote some of his most pivotal works, including *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Tom loved writing, and in it found an escape from the hardships of his life. He and his father were on bad

terms. His father had forced him to leave the University of Missouri a few years earlier for failing out of ROTC, and, when he was actually present in their St. Louis home, was a constant cause of violence and disturbance. Tom exchanged letters with his mother frequently, almost always inquiring about Rose's current condition. He was aware of her institutionalization and diagnosis, and often wrote in his diary that he wished he could help his dear "little" sister (See *Notebooks* and Devlin).

Even in these early days of his writing, Williams drew on his personal experience to create drama. He looked to American poet Hart Crane as a model whose "insistence on transmuting the raw material of one's own life into the stuff of poetry and drama" became a goal for young Tom. Williams' biographer, Donald Spoto, says that this task—bringing Tom's life to drama, became, "perhaps the single great challenge he was facing, then or thereafter" (Spoto 59).

Many writers before have identified the autobiographical situations in the plays *The Long Good-Bye* and *The Glass Menagerie*. That is not my task. Rather, I wish to suggest that in these early plays, the sister and writer character, are two halves of a binary opposite that, like the actual Rose and Tom, operate on different planes and in different realms. These plays represent a time in Williams' life in which he felt torn between a responsibility to care for his sick sister and move on with his own life and work. They express a need for escape from his stagnant life in St. Louis, they cry of his guilt in being away from his sister, and they establish his creative force as



something that is dually creative and destructive, a comfort to his sister's memory and a betrayal of her current condition.

In 1940, while living in New Orleans, Williams composed *The Long Good-Bye*. This one-act takes place in an unspecified city in the American mid-west. It centers on Joe, a young writer, who is moving out of his childhood home. His mother has recently died, leaving him \$150. *The Long-Good-Bye* is a memory play, literally a "long good-bye," written in non-chronological series of scenes that occur between the time that Joe's mother became very ill, and present day. As Joe's memory unfolds, we discover that his mother actually committed suicide so that her children could have her insurance money. Joe's sister, Myra, is a former swimming champion and a lover of boys. She dates many of them, creating a reputation for herself of which Joe is ashamed. By the end of the play, Myra has become estranged from Joe, and Joe is left alone in the house with only the movers going in and out as they strip away everything that makes up the memories of the young writer. Joe, though ready to leave this place once and for all, finds it very difficult to say his last good-bye.

Joe is not a positive portrait of a writer character. He is a destructive force as much as he is a creative one: selfish, and incapable of helping the people that he loves. This is partially due to his being a writer. His sister Myra goes out with boys to enjoy herself all the time, but Joe only sits at home on his fruitless typewriter. He does not take progressive action in any form, even when his mother warns him that she is going to kill herself. He doesn't protect Myra from aggressive men, but rather,

rubs her falsely created reputation of being a whore in her face. He even forgets to feed the goldfish, and it dies too. He is incapable of living in the real world as a participatory being, and spends all of his time either with his typewriter or with his best friend Silva, making up fake stories of a meaningless existence with both.

The only action that Joe takes is to conjure the memories of his home. He feels a desperate need to escape the house. “. . . No I’m not gonna stay here,” he says to his friend Silva, “all of this is dead for me” (Vol. 6, 205). But, he has to have some parting ritual before he leaves, a sort of last creation. “Every stick a furniture out—before me!” (225) Joe must unravel the memories of this house in order to say good-bye to it. It is because he is a writer, weaving these tales as they happened to him, that he can conjure the things that happened to him and finally say good-bye. It is only because he is a writer that he can find the freedom that he so longs for.

Myra is Joe’s opposite in every way. Myra is Joe’s older sister, though he and his mother both remark that she is still a baby and seems younger than Joe. She is outgoing and outspoken, always ready to enjoy herself. She has had extensive sexual experience, while we have every reason to believe that Joe is a virgin. Events of the house are kept hidden from her, and she is kept ignorant of her mother’s suicide, while Joe is aware of everything that happens. Myra finds worth in material possessions; in fact, according to Joe, she dropped out of high school so that she could have more clothes and cash. Joe only finds worth in sentimental and immaterial things: the smell of his mother’s perfume and the sanctity and wholeness

of the objects in the house.

Myra has similar desires to Joe, but attempts to achieve her desire with dissimilar tactics. Whereas he wants to conjure these memories and create so that he can find freedom, she wants him to stop writing all the time so that he can enjoy life. She finds joy in dating a lot of men, and it is because of this that Joe says he cannot protect her. She wants escape from hardship just like Joe, but she tries to find it in men, not creative work. We assume that this doesn't work out well for her, as Joe has no idea where she is by the end of the play.

The relationship between Joe and Myra is one of the most volatile relationships between a writer and a fragile female in the canon, due to their contrasting personalities and tactics. They are incapable of understanding each other, for they operate on completely different planes. In their final confrontation, Joe accuses Myra of being a whore, yelling:

I used to have hopes for you, Myra. But not any more. You're going' down the toboggan like a greased pig. Take a long look at yourself in the mirror. Why did Silva look at you that way? Why did the newsboy whistle when you walked past him at night? Why? 'Cause you looked like a whore—like a cheap one, Myra, one he could get for six! (224)

She launches back at him, accusing him of loafing around all day and “writing crap that nobody reads. You never do nothing, nothing, you don't make a cent!” (225). Joe bases his judgments of Myra and of other people on appearance and character. This makes sense, as he is a writer who examines these qualities and creates them into characters. Myra bases her judgment on work and money. This is interesting, as Joe

is the artist but never seems to care about what his work yields him the way Myra does. Myra suggests that he's been talking about leaving for a long time (225). Again, we see that Joe is stationary, incapable of taking action towards getting what he needs. Myra is an action taker, searching constantly for happiness, while Joe waits by, observing life but not actually living it.

Joe has a lot of trouble parting with his past, as if he, like the later Tom of *The Glass Menagerie*, and like Williams himself, is "pursued by something," haunted by the memories of what he left behind. As Joe prepares to leave the house, he converses with his friend Silva, who plays a sort of devil's advocate sitting on the shoulder of Joe throughout the play. Silva worries that Joe may be contemplating suicide:

Because your state of mind is abnormal. I've been lookin' at you. You're starin' off into space like something's come loose in your head. I know what you're doing. You're taking a morbid pleasure in watchin' this junk hauled off like some dopes get in mooning around a bone orchard after somebody's laid under. This place is done for, Joe. You can't help it. Write about it some day. Call it "An Elegy for an Empty Flat." But right now my advice is to get out of here and get drunk! 'Cause the world goes on. And you've got to keep going on with it. (226)

Joe replies that Silva is just too free a spirit, too unattached. "You're kidding yourself," he says, "You're saying good-bye all the time, every minute you live. Because that's what life is, just a long, long good-bye!" (227) To Joe, life is *not* a "long good-bye," and though he spends the entire play trying to part with his memories, in the end, he cannot. Rather than a parting, life to Joe seems to be defined by his

creative activity—his remembering. He leaves the house, reluctantly, but we have the overwhelming sense that he doesn't wish to.

For Tennessee Williams, *The Long Good-Bye* was a chance to deal with his guilt in leaving his sister. In an essay entitled "The Escape that Failed: Tennessee and Rose Williams," Michael Paller suggests that *The Long Goodbye* was an attempt for Tennessee to "escape the memory of his damaged sister" (Paller 75). In it, he believes that roles of the sister and brother are reversed, so that Myra is more reminiscent of Tennessee and Joe of Myra. I don't believe this to be true, for the following reasons. Myra is more like pre-lobotomy Rose than any other fragile female in the cannon: outgoing and sociable, unstable but loving. Joe resembles the artist character of the cannon quite clearly. This writer personality is accurately defined by George Niesen in his essay "The Artist Against the Reality in the Plays of Tennessee Williams." He labels the artist figure in Williams' plays as the following:

He is sensitive to time, to his own feelings, and to others and their feelings. He is generally so sensitive, in fact, that he cannot function well in the real world. He creates, of course. The artist attempts to give some kind of meaning to life and death. He reaches for the unobtainable and often fashions an idealistic fiction to replace a frustrating reality. Finally, and surprisingly, the artist is invariably associated with destruction, either his own or that of someone close to him. (463)

This definition is extremely befitting to Joe. Williams does not create Joe to "escape the memory" of Rose, but, rather, he puts Joe in such a situation so as to parallel his own feelings of betrayal in leaving Rose behind. Rose was in her most volatile state

between the time that Williams' left for New Orleans in 1939 and the time of her operation several years later. In a diary entry dated 10 July 1939 he exclaims:

Rose, my dear little sister—I think of you, dear, and wish, oh, so much that I could help!—Be brave, dear little girl—God must remember and have pity some day on one who loved as much as her little heart could hold—& more! Why should you be there, little Rose? And me, here? – No reason—no reason—anywhere—why?—why?...God bless you tonight—my dear....” (159)

Clearly, Williams wanted desperately to save his sister, but was utterly helpless in preventing her decline. Joe's world in *The Long Good-Bye* is literally and metaphorically crumbling down around him, and he does nothing but sit and watch it happen. He is incompetent to help his struggling sister, and she is, in the end, lost to him. Joe's saving grace is that he is the creator of the story that surrounds him, and it is within his art that he can conjure up his most potent memories of Myra in order to preserve them. *The Long Good-Bye*, then, is not Williams' farewell to his sister, but his acknowledgment of guilt in not protecting her. In confessing the truth of his and his sisters' tragedy through metaphor, Williams helped his sister in the only way he could, by making her eternal.

Rose had no knowledge of her brother's preservation of her healthy self. She had receded deeply into her schizophrenia and was beyond help. On January 17, 1943, under the agreement of Edwina Williams, a bilateral prefrontal lobotomy was performed on Rose Williams. On January 20, three days after the operation was deemed having caused “marked improvement,” Edwina wrote to Tennessee telling

him that Rose had undergone a head operation. Williams was not aware of the type or nature of the operation until March of 1943, when he wrote in his diary:

A cord breaking  
 1000 miles away.  
 Rose. Her head cut open.  
 A knife thrust in her brain.  
 Me. Here. Smoking. (*Notebooks* 361)

But even then, Williams was unaware of the enormous change that he would later see in Rose, and what a tremendous mistake the operation had been. In a letter to Paul Bigelow in April of 1943, Williams remarked that he had been to see Rose in the sanitarium and that she seemed “almost more than normally acute.... All of her old wit and mischief was in evidence ....” (*Notebooks* 362). Later, Tennessee and Edwina would recognize that the operation had caused their beloved Rose to be lost to them forever. Donald Windham, arguably Williams’ closest friend at the time, remembers what Williams was like during the months following the lobotomy:

His entire manner of behavior at that time was the result of his having such a backlog of emotional material stored inside him, so much accumulated “by-product of existence” pressing on his heart, that he dared not receive any more, only release the complex images and insights he was packed with. . . . The emotional material stored in him was concealed. . . . His art sprang from his repressed self-knowledge and the resulting ingenuity his sense of self-preservation used in presenting these too-upsetting-to-face revelations to him in an acceptable way. (vi-vii)

This was a time of great change for Williams, as he was caught between two worlds: that of ignorance and truth about his sister’s condition, and that of success and utter failure as a writer (this was almost exactly a year before he had any great critical

success. This pull of polar opposites, the literal cutting of a chasm between the writer and sister characters, and the change in William's life are felt in *The Glass Menagerie*, composed beginning in the fall of 1943 and premiering in December 1944. As the fictional Tom remarks, "Adventure and change were imminent in this year. . . . All the world was waiting for bombardments" (*Menagerie* 39).

The familiar story of *The Glass Menagerie* is similar to that of *The Long Good-Bye*. In it, Tom, the narrator, presents us with a glimpse of his life as it was in 1937 in a small St. Louis apartment he shares with his sister, Laura and mother, Amanda. Cripplingly shy Laura is a recluse from society, living in an imaginary world of glass animals. Amanda, his overbearing, former Southern belle mother, desires respectable, successful lives for her children and will do anything to see that they find happiness.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, we also see similar character creations to that of *The Long Good-Bye*, with Tom and Laura representing two sides of a binary opposite, traveling in dissimilar directions. But in *Menagerie*, Williams' goes much further, and his creation of a story about writer/brother and sister leaves a much more chiseled image in our minds (no pun intended) than was given three years earlier. This binary results in a wholeness in the play—the representation of a full spectrum of feeling.

In a binary of body and mind, Laura represents physical incompleteness,



while Tom represents psychological incompleteness. Rose has a bad foot that prevents her from walking well. Like her little glass unicorn, her physical ailment prevents her from operating in society, and makes her very shy. This makes her a sort of physically half-person, never completely existing in reality or in her fantasy unicorn world because of her physical incompleteness. Tom doesn't have a physical deformity, but is psychologically fragmented. His frustration in the play derives from his lack of things: not having anything in his life to call his own (*Menagerie* 21), and desiring to move forward. He longs for something non-physical—freedom—and is so caught up in his hunger for it that he has as much trouble living in reality as Laura does. He forgets to pay the light bulb, and has horrible social skills. Tom is also divided between two psychological roles due to his status as a writer: he is both the narrator and playwright, and the actor inside the illusion that he creates (Scheye 208). Thus, Tom's psychological incompleteness represents the opposite side of the binary containing Laura's one working leg—brother and sister's fragmented, dissimilar selves, together form a two-fold whole.

Laura and Tom also represent two contrasting halves of the creative self: the preserver and the destroyer. Other scholars have noted that Laura is just as much a creative power as is her brother, and perhaps even more so. Laura creates an imaginary world of characters out of her glass menagerie of animals, and even creates sort of "plays" between them (Hammer 42-43). She is the preserver of life for these little animals and for the imaginary world in which she lives. This is why

Jim's shattering of her glass unicorn's horn is initially such a shock for her—Laura does everything in her power to care for her little imaginary creations. Tom, on the other hand, couldn't care less about conserving illusion. In fact, though Tom forms the stories within the play, or at least retells them, illusion is exactly the thing that he is trying to break. He supposedly sits at his typewriter at all hours working and gets in scolded for writing poems on the lids of shoeboxes in the factory where he works, but we never see the work that this yields. He, like Joe of *The Long Good-Bye*, is a source of destruction more than he is a force of creation. He and Joe both, as George Niesen notes, "must escape the reality" of their existences (Niesen 467), and do so by abandoning their sisters. Niesen goes on to say that:

Joe and Tom, in their attempts to become artists and to fulfill themselves, must break away from their environments and families. Like the phoenix, they must create from the ashes of the past they have destroyed. . . . Tom cannot abandon Laura without destroying her. . . . for they are kindred spirits. (468)

Tom must extinguish Laura so that he can become a creative force. His move from one side of this binary opposite to the other signifies an artistic death for Laura. She can no longer live in her magical world, occupying her half of the binary, if Tom is going to be able to produce work. It is because she is a preserver, a *positive* force, that her image haunts Tom after he leaves her. It is her magic that "pursues" him. The only way for Tom to forget Laura is to preserve her in a memory.

The ending fates of Tom and Laura, then, make up a third binary opposite in *The Glass Menagerie*. Throughout the play, Tom refers to the stagnant nature of his

life in St. Louis. He longs for movement so that he can continue his creative work. In St. Louis, Tom expends all of his energy in non-productive ways, going to the movies almost every night and arguing with his mother constantly. Tom longs for *motion* and *hope*. This desire for flight from family and self is common in Williams' writer character. It is what Nancy Tischler calls the "eternal struggle to cut the umbilical cord" in Williams' protagonists (Tischler 166). Tischler says that these characters must always make great sacrifice in achieving freedom:

To fall in love or to accept the role imposed by society is to die. But to cut the vital cords that bind man to his society and his family is to destroy something in himself. Myra, love, biology, conscience, and society all conspire to murder the nonconformist, disengaged poet. (159)

In the end of *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom comes out of a dark room, leaving the stagnant home of his mother and sister to go and write. As he exits on the fire escape, he recites his ending monologue. In this monologue, the small flickering light of the candles that the gentleman caller brought symbolize Laura's fading illusion that she might have a chance with Jim. The candles—Laura's hope—must be extinguished in order for Tom to forget Laura. He pleads, "I reach for a cigarette, I cross the street, I run into the movies or a bar, I buy a drink, I speak to the nearest stranger- anything that can blow your candles out! . . . Blow out your candles, Laura—and so goodbye. . . ." (*Menagerie* 97). In the end, though Tom has tried everything to blow the candles out, it is only Laura who can. In order for Tom to find freedom, Laura must make herself eternally captive, and she does. The fates of Tom

and Laura cannot parallel, and brother and sister will never truly be together again, just like Tennessee and his Rose.

In November of 1943, one month before *The Glass Menagerie* opened to rave reviews in Chicago, Tennessee wrote the following of his new play:

It has some interesting new techniques and all in all I am not displeased with the out-come That is, when I consider the terrible, compulsive struggle it was to do the thing and what a frightful, sentimental mess it might well have been, and was at some stages. It needs a good deal of pruning, condensing, possible some rearranging even in this version. . . . I think it contains my sister, and that was the object. (413)

Later he would say several times that *Menagerie* did not contain Rose, or that Laura was only an abstraction. To me, the significant thing about this passage is the obsessive nature with which Tennessee wrote, and the need that he felt to express the emotional struggle within him. Nowhere else in his diaries, until *Two Character Play*, did Tennessee feel the need to exclaim such an “outcry” from his heart. He could, as Edwina said many times, “find not other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression” about one of the most significant inner trials in his life—the loss of his sister Rose (*Remember Me* 65).

The biographical connotations of *Menagerie* have been well established by Williams’ critics and biographers. Williams himself said that Laura is “a sort of abstraction” of Rose, though, many scholars note, she is actually more like Tennessee himself in her incredible shyness and desire to live in a world of magic (Devlin 87). Specific events in the play are clearly autobiographical of Williams’ own life, such as Tom’s employment at the International Shoe Company, his getting fired

for writing poems, the family's expensive light bill as a result of Tom's late-night writing, and his father's missing presence in the home. Laura is two years older than Tom, just as Rose is to Tennessee and Myra is to Joe. But it is the *emotional* autobiography, that "inescapable difference" of Laura's, and the characters themselves that I believe are more significant. They do not confine the intentions of Williams, or the emotional breadth of his work, like a pure biographical analysis would do.

In the end, Williams didn't care much for *Menagerie*, believing it to be too simple, and even downright boring. In fact, Edwina remembers that Tom thought George Kelly's *The Deep Mrs. Sykes* deserved the Drama Critics' Circle Award over *Menagerie* (Remember Me 154). Williams said that in *Menagerie*, "I said all the nice things I have to say about people. The future things will be harsher" (Parker 67). And they were.

## CHAPTER 3

## AFTER THE BREAK

*“I have always been more interested in creating a character that contains something crippled. I think nearly all of us have some kind of defect, anyway, and I suppose I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person. But these seemingly fragile people are the strong people really. They have a certain appearance of fragility those neurotic people that I write about, but they are really strong.... These fragile people—they’re always spiritually stronger, sometimes physically stronger, too. They hold up better, though it costs an awful lot.”*

—Tennessee Williams in an interview with Joanne Stang, 1965

When Williams finished writing *Camino Real* in 1953, ten years had passed since his sister’s lobotomy. At the time the lobotomy was performed in 1943, the effects (especially long-term) of the operation were not known. But ten years later, Tennessee, his mother, and the doctors who performed Rose’s surgery had realized that the operation had been a huge mistake. The effects were this: Rose was lucid, but “without that awareness of herself or the other person that enables her to make any kind of deep relationship” (*Remember Me* 234). She understood on a minimal level what was going on around her, but her personality, and her ability to feel and communicate emotion was gone. “Rose was now lost to all of us, forever”

remembers Edwina (*Remember Me* 88). In an interview in 1959, Williams recalled that lobotomies such as the one performed on Rose had “been exposed as a very dangerous operation, and wasn’t practiced anymore” (Devlin 71). Tennessee was not on good terms with Edwina because he blamed her for letting this tragedy happen, but he continued to support his mother financially through the royalty proceeds from several of his plays.

In *Remember Me to Tom*, Edwina expresses an opinion that the lobotomy left Tennessee with a life-long guilt:

I think Tom always felt as though he had failed Rose, that had he been on hand when the big decision was made, he might have been able to stop the lobotomy. . . . Tom’s sense of loss and loneliness . . . must have been devastating, although he never talked much about it. I think his was a grief beyond words, as he says his beautiful, imaginative sister whom he had always idolized, partially destroyed. Fragile, lovely Rose, to Tom must seem a broken creature, to use one of his similes, like a soft moth that flew too near the flame and suffered severe crippling. (86)

Williams himself never spoke much about the operation other than to acknowledge that it had happened. But, in his work, there are clear parallels to his feeling of guilt, and his fear of becoming confined to a place like his sister. He expressed his fear of madness through characters such as Blanche and Alma, and in plays like *Suddenly Last Summer*. As Edwina so eloquently states, Rose and Tom “met the tragedy in their lives in different ways. One became a brilliant writer, the other succumbed to mental illness (86-87). Rose’s mind was overtaken by a force outside of her control. It was Williams greatest fear that he, like his sister, would be forced to succumb to the “blue devils” (his were depression and anxiety) that at times overwhelmed him.

He suffered from these conditions a great part of his life, and yet, Williams continually pulled himself out his pits of angst by expressing his feelings through his words. This is a trend throughout Williams' work: that the writer escapes madness through his creative work, and that the characters (usually fragile females) that cannot create are succumbed to their fragile condition.

Lord Byron and Marguerite of *Camino Real* (1953), though not brother and sister contain all of the traits of the writer and fragile female. Their relationship, rather than an opposition like Laura and Tom, or Joe and Myra, represents a binary parallel, in which the two characters mimic each other until their separation, but never actually speak to each other.

Marguerite is a beautiful woman of no identifiable age, containing traits that correspond to both Williams and Rose. She speaks of her escape from a "resort," with "rows and rows of narrow white beds as regular as tombstones," where patients are treated strangely and the sterile "smell of an empty icebox" lurks the halls (Vol. 2, 497-498). This description is reminiscent of a sanitarium like the one that Rose was living in at the time *Camino* was written. Like Rose, Marguerite never escapes confinement, and will remain a "non-permanent" resident in the limbo-like world of the *Camino Real* for the rest of her days. Parts of Marguerite are analogous to Williams' own personality. She suffers from extreme anguish as a "price of admission" for her confinement, something that Rose couldn't possibly feel in her condition, but that Williams himself often did. Also similar to Williams' persona are



her unnatural fears of things without natural cause, and the lack of human connection in her sexual escapades. Some things in Marguerite's character seem to contradict one another, for instance she doesn't believe in the power of tenderness but embarks in many sexual interactions, and she talks about "getting used" to her lover Jacques in a sweet and devoted monologue, but in the same monologue admits she doesn't actually love him.

Lord Byron, though not the only writer character in the play, is the writer most similar to Williams. He, like the other writer figures in Tennessee's work, and like Marguerite, longs for flight from his place of capture. His confinement makes him unable to create. "The metal point's gone from my pen," he explains, "there's nothing left but the feather" (503). Like Tom's St. Louis home, the place Byron occupies is void of movement, and as a result, it seems to him a phony place. "And lately," he states, "I've found myself listening to hired music and behind a row of artificial palm trees—instead of the single—pure-stringed instrument of my heart . . ." (508). Byron idealizes "freedom" (504), and is plagued by the memory of his "one-time devotion" (504), another poet who died at sea. Williams' description of Shelley's mutilated body and brain shares uncanny parallel to what Williams experienced with Rose:

I saw the front of the skull had broken away in the flames, and there—  
And there was the brain of Shelley, indistinguishable from a cooking  
stew!—*boiling, bubbling, hissing!*—in the *blackening—cracked—pot* of  
his skull! (505)

Shelley's heart had been taken from his mutilated body. 'What can one man do with another man's heart?' Byron pleads, about the one person who ever had meaning in his life. It's impossible for the reader not to think of Williams in this passage, pining for the heart of his sister that was lost to him forever.

Byron and Marguerite share almost identical traits. Both pine for freedom from the Camino Real. Both are physically *and* psychologically incomplete: Byron has a limp leg like Laura and a missing piece of his heart (Shelley), and Marguerite feels her body deteriorating with age, and is missing the papers that would free her from the Camino Real. Both are dually creative *and* destructive forces. Byron used to be a wonderful poet, but is ultimately the destruction of Marguerite's hope for escape Marguerite fabricates stories of a different kind, but emotionally abuses her lover. Here, unlike in *The Long Good-Bye* and *The Glass Menagerie*, the traits of the writer and the fragile female are parallel, and in many ways it is as if Williams held a mirror up to one of the characters in order to create the other. Every time that Byron reaches a point of emotional intensity, Marguerite responds to him physically and emotionally by standing up in pain or calling out. Byron and Marguerite, a renowned poet and a historical muse, seem almost twins, two halves of a binary mirror with only one significant difference: their ends.

Byron achieves freedom because he is a writer, whereas Marguerite remains confined to the Camino. He says that writing is capable of being destructive, but that the true vocation of a poet is:

[. . .] to influence the heart in a gentler fashion.... He ought to purify it and lift it above its ordinary level. For what is the heart but a sort of—A sort of—*instrument!* For what is the heart but a sort of—A sort of—*instrument!*—that translates *noise* into *music*, chaos into—*order*. . . —a mysterious *order!* (507)

Byron finds a kind of truth in writing that he cannot find in life on the Camino Real. He seems to instruct Marguerite directly when he says “*Make voyages! —Attempt them!*—there’s nothing else. . . .” (508). But Marguerite cannot move outside of her cage of illusion, perhaps because she herself *is* a creation, based on Camille of Alex Dumas’ novel. Marguerite cannot break free from the Camino Real because she is not a creator and cannot write her own escape. Like Rose, she is literally not allowed to come to terms with reality because her name is not on a certain list of the privileged—we can assume that the title of this list is “the sane.” Thus we see a trend of *The Glass Menagerie* reappear; the fragile female who cannot come to terms with reality suffers madness. Though Byron and Marguerite mirror one another, they will never occupy the same mirror, for Byron can face reality through his writing, and Marguerite, like the doomed Rose, never will believe that the violets in the mountains can break through the rocks; she cannot feel real tenderness because she is part of the created, not the *creating*. Real agency exists for neither woman.

The next play with incarnations of the writer and the fragile female is *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). It is the only play in the cannon that includes an actual lobotomy, or at least the threat of one. In *Suddenly*, the writer figure is not actually present. Sebastian Venable, cousin of the protagonist Catherine, died last

summer in what his cousin describes as a freak accident. Significantly, here we find *two* examples of the fragile female, not just one, in the characters of Catherine and also in Violet Venable, Sebastian's mother.

This is the only play analyzed thus far that is not outside of time; that is, there is no a manipulation of sequential events and memory like in *The Long Good-Bye* and *The Glass Menagerie*, and no fantastical notion of the passage of time like in *Camino Real*. The events of *Suddenly* take place in the course of a single day, though the past is often referenced. The atmospheric jungle of *Suddenly* is symbolic of an actual sanitarium, and its "true story" is elaborate, but its message of the connection of fear to truth and the nature of platonic love shines through. Williams called *Suddenly* "a moral fable of our times" (quoted in Devlin 52), significant to my analysis because Williams often speaks about this grouping of plays (with writer/fragile female relationships) as being truth-telling metaphors for society. In *Suddenly*, Williams again situates his writer and fragile female as parallels that share an uncanny amount of traits, but meet different fates.

Sebastian and Catherine, like Lord Byron and Marguerite, are situated on two sides of a binary mirror. The characters occupying this mirror, however, mimic each other to an even greater degree, and share a close relationship that is not present in the earlier plays. Catherine is a creator as much as her deceased cousin Sebastian was—regardless of whether her story is truth or fiction, she weaves it with the poetic mastery of a writer. Both cousins are destructive forces as well: Catherine is

violent in the asylum, and annihilates Mrs. Venable's illusions of grandeur (Mrs. Venable calls Catherine "the destroyer" repeatedly) with her revelations of Sebastian's homosexuality and his instigation of his own horrific death. Sebastian sees terror alongside every existence of beauty in his world. He uses Catherine and his mother as objects to procure men, and even the plants in his greenhouse look like dead bodies. He destroys his own life by refusing to correct any wrong in it.

Near the end of her story, Catherine remembers:

*He!—accepted!—all!—as—how!—things!—are!—And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever, and even though he knew that what was awful was awful, that what was wrong was wrong and my Cousin Sebastian was certainly never sure that anything was wrong!—He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever! (Vol. 3, 419)*

But Catherine is just as unable to change a situation as her cousin is—in fact she says that her plea to Sebastian, begging him to run from the cannibalistic children at the beach, was the only time she ever contested him on anything. The truth serum that "Doctor Sugar" puts in her veins forces her to reveal the story of Sebastian's death, but without it she never would have admitted what happened, even though doing so is the only way to prevent her brain from being cut apart. Sebastian and Catherine are both physically incomplete, as he had a heart condition that made his heart only partially working, and she does not have complete use of her brain due to over-medication. Sebastian, in life, is constantly searching for divine salvation, and Catherine for love. In the end, neither finds what he/she is looking for. When Sebastian was alive they used each other because doing so allowed each of them to

feel some sense of completeness. This, too, is a development from the other plays, for the identity on each side of the binary is dependent on its other half, and feeds off of its other half, as the writer and his fragile female embark on “reversibility of traits” (see Nikolopoulou) that will continue through the rest of their plays of the canon.

Violet Venable also serves as a fragile female akin to the other muses of the canon. She does not see herself as Sebastian’s mother, but rather, wishes to serve as his muse. She is jealous of the men whose attentions Sebastian wishes to gain. She refuses to procure men for Sebastian to sleep with, instead trying to ascertain that he was not gay. Significantly, she notes that Sebastian always took 9 months to write a single poem, the same length of human gestation. Thus, we can procure that Mrs. Venable actually saw herself as Sebastian’s lover, helping him to create his art from a place of tenderness. Until he spends the summer with Catherine (the only summer he could not write a poem because his mother wasn’t there) Violet is Sebastian’s muse.

Sebastian, like the artists of the early plays, is freed because he is a writer. This time, of course, his freedom only occurs through death. He sacrifices his closest companion, Catherine, to madness as a result of having prompted his own freedom (death), but in a more traceable string of events than in the other plays. Also unlike the earlier plays, here the writer is not the only one to blame for the female’s descent into insanity. Catherine was, as far as we know, completely lucid before

witnessing the horrific murder of her cousin. Had she chosen not to be used by Sebastian and use him in return, she would not be in the sanitarium. Catherine, we assume, will, like Rose, be confined to an asylum for the rest of her life, though she probably will not be given a lobotomy. His mother has also descended into another kind of insanity as a result of his self-sacrifice. After Sebastian's death she suffers from paranoia and absolute refusal of the truth akin to that of Williams' own mother. She attempts to create something out of the wreckage, remembering Sebastian as a much more holy figure than he was, and casting the blame on poor Catherine. Her agreement to a lobotomy without any hesitation is reminiscent of Edwina's own orders to have Rose's brain cut in two.

*Camino Real* and *Suddenly Last Summer* we see parallels to Williams' growing fear of confinement and his burgeoning guilt over what had happened to his sister, present in the transference of the writer and fragile female to a binary mirror. Throughout his life, Williams suffered from hysteria, paranoia, and nervousness. It was his greatest fear that he would end up like Rose, completely overtaken by the "blue devils," as he called them, and confined to a place where he could not create. Soon after Rose's lobotomy, in July of 1943, he wrote a letter to Donald Windham expressing fear of his unstable mental condition:

I have plunged into one of my periodic neuroses, I call them "blue devils," and it is like having wild-cats under my skin. They are a Williams family trait, I suppose. Destroyed my sister's mind and made my father a raging drunkard. In me they take the form of interior storms that show remarkably little from the outside but which create

a deep chasm between myself and all other people, even deeper than the relatively ordinary ones of homosexuality and being an artist. (91)

But it was also his actual connection to Rose that he believed created this “chasm” between himself and other people:

My sister and I had a close relationship, quite unsullied by any carnal knowledge. As a matter of fact, we were rather shy of each other physically, there was no casual physical intimacy...*And yet our love was, and is, the deepest in our lives and was, perhaps, very pertinent to our withdrawal from extra-familial attachments.* (Memoirs 119-120, italics mine)

Tennessee never explains specifically what it is that makes he and Rose draw away from other people and from life, but in his personal writings, he does write continuously about his strange fears and hysterias, “the little blue devils.” These surfaced most in the sixties, until his younger brother, Dakin Williams, forced him into a mental institution. Williams was a sensitive man, and in the incarnations of his writer characters, especially the later ones, the writer increasingly become so sensitive that he “cannot function well in the real world” (Niesen 463). In *Camino Real*, Byron ascends out of the Camino as if onto heaven because he cannot write in the confinement of the walls within the Camino Real. In *Suddenly*, Sebastian cannot create and sacrifices himself to the cannibal children, refusing to relinquish his stubborn, passive identity. The writer’s work, in these plays, becomes so intertwined with his life that the two cannot be separated. Lord Byron’s idealistic identity is defined by his writing, and Sebastian, as Mrs. Venable says, “his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet and—vis versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can’t separate them” (Vol. 3, 352). This suggests that as a writer develops his craft, his relation to the real world—his



sanity—diminishes. These plays also suggest that in order to create, the writer must sacrifice a great deal; he must give up his way of living, and his very life. Surely for Williams in these years, this was true.

The women of *Camino* and *Suddenly* are much more empowered than Myra and Laura. As their male counterparts become weaker and less prominent (or at least less present) in the plays, they themselves take the stage. Marguerite is truly a fighter, and though she is tempered with a strong belief that tenderness cannot save her, she tries her best to save *herself* from the “dim, shadowy end” of the plaza (Vol. 2, 526). She is a voice of honesty among a world of lies, and is sexually unbound by rules or feelings. Catherine, an even stronger woman than Marguerite, stands by her confession of what truly happened to her dead cousin, even when everyone else doubts its validity. Her voice almost echoes Williams himself when she pleads, ““But, Mother, I DIDN’T invent it. I know it’s a hideous story but it’s a true story of our time and the world we live in and what did truly happen to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo” (Vol. 3, 382). Catherine gives Sebastian’s life and death meaning with her story, and she believes that she could have saved Sebastian had he only held onto her hand (375). She has the gifts of preservation and inspiration, traits which we will see in the later plays as well.

Perhaps this increase in strength of the fragile female occurred because of Rose’s de-habilitation; though Williams’ sister was forced into incompetency in real life, in his plays, he could let her fight. Roses’ condition also may have given her a

strength that she had not possessed before, for in her state no one could hurt her feelings or scare her as they had before. In an interview in 1965 Williams spoke publically of her condition:

My sister, as everyone knows by this time, is a mental invalid, afflicted with schizophrenia. I can say this because she would never hear it. But her spirit is much stronger than my spirit. Nobody who tried to put her down could possibly put her down. (116)

Williams was emotionally vulnerable for his entire life, but Rose was not because the operation made her unable to feel. Perhaps for this he was somewhat envious of her, for his creative spirit would cause him to face an incredible amount of harsh personal and artistic criticism in the years after *Suddenly Last Summer* was published. Much like the writer figures in his plays, he would be forced into a harsher and harsher reality because of his writing, but his sister would continue living in her magical—however limited—world.

Regardless of the parallels, undeniably the traits of the writer and the female protagonist in these two plays are intertwined, forming stronger, braver women and more vulnerable, less destructive male writers. The writer and fragile female characters, in these two plays, become players in give and take relationships, in which, as Michael Paller says, there is a private conflict between two polar opposites: ‘It’s the only thing in my life that I want to remember!’ versus ‘It’s not my fault!’” (Paller 83). Perhaps, Williams does this to suggest that the feelings surrounding these two types of guilt are the same, for in his plays the male comforter is always also the betrayer, the female preserver of truth is also the

resistance to it, and the relationship between the two is as horrifying as it is profound. By creating the images of Catherine/Marguerite and Sebastian/Lord Byron, images that parallel the opposite-sex counterparts and mimic their traits at different times in the plays, Williams allows for different images of the two personas to be seen alongside one another. Violet serves a purpose on an even higher level, bringing a mother-son relationship into the mix and creating a second source of muse that is as destructive where Catherine is creative and comforting where Catherine is betraying. Rose and Tennessee are all of these things: the comforter *and* the betrayed, the creator *and* the destroyer, the physically *and* the psychologically incomplete, the free *and* the captive. He and his sister, and these two recurring characters, represent aspects of *all* people. As Michael Paller states, having several images of Rose and several of Tom existing side by side, some of them positive and some of them not, could only have been possible with the presence *all* of the varying images alongside one another (86). In these plays, Rose and Tom are not limited to one place or time, but are everywhere and everything, mirroring each other so that each could share aspects of the other in a way that they no longer did in real life. Williams allowed the fragile female to fight in a way that she could not in real life by giving her the writer's courage and emotional range, and by giving the writer power over his family and vulnerability, Williams could protect his Rose and express his fears in a way that *he* could not in real life. Mrs. Venable could not "cut

this story out of [Catherine's] brain" as the doctors had done to Rose, because the reality of Sebastian's story was there to protect his cousin.

Tragically, in neither of these works can the male and female(s) share the same psychological space and so truly be together in the end, for Rose's story was cut out of her brain, and Tennessee could not face the remnants of mad Rose that he saw when he looked at himself in the mirror. It is as if, in these plays, both of these fictional recurring characters looked and the mirror and saw a stranger standing in his/her place, became frightened, and retreated on different paths. The two personas have not yet come to understand each other. However, as Williams' work progresses, they will learn to know each other as fully as they know themselves.

## CHAPTER 4

## THE MOURNING AND THE MAGIC

“Magic is the habit of our existence.”

-*Felice, Two-Character Play*

*Night of the Iguana*, written in 1964, was Williams' last critically successful play. It contains one of Williams' most striking fragile female personalities in the character of Hannah Jelkes, a young water-colorist who serves as caretaker to her grandfather Nonno, “the oldest living and practicing poet” (Vol. 4, 284).

Nonno and Hannah represent multiple and overlapping characteristics of the typical artist/female duo, but here, like in *Suddenly Last Summer*, their ages are different. Both Nonno *and* Hannah are artists. Both Hannah and Nonno are psychologically and physically incomplete; Nonno cannot use his legs and is almost completely deaf, and Hannah cannot feel or see the truth of their situation. Like Sebastian and Violet, the couple is traveling the world together. But Hannah and Nonno have a much more difficult time making their ends meet, especially because Nonno is in failing health.

*Night of the Iguana* deals with the healing power of creativity and the damaging, maddening downfall of the non-creator. Both Hannah and Nonno find

redemption in their art. It is the only thing that keeps Nonno alive. He has been writing his last poem for 20 year. When he finally completes his masterpiece, he has no more reason to live, and so he dies. His struggle to create this last poem is what sends the couple wandering the globe; it is the cause of their bankruptcy, their vagrant lifestyle, and of Nonno's delusion. But it is also freedom, as its completion allows him to leave behind his pain and suffering for a better place. Hannah sacrifices everything for Nonno and for the continuation of his art. In this way, the couple can be compared to Sebastian and Violet again, because in both circumstances the muse makes sacrifice so that the artist can create. Hannah sacrifices any possibility of a love life, her happiness, and even her body in order that she might continue supporting her poet grandfather. His creativity, then, and especially that last poem, is her personal demise. But, her own creativity (something we haven't seen with a muse before this) is her salvation. Hannah has endurance. She does whatever she can to keep on going—to help her grandfather, to sell her watercolors, and to live. As an artist, she wants to really see the people that she draws and connect with her own muses. "Most times," she says, "I do see something, and I catch it—*I can...*" (355). Her art is her means for understanding the world.

Thus, Hannah and Nonno both contain characteristics of both the artist *and* the fragile female. For Williams, this trend would be one that will be continued and further developed in the later plays. Though he and Rose could share very little after her operation, he always saw himself as very similar to her. This is why he so feared

his own descent into madness, and is perhaps his motivation for creating a reversibility of traits between his artists and fragile women. By overlapping characteristics of the writer and fragile female, and of himself and Rose, he could explore the fates of such personalities, discover their desires and fears, and bring to life their possibilities for connection and understanding.

In 1972, three years after having been committed to a mental hospital for several weeks at the demand of his brother Dakin, Williams wrote *Small Craft Warnings*, expanded from the one-act *Confessional* (1971). In it are a screenwriter, Quentin and an emotionally unstable woman, Violet. These are the next chronological appearances of the writer and fragile female characters in Williams' work. The relationship between Quentin and Violet is not fully developed in *Small Craft Warnings*, but they, like Catherine/Sebastian and Byron/Marguerite, exhibit many parallels and a reversibility of traits.

Violet is a weak and troubled woman who searches for God through sex. She finds spiritual salvation from her otherwise meaningless existence in the sexual male figure. Other characters in the play describe Violet as a water plant, an "amorphous" creature with a "not-quite-with it appearance . . . . Something more like a possibility than a completed creature" (Vol. 5, 226) and a "parasite creature, not even made out of flesh but out of wet biscuit dough, she always looks like the bones are dissolving in her" (235). She has no stability except for the temporary wholeness that she finds in sex, having lost any hope for a longer-lived happiness or security.

Like Catherine, Violet tries to defend her normality, shouting that she is “not depressed” when Leona accuses her. Like the other fragile women before her she hasn’t lost her will, and Violet is in a situation as desperate as any. Violet is so broken down by life, so incomplete, that she only hopes for temporary, small tastes of freedom brought in bed by a man—any man—who will take her.

Quentin, the screenwriter, similarly searches for God in sex, and doesn’t find it. He is described as having a quality of sexlessness, as he has participated in the homosexual scene so much that he has become immune to it (240, 261). He has lost the capacity for being surprised, having been broken down by the act of sex over and over again. Like Violet, he continues to search for the element of surprise through sexual prowess, for he believes that the capacity for being surprised is the one thing he cannot live without. This parallels Violet, too, for just as she has surrendered to “temporary arrangement,” Quentin has surrendered to meaningless sex in hopes of some small completion.

Quentin doesn’t seem to identify as a writer in the play as much as he does a gay man. He mentions that he writes screenplays, or, rather, that he puts touches of erotica in already written screen plays (Vol. 5, 256). Williams presents him more as a sexual figure than as a creative figure. He and Violet are both creative and destructive forces, trying to create small moments of tenderness and surprise, but failing miserably to do so. As a result, this play is much more depressing than the earlier ones containing the writer/fragile female relationship. The characters



exhibit less attractive qualities than those of the earlier plays, prompting the reader to, “accept the full range of human behavior” (O’Connor 103). Also, Quentin and Violet don’t ever interact in *Small Craft Warnings*. Like in *Camino Real*, the writer and the fragile female are in a sort of limbo space, but neither one psychologically escapes from it (though Quentin escapes physically). The two characters represent two downward spirals that parallel each other but never actually cross paths. As a result they cannot help each other, they cannot save each other—though they are like souls, they are completely alone.

Few parallels can be made between Violet and Rose, for Violet is all but void of emotion, and is very sexually active, whereas Rose was a virgin until her death (See Williams, *Memoirs*). Doc, an illegal abortion doctor and frequenter of the bar where the play is set, seems to be a lot more like Williams himself in personality and disposition. In fact, Williams’ played the role of Doc during the play’s off-Broadway in order to up ticket sales.

Still, the play serves as a heart-wrenching reminder of the hopelessness and anguish that Williams had felt over the past few years. His only long time lover, Frank Merlot, had died in 1963, sending Williams into a deep depression that lasted for over a decade. During that time, Williams suffered great blows from critics for plays such as *In the Bar of the Tokyo Hotel* (1969) and *Will Mr. Merriweather Return from Memphis?* (1969). To top it all, Williams was committed to a psychiatric ward in 1969 by his brother Dakin, against his will. He was abandoned by so many that he

loved and trusted. *Small Craft Warnings* was intended to pull him out of this rut, and though it did receive better praise than the plays from the previous few years, it was not near as successful as *Night of the Iguana* or *The Glass Menagerie* had been. The criticism that he received would only fuel Tennessee's dark fire, for next he would complete the play that he believed was his story, his "human outcry" (quoted in Devlin 255)

*The Two-Character Play* exists in three published drafts, *The Two-Character Play*, published in 1969, *Out Cry*, published in 1971, and *The Two-Character Play* again, published in 1973. These three plays are for the most part very similar, except for small dialogue changes, slight characterization alterations, and their endings. In all three, the only two characters present onstage are Felice and Clare, a brother and sister acting duo who at a young age witnessed their father kill their mother. The siblings suffer from mental problems, and are desperate to complete their self-written/self-performed play, also conveniently entitled *Two-Character Play*. *The Two-Character Play*, which Williams called his "a very personal play" and his "best play yet" (quoted in Devlin 255) is the story of a life of artistic creation, an expression of a fear of confinement, and a poignant portrait of a relationship between a sister and brother that know each other more than two real humans ever could.

Tennessee wrote his *Memoirs* while working on *Two-Character Play*. In the stream-of-conscious *Memoirs*, Rose evolves into as a sort of subconscious fixation, as

memories and thoughts of Rose populate Williams' mind as much or more than any other subject in the book. Tennessee confesses that looking back at the St. Louis years before Rose's lobotomy is difficult for him because he realizes in retrospection that he did not treat her well during that period (*Memoirs* 114-129). Tennessee describes in great detail memories of his and Rose's childhood together, reminisces their summers in St. Louis, and describes frightful days in the late 30s when he and she both realized that she was going mad. A good part of the book that is written about Williams' present day (in 1971) centers on Rose too, for in the later period of Tennessee's life the two spent a lot of time together; she would often leave her New York sanitarium, accompanied by nurses, to visit her brother in the city. Most of Tennessee's anecdotes about Rose in *Memoirs* are not sensationalized or sad, but rather, they express wonder, admiration, and profound affection for his sister. He seems fascinated by Rose, this creature whom he knows so well, but who knows him so very little. Of the 1943 lobotomy, Williams says the following:

I regard that as a tragically mistaken procedure, as I believe that without it Rose could have made a recovery and returned to what is called "normal life," which, despite its many assaults upon the vulnerable nature, is still preferable to an institution existence. (251)

"Confinement," Williams writes, "has always been the greatest dead of my life: that can be seen in my play *Out Cry*" (233). "What is it like being a writer?" he asks, supplying us with the answer, "I would say it is like being free. . . . It means freedom of being. And someone has widely observed, if you can't be yourself, what's the point of being anything at all?" (231). In these *Memoirs*, Williams presents the reader with

the notion that to him, writing is life. Writing is existence. Rose is beauty, supplying the color to his writing and to his life. She is the inspiration for stories, the will to keep him moving forward, and the source and recipient of the deepest love in his life (120). For Tennessee, Rose is a delicate muse, and one that, without a doubt, he will do everything in his power to help for the rest of his life.

*The Two-Character Play/Out Cry* deals with the two, interlocking forces that frame this investigation: the healing and escapist creative power, and the madness that befalls the non-creator. But, in the three versions of this work, madness and creation interact in a new way, as the two recurring personas share reversible traits and exist as one entity in world of opposing forces. R.B. Parker says the work is Williams' expression of his struggle between his "ambiguous, near-incestuous love for his schizophrenic sister, Rose; and his compulsive need for theatre as personal escape and therapy" (Parker 71). While he accurately identifies the two strongest forces that exist both in the play and in Williams' life, I would say that rather than representing a struggle, *The Two-Character Play* and its subsequent versions present the writer and fragile female characters as a singular combined power that is both mad and creative, preservative and destructive, male and female. Due to the formation of this singular force, finally, the two recurring characters can communicate with one another deeply, commune in the same psychological and physical space, and move towards a shared ending, rather than being separated. The writer Felice does not struggle between choosing creation *or* Clare—writing *or*

Rose—but rather, he is able to “out cry” because he finally has formed an unbreakable connection to his muse, who is literally a part of himself.

In *Two-Character Play*, Felice and Clare share a reversibility of identical traits throughout the course of the play. The two characters have androgynous names. Both suffer from an unnamed mental condition and from physical defects; Clare has constant headaches (this could be a metaphor for Rose’s “incomplete” mind) and Felice has a heart condition (interestingly Williams had heart palpitations). They have similar appearances—Clare notes that Felice’s hair has grown almost as long as her own and that he could pass for a woman (320). They even share the same pair of prescription eye glasses (320); they literally “see” the same.

Williams goes so far in his intertwinement of traits between the two characters as to create physical and psychological intimacy between the two, not as a literal suggestion of incest, but as a metaphor for their close understanding of each other. Williams says that the play has an element of *Leibestod*, or the consummation of erotic love in or after death, and in the realm mental and physical communication between Felice and Clare, the play is an erotically intimate exchange. The two characters touch one another with the suggestion of intimacy when talking about their deceased parents. They finish each other’s sentences and each always know what the other is thinking. They cannot be physically separated from one another without causing each other physical and mental pain (353). In a very interesting article about the psychological connotations of the play, Kalliopi Nikolopoulou,

states that in *Two-Character Play*, “. . . brother-sister incest becomes in Williams’ work a figuration of a profound psychic transaction through which two polar principles (gendered, or otherwise) interpenetrate to form a totality” (129). This intermingling and sharing of physical traits, feelings, and thoughts results in the formation of a single entity, through which the voices of the muse and writer become a unified, however volatile, unbreakable force. Brother and sister become one because of their metaphorically incestual connection.

A second important variable of this metaphorically sexual intimacy is that it is deviant because the two are brother and sister. Its unusual nature is the source of the absurdist-like language and plot of the play. To the outside world, and even to the reader at times, there is something wrong in the relationship that Felice and Clare share, and as a result, they are pulled away from society, existing completely alone onstage, within a language that is only understandable to themselves. This perceivably abnormal connection serves to intertwine the two to an even greater degree, as they form a “unified other.” Their world and their selves become other-ed by the space outside of their physical confinement and also by the audience watching the play.

That the play exists in two planes of reality blurs the distinctions between theatre and life; stage and home; horror and beauty; confinement and freedom; Tom and Rose. Whereas in the earlier plays there was always a world of harsh reality from which writer and fragile female had to escape, here, both reality and the

illusion are created by Felice and Clare, and the only possible existence is a world of magic. Horror and beauty exist alongside each other, and seem present in everything. Sometimes it is hard to tell what in the play is illusion and what is life, for all reality contains sunflowers and soap bubbles, and all lines of the play are as strange as Felice and Clare's everyday language. When Clare asks Felice if he hates her, he replies "... of *course* I do [hate you], if I love you, and I think that I do" (363). Even love cannot exist without its opposite force, hate. The multitude of binary oppositions in *The Two-Character Play*, which were in the earlier plays present within the writer and fragile female characters, are now transmuted and expanded to fill the world of *The Two-Character Play*. Now, neither Felice nor Clare is entirely bad or entirely good at any moment. In fact, they are at times very cruel to each other as much as they are kind and caring. Also, here, one character does not create a reaction in the other that sparks movement like in the earlier plays, for here they move together, in a world where art and life, inspiration and creation, exist as joint forces. They are the totality of two polar principles, as Nikilopoulou said, moving in a world of inverted frames (130). Madness is no longer a sacrifice of artistic creation, and artistic creation is no longer a salvation from the harsh cruel world. Work may keep Felice and Clare out of the asylum, but it does not make them sane.

The one large distinction between Felice and Clare that we can surmise is that Felice is the writer, resembling Tennessee, and that Clare is the fragile female

resembling Rose. Williams precludes his play with a line from *Song of Solomon*, 4:12, “A garden enclosed is my sister . . .” hinting that the play does contain her. If Felice is the artist, then Clare is the subject for his art—his muse. In her article “The Two-Character Out Cry and Break Out,” Felicia Londré dissects the different versions of *Two-Character Play*, ascertaining that *Out Cry* (the 1971 version) is more about the relationship of art and life than are the other versions. She states that:

If *Out Cry* is indeed about the concerns of the artist for his artistry—or, in other words, if it is an exemplar of the old dictum that “The subject of art is art”—one would have to signal Felice as representing the artist, the creative consciousness. His alter ego Clare is his art, so close as to be virtually inseparable from himself. Felice threatens to leave Clare and even makes the attempt but tells the audience: “Impossible without her. No I can’t leave her alone. I feel so exposed, so cold” (55). Shortly after she says: “Oh, what a long long way we’ve traveled together, too long, now, for separation” (59). Felice often refers to her beauty, her “face of an angel” (33, 48, 59) as if she were his muse. (103)

Though Williams said that his “cri de Coeur” (quoted in Devlin 239) was an inner conflict “transmuted into the predicament of a brother and sister,” it is undeniable that the predicament of brother and sister contains traces of he and his own muse, Rose. Felice cannot leave Clare the way that Tom left Laura, for here they are too interconnected to break apart. Both Felice and Clare make references to the long road they have traveled together, a road that could reference the long creative journey of Williams that includes his muse, or could reference the journey of the writer and fragile female across all of Williams’ work up to this point. Williams’ fragile female character has by this time in his work shared a profound range of



experiences with his own image, the writer, within the “garden enclosed” that is Tennessee’s plays. *The Two-Character Play* speaks to this range of experiences, this lifetime of interaction between two fictional characters who are the transmutation of Williams and his sister Rose in an alternate reality.

*The Two-Character Play* (1973) and *Out Cry* (1971) end differently, but in both endings the writer and fragile female find a way to escape reality hand-in-hand and live in an alternate reality, together. In the end of *The Two-Character Play*, Felice and Clare attempt to “get lost” in the warmth and sunflowers of Felice’s “Two Character Play,” in order to escape their dark and cold confinement in the theatre. In *Out Cry*, too, the two attempt to go back into the play, reaching such a point of involvement within the play that their “magic” becomes real to them. The acknowledge of a revolver in *The Two-Character Play* determines its ending. Felice and Clare attempt to shoot one another, but each admits, “I can’t!” Williams’ stage directions conclude *The Two-Character Play* as follows:

. . . . FELICE raises his eyes to watch the light fade from the face of his sister as it is fading from his: in both their faces is a tender admission of defeat. They reach out their hands lifting toward each other. As they slowly embrace, there is total dark . . . . (Vol. 5, 370)

If they were to kill each other, they would be admitting that their art could not save them. One would be taking responsibility over the other, and so power and action would not be shared the way it is through most of *The Two-Character Play*. They would also be without one another. In this ending, they accept a sort of defeat, in which they can be together. *Out Cry*, in my opinion, has a more poignant ending. The

revolver is not an option. Clare sees it, picks it up, gasps and drops it, and looks back to her brother (*Out Cry* 71). *Out Cry* ends as follows:

FELICE: Hurry it won't hold!

[*She crosses to him and touches his hand.*]

CLARE: —Magic is a habit.

[*They look slowly up at the sunflower projections.*]

FELICE: —Magic is the habit of our existence. . .

[*The lights fade, and they accept its fading, as a death, somehow transcended.*] (71-72)

Their magic allows them to go beyond death, hand in hand. In life, their creation of “Two-Character Play” is both their existence and their life’s blood. Their joint belief in their illusion and maintenance of it allows them to transcend together into another world where writer and muse will always be together, creating.

*The Two-Character Play/ Out Cry* was as much Tennessee’s life work as the play within the play is Felice’s. “I never stopped working on it,” said Williams (quoted in Devlin 239). Williams also said several times that the play was an expression of what he had gone through in the sixties, transmuted to this situation between a brother and sister (see Devlin). Many personal feelings are included in this play, and we know from *Memoirs* that Rose was an obsession that consumed his mind. Williams had fully realized at this point that Rose was lost to him forever, but in *The Two-Character Play*, he created a brother and sister, writer and muse, who

need each other, who have the capability to love each other, and who together create magic. In Williams' "human outcry" the relationship between writer and fragile female cannot be broken with any knife, person, or personal tragedy, for the two characters have formed an unbreakable bond within the playground of Williams' alternate reality, his work.

## CHAPTER 5

## MEMORIES AND MUSE

*She is living presence of truth and faith in my life...She is so beautiful. My grandmother, also named Rose, my other Rose, was beautiful too, while dying...Nobility of the two Roses. That is their beauty... But...I think the most important thing to me is the creative activity. And there is a fear that I will not work well, and there is the great joy at the same time when the work is starting and I am working well. Or, if not, at least when I am working and I have the end in sight I know where I am headed...*

*-Tennessee Williams, Notebooks*

During the last six years of his life, Williams' composed countless plays from a noticeably evolved perspective: that of a man knowing that he is approaching death. One of these, *Vieux Carré*, published in 1977, is next in the chronology of Williams' plays including his writer and fragile female character. In *Vieux Carré*, the autobiographical "Writer," a playwright on the verge of creative and sexual awakening, and Jane, a fragile, sickly woman, occupy the same boarding house at 722 Toulouse in the French Quarter. The play is a semi-fictional retelling of the events in Tennessee's life when he lived in the same boarding house in New Orleans in the late 1930s and early 1940s. "Once this house was alive," the Writer recalls, "it was occupied once. In my recollection it is still but by shadowy occupants like ghosts. Now they enter the lighter areas of my memory" (*Vieux Carré* 5). In *Vieux*

*Carré*, Williams creates a writer figure who is outside of time, who has the power to conjure his memories, and who can interact with those memories with a dual perspective: that of an old, bitter writer on the verge of death, and that of his younger, naïve self. This writer figure conjures the ghost muses of his past in order to get back in touch with them, including most prominently the young lady Jane with whom he shares an almost spiritual connection.

Jane shares the broken and gallant qualities of Williams' fragile female character. An elegant but extremely ill woman from New York, she lives in the boarding house with her lazy, stripper boyfriend. She suffers from a blood condition we can assume is leukemia or severe anemia. Jane has all but given up on happiness. "No, I've stopped thinking," she says to the landlady, "Just let things happen to me" (10). Jane is an illustrator of women's fashion, and her attitude towards her artistry is much like Tennessee's response at this time in his life to his critics. "They're no good, I'm no good, I just had a flair, not a talent, and the flair flared out, I'm . . . finished" (84).

Like Felice and Clare, Jane and the Writer share a reversibility of traits. The writer too is physically debilitated—one of his eyes has a cataract (which Williams actually had) and several characters refer to him as "one-eye." The Writer feels discouraged about his art, and regards it with the bitterness of an older Williams' rather than a hopeful young Tennessee. Both characters are discarded by that which they need. In one scene, the Writer receives a rejection letter from a publisher and

Jane receives a note from Oschner's clinic telling her that her condition has worsened. Of it, she says, "'Let's just say it was a sort of a personal, signed rejection slip, too," she says (54). Jane's lover's name is Tye, and the Writer's free-spirited friend with whom he departs at the end of the play is called "Sky," not an accidental parallel on Williams' part. Tye and Sky offer Jane and the Writer, separately, a glimpse of reality, tenderness, and sensual joy. The comforting vision of the angel in the alcove is seen by the writer in times of desperation, but at Jane's lowest and most sexually degrading point in the play, she seems to see her, too (99-100). Thus the Writer and Jane are two almost identical characters, traveling across the same arc, with a reversibility of traits that serve to draw parallels between the artist and the muse, suggesting that the creator and his inspiration are not so separate.

Jane and the Writer share a spiritual understanding as a result of their parallel traits that neither of them has with anyone else in the play. In *Vieux Carré*, the writer and the fragile female can only find emotional solace in the company, conversation, and observation of one another. Both Jane and the Writer are very shy and timid, but when they are together, they seem to have known each other in a different life. Because they are so similar, each can recognize their own personal traits in the other and help him/her along. For instance, the Writer assures Jane that Tye meant nothing by whistling as he left her for good, and Jane convinces the Writer that he needs to leave with Sky. They understand one another's need to escape from where they are, the feeling of non-physical loneliness, and they both

realize that “Time. Means. Luck,” these are “Things that expire, run out. And all at once you’re stranded” (82). Both are hopelessly lonely, and yet, for a few months in the Vieux Carré, they share coffee, chess, and the communion of the like-hearted, the weak and the fragile.

That *Vieux Carré* is written from the perspective of an older Tennessee Williams tempers the play with Tennessee’s younger and older experiences, giving the writer character a lost sense of self which he can only overcome by getting in touch with the ghosts of his past. This dual existence of the Writer makes the characters more exaggerated, as they are memories, not real, living people. It also makes the other characters have more of a sense of the future; they share premonitions with the Writer and tell him what they think his life will turn out to be. The dying painter, Nightingale, says to the Writer “You know, you’re going to grow into a selfish, callous man. Returning no visits, reciprocating no...caring” (50). Jane might have been a real person that Williams knew in New Orleans, but she also seems to be an image of his sister, and can exist because the play is outside of time; what Williams’ conjures is a collection of figments from his memory and his imagination—they may not be real in life but they are real to his experience as a writer. At the end of *Vieux Carré*, a song plays with the lyrics “Makes no difference how things break, I’ll still get by somehow; I’m not sorry, cause it makes no difference now” (113). For Williams, the years in which he wrote these last few plays was void of critical success and compassion from his critics. There was, as we

see in the Writer, a lost sense of self. Williams' wrote this play in an attempt to find the sense of self that he had first developed in New Orleans, to remember the inspiration of his muses, and with their guidance, to move forward with his work.

*Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, published in 1980, is the semi-fictional retelling of the lives of F. Scott Fitzgerald and his mad wife, Zelda. This is the most violent and volatile relationship between a writer and a fragile female in the canon thus far, and in many respects, doesn't belong in this grouping because it is based on the lives of Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, not Tennessee and Rose. However, there emerges from the play an interesting theme about the nature of artistic inspiration and muse that contribute insights into this examination.

In most of *Clothes*, Zelda resides in a sanitarium, where she was sent by her husband Scott, making her the only female in the canon other than Catherine who shares the same physical space as Rose. This is about the only similarity that she shares with Rose or any other "fragile" female, however, as she is coarse and violent, angry and manipulative. Zelda believes that Scott is appropriating her life as material for his writing, because his female characters are so strongly made. She isn't the only one that sees a stark resemblance between herself and Daisy, herself and Nicole, and others. Hemingway, another character in the play based on real life, says to Scott "You know as well as I know that every goddam character an honest writer creates is part of himself. Don't you -Well *don't* you?" (Vol. 8, 269).

Hemingway admits that this personal appropriation is the nature of writing. "Scott,



it's my profession to observe and interpret all kinds of human relations. . . . Maybe it's rough, this commitment, but we honor it with each truth as we observe it and interpret it" (271). But Scott refuses to admit that he is using Zelda. He suffers from alcoholism, and is focused solely on finishing his work. He sees little truth in the real world; his sense of reality resides in the books he writes. In their last poignant scene together, Zelda pleads with Scott:

The incredible things are the only true things, Scott. Why do you have to go mad to make a discovery as simple as that? . . . The mad are not so gullible. We're not taken in by such a transparent falsity, oh, no, what we know that you don't know or don't dare admit that you know is that to exist is the original and greatest of incredible things. Between the first wail of an infant and the last gasp of the dying—it's all an arranged pattern of—submission to what's been prescribed for us unless we escape into madness or into acts of creation. . . . The latter option was denied me, Scott, by someone not a thousand miles from here. Look at what was left me! (274)

Again we see this idea that fragile people either go mad or create. They cannot be both, they must be one or the other: a mad person, or an artist. This passage also suggests that it is possible that the writer is unaware of the source of his inspirations, and that the mad, if they cannot create, often end up serving as that inspiration.

In *Vieux Carré* and *Clothes*, Williams' seems to have developed bitterness towards the living, a sort of idealist grandeur for what "used to be," and a submission into a world that is incredibly lonely. As Zelda and Scott part ways at the end of the play, she screams out, "I'm not your book! Anymore! *I can't be your book anymore! Write yourself a new book!*" (280) The muse and the creator are eternally

tied to one another in a bond that cannot be broken, and, even more interestingly, the muse is untenably tied to the creation of the creator. Zelda believes that she no more exists outside of Scott's fictional literature than she exists outside the walls of her confinement. Her life is his book—his life's work—and she is more existent to him within its imaginary pages than she is in reality.

In 1981, Williams finished *The Notebook of Trigorin*, a loose adaptation of Anton Chekhov's *The Seagull*, in which Trigorin, the aging writer, is now the center of the story. In *The Notebook of Trigorin*, Nina is much stronger than the original Nina of Chekhov's version. She is also much stronger than Rose. Her lover, the stoic Trigorin, acts as a sort of fatherly advisor to the young Konstantin, and the two seem almost to be the same person at different periods of life. This is a theme that arises often in the latter plays—that an older writer gives advice to his younger self and comments on his younger self's actions, though usually the older and younger self is not broken into two characters. Trigorin, like Zelda, believes that a writer needs “both sexes” in order to write characters of both sexes (*Trigorin* 44), another recurring theme in these later plays. In all, this “fusion” of adaptation and interpretation (Hale xx) is a beautiful play about the growth of the young artist and the recession of the elderly one.

*Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), Williams' last produced play, is one of the most significant works in this investigation, due to its creation of a mythological playground in which Tennessee and Rose could share a life together in

a way that they could not in life, and in which Tennessee could revisit memories of his pre-lobotomy sister while fusing them with a fictional version of an older, healthy sister. Like in *Vieux Carré*, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, and *The Notebook of Trigorin*, the writer figure in *Something Cloudy* is given a perspective through which he can observe his younger self. But here, in the last play, there is a sentimentality in the writer, sweetness in the fragile female, and a sense of completeness in their relationship that is not felt anywhere else in Williams' work. In *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear*, perhaps Williams' most autobiographical play, Williams makes himself and Rose, a fictionally existent and fully-formed companion, eternal.

In *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear*, Williams revisits his memories and his muses through the older perspective of a dying man, as he did in *Vieux Carré*, in order to not only get back in touch with his muses, but mend his relationships with them and make them live on. In his article "Memories and Muses: *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear*," Bruce Mann states that for this older narrator figure:

Revisiting the muses is difficult. These ghostly, dying figures no longer inspire him in the same way but instead remind him of disturbing things, such as how badly he behaved toward them in life, how he has lost his creative powers, and how close he is to death. (140)

For the Writer in the dark *Vieux Carré*, this is true. But in *Something Cloudy*, *Something Clear*, I would suggest that the muses don't serve to remind the older Williams solely of the bad things. These plays also allow Williams' fictional self, August, to interact with his memories in a more sensational way. When Williams'

star actress Tallulah Bankhead, dead lover Frank Merlot, and childhood crush Hazel appear on the sand dunes, Williams' wants something from them. He confronts each with a situation that happened in real life, in order to try and fix it for himself and in order to say what he couldn't say to his companions in real life. His two companions that stay with him through the whole play, August and Kip, also serve as incomplete memories that Williams needs to complete. But he doesn't just manipulate them to fit his needs—they, especially Clare, try to "fix" August in return.

August and Clare share qualities of the writer and fragile female characters that came before them, but have a maturity and a solidity to them that the others lack. They, like the other couples, are only partially complete, physically: Clare has diabetes, only half a working kidney (*Something* 54) and August only has one working eye due to a cataract (like the Writer of *Vieux Carre*). Their relationship is complicated; Clare is trying to get August to become the caretaker of her "brother" Kip because she knows that she is dying and cannot fulfill her duties to her brother alone. Clare pushes August to keep writing, scolding him, "you've got to get off the frame, now and into the picture" (28). Clare acts as a conscience to August, motivating him in his work, reminding him not to get tiresome, helping him deal with his feelings for Kip, and guiding him to treat Kip well. August makes "concessions" for his art; he needs money and so will sacrifice the quality of his work in order to get a check. Clare doesn't want him to make those concessions because she sees the intangible significance of his art. She is his moral guidance.

August is far from a positive portrayal of Williams—he is driven by sex and is even cruel at times, but what he lacks in kindness he makes up for in wisdom.

Both August and Clare are aware of the past and future, creating two frames of reality like in *Two Character Play*. However, in *Something Cloudy* the frames do not collide, but sit beside each other helping the characters to come to terms with reality. In *Two Character Play* the memories of Felice and Clare haunt the two characters. In *Something Cloudy*, the memories of August and Clare serve as sweet reminders of summers past when life wasn't so complicated, of mistakes made, but also of love shared. There are many changes within the dialogue from the past to the future, such as the following:

CLARE: You have a strange voice.

AUGUST: Are you sure you can hear it?

*(He is winding up the portable phonograph.)*

CLARE: It isn't as clear as it was that summer.

AUGUST: Forty years ago, Clare.

CLARE: I feel light headed. Is it déjà vu? (34)

Their awareness of what is going to happen in the future makes their memories that make up the play more significant and more shared, for we know, and they both know, that their situation is only temporary. Clare says that she will die next year, and August will move on to another place, but here in the play, they are together for a few moments.

Summer had a deep significance for Tennessee, as a time of sexual awakening (with the real Kip, one summer in his past), and as a time of magical play with Rose. In the summer forty years before Williams wrote *Something Cloudy*, he was living in the dunes in Mexico and traveling around the gulf area frequently. Rose was not physically present with him during this time, but she was with Williams during every one of his summers up until 1939. In Williams' *Memoirs* and *Notebooks* he reveals many of these summers (See *Memoirs* and *Notebooks*).

Thus, the title "Something Cloudy, Something Clear" is significant on several levels, as Williams separates the play into two different frames through which to view his past. On the most basic level, "something cloudy" refers to August's bad eye, while "something clear" refers to the good one. Williams, too, suffered from a cataract for which he underwent several surgeries. August's "clear" eye is the eye through which he sees Clare, truth, beauty, and love; his "cloudy" eye is the one through which he views his failing work, sex, money, and Kip, who is interestingly a much less developed character than Clare. "Something cloudy" also refers to August's view of the future (Williams' present day), in which he is melancholy, bitter, and confused, while his view of the past and the kinder people in it is "clear." On an even deeper level, the play tells the story of two different passages into adulthood, the "clear" one that Williams had as he ventured into success as a writer, and the "cloudy" one that he experienced at the time he was writing the play, as he makes the journey to his death. Even the stories of Kip and Clare represent a

contrast, for in the play, Williams is really writing not about one summer, but a metaphorical time of awakening, at one time shared with his sister Rose, and at another time shared with a lover, Kip. Everything in the play has what its first director, Eve Adamson called “double exposure,” in which these two frames are present but we see all things through both frames (quoted in Fisher 204). Because of this double exposure, Williams succeeds in “exploding time” (quoted in Fisher 204), making himself, as August, the “puppet master” of his life, outside of time in a way that no other writer figure was, and creating a sense of awareness over past and present in which the fictional Williams can do anything that he wants. “Life is all,” August says, “it’s just one time. It finally seems to all occur at one time” (59). Finally, Williams had created a world in which past and present happened both before the lobotomy and after it, where all life occurred in the moments of a play, and where anything was possible.

This work is truly an accumulation of all that Williams was working towards and all that he had struggled against. It is located in a place that exists in the now but includes the past, in which he and his Rose could be together as they had been before the lobotomy, right now. The play ends with an incredibly moving scene, in which August, Kip, and Clare share a picnic on the beach. August names Clare the “Queen of the Fireflies” (81), perhaps because little Tom Williams and his sister Rose chased fireflies, a past time that he recalled in his personal writings (*Memoirs* 87). August and Kip marvel at humble, gallant Clare:

KIP: How beautiful she is, the Queen of the Fireflies. It's dark now, it's time for her to shine.

AUGUST: When did she ever stop shining? Like the sky on the sea.  
(84)

This last scene with wine and bread shared between three close friends is a sort of communion between Williams and the people he loved most. To him, Rose never stopped being beautiful, and remained the “living presence of truth and faith” in his life until the day he died. To the real world, she was lost, but in his memory and with the power of his own magic, Williams’ made his sister shine.

In reality, Tennessee never could have shared this meeting of the souls. As Williams grew older he became so involved in his work that he felt increasingly separated from other people. Williams lived for his work. He sacrificed his relationships to his family for his art. In this last communion on the beach, however, Williams is reunited with the familial, the only source of true love he ever felt. In the last moments of the play, Kip leaves the beach and August and Clare are left alone with the stars. She warns him jokingly that his “little bits of romantic excess” will get him in trouble someday (83). Williams ends the play talking with delicate Rose, the muse whose significance had formed his life’s work. In this, his last work, there is something clear; the fragile female is a fully functioning, human being, who can communicate with the artist, share the same space with the artist, and help the artist to create. She has become a thing as palpable as you or I in these plays. “Brother” and “sister” exchange their last words:



AUGUST: That long ago summer in the shack on the dunes.

CLARE: I'll leave you to that secret reference for tomorrow.

AUGUST: Poising forever—the human equation—against the age and magnitude of a universe of—stars. . . The lovely ones, youthfully departed long ago. But look (*he points*) very clearly here, here while this memory lives, the lovely ones remain here, undisfigured, uncorrupted by the years that have removed me from their summer.  
(85)

The lovely ones remain, “undisfigured, uncorrupted” in a place that they—that Rose and Tom—can never be harmed. In *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, Williams has created a place for their memories, a place for the love that was the deepest in their lives, a place for them to both argue and protect one another, tease and to tell one another secrets, and a place of safety and comfort that no knife could cut and no theatre critic could cut down (See *Wounded Genius*). This is the resting place of two characters that grew into life decades earlier, and who, through the creative and personal struggle of a true artist, could finally be at home.

## CHAPTER 6

### AN UNTENABLE BOND

In this study, I have examined the two greatest forces in the life of playwright Tennessee Williams: writing and his sister Rose. Rose Williams received a lobotomy in 1943 and fell into an emotionless existence where she would remain for the rest of her life. Specifically, I was interested in the appearance and progression of the male writer figure and fragile female as they appeared in Williams' plays. I examined each of the plays in the Williams' cannon that involved a relationship between a male writer and a fragile female. I held the themes and characteristics of these plays up to the events of Williams' life. Finally, I tracked the progression of the two recurring characters and their relationship over the course of Tennessee Williams' life work.

Through this investigation, I found that in creating the writer and fragile female, Williams created a space where he and his sister were able to flourish fictionally in a way that it never could in real life. If these plays are put together to form a through-line of Williams' autobiographical work, we see that in his early years as a writer, Williams expressed his own emotional turmoil over his sister Rose's condition and his own guilt in leaving her by creating a writer character and

a fragile female character within two separate halves of a binary opposition, In the plays *The Long Goodbye* (1940) and *The Glass Menagerie* (1943), these two personas could not share the same fate, world, or qualities, because their real-life counterparts were separated psychologically and physically. As we move chronologically through the plays of Williams in which these two characters appear, we see that they begin to share almost identical traits (*Camino Real* in 1953 and *Suddenly Last Summer* in 1958). A reversibility of traits grows between the writer and the fragile female as they are situated on two halves of a binary mirror, with one distinct difference: their fates. Sister and brother, writer and fragile female, do exist in the same, confined world, but whereas the female remains permanently trapped, the writer is given a chance to escape through his creation. In *The Two-Character Play* (1973) and its alternate versions, the traits between the writer and the fragile female are so reversible and their relationship is so physically and psychologically intimate that they literally interpenetrate to form a single character, able to create, live, and free both sister and brother from a cruel and harsh world. In two of Williams' final works, *Vieux Carré* (1977) and *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), Williams allows the writer to confront the fragile female through memory. In his last produced work, *Something Cloudy, Something Clear*, these two characters have evolved into magnificent and complex creations, who can, unlike Williams' and Rose in real life, share the same space, communicate on an emotional level, and love one another. This analysis explores connections between Williams' life and his life's

work, revealing significant discoveries about one of America's greatest storytellers and the stories he told.

The two most influential forces in Tennessee Williams' life were his writing and his sister Rose. However, I would ascertain that these two things are not altogether separate entities. Rose was lost to Tom before he turned 32, but in his life's work, he made Rose a fully functioning human being. Her legacy in his writing is unmatched by any other in his writing. She is perhaps the strongest female force in the work of any Western writer, along with the Dark Lady of Shakespeare's sonnets. In Tennessee's life and work, Rose and writing form an untenable bind, through which Tennessee expressed the "emotional currents" of his life and created an eternal bond between a brother and sister who loved each other more than the world ever could.

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This critical bibliography is the most recent and up to date in existence, and will be useful in locating additional sources for research. It includes a paper by Adler, documenting the important events of Williams' life, including the productions of his plays and his life occurrences involving the second figure of my research, his sister, Rose, which will serve as a frame of reference for my research.

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This critical companion includes summaries of most of the Williams' cannon, which will serve as a constant reference during my analysis.

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This research oriented, comprehensive bibliography is dedicated solely to Williams. It has been extremely useful to me not only in its documentation of all of

the works written on and by Williams, but in its categorization of what Kolin calls the eight major areas of Williams research. It includes the insights of leading scholars into the plays, including artist-scholars who have worked on productions of the plays as directors, actors, etcetera. It includes several samples and critiques of different areas of Williams' research, including those that surfaced in the 90's that are extremely pertinent to my project about his private life. The book is separated into chapters, and each one is dedicated to a major Williams play.

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**Books:**

*Remember Me to Tom.* By Edwina Dakin Williams, Walter Dakin Williams, and Lucy Freeman. New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1963.

This is the personal memoir of Edwina Dakin Williams', mother of Tennessee. It's an excellent reference to his younger years and provides insightful information into Rose's lobotomy, Rose and Tom's relationship, and Tom's desire to write that cannot be found anywhere else.

*The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume 1.* Ed. Albert J. Devlin. University of the South Press: Tewanee, AL, 2000. Print.

This collection of Williams' letters, the first of a two volume set, includes correspondences between Williams and his mother, his brother, his father, his grandfather, and even Rose. It includes the letters between he and his mother discussing Rose's lobotomy, and examples of the way that Williams interacted with his sister. This will be useful in examining the relationship of Williams and his sister

from several different angles, and offers raw, close insight into the heart and mind of Williams.

*The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams, Volume 2.* Ed. Albert J. Devlin. University of the South Press: Tewanee, AL, 2000. Print.

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Williams' autobiography offers insight into the relationship between Williams and his sister, her effect on his life, his guilt over her condition, and his fear



of becoming like Rose. This work will be part of the lens through which I analyze Williams' work, and a frame of reference for his own views of life and art.

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This publication is a collection of all of the diary entries Williams made between his early college days and the time of his death. This source offers profound insight into Williams' personality, fears, loves, hopes, cares, and dreams. His entries about Rose, his mention of her presence in his work, his self-written epitaphs thanking her for her influence—all of these are incredibly influential to answering my research questions.

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This is a collection of television, radio, and print interviews done with Williams, spanning over the entire course of his career. In these interviews, Williams reveals information about his life and art that he did not reveal in any other setting. Many of these interviews concern his insight into his own work, crucial to my investigation. They also give the reader a taste of Williams character, also extremely important to my project.

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Bissiri, Amadou. *The artist-figure in Tennessee Williams' later plays: A contextual approach*. Diss. Boston University, 1996. Dissertations & Theses: A&I, ProQuest. Web. 27 Sep. 2009. Print.

This dissertation explores the artist-figure in Williams' plays, post 1969. It deals with several of the plays that I will be grappling with, clearly and comprehensively examining the artist-figure and the autobiographical nature that they embody. This will prove a useful tool in my examination of the "writer-figure" in Williams' work. It does not include an investigation of the "Rose" characters.

Hitchcock, Francesca Marie Oglesby. *In search of Brother Adam and Sister Eve: The quest for the androgynous ideal in the works of Tennessee Williams*. Diss. The University of Alabama, 1993. Dissertations & Theses: A&I, ProQuest. Web. 27 Sep. 2009. Print.

This dissertation argues that Williams' relationship to Rose was the most pertinent in his life, and that much of his work was an attempt to return to the "oneness" and Southern mythos that he shared with her. Furthermore, Hitchcock suggests that the male-female pairings of brothers and sisters in the Williams canon are an attempt at creating androgyny, a search for "psychic wholeness" on the part Williams. Though it does not specifically explore the writer figure, this research is



pertinent to my exploration of brother-sister relationships and of their connotations to Williams' life.

**Films:**

*Tennessee Williams: Wounded Genius.* A&E Biography Series: A&E Home Video, 2005. Video.

This powerful film is a narrated, comprehensive biography of the life and art of Williams, including interviews from both his early and latter careers, pictures from his childhood and throughout his life, and readings of portions of his plays, letters, and diaries. It attempts to suggest that Rose and “the critics” played the two strongest forces in his life, and that the critics were what ultimately destroyed him, while Rose acted as his “soul mate” and savior. It is deeply moving, and will serve as an *emotional* frame of reference for my project, as well as giving it some real *meat*. Watching Williams talk about Rose (which happens in the video) and seeing these hundreds of pictures, etcetera offers inspiration and grounded reality to my studies.