



**UNIVERSITI PUTRA MALAYSIA**

**OBJECT RELATION PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM ON SELECTED  
WORKS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

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**OBJECT RELATION PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM ON SELECTED  
WORKS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

**By**

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**Thesis Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies, Universiti Putra Malaysia, in  
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**October 2008**

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This study uses the object relation psychoanalytical theory to investigate personality development of the characters in Tennessee Williams's selected plays *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*. It unveils how the characters relate with their environment and in cases when they fail to do so, how they escape from the anxieties and fears of annihilation.

Since the autobiographical style is dominant in Tennessee Williams's works, this research probes into the Williams's personal life in order to find out the relations between the playwright's life and his works. It attempts to clarify and explicate the meaning and effect of Williams's life experiences, using Melanie Klein's and D.W. Winnicott's theory of object relation on his selected works. Tennessee Williams experienced losing loved object in his life, and consequently tried for reparation. He had



a sense of dependency and guilt through out his life as evidenced by the way he responded to life's events and the works he created.

This study seeks to depict how life is handled from childhood and how the mother plays crucial role in personality shaping. The research gives the reader a new understanding of personalities and the relationships between the individuals and their environment.

Loss and unsuccessful reparation, which result in loneliness, anxiety, mourning, melancholia and also dependency, caused by false self and not good-enough mothering, are the major concepts of object relation theory that this study looks into.



Abstrak tesis yang dikemukakan kepada Senat Universiti Putra Malaysia sebagai memenuhi keperluan untuk ijazah Master Sastera

**KRITIKAN PSIKOANALISIS PERHUBUNGAN OBJEK BAGI KARYA  
TERPILIH TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

Oleh

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**Oktober 2008**

**Pengerusi : Professor Madia Rosli Talif, PhD**

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Kajian ini mengaplikasikan teori psikoanalisis perhubungan objek untuk menyiasat perkembangan keperibadian watak-watak dalam drama-drama terpilih iaitu *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* dan *Sweet Bird of Youth* hasil karya Tennessee Williams. Ia mengisahkan bagaimana watak-watak tersebut berhubungan dengan persekitaran mereka dan jika mereka gagal, bagaimana mereka melepaskan diri daripada kebimbangan dan ketakutan akibat kemusnahan.

Oleh kerana gaya autobiografi amat ketara dalam hasil-hasil karya Tennessee Williams, kajian ini meneliti kehidupan peribadi Tennessee Williams untuk mengetahui perkaitan antara kehidupan beliau dengan hasil-hasil karyanya. Tesis ini cuba menjelaskan dan



menerangkan maksud dan kesan pengalaman hidup Tennessee Williams terhadap hasil-hasil karyanya yang dipilih melalui teori perhubungan objek yang diperkenalkan oleh Melanie Klein dan D.W. Winnicott. Tennessee Williams pernah mengalami kehilangan objek kesayangannya dan cuba untuk mendapatkan gantirugi. Semenjak itu, beliau berasa bersalah dan mengalami kesan kebergantungan sepanjang hidupnya seperti yang terbukti dalam cara beliau memberi respons kepada peristiwa dalam kehidupannya dan hasil-hasil karya yang dicipta.

Kajian ini mencuba untuk menggambarkan bagaimana kehidupan sejak kecil dikendalikan dan bagaimana seorang ibu memainkan peranan yang penting dalam pembentukan sahsiah.

Kehilangan dan pemulihan yang gagal mengakibatkan kesunyian, kebimbangan, dukacita, melancholia dan kebergantungan yang disebabkan oleh diri maya dan sumbangan ibu yang tidak mencukupi, merupakan konsep penting dalam kajian teori perhubungan objek ini.

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Sincerely

Shadi Shakouri



This was thesis submitted to the Senate of Universiti Putra Malaysia and has been accepted as fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art. Members of the Supervisory Committee were follows:

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Date: 12 February 2009





## DECLARATION

I declare that the thesis is my original work except for quotations and citations which have been duly acknowledged. I also declare that it has not been previously, and is not concurrently, submitted for any other degree at Universiti Putra Malaysia or at any other institution.

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Shadi Shakouri  
Date: 20.06.2008



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*'When you're in love you're a master  
Of all you survey, you're a gay Santa Clouse.  
There's a great big star-spangled sky up above you,  
When you're in love you're a hero ....'*

*(Williams, The Sweet Bird of Youth 77)*



## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams or Thomas Lainer Williams was born in 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, the United State of America. He was an obsessive worker, a hypochondriac, a habitual swimmer and an amateur painter. He was a multi millionaire and loved to be a frequent traveler and aspired to write and travel.

Tennessee Williams is one of the most significant American playwrights who was living in the twentieth century during the modernism era and the World Wars and also the Vietnam war. The effects of wars on American life style and culture were obvious. And surely Tennessee Williams was not out of the stream of war as Boxil refers, “the war in Vietnam had exploded the illusion of American innocence, [and] in the tide of woman’s Liberation and Gay Liberation, Williams’s plays which had derived much of their dramatic tension from female dependency and homosexual guilt, began to look dated” (18). It was the decade of the war and its aftermath; the former characterized by fear of death, the latter by fear of the bomb and of the government. Tennessee Williams created his characters in such area; they are not satisfied with the changes of their social life. The world in which his characters live, move and breathe is unmistakably the United State of the 1930s. Eisinger claims, “[...] increasing dehumanization [of wars] finds reflection in the literature and the art of the period, with their theme of “the quest for identity” and “the alienation of man from self and from society” (Adler, *The Moth and Lantern* 2). Eisinger adds, “The shifts in social class and status resulting from the new



deal of thirties and the wartime economy of the forties caused many people to feel a sense of dislocation. Their resulting search for belonging and connection led them to look to the past to discover some stability” (Adler, *The Moth and Lantern* 2).

The effects of war on the American society and social class shifting which caused dislocation and loss of the American identity are evident in Tennessee Williams’s works. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Chance in *The Sweet Bird of Youth* are Williams’s tropes of people in or after wartime who need to move into the present reality and to find what they think they have lost from their glorious past. Adler points out, “*A Streetcar Named Desire* examines post-World War II America and as the time of *Menagerie* proceeds to Chamberlain and the Munich Pact, and the rest of the world was waiting for bombardments, Americans were still escaping reality through dance halls and bars, movies and sex” (*The Moth and Lantern* 3).

The effect of war is explicit in Tennessee Williams’s mentioned plays. He was an outstanding playwright of the post war period and his works reflect socially dominated themes during that time such as isolation, alienation, and lost identity. Tennessee Williams creates ambiguity only in the multiple renderings of such words like reality, desire, and illusion. He tries to help readers to understand the complexities of human conditions especially from the psychological aspects. Akinson mentions that, “Williams’s characters try to escape from the loneliness of their lives into some form of understanding, the truth invariably terrorizes them” (10). Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Princess in *Sweet Bird of Youth* are looking into and also living in their past and their illusions. Through Tennessee



Williams's plays the theme of illusion and reality is mixed with the theme of past and present. More description is available in chapter 3.

Tennessee Williams's diction and language in writing his plays are powerful; his prose is colorful and imaginative. Bradley describes that, "his works express truth and sincerity on a stage in which the home, the site of dialogic bonding, had virtually collapsed" (53). He had been winning prizes for various types of writing. He received the Pulitzer Prize for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams followed the success with writing *Sweet Bird of Youth* which opened on Broadway. *Sweet Bird of Youth* was an overwhelming success and proved to be the most substantial triumph for the playwright.

Another of Tennessee Williams's characteristic is his special attention to his hometown and its impact on his works. Certainly Tennessee Williams is the most prominent American Southern Dramatists of his time who helped transform the contemporary idea of Southern literature not only to pave the way for others but also to help the South find a strong voice in those auspices where it had only been heard a whisper. In most plays, Tennessee Williams uses the addresses and places of his Southern hometown. After moving his family from Episcopal home in the South to St. Louis, Rose his older sister who was his beloved too, began to cease to develop as a person and fail to cross over the barrier from childhood to adulthood. This matter anguished him all his life. The effects of Tennessee Williams's personal life experiences are obvious in most of his plays.

Tennessee Williams was not only a playwright but also a poet, fiction writer and an artist. His poems and nearly all his fictions are short and most of his plays are short too.





Rathbun says that, “his technique has not always been appreciated, but he has created an interest in theater to accept the works of other new avant-garde school of play writing” (17). Because of his plays, he has had a very special influence on theater too: Rathbun confirms that, “the American theater has a great deal to be thankful for in the works of Tennessee Williams” (17). Tennessee Williams also always focuses on time; the theme of time in most of his dramas and the fear of its loss is always unique in his plays. Boxill refers to Williams’s special attention to ‘Time’ and says, “the past was far from ideal when it was the present, a point that Williams often makes by showing the pathetic delusions of his nostalgic characters” (5).

His play's premise is unique and it is not a re-hashed drama. Kerkhoffs claims that, “audiences go to his plays not to be shocked but to see the playwright's sympathetic portrayal of characters whose fears and loneliness reflect their own” (4). In fact his plays frequently deal with complex relationship, neurosis, psychological disintegration, clashes and conflicts. Williams pays special attention to create characters that are very neurotic and frustrated. They seem frequently to be depressed, fractured and unsecured; without intimate connection to other people and their environment. Tennessee Williams, whose imagination was fired by writers like Anton Chekhov and D.H. Lawrence, purposely used the psychological elements of personality to create some characters that are reminiscent of some members of his own family. For example the mother, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, share similar traits with Tennessee Williams’s mother. Similarly Laura Wingfield, a pretty crippled shy girl, is very similar to Williams’s sister Rose, who was lobotomized and mentally ill and who spent most of her life in mental hospitals. Tennessee Williams in all of his life felt guilty for leaving his ill



sister alone like what Tom the narrator and character of *The Glass Menagerie* did to his mother and his crippled sister. It was a sense of guilt that Tennessee Williams could not leave aside and he put in most of his works. Alder states that:

within *The Glass Menagerie*, [...] a guilt play structured in which a narrator/central character attempts to come to terms with having followed the imperative of individuating himself as a man and developing himself as an artist over his responsibility to care for his sister and mother (*The Moth and Lantern* 3).

Tennessee Williams's unique dramas involve his emotionally biographical themes of sexual orientation, disaffection, dependency, lost and difficulty in maintaining intimate relationship. He delicately portrays his major characters with great sympathy; they are at the same time fragile and strong, attractive and repulsive. These qualities could be found in Amanda, Tom, Laura, Blanche, Chance, and other characters. His readers feel a sense of doom, frustration and insecurity through these characters. At the end of the plays, they all became losers. They lost their idealized objects, love, youth, beauty or properties and their struggle to overturn it, is ineffective.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Those who intend to specialize in literature need to know the relationship between literature and psychoanalysis. Winnicott confirms that, "the area of individual development and experience seems to have been neglected while in literature nowadays most attention was focused on psychic reality, which is personal and inner" (*Playing and Reality* xv). In the development of an individual, the infantile period is the basic element of shaping one's personality. Psychoanalysis helps to uncover some realities which are



hidden in the layers of literature, philosophy and art. Winnicott adds that, “it is possible to see that psychoanalysis is doing as an intermediate to find recognition in the work of philosophers” (*Playing and Reality* xv). Psychoanalytic theory is a general term for approaches to psychoanalysis, and object relation theory is considered as one of the offshoots of psychoanalytic theory. Object relation theory is the theory of understanding human development and relationship. The focus on the interaction of this theory and its application in literary text is largely ignored as affirmed by Winnicott in his book *Playing and the Reality*. While the impact of psychic development to achieve a healthy life is very important, some literary texts are created to highlight its influence. By using and applying this theory on literary text the significance of literary text is highlighted and also the importance of psycho-biographic study of authors is uncovered. This opens the door to understand people’s life and the real meaning of relationship that emerges in literature.

Three plays *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* are selected to show how one can apply the object relation theory to understand characters in literary text, and how one can find the reason for creating such characters by the author.

Object relation theory is used to analyze these selected texts to find out:

- (i) the reasons for characters’ psychological problems which result failures in the characters’ relationships with others and their environment.

- (ii) the psychological complexes of the author's life that are reflected in his characters.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The aim of this research is to offer insight not only into some of the works of Tennessee Williams, but also to some degree, of his own life. The central concept of Tennessee Williams's plays indicates that he was plagued and annoyed by his life; his plays are also seemingly influenced by his emotional and sexual relationships.

The study also offers a view of Tennessee Williams as a writer who very delicately penetrates and explores universal themes of human relations and psychoanalysis. It tries to uncover the reasons for Williams's characters failure to find healthy relationship with others and their environment. It also aims to unveil the object relation signs which make the characters dependent, lonely, desolated, and depressed. Tennessee Williams has experienced such object relation complexities during his life and by creating such characters, he wants to highlight these traits. Please refer to chapter 4 where the problems between characters and Tennessee Williams are traced.

In short, this study aims to offer a deeper understanding of Tennessee Williams's selected plays by interpreting and reading the texts from one aspect of psychoanalytical theory, namely the object relation theory.



## **Scope of Study**

The study is conducted in the arenas of psychoanalytical object relation theory. Two post Freudian theorists are referred to in this study. They are Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott.

A reading of Williams's show evidences of dysfunctional behavior, frustration and insecurity. The characters in Williams's plays portray individuals with failures of personality which can be traced to their infancy period. In this study, the character's complexes to achieve a normal life, their incomplete infantile transfer positions, unhealthy personalities especially of the main characters from the perspective of object relation criticism are examined. The three plays named *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Sweet Bird of Youth* are chosen and analyzed to uncover all these elements which Williams uses to create his characters and their complicated personalities.

## **Conceptual Theory**

In clarifying psychology, Shila Akhavan elucidates that, "It is a scientific study of mental processes" (5). Psychology also refers to the application of such knowledge to various spheres of human activity, including issues related to everyday life such as family, education, and work. On the other hand psychoanalysis is a body of ideas which is devoted to the study of human psychological functioning and behavior. Stephen Frosh makes it clearer and says that, "psychoanalysis is a profound source of both insight and

challenge for individuals who wish to build social forms conducive to positive human development and to enrich personal relationships” (35). Under the broad umbrella of psychoanalysis there are different theoretical orientations regarding the underlying theory of understanding human development. One of them is called psychoanalytic theory. Psychoanalytic theory is a general orientation of psychoanalysis which attempts to provide a conceptual framework more or less independent of clinical practice. An offshoot of this theory is the object relation theory.

Object relation psychoanalytic theory henceforth referred to as OR, aims to determine the factors that shape the behavior of characters. In literature it also seeks to determine not only the OR motivations of characters, but also the motivations of the author. Using the biography of the author, an OR analyst can propose correlations between the authors own OR factors and the OR factors of his characters. Furthermore, the purpose of OR literary criticism is to show that literature is structured by complex and contradictory power of relations in human, not just by the author’s spontaneous ideas. From this approach, OR critics offer interpreting a text to reveal the common OR elements, the connection between the characters in the work and their environment. They discover how the character’s actions are motivated from their relationships. OR theory is specifically an interpersonal perspective. It works on a person’s character or personality which is significantly shaped by his or her early interactions with primary caregivers during the critical development stages or infantile transfer positions.

In OR theory, the character disorders are considered as the external manifestation of inaccurate internal schemas of interpersonal relations resulting from specific



developmental faults and errors. The schemas form the person's internal world and influence which consequently shapes the person's experiences and relation to the external world. This theory emphasizes the fundamental human drive of having a relationship with someone or something. The relationship between a baby and a mother centralizes the developmental stages. This theory is the theory of relationships between man and his environment, a basic tenet is that, a man is driven to form relationships with others. So in case of failure to form successful early relationships with the mother it results to later problems in adulthood.

Karl Abraham first wrote an approach to theory of OR; however, the British-based psychoanalyst Melanie Klein is considered as the founder of this theory and is largely involved with developing the modern theory especially on the relationship between mother and child. Explanations are discussed further in pages 16-20. Klein considers the mother as the principal object. Daniels explains:

Object relations theory is an offshoot of psychoanalytic theory that emphasizes on interpersonal relations, primarily in the family and especially between mother and child. "Object" actually means person, and especially the significant person that is the object or target of another's feelings or intentions. "Relations" refers to interpersonal relations and suggests the residues of past relationships that affect a person in the present. Object relations theorists are interested in inner images of the self and other and how they manifest themselves in interpersonal situations (1).

The OR theorists tend to give a greater weight to the influence of the environment in the shaping of one's personality. They focus on the pre-oedipal development in terms of object presentation and object relation. They also give heavy attention to environmental

influences rather than inner influences. Unlike other traditional psychoanalyst they place less attention to biological factors and more emphasis on developing the self through relationships within a family and others. The theory presents a comprehensive overview for the understanding of creativity and the nature of inner reality. The key concepts which are used by the OR theorists are as follow:

**Object** refers to “not so much an inhuman entity but usually to someone toward whom desire or action is directed” (Clair 39). Klein divides object into two pairs of dichotomies; Whole object and Part object, and also Good object and Bad object. This concept, introduced by Melanie Klein, denotes an object as it appears in an infant's phantasies. The splitting of the object into good and bad is a kind of defense against ambivalence and anxiety.

#### **Whole object and Part object:**

A mother's breast is the first object that a child recognizes and sees it as the first 'part object'. In object relation theory breast is the first and the most important object that an infant starts to know and relates in his mental phantasy world immediately after birth (please refer to chapter 2). Lee confirms this and says that, “breast is the central source of power” (44). The infant starts to talk and to project his feeling to breast. In process of development, he<sup>1</sup> gradually feels the mother as the 'whole object'.

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<sup>1</sup> As object relation theory focuses on relationships between mother and her infant, for avoiding of double using feminine pronoun (mother as female) they refer to infant as 'he'. This is a common convention in object relational writing and is not intended as sexist.



### **Good object and bad object:**

At the early level of development, when an infant experiences the emotions associated with love, it means he has a good breast that provides milk.

The child perceives his mother's breast as a good object. This good object meets the infant's needs and provides feeling of gratification. If the mother's breast does not have enough milk to feed an infant fully and the child is not satisfied by breast-feeding, breast is proved as a bad object and feels it as an object of frustration and hate. Thus, during this period, the child can only experience gratification or deprivation.

The satisfaction emotion is extended from part object to whole object. Thus, the infant rejects or wants the mother as well as the breast. This pattern repeats onwards as we categorize people and things as good or bad and desire or hate accordingly. The child seeks to join itself to the good object and ejects the bad object. He tries to keep good objects safe from the unpleasant influences of bad objects. The child will seek to expel bad objects, either because they form a threat or because the bad object, which is a part of the self, is in danger of attack from other aspects of the self.

The following paradigm shows the relation between object and splitting of the object by Melanie Klein:

