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The Characters and Dramaturgy of Tennessee Williams: An Analysis Through the Presentation of Two One-Act Plays

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The Characters and Dramaturgy of Tennessee Williams: An analysis through the presentation of two one-act plays

Bachelor of Arts (Drama Studies) Hons.

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An analysis into the background of Tennessee Williams strongly suggests that the two one-act plays, *This Property is Condemned* and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* are autobiographical accounts, being that the characters are based either on Williams himself, family members or friends, and indeed, the plays are representations of the era in which they were written.

Also, a simultaneous investigation into the dramaturgy of these plays shows Williams' innovative "use of all the resources of the contemporary stage" (Boxill 23), and the rehearsal process and workshop presentation was an exploration and discovery into how these resources can be implemented by directors, designers and actors, in order to give the audience a deeper understanding of the plays and characters.

**A tribute to courage in the face of adversity**

*This Property is Condemned* is a "memory play" (Boxill 27) in that it reveals the past of the central character, a teenage girl called Willie, through her recollections during the conversation with Tom: a teenage boy she meets while walking along the railroad tracks in a small town in Mississippi. It could be suggested that the characters are partly representative of Williams' relationships with both his childhood friend Hazel Kramer and his sister Rose. Williams recalls that Hazel was his "closest childhood friendship which ripened into a romantic attachment" (Williams, *Memoirs* 15), and "it was at puberty that I first knew that I had a sexual desire for Hazel" (Williams, *Memoirs* 18), the same desire that is expressed toward Willie by Tom when he asks if she will dance for him with her clothes off (Williams, *Property* 189). Indeed, Tom’s gracious acceptance of
Willie’s refusal is paralleled with Williams’ admittance that “I was a gentle boy who liked to play with girls” (Spoto 10).

Nevertheless, it is the mutual exchange of imagination that connects Williams with both Hazel and Rose, as he recalls how he and Rose would play games and share stories: “she had an incredible imagination” (Spoto 10), while with Hazel “the chief diversion… was illustrating stories that we made up” (Williams, Memoirs 15). Similarly, the character of Tom embraces Willie’s need to express and share her imagination, for example, he agrees with her references to the “white sky” looking as if “everything had been swept off with a broom” and it’s resemblance to a “white piece of paper” (Williams, Property 185), and when Willie tells of Miss Preston’s misinterpretation of the picture she drew of her “old man getting conked with a bottle” (Williams, Property 189), it is a direct connection to Williams’ early storytelling method he shared with Hazel.

However, the possibility that the picture drawn by Willie is an indication of what she was witnessing at home, is directly related to Williams’ and his sister’s childhood experiences. Their father, Cornelius, was a “drinker, an open gambler, and a covert womanizer” (Spoto 13) and according to Dakin Williams, in his conversation with Spoto in 1985, “life at home was terrible… By the late 1920s, mother and father were in open warfare” (Spoto 18). Moreover, one of the many times he came home drunk and was terrorizing their mother, Edwina, “she ran into the bedroom and locked herself in. He broke down the door, and in doing so the door hit her and broke her nose” (Spoto 18-19). An example of how his behaviour was affecting Rose is explained when their mother fell ill after her miscarriage:
Edwina suffered at least eight illnesses requiring surgery...each time her mother went to the hospital – and eventually each time a doctor’s visit was announced – Rose was almost paralyzed with terror. If her mother died, she would be at the mercy of a father whose airy unconcern and drunken moods kept her in a constant state of anxiety” (Spoto 17-18).

The anxiety increased over the years and “so Tom remembered his sister’s gradual entrance into an inner world of darkness and unreality and, eventually, complete psychotic breakdown” (Spoto 19).

Likewise, we learn that Willie’s disjointed state of mind is also attributed to her upbringing, for instance, she tells Tom that she has been abandoned by her parents:

Mama run off with a brakeman on the C. & E. I. After that everything went to pieces...My old man got to drinking...Disappeared...Then there was me an Alva. Till Alva’s lungs got affected” (Williams, *Property* 187).

In fact, Willie took care of her sister until what was probably an unpleasant death, “it wasn’t like death in the movies” (Williams, *Property* 187), and it seems Alva’s death had a devastating effect on Willie and although her sister “became a prostitute and died young” (Boxill 48), Willie tries to “exalt” (Boxill 48) her memory, probably as an expression of her own fear for the future. By wearing Alva’s clothes and claiming to have “inherited all of my sister’s beaux” (Williams, *Property* 188) she is revealing the teachings of her sister, that the role of a woman is to be physically attractive to men and sexually available, and indeed, if she follows these rules, it will diminish her loneliness.

On the other hand, Willie is aware of the reality that these attributes are not guaranteed to
eliminate loneliness as Alva’s beaux disappeared, however, Willie does not submit to this reality because she cannot envisage an alternative future for herself.

Willie is desperately trying to survive with only the memory of her sister to guide her, and is fortunately making decisions for herself along the way. For instance, she rejects Tom’s request to “dance for him with your clothes off” (Williams, Property 189), as she did for Frank Waters, by replying “I was lonesome then an’ I’m not lonesome now” (Williams, Property 189). Despite the circumstances, Willie displays vivacity, and courage to confront her fears without a trace of self-pity, perhaps suggesting a glimmer of hope that she is not destined to condemnation, as the title of the play alludes.

When one critic suggested that Willie was plainly damned to a dreadful existence, Williams replied, “I don’t think of my little people as damned – not as long as they keep courage and gallantry. These are very important Southern qualities, bred in the bones of the people I write about, such as …the little girl on the railroad tracks (Phillips 121-122).

Unfortunately, Williams witnessed his sister Rose, a “vivacious” (Roudane 11) young girl, become increasingly “fragile and sensitive” and never recover from her “hideous inner turmoil in trying to cope with life” (D. Williams 19). However, it appears that Willie’s courage was inspired by his mother’s ability to endure life’s harsh realities, “it is easy to admire the courage and cheer…that this small woman brought to an increasingly unhappy life” (Spoto 16).
The individual’s quest for survival

The Lady of Larkspur Lotion contains “two main archetypes” (Boxill 34) that Williams repeatedly used in his work: Mrs Hardwicke-Moore is the “faded belle” (Boxill 34) who clings to the gentility of the Old South, as did Williams’ mother, Edwina, “a beautiful, sexually fastidious Southern belle (Boxill 7), who, due to her upbringing as a rector’s daughter was

accustomed to a gentler society, a more elegant atmosphere, a servant and well-bred, courteous neighbors and the thousand details of life among the Southern gentry (Spoto 16).

The Writer could be construed as the second archetype: the “wanderer” (Boxill 34), and is a confessional representation of Williams’ own experiences in New Orleans when he indulged his desires and realized his aspirations to be a writer: “In 1938 at the age of twenty-seven” he “set out on his own. He lived in a boarding house in the old quarter” (Boxill 13) and the financial pressures of the times and his circumstances meant “I had to hock literally everything I owned… and I was bounced from lodging to lodging for nonpayment of rent” (Williams, Memoirs 2). However, the need to move from place to place was not always due to financial necessity, it was a deep-rooted habit that had been planted in his childhood:

By the time Thomas Williams was fifteen, he and his mother and sister had lived in more than sixteen different homes. This certainly contributed to the pattern of geographical instability in his later life, when a kind of gypsylike impermanence and wandering characterized even his most successful years (Spoto 16).
Also, the character of Mrs Wire is based on the archetype of the tyrant, whose brusque and down-to-earth disposition has often appeared in his works, for example, Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, furthermore, the tyrant is usually in opposition to the faded belle and the wanderer who “stand out from the rest as if to illustrate time’s most pathetic casualties: the has-been and the might-have-been” (Boxill 34). It appears that Mrs Wire is loosely based on Williams’ father, Cornelius, who was “a shrewd businessman” (Spoto 18), and although his extremes of alcohol abuse, fornication and the occasional physically abusive act are perhaps more suited to Stanley Kowalski, Mrs Wire also lacks the “compassion and understanding” (Williams, *Larkspur Lotion* 71) enabling her to tolerate the illusions and sensitivities of Mrs Hardwicke-Moore and the Writer. Similarly, “Cornelius was not only volatile and unpredictable and frightening to Rose and Tom, he was also intimidating” (Spoto 18). As Boxill notes,

“In ‘Facts about Me’ (1958) Williams has said that he derived from his mother and father an uneasy combination of the Puritan and the Cavalier which helps to account for the thematic conflicts in much of his work.” (7).

It is evident that Williams not only acknowledged conflicts between people but also conflicts within the individual, and though it could be said that each character in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* is a portrayal of one essential archetype, there is evidence that they oppose the traits of that archetype, giving the characters’ depth and realism. For instance, despite Mrs Hardwicke-Moore’s surroundings she tries to uphold the quintessential characteristics and beliefs equated with the Southern belle, as did Edwina Williams who
observed every prescription of Southern etiquette and charm. Aristocratic manners are equated with profound virtue and even delicacy of diction and a studied poise had almost religious significance... And sex (when it was mentioned at all,...) was a man’s mysterious reward and a woman’s grim obligation (Spoto 12).

Likewise, Mrs Hardwicke-Moore tries to maintain the ideals and supremacy of the “Southern gentry” (Spoto 16) by claiming to have descended from “the Hapsburgs” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 70), a royal family of Europe, and to be the owner of a Brazilian rubber plantation, from which she receives “quarterly payments” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 69). Moreover, when Mrs Wire asks for payment of rent she tries to undermine her authority as landlady by assuming superior airs: “I have had very little experience with cockroaches in my life” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 67), and “I’ll pay you the rest of the rent as soon as you’ve exterminated these roaches” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 68).

Also, Mrs Hardwicke-Moore displays a picture in her room of a Roman saint (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 67) to signify the grace and purity that supposedly belong to someone of religious standing. However, we learn that Mrs Hardwicke-Moore is penniless and an alcoholic prostitute, who drinks Larkspur Lotion, (a “common treatment for body vermin” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 66), presumably a cheap, alcohol based liquid), to reach a state of euphoria and escape her miserable existence. Furthermore, Mrs Wire takes offence at the insinuations made about the cockroaches and even defends her establishment, but when she realizes that the tenant is trying to avoid paying rent, she calls her bluff, “You’ll have to pay me the rent right away or get out” (Williams,
Mrs Wire has also been driven to this position by her struggle to survive "the hard-knuckled hand of need, the cold iron fist of necessity" (Williams, *Larkspur Lotion* 72), and indeed, the conversion of a boarding house into a brothel, perhaps signifies her insight into the desires of people, and in times of need, a practical wisdom that will ensure her own survival.

Therefore, it appears that the Writer displays what Williams had learned from the experiences and observations of his family, and was still discovering in New Orleans, those discoveries being a sense of humanity, that each person's expression of their struggle to survive is misunderstood by others, and for that reason, conflicts arise between people. For example, Williams had struggled with his homosexuality for years and "it was during his postgraduate days in New Orleans... that he came out as a homosexual" (Boxill 13), a fact that was "recalled in *Vieux Carré*" (Boxill 13), 1979, the two-act expansion of *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*, in which the Writer encounters his first homosexual experience. In addition, Williams admits to the confessional presentation of this experience in the stage directions for *Vieux Carré*:

**TIME:** The period between winter 1938 and spring 1939.

**PLACE:** A rooming house, No. 722 Toulouse Street, in the French Quarter of New Orleans.

**THE SETTING OF THE PLAY:** It is a three-story building. There are a pair of alcoves... separated by plywood, which provides a minimal separation... between the writer (myself those many years ago) and an older painter (Williams, *Vieux Carré* 4).
For Williams’ desire to expand the one-act play to include this confession, signifies that he probably wanted to include it in *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* but due to the conservative climate of the 1930s and rules of censorship, it was not a viable option.

**Society reflecting the times**

The stock market crash of 24 October 1929, when twelve million shares were sold on the Wall Street stock exchange, sent most Americans into abject poverty, and so began the social and economic struggle that is known as the Great Depression of the 1930s. This resulted in cut backs in industry and the subsequent loss of jobs, and brought the final demise of the Old South; a way of life that had been dying a slow and gradual death since the end of the Civil War in 1865.

It could be suggested that Willie’s situation in *This Property is Condemned* is a reflection of the effects of the Great Depression. For instance, the selfish mentality of both parents who abandoned her and the railroad men who disappeared because of their apparent fear that “they might get stuck for expenses” (Williams, *Property* 188), could perhaps be symptoms of a disconnected society that is struggling under the collapse of social and economic systems that would normally hold it together, especially since small towns are usually built due to the expansion of industry, to support the larger towns and cities. Consequently, the small railroad towns that had attracted people because of employment would have dissolved under the economic pressures, and explains the transferal of the “freight sup’rintendant…to Grenada” (Williams, *Property* 187) as well as the disappearance of the other railroad workers.
Hardwicke-Moore’s superior attitude is out of place and no longer achieves the desired result of respect by intimidation.

The abject poverty that affected most Americans brought out the best and worst in people from the extreme of bitterness that evoked selfishness, to the opposing extreme of compassion that evoked charity. For example, perhaps Mrs Wire is bitter due to her disappointment at, what started out as a respectable position as landlady in a respectable establishment those “seventeen years” (Williams, *Larkspur Lotion* 69) ago, being turned into the management of a brothel by the intrusion of the Depression. On the other hand, the Writer is compassionate toward Mrs Hardwicke-Moore because he can relate to her need for illusions and the assistance in reaching a state of well being, as is demonstrated by his acceptance and development of her illusions and the final gesture of sharing the contents of his bottle. In acceptance of these gestures she does not question his unusual claim to be “Anton Pavlovich Chekhov” (Williams, *Larkspur Lotion* 72), probably as a reciprocated acknowledgement and understanding of his situation.

Williams is also expressing his own admiration for the works of Anton Chekhov possibly due to his aspirations to be as good a writer as he and an admittance of his influence:

I fell in love with the writing of Anton Chekhov, at least with his many short stories. They introduced me to a literary sensibility to which I felt a very close affinity at that time...Chekhov takes precedence as an influence (Williams, *Memoirs* 40-41).

It was a wise choice for Williams to begin his writing career in New Orleans,
a city whose faded antebellum elegance and Bohemian freedom provided
the perfect backdrop for his inner development as well as the setting for
much of his work (Boxill 13),
as it also provided an opportunity to develop and expand the resource pool of characters
he could use in his work. These characters are essentially autobiographical reproductions
of family and friends, but by observing the people and lifestyle of New Orleans, and
including their traits and surroundings in his characters and plays, allowed a certain level
of detachment to create them from a scientific, rather than emotional base, therefore, he
became “a disciplined writer” (Boxill 13).

The combination and careful balance of theatre science and emotional integrity
Williams is often very specific in his stage directions which inspire “the use of all the
resources of the contemporary stage – language, action, scenery, music, costume, sound,
lighting” to place “essentially naturalistic characters within a frankly evocative setting
where reality is interfused with the stuff of dreams” (Boxill 23). Accordingly, my actors
were given a copy of Uta Hagen’s ‘Object Exercises’ (81-90) as an example of the level
of understanding they should have of their character’s circumstances, and they were
asked to do the exercises over a couple of weeks to incorporate the ideas and facts they
were learning in rehearsals. Also, Williams’ “call for a new, plastic theatre to replace the
outworn theatre of conventional realism” (Boxill 68) is an invitation to actors, directors
and designers to use all theatrical resources to enable a deeper understanding of the
characters and plays, as opposed to using them literally.
Before rehearsals began I collected photographs, maps, poems and facts in order to acquire an informed understanding and impression of the historical and geographical aspects of the plays, for myself and for the actors; with the added intention that they would inspire an expressionistic approach to the plays.

Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn’t be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually or should be attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are (Murphy 7-8).

For example, Willie’s costume is a reflection of the character rather than merely an indication of the era in which the play is set, as Williams describes in the stage directions of This Property is Condemned:

The girl WILLIE is advancing precariously along the railroad track, balancing herself with both arms outstretched, one clutching a banana, the other an extraordinary dilapidated doll with a frowsy blond wig. She is a remarkable apparition...dressed in cast-off finery. She wears a long blue velvet party dress with a filthy cream lace collar and sparkling rhinestone beads. On her feet are battered silver kid slippers with large ornamental buckles. Her wrists and her fingers are resplendent with dimestore jewellery. She has applied rouge to her childish face in artless crimson daubs and her lips are made up in a preposterous Cupid’s bow. ...there is
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something ineluctably childlike and innocent in her appearance despite the make-up. She laughs frequently and wildly and with a sort of precocious, tragic abandon (Williams, *Property* 183).

During our first rehearsals we found that this description of Willie illustrates the fact that she “stands awkwardly between the world of childhood, represented by the tattered doll which she hugs to her breast, and the adult world into which she has been prematurely initiated” (Phillips 120-21). To emphasise the transition from these two worlds, it seemed logical that even though Willie is dressed as an adult she would still play with the doll, treating it as a mother treats a child, more importantly, the doll symbolizes Willie and her experiences. When Willie is remembering Alva’s call for her beaux, “Where is Albert? Where’s Clemence?” (Williams, *Property* 187), I asked the actor to speak to the doll, to signify Willie’s helplessness which attributed to her “compound fracture of the scull” (Williams, *Property* 189), the symbol of Willie’s disjointed and incoherent state of mind. Also, to display her desire to imitate a woman, we added various accessories to Willie’s costume, to show that she is laden with these items that are discarded or applied, depending on whether she is yielding to her impulses as a child or succumbing to the pressures of what she believes is required to be a woman.

Also, Tom experiences a sexual attraction toward Willie that is indicative of his entrance into teenagehood. Therefore, after studying Chekhov’s *Lessons for the Professional Actor*, I conducted a series of exercises in which the actors were asked to remember the feelings, thoughts and impulses from their own childhood and then to examine any differences they have noted from the transitions into both teenage and adulthood, and indeed, how they reflect or differ from their character. Throughout the
discussion that followed, there was a mutual interest into how the instant of sexual
attraction had influenced our interaction with people during these transitions, and that the
subsequent reaction we experienced determined "a certain atmosphere" (Chekhov 37).
Consequently, it seemed logical for these teenage characters to share a moment of sexual
attraction, especially to give the actor playing Tom an objective to stay and listen to
Willie's story. The inclusion of this moment within the performance was placed at the
time where the atmosphere is of excitement because Willie has tickled Tom and is
encouraging him to play by instigating a chase to retrieve his hat, and for this reason, the
sudden contrast in atmosphere into the embarrassed silence while they recover from the
moment of sexual attraction, heightens the significance of their surprised reaction at this
unfamiliar experience they have not yet learned to control.

Furthermore, the conversation between Tom and Willie contains "repetitions" in
language, and "circularities" (Boxill 48) in the action, and their relevance evolved out of
an exploration into the "given circumstances" (Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares* 54) of
Willie; being an examination of her background, as is described in the text, and indeed
how her past has influenced her present situation and affected her future objectives.

We found that the "white sky" is a symbol of purity, therefore, when Willie
repeatedly acknowledges its existence, whether it "looks like everything had been swept
off with a broom" (Williams, *Property* 185) or it is "white as a clean piece of paper"
(Williams, *Property* 192) emphasises her desire for freedom from the physical and moral
pollution that is condemning her future. For example, she is threatened with eviction by
"the county investigator" (Williams, *Property* 190) from the condemned boarding house
in which she resides, and in addition, her reputation as a female is contaminated by the
incident with Frank Waters when she danced naked for him (Williams, *Property* 189). These discoveries gave the actor playing Willie a reason for the character’s lack of self-pity because she can aspire, even if only in her imagination, to a future free of fear and shame.

Also, the fact that the play returns to the starting point, in that Willie climbs back onto the railway tracks from where she first appeared, we are forced to retrace the route that has brought her to this point and examine why she is repeating it. Perhaps she is helplessly searching for a destination away from the despair of her situation. Therefore, slides were projected to illustrate the parallel between the gradual dereliction of the house and Willie’s life, and though we realize the hopelessness of her situation, we also appreciate the courageous nature of this girl which aids her struggle to survive her day-to-day existence, as was hopefully emphasized in the final slide. My original idea was to have the slides change gradually throughout the play but it was distracting for the audience. However, the parallel between the slides and the action would have perhaps been clearer. It was my intention to get closer to the windows of the house, as we learn more about Willie and in the end, her desire to get back on the tracks is an expression of her fear to go back to the house, where she is alone to face her fears without any outside distractions.

The comfort of consistency and necessity of contradiction

The expressionistic use of the “resources of the contemporary stage” (Boxill 23) in the performance of *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* enabled the portrayal of the individuality of each character. During rehearsals we explored their voices and physicality as a reflection
of their given circumstances, for example, I conducted a workshop involving Laban’s Effort Actions which examine the use of time, weight, space and flow of movement and Stanislavski’s methods on Speech Tempo-Rhythm (Building a Character 224-244), in order to achieve both an internal and external expression of their character, and indeed, to encourage the actors to embrace the changes from their personal voice and movement patterns. When the results of these exercises reached a certain level of success, they were incorporated into the rehearsals with the text and indeed, the individuality of each character began to evolve. However, I detected a level of uncertainty with the actor playing Mrs Hardwicke-Moore, who could not realize the magnitude of the suggested demotion in her character’s lifestyle, and for this reason, I tried an exercise from Viola Spolin’s Improvisation for the Theater called ‘Explore and Heighten’ (217-18) and when the actor reached the line “now I have had very little experience with cockroaches in my life” (Williams, Larkspur Lotion 67), I asked her to explore and describe the surroundings in which she lived, where she had such a limited experience of cockroaches, and when she replied with a list of beautiful and extravagant surroundings and personal feminine possessions, I asked her to heighten this exploration which included the presence of servants, a discovery that inspired the actor to incorporate in her character’s treatment of Mrs Wire.

In order to highlight the realism of the characters, it was imperative to include actions and images that are contradictory to the consistent images evoked by the essential characteristics of the aforementioned archetypes. Therefore, we made lists of the consistent images we had of each character and then went on to list the contradictions of these images with the intention of embracing them as “it is the simultaneous difference of
unresolved contradictions that gives the characters much of their depth and three­
dimensionality” (Fuegi 568). At first, the actors were challenged by this task because they had fixed the characters as stereotypes rather than the “complex individuals” (Fuegi 568) that are inherent in the plays of Tennessee Williams. Accordingly, Mrs Hardwicke-Moore’s actions at the beginning of the play introduce the complexities of this character, for instance, in lighting the candle rather than putting on the naked light is an indirect expression of her need to avoid the harsh reality of her circumstances, then the subsequent action to lift the picture of the Roman saint, whose judgmental presence has been avoided while conducting business the night before, and finally, to check the contents of the bottle of Larkspur Lotion, gives a “mental superimposition of one image over another that produces depth” (Fuegi 568).

Similarly, the simultaneous intrusion of the bright light on the entrance of Mrs Wire emphasizes the harsh atmosphere that surrounds this character, and although it is inferred that Mrs Wire would like to be a respected businesswoman, this image is contradicted when she looks through Mrs Hardwicke-Moore’s dressing table drawers in search for money. Also, an example of The Writer’s contradictions is when he forcibly removes Mrs Wire from the room, which is inconsistent with the gentleness and sensitivity we have witnessed.

In conclusion, the analysis of Tennessee Williams’ *This Property is Condemned* and *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion* shows that characters are portrayed on the basis of “subjective realism” (Murphy 10) in that each character’s version of reality is expressed according to their individual needs and desires which are a result of upbringing, experiences and
observations, and that conflict arises when the characters cannot understand each others choices to overcome or endure life’s difficulties.

In reflecting upon the performance of the plays, the actors were successful in revealing the subjective realism of their character, furthermore, I have expanded my awareness of the resources to be used by directors, designers and actors of contemporary theatre in order to enrich the theatrical experience of audiences.
Works Cited.


