

## A Comparison of Tennessee Williams and Anton Chekhov

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**Abstract:** This essay sets out to make a comparison analysis between the American playwright Tennessee Williams and Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Both playwrights are outstanding figures in the world literature, via case study of *The Glass Menagerie* and *The Cherry Orchard*, we got a conclusion that Tennessee Williams was much indebted to Anton Chekhov who exerted great influence on the former.

**Key words:** Tennessee Williams; Anton Chekhov; world literature

### 1. TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND HIS ARTISTIC FEATURES

Williams is regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights, and a great innovator of his genre. Williams, more so than any other playwright, is remembered for his characters. Blanche DuBois, Stanley Kowalski, Big Daddy, Laura, Tom, all have become prominent figures in American theatre. Perhaps this is because how well Williams fleshes out characters and thus, makes them very real to the reader and audience. All of his most famous characters are modeled after his family members or friends. For example, Laura in *Glass Menagerie* is a representation of Williams's sister who underwent a frontal lobotomy her parents approved. Tom is representative of Williams himself, who had to go to work at a shoe factory to support the family because the father was always on the road. Williams also brought many issues such as homosexuality, fetishism, sex, his belief in the falsehood of religion, and domestic violence, shocked the audiences of his time. Williams's language in his plays is often thought of as too poetic, and his plays are often called too wordy, others would say that his language is highly stylized, but yet still natural sounding. Williams's plays often contain an overbearing male figure, often a husband, and an almost overly emotional female. A major theme is survival in a world that seems bent on crushing the human spirit and the inescapable-ness of the human condition. Overall, Williams was able to bring new issues to the theatre and great characters while still touching on many universal themes.

The *Glass Menagerie* reflects Williams's own life so much that it could be mistaken as pages from his autobiography. The characters and situations of the play are much like those found in the small St. Louis apartment where Williams spent part of his life. Williams himself can be seen in the character Tom. Both worked in a shoe factory and wrote poetry to escape the depressing reality of their lives, and both eventually ended up leaving. One not so obvious character is Mr. Wingfield, who is the absent father only by the looming picture hanging in the Wingfield's apartment. Tom and Williams both had fathers who were, as Tom says, "in love with long distances." Amanda, an overbearing mother who cannot let go

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\* Received on March 29, 2010; accepted on June 19, 2010

of her youth in the Mississippi Delta and her “seventeen gentleman callers” is much like Williams own mother, Edwina. Both Amanda and Edwina were not sensitive to their children’s feelings. In their attempts to push their children to a better future, they pushed them away. The model for Laura was Williams’s introverted sister, Rose. According to contemporary Authors “the memory of Rose appears in some character, situation, symbol, or motif in almost every work after 1938.” Edwina, like Amanda, tried to find a gentleman caller for Rose. Both situations ended with a touching confrontation with the caller and an eventual heartbreak.

Tennessee Williams’s brilliant use of symbols adds life to the play. The title itself, *The Glass Menagerie*, reveals one of the most important symbols. Laura’s collection of glass animals represents her fragile state. When Jim, the gentleman caller, breaks the horn off her favorite unicorn, this represents Laura’s break from her innocence. Laura is no longer alone in her world of glass animals. She has had a break into the real world. Another symbol is the ever present large-than-life-size photograph of Mr. Wingfield. This picture is a constant reminder of painful past foreshadows Tom following in his father’s footsteps. Amanda’s fears of being left alone again are represented by Mr. Wingfield’s smiling face always watching over the family. The play ends with Tom escaping to the outside world, but never escaping thoughts of his beloved sister, Laura. He confesses to the audience that he cannot forget Laura’s “candles.” Laura’s “candles” symbolize the memory of Laura which stays with not only Tom but with anyone who is touched by *The Glass Menagerie*. All of these symbols represent Laura’s broken innocence, Tom’s inability to escape the past, and Amanda’s fulfilled fears of being alone portray the recurring theme of a struggle towards a better life and the inevitable disappointment this brings.

## **2. ANTON CHEKHOV AND HIS ARTISTIC FEATURES**

The most important dramatist Russia has so far produced is Anton Chekhov (1860-1904), a physician of Moscow who left, besides many fine short stories, a few dreams which are strikingly original. Chekhov combined a naturalistic method with a philosophic mind and a humanitarian gentleness of temper. At least four of his plays – *The Sea Gull*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Three Sisters* – have become widely known throughout the world, particularly through the interpretation of the Moscow Art Theater players. *The Cherry Orchard* is perhaps most typical both of the author’s method and of his success in creating “atmosphere.” The surviving members of an ancient land-holding family come back from Paris to find that their country place is about to be at auction for debts. A family friend and former peasant, now a prosperous merchant, suggests that they cut down the cherry orchard and build little cottages which they can rent out and thus pay off their debt; but family pride and a general spirit of procrastination will not permit them to consent to such a solution. In their natures, sorrow over trouble and levity over responsibilities are inextricably mixed. They can take nothing seriously. They argue and talk it all over in their own charming fashion until finally the house is sold over their heads and the sound of the axe is heard in the beloved orchard. When they leave, with characteristic absent-mindedness they accidentally lock the faithful old servant, Firs, in the empty and abandoned house. That is all: there is no struggle, nothing that could technically be called a plot; yet on the stage the representation is full of suspense and pathos. The author’s conception is intense, though detached. There is no hint of social “problem” or blame for anybody or any party ---- only a teacher, acute delineation of weak, delightful people. Among the naturalist of the teacher, Chekhov and Synge alone have been able to achieve the classic tragic note. Their scenes rise out of human experiences, wherein love and tenderness and family relationships have had their due need. Especially with Chekhov does one feel the presence of an understanding heart; nothing escapes his observation, yet all is rendered with sympathy and pity.

Chekhov is “one of the most enigmatic Russian writers” because of the fact that his complexity is not clearly apparent. Chekhov rejected following religious or political ideology, and he dislikes the notion that self-fulfillment is feasible through material things. Chekhov’s writings are influenced by Gogol, Lermontov, and Tolstoy. However, the influence of Turgenev is very significant because we find “Chekhov rebelling against many conventions accepted by these writers.” Chekhov would take issues importantly with Turgenev, from whom he had learned so much. Impressive techniques that are often used in Chekhov’s stories are his “resolution by means of a surprising ending.” The other technique has

been called “a zero ending.” In this form the “conflict leads to expectations of a dramatic conclusion while in fact the story seems to end in an unmotivated relaxation of tension, and without a climax.” Both of Chekhov’s techniques: “the surprise ending and the zero ending have in common the tension between the expected and the actual resolution which creates the aesthetic effect.” Chekhov’s zero ending” has significantly influenced the short stories.

Chekhov, considered as the father of the modern short story and of the modern play, was well-acquainted with the realities of nineteenth century lower-middle-class and peasant life, an acquaintance that was reflected objectively and unsentimentally in his mature writings. Making their first appearance among these brief vignettes and jokes are the themes that predominate in Chekhov’s fiction: the obsequiousness and petty tyranny of government officials; the sufferings of the poor as well as their coarseness and vulgarity; the vagaries and unpredictability of feeling; the ironical misunderstandings, disillusionments, and cross-purposes that make up the human comedy in general. But Chekhov’s art was also developing during the mid-1880s to embrace more serious themes---starvation in “Oysters,” abandonment in “The Huntsman,” remorse in “The Misfortune.” The narrative began to identify more closely with a particular character’s point of view and to show more atmosphere or mood by evoking through concrete details the emotions at work in a character’s mind.

### **3. THE INFLUENCE OF ANTON CHEKHOV ON TENNESSEE WILLIAMS AND THE WORLD LITERATURE**

With respect to twentieth-century drama, few playwrights with so small an oeuvre have wielded such vast influence over the course of literary history. Among his innovations were his economical husbanding of narrative resources, his concentration on character as mood rather than action, his impressionistic adoption of particular points of view, his dispensing with traditional plot, and as Charles May declared in an essay collected in *A Chekhov Companion*, his use of atmosphere as “an ambiguous mixture of both external details and psychic projection.” In all these regards Chekhov had an immediate and direct impact on such Western writers as James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Sherwood Anderson; indirectly, most major authors of short stories in the twentieth century, including Katherine Anne Porter, Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Bernard Malamud, and Raymond Carver, are in his debt.

In the 1980’s Williams gained a huge fame in the Soviet Union, he was called the biggest success since Chekhov. Williams’ frank memoirs appeared in 1975. From the late 1940s Key West became one of Williams’ favorite places. Tennessee Williams did not express strong admirations for any early American playwrights; his greatest dramatic influence was the brilliant Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Chekhov, with his elegant juxtaposition of the humorous and the tragic, his lonely characters, and his dark sensibilities, was a powerful inspiration for Tennessee. The newness of Chekhov was his portrayal of daily life and its encompassing crisis. He illustrated how the average person suffers, their imperfections, without making excuses for the characters. Interestingly, he managed to capture the way that life is a mixture of emotions. In his plays something could be awfully tragic whilst at the same time being amusing. In life like in Chekhov’s work a situation that is awful would be amusing because it was ironic or because it had to be to make it through the situation. Chekhov saw this and allowed his characters to be real in this way. Characters in Chekhov’s work told the story without Chekhov imposing his voice on the audience. This allowed characterization rather than plot to carry the drama.

Williams unquestionably found Chekhov’s work to be memorable enough to incorporate some elements of Chekhov’s styles into his own plays. Through his innate sense of the human condition, Anton Chekhov served to influence the shaping of Tennessee Williams’ characters in such plays as: *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In *The Cherry Orchard* the plot revolves around a woman and her family who are losing a cherry orchard that has been in the family for generations due to their lack of funds. The main character, Ranevsky, is unable to move past the problem of her history and deal with the current crisis. The plot follows her character through a very real and sincere problem and manages to combine the misery of her problem with the natural humor and irony of life. Seeing as *The Glass Menagerie* is a play of memories it is fitting to compare the character of Ranevsky in *The Cherry*

Orchard to the characters in Williams's play, in particular Amanda is a reminiscent character. *Streetcar Named Desire*, whilst not being a play that focuses on the memories of the characters is similar to *The Cherry Orchard* in plot because it also has to do with losing a family estate and include the use of wit and irony in a play that seems almost tragic.

There is a natural appeal to a writing style, such as Chekhov's where characters can be natural and still holds their entertainment appeal. Williams himself acknowledged the influence of Chekhov. Both playwrights share a similar attitude in regards to characterization, so much so that they face some of the same problems. There is breach between the character's feelings and their ability to verbalize these emotions. This crack can threaten to become a void, which will leave the audience lost (Stein 10). The hopelessness and the mediocrity of the characters in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* as well as the characters in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* can be summed up in this quote of Chekhov's on his plays. "Any idiot can face a crisis—its day to day living that wears you out." (Brainy Quote)

The presence of Anton Chekhov's influence in Tennessee Williams' work is widely recognized not just in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A streetcar Named Desire*, but he held Chekhov as one of his inspirational heroes and lent his own twist on Chekhov's style throughout many of his plays. There are similarities to be drawn to that if Anton Chekhov, between Williams's characters, political, social beliefs, substructure of the stories, and symbolism. Williams saw in Chekhov an ability to truly understand and portray human nature through his revolutionary drama and wanted to emulate that unique talent. Chekhov was a master at understanding the human condition; he emphasized the human ability to be flexible and feeling on a multitude of levels. Chekhov was one of the first to pull away from the high dramatic monologue style of acting but Williams recognized the fact that making your characters realistic and easily relatable would never be out of style.

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