

## Sombre Morality : A Study of Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*

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**Abstract.** Tennessee Williams is one of the most distinguished playwrights in the history of American drama. He has tremendous will power to explore the dark areas of human desire and compulsion. The present study is an analysis of Tennessee Williams's play *Sweet Bird of Youth*. (1959) It is one of the most prominent plays dealing with the theme of immorality. It is an established fact that his world is replete with death, destruction, desire, love, romance and sexuality, passing of time and fading of youth and beauty, isolation, guilt and loneliness. *Sweet Bird of Youth* presents fleshy corruption and crippled sensitive life. It is the story of two fragmentary and bitter characters who live the miserable lives of hopelessness.

**Keywords :** Morality; death; corruption; hopelessness; isolation; guilt and loneliness.

Tennessee Williams is unquestionably the most influential American playwright after the World War II. His plays portray the marginalised people hovering at the end of tether, but such marginalization fails to suppress their individuality. They lead a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface. The play *Sweet Bird of Youth* deals with the theme of immorality. It is the story of fragmentary and bitter characters who lived miserable lives of hopelessness. The truth of the matter is that the play faces a crisis of identity. The Princess Kosmonopolis (pseudonym of Alexandra Del Lago), a dissolute movie star and Chance Wayne, a self-centred gigolo are close to each other living in a small southern town in the Gulf of Mexico.

We see Chance and Princess sitting in a hotel, Royal Palm's bedroom in the opening scene of the play. On a fine morning, Chance comes to meet Princess with hope of getting a chance to enter the beautiful world of the film industry. He is a "good-looking (15) finest, nicest, sweetest,(49) young man of "twenty- nine years". (*Sweet Bird of Youth*, 23)

His aim is to find his childhood's sweetheart Heavenly Finleys, the daughter of Boss Finley, a local politician and an established person in the film world. Boss Finley and his son Tom Finley Junior are figures of hate. Both are ready to avenge Chance who has infected Heavenly with a venereal disease. Chance neither knows about the infectious disease of Heavenly caused by him nor of his mother's death who was staying in the town. He could not get the message of death of his mother because of the changed address. The church authority cremated her, and she was buried in their family graveyard. Alexandra Del Lago, who is quite aged now, has been a successful film actress in the past. In her last premiere of the

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film, she experienced herself the pale and wrinkled shadow of the old Alexandra. Now she is worried of the reality that her chief asset of youth has left her. On hearing the gossip of the people, she left the theatre and has been travelling since the time of the premier. Coming at St. Cloud, she met Chance at his hotel, where he has been working as a beach boy. Now both are fellow travellers and Chance is attending all her physical and mental needs. Most of his time passes in bringing her oxygen to relieve shortness of breath and helping her in every way as a male nurse.

After sometime, both share the same bed and Princess asks him the story of his past life and family. Chance explains his handsomeness of infancy which made him different from his family and generation. He has not enjoyed the company of the right social circle. He has only craved to look more handsome in uniform and, therefore, has joined the Navy. But he was always afraid of death, and by presenting a false certificate, he made himself free from the restrictions of the soldiers and returned home. Except Heavenly Finley nobody welcomed him after his return from Navy, and she became the most loveable figure of his life. Chance and Heavenly have been in love since their youthful days. Her father was ever against their relationship. Chance wanted to marry Heavenly for selecting the political field of her father. She was faithful to Chance until she caught infection of his venereal disease. Princess is very much influenced by Chance's sincerity and offers to help him. Chance proposes to organise a false beauty contest in which they (Heavenly and Chance) want to be winners and plan to grab a new film at the prize of contest. This proposal of Chance is turned down by Princess. Meanwhile, Boss Finley organizes a political rally the same evening and the rival group arranges the people to shout Heavenly's corruption for perplexing Boss Finley. He turns angry and wants to keep Chance far from the city and he decides to present Heavenly on the stage for clearing the rumours. After her objection, she is threatened to face similar consequences for her lover Chance and he has to meet the same fate like Negro who was castrated after messing the white women.

Once again, the next scene takes place at the hotel in a big rally. Chance goes there with some of his all friends but their cold responses deeply hurt him. He too sings a song but nobody joins him. Miss Lucy, Boss Finley's mistress, takes pity on him and informs that her master intends to castrate him. But Chance doesn't want to leave the place without Heavenly. Even he wants to see her for a while who is taken away by her father. Her father warns her to castrate him if he stays in the town but Chance does not care for his warning.

At last Chance telephones a Hollywood reporter and forces Princess to tell about her discoveries to realise his reverie. But Princess does not respond properly and talks only about herself. Now, she is very much happy and realises that her comeback in movie is successful. She offers Chance the job of her

companion which he refuses due to the fear of castrations. He decides to repent for his sexual transgressions and the play ends with illuminative statement of Chance:

I don't ask for your pity, but just for your understanding— not even that— no. just for your recognition of me in you and the enemy, time in us all. (93)

In the play, Chance and Princess sell their youth for money. The loss of their sweet bird of youth is like a blow of death for them. Both cannot rise above the crushing disappointment. They are defeated by their high ambitions. The princess has sold her everything— heart, soul and body— for getting the top position. She is a shameless opportunist, who picks up young men; uses them for her sexual gratification, and then cast them away. Chance has whored himself and recalls his past as an act of goodwill :

I gave people more than I took. Middle aged people  
I gave back a feeling of youth. Lonely girls?  
Understanding, appreciation. An absolutely  
convincing show of affection. Sad people, lost  
people something light and uplifting .(38)

Chance and Princess live in the world of illusions. Princess wanders in her days of sweet youth and takes refuge from the bitter reality of life and enjoys the nourishing diet of sex, hashish and pure oxygen etc., while Chance wants to cash his sound body before it fades. She insists Chance to act up to her wishes. She shows claws when he tries to outsmart her and reminds him of dictating terms in their relationship but after some time says:

I want to help you. Believe me, not everybody  
wants to hurt everybody. I don't want to hurt you,  
can you believe me ? (41-42)

In her life, Princess has been too busy to climb up the ladder of success for getting a faithful soulmate. After a great success also, she could not win a single permanent mate. "For Alexandra, sex is an end in itself, rather than as for D.H. Lawrence, a means for exploring the otherness of the other partner". (Kataria, 107) Chance becomes aware of the fact about her and refuses to be her sexual slave any more. She offers him the role of a lap dog on a golden chain that Chance refuses as he is fearful of castration. However, she too is aware of reality.

The play is tragic in the sense that Chance, the protagonist, could not go to his home again. His youth, the beautiful sweet-bird-of-youth, is lost and he is sexually drying. Chance, a perverted creature, attempts in vain to reach his goal and Princess, devoid of human concerns, attains her goal in the most condemnable and animalistic way. Princess lacks love and human warmth. An intimate relationship is seen between Chance Wayne and Alexandra Del Lago in the very beginning of

the play and also at the end of it. They use each other in the play in their downward journey. On the other side, Heavenly is always loyal to Chance. She opposes her father :

Don't give me your voice of God speech, papa,  
there was a time when you could have saved me,  
by letting me marry a boy that was still young and  
clean, instead you drove him away. (Fedder, 53)

Once again we see the dramatist is involved with an Oedipal situation in which father is prepared to destroy the life of his daughter. Here, a father is destroying the life of his daughter in the same way as a mother destroys the life of person in D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*. The portrayal of Chance is very close to Birkin—the phallic prophet in D.H. Lawrence's *Women in Love*. But “Birkin, like Chance, never ceases to proselytize the dark knowledge you can't have in your hand.” (105)

Chance has different faces for different people and he has different roles throughout the play, “Chance is an actor, obviously assuming various roles throughout the play – son, blackmailer, lover, young romantic with Aunt Nonnie, sophisticated in St. Cloud and at the bar, and finally Fatalist, appealing to the audience for understanding.... He exhibits self-destructive tendencies and accepts his castration.” (Niesen, 482) He is a combination of cheap values and has no real worth. In his personality, we find a volcano of hatred. His relationship with Princess is shameful which creates hatred in audience; they don't sympathize with him on his castration. Though he is himself an evil, he has great love for Heavenly. He tells Tom, “I know I have done many wrong things in life, many more than I can name or number, but swear I never hurt Heavenly in my life.” (77)

Chance's sinful past becomes the tool of his castration. He is the same kind of sinful creatures as Val Xavier in “Orpheus Descending”. He represents the lost innocence, which can never be regained. But he differs from Val in the sense that if Heavenly's father had agreed, they would have been married a long time ago. He and Boss Finley are the opposite sides of the same coin. Chance becomes victim of the sex envy because of the unconscious feelings Boss Finley harbours for his beautiful daughter who reminds him of his dead wife. Williams describes him:

It is important not to think of his attitude towards her in the terms of crudely conscious incestuous feeling, but just in the natural terms of almost any aging father's feeling for a beautiful young daughter who reminds him of dead wife that he desired intensely when she was at the age of his daughter. (52)

Here, Signi Falls presents the same point of view," this aging politician watches his beautiful daughter with the same lust he had felt for her mother, at the same age when he had desired her so intensely." (Falls, 120)

Boss Finley is a symbol of hatred and fascism in the play. His image is not less than a monster who wants to use his own daughter for his political purposes. He cares less for her life by curing her from sexual disease caused by Chance but is more interested to castrate Chance for causing her infection :

Boss Finley desires his own daughter, an incestuous motif which reflects Freud's association of incest with anarchy. Himself important, or so it seems, he urges his daughter into a relationship which will serve his political purposes. She, meanwhile, has contracted venereal disease from her lover and is incapable of bearing children while that lover is himself emasculated, at Boss Finley's command on Easter Sunday. (Bigsby, 64)

The play mirrors a universe of Inferno. In the end, as Gerald Weals observes, "Alexandra and Chance, for whom the loss has made desperate," (Weals, 28) become fellow travellers in their journey to hell. Both share moments of life and feel that time is running fast. Like Val and Sebastian, Chance is an artist who attaches himself to an older lady. He also infects Heavenly whose cure requires removal of uterus, a kind of castration. She is unable to be a mother and to have a happy married life. Therefore, his punishment life Sebastian Venable in "Suddenly Last Summer" fits his crime.

The study of the play highlights a long tale of destruction in forms of impotence, sterility, frigidity and castration of major characters. George Niesen observes, "Indeed the entire play is one of destruction, castration and impotence. Boss Finley disenfranchises voters. He is responsible for the Negro's castration and is more at fault than Chance for Heavenly's sterility. . . . Still, the Princess and Chance are alive at the end of the play though alone, powerless and futureless." (Niesen, 483)

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