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Images of Loss in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*, and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*

by

DIPA JANARDANAN

Under the Direction of Matthew C. Roudané

ABSTRACT

This dissertation offers an analysis of the image of loss in modern American drama at three levels: the loss of physical space, loss of psychological space, and loss of moral space. The playwrights and plays examined are Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983), and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1998). This study is the first scholarly work to discuss the theme of loss with these specific playwrights and works. This dissertation argues that loss is a central trope in twentieth-century American drama.

The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze how the image of loss is modified and transformed in each playwright's work leading these images to reveal an emotional truth that transcends the plight of particular individuals or families and casting a universal appeal to a diverse audience. Chapters examine specific themes related to the theme of loss. As part of the critical methodology, the live spectacle of performance has been acknowledged. This study analyzes how Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel modify and transform the image of loss by focusing on the myth of the American dream, illusion

versus reality, empowerment, and the complexity of human relationships. Although these plays are meant first and foremost to be appreciated as theater, that is to say "live performance," this study deals with these plays as drama, that is, as written texts. The audience observing the "live" spectacle and the reader of the text are both challenged to define their "own space." Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel, modify and transform the image of loss to reveal a common humanity that is not only a force in their work, but also a strong presence in the works of American dramatists as diverse as Eugene O'Neill and Adrienne Kennedy. From domestic drama to the drama of social and political criticism, Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel along with a medley of American playwrights, have taken the genre of American drama from backseat status (secondary to the novel and poem) into the forefront of recognized American literature.

INDEX WORDS: Images of loss, Loss of physical space, Loss of psychological space, Loss of moral space, Contemporary American drama, Twentieth-century American drama, Myth of the American dream, Complexity of human relationships, Reality, Illusion, Empowerment

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Georgia State University

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DIPA JANARDANAN

Committee Chair: Matthew Roudané

Committee: Pearl McHaney
Nancy Chase

Electronic Version Approved:

Office of Graduate Studies
College of Arts and Sciences
Georgia State University
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Pat and Indira Janardanan and my children, Viraj and Alisha. Mom and Dad, I would not have been able to complete the Ph.D program without your kindness, generosity, and cooperation. Your faith in me and your unconditional love have inspired me to follow my dreams. Thank you for believing in me. Viraj and Alisha, I hope you both always follow your dreams.

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Chapter One: Introduction

[T]ime is short and it doesn't return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition.

Tennessee Williams, "The Catastrophe of Success"

Scholars, critics, and theatergoers contend that modern American drama is characterized by a sense of loss. C.W.E. Bigsby and Matthew C. Roudané were among the first to recognize the theme of loss in modern American drama at three major levels: loss of physical space, loss of psychological space, and loss of moral space. While there is an enormous amount of scholarship on this "sense of loss" in the works of American playwrights ranging from Eugene O'Neill to Adrienne Kennedy, this dissertation focuses on four specific playwrights and one play by each. The playwrights and plays that are examined are Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949), Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* (1983), and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* (1998). The focus of this dissertation is to analyze how the image of loss is modified and transformed in each work by each playwright to reveal a quality that transcends the plight of the particular individual or family examined in these plays.

While the primary emphasis of my study is an informed reading of these four plays, I also use appropriate interviews with the playwrights and initial theater reviews as well as the extant scholarship and major critical statements on these writers. Indeed, with such canonical writers as Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, I am selective regarding the scholarship but with the newer playwrights, especially Paula Vogel, where

considerably less scholarship is available, I bring to bear mainly my own critical faculties.

As part of my critical methodology, I not only carefully analyze these four particular plays, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Norman's *'night, Mother*, and Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* by focusing on the theme of loss, but also enter into a larger cultural debate vis à vis the ongoing narrative history of American drama since World War II to the present. One chapter is devoted to each play in order to explore the significant themes related to loss. As part of my critical methodology I acknowledge the live spectacle of performance. Indeed, while these plays are meant first and foremost to be appreciated as theater, that is to say "live performance,"[1] my study deals primarily with these plays as drama, that is, as written texts.

The significant themes of each play are explored because they form the subtext and add layers of meaning to my primary focus--loss of physical space, loss of psychological space, and finally loss of moral space. I contend that the primary themes in the works of Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel work in the areas of text and performance, creating the multi-dimensional texture that is necessary to "strip the layers and get to the marrow"--in hopes of coming to a better understanding of self. As George states in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "when you get down to the bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone . . . the marrow". . . and that's what you gotta get at" in hopes of getting a better understanding of self (Albee 213)[2].

The loss of physical space is a perceived dilemma for Tom in *Menagerie*.

However, as he gains a better understanding of self, he realizes that the freedom he craves was not going to be what he what he has imagined. As Bigsby observes:

> *The Glass Menagerie* is not narrated by a confident voice. Tom is as lost in the supposed present as he had been in the recalled past. Imagining that the suffocation of his spirit, the warping of his ideals, and the stultification of his aspirations were a product of his physical environment, he had broken free. But his freedom, like that invoked by Miller's Linda at the end of *Death of a Salesman*, is an ironic one. The space which he needed was not a physical one after all. Like Albee's Jerry, in *The Zoo Story*, he comes to realize that all his retreat from human relationships has won him is 'solitary free passage.' (*Critical Introduction* 47-48)

As Tom travels back to the painful memories of his past, he has to come to terms with the fact that he can never escape the guilt he feels for abandoning his mother and sister. He also realizes that no matter how much physical distance he maintains, his memories will always haunt him. The freedom he imagined is no freedom at all--he is trapped. Tom's love for his sister and mother is greater than the perceived freedom of physical space he thought he needed. Hence he realizes that no matter where he travels, he will always be imprisoned by his loss.

If *The Glass Menagerie* were simply about the Wingfields' inability to accept reality or the trauma that results from a series of abandonments, then it simply would not be one of the most studied and recognized works of the American literary canon. By the same token, if *Death of a Salesman* were merely about the deterioration of a salesman in pursuit of the "American dream," or if it were a play merely about capitalism, or even

Marxist philosophy, then I doubt the play would be considered one of the most performed and widely read works of literature in the world. Likewise, if one were to assume that Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* were merely a play about suicide or a dysfunctional mother-daughter relationship, could it be so critically acclaimed, have won the Pulitzer Prize for drama, and have the power to elicit extreme feminist and sexist readings? Some of these debates are whether Norman is giving a voice to the "voiceless" female[3] or, in performance, whether Jessie's weight is the source of her misery,[4] and whether or not *'night, Mother* is universal[5] enough to be granted canon status. In a similar fashion, if Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* were simply about pedophilia and a dysfunctional victim-victimizer relationship, could audiences feel empathy for the oppressor? Is this play about pedophilia (a term mentioned only once in a stage direction) or is it about the complexity of human relationships? These are the types of questions that are explored by analyzing the image of loss in each of these plays.

While a few critics including Bigsby and Roudané have focused on the theme of loss, most narrative histories of American drama and most individual studies of these plays and playwrights have focused on other subjects, issues, and themes. As Delma Presley observes in the first review of *The Glass Menagerie* (*Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 1944), Tennessee Williams's goal was to gain a better understanding of "people and how they tick" (9). Williams himself states in his production notes that his goal in writing *The Glass Menagerie* was to present nothing less than the "truth, life, or reality" (7). Indeed, as Presley and other critics contend, some of the fundamental aspects of Williams's play include, first, that this "memory play," as the author classified it, uses lighting, music, screens and other devices to show the audience how past events can

affect the present. Second, set during the Depression with America on the brink of war, the play examines the various ways family members cope with social and personal forces of change. Finally, *The Glass Menagerie* examines the universal conflict that arises when individuals must choose between self-fulfillment and family commitment. My primary aim is to examine the image of loss as it permeates the Wingfield household on the physical and psychological levels and gain a better understanding of the transcendent core of this work that is considered by many as a "masterpiece" of American literature.

As Williams states in his essay "The Catastrophe of Success," [6] which is included as an introduction to the play, "the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition" (17). While a host of compelling themes emerges in this play ranging from sociopolitical views to the myth of the American dream, as Roger B. Stein argues, "*The Glass Menagerie* is built upon more than the poignant plot of illusion and frustration in the lives of little people. Williams has given the drama further significance by deepening the losses of individuals and pointing to social and even spiritual catastrophe" ("*The Glass Menagerie Revisited*"14). The importance of the social background of the play can be noted in the beginning of the play when Tom states, "The huge middle class of America was matriculating in the school for the blind . . . In Spain there was a revolution . . . Here there was only shouting and confusion" (*The Glass Menagerie* 23). Throughout the play, Williams reminds us that the dire economic situation of the Wingfields is a reflection of the social crisis America was facing. Williams draws upon the fact that America was on the brink of war and going through the Depression to convey the effect of past events on the present. Moreover, social forces greatly impact the lives of the Wingfields and others as America's youth depart on ships

to join the war effort. Just as Tom struggles to come to terms with his guilt of abandoning his mother and sister by going back in time to a painful memory, America poises itself to do battle with formidable enemies as well. Indeed, many themes emerge in Williams's play and although many scholars and critics have made compelling arguments as to the relevance and poignancy of these themes, the purpose of this dissertation is to explore a theme that few have identified and none have developed extensively.

Henry Popkin suggests that Miller attempts to focus on "hidden evil and social responsibility" in *Death of a Salesman* (qtd. in Downer 218). Popkin, according to Downer, argues that the primary focus of "each [Miller] play is the tension between little people and big issues, and each play confirms our belief that little people cannot live up to big standards" (219). If this is the case, then is the dilemma of the "little" person less significant? Can there not be a transcendent quality that arises out of this dilemma that reveals a "human" condition? If so, is this not a significant issue? Another question that has been critically debated is what product is Willy Loman selling? Would Willy Loman's plight be any less significant if we knew the answer? Miller himself has responded that "I [Miller] have and had not the slightest interest in the selling profession. . . . Willy was selling himself" (qtd. in Downer 230). Other debated issues are Loman's need to be "well liked," and his inability to distinguish reality from fantasy. Along the same line, Susan Abbotson argues that Miller's focus in *Death of a Salesman* was "twofold: Firstly, Miller wanted to write a social drama confronting the problems of an ordinary man in a conscienceless, capitalistic social system. Secondly, he wanted that same play to be a modern tragedy that adopted older theories to allow for a common man as tragic protagonist" (66). Abbotson elucidates this theme by arguing that society's

interpretation of the "American Dream" and equating it to success at any cost is central to Miller's play. While this idea is a valid and compelling force in *Salesman*, my study will focus on the universally transcendent aspect of Willy Loman's struggle with identity and self-worth, which takes this theme beyond the purely "American" dilemma. Also, I shall examine the theme of loss in this play to reveal a universal truth that even if Loman is considered a "common" or "ordinary" man, his true predicament reaches far beyond any societal boundaries. By the same token, some scholars and critics have focused on Miller's poetic language in *Death of a Salesman* to reiterate the theme of Willy Loman's struggle to chase the elusive American dream. Stephen A. Marino points out that "Metaphors of sports and trees--expressed by images and symbols of boxing, burning, diamonds, nature, fighting, air, and smells--extend through the entire play" (29). Indeed, although Marino makes a strong argument for the "incredible poetic power" (29) of Miller's language in his plays, his analysis focuses more on Willy Loman's desire for financial success in capitalistic America. The focus of my study is different. What is it about *Death of a Salesman* that stirs audiences from America to Russia in believing that the play is about their public and private struggles? This study shall examine the role of the image of loss in the destruction of the American dream. Or is it truly a universal dilemma? What makes an individual believe that he is more "valuable" to his family dead than alive?

Williams and Miller struggle to reconcile past and present in their plays. Williams himself refers to "Nostalgia" as the "first condition of the play (*Menagerie* 9). However, as Bigsby comments, "it is a nostalgia for the past which he could not entirely convince himself had ever existed" (*Critical Introduction 2*, 45). The characters of *Menagerie* and

Salesman are caught in a "temporal and spatial void" (Bigsby *Critical Introduction 2*, 45). The inability to relate to the reality of their present environment imprisons them in "distorted memories of the past or wistful dreams of a redemptive future" (45). Tom's refusal to deal with reality makes him abandon his mother and sister. No amount of escapism in the form of movies, alcohol, and cigarettes can prevent the inevitable. Even so, his physical departure from his surroundings provides no comfort from the guilt laden prison of his mind. Similarly, Amanda, as a result of a series of abandonments, retreats into a past that is both myth and reality. Her mythic Blue Mountain provides an illusion that comforts her from the harsh realities of her present situation. She must work menial jobs in order to provide for her family; she must care for a daughter who is physically and emotionally incapable of caring for herself, and she has to live with the inevitability of her son's departure. Indeed, Laura is the most isolated of the three Wingfields. Her forays into the real world, punctuated by her brief attendance at Rubicam's Business College, and her even briefer encounter with Jim, the gentleman caller, cause her to retreat further into her illusory world of glass figurines. In the case of Miller's Loman family, the tragic element is that they do not realize that the security and contentment they desire are commodities that cannot be purchased. As a result, Willy Loman does not realize that he has placed the highest value on what is no more than a myth and illusion. Willy equates success to being well-liked and personally attractive. His dreams of a better future become powerful fantasies that make it impossible for him to distinguish illusion from reality.

Another recurring theme in Williams's work is the pressure of "time," which for the protagonists "prompts the lies and evasions which themselves become the basics for

misunderstandings and despair" (Bloom 91). Williams challenges us to confront the concepts of reality and illusion from the first scene to the last. For Williams, anything that is nostalgically remembered exists "outside" of time and is therefore immune to the ravages of time. Therefore, as Tom struggles with his painful memories of a particular period of his life, Williams invites the audience to confront its own concepts of truth, reality, illusion and ultimately to come to terms with the human need to control some aspect of individual destiny. By the same token, time and space are essential elements in Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Certainly the theater and stage allow these components to come together as past and present co-exist in Willy Loman's mind as he vacillates between reality and illusion, ultimately succumbing to his own twisted notions of love, respect, and the American dream.

This dissertation shall explore how these playwrights modify and transform the image of loss in each play to highlight the "human" condition. Are certain illusions and fantasies necessary to sustain "self"? How are these plays so readily translatable to cultures that are not mystified by the American dream and have no concept of the door-to-door salesman? What does the myth of the American dream, which has been inculcated into the American psyche, deem as most valuable? Is the ability to pay off a mortgage at the expense of an individual's life the realization of the distorted version of success? Although the image of loss permeates the works of Williams and Miller, a possibility of transcendence of the human spirit comes from this loss. Williams's protagonists attempt to rely upon "individual integrity" to "deflect apparent social determinisms"; however, these characters are constantly challenged and unable to overcome the "Power of those determinisms" (Bigsby, *Critical Introduction 2*, 30).

Similarly, in Miller's play the characters are only able to act upon the conflict of self and society within their imaginative minds. Even so, whether real or perceived, there is a level of transcendence, an area between reality and illusion, which makes this part of the human condition.

In addition to the themes that comprise the subtexts of Williams's and Miller's plays, this study shall examine the significant themes related to loss in Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*. Although we know in the first few lines of *'night, Mother* that Jessie is planning on committing suicide and as a final act will take control of her own destiny, Norman's unique use of dialogue reveals the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship and, on a more transcendent level, the "emotional truths" (Bigsby *Contemporary* 210) that can be revealed in outwardly banal conversation. As Bigsby observes, "For somewhere beneath the apparent banalities of conversations which seem no more than ways of passing the time, of filling the silence, are emotional truths which bruise the language and expose hidden tensions and anxieties" (210). Norman also explores the tensions of mother-daughter relationships. As explained by Bigsby: "Norman herself recalls that her own mother 'had a very serious code about what you could and could not say. You particularly could not say anything that was in the least angry or that had any conflict in it at all.' In a sense, then, her plays, in addressing those very topics--anger and conflict--themselves represent a release from the silence and denial which she herself experienced" (*Contemporary* 217). In *'night, Mother* Thelma fights to preserve Jessie's life and Jessie struggles to control her own fate. When Thelma, Jessie's mother, cries out to her daughter that suicide is not necessary, Jessie replies that the whole point is having a "choice": "No, I don't. That's what I like about it" (Norman

27)[7]. Ironically, this struggle results in a connection between mother and daughter that emerges as the universally transcendent feature of Norman's play.

Norman's *'night, Mother* cannot be minimized as a play merely about suicide, simply a mother-daughter drama, or only about lost opportunities. Both women have suffered losses in their lives ranging from loveless marriages, death of a spouse, and estrangement from a son, and Jessie has the added burden of a disease--epilepsy that controls her life. Nevertheless, a transcendent quality emerges when Jessie, who has been unable to control any part of her own life, has found a permanent solution, and, in one of the most significant scenes of the play, states:

> And I can't do anything . . . about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off like the radio when there's nothing on I want to listen to. It's all that I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it. So, let's just have a good time. (Norman 36)

Jessie meticulously orchestrates her suicide as a final act of total control--something she had never possessed in her life. There is no desperation in her actions, only a controlled, deliberate, execution of a well thought-out plan to free herself from a meaningless existence.

The image of loss is heightened by Norman's use of real time in *'night,* Mother. Just as Tennessee Williams was concerned with the loss of time in *The Glass Menagerie*, and Arthur Miller made us aware of the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life in *Death of a Salesman*, Norman's play begins in present time from the moment the audience sits in their seats and the first line is uttered on stage. Jessie is aware of the

passing of time; however, instead of waiting for death, she has decided to assume control of future time by killing herself.

Some feminist critics have argued that Norman's *'night, Mother* was a statement about the status of women in society. Linda Kintz argues, for instance, that "Norman's *'night, Mother* stages the space of women's worthless domestic work and its aesthetic invisibility, initially foregrounding the special or organizational role of architecture in a set representing an isolated middle-class or lower middle-class house in the United States" (*The Subject's Tragedy* 207). Indeed domestic items are noted and mentioned throughout the play; however, they are used to charge each scene with the importance of "trivial" details similar to the domestic details that gave life and meaning to an absent woman in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles.*[8] The towels Jessie gathers at the beginning of the play are items required for the ritual that she has initiated and plans to execute. Kintz seems to suggest that because domestic items and consumer products are mentioned throughout the play, Norman is somehow drawing attention to the meaningless domestic work of women and thereby marginalizing the role of women in society. Kintz also appears to suggest that "this offers a clue to Jessie's and Thelma's separate but connected dilemmas" (Bigsby *Contemporary* 239). Although Kintz makes an interesting argument, the domestic scene plays a secondary role to the intensity of the drama taking place. Jessie's desire to take control of her own destiny has little to do with a marginal role. In fact, the image of loss emerges as a vehicle by which Norman empowers Jessie to choose her own fate, "It's all that I really have that belongs to me and I'm going to say what happens to it" (Norman *'night, Mother* 36). This image is deeply embedded in Norman's *'night, Mother* on many levels. Bigsby explains that, "her death is a response to loss. It is

not the loss of her father, her husband or son, however" (*Contemporary* 237) As Jessie states in one of the most important scenes in the play:

> I am what became of your child. I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. . . . That's who I started out and this is who is left. That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I was and never got there. Somebody I waited for and never came. And never will . . . I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. (Norman 76)

Some feminist critics argue that *'night, Mother* is about defeat. They claim that the play is about a woman who does not like what her life has become, so, instead of trying to change it, decides to simply end her life. Interestingly Norman's own words contradict this argument: "by my own definitions of these words, [*'night, Mother* is] a play of nearly total triumph. Jessie is able to get what she needs . . . I think that the question the play asks is, 'What does it take to survive? What does it take to save your life?' Now Jessie's answer is 'It takes killing myself.'" (Betsko 339-40). Norman goes on to suggest that survival for Thelma, the mother, consists of relying on the details of day-to-day life. For Jessie this type of life offers no meaning. The loss that permeates this play--physical and psychological, ironically results in empowerment. Thus, Jessie's final act is one that she controls--something decisive, final and her own. This freedom of choice was something Jessie did not feel she possessed in her life. By the same token, the realization that she could end her life and release herself from her meaningless situation gave her purpose and meaning. And the empowerment she feels emerges as the transcendent feature of Norman's play.

Jenny Spencer observes in regards to *'night, Mother* that, "it has been argued that the play self-consciously addresses a female audience in focusing on issues of female identity and autonomy, particularly on the processes which women need both to identify with and detach themselves from their mothers in order to acquire a 'normal' gendered identity" (qtd. in Clive Bloom 155). Although Spencer makes a compelling argument for the protagonist, Jessie, to develop her unique identity, this study will examine the mother-daughter relationship to see how the image of loss is transformed to attain a transcendent universal quality. By the same token, Darryl Grantley argues that Norman brings forth the "barrenness of the family's emotional life" but goes on to observe, "Far more important is the candid discussion between Jessie and her mother of the life of the family during Jessie's childhood and subsequently an analysis convincingly provoked by the crisis in which the two women find themselves" (155). Grantley observes that "because of the limitations of the protagonists," Thelma and Jessie cannot effectively communicate their true emotions and pain. Is this merely a mother-daughter predicament? Is this "tragedy of the ordinary" a dilemma that transcends this particular relationship? What transcendent quality can possibly emerge from the trivial discussions of day-to-day life? These are the types of questions that I examine in this dissertation by analyzing the theme of loss in each work.

The image of loss is modified and transformed in each a play. In *'night, Mother*, the one element that most critics agree upon is that, as Grantley observes, "Jessie's suicide is . . . presented as a positive choice freely and rationally arrived at, and also as the right of an individual to make a fundamental decision about her life" (157). The transcendent quality of Jessie's actions can be noted in a very poignant scene in the play

when she tells her mother that she "can get off [the bus] right now if I want to, because if I ride fifty more years and get off the bus, it's the same place when I step down to it" (32). Thus, the image of loss is modified in this play and, as Roudané argues, "For Jessie, progression of the self ceases to be a viable reality, except in the all important context of seizing control of the final 90 minutes of her life with the confidence and resolution of an executioner. As she tells her mother early in the play, 'When ever I feel like it, I can get off [the bus]. As soon as I've had enough, it's my stop. I've had enough'" (qtd. in *American Drama Since 1960* 130).

In view of the significance of the mother-daughter relationship, it is ironic that many feminist critics found Norman's *'night, Mother*, as Bigsby observes, "as capitulating to stereotype and hence being rewarded for its conservatism" (*Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, 318). Indeed, the image of loss is transformed in this play and results in affirmation of identity. As Bigsby explains, "The main thrust of the feminist assault grew out of rejection of Norman's suggestion that identity could be affirmed through its ultimate denial" (318). The mother-daughter relationship is one of the most mysterious and complex relationships in any culture. One aspect of the complexity of Thelma and Jessie's relationship can be noted in Norman's own words, "She [Jessie] *wants* Mama to live, and to live free of the guilt that Mama might have felt had Jessie just left her a note. . . . The play exists because Jessie wants something for Mama" (Betsko 328). This dissertation focuses on the complexity of this relationship and on the transcendent core that emerges from examining the image of loss in this play.

Marsha Norman and Paula Vogel are more contemporary playwrights than Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and their impact on American drama has occurred

only within the past two decades, yet many compelling themes that have been debated by critics and scholars have surfaced in regard to their work, ranging from feminist readings and mother-daughter relationships to suicide and pedophilia. Many of these themes are essential in grounding these playwrights within a larger cultural framework; however, by exploring the image of loss in Norman's *'night, Mother* and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, emotional truths shall be revealed that transcend the themes of suicide, mother-daughter relationships, and pedophilia and give us a better understanding of the complexity of human relationships.

Just as Norman transforms and modifies the image of loss in *'night, Mother* to give Jessie the authority to control her own destiny and ultimately affirm her identity, so Paula Vogel modifies this theme to enable her protagonist, Li'l Bit, in *How I Learned to Drive* to take control of her own identity and thus places her in the "driver's seat." Thus, Vogel establishes the complexity of human relationships to be the transcendent core of her play.

In contrast to Williams, Miller, and Norman, the image of loss takes the form of a "journey" in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*. As Bigsby explains, in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*, "Jerry tells the resistant Peter that sometimes it is necessary to go a long way out of your way in order to come back correctly. That is the nature of the journey on which Vogel takes her audience" (*Contemporary* 290). Indeed, Norman has a distinct opinion on the nature of theater as well. When asked if she thought that theater is "political" and "dangerous," she responded: "Highly political . . . Highly dangerous . . . At 8'o'clock we go in as disparate, individual people. Two hours later we come out as a community that took a journey together. You get elected by dividing and confusing

people. Theater does the opposite--it forges a community, where there wasn't one before" (qtd. in Bigsby *Contemporary* 290). Vogel admits that she deals with subjects that are considered "taboo but prevalent in the culture" (Bigsby 290). As Bigsby argues, Vogel's politics are more inclusive than exclusive, even child abuse turning out to be, in her words, 'greyer' than most would be prepared to acknowledge" (289). By her own admission, Vogel wants to "*seduce*" (Bigsby 289) the audience and take them on a "ride they wouldn't ordinarily take, or don't even know they are taking, then they might see highly charged political issues in a new and unexpected way" (qtd. in Bigsby 289).

Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* is about an unconsummated relationship between Li'l Bit (the niece) and Peck (the uncle); however, this only serves as the vehicle that drives the play. As Vogel herself states, '"Critics' . . . have said that this is a play about pedophilia, but I think the relationship between the two characters is more complex than that" (qtd. in Bigsby *Contemporary* 320). Vogel transports us on an introspective journey that challenges our notions of the familiar and the "norm" with the taboo topic of pedophilia, which, in fact, is mentioned only once in the play and that too, in a production note. Vogel challenges us to examine our ideas of self, society, and boundaries to reveal emotional truths that we have to define for ourselves, that transcend social, cultural, and political realms. When Vogel was asked if she had consciously thought of pedophilia while writing her play, she responded: "I didn't have it in my mind at all . . . I think I wanted this play to suspend those kinds of judgment as long as possible" (Bigsby 319). Vogel argues that her idea was "to create a man who was, in a way, a love object to a woman as subject. I wanted the arrows to reverse themselves in the course of the play" (319). In Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, it would have been easy for the "taboo" topic

with which she confronts audiences to overshadow the "journey." In contrast, Vogel depicts Peck as offering Li'l Bit "an understanding that no one else in her family cares to do and ultimately, warns her against himself, thus surrendering the one thing that holds him back from despair . . . As Vogel observed, 'I see him as teaching her ego formation, as giving her the tools to grow up and reject him and destroy him.'" (qtd. in Bigsby *Contemporary* 321).

Vogel takes the image of loss to another level in this play. Peck does seduce and damage Li'l Bit; however, Vogel leaves us with a keen sense of ambiguity. She takes the audience into an exploratory analysis of "power" and seduction. It is not simply the journey of the victimizer and victim. The physical, emotional and psychological loss is experienced by the uncle and niece. There is even a transference of power from Peck to Li'l Bit. She becomes his "lifeline." As Bigsby argues, "She [Vogel] takes her audience to places they have not been, exposes them to experiences which threaten their composure, moral assurance and, ultimately, therefore, innocence" (*Contemporary* 323). Uncle Peck and Li'l bit take turns in the "driver's seat" on their emotional journey. Vogel exposes the damage Peck inflicts on his niece; however, the emotional journey, which both have embarked upon, appears to be more significant and is echoed throughout the text with phrases such as "good defensive driving involves mental and physical preparation". . . and "are you prepared?" (Vogel 35).[9] Bigsby argues that "She [Li'l Bit] responds to his [Uncle Peck] evident need as he in turn offers her understanding. He exploits her youth and innocence, damages her, but also, in his own terms, seeks her consent and will not transgress the terms of that consent . . . nothing he does justifies his actions but his own vulnerabilities are real" (*Contemporary* 324). Although the catalyst in

this play is the taboo topic of pedophilia, a transcendent aspect that emerges at the end of the play as Li'l Bit sits securely in the "driver's seat" makes it apparent that the journey of the uncle, niece and audience is Vogel's primary focus. The loss has been transformed into empowerment as noted in the last scene, when "as Li'l Bit drives off in her car . . . she looks in her rear-view mirror and smiles at the spirit of Peck who sits behind her. She is now in charge of the car" (Vogel 59).

The significance of Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* goes beyond the victim-victimizer layer of the drama. Vogel refuses to reduce the protagonist, Li'l Bit to the status of victim, or to make her oppressor Uncle Peck a mere villain. In spite of the serious situation, Vogel avoids simply condemning the oppressor and forces us to look at the humanity that binds these two individuals. Li'l Bit does not demonize the man who took advantage of her. In contrast, she looks back at his actions with a certain amount of empathy and forgiveness. Ultimately, she sees Uncle Peck as a man who had to deal with his own demons. Vogel also uses the image of loss, portrayed in the journey of Peck and Li'l Bit, to elucidate her concept of the essence of theater. Bigsby explains Vogel's themes in relation to her outlook on the real role of the theater:

> The essence of the theatre . . . is that it leads the audience beyond the boundaries of the given, that it allows the imagination to define its own space. This is not an abstract space, however. Her figures are earthed in emotional truths. They are responsive to needs which transcend the strategies they devise to handle them. Fear of death, desertion, a quixotically demanding sexuality, make their situation familiar, even if

> that familiarity is placed under strain. In other words, the universal is plainly not entirely evacuated from these plays. (296)

Text and performance are critical aspects of any piece of dramatic literature. The audience observing the "live" spectacle and the reader of the text are both challenged to define their "own space." Once defined, this knowledge takes the audience on a journey--even if it is only for a transcendent moment--to a place they may not have gone before.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore the theme of loss in four unique works by four diverse American playwrights in a manner that has not been done before. In so doing, I acknowledge the "live spark" of theater performance. Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel transform and modify the image of loss in each work to reveal the human condition that speaks to American as well as international audiences. The loss of hope, the loss of innocence, the myth of the American dream, the complexity of human relationships, reality, illusion, and empowerment are elements that transcend the plight of the individuals and families analyzed in these four American plays by these particular American playwrights. My task is to peel away the layers of these works and reveal the "common humanity" that is the "essence of theatre."

Notes to Chapter One

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[1] References to "text" in this dissertation refer to the written dialogue of the characters of each play and the stage directions and production notes provided by the playwrights. References to "performance" include but are not limited to the element of "live performance" of actors on stage. While the primary analysis of this dissertation shall focus on the written text (drama), specific aspects of live performance (theater) shall be incorporated to elucidate the theme of loss in each work.

[2] All subsequent references to Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are from the Plume 1997 edition.

[3] As Norman states, "I know that in general I'm regularly attacked by women who say, 'She's making us look bad.' Or 'Because she's a woman, she should be doing this or that' (Savran Interview 190). Also see Jeanie Forte's article "Realism, Narrative. And the Feminist Playwright, Jenny Spencer's "Norman's *'night, Mother*: Psycho-Drama of Female Identity" and Louis K. Greiff's "Fathers, Daughters, and Spiritual Sisters: Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*."

[4] For instance, John Simon, in *New York Magazine* described Jessie as "fat, unattractive, and epileptic" (qtd. in Dolan *Feminist Spectator*, 30), and other male critics referred to Jessie as "heavy set, slow moving and morose" (30). Jill Dolan clarifies for us that Norman did not have Jessie's weight in mind when considering Kathy Bates for the role. By the same token, Jessie's weight is not even an issue in the textual aspect of the play. In fact, the dialogue between Jessie and Thelma alludes to Jessie being thin when Thelma states, "You never liked eating at all, did you? Any of it! What have you been living on all these years, toothpaste?" *('night, Mother* 53). Dolan also points out that when it comes

to body size, female characters in plays have been scrutinized more than male performers.

[5] William W. Demastes in "Jessie and Thelma Revisited: Marsha Norman's Conceptual Challenge in '*night, Mother*" comments, "Does '*night, Mother* rise to a universal level sufficiently to grant it canon status. Which canon? Should the play qualify to enter into a new and growing feminist canon, especially given the concern that it betrays feminism by presenting defeated women and by using an ideologically repressive form of expressionism--realism? What is the universality we are seeking? Is it gender-specific, and if so, are mother-daughter relationships less 'universal' (less consequential, somehow) than the father-son relationships that dominate the canon?" (110).

[6] Tennessee Williams's essay "The Catastrophe of Success" was written three years after the opening of *The Glass Menagerie* and was first published in *The New York Times* in 1948. It is now included in The New Directions 1949 edition of *The Glass Menagerie*. The play brought Williams critical acclaim, financial security, sudden prominence, new opportunities, and access to a wider audience. However, Williams called the aftermath of fame a "catastrophe." "The Catastrophe of Success" chronicles the impact of sudden fame and wealth on a struggling young writer. The New Directions edition also contains Williams's own production notes. All quotes from *The Glass Menagerie* are from this edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references.

[7] All quotes from '*night, Mother* are from the Hill and Wang 1983 edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references.

[8] Susan Glaspell's play, *Trifles*, was written in 1916. Although it takes place long before the modern women's movement began, *Trifles* reveals, through Glaspell's use of formal

literary conventions, the role that women are expected to play in society, and the harm that it brings not only the women, but the men as well. Perhaps the single most important theme in *Trifles* is the difference between men and women. The two sexes are distinguished by the roles they play in society, their physicality, their methods of communication, and their powers of observation.

[9] All quotes from *How I Learned to Drive* are from the Dramatists Play Service Inc. 1997 edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references.

Chapter Two: Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*

The theme of loss permeates Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Indeed, the fact that it is a "memory"[1] play based on Tom Wingfield's recollection of a part of his life that he has never been able to reconcile or escape sets the stage for the "loss" that will serve as the driving force of the play. As Bigsby observes,

> It is true the apartment is both literally and metaphorically a trap which Tom and his mother, at least, wish to escape . . . His [Williams's] characters are . . . the victims of fate (Laura), of time (Amanda), and of a prosaic and destructive reality. ("Entering *The Glass Menagerie.*" 34)

The more Tom tries to free himself from the ties that bind him to his mother Amanda and sister Laura he realizes that the freedom he craves is never going to be what he had imagined. As Tom gains a better understanding of self he realizes that he can never escape his real dilemma – loss of psychological space. No matter where Tom travels in his attempt to escape his predicament, he cannot free himself from the guilt he feels for abandoning his family. *The Glass Menagerie* is not merely a story of a tragic series of abandonments that leaves a family emotionally bankrupt; nor is it only a story of a family destroyed by its inability to accept reality. It is a story in which the image of loss is a device by which Williams is able to get to the "marrow"[2] of a universal truth--the human condition of an individual's inability to escape a psychological loss of space no matter how much physical distance is attained. Thus, as Bigsby explains, "[H]e [Tom] comes to realize that all his retreat from human relationships has won him is 'solitary free passage.'" ("Celebration of a Certain Courage," 93-94). Tom's love for his mother and

sister is the root cause of his guilt. Thus, memory becomes his eternal prison as he struggles to reconcile his past and present.

As the theme of loss permeates the Wingfield household, it is enhanced by the innovative techniques Williams employs, such as screens on stage, music, and lighting to blend text and performance, illusion and reality. In addition to these innovative production techniques, Williams also employs a creative literary technique by making Tom Wingfield both narrator and character in the play, thus giving him poetic license to try to come to terms with the psychological loss that is the genesis of the play. In Williams's original script a screen device was used to project images and titles on the stage. As Williams states in his production notes, "I do not regret the omission of this device from the original Broadway production. The extraordinary power of Miss Taylor's performance made it suitable to have the utmost simplicity in the physical production" (*Menagerie* 8). To be sure, such works as Eugene O'Neill's[3] *The Hairy Ape*[4] (1922), Elmer Rice's *The Adding Machine* [5](1923), and Sophie Treadwell's *Machinal*[6] (1928) radicalized the earlier American stage. Still, the technical innovations that Williams employed in *The Glass Menagerie*, at the time of performance (1945), were dramatic innovations, radical breakthroughs in mainstream theater. In fact, these innovations, seldom, if ever, had been seen by Broadway audiences until Williams, and later, Arthur Miller, in *Death of a Salesman* (1949), made use of them. Williams used these devices to strengthen the emotions presented on stage that might not be fully articulated by language or performance. Another device applied by Williams "to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages" (*Menagerie* 9) is music. Williams used the tune, "The Glass Menagerie,"[7] throughout the performance to connect Tom, the narrator to past and

present. After all, as Williams mentions, “nostalgia . . . is the first condition of the play” (9). The dance hall music (popular dance tunes from the 1920s) that wafts in to the Wingfield apartment and can be heard in specific instances throughout the play brings poignancy to the fact that Laura will never be a part of that world. By the same token, the phonograph and old records (left behind by the absent father), give a lyrical and haunting quality to the fragility of Laura’s world. Although Laura plays the records repeatedly for comfort, the delicate music along with the emphasis on her world of glass remind us of the delicacy of family life and the Wingfield’s inability to escape their past. Certainly Williams also made use of innovative lighting techniques to bring emphasis to the unwritten emotions of his characters. As Roudané explains, “Williams reinforced his language . . . by refining what he termed his ‘plastic theatre’: the use of lights, music, sets, and any other forms of nonverbal expression that would complement the textual version of the play” (*The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* 3). The poetic quality of Williams’s language and his use of innovative dramatic techniques help to transcend the individual plight of Tom Wingfield by removing the barriers between the audience and the stage to transport us to the level of a common humanity. At the beginning of the play the audience is faced with a formidable wall. However, as Tom gives his opening commentary, we are given a voyeuristic journey into the fragile world of the Wingfields as the walls suddenly become transparent.

The theme of loss permeates the play from the opening lines of dialogue in which Tom Wingfield mentions, “that the time period of the play was the thirties, when the huge middle class of America was matriculating in a school for the blind” (23). Thus, the social significance of the play contributes to the theme of loss. The fact that America was

on the brink of war and going through the Depression conveys poignantly how past events can affect the present. By the same token, social forces greatly impact the lives of the Wingfields and others as the youth of America depart on ships to join the war effort. Just as Tom struggles to exorcise the demons of his guilt of abandoning his mother and sister by going back in time to the painful memory, America poises itself to do battle with formidable enemies as well. To further heighten the atmosphere of loss, Tom refers to his long absent father as "a telephone man who fell in love with long distances" (23). Another visual feature that enhances the impact of loss on this family takes place when Tom first appears on stage and is dressed in a merchant sailor's uniform as he faces the audience while making his commentary and then "strolls across to the fire escape," foreshadowing his departure at the end of the play (*Menagerie* 22). Consequently, within the first few lines of the play, Williams, by employing innovative dramatic techniques and poetic language, conveys the social, personal, and dramatic significance of past events to the present situation.

Tom, as narrator, gives us "truth in the guise of illusion" (*Menagerie* 22). He does this by giving us his recollection of a certain time period in his life. Through the use of poetic license to present truth, Williams is able to seamlessly alternate between illusion and reality. By the same token, Williams uses the image of loss to play within the dynamics of illusion versus reality to allow each character to create his own individual reality. In effect, truth is made more bearable by the use of illusion and the theme of loss becomes a universal truth. For example, Tom's perceived dilemma of loss of physical space results in his retreat from the relationship that he most treasured and, as a result, is not the freedom that he imagined. Tom's escape from his physical environment results in

a psychological loss of space, and, as he states in one of the most poignant scenes in the play,

> I didn't go to the moon, I went much further--for time is the longest distance between two places . . . I descended the steps of this fire escape for a last time and followed, from then on, in my father's footsteps, attempting to find in motion what was lost in space . . . I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something . . . Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! (*Menagerie* 114-115)

Although Tom physically abandons his mother and sister, he is unable to escape his psychological burden. Tom, Amanda, and Laura are inextricably linked to the past, and are unable to escape the psychological losses each has suffered. Consequently, they are powerless to deal with the harsh realities of a contingent and bewildering present.

Ironically, in *The Glass Menagerie* the fire escape provides no escape at all. In scene one we find that the apartment "is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth . . . the fire escape is what we see--that is the landing of it and steps descending from it" (*Menagerie* 21). The structure cannot provide escape from the fire of guilt that burns in Tom's heart. In another scene, Laura trips on the fire escape on her way to the grocery store, dramatizing her ineffectual attempts to escape her illusory world (*Menagerie* 47). In addition to the visual quality of the fire escape looming in front of the audience, a "blown-up photograph" (22) of the absent father hangs in the living room of the lower middle-class tenement of the Wingfields and represents the embodiment of loss, the collapse of moral nerve and responsibility, and serves as a

constant reminder of the crippling past they cannot ever escape. Ironically, the fate of the characters is established in the first scene of the play. The harder the Wingfields try to overcome their unfortunate circumstances and take a stand in reality, the further they are pushed into the world of illusion

Since the abandonment of his father, Tom has been the primary caretaker and breadwinner for his family. Although his job at the shoe warehouse stifles his creative aspirations as it deadens his will to live, and his mother's constant complaints, accusations and "Rise and Shine" (*Menagerie* 41) wake-up calls make him wish he really were dead, Tom valiantly tries to forget his miserable circumstances and attempts to forestall his inevitable departure by inoculating himself with his narcotics--going to the movies, drinking alcohol, and smoking cigarettes. Certainly, Tom understands his mother's anxiety to keep the family intact and improve their economic situation; however, her desperation causes her to chatter incessantly, resulting in constant arguments with her son while fragile Laura watches helplessly. Amanda fears that Tom will leave his job at the shoe warehouse to pursue his dreams and abandon her and Laura just as her husband had done. Consequently, Tom's desperation surfaces as his dreams of being a writer are squashed by the realities of being forced to work to support his mother and sister. By the same token, the helplessness Amanda feels at her inability to prevent Tom's inevitable departure causes her to berate him about most aspects of his life. Amanda's love and concern for her son are superseded by her fear of losing him. Similarly, Tom's anger at having to give up his dreams in order to care for his mother and helpless sister surfaces, but it is temporarily restrained by the guilt he feels at the thought of abandoning them and following in his father's footsteps. In one of the most powerful

scenes of the play, Tom's growing frustration at his mother's lack of concern for his hopeless predicament causes him to strongly rebuke his mother:

> Listen! You think I'm crazy about the *warehouse*? You think I'm in love with the Continental Shoemakers? You think I want to spend fifty-five *years* down there in that--*celotex interior!* With *fluorescent--tubes!* Look! I'd rather somebody picked up a crowbar and battered out my brains–than go back mornings! I *go!* Every time you come in yelling that Goddamn *"Rise and Shine!" "Rise and Shine!"* I say to myself, "How *lucky dead* people are!" "But I get up. I *go!* For fifty-six dollars a month I give up all that I dream of doing and being *ever!* And you say self--*self's* all I ever think of. Why, listen, if self is what I thought of, mother, I'd be where he is--GONE! [*He points to his father's picture.*] As far as the system of transportation reaches! (*Menagerie* 41)

Unfortunately, no amount of alcohol, cigarettes, or escapism in the form of movies can prevent Tom from his fate. Ironically, Tennessee Williams's explanation for his career as a dramatist that "he was creating imaginary worlds into which I [Williams] can retreat from the real world because . . . I've never made any kind of adjustment to the real world" (Lewis Funke 106) can be observed in Tom Wingfield's inability to cope with reality and his ultimate abandonment of his mother and sister.

The loss suffered by Amanda Wingfield is both physical and psychological. In the opening scene we are told that she has been abandoned by her husband who "gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town" (*Menagerie* 23). As a result of a series of abandonments, Amanda retreats into a distant past that is as

much myth as it is reality. As Bigsby observes, "For his [Tom's] Mother, Amanda, the past represents her youth, before time worked its dark alchemy. Memory has become myth, a story to be endlessly repeated as a protection against present decline. She wants nothing more than to freeze time; and in this she mirrors a region whose myths of past grace and romantic fiction mask a sense of present decay" ("Entering *The Glass Menagerie"* 38). Indeed, Amanda is a survivor; however, she is able to survive only by clinging to a mythical past--an illusion necessary to deal with the harshness of her present reality. Amanda's forays into the past allow her to temporarily forget the misery of a life she had never envisioned for herself. The pain of being abandoned by a man that she loved and the burden of having to care for a daughter fragile in mind and body in a time period (1930's) when single-motherhood was a much greater burden both socially and economically than in 2007. There were very few options open to her. Bigsby argues, "that it is Amanda who bears the greatest burden, twice abandoned and left to watch over her daughter. Though querulous and puritanical, she is allowed moments of touching vulnerability when she exposes the nature of her own pain" ("*Entering*" 42): "I've never told you [Tom] but I loved your father . . ." (*Menagerie* 50).

Although the loss that Amanda suffers is great, her strength to persevere and her optimism and even her attempt to face reality can be noted when she states " in these trying times we live in, all we have to cling to is--each other" (*Menagerie* 49), and "Life's not easy, it calls for--Spartan endurance!" (50). Ironically, even though Amanda bears the greatest burden as a result of her losses, she is the one who makes the greatest effort to deal with the harsh realities of the present. For example, although Amanda pushes Tom to continue working in the shoe warehouse, she also works hard at two

menial and depressing jobs in an attempt to improve her family's dire economic situation--one selling magazine subscriptions and the other demonstrating brassieres at Famous Barr. As Bigsby explains, "and though she [Amanda] sustains herself with memories and fantasies of a reassuring future, she is forced to an acknowledgement of her situation, as Tom is not" ("*Entering*" 42). We must also keep in mind that the time of the play is during the Great Depression and America is on the brink of World War II. As Roger B. Stein explains, "The note of social realism runs throughout the drama, fixing the lives of individuals against the larger canvas" ("Catastrophe without Violence" 14). The Wingfield's dire economic situation mirrors that of many Americans at that time who were faced with the harsh realities of an uncertain future. Through losses Amanda has gained an understanding of her present predicament. Although she needs the mythic quality of her "gentlemen callers" in Blue Mountain, Amanda is the only character in the play who shoulders the responsibility of the gravity of her family's situation. She is aware of the physical and emotional limitations of her fragile daughter and she understands that her son may abandon the family in the same manner as her husband. Thus, she pays tuition to send Laura to Rubicam's business College to obtain a practical degree that would enable her to obtain employment and earn a living.

The universal truth that emerges as the image of loss permeates the life of Amanda Wingfield is her genuine concern for the well being of her children and hope for a better life for them. Tennessee Williams himself felt that Amanda was a central figure in the play, "the mother's valor is at the core of *The Glass Menagerie*," . . . he explains, "She's confused, pathetic, even stupid, but everything has got to be all right. She fights to make it that way in the only way she knows how" (Jean Evans Interview 14). Certainly

the temporary loss of hope Amanda suffers when she realizes that Laura will not be going back to business college is overshadowed by her genuine fear for her daughter's future and can be noted in one of the most poignant scenes in the play:

> So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? We won't have a business career--we've given up that because it gave us nervous indigestion . . . What is left but dependency all our lives. I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South--barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife! Stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room--encouraged by one in-law to visit another--little birdlike women without any nest--eating the crust of humility all their life. (*Menagerie* 34)

Amanda's genuine concern for Laura's future comes through in this scene. Despite all the mythic talk of the many gentlemen callers in Blue Mountain and the need to keep up the formalities and manners of the genteel south, a strong, protective, maternal instinct keeps Amanda grounded in reality and her "take charge" attitude resurfaces. In this situation, Amanda must assume full responsibility for her fragile daughter's well-being and must ensure Laura has a secure future. As a result, Amanda does not linger in hopelessness. If her daughter will not pursue a degree at Rubicam's Business College, then it is time to move to the next plan of action befitting the universal mother-daughter plight--marriage.

This tenacity can be noted when Amanda states to Laura in a poignant scene, "Of course some girls *do marry*" (*Menagerie* 34). After making this statement, she does everything in her power to find a gentleman caller for her delicate daughter.

The mother-daughter relationship in any culture is complex. The relationship between Amanda and Laura is no exception. This is a mother-daughter relationship that is hindered by the effects of loss, abandonment, and guilt, but is still filled with love, genuine affection, and concern. Similarly, in Marsha Norman's *night, Mother,* love and concern are the motivational factors that compel Thelma to go to great lengths to prolong and prevent her daughter Jessie's inevitable suicide. Certainly both mother-daughter relationships are complex and have specific features in common such as physical handicaps suffered by both daughters, moments when each mother-daughter pair connect at some level, and genuine love and concern; however, the most significant and distinguishing aspect that sets the two relationships apart is that Norman establishes Jessie's empowerment as the focal point in '*night Mother,* whereas Williams's Laura is powerless to escape her world of glass. Certainly the relationships between Amanda and Laura and Thelma and Jessie have universal appeal because of the nature of their complexity. Another feature that adds to the complexity and sets the pair apart is that in *Menagerie,* it has been established that the majority of the caretaking will be the mother's responsibility and because of the daughter's fragile mental and physical condition, she will never be able to care for her mother in the future. Nevertheless, there are poignant moments throughout the play in which Laura patiently humors her mother and encourages her to speak of her Blue Mountain days. One such example occurs in scene one:

> AMANDA. Why, I remember one Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain –
>
> TOM. I know what's coming!
>
> LAURA. Yes. But let her tell it.
>
> TOM. Again?
>
> LAURA. She loves to tell it.
>
> AMANDA. One Sunday afternoon in Blue Mountain – your mother received--*seventeen!*--gentlemen callers! (*Menagerie* 25-26)

Laura encourages Amanda's stories and even flatters her mother when her mother asks if they are to receive any gentlemen callers by exclaiming, "I'm just not popular like you were in Blue Mountain. . . ." (*Menagerie* 28). Therefore, although Laura may not be able to physically take care of her mother in the future, it appears that she may be able to provide some moral support. Similarly, in '*night, Mother*, Jessie tries to make meticulous plans to ensure her mother's well-being even when she is no longer physically around to care for her.

Although Amanda digresses into her Blue Mountain days and longs for a time when her youth, beauty, and charm were much admired, her maternal concern for the future of her daughter brings her back to reality. Amanda's practicality and love for Laura can be noted in the manner by which she suppresses her own concerns about her daughter dropping out of business college and with renewed optimism asks Laura, "Haven't you ever liked some boy?" (*Menagerie* 34). As Nancy B. Tischler observes, "Her [Laura's] mother is both Laura's disease and her brace. It is Amanda's forcefulness that allows Laura to walk at all, but it is also Amanda's example that discourages Laura from walking naturally" ("The Revelation of Quiet Truth" 36). The love and concern

Amanda feels for her daughter makes Laura even more fragile by exaggerating the nature of her physical handicap. Amanda's zeal in helping Laura to overcome the slight limp, which is the result of an early childhood disease, only draws more attention to her condition. Amanda's well-meaning but often overpowering need to overcome her "slight disadvantage"[8] can be noted when she responds to Laura's exclamation, "I'm -- crippled!" (*Menagerie* 35) with the following: "Nonsense! Laura, I've told you never, never to use that word. Why, You're not crippled, you just have a little defect--hardly noticeable, even! When people have some slight disadvantage like that, they cultivate other things to make up for it--develop charm--and vivacity--and--*charm!* That's all you have to do!" (*Menagerie* 36). Certainly Amanda's overzealous manner contrasts starkly with the quiet demeanor of her daughter; however, her love for Laura and her desperate concern for her future come through in this scene. In fact, Amanda's desperation makes her fragile and vulnerable at times. This vulnerability arises out of her impossible predicament and her sense of her own mortality. Whereas Tom, regardless of the hardships he faces, can still take care of himself, Amanda knows that her daughter is completely dependent on her. Amanda fears that if she is unable to secure Laura's future, she will fail as a mother. Considering the unique nature of the mother-daughter bond, it is not difficult to believe the measures Amanda would take to ensure Laura's security.

Ironically, although Amanda's fear for her daughter's future grounds her firmly in reality, each attempt she makes to help her daughter compensate for her slight disability results in Laura's further retreat into her illusory world of glass figurines. In the same scene Amanda turns to the "larger-than-life-size photograph"(*Menagerie* 23) of her absent husband, as she does many times throughout the play, and ends her discussion

with her daughter by stating, “One thing your father had plenty of--was *charm!* (*Menagerie* 36). In this particularly revealing scene, the image of loss is dramatized on many levels. First, we are made aware of Laura’s acute self-consciousness of her physical condition. Second, we see Amanda’s determination to not lose hope in procuring a better life for her daughter. Third, and by far the most poignant, is the looming photo of the absent father and husband who, by his absence, has disabled his family to such an extent that each remaining member must retreat into his own world of illusion in order to survive the harsh reality of his present situation. Tom’s narcotics include movies and alcohol, Amanda retreats into her world of Blue Mountain and gentlemen callers, and Laura’s only outlets are her old phonograph records and her delicate world of glass figurines. Ironically, the phonograph and records are relics left by her father--once again drawing prominence to the devastation his “love of long-distance” (*Menagerie* 23) has caused his family.

The loss permeating *The Glass Menagerie* is heightened by the fact that Williams gave much attention to stage directions, lighting, and music. These aspects can be observed in the details Williams provides in the stage directions preceding scene one:

> *The apartment faces an alley and is entered by a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all of these huge buildings are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation. The fire escape is part of what we see--that is, the landing of it and steps descending from it . . . The scene is memory and is therefore nonrealistic. Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it*

> *touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart. The interior is therefore rather dim and poetic . . . At the rise of the curtain, the audience is faced with the dark, grim rear wall of the Wingfield's tenement.* (*Menagerie* 21)

Just as Williams gave poetic license to Tom Wingfield so that he could serve as narrator and a character in the play, thus giving significance to the language and text of the play, so he has given the performance aspect much importance. As Roudané observes, Williams "was aware of the social dimensions of his theatre, an awareness that allowed Laurette Taylor as Amanda, Eddie Dowlings as Tom, and Julie Haydon as Laura to move --physically and symbolically--beyond the scripted text of *The Glass Menagerie* and into a broader collective social context." ("Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* 2). By combining innovative dramatic techniques with carefully orchestrated language, Williams is able to convey the depth of loss that imbues the life of the Wingfields. The extensive stage directions from scene one to the last scene convey the misery of the Wingfields and the dim, dark and gloomy stage reflects the pain and the suffering felt by Tom. As Roudané observes, "Williams celebrates language. His is a poetic language that makes the word flesh, creates an alluring stage ambience, that becomes the visible means to performance grace" ("Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* 2). Indeed, as Roudané explains, "Stage symbol, scenic image, body language were to assume important roles, roles accentuating the conflicts that the characters themselves were articulating to audiences through their language" (3). Thus, by the creative and unique use of language, Williams is able to give

the audience, as Tom states in the first scene, “truth in the pleasant guise of illusion” (*Menagerie* 22).

The loss of psychological space is the human dilemma that Williams captures in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tom’s refusal to deal with reality makes him abandon his family; however, his inability to escape the guilt he feels at abandoning his family is the universal truth that he can never reconcile in his tortured mind. Undeniably, the extensive stage directions throughout the play remind us that this is a story to be performed. Nonetheless, Williams’s stage directions possess a poetic quality and capture the humanity that is contained within “*those vast hive-like conglomerations of cellular living--units that flower as warty growths in overcrowded urban centers of lower--middle population”* (Williams, *Menagerie* 21). We are reminded that the events we see before us are from Tom’s memory, hence they are selective and Williams goes a step further by suggesting that since memory “omits some detail” (21) it may not be very reliable. To be sure, the audience and reader are challenged to form their own opinions on the reliability of Tom’s memory. Nonetheless, Tom’s struggle to deal with a very painful segment of his life comes through the dialogue and stage directions. Consequently, by acknowledging his dilemma we feel the plight of these people who are physically and emotionally imprisoned by “the huge buildings” that “are always burning with the slow and implacable fires of human desperation” (*Menagerie* 21.) As Tom acts as both narrator and a character in the play, we can feel the inner turmoil as painful memories resurface and are presented on stage in an attempt to come to terms with an overwhelming sense of guilt – of abandoning his beloved family. Thus, since “memory is seated predominantly in the heart” (21) it is appropriate that the audience sees on stage a reflection of the guilt

– ridden heart of the narrator. After all, as Delma Presley observes in the first review of *The Glass Menagerie*, William's goal was to gain a better understanding of "people and how they tick" (9).[9] This aspect can be noted when Presley observes:

> The review that appeared after the first performance in Chicago of *The Glass Menagerie* (*Chicago Tribune* December 26, 1944) carried this headline: 'Fragile Drama Holds Theater in Tight Spell.' These words still speak for most who experience the play for the first time. The tense encounters and tender moments involving a mother, her two children, and a visitor are captivating. But there is more, and the play's first critic realized this fact. Chicago's Civic Theatre had introduced the author of 'a tough little play that knows people and how they tick.' (8)

In fact, Williams himself states in his production notes that his goal in writing *The Glass Menagerie* was nothing less than "truth, life, or reality" (*Menagerie* 7). That being so, the universal truth that is distilled out of the emotional suffering of the Wingfield household transcends their individual plight and becomes a "reality" in text and performance[10]. By the same token, Williams mentions in the production notes that "nostalgia is the first condition of the play" (9), consequently he challenges the concept of reality and illusion from the first scene to the last. In other words, anything that is nostalgically remembered exists "outside" of time and is therefore immune to the ravages of time. Therefore, as Tom struggles with his painful memories of a particular period of his life, Williams challenges both reader and audience to confront their own concepts of truth, reality, illusion and ultimately to come to terms with the human need to control some aspect of individual destiny.

As Roger B. Stein observes, "*The Glass Menagerie* projects not a series of violent confrontations leading to catastrophe but a vision of lonely human beings who fail to make contact, who are isolated from each other and from society and are ultimately abandoned in the universe" (136). Indeed, *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the most studied and recognized works of the American literary canon because of its focus on the plight of isolated and lonely human beings. As Susan B. Abbotson comments, Tennessee Williams, focuses on the "disconnection between individuals and their society" and by contrast, his contemporary, Arthur Miller focuses on "their connection" (*Masterpieces* 9). Indeed, the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* are isolated and disconnected from society; however, in their individual illusory existences, each makes a connection. For example, Tom, as narrator and character, makes use of memory to make his connections. As Williams reminds us, memory is selective and not always reliable. Nonetheless, Tom is able to visit specific instances in his life that had relevance to him; therefore, he is able to connect to his family and society in his imagination. Certainly, since Tom works in a shoe warehouse, he has exposure to other individuals; however, the only person Tom mentions or brings home is Jim O'Conner, "an emissary from the world of reality," (*Menagerie* 23). Once again Williams exposes the disconnect of his characters when Tom distinguishes Jim, the gentleman caller, from himself and the rest of his family by mentioning that Jim is, "from a world of reality that we [Wingfields] were somehow set apart from" (23). Williams makes us aware that the play is memory and therefore not realistic; however, the pain that Tom experiences as he narrates segments of his life is infused with the pain of the individual family members and is given potency and meaning.

Of course Amanda has to deal with the outside world as she attends her D. A. R. meetings and works in menial jobs outside the home. However, Amanda's connection to society is maintained primarily in her imagination when she talks about her suitors in Blue Mountain. Her illusory connection to a mythic place is the only time we see her fully connected to society. Just as Tom's memory connects him to society and his family, so Amanda's memories of her youth and popularity with men in her Blue Mountain days makes us aware that Williams was more interested in the struggle of the Wingfields in their quest to make a connection tone another than in their obvious disconnect from society at large. After all, Tom tells us in scene one that, "memory is seated predominantly in the heart" (21); therefore, guilt and loss are vehicles that drive this play as Tom comes to a better understanding of self and ultimately an understanding that indeed, his escape is a solitary confinement in the prison of his own mind – a place that he can never escape. Certainly, the most isolated member of the Wingfield family is Laura. Despite that, she also has a short-lived exposure to the "world of reality" (23) when she attends, albeit briefly, Rubicam's Business College and later when she is reintroduced to Jim O'Conner--a boy she had a crush on in high school. At any rate, due to Laura's frail mind and body, these connections are indeed short-lived, and she resorts back to her illusory world of glass figurines and phonograph records. Certainly even Jim O'Conner, the "emissary from a world of reality" has trouble connecting to the real world. His talents peaked in high school, and he has not been able to progress much in the six years after graduation. Ironically, Jim makes a momentary connection with Laura; however, he is unable to emote these feelings. Hence, Williams confines him to his "symbolic" representation--as Tom comments in Scene One, "he [Jim] is the long-

delayed but always expected something that we live for" (*Menagerie* 23). By confining Jim to the status of symbol, Williams brings focus to the rich, illusory world of the Wingfields as the struggle to connect to one another in order to survive the harsh realities of their individual predicaments. Illusion and reality are vital aspects of the world Williams creates in this play, one feeding on the other in a symbiotic relationship and begging the universal question--is illusion not a vital aspect of survival?

The physical and psychological losses that plague the Wingfield household translate to American and international audiences. Hence, *The Glass Menagerie* is one of the most translated and performed plays in the world. As Irene Shaland observes: "Probably the first true meeting of the American playwright and a Soviet audience occurred in 1967, twenty years after Williams had become famous all over the world. It was the publication of an anthology of ten years of Williams's plays, translated by Yakov Bereznitsky, a movie and drama critic (*The Glass Menagerie and Nine Other Plays*" 5). Shaland also explains that the 1969 staging of *The Glass Menagerie* and the 1971 staging of *A Streetcar Named Desire* "marked the beginning of his [Williams's] true existence as an integral part of Russian spiritual life. During the seventies and the first half of the eighties, Tennessee Williams became a favorite Western playwright, and also one of the most frequently staged authors in the Soviet theatre" (5). The image of loss translates to the "public issues"[11] and "private tensions" (Roudané *Public* 1) of many cultures. Certainly, the universal truth distilled from the play translates beyond the St. Louis tenement of the Wingfields to many diverse cultures, firstly, because of Williams's "ability to peer into the depths of human nature without abusive curiosity but with understanding and compassion" and secondly, because of "Williams's concept of

people's eternal need for one another--a need strong enough to overcome arrogance, brutality, and egoism" (Shaland 7). Shaland captures the essence of the Wingfield's predicament – the need for a genuine human connection. However, their dilemma goes beyond that crisis and rests on the fact that once they have made that connection, they are unable to sustain it. For example, although Tom and Amanda come close many times during the play to making a real connection, their individual insecurities and fears make the connection impossible. This attempt and ensuing failure to connect can be seen in scene four when Amanda states to Tom, "I've had to put up a solitary battle all these years. But you're my right-hand bower! Don't fall down, don't fail!" and Tom replies, "I try, Mother" (*Menagerie* 48). That being so, it is inevitable that their individual anxieties and disillusionments will not allow for the type of compassion, selflessness, and unconditional love to surface that would sustain a real connection between mother and son. Consequently, Tom and Amanda's failed attempt at connecting can be noted in the stage direction that follows their discussion of Tom's insatiable desire for going to the movies for "adventure" (51). To this extent, the stage direction announces, "*Amanda looks baffled, then hurt . . . Tom becomes hard and impatient again*" (51). It is at this point that the audience realizes that a genuine sustained human connection is impossible between mother and son. As the image of loss permeates this scene, we feel the time slipping away. In fact, time is the enemy for mother and son. Amanda has been abandoned by her husband and has raised two children by herself. Her only consolation is her mythic Blue Mountain days which exist in her imagination, and therefore, outside the ravages of time. As Bigsby observes, "For Tom, memories of the past are a distraction from present failure for though situated in time they exist outside of time" ("Entering"

39). By the same token, Williams has stated that the most significant aspect of a play is that it exists "*outside* of time," and is "*a world without time*" (*Where I Live* 50). That being so, the theme of loss permeates this play in the form of guilt, abandonment, and ultimately, the futility of controlling the hands of time. Hence, it is not difficult to fathom the appeal of *The Glass Menagerie* to a variety of international audiences; for, are these not human emotions that are basic to all cultures? Its essential transnationality continues to engage audiences in the twenty-first century.

The Wingfields represent the devastation that can occur when simple human contact fails. By the same token, another aspect of the universal appeal for audiences from America to India lies in the fact that Williams brings forth the fragility of family relations and the anguish individuals are faced with when they must choose between personal fulfillment and family obligation. As Ward Morehouse observes in a review (1945) of *The Glass Menagerie* in the *New York Sun*, the play, "is fragile and poignant . . . it is something to see, to cheer about, and to see again" (qtd. in R. Martin 10). Consequently, the human condition of the Wingfield's predicament as they cling to their myths, illusions, and dreams can be felt in both performance and text. Although Laura blows out her candles, the last scene between mother and daughter holds a glimmer of hope for them to have a closer and more honest relationship, considering they have only one another. This glimmer of hope is alluded to as Morehouse explains, "Tom is off to his wanderings, to the moon and lesser distances walking out as his carefree and hard drinking father did before him, and Amanda is holding Laura close in her protecting arms, frustrated but still not conceding defeat" (qtd. in R. Martin 21-22). Similarly, the poetic quality of the stage directions for the closing scene adds poignancy to the text:

"*Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty . . . Amanda's gestures are graceful almost dancelike, as she comforts her daughter*" (*Menagerie* 114). The Wingfields' predicament is universal in that it is the plight of the individual who must choose between family commitment and self-fulfillment. Amanda suppresses her dreams and desires and replaces them with a zealous attention to governing the lives of her children. In fact, Amanda, as a result of her early losses, fervently tries to ensure the success of her children with her well-intentioned but misguided attempts to care for them. Amanda's desire for their success as can be noted when she exclaims to Tom, "I'll tell you what I wished for on the moon. Success and happiness for my precious children!" (*Menagerie* 58), prevents her from realizing the damage she inflicts on them. As much as she loves her son, Tom, she does not understand his need to fulfill his dream of being a writer.

Amanda's insecurities and fear of losing everything she holds dear fuels her battles with her son. Even so, there are moments in the play in which Amanda and Tom make an effort to communicate their feelings and desires; however, by expressing their true feelings, the disparity between what is longed for and the harshness of their real situation is too much to bear for mother and son. This struggle for communication can be noted in one particularly poignant scene when Amanda states to Tom: "I know your ambitions do not lie in the warehouse, that like everybody in the whole wide world--you've had to make sacrifices, . . . There's so many things in my heart that I cannot describe to you! (*Menagerie* 50). Similarly, Tom tries to connect with his mother and responds by stating, ". . . You say there's so much in your heart that you can't describe to me. That's true of me, too. There's so much in my heart I can't describe to *you!* (51).

Tragically, mother and son are unable to make a real connection. Amanda cannot understand Tom's need for escapism--to the movies, and, consequently, Tom's impatience with his mother resurfaces. This debacle can be noted in a very revealing stage direction that captures the essence of the mother and son's unfortunate predicament: "*Amanda looks baffled, then hurt. As the familiar inquisition resumes, Tom becomes hard and impatient again. Amanda slips back into her querulous attitude toward him*" (51).

Amanda's inability to make a human connection with her son can also be noted in the last and one of the most significant scenes of the play:

> That's right, now that you've had us make such fools of ourselves. The effort, the preparations, all the expense! The new floor lamp, the rug, the clothes for Laura! All for what? To entertain some other girl's fiancé! Go to the movies, go! Don't think about us, a mother deserted, an unmarried sister who's crippled and has no job! Don't let anything interfere with your selfish pleasure! Just go, go, go--to the movies! (*Menagerie* 113-114)

The image of loss powerfully dominates this final scene of *The Glass Menagerie*. Amanda's misery and frustration at her inability to control the destiny of her family impairs her ability to see the love and devotion her son feels for his mother that has, indeed, prevented him from abandoning his family as his own father had done. She has spent so much time worrying about her fragile daughter, Laura, she is unable to see the fragile emotional state of her son, Tom. Ironically, Amanda's ultimate fear of further abandonment becomes a self-prophecy that unfolds in the final scene--a scene that is further heightened by one of the last stage directions of the play in which "*she* [Amanda] *glances a moment at the father's picture*" (*Menagerie* 114).

Certainly, Tom and Amanda, although prone to periodic escapism with their individual drug of choice--a mixture of alcohol, cigarettes, and movies for Tom, and mythic Blue Mountain for Amanda, have the ability to ground themselves firmly in reality. By contrast, fragile Laura is never able to internalize and live firmly within the realm of reality. Although she is able to periodically surface to the world of reality as when she attempts to attend business college or when she tells her mother about a boy she liked in high school, Laura is not equipped to deal with the realities of her present situation. By retreating into her world of glass figurines and old phonograph records, she is protected from the harshness of the effects of abandonment, loss, and economic hardship that Amanda and Tom have to face. The dance hall and the typewriter, symbols of the real world as Bigsby explains are "outside her [Laura's] experience" (*Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, 33). As Bigsby observes, "Laura's glass menagerie is frozen. Time is suspended as it will continue to be suspended for her, as it has been suspended for the woman on whom she was based[12] and who has spent a lifetime in a mental hospital in recoil from the real . . . Vulnerable, she chooses instead a world of myth, symbolized by the glass unicorn. It is a factitious security broken as easily as the unicorn's horn" (*Modern American Drama 1945-1990*, 33). In reality, Laura is mentally and physically too fragile to cope with the harsh effects of the loss that permeates the play. She has been abandoned by her father, rejected by Jim, the gentleman caller, and finally abandoned by her beloved brother, Tom. By the same token, Laura is incapable of internalizing these factors, thus, she does not have to deal with their effects.

The bonds that hold the Wingfields together are tenuous at best. Tom's love for his family prevents him from pursuing his dreams. Amanda's concern for the future of

her daughter causes her to alienate her son--her lifeline. By contrast, Laura is so emotionally fragile and removed from reality, that after her encounter with Jim, after she finds out that he is engaged to be married, is desolate. As noted in the stage directions, "*The holy candles on the altar of Laura's face have been snuffed out. There is a look of almost infinite desolation"* (*Menagerie* 108). She is unable to come to terms with the emotions she feels. Still, as a final attempt to make a genuine connection, she [Laura] gives the broken unicorn to Jim. After this final gesture of affection; however, as mentioned in the revealing stage direction, "*She rises unsteadily and crouches beside the Victrola to wind it up*" (109). Hence, we realize that she has retreated back to her world of glass figurines and old phonograph records. In fact, the play ends with Laura blowing out her candles and thereby severing her connection to the real world. Indeed, although the image of loss permeates *The Glass Menagerie* from the first to the last scene, it appears that mother and daughter have ultimately made a genuine connection, when, as revealed at the end of her mother's speech, "*she* [Laura] *lifts her head to smile at her mother*" (114).

Although Laura blows out her candles in the last scene, mother and daughter have made a connection. The extinguishing of the candles also signifies the beginning of a new start for Amanda and Laura--one in which a stronger bond has been formed that transcends the fragility of Laura's world of glass, one that cannot be shattered by outside forces. As the last few stage directions indicate, "*Now that we cannot hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty"* (114) The stage directions also comment that, "*Amanda's gestures are slow and graceful, almost dancelike, as she comforts her daughter*" (114). This description is a stark contrast to

earlier ones describing Amanda as “absurd,” “grim,”(29) and “ugly--babbling old--witch” (*Menagerie* 42). The significance of this last stage direction has elicited the interest of scholars and critics regarding Williams’s unconventional theatrical techniques in relation to the thematical aspects of his play. For example, Benjamin Nelson argues that Williams, “[. . .] in relegating this scene [last mother-daughter scene] to background silence while Tom makes a self-conscious statement about drifting like a dead leaf . . . he has substituted a painfully pretentious narration for what could have been an intense and luminous moment between the two women” (93). On the contrary, Williams, with his detailed and poetic stage directions focuses the audience’s attention by the use of soundproof glass to the compassionate “*gestures”* of Amanda as she makes a “*comforting speech to Laura” (Menagerie* 114). Consequently, by making use of innovative techniques such as sound proof walls and translucent and transparent scenery, Williams was able to elucidate the “truth” about the characters through “illusion.” Indeed, as Jo Mielzner, Williams’s set designer, explains,

> My use of translucent and transparent scenic interior walls was not just another trick. It was a true reflection of the contemporary playwright’s interest in--and at times obsession with--the exploration of the inner man. Williams was writing not only a memory play but a play of influences that were not confined within the walls of a room. (qtd. in Bigsby “Celebration” 96)

The stage directions for the final scene state that “*Now that we cannot hear the mother’s speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty*.” Thus, Amanda’s inner beauty and essence is revealed as she protects and cares for her fragile daughter. In

fact, the silent dialogue of mother and daughter is one of the most powerfully revealing scenes of the play. Until this scene, Amanda's voice is shrill, domineering and is heard *before* she appears in a scene. In silence, the true compassion in her nature is allowed to surface and "silliness" is replaced with "dignity" and "beauty."

The "hope" that flickers at the end of the play is that Amanda and Laura have come to some type of understanding of their "reality." Despite the candles being blown out and Tom abandoning them, the loss felt by mother and daughter results in the possibility of Amanda and Laura having a more honest and realistic relationship. Amanda's fear that Tom would follow in his father's footsteps has been realized and now her strength and compassion can be fully devoted to her daughter. Similarly, although Laura retreats to her glass world and old phonograph records, she also looks up from her world of illusion and smiles at her mother. There is an acceptance in the gestures between mother and daughter that suggests the possibility of a genuine understanding of the reality that they have only each other--and that may be enough. Although Jordan Y. Miller states in his essay "The Three Halves of Tennessee Williams's World," "The pitiful figure of Amanda, never to face any knowledge of who or what she is, and Laura, never able to rise above her fears to realize such potential as is there" (59), there is no sense of defeat in the descriptions of Amanda and Laura in the conclusion of the play. In contrast, there is a sense of hope. As Bigsby observes, a sense of timelessness is given to this last mother-daughter scene ("Celebration" 92). In fact, the compassion of the mother for her fragile daughter as "*she lifts her head to smile at her mother*" (*Menagerie* 114) reveals not only the timeless bond that has been formed, but also a sense of hope for the pair. After all, Williams himself suggests that life, "achieves its highest value and

significance in the rare moments--they are scarcely longer than that--when two lives are confluent, when the walls of isolation momentarily collapse between two persons" (*Where I Live* 36-37). This rare moment is precisely what is captured in this silent scene and is thus, the essence of theater. Williams also states that it is the "continual rush of time [. . .] that deprives our lives of so much dignity and meaning, and it is perhaps, more than anything else, the *arrest of time* [. . .] that gives certain plays their feelings of depth and significance" ("Timeless World" 129). This arrest of time is what takes place in *The Glass Menagerie*. Thus, although Amanda and Laura have lost Tom, the arrest of time, captured momentarily provides mother and daughter a glimmer of hope.

Williams's idea of the essence of theater, this arrest of time, is heightened by the image of loss in *The Glass Menagerie*. As Williams comments,

> In a play, time is arrested in the sense of being confined . . . the audience can sit back in a comforting dusk to watch a world which is flooded with light and in which emotion and action have a dimension and dignity that they would likewise have in real existence, if only the shattering intrusion of time could be locked out. The great and only possibility of man lies in his power deliberately to choose certain moral values by which to live as steadfastly as if he, too, like a character in a play, were immured against the corrupting rush of time. ("Timeless World" 129)

The images of loss that permeate this play and include the absent father, Tom's escapism into the world of movies, alcohol, cigarettes and poetry writing, Amanda's mythic Blue Mountain, Laura's fragile world of glass and ultimately, Tom's abandonment of his

mother and sister--all the noise of human drama, reality and illusion, converge in this final silent mother-daughter scene. Ultimately, Amanda has to face reality whereas Tom cannot. Nonetheless, despite the weaknesses and flaws of the Wingfields as they journey between reality and illusion, there is a sense that at least mother and daughter have connected and, as a result, may have a better relationship.

Although the absent father never makes an appearance onstage, he epitomizes the abandonment and loss the Wingfields can never escape. As Tischler observes, "one of the chief characters is sketched only by implication. The father of the Wingfield family hovers over the scene, although he never appears on the stage at all" ("Revelation" 36). Since, as Williams mentions in the production notes of *The Glass Menagerie*, "nostalgia is the first condition of the play" (22), it is appropriate that "*a blown-up photograph of the [absent] father hangs on the wall of the* [Wingfield] *living room, to the left of the archway*" (22). The stage directions capture the photograph's significance and at the same time solidify Williams's philosophy on the "unimportance of the photographic in art" (7): "*It is the face of a very handsome young man in a doughboy's First World War cap. He is gallantly smiling, ineluctably smiling, as if to say "I'll be smiling forever"* (22). His smile is frozen in time. It transcends the misery and devastation that his permanent departure wreaked on his family. In fact, the smiling, immutable photograph of the handsome, absent father is the embodiment of loss and a crippling past that his family can never escape. Ironically, the photograph, like the play itself, exists outside of time. As Williams explains in his production notes "Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art" (*Menagerie* 7). Undoubtedly, the absent father is the "fifth character" (23) in *The Glass Menagerie*, and Amanda glances at his

photograph in particularly poignant scenes throughout the play, as if to seek his advice. The play ends with Amanda glancing at her husband's photograph, establishing the devastating consequences of this abandonment as Tom follows in his father's footsteps.

Just as the absent father is established by Tom as the fifth character in the first scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, Jim, the gentleman caller, Tom announces, "is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from the world of reality that we were somehow set apart from" (23). In the same scene, Tom goes on to establish Jim's significance by explaining," "But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for" (23). That being so, Jim also represents the myth of the American dream.[13] Stein explains, "*The Glass Menagerie* is built upon more than the poignant plot of illusion and frustration in the lives of little people. Williams has deepened the losses of individuals by pointing to social and even spiritual catastrophe" (*Menagerie* 136). America is in the midst of the Depression and on the brink of World War II. In fact, Tennessee Williams opens *The Glass Menagerie* by commenting that "Their eyes had failed them, or they had failed their eyes, and so they were having their fingers pressed forcibly down on the fiery Braille alphabet of a dissolving economy" (23), emphasizing the fact many Americans, not just the Wingfields, were trapped in illusions and the reality is "that the American dream itself is a sham and a failure." (qtd. in Stein 137). As a result, these illusions create a version of the myth of the American dream. Ironically, Amanda and Jim are victims of this dream. For example, when Tom tells his mother about the grim conditions at the shoe warehouse, Amanda responds, "Try and you will *succeed!*" (*Menagerie* 49). The extent of her belief in this motto of the American dream can be

observed in Williams's stage direction, "*the notion makes her breathless*" (49). Nevertheless, as Stein argues,

> It is not Amanda, however, but Jim, the emissary from reality, who is the chief spokesman for the American dream. To Jim the warehouse is not a prison [as it is for Tom] but a rung on the ladder toward success . . . Jim is the booster in the American tradition. He is awed by the fortune made in chewing gum and rhapsodizes on the theme of the future material progress of America: "All that remains is for the industry to get itself underway! Full steam--*Knowledge--Zzzzzp! Money--Power!* That's the cycle democracy is built on!" (137)

Although Jim enthusiastically promotes the rhetoric, the reality of his situation is quite different. Six years after graduating from high school he has not progressed beyond the status of a shipping clerk in a shoe warehouse. Even though Jim attempts to look to the future, while the Wingfields are paralyzed by their past, his success is also a myth of the past (high school), therefore, frozen in time, and his future is as uncertain as that of the Wingfields.

The social significance of the play can be noted when Williams in his essay "Catastrophe of Success" observes, "The Cinderella story is our favorite national myth, the cornerstone of the film industry if not of the Democracy itself" (*Menagerie* 11). Nonetheless, Williams's characterization of Jim, the gentleman caller as not only an "emissary from the world of reality" (23) but as "symbol" (23)--"the long-delayed but always expected something we wait for" (23) magnifies the effect of the loss endured by

the Wingfields. In fact, Jim is the only "outside" force that albeit briefly, infiltrates the illusory world of the Wingfields. However, Jim is not Prince Charming and Laura is not Cinderella. In fact, there is no glass slipper--only a broken glass unicorn. Ironically, Jim, the outsider, in his attempt to educate Laura on her self-worth, her "uniqueness," captures the essence of Williams's philosophy in "The Catastrophe of Success": "[T]he only somebody worth being is the solitary and unseen you that existed from your first breath" (*Menagerie* 17). Jim is able to see Laura's "difference" as a positive quality; however, his preoccupation with blindly internalizing the American dream rhetoric, "you must be a go-getter," "if you try hard enough, you can succeed," motivates him to get engaged to be married and enroll in radio engineering and public speaking classes, but at the same time makes him unable to cope with the feelings he has for this fragile girl who has idealized him since high school. Therefore, all he can state is, "You [Laura] make me feel sort of--I don't know how to put it! I'm usually good at expressing things, but--this is something that I don't know how to say!" (*Menagerie* 105). By the same token, the shattered unicorn symbolizes the shattering of the myth as well as acting as a normalizing force. In a poignant scene, Laura, after realizing that Jim has accidentally broken the unicorn's horn, tells him, "Now it is like all the other horses . . . Maybe it's a blessing in disguise" (104). Jim, for all his All-American charm, is as caught up in the myth of the American dream as Laura is in her world of glass figurines.

As the theme of loss imbues the Wingfield household in *The Glass Menagerie*, it becomes apparent that time, certainly, is the enemy in Williams's world, and, "the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition" (Williams *Menagerie*, 17). Certainly, Tennessee Williams was attempting to

come to terms with a certain period of his life by "freezing" time in a work of art that is recognized as one of the most translated and performed plays in the world. Nonetheless, unlike the stage magician, who presents "illusion that has the appearance of truth,' by giving us "truth in the "pleasant guise of illusion," (22) Williams reveals a universal truth of the human condition that, "Snatching the eternal out of the desperately fleeting is the great magic trick of human existence" ("The Timeless World of the Play," *Where I Live: Selected Essays*. 52). Hence, since art gives life dignity and beauty that cannot be corrupted by time, Tom Wingfield, as both narrator and a character in the play, looks to the past to come to terms with the intense loss he feels for abandoning his family. In fact, the past and memory is so critical to the events that link the characters of this play that Williams's establishes, in his production notes, that "nostalgia . . . is the first condition of the play" (*Menagerie* 9). By the same token, Williams, in the first scene, establishes the unreliability of memory by stating, "Memory takes a lot of poetic license. It omits some details; others are exaggerated . . . for memory is seated predominantly in the heart" (21). In fact, it is the basic human emotion of guilt that brings Tom back, albeit in "memory," to the St. Louis tenement apartment that he had shared with his mother and sister (the family he had abandoned), the very prison from which he had "escaped," to come to terms with his pain. Memory allows Tom to observe parts of his life that now exist outside of time, so therefore are not susceptible to the ravages of time. Certainly, as Bigsby explains, "His[Williams's] protagonist--victims are not, finally, destroyed by capitalism, political corruption, or a new brutalism, but by life's own internal tensions--that sacrifice of the spiritual to the material which is the motor force of history and . . . the root of the tragic." (*A Critical Introduction to Twentieth – Century American Drama*

Vol. 2, 12). After all, although Williams began his career as a political[14] writer, his primary focus was an "obsessive interest in human affairs," (*Menagerie* 16) and to gain a better understanding of "people and how they tick" (Presley *The Glass Menagerie: An American Memory*, 9). Contrary to Nelson's view that, "The underlying belief in *The Glass Menagerie* is that there is very little, if any, reason for living," ("The Play is Memory" 94), as the silent scene between mother and daughter exemplifies, there is a reason to live, and that reason is as Williams comments that although, "Everywhere the people seem to be waiting for the new cataclysm to strike them . . . the people want to survive, they want to keep on living through it, whatever it may be" (*Where I Live: Selected Essays*. 34).

The theme of loss infiltrates the world of the Wingfields in *The Glass Menagerie*. Tennessee Williams uses this theme not only to come to terms with a painful part of his own life, but to distill a larger truth of the human condition that although life is fragile, as are the attempts that human beings make to establish a genuine connection, the real strength lies in the resiliency of the human spirit in its quest to survive. Thus, Williams states that, "[T]he monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, *unless you devote your heart to its opposition*" (*Menagerie* 17) [italics mine]; this takes place in the final silent scene and in Tom's closing speech, reinforcing the idea that individual choice is still involved and can make a difference. Tom's guilt makes him face his past actions; Amanda gains grace and dignity as she comforts her daughter, and fragile Laura is able to look up and smile at her mother. Loss can result in something more significant – in other words, although time can be the enemy, it can also allow a certain compassion to surface. Although the rapid motion of time hurls human beings through their daily lives filled

with pain, suffering and grief, it can also heal, nurture and awaken us to greater truths. Ironically, Williams, by capturing time in a work of art, opens our minds to the beauty of life despite its imperfections. Indeed, there is hope for a deeper compassion to surface that is strong enough to resist the ravaging forces of time. Ultimately, the essence of theater lies in its ability to "freeze" time on stage--however briefly--so that we can glimpse a part of humanity that reflects our own fears, hopes, anxieties and desires. By filtering out the noise of everyday life, drama has the ability to transport us to a self-reflective moment that we may have never experienced otherwise. Therefore, as Bigsby observes, "*The Glass Menagerie* has a deceptive simplicity" (*Critical Vol. 2*, 40). Williams uses the image of loss as a vehicle to distill the universal truths that are revealed as illusions accede to reality--the reality of the ability of the human being to survive. Undeniably this is an idea so complex that Williams himself referred to it as a "*mystery*" (qtd. in Bigsby 52).

Notes to Chapter Two

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[1] As Delma Presley explains, "[. . .] this 'memory play,' as the author preferred to classify it, effectively uses lighting, music, screens, and other devices to reveal how past events can forcefully affect the present"(10). Williams himself states in his production notes to the play, "Being a 'memory play,' *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom of convention (7)."

[2] In Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf.* George uses the term "marrow" as a metaphor for coming to terms with reality (213). As Bigsby explains in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth – Century American Drama: Williams, Miller, Albee Vol. 2*, "The process of the play is a slow and relentless stripping of illusions, a steady move towards the moment when their myth will collapse of its own weight, when George and Martha [the principal characters of the play] will be left to confront reality without benefit of their fantasies or the protective articulateness which has been their main defence (266)."

[3] Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953) is considered to be one of the greatest American playwrights. He is the only American dramatist ever to have received the Nobel Prize for Literature (1936). O'Neill challenged the conventional boundaries of the drama of his time and thereby paved the way for modern American theatre. Among O'Neill's best-known plays are *Anna Christine* (1922), *Desire Under the Elms* (1924), *Mourning Becomes Electra* (1931), *The Ice Man Cometh* (1946) and *Long Days Journey into Night* (1956). O'Neill's plays range in style from satire to tragedy. They often depict people who have no hope of controlling their destinies.

[4] *The Hairy Ape* showcases O'Neill's social concerns and his belief that the capitalist system persecuted the working man. However, he felt that the socialist movement did not have all the answers either. The industrial environment is presented as dehumanizing. The character Yank has also been interpreted as representative of the human condition--alienated from nature by his isolated consciousness, unable to find belonging in any social group or environment.

[5] Elmer Rice (1892-1967) is an American playwright whose first play, *On Trial* (1914), was the first American stage production to employ the flashback technique of the screen. His first major contribution to the theatre, however, was the expressionistic *The Adding Machine* (1923), which satirized the growing standardization of man in the machine age through the life and death of the book-keeper, Mr. Zero.

[6] Sophie Treadwell (1885-1970) was a journalist, playwright, novelist and feminist. She was considered to be one of the most innovative writers of the twentieth century. The major themes Treadwell explored included the social status of women, personal and ethnic identity in America, and America's core values and its international role. As a journalist, Treadwell was probably the first American woman to be a war correspondent. *Machinal* is based on the real-life trial of Ruth Snyder for the murder of her husband. During the spring of 1927, Treadwell attended the notorious trial of Ruth Snyder and her lover, Judd Gray. Although she did not officially cover the trial as a reporter, her time spent in the courtroom served as the catalyst for *Machinal*, a powerful expressionist drama from the 1920s about the dependent status of women in an increasingly mechanized society. *Machinal* is a play in nine episodes, first produced in 1928 and published in 1929.

[7] As Williams mentions in his production notes, "A single recurring tune, "The Glass Menagerie," is used to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages. This tune is like circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at some distance and very likely thinking of something else. It seems under those circumstances to continue almost interminably and it weaves in and out of your consciousness; then it is the lightest, most delicate music in the world and perhaps the saddest. It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow" (*Menagerie* 9).

[8] The disadvantage refers to Laura's one leg being slightly shorter than the other, thus causing a slight limp--the result of an early childhood disease. Refer to *The Glass Menagerie* (36). Williams himself has stated, "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" (Devlin *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* 110).

[9] The first review of *The Glass Menagerie* appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*, December 27, 1944. As Delma Presley explains in "*The Glass Menagerie: An American Memory*," "As he [Williams] wrote in the production notes, Williams's goal was to present nothing less than 'truth, life, or reality'" (9). Presley goes on to observe that, "What he [Williams] took most seriously was his belief that he could not depict truth upon the stage if he were not, first, true to himself. Good drama, surely even a good life, he explains, involves an 'obsessive interest in human affairs, plus a certain amount of compassion and moral conviction'" (11).

[10] As Roudané observes, [Williams] "A connoisseur of the visual and a celebrant of the magical textures of the human body live on a stage, Williams nonetheless was foremost attracted to the word itself. Indeed, of all the creative forms which Williams indulged in – poetry, short fiction, memoirs, letters, his production notes, and stage directions – it is his use of language that most animates his stage" (*The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* 2).

[11] Bigsby explains "The theatre is the most public of arts. It offers the opportunity of acting out the anxieties and fears which are born in the conflict between private needs and public values" (*Critical Introduction Vol. 2*, 1). See Roudané's *Public Issues, Private Tensions*. Roudané explains, "Indeed the volcanic confluence of public issues and private tensions informs all of contemporary American drama and theater, giving the genre its particular ambivalence and intensity" (4).

[12] The character, Laura is modeled after Tennessee William's own sister, Rose. As noted by Lyle Leverich in the biography *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, "For Tom [Tennessee Williams], the fear of madness intermixed with shame and guilt, would elicit a transmuted love and devotion for his sister that ultimately would exclude all else. Very often Rose used the expression, 'It's tragic--it's just tragic' to describe whatever it was that disturbed her. And now the harsh, pitiful reality of seeing her confined within Saint Vincent's sanitarium, and of realizing how tragic indeed her life had become, was fully and lastingly impressed upon her brother"(212)

[13] Jim O'Connor is devoted to goals of professional achievement and attaining personal success (American dream--Work hard and you can achieve anything). However, six years after finishing high school, he works as a shipping clerk at a shoe warehouse. As

Benjamin Nelson explains, “On the surface Jim is the young man most likely to succeed. He has made the right connections, he is engaged, he is waiting for the inevitable thrust that will catapult him to success. He radiates confidence and his conversation is sprinkled with references to the marvelous opportunities which await the ‘go-getter’ [the main emphasis of the American dream]. But Jim is not at all as confident as he would have Laura believe. Beneath the bravado and good-hearted bluster, Jim is afraid that democracy--the good old U. S. A--may leave him behind” (“The Play is Memory” 88).

[14] As Bigsby explains, “Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, who dominated the American theater for nearly a decade and a half, both began their careers as political playwrights. Formed by the 1930’s, they responded to the economic and social realities of the age. Though their first works appeared on Broadway in the 1940s, they had both been writing for more than a decade, and in the case of Tennessee Williams those early works were actually staged by a radical theater company in St. Louis” (*Critical Introduction Vol. 2*, 1).

Chapter Three: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*

The theme of loss pervades Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* just as it does Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie.* Willy Loman is the embodiment of the loss of physical space, psychological space and moral space just as the "blown-up photograph" (*Menagerie* 22) of the absent father that hangs in the living room of the tenement of the Wingfields represents the embodiment of loss, the collapse of moral nerve and responsibility. However, there are two main aspects that distinguish the loss exemplified in Miller's *Salesman* from Williams's *Menagerie*. First, the title itself forecasts the ultimate loss that serves as the driving force of the play. Second, whereas loss and guilt make Tom Wingfield return, albeit in memory, to a painful part of his life to come to terms with his past actions, Willy Loman succumbs to the effects of loss that results in a downward spiral that is played out in the last twenty-four hours of his life, resulting in the ultimate destruction of mind, body, and spirit.

Though *Death of a Salesman* is regarded by scholars, critics, and theatergoers as the quintessential[1] American drama, it is also one of the most translated and performed plays in the world. As Roudané comments, "[T]he play also transcends its own borders, its American heritage and claims to American essentialism . . .The play continues to engage audiences on an international level, not only because it traverses intercultural borders, but also because it brings audiences back to the edges of prehistory itself" ("Celebrating *Salesman*" 25). Certainly, the plight of the Lomans in their pursuit of the American dream[2] is replete with the quantifying myths of "if only" and "we must" – "If only we could pay off the mortgage;" "We must keep up with the Joneses;" "We simply must have that new refrigerator, then we will be happy, prosperous, and content." In the

case of the Lomans, the tragic element is that they do not realize that the security and contentment they desire are commodities that cannot be purchased. So it is no surprise that Willy Loman does not realize that he has attributed great worth to the mythical and illusory. As A. D. Choudhuri observes, "Dreams of a better future slowly take the shape of wishful fantasies, so much so that the sharpness of the conflict between illusion and reality, between Loman's little dreams and the impersonal forces of society, seem to be apparently lost in comprehensive images of extraordinary poetic force" (70). In fact, Willy Loman is completely oblivious to the social forces that control his life because he, indeed, equates success and happiness to being "well-liked" and "personally attractive" (*Salesman* 33)[3]. Consequently, these are the values he "lovingly" attempts to pass on to his sons. Undoubtedly, Willy's value system is poignantly revealed when he states to his sons:

Bernard can get the best marks in school, y' understand, but when he gets out in the business world, y' understand, you are going to be five times ahead of him. That's why I thank Almighty God you're both built like Adonises. Because the man who makes an appearance in the business world, the man who creates personal interest, is the man who gets ahead. Be liked and you will never want. You take me for instance. I never have to wait in line to see a buyer. "Willy Loman is here!" That's all they have to know, and I go right through. (*Salesman* 33)

By the same token, Willy never nurtures genuine values such as love, affection, family relations and, in fact, replaces them with superficial qualities such as "making connections" and "appearances are everything." Therefore, his sons are also encouraged to believe the same myths as their father. Hence, the myths that have become the real

world for Willy become an endless source of frustration and hopelessness for his sons because they are products of illusion. Undeniably, Willy Loman's blind faith in his superficial vision of the American dream leads to his rapid psychological decline as he is unable to accept the disparity between the mythic dream and his own life.

Certainly, since Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams began writing in the 1930s, the Depression, as C. W. E. Bigsby comments,

> shaped the writing of both playwrights . . . the senses of promises turned to dust, of the individual suddenly severed from a world that had seemed secure, underlies much of their work. . . .The shock which both writers express seems to derive from their sense of the fragility of the social world, the thinness of the membrane that separates us from chaos. That conviction was shaped by the events of a decade that began with economic debacle and ended with war in Europe. (*Modern 1945-2000*, 69)

Moreover, although Williams's and Miller's characters have similarities such as difficulty in distinguishing reality from illusion, and a belief in a mythic version of the American dream, some of Williams's characters in *The Glass Menagerie* have the capacity of grounding themselves in reality and therefore maintaining some sense of self. For example, in the final silent scene in *Menagerie*, Amanda gains dignity and beauty as she comforts her daughter, and thus also gains a sense of self. In contrast, Miller's Willy Loman, by placing ultimate value in the superficial aspects of the American dream and by believing, as Choudhuri comments, "that all the valuable things in life – honour, recognition, dignity, sense of importance, peace of mind – are purchasable commodities,"(71) ultimately, sacrifices his own life in hopes of obtaining these qualities.

Since Willy's dilemma cannot be resolved "outside of time," in contrast to Tom and Amanda Wingfield, he literally is left with no "self." Ironically, as much as he longed for security for his family, he dies not knowing that Linda made the last payment on their house. In the poignant last scene of the play, Linda, as she pays her last respects to Willy states, "I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. . . We're free. . . We're free. . . We're free. . . (*Salesman* 139). The last scene exemplifies the core of Miller's work, that, as Bigsby observes, "[T]he essence of Miller's [. . .] drama is that private and public are finally inseparable [. . .] There is no action without consequence and no consequence that can be contained within the self, no self outside the community which gives it both context and meaning." (*Critical Introduction Vol. 2* 136). That being so, as Linda mourns the loss of her husband, Willy, her understanding of the man is limited. What does the myth of the American dream, which has been inculcated into the American psyche, deem as most valuable? Is the ability to pay off a mortgage at the expense of an individual's life the realization of the distorted version of success? Certainly Miller does not absolve Willy Loman of his individual responsibility in the creation of his dilemma. However, the private and social forces exist in such symbiosis that, Willy, like most of Miller's characters, is caught in a philosophic debate, giving his work a quality that transcends social, cultural, and political boundaries. As Roudané explains,

> *Death of a Salesman*, many critics suggest, is a critique of a capitalist society that brutalizes the unsuccessful. While the sociopolitical textures of the play are present, however, *Death of a Salesman* gains its power from additional sources. What allows the play to transcend itself, to go

> well beyond the level of an oversimplified social protest, concerns the fundamental practical *and* metaphysical question, what does it mean to be fulfilled in one's existence? This question holds the key to the play's greatness, its philosophic largeness. (*American Drama Since 1960*, 193)

On one hand, Willy Loman can never be fulfilled because he is a metaphor for what can happen to an individual when he substitutes a myth, an illusion for reality. Certainly the sociopolitical views that are alluded to throughout the play form one dimension of Miller's work. On the other hand, the essence of the play does not rest on whether or not a Marxist[4] or Universalist[5] reading is a closer reading of Miller's intent in this play. The real significance can be noted in Miller's own words, "This play [*Salesman*] seems to have shown that most of the world shares something similar to the plight of the Lomans" (qtd. in "Birthday" 22). What happens to an individual who believes in a myth that has become the doctrine for his life, who believes that the realization of this dream/myth is to be had at any cost? This is the predicament of Willy Loman. Illusion has become his reality. Whereas Tom Wingfield in *the Glass Menagerie* brought us "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion," (*Menagerie* 22) Willy Loman has substituted the myth of the American dream for his reality. Willy has succumbed to this myth with such certainty, that as Bigsby comments, "[. . .] he [Willy] remains illusioned . . . in his conviction that his death can win what his life cannot" ("*Death of a Salesman"* 101).

Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, like Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, is a "memory" play. Just as Tom Wingfield attempts to reconcile certain events of his past, Willy Loman tries to find that moment in his past that was the catalyst to the downward spiral that leads him to believe that he would be more valuable to his family dead than

alive. Since *Salesman* catalogs the events of the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life, as Susan C. W. Abbotson explains, it was Miller's plan,

> [T]o write a play without transitions, where the dialogue would flow from one scene to the next without any apparent breaks. Instead of using a chronological order, in which single events followed on from one another, he [Miller] wanted to create a form which displayed the past and present as if they were both occurring at the same time. In this way, he would be able to transmit to the audience exactly what was going on in the mind of his protagonist; indeed, an early title for the play was *The Inside* of *His Head*. ("Tragedy" 35-36)

Text, performance, reality and illusion converge in the last few scenes of the play when Biff makes a final attempt to make a genuine connection with his father and implores him [Willy] to "take that phony dream and burn it before something happens" (*Salesman* 133). Biff's earnest attempt to connect with his father and his own need for validation as a son can be noted in a particularly revealing scene when Biff cries, "Pop, I'm nothing! I'm nothing, Pop. Can't you understand that? There's no spite in it any more. I'm just what I am, that's all" (*Salesman* 133). However, Willy is so immersed in his desire to fulfill the American dream for his son, he imagines Biff's tears as validation for the love he feels for his father. The extent of Willy's departure into his mythic realm can be observed in the final scenes when Willy's dead brother, Ben, appears as an emissary from the world of illusion to guide him through his final act – one which Willy perceives to be a victory, as can be observed when he [Willy] shouts, "Oh, Biff! He cried! Cried to me.

That Boy – that boy is going to be magnificent!" (133). Ben encourages Willy to carry out his mission by stating, "Yes, outstanding, with twenty thousand behind him" (133).

Willy is incapable of internalizing the shortcomings of his son Biff because by doing so, would be to forfeit his dream. Willy's distorted notions of what it takes to succeed, his inability to accept or understand Linda's genuine love for him, and his unwillingness to understand the need of his sons to be loved unconditionally, make Willy view the world in a one–dimensional, success at any cost, manner. Just as Laura Wingfield's illusory world of glass figurines becomes her reality, Willy Loman's determination not to, "[G]o out the way he came in," combined with his one-dimensional view of "a man has got to add up to something" (125) in one respect, makes him as ill-equipped as Laura to deal with reality. On the other hand, Willy makes a conscious decision to fulfill his dream at any cost--thus resulting in his final act. Willy Loman's retreat from reality is so extensive that he literally creates an alternate reality to stay true to his distorted dream of success for his sons based on "personal attractiveness" and being "well-liked." Certainly at times Willy demonstrates a brief understanding of Biff's personal crisis when he "*confidentially, desperately*" (92) comments to Bernard, "You were his friend, his boyhood friend. There's something I don't understand about it. His [Biff's] life ended after that Ebbets Field game. From the age of seventeen nothing good ever happened to him" (92). However, Willy refuses to acknowledge his role in his son's inability to acquire success after high school. For example, when Bernard asks, "What happened in Boston, Willy?" (94), Willy, instead of confessing about The Woman, "*angrily*" states, "Nothing" (94), once again reinforcing the fact that he [Willy] has a

choice and chooses to remain silent, spiraling a series of lies, evasions and illusions that eventually become his reality.

Willy Loman loves his wife and sons; however, his inability to accept reality with its imperfections makes him create a reality in his mind that cannot be realized in "life." Willy's life is based on lies, exaggerations, and avoidance. Ironically, it is Happy, Willy's womanizing younger son, who to a great extent is unacknowledged by Willy, who crystallizes Willy's philosophy by attempting to follow in his father's footsteps, and, who, like Willy, is unable to ever tell the truth. Biff, on the other hand, attempts to follow his passion for working outdoors by herding cattle and working on farms; however, he is never content because he knows that he is not fulfilling his father's dream of succeeding in the business world. Biff's need for validation and approval from his father always brings him home. In fact, Biff's predicament can be observed in a very poignant and revealing scene when he states to his younger brother, Happy,

> There's nothing more inspiring or – beautiful than the sight of a mare and a new colt . . . And whenever spring comes to where I am, I suddenly get the feeling, my God, I'm not getting anywhere! . . . What the hell am I doing, playing around with horses, twenty-eight dollars a week! I'm thirty-four years old, I oughta be makin my future. That's when I come running home. And now I get here, and I don't know what to do with myself. I've always made a point of not wasting my life, and every time I come back here I know that all I've done is to waste my life [. . .] I'm not in business, I just--I'm like a boy. (*Salesman* 23)

Willy has inculcated his son, Biff, with the myth of the American dream with such conviction, that Biff feels he is a failure unless he succeeds in business. Certainly Willy evades the "truth" that he, himself, is a mediocre salesman at best. Moreover, Willy is unable to accept genuine love and affection from his wife, yet accepts gratification from The Woman, and lies and exaggerates his sales figures to his wife and sons. Therefore, the "truth" is too closely aligned with reality for Willy Loman. By the same token, carpentry--working with his hands, is too "natural" for Willy; as a result, he is unable to acknowledge it as a valid or significant profession. Willy is so captivated by the "making it in the business world" (something that does not come to him naturally) mantra that he is unable to comprehend the lonely demise of Dave Singleman, the salesman who was still selling when he was eighty-four years old. Willy's distorted ideas of success can be observed in a significant scene when he attempts to persuade Howard Wagner, his boss, to give him a sales position in New York so that he would not have to travel, by telling Howard about Dave Singleman:

> [. . .] and without ever leaving his room, at the age of eighty-four, he made his living. And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want . . . when he died – and by the way he died the death of a salesman, in his green velvet slippers in the smoker of the New York, New Haven and Hartford, going into Boston – when he died, hundreds of salesmen and buyers were at his funeral. (*Salesman* 81)

These are the illusions and myths that have become Willy Loman's reality and the legacy he has inculcated in his sons. Undoubtedly, Willy admires Dave Singleman's ability to command power without even leaving his room. As Irving Jacobson comments, "The

nature and extent of his [Dave Singleman's] prominence was succinctly illustrated in his ability to sit in a hotel room and make his living by phone, comfortably attired in the luxury of green velvet slippers. This image has had a decisive role in Loman's life: "And when I saw that, I realized that selling was the greatest career a man could want" (250). Jacobson also points out that, "Singleman achieved a success that presented him [Willy] with a world of loyalty, aid, and love (250). Ironically, Willy is given loyalty, aid and love by his wife, sons, and friend, Charley, but, he is unable to accept, internalize, or reciprocate these qualities. However, Willy pleads with his boss, Howard Wagner, to recognize, as Jacobson explains, "quasi-familiarities in the past--'I was with the firm when your father used to carry you here in his arms' . . . --but the reality that 'business is business' and not a family makes his appeal irrelevant" (qtd. in "Family Dreams" 252).

Willy's obsession with the superficial "social" world of the sales profession that imbues itself with a pseudo-familial atmosphere in order to fill quotas, encourage sales and increase profits, prevents him from making a genuine connection with family and friends who care for him. For example, Willy's sincere friend and neighbor, Charley, who has treated the Lomans as family, elicits nothing but contempt and ridicule from Willy. Throughout the play Willy refers to Charley and his son, Bernard, in derogatory terms. When Charley tries to help Willy take his mind off his troubles by playing cards, Willy shows no respect for him and calls him "ignorant," (*Salesman* 42) and when Charley offers Willy a job so that he would not have to travel, Willy responds, "What the hell are you offering me a job for? . . . I got a good job . . . What do you keep comin' in here for?" (43). Similarly, Willy is incapable of acknowledging Bernard's kindness and friendship. He thinks of Charley and Bernard as average people because they are loving,

kind, and generous. Ironically, they are grounded in reality and the pursuit of the real American dream that promotes hard work, family loyalty, respect, and humility. These are the qualities that Willy is unable to appreciate or internalize because he is entrenched with superficial notions of being "well-liked" and the need to possess "personal attractiveness." Consequently, Willy has no tools - nothing genuine to pass on to his sons that will instill the qualities needed to pursue the real American dream. In contrast, Charley has been able to provide valuable tools to Bernard that enable him to have a successful law career, yet, allow him to remain humble, loyal, and family-oriented. What's more, Willy, in a revealing scene comments to Charley, "A man who can't handle tools is not a man. You're disgusting" (*Salesman* 44); however, Charley and his son, Bernard, quietly live out the American dream while Willy gives up his own life believing in the mythologized version of the same dream.

The disparity between Willy and Charley's lives culminates in a poignant scene when Willy, having been fired from his job, goes to Charley's office to seek assistance and finds out the extent of Bernard's professional success:

> CHARLEY. *an arm on Bernard's shoulder:* How do you like this kid? Gonna argue a case in front of the Supreme Court.
>
> BERNARD. *protesting:* Pop!
>
> WILLY. *genuinely shocked, pained, and happy:* No! The Supreme Court!
>
> BERNARD. I gotta run. 'By, Dad!

> CHARLEY. Knock ’em dead, Bernard!
>
> WILLY. *as Charley takes out his wallet”* The Supreme Court! And he didn’t even mention it!
>
> CHARLEY. *counting out money on his desk:* He don’t have to – he’s gonna do it.
>
> WILLY. And you never told him what to do, did you? You never took any interest in him.
>
> CHARLEY. My salvation is that I never took any interest in anything. There’s some money – fifty dollars. I got an accountant inside. (*Salesman* 95-96)

This dialogue makes it clear that Charley leads his life by “doing” and not by dreaming and mythologizing. He creates a successful business that allows him to stay close to his family without the hardships of constant travel, such as Willy and his family have to endure. Even so, Charley always shows his affection, love, and support for the Lomans, thus he is called “Uncle Charley.” Out of love and respect, Charley offers Willy a job many times and Willy, filled with false pride, vainglorious notions, and a mythologized view of the world, always refuses. That being so, when Willy states to Charley that he [Charley], “. . .never took any interest in him [Bernard] (95), the truth is that Charley takes the ultimate interest in his son by leading by example. Certainly Charley works hard and builds a successful business while maintaining his dignity and retaining a compassion for others. Therefore, it is not surprising when Charley, in response to

Willy's surprise that Bernard had not mentioned that he was going to argue a case before the Supreme Court, states, "He [Bernard] don't have to--he's gonna do it" (95). In fact, Charley shows great compassion and respect for Willy by offering him a job, once again, even before Willy tells him he has just been fired by Howard Wagner. Still, Willy is unable to acknowledge or accept anything genuine that, ironically, would allow him to make an honest living; however, he accepts a weekly stipend which allows him to keep his mythic illusions alive.

Similar to the absent father in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie,* Willy epitomizes physical, psychological and moral loss. Although Willy is able to understand that Charley has always been a friend, the disparity between the genuine and superficial is too great for any change or accommodation to take place. Charley has become successful by working hard; however, he values and measures success in a different manner than Willy. Certainly both men desire success for their sons; however, Charley is able to set a positive example by establishing his own business and showing compassion to his neighbors, whereas Willy's superficial definition of success - being well-liked, personally attractive, and being recognized in many places, sets himself and his sons up for failure. The ideology that Willy instills in his sons at an early age, that the greatest success and achievements in life are based on a popularity contest, is one aspect of the myth of the American dream. However, Willy succumbs to this myth with such intensity that he is willing to die for it so that his son, Biff, will realize how popular his father was by viewing the masses that show up for his funeral. In one of the most poignant scenes in the play in which Willy speaks with his dead brother, Ben, we see that illusion has completely replaced reality for Willy Loman:

> Ben, that funeral will be massive! They'll come from Maine, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire! . . .that boy will be thunder-struck, Ben, because he never realized--I am known! . . . he'll see it with his eyes once and for all. He'll see what I am, Ben! He's in for a shock, that boy! (*Salesman* 126)

Despite the fact that Willy has a one-dimensional view of success, there is a child-like innocence about him that makes him appear somewhat noble at times. For example, Willy is genuinely shocked that Howard Wagner could so callously fire him when he, Willy Loman had been responsible for naming him as a child. Undeniably, the social environment of the sales world becomes a family environment for Willy. He looks for love, approval, dignity, and validation from outside forces, while he is unable to accept the love and compassion of his wife, sons and friend, Charley. Certainly Charley tries to help Willy to become more grounded in reality, but to no avail. In a particularly revealing scene, Charley tells his friend, "Willy, when're you going to realize that them things don't mean anything? You named him Howard, but you can't sell that. The only thing you got in this world is what you can sell. And the funny thing is that you're a salesman, and you don't know that" (97). Willy responds to Charley, demonstrating his child-like innocence, yet at the same time epitomizing his fatal adherence to his elusive dream: "I've always tried to think otherwise, I guess. I always felt that if a man was impressive, and well-liked, that nothing . . ." (97). Moreover, although many scholars and critics either attempt to oversimplify or overcomplicate the character of Willy Loman, clearly, his innocence mixed with his single-mindedness add fuel to this on-going debate. As Miller explains to an actor playing the Willy Loman character in the Beijing production

of *Salesman* to help him understand the complex nature of the role and to make sure that Willy is not portrayed in a satiric manner, "People who are able to accept their frustrated lives do not change conditions, do they? So my [Miller's] point is that you must look behind his [Willy's] ludicrousness to what he is actually confronting, and that is as serious a business as anyone can imagine. There is a nobility, in fact, in Willy's struggle. Maybe it comes from his refusal ever to relent, to give up" (*Salesman in Beijing* 27).

Certainly Willy's innocence, vulnerability and absolute adherence to a dream prevent him from being analyzed as merely a victim, dreamer, or fool. After all, what is it about Willy Loman that stirs the hearts of diverse audiences in China, Japan, India, South Africa, Korea, Russia, Mexico and Australia,[6] and many other countries, to make them believe that they are viewing scenes from their own private lives? Brooks Atkinson's review of *Death of a Salesman* captures the play's appeal to diverse audiences: "[. . .] Mr. Miller does not blame Willy, his sons, his boss, or the system, and he draws no moral conclusions. In the space of one somber evening in the theatre he has caught the life and death of a traveling salesman and told it tenderly with a decent respect for Willy's dignity as a man" (qtd. in Hurrell 54). Atkinson points out that Miller, in *All My Sons*, which he states "was a first-rate piece of work," (qtd. in Hurrell 54) argued a moral point and reached a conclusion; in contrast, Atkinson comments, "*Death of a Salesman* is a creative work of art in which the form is so completely blended with the theme that you are scarcely aware of the writing. You accept it as a whole – play, acting, directing and scene designing fused into a unit of expression" (qtd. in Hurrell 54) To be sure, the fact that Miller refused to draw strict moral conclusions out of this work has allowed a transcendent quality, a universal truth to resonate from the plight of the Lomans to touch

the core of audiences in America and all over world. The mixed reviews *Death of a Salesman* has elicited since its premiere on February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theater in New York City, have added further dimensions to the international fascination with this play. As Eleanor Clark for the *Partisan Review* comments,

> These are, notably, a superb performance by Lee J. Cobb as the salesman, a beautifully flexible and elegant stylization of a small Brooklyn house by Jo Mielziner, . . . however, it becomes necessary to question just what it is that gives the play its brilliant down-in-the-mouth effect . . .The play, with its hodge-podge of dated materials and facile new ones, is not tragedy at all but an ambitious piece of confusionism, such as in any other sphere would probably be called a hoax, and which has been put across by purely technical skills not unlike those of a magician or an acrobat (qtd. in Hurrell 61)

Indeed, the "hodge-podge" materials Clark refers to are what make Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller the dramatic successes who forever changed the face of American drama. Certainly Miller has acknowledged that in *Salesman* he wanted "to do a play without any transitions at all, dialogue that would simply leap from bone to bone of a skeleton that would not for an instant cease being added to, an organism as strictly economic as a leaf, as trim as an ant" (*Timebends*, 131). Consequently, Williams and Miller were able to combine poetic language with innovative techniques ranging from lighting and music to transparent walls so that characters could, "enter or leave a room by 'stepping through' a wall onto the forestage" (*Salesman* 12) in order to bring past and present, reality and illusion together on stage at the same time, techniques that had never

been viewed by mainstream dramatic theater audiences before. So, in fact, Williams and Miller were literary magicians; otherwise, how could their work have impacted American and international audiences to such an extent that, as Roudané observes, "Williams and Miller validated the aesthetic quality of the American stage . . . we may say the American Theatrical Renaissance commences during an incredibly fertile time, framed by *The Glass Menagerie* and *Death of a Salesman* . . . [and] shows no signs of diminishing" (*Public Issues, Private Tensions* 2). Certainly the questions left unanswered by Williams and Miller give both *Menagerie* and *Salesman* an appeal that transcends social, economic and cultural boundaries.

The image of loss pervades *Death of a Salesman* in a manner that has elicited critical debates from scholars, critics, and theatergoers since its 1949 premiere. As Harold Bloom observes, "The crucial question might be: what sent Loman into his internalized exile? The form of that exile is unappeasable yearning, since no success and no popularity could gratify so ceaseless a need. Poor Loman essentially wants to sell himself, and so nothing could suffice for him to buy himself back" ("Introduction," *Major Literary Characters: Willy Loman*, 3). Bloom makes a valid observation; however, Willy Loman also yearns to sell his idea of the American dream to his sons, especially Biff. Willy's life is the commodity that he is willing to sacrifice in order to make his myth a reality. In fact, what is significant in Willy's decision to give up his own life is that he whole-heartedly believes that he will be giving his son, Biff a chance at success with the twenty-thousand dollar insurance money. As Choudhuri observes, "It [the play] began with dreams and longings of the human heart and the curtain comes down on shattered dreams; the longings are still there, but side by side stand the hard facts of

reality" (69). Certainly Willy Loman was a dreamer and yearned for success and recognition. However, Willy's distorted views of success, love and a blind devotion to a myth make him unable to accept or understand genuine affection. Additionally, Willy's inability to accommodate the reality of his life makes the disparity between reality and illusion too great and eventually makes genuine communication between himself and his family impossible. For example, when his sons meet him at a restaurant, Biff tries to connect with his father by telling the truth; even so, Willy is unable to accept any aspect of reality. In a significant scene at the restaurant, Biff tells Willy, "Who was it Pop? Who ever said I was a salesman with Oliver? . . . I was never a salesman for Bill Oliver. . . . Let's hold on to the facts tonight, Pop. We're not going to get anywhere bullin' around. I was a shipping clerk" (*Salesman* 106). Willy responds to Biff's attempts to tell the truth by establishing the fact that reality, has indeed, been firmly replaced with illusion, "The gist of it is that I haven't got a story left in my head, Biff. So don't give me a lecture about facts and aspects. I am not interested" (*Salesman* 107). In fact, Willy is unable to accept reality. Myths, lies and exaggeration are the framework of Willy's illusory world. That being so, truth and reality simply have no place in his fragile existence. Willy's need to actualize his dream of success for his sons at any cost combined with his belief that "A man can't go out the way he came in," (125) . . . and "a man has got to add up to something"(125) make him as fragile as Laura Wingfield caught in her illusory and breakable glass world. Any attempt Biff makes to confront his father with the truth threatens Willy's illusion.

Willy Loman's need to be admired, loved and respected by his son Biff propels much of the action of *Death of a Salesman*. As psychological and moral loss pervades the

Loman household, Willy's deterioration can be observed in his inability to make a genuine connection with Biff because he himself is so disconnected with reality. To be sure, Biff and Happy love their father, but are unable to satisfy his need for "success in business." So they are reduced to lying, exaggerating, and womanizing because as Biff tells his mother, Linda, "I just can't take hold, Mom, I can't take hold of some kind of life" (*Salesman* 54). This comment reinforces the personal and social disconnect these brothers face after being raised to believe that they were destined for success because they were attractive and well-liked. So much emphasis was placed on superficial aspects of the myth of the American dream by their father, and so little attention was given to important qualities such as hard work, dedication, loyalty, and compassion, that Biff and Happy are unable to dedicate themselves to any particular profession, relationship, or path in life. Hence, they are relegated to a life of yearning for something better, like their father, but they are missing the tools necessary to achieve their goals. Even so, Biff, in the final scene, comes to an understanding of his father's plight, and, therefore, a better understanding of his own situation when he states, "You know something, Charley, there's more of him [Willy] in that front stoop than in all the sales he ever made . . . He had all the wrong dreams. All, all, wrong. . . . He never knew who he was" (*Salesman* 138). In contrast, his brother, Happy, is angered, as the stage directions indicate, that he was, "*almost ready to fight Biff*" by Biff's comments as he shouts, "Don't say that! And a more confident, self-assured, protective Biff states to his younger brother, "Why don't you come with me, Happy? . . . I know who I am, kid" (138). In this final scene, Biff makes a connection with his father that he was not able to share when Willy was alive. He has a better understanding of the devastation that occurs by blindly following a

"wrong" dream; therefore, he becomes more confident in discovering and following his own path. On the other hand, Happy, in his attempt to stay true to his father's mythologized dream, has little understanding of his father and understands himself even less. Ironically, his lack of understanding makes him follow in the same misguided footsteps of his father. This lack of understanding comes forth when he states, "I'm going to show you and everybody else that Willy Loman did not die in vain. He had a good dream. It's the only dream you can have--to come out number--one man. He fought it out here, and this is where I'm gonna win it for him" (*Salesman* 139).

Biff's need to connect with his father transcends cultural boundaries, and can be noted in the question posed to Miller by the Chinese actor playing Biff in the Beijing production of *Salesman*, and in Miller's response. The actor asks Miller, "What is Biff's need, what is the burden that only his father can help him unload?" Miller responds, "I explain once again that this is a love story; that away from home he [Biff] sometimes feels a painfully unrequited love for his father, a sense of something unfinished between them bringing feelings of guilt" (*Salesman in Beijing* 79). The unconditional love that Biff requires from Willy, his need to be accepted, and to receive his father's blessings before he can go forth with his own dreams, is a universal need that makes the father-son relationship of Willy and Biff transcend cultural boundaries, and touches the core of individuals in countries in which the profession of traveling salesman does not even exist.[7] That the story appeals to many diverse cultures comes forth when a Chinese actor states to Miller that he understands the plight of Biff and Willy: "[T]hat it is very Chinese" (79).

Just as Biff and Happy loved their father, Linda not only loved Willy, but dedicated her life to caring for him. In fact, upon knowing his plan, Linda dedicates her life to keeping him alive. By the same token, Linda is burdened with not only keeping Willy alive, but to do so without compromising his dignity. Linda's love for Willy and her dedication can be observed when she states to Biff, "No, you can't just come to see me, because I love him [Willy]. He's the dearest man in the world to me, and I won't have anyone making him feel unwanted and low and blue. . . . Either he's your father and you pay him that respect, or else you're not to come here. I know he's not easy to get along with--nobody knows that better than me--but. . . . " (55). Although Linda loves her sons, Biff and Happy, her love for Willy and her desire to protect him from harm makes her take a stand with Biff. By doing so, she clarifies that her loyalty, love and dedication, especially after discovering Willy's attempts at suicide, are firmly with her husband. In fact, as Bigsby observes,

> Miller has said of *Death of a Salesman* that love was in a race for Willy's soul. In the case of Biff, whose love/hate for his father is at the heart of his own confused identity, this is an accurate enough account of a crucial struggle. In the case of Linda that love is without substance. It is a kind of background noise, diffused and unfocused. It is real enough. It is present in the gentleness and practicality which she brings to her relationship with Willy. But it could never win any race to redeem him because of a fundamental failure of understanding that Miller seems to feel is inseparable from the feminine sensibility. (*Critical Vol. 2*, 147)

In one respect, Linda understands that Willy adores Biff, yet there are unresolved issues with father and son. On the other hand, Linda is incapable of understanding Willy's passion for fulfilling his mythologized dream of success at any cost. Therefore, as she is unable to understand the intensity of his quest, her love and dedication are inadequate to prevent Willy from fulfilling his fatal vision. Certainly, as Irving Jacobson comments, "Critics have attacked her [Linda] as 'profoundly unsatisfactory' as a character, 'not in the least sexually interesting,' and a symbol of the 'cash-payment fixation.' But given Loman's inability to accept disagreement from his sons or Charley, it is hard to suppose that he would tolerate a less acquiescent wife" (257). Although Jacobson makes some valid observations, Linda Loman is a complex character faced with a delicate situation. Indeed, Linda's love and concern for Willy's declining health impel her to treat him as a child in order to protect him, and at the same time, prevent her from noticing the extent to which Willy has succumbed to his illusory world. Nonetheless, in her attempts to help Willy, she sometimes enables him to live out his myths. Ever since she discovers the rubber pipe in the basement, she makes it her mission to save Willy. However, the reality is that no one can save Willy from fulfilling his fatal mission. To be sure, Linda's love and concern for her husband can be observed in one of the most significant scenes of the play when she states to Biff:

> I don't say he's a great man. Willy Loman never made a lot of money. His name was never in the paper. He's not the finest character that ever lived. But he's a human being, and a terrible thing is happening to him. So attention must be paid. He's not to be allowed to fall into his grave like an old dog. Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person . . . He

> drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him. And what goes through a man's mind driving seven hundred miles home without having earned a cent? Why shouldn't he talk to himself? Why? When he has to go to Charley and borrow fifty dollars a week to pretend to me that it's his pay? How long can that go on? (57)

Clearly, Linda, upon discovering the rubber pipe, had a critical task at hand. How can she prevent her husband from committing suicide? She had to have a plan and carry it forth--the clock was ticking. Thus, she convinces her son, Biff to move back home in hopes that they could work as a team to "help" Willy. Ironically, Linda is also caught up in the lies, fabrications, and exaggerations that imbue the Loman household. She reminds Willy how well-liked he is, she allows Biff to believe that he made such an impression on Bill Oliver in the past, that he will remember him, she even allows Willy to believe that his boss, Howard Wagner, will allow him to be a member of the firm someday. Ironically, although Linda is grounded in reality--paying the bills, mending, cooking and insurance premiums, she encourages Willy's illusions and myths. Consequently, Linda's role and complexity has been debated by many critics. When the play premiered in 1949, most critics viewed Linda's representation in a positive manner such as a nurturing wife and good mother; however, during the sixties, with the rise of the new feminist movement, with its emphasis on the role of women and the preconceived notions of the institution of marriage in society, critics began questioning Linda's part in Willy's illusions and eventual demise. As Brenda Murphy and Susan C. W. Abbotson observe, "Linda has even been described by Charlotte Epstein as prodding Willy to his doom" (6).

Certainly there are as many opinions by scholars and critics regarding the significance of each of the characters of *Salesman* as there are opinions of the play itself. However, regardless of whether or not Linda is considered an interesting, important, or even marginalized character, her love for her husband and her desire to keep him alive and her appeal that, "Attention, attention must be finally paid to such a person," combined with a belief that Willy's exhaustion is what makes him fantasize, and if he could just not have to travel anymore, then perhaps everything will be fine, make her an integral aspect of the plight of the Lomans.

As Roudané explains, "Even Linda, who knows that 'only the shallowness of the water' (59) saved Willy from suicide the year before, and that Willy has 'been trying to kill himself' (58) recently, contributes to the truth-illusion matrix. If Linda casts herself as supportive wife, she is also a complex figure who plays a central role within the family dynamics" ("*Death*" 70). In fact, Linda knows Willy's fragile state from the beginning of the play. However, she feels that she must keep her knowledge of the rubber pipe from Willy to keep his dignity in tact. Whether or not we agree with Linda's tactics, the significance of her actions lay in the fact that she acted out of love and respect for her husband. Her insistence that Willy should ask his boss for a job in New York so that he would not have to travel adds credibility to the notion that she really believed that Willy's main problem was exhaustion.

The importance of the Linda role became an issue for Miller when he directed the production of *Death of a Salesman* in Beijing, China. Miller comments,

> When I directed *Salesman* in China I had Linda 'in action.' She's not just sitting around. She's the one who knows from the beginning of the play

> that Willy's trying to kill himself. She's got the vital information all the time. Linda sustains the illusion because that's the only way Willy can be sustained. At the same time any cure or change is impossible in Willy. Ironically, she's helping to guarantee that Willy will never recover from his illusion. She has to support it; she has no alternative, given his nature and hers. (qtd. in Roudané *Conversations*, 370)

Consequently, by explaining the role of Linda, via translator to a Chinese actress who did not speak a word of English, Miller was able to view and reflect on the significance of Linda as a key figure in the play. She is not a passive individual waiting for the inevitable to take place. Hence, after finding the rubber pipe, Linda is geared for action to protect Willy from his most formidable enemy, himself. Ironically, she is forced to keep Willy's myths alive because she believes that by doing so she is keeping him alive. Certainly Linda loved Willy; however as Bigsby observes, "Her [Linda's] almost complete failure to understand Willy, as opposed to sympathise with and admire him, is thus finally a sign of the inadequacy of that love. It is not strong enough to make demands, to wrestle Willy away from his illusions" (*Modern 1945-2000*, 107). Although Bigsby makes a valid point, if Linda believed that she was keeping him alive, giving him something to live for by sustaining his illusions, then, is that not an act of genuine love? Or, perhaps Willy Loman's illusions were too powerful for any love to penetrate. By the same token, whether or not we believe in the adequacy of Linda's love for Willy, the significant aspect is that Linda loved Willy to the best of her ability. Her genuine shock and lack of understanding of Willy's final deed, make it apparent that Linda believed that if she could just keep Willy alive long enough, he would finally stop trying to kill himself, and

then everything would once again be right in their world. Her disbelief and lack of understanding of the magnitude of Willy's mythic dream can be observed in the final scene of the play when she cries out to her dead husband, "Why did you do it? I search and search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home. We're free and clear." (*Salesman* 139).

As the theme of loss permeates the lives of the Lomans, it is modified and transformed to incorporate the tragic consequences that arise when truth and reality are replaced by lies, exaggerations, denial, myths, and illusions--when the real American dream is replaced by a distorted myth. This is the plight of the Lomans in Miller's play and the universal plight of all the Lomans in the world, giving *Death of a Salesman* its perennial appeal and making it a drama that is as critically debated in 2007 as it was when it premiered on February 10, 1949, at the Morosco Theater in New York City. Ironically, although *Salesman* is considered the quintessential American drama, as Brenda Murphy comments, "[S]ince its premiere, there has never been a time when *Death of a Salesman* was not being performed somewhere in the world" (*Miller: Death of a Salesman* 70). Hence, what is it about this play that elicits so much international attention? What is it about the plight of the Lomans that speaks to audiences who have, at best, only a basic understanding of American culture and perhaps even less understanding of the traveling salesman profession? The international appeal of this play is the universal truth that arises out of Willy's plight and the Lomans' predicament, and is revealed in Miller's response to a particular question when he produced *Salesman* in Beijing. Miller

was asked by the Chinese actors how they could make the play more American, to which Miller responded,

> The way to make this play most American is to make it most Chinese. The alternative is what? – you will try to imitate films you have seen, correct? . . . But those films are already imitations, so you will be imitating an imitation. Or maybe you will observe how I behave and imitate me. But this play cannot work at all – it can easily be a disaster – if it approached in the spirit of cultural mimicry. I can tell you now that one of my main motives in coming here is to try to show you that *there is only one humanity* [italics mine]. That our cultures and languages set up confusing sets of signals and these prevent us from communicating and sharing one another's thoughts and sensations, but that at the deeper levels where this play lives we are joined in a unity that is perhaps biological. (*Salesman in Beijing* 5)

The transcendent core of Miller's *Salesman* is comprised of the father-son relationship of Willy and Biff, Linda's sustaining Willy's illusions out of respect and the need to keep him alive, Willy's belief in a dream that he his willing to die for, and the catastrophic consequences that arise out of a family's inability to communicate because lies, evasions, myths and illusions have replaced truth and reality as a deadly silent language that, indeed, is a silent killer. Certainly the Lomans' inability to evade rather than communicate transcends cultural boundaries. That being so, Miller's belief that there is "only one humanity" is the core of the play's perennial international appeal. The Lomans' saga translates readily to many diverse cultures, because, as Miller explains, all of

humanity is unified at "the deeper level" where *Salesman* "lives." In fact, the Chinese production was successful because of Miller's ability to step into the psyche of all human beings; as he explains, "Audiences viewing the play from around the world, . . . find themselves on similar familial borders, similar professional thresholds, and similar psychological precipices." (qtd. in Roudané "Celebrating *Salesman*," 22).

Along with China, India has also embraced the various productions of several Miller plays. However, as Rajinder Paul observes,

> Of all Miller's plays that have been performed in India--*All My Sons*, *After the Fall*, *Incident at Vichy*, *View from a Bridge*--*Death of a Salesman* has been the most popular both as Theatre and in book form. Almost everyone who has been connected with theatre after the partition of India and Pakistan (an arbitrary but undeniable watershed for modern Indian drama) has seen or read this play. Hardly anyone I know is in disagreement about its claim to being a modern classic of world drama. (24-25)

The enormous popularity of *Salesman* in India is no small feat considering India has over fourteen major languages with theatrical performances staged in each language. This aspect, combined with fact that popular dramas are sometimes staged in more than language makes *Salesman's* popularity even more significant. Moreover, another feature that separates India from many other countries is that each state in India has its own unique culture which includes language, customs and food. In fact, India is so culturally diverse that, although a majority of Indians are Hindu, almost every major religion is also represented in this country. Yet another unique feature of India is that patriarchal and matriarchal cultures co-exist in India adding another dimension to a country rich in

theater and arts ranging from ancient Sanskrit dramas such as the *Mahabharata*[8] and *Ramayana*[9] to Kathakali[10] in Kerala to the trendy Bollywood [11]of Mumbai. Despite these diverse factors, *Salesman* was a success in India in English and regional language productions. As Paul observes, "The achievement of Miller is that he is the first truly tragic writer not to use the classic model of tragedy: his Willy Loman is a nondescript, unattractive little man who is nevertheless a great tragic figure. Of the four or five great American dramatists--O'Neill, Williams, Wilder, and possibly Albee--Miller is far and away the greatest in this respect" (Paul 24). Willy Loman's need for love and respect from his son, Biff and his inexhaustible desire to see his sons succeed speak directly to modern and ancient Indian beliefs. India, a country where modern conveniences and technology co-exist with ancient customs and practices, is the land of Maya,[12] which represents illusion. That being so, a point where illusion and reality meet is very familiar to an Indian audience as is the notion of getting a better understanding of "self." As Hinduism[13] is as much a philosophy as a religion, it is woven into the cultural framework of India. The basic tenets of Hindu philosophy state that the self is not an entity completely separate from the universe. Therefore, a natural path is one that goes toward enlightenment. Lies, evasions, myths, and illusions make us believe that Maya (illusion--fleeting reality) is the real world. Therefore, as Willy does not understand himself, he feels at odds with his natural environment, always striving for that which does not come naturally and is lost to Maya--the illusory world. What's more, the English and Bengali productions of *Salesman* were the most successful in India. As Asim Chakravarty, the Bengali producer who produced it in 1964 and enjoyed over 150 performances observes, "*Death of a Salesman* is unique in one respect, that everyone, somehow, somewhere,

finds himself identified; and therein lies the success of the play" (qtd. in Paul 25). Regardless of whether *Salesman* is produced in English or one of the other major Indian languages such as Hindi[14] or Bengali[15], as Paul comments, "[O]f all American dramatists, modern or not, Miller is the best known in India, and his *Death of a Salesman* the most popular play" (Paul 26).

Although it may be too late for the Lomans to gain a richer understanding of the need for a value base that goes beyond the material and that accepts human life as a priceless commodity, perhaps it is not too late for the audience to supply the element missing in Willy Loman's life, to give value to what Willy was really selling--himself. Hence, Miller draws the audience towards a Reader-Response[16] scrutiny of his play. In fact, the essence of *Salesman's* appeal to diverse audiences from various cultures is indicative of the importance of text and performance in this work. As Miller states,

> [B]y showing what happens where there are no values, I at least, assume that the audience will be compelled and propelled toward a more intense quest for the values that are missing. I am assuming always that we have a kind of civilized sharing of what we would like to see occur within us and within the world. I think that drama, at least mine, is not so much an attack but an exposition of 'the want.' This kind of drama can be done only if the audience is constantly trying to supply what is missing. (qtd. in Gelb 32)

Indeed, Miller's *quintessential* [italics mine] American drama resonates with American and international audiences alike. Perhaps Miller's words upon producing the play in China in 1983 best sum up the universal transcendent core of *Salesman* that makes it as poignant in 2007 as was in 1949 when it premiered in New York: "I theorize

a universality of human emotions; I hope that the production here [in Beijing] of this very American play will simply assert the idea of a single humanity once again" (*Salesman in Beijing* 44). Without a doubt, the theme of loss permeates the Loman household and ends with the ultimate loss, the loss of life. However, it is Willy's twenty-four hour journey that captures the past and present, illusion and reality, dream and distorted myth that seizes the hearts and minds of the audience as Willy has to face his ultimate, most formidable enemy, himself. It is at this moment, as we see a certain familiarity reflected in Willy's plight, that we realize the essence of Miller's theater, a common humanity which, indeed, transcends cultures, languages, sociopolitical views and leaves an indelible mark on all those who witness the physical, psychological and moral disintegration of a man who "had the wrong dreams" (*Menagerie* 138). Although it may be too late for Willy and the Lomans, just as it was too late for Williams's Tom and the Wingfields, our acknowledgement of their plight, of their loss, even if only for a moment, is the transcendent core and thus, the essence of theater.

Notes to Chapter Three

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[1] As Matthew C. Roudané comments, "A play concerning the most public of American myths, *Death of a Salesman* lays bare the private individual's sensibility, a sensibility neutralized by those very myths. In an era where many scholars question precisely what constitutes American essentialism, most theatergoers still regard [*Salesman*] as the quintessential American play" ("Celebrating *Salesman*" 25).

[2] The American dream as an ideal represents the notion that by working hard and having goals, one could fulfill one's dreams. However, Willy Loman equates the American dream only with material success and superficial aspects such as "physical attractiveness" and "making contacts." The American dream defined by Miller, "is the largely unacknowledged screen in front of which all American writing plays itself out--the screen of the perfectibility of man . . . People elsewhere tend to accept, to a far greater degree anyway, that the conditions of life are hostile to man's pretensions. The American idea is different in the sense that we think that if we could only touch it, live by it, there's a natural order in favor of us; and that the object of a good life is to get connected with that live and abundant order" (qtd. in Roudané *Conversations*, 36).

[3] All quotes from *Death of a Salesman* are from the Penguin Books 1949 edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references.

[4] Reading *Death of a Salesman* from the point of a Marxist results in the idea that Miller uses his play as a vehicle to demonstrate the effects of a changing capitalist society. In *Understanding Death of a Salesman*, Brenda Murphy and Susan C. W. Abbotson explain, "The question of *Salesman*'s social statement has been a major issue in the debate over the play for fifty years. Miller has been criticized for presenting Willy's failure as the

inevitable end of a man who has finally broken under the pressures of an economic system that he is fatally incapable of understanding," (xvi). Murphy and Abbotson go on to say that Miller responded to this type of criticism by commenting, "a play cannot be equated with a political philosophy" (xvi).

[5] Roudané explains, "*Death of a Salesman*, the universalists counter, seems beyond philosophical limits or gendered subjectivity, and thus is a play to which all – social constructionists, Jungians, Marxists, postculturalists, and so on--react," (Roudané "Celebrating *Salesman*" 24).

[6] Refer to Susan C. W. Abbottson, (*Student Companion to Arthur Miller* 8). Also see Rajinder Paul, "*Death of a Salesman in India,*" *The Merrill Studies in Death of a Salesman*.

[7] As Miller observes, "Parallels exist in the play with Chinese society, I have reason to think, assuming that people want to rise in the world everywhere. And if there aren't as yet traveling salesmen in this country [China], I conjecture that the idea of such a man is easily enough grasped from the text itself. In any case, the salesman motif is in some great part metaphorical; we must all sell ourselves, convince the world of a persona that perhaps we only wish we possessed" (*Salesman in Beijing* 44).

[8] "The *Mahabharata* is one of the three major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, the others being the *Ramayana* and *Sivarahasya*. With more than 74,000 verses, long prose passages, and some 1.8 million words in total, it is arguably the longest epic poem in the world. Taken together with the Harivamsa, the Mahabharata has a total length of more than 90,000 verses. It is of immense religious and philosophical importance in India and Nepal, a major text of Hinduism. Its discussion of human goals (artha or wealth, kama or

pleasure, dharma or duty/harmony, and moksha or liberation) takes place within a long-standing mythological tradition, attempting to explain the relationship of the individual to society and the world (the nature of the 'Self') and the workings of karma. In its final form, it was completed by the first century, with its central core Bharata (consisting of 24,000 verses) dating back to the 6th century BCE."

"Mahabharata." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Mar 2007, 12:33 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Mar 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Mahabharata&oldid=118499536>.

For more detailed information on Indian theater ranging from Sanskrit drama to the ancient Indian epics refer to Rachel Van M. Baumer and James R. Brandon's *Sanskrit Drama in Performance*, Balwant Gargi's *Folk Theatre in India* and *Theatre in India*, Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, and Bonnie C. Wade's *Performing Arts in India: Essays on Music, Dance, and Drama*.

[9] "The *Ramayana* is an ancient Sanskrit epic attributed to the poet Valmiki and is an important part of the Hindu canon. The name *Ramyana* is a tatpurusa compound of *Rama* and *ayana* "going, advancing," translating to "the travels of Rama. The *Ramayana* consists of 24,000 verses in seven cantos and tells the story of a prince, Rama of Ayodhya, whose wife Sita is abducted by the demon Rakshasa king of Lanka, Ravana. In its current form, the *Valmiki Ramayana* is dated variously from 500 BCE to 100 BCE. As with most traditional epics, since it has gone through a long process of interpolations and redactions, it is impossible to date it accurately. The *Ramayana* had an important influence on later Sanskrit poetry, primarily through its establishment of the Sloka meter.

But, like its epic cousin *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana* is not just an ordinary story. It contains the teachings of ancient Hindu sages and presents them through allegory in narrative and the interspersion of the philosophical and the devotional. The characters of Rama, Sita, Lakshmana, Bharata, Hanuman and Ravana (the villain of the piece) are all fundamental to the cultural consciousness of India. One of the most important literary works on ancient India, the *Ramayana* has had a profound impact on art and culture in the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. The story of Rama also inspired a large amount of latter-day literature in various languages, notable among which are the works of the sixteenth century Hindi poet Tulsidas and the Tamil poet Kambar of the 13th century."

"Ramayana." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 26 Mar 2007, 16:27 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Mar 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Ramayana&oldid=118029105>.

For more specifics on Indian drama and the ancient Indian epics refer to Rachel Van M. Baumer and James R. Brandon's *Sanskrit Drama in* Performance, Balwant Gargi's *Folk Theatre in India* and *Theatre in India*, Farley P. Richmond, Darius L. Swann, and Phillip B. Zarilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, and Bonnie C. Wade's *Performing Arts in India: Essays on Music, Dance, and Drama*.

[10] "Kathakali is a form of Indian dance drama. It originated in the Indian state of Kerala during the 17th century. The name Kathakali derives from the Malayalam words "katha" (meaning story) and "kali" (meaning play). Kathakali originated from Ramanattom ("Raman"= the hindu god, Sri Rama; "attom"= enactment") and Krishnanattom ("Krishnan"= the hindu god, Krishna; "attom"= enactment). History has it that Raja

(ruler) of Kottarakkara (a province in Kerala) sculpted Ramanattom when the Zamorin (then ruler of Kozhikode, another province in Kerala) refused to allow a performance of Krishnanattom in the former's palace. Subsequently, Kottayam Thampuran (ruler of Kottayam, another province in Kerala) composed several plays on Mahabharatha thereby making these distinct from stories based on Ramanattom. Consequently, Kathakali was born. But it also incorporated several outside elements, which is thought to have contributed to its popularity. In particular, the increasing use of Malayalam, which is the local language (albeit as a mix of Sanskrit and Malayalam, called Manipravaalam) made it more popular among the masses. During its evolution, Kathakali also imbibed elements from folk and martial arts which existed at the time in Kerala. Characters with vividly painted faces and elaborate costumes re-enact stories from the Hindu epics, *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. Kathakali is traditionally performed in the Hindu temple, but nowadays may also be seen in theatre performances."

"Kathakali." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Mar 2007, 00:20 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Mar 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Kathakali&oldid=118399431>.

For more detailed information on Kathakali, refer to Phillip B. Zarilli's *Indian Theatre: Traditions of Performance*, and Balwant Gargi's *Folk Theatre in India* and *Theatre in India*.

[11] "Bollywood is the informal name given to the popular Mumbai-based (formerly known as Bombay) Hindustani language film industry in India.

"Bollywood." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Mar 2007, 09:30 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Mar 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Bollywood&oldid=118477995>.

For more information on India's Bollywood refer to Tejaswini Ganti's *Bollywood: A Guidebook to Popular Hindi Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

[12] "Maya in Hinduism, is a term describing many things. Maya is the phenomenal world of separate objects and people, which creates for some the illusion that it is the only reality. For the mystics this manifestation is real, but it is a fleeting reality; it is a mistake, although a natural one, to believe that maya represents a fundamental reality. Each person, each physical object, from the perspective of eternity is like a brief, disturbed drop of water from an unbounded ocean. The goal of enlightenment is to understand this —more precisely, to experience this: to see intuitively that the distinction between the self and the universe is a false dichotomy. The distinction between consciousness and physical matter, between mind and body, is the result of an unenlightened perspective." "Maya (illusion)." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 10 Apr 2007, 02:27 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 1 May 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Maya %28illusion%29&oldid=121585838>.

For more detailed information on the concept of maya in Hinduism consult Ruth Reyna's book, *The Concept of Maya from the Vedas to the 20th Century*.

[13] "Hinduism is a religion that originated on the Indian subcontinent. With its foundations in the Vedic, it has no known founder, being itself a conglomerate of diverse beliefs and traditions. It is considered the world's "oldest extant religion," and has approximately a billion adherents, of whom about 890 million live in India placing it as the world's third

largest religion after Christianity and Islam. Other countries with large Hindu populations include Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Malaysia and. Hinduism provides a vast body of scriptures. Divided as revealed and remembered and developed over millennia, these scriptures expound on a broad of range of theology, philosophy and mythology, providing spiritual insights and guidance on the practice of dharma (religious living). Among such texts, Hindus revere the *Vedas* and the *Upanishads* and consider these as being among the foremost in authority, importance and antiquity. Other major scriptures include the Tantras and the sectarian Agamas, the *Puranas* and the epic *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. The *Bhagavad Gita*, a treatise excerpted from the *Mahābhārata*, is widely considered a summary of the spiritual teachings of the *Vedas*." "Hinduism." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 28 Mar 2007, 13:40 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 28 Mar 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Hinduism&oldid=118510512>. For more specific information on Hinduism refer to Jeaneane D. Fowler's book, *Hinduism: Beliefs and* Practices, and Pratima Bowes's *The Hindu Religious Tradition: A Philosophical Approach*. Also see Robert S. Ellwood and Gregory D. Alles's *The Encyclopedia of World Religions*. 159-162.

[14] Hindi is one of the official languages of India. It is also informally considered to be the national language of India.

[15] Bengali is the language spoken in the state of West Bengal, India and in the country of Bangladesh.

[16] Reader-response theory deals with the relationship between reader and text, text and reader. The focal point is the different ways in which a reader participates in reading a

text and the different perspectives that arise in response to the text. Essentially, reader-response theory gives importance to the reader's contribution to the text. For a more complete analysis of reader-response theory, refer to Michael J. Hoffman and Patrick D. Murphy's *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction* and Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack's *Formalist Criticism and Reader-Response Theory*.

Chapter Four: Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*

The theme of loss permeates Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother*. In fact, in the first few lines of the play we know that Jessie is planning on committing suicide. However, although Jessie's suicide, like that of Miller's Willy Loman, is the ultimate loss, death, Norman's focal point in this play is Jessie's empowerment to control her own destiny. Therefore, unlike the desperation felt by Willy to prove to his son, Biff, that he is "known," and that his son will realize this fact because his "funeral will be massive"(*Salesman* 126), Jessie, meticulously orchestrates her own suicide as a final act of total control--something she had never possessed in her life. There is no desperation in her actions, only a controlled, deliberate, execution of a well thought-out plan to free herself from a meaningless existence. Moreover, the image of loss is heightened by the mother-daughter relationship in '*night, Mother* as Thelma fights to preserve Jessie's life and Jessie struggles to control her own fate. Ironically, this struggle results in a connection between mother and daughter that was never possible until this moment. The helplessness Thelma feels in attempting to prevent Jessie's suicide, the anticipation of the final shot by the audience as events unfold onstage in real time, and the revelation of the deep psychological loss felt by Jessie--impelling her to end her misery and take control of her fate are the driving forces of this play.

Tennessee Williams was concerned with the loss of time in *The Glass Menagerie*, and Arthur Miller made us aware of the last twenty-four hours of Willy Loman's life in *Death of a Salesman*. Norman's play begins in present time from the moment the audience sits in their seats and the first line is uttered on stage. By the same token, as

Linda Kintz argues, "The passage of time in this play in a very stark sense means loss, as it does in everyone's life, as aging leads to death" (213). Indeed, Jessie is aware of the passing of time; however, instead of waiting until age leads to death, she has decided to assume control of her own destiny by killing herself. She feels she has waited long enough and states, "I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it" (*'night, Mother* 76)[1]. For Jessie, death is, "just a matter of where I'd rather be" (74). However, the significant aspect is that she has chosen this particular evening to end her life. Ironically, she gains control over her own life by taking control of when and how she will die. As Norman mentions in the stage directions at the beginning of the play, Jessie has, "a sense of purpose, but is clearly aware of the time passing moment by moment" *('night, Mother* 1). To further illustrate the significance of time in this play, Norman clarifies, "*The time is the present, with the action beginning about 8:15 [pm]. Clocks onstage in the kitchen and on a table in the living room should run throughout the performance and be visible to the audience. There will be no intermission*" (3). As Robert Brustein observes, "Scrupulously realistic,'*night, Mother* . . . not only measures its own time . . . but also the time of the audience . . . the clocks on the stage display the same hour as the watches on the wrists of the spectators . . . . it gives the play the density and compression of an explosive device, and accounts in part for its remorseless power" (159). Norman uses the element of time in this play to reveal Thelma and Jessie's disparate views of life and survival. By the same token, we are constantly reminded of the urgency behind Thelma's frantic actions to keep her daughter alive, and Jessie's awareness of each passing moment as she attempts to keep her composure and adhere to the schedule she has devised for the intimate evening she has planned for herself and her mother which includes filling candy

jars and pill bottles, ordering groceries, discussing personal issues, giving manicures, fine tuning funeral arrangements and committing suicide.

Physical and psychological loss permeates '*night, Mother* as the audience is drawn into the banal conversation of mother and daughter. There is an utter sense of loss for Thelma, a mother who is forced to watch her child, Jessie, methodically prepare for her own suicide, knowing that there is nothing she can do to prevent it. The enormity of this helpless predicament comes forth in a particularly poignant scene when Thelma exclaims to her daughter, "You're gone already, aren't you? I'm looking right through you! I can't stop you because you're already gone!" (78). It is at this point that Thelma realizes that Jessie is lost to her--that no matter what she tries to do to prolong her daughter's life, or prevent her from killing herself, the inevitable will happen. The sadness, loss, and emotional bankruptcy Thelma feels as this realization sweeps over her is evident in the following stage direction that precedes this poignant scene:

> *Mama is nearly unconscious from the emotional development of these last few moments. She sits down at the kitchen table, hurt and angry and desperately afraid. But she looks almost numb. She is so far beyond what is known as pain that she is virtually unreachable and JESSIE knows this, and talks quietly, watching for signs of recovery. ('night, Mother* 79)

By the same token, the image of loss in Norman's play is intensified by abandonment, loss of a spouse, loss of a father, estrangement from a brother and son, and a physical disability--many of the problems faced by Williams's Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*. For instance, Laura was abandoned by her father and left with only "a blown-up photograph of the father" (*Menagerie* 22), an old phonograph and records belonging to her father,

and a postcard that states, “Hello-goodbye!” (23). As Louis Grieff comments, “Through such symbols, this invisible father comes to represent the spirit’s desire for freedom and escape--imagination’s urge to say ‘Hello-goodbye’ to the compromises of daily life”[2] (224). Jessie’s father dies leaving her with animals made from pipe cleaners and memories of a “Big old faded blue man in the chair” *(‘night, Mother* 47). Be that as it may, we know that Jessie had the luxury of the knowledge that her father loved her and she had a chance to form a bond with him.

Although both daughters suffer physical ailments (Laura’s limp and Jessie’s epilepsy), and they both keep the memory of their fathers alive, a significant difference between Laura and Jessie is that Jessie has lived in the real world. She has survived a failed marriage to a man she still loves, she is estranged from her rebellious, delinquent, teenage son, she has been employed, albeit briefly, in the real world, and even her beloved dog, King, was run over by a tractor. In contrast, Laura’s contact with the outside world consists of a few forays to Rubicam’s Business College and a brief encounter with Jim O’Connor, the gentleman caller--a boy she had a crush on in high school, who as a man, crushes her hopes of a life beyond the world of her glass menagerie. Nonetheless, Laura has her illusory world to live within, a protection from the harsh realities of the outside world, whereas Jessie decides she is ready for her life to be over, and compares her decision to disembarking from a bus, “because even if I [Jessie] ride fifty more years and get off then, it’s the same place when I step down to it. Whenever I feel like it, I can get off. As soon as I’ve had enough, it’s my stop. I’ve had enough” (33). As Jenny Spencer comments, “We do not leave the theatre asking why Jessie commits suicide . . . Not only depressed, she feels betrayed and abandoned. Or as she first explains: ‘I’m tired.

I'm hurt. I'm sad. I feel used'" [*'night, Mother* 28] ("Norman's *'night, Mother*" 367). Jessie is in control of her own destiny. She decides that she no longer wants to live. In contrast, Laura is simply incapable of making decisions for herself and is confined to a life of complete dependency. Moreover, the relationship Thelma has with Jessie is symbiotic. They both have the ability to care for one another. In contrast, Amanda will have to care for her emotionally and physically disabled daughter, Laura with little hope of the roles ever being reversed.

Certainly the mother-daughter relationship is one of the most complicated, yet little understood relationships, as elucidated by Williams's Amanda and Laura and Norman's Thelma and Jessie. Nonetheless, although as Greiff suggests, "Laura Wingfield's and Jessie Cates' families and life-situations are, indeed, alike" (225), the single point of connection that takes place for each mother-daughter pair, however brief in duration, is the transcendent element that unifies both plays. The elements of text and performance come together as we witness this point of connection in both dramas. Indeed, the silent scene between mother and daughter at end of Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* captures a transformed Amanda, who is now described as graceful and dignified as she comforts her daughter, and is a far cry from Tom's earlier description of her as an "ugly-babbling old witch" (*Menagerie* 42). By the same token, Laura looks up at her mother at the end of her speech and smiles, indicating a connection between the two that is much stronger than at any other point in the play. Similarly, although we are drawn in real time in *'night, Mother* into the horrific situation that unfolds onstage as a mother is forced to ready herself for the suicide of her daughter, we also become privy to the banal discussions between Thelma and Jessie that gradually give way to specific

instances in Jessie's life that are wrought with pain and suffering and then moments of clarity in which she decides that she has nothing to live for. As she states, "I would wonder, sometimes, what would keep me here, what might be worth staying for, and you know what it was? It was maybe if there was something I really liked, like maybe if I really liked rice pudding or cornflakes for breakfast or something, that might be enough" ('*night, Mother* 77).

Consequently, Jessie decides to exercise complete control of the last few hours of her life as she has made a "choice" to end it. Ironically as Jessie assumes complete control over her own destiny by her choice, she removes every ounce of maternal power from Thelma who has no choice but to unwillingly serve as her accomplice by accepting the inevitable. The cruelty of this act is mitigated by Jessie's explanation that the only alternative would have been to leave a note. She did not want to do that because, as she states to her mother in a very significant scene, "I only told you so I could explain it, so you wouldn't blame yourself, so you wouldn't feel bad. There wasn't anything you could say to change my mind. I didn't want you to save me. I just wanted you to know" ('*night, Mother* 74). The fact is until Jessie makes the decision to end her life, other people have governed it. Even though Thelma genuinely cares for her daughter, just as Williams's Amanda cares for Laura, her attempts of protecting Jessie also have disastrous results. For example, we find out that Thelma has kept Jessie's epilepsy a secret from her for years. Moreover, she introduces Jessie to Cecil, a man whom Jessie loves but ends up abandoning her because "I [Jessie] didn't know how to hold on to him" (57). Even so, Jessie's love for her mother prompts her to takes steps to ensure her mother's well being

when she is no longer there to take care of her. Hence, the detailed lists of everything that must be done before she takes her final exit.

'*night, Mother* sparkles in performance. As Jenny Spencer observes, "Clearly the success of '*night, Mother* rests on the peculiar power of the play in performance; it works for audiences, when it does work, on a number of levels--the naturalistic illusion so carefully maintained that the play, like unmediated experience itself, appears open to multiple interpretations."[3] Spencer contends that most males respond differently than females to Norman's play. She uses her own personal response as a segue to her theory:

> Like most of the audience, I knew the play ended with suicide. But being armed against an indulgently emotional response did not prevent me from having one. What I experienced as almost overwhelmingly painful, however, was viewed with utter indifference by the otherwise sensitive men in my company. . . It appeared that for most of them [males] the play seemed too limited in focus, too predictable in effect to capture their interest completely. A subsequent survey of reviews revealed a similar disparity of reaction, although not entirely along the lines of gender. John Simon[4] and Frank Rich[5] applauded Norman's ability to weave an existential experience out of the most homely of materials. But Stanley Kauffman[6] and Richard Gilman[7] envied the 'rapture' of others, finding Norman's play blatantly contrived on the one hand and utterly boring on the other. Gilman, in particular, captures the predominant male attitude I witnessed with this comment: 'When the shot sounded, I wasn't startled,

> dismayed, or much moved; it was all 'sort of' sad, 'sort of' lugubrious.' ("Psycho-drama" 364)

Given the fact that the primary focus of Norman's play takes place within the mother-daughter dynamic, most of the dialogue captures the banal conversations of day-to-day life and domestic activities, and considering that any woman watching the play is either a mother or a daughter, it is not surprising that males and females will respond differently to *'night, Mother*. Even so, we must not overlook the significance of the empowerment Jessie feels when for the first time in her life, she is able to take complete control of her destiny and thereby decides that she whole-heartedly wants to end her life. By giving too much emphasis to gender-based responses, and, ironically, to many feminist critics who view Norman's play as a tale of defeat, it is easy to overlook the primary focus of the play, which is, as Norman herself explains, "a play of nearly total triumph. Jessie is able to get what she feels she needs." (Betsko 339).

In response to the comment that suicide cannot be considered survival, Norman explains, "[B]y Jessie's definition of survival, it is. As Jessie says, 'My life is all I really have that belongs to me, and I'm going to say what happens to it.' . . . Jessie has taken an action on her own behalf that for her is the final test of all that she has been. That's how I see it" (Betsko 339). The empowerment Jessie feels by deciding her own fate comes through in the dialogue she has with her mother, which on the surface appears banal, but conveys not only emotional truths but the new found confidence that has been instilled in her by her choice. The decisiveness of Jessie's response to Thelma's, "You don't know what dead is like" *('night, Mother* 18), when she retorts, "Dead is everybody and everything I ever knew, gone. Dead is dead quiet" (18), brings focus to the importance of

text and performance in this play. In fact, Norman, herself has stated that the first line Jessie states in '*night, Mother*, "We got any old towels," (6), "was a ritual piece, that Jessie was coming in to celebrate this requiem mass, that she has these stacks of towels: here are the witnesses, the household objects. She comes in as though she is the altar boy" (Savran "Interview" 186). Hence, from Jessie's first few lines we know that she is in control of the conversation and of her own life.

Just as Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* (1916) explored gender relationships, power between the sexes, the nature of truth, and ultimately the power of the "trivial" details of day-to-day life, Norman explores the power of dialogue--the power of the seemingly banal conversation to bring forth emotional truths. As a result, it is not surprising that the plight of Thelma and Jessie transcends national and cultural boundaries and has appealed to many international audiences. As Norman observes,

> *'night, Mother* is done all over the world . . . Curiously enough, my work has always been popular in Eastern Europe. But this time I've caught the Mediterranean crowd. What strikes you as you watch it in a foreign country, in another language, is that the play seems to contain this other culture. In Italy you get enormous 'Mama mia' mamas, and the Jessies are always Ariels, little sprites. In Scandinavian countries it's quite the opposite. The mothers are really small, like the old woman who lived in the shoe, and the daughters are Valkyries, towering over these little Mamas. In the Latin American countries Mama and Jessie look like sisters. The great thing about watching the play in another language, particularly one you don't understand, is that you get it all . . . You're so

> aware of what you can expect from an audience, you know what the trip is like, you know what the scenery is like. So, if people don't gasp at the right time you think, 'Gee, something happened.' (Savran *In Their Own Words* 188)

Loneliness, isolation, and loss are transnational themes. Moreover, Thelma's emotional struggle to prevent her daughter from committing suicide is a plight that certainly has no national boundaries. Moreover, the complexity of the mother-daughter relationship is clearly one that transcends international boundaries. Although many critics have brought forth gender specific responses to the play, the theme that may transcend all social, political and economic boundaries is one of empowerment of an individual to take control of her own destiny. This final act is done with such deliberation and tenacity that Jessie is able to convey to her own mother, although Thelma remains reluctant, that it is the only solution for her dilemma--she has simply had enough--it was time to get of that "hot," "bumpy," "crowded," bus (*'night, Mother* 33). Jessie's new found power, confidence and determination is evident in a particularly revealing scene when she responds to Thelma's appeal to not give up, and her plea that they could "have more talks like tonight" (75), and she [Thelma] would "pay more attention" (75) by stating,

> I'm not giving up! This is the other thing I'm trying . . . this will work. That's why I picked it . . . No, Mama! We wouldn't have more talks like tonight, because it's this next part that's made this last part so good, Mama. No, Mama. This is how I have my say. To Dawson and Loretta and the Red Chinese and epilepsy and Ricky and Cecil and you. And me. And hope. I say no! Just let me go easy, Mama. (75)

The dialogue between mother and daughter reveals the conviction Jessie has in her choice to end her life. She is not giving up. She has decided to set herself free from a meaningless existence. In fact, she even states that she has wondered about, "what might be worth staying for" (77), and found that she did not like anything, and therefore made a conscious decision to end it all. As Norman explains, " Jessie has taken an action on her own behalf that for her is the final test of all that she has been . . . I think the question the play asks is, 'What does it take to survive? What does it take to save your life?' Now Jessie's answer is 'It takes killing myself.' (Betsko 339-40). Whether or not we are satisfied with this definition of survival is not significant. What is important is that we recognize that ending her life is Jessie's definition of survival. As Jessie states, "My life is all I really have that belongs to me, and I'm going to say what happens to it" *('night, Mother* 36).

Certainly Jessie's definition of survival clashes with Thelma's maternal instinct to protect her daughter. Ironically, in this case, Thelma has the futile task of trying to protect Jessie from herself. In a significant scene that sets the stage for one of the most revealing scenes of the play, the anguish Thelma feels surfaces when she cries out to Jessie, "How can I let you go?" (76). Jessie in return states, "You can because you have to. It's what you've always done" (76). In response, Thelma exclaims, "You are my child!" (76). Jessie has basically lost herself. Consequently, in one of the most important scenes in the play, Jessie's dilemma is elucidated when in response to Thelma's pleading, she states,

> I am what became of your child. I found an old baby picture of me. And it was somebody else, not me. It was somebody pink and fat who never heard of sick or lonely, somebody who cried and got fed, and reached up

> and got held and kicked but didn't hurt anybody, and slept whenever she wanted to, just by closing her eyes . . .That's who I started out and this is who is left. That's what this is about. It's somebody I lost, all right, it's my own self. Who I never was. Or who I tried to be but never got there. Somebody I waited for who never came. And never will. So, see, it doesn't matter what else happens in this world or in this house, even. I'm what was worth waiting for and I didn't make it. Me . . . who might have made a difference to me . . . I'm not going to show up, so there's no reason to stay, except to keep you company, and that's . . . not reason enough because I'm not . . . very good company. Am I. *('night, Mother* 76)

Jessie wants her mother to understand why she cannot go on living. She also wants Thelma to understand that she is not the same entity who was born from her mother. She no longer identifies with her life. In other words, Jessie no longer recognizes herself. Therefore, regardless of what happens around her, she is unable to identify with or make any connection to her surroundings. Hence, she has no sense of self. Jessie also wants her mother to understand that the act she is about to commit is something exclusively her own. It is *her* decision. Jessie's decision is something that her mother cannot control. Jessie also emphasizes the fact that she has probably stayed around thus far to keep her mother company. Nonetheless, she also acknowledges that she is not very good company. Moreover the stage directions inform us that, "There is no self-pity" (76) in Jessie's voice. She is very self-assured and calm, and very much in-control of the situation. In response to Jessie's complete composure, Thelma recognizes that she has "gone already"

(‘*night, Mother* 78); her daughter no longer exists, and there is absolutely nothing she can do to prevent her from carrying out the final part of her ritual. As horrifying a realization as it is for Thelma, that her child no longer belongs to her, it is in these last few scenes that mother and daughter make a real connection. Thelma has made a connection with Jessie that was simply not possible before. It is in these final moments that we realize that the banal conversation from the beginning of the play has had a distinct purpose.

Jessie has orchestrated an elaborate ritual comprised of daily household activities, a strict schedule, and carefully chosen words to bring closure to a life that she has spiritually already left. She made sure that the ritual would only involve mother and daughter by clarifying to Thelma in the first few scenes that, “This is private. Dawson is not invited . . . I don’t want anybody else over here. Just you [Thelma] and me [Jessie]” (‘*night, Mother* 17). Norman’s stage directions remind us of the power and immutability of Jessie’s plan. We are told that her voice is “*Firm and quiet*” (17). As Sally Browder observes, “The power of the play *’night, Mother* lies in its relentless movement toward the final gunshot. No matter how much we do not want to believe it will come, we are forced to share with the mother a growing realization that the evening will end with Jessie’s death” (109) The control Jessie assumes over the evening is intensified by her threats to kill herself sooner if Thelma tries to bring in outside forces to prevent Jessie from carrying out her elaborate plan.

Undeniably, Jessie has systematically exercised complete control of every aspect of her life within the ninety minutes of the play. By the same token, she has exorcised all her demons as well. As Sally Browder explains, “[W]hen her [Jessie’s] life is compressed within the boundaries of that evening, what emerges are a few hours of honesty and

intensity that burst like a meteoric glimpse of what this mother-daughter relationship is and what it might have been" (110). Jessie has come to terms with specific aspects of her life by asking her mother questions she has never been able to articulate until she made a decision to take control of her own destiny. Ironically, although Jessie herself admits, albeit at her mother's insistence, that she has had no epileptic seizures for an entire year because of the medication, it is precisely the clarity of thought that she has regained that enables her to understand the utter meaninglessness of her life. Thus, she is able to methodically construct and orchestrate a plan that would enable her to free herself from her life. As Browder points out, "When Jessie chooses suicide, she not only defines the boundaries of her existence, she draws the boundaries between mother and daughter as well. She makes a choice that is not her mother's choice" (110). In fact, choice equals power in this play. Jessie *chooses* to not be like her mother in accepting whatever life has to offer. She is not content with choosing between a snowball or a Hershey bar. The endless array of candy bowls, that are a staple for Thelma, cannot "sweeten" (Browder 110) Jessie's life.

Just as the "trivial details" played a major role in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Norman's *'night, Mother* gives significance to the emotional truths that can be revealed in seemingly banal conversation between mother and daughter. However, a major distinction between the two plays is that Jessie does not play a marginalized role as Minnie Wright does in Glaspell's play. In *Trifles*, Minnie Wright is physically nonexistent on stage and spiritually nonexistent in her marriage. She has been marginalized by a patriarchal society that considers a woman's feelings and situations to be domestic "trifles." Moreover, the two other females in the play, Mrs. Hale and Mrs.

Peters, are the only ones who give validity to Minnie's existence by acknowledging Minnie Wright had once lived as spirited and lively Minnie Foster. In essence, Minnie's situation can be viewed as a "living death." Another significant difference between Minnie Wright and Jessie Cates is that Minnie physically and spiritually had no voice in the play and in her life. In contrast, Jessie Cates dominates the dialogue and stage of *'night, Mother*. Text and performance come together in Norman's play to evoke a tragically triumphant, and powerful Jessie Cates who has decided to take over the reins of her life.

'night, Mother elicited a wide range of responses from scholars and critics ranging from gender-based responses to rebukes from feminist critics for casting Jessie Cates as a marginalized female who decides to kill herself instead of standing up for her rights. As Jill Dolan observes,

> The production history of *'night, Mother* is an excellent case study of the gender-biased politics of reception, since it is one of the first plays written by a woman and addressing women's concerns to gain widespread attention, critical acclaim, and economic success. When *'night, Mother* opened on Broadway in 1983, it provoked a media response polarized around gender differences. On the one hand, powerful male New York critics such as Frank Rich and Mel Gussow[8], writing for the *New York Times*, struggled to reconcile Norman's gender--and her female characters--with their desire to inscribe the play into the predominantly male canon of good drama. On the other hand, the feminist press was split between claiming--or disclaiming--Norman as the vanguard of their own

> separate canon, and applauding her elevation into the dominant male realm. ("Feminism and the Canon" 19)

Norman intentionally leaves out a physical description of Jessie and states in her production notes, "Under no circumstances should the set and its dressing make a judgment about the intelligence or taste of Jessie and Thelma" (*'night, Mother* 20) She also informs us that, "It [the set] should simply indicate that they are specific real people who happen to live in a particular part of the country" (2). Despite that, male critics' responses were geared towards Jessie's physical appearance[9]. Dolan observes that the male critics, "proceeded to construct their own list of reasons for why Jessie decided to commit suicide. First among these, according to critics, is her weight" ("Feminism" 30). For instance, John Simon, in *New York Magazine* described Jessie as "fat, unattractive, and epileptic" (qtd. in Dolan 30), and other male critics referred to Jessie as "heavy set, slow moving and morose" (30). Dolan clarifies for us that Norman did not have Jessie's weight in mind when considering Kathy Bates for the role. By the same token, Jessie's weight is not even an issue in the textual aspect of the play. Hence, Dolan brings forth the importance of scrutinizing text as well as theatrical performance in analyzing a play. As Dolan points out, "Although the fatal, tragic flaw in Norman's text is epilepsy, the production's received flaw, which provides the cause of Jessie's demise, is fat" (30). In fact, the dialogue between Jessie and Thelma alludes to Jessie being thin when Thelma states, "You never liked eating at all, did you? Any of it! What have you been living on all these years, toothpaste?" *('night, Mother* 53). Dolan also points out that when it comes to body size, female characters in plays have been scrutinized more than male performers. For example, Lee J. Cobb, who played Willy Loman, "set the standard"

(Dolan "Feminism and the Canon" 32) in the original 1949 Broadway production of Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Dolan observes, "Cobb was a big man, but reviewers do not refer to him as overweight or unattractive. Instead, they recall his massive size as a mark of authority" (32). By the same token, when Dustin Hoffman played Willy Loman in the 1984 *Salesman* revival, Dolan points out, "the conception of the character was changed to accommodate the actor" (32); in contrast, Dolan states, "[i]n *'night Mother*, the performer's appearance was collapsed into the reception of the character" (32). Dolan makes a valid point that society is much more critical about how women should look in "social and performance roles" (32). Body size does not contribute to Willy Loman's failure, and, as Dolan states, "The man matters more than the body. This is opposite of the reception to Kathy Bates in the role of Jessie" (33).

Norman's *'night, Mother* has elicited many responses from critics and scholars from a variety of disciplines and theoretical perspectives. In one particularly intriguing perspective, Dolan compares *'night, Mother* to *Death of a Salesman* in that both Jessie Cates and Willy Loman have been denied the mythic American dream and both end their lives in an attempt to change their situations. Dolan distinguishes Willy's plight from that of Jessie by arguing that Willy leaves a monetary "legacy" to his family, whereas "Jessie's death leaves no similar legacy to her mother and in effect wipes out even the heritage of regeneration Thelma might have left at her own death" ("Feminism and the Canon" 32). While Dolan makes an interesting comparison, we should keep in mind that Willy Loman actively pursued his distorted idea of the American dream. He placed the highest value on nothing more than a myth and an illusion. The Lomans do not realize that the security and contentment they desire are not commodities that can be purchased.

Even if he pursued the wrong dream, what is significant is that Willy believed that he was worth more dead than alive. Ultimately the lines of reality and illusion blur for Willy as his wistful fantasies take over. Illusion becomes reality for him. In contrast, Jessie Cates does not actively pursue the mythic American dream. Clearly, loss pervades her life and she perceives that her own life is meaningless; however, she does not confuse reality with illusion. In fact, she takes inventory of her life and chooses to gain control of her own destiny. Thus, Jessie actively plans out her own demise. Although on the one hand, it would appear as though both Willy and Jessie have been denied the mythic American dream, on the other hand, since Willy believed he had actualized his "wrong dream," and Jessie succeeded in her goal, perhaps they were not denied the *mythic* dream after all.

Just as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in text and performance, reveal emotional truths that transcend social, political, and national boundaries, Norman, as Leslie Kane observes, "Dramatizes the personal crises of ordinary people struggling to have a self and be a self" (255). Kane highlights the fact that Norman's characters are placed in "critical situations" (255) where they are "forced" (255) to make a choice. Jessie Cates does not want to merely exist. She knows that each day will be a mirror image of the next and as she states to Thelma, "I'm just not having a very good time and I don't have any reason to think it'll get anything but worse" *('night, Mother* 28). That being so, she has made a choice, she has come up with a plan to permanently end her misery. As Demastes explains, "But though partly an act of despair, the suicide is finally less an act of surrender or even violent rebellion than it is a considered act of control on Jessie's part, taken by a composed, thinking being" (*Beyond Naturalism* 151). Her ability to choose to end her life gives her a sense of self.

Ironically, for Jessie, to go on living, when she has chosen to kill herself, would be to lose her sense of self again. Norman uses the image of loss in this play as a vehicle to explore what it means to survive. As Kane observes, "*'night, Mother* faces the issues of bonding, separation, and self with uncompromising honesty" (264).

Jessie understands her limitations, and although her epilepsy is finally under control, she has thought over her options and decides, "And I can't do anything either, about my life, to change it, make it better, make me feel better about it. Like it better, make it work. But I can stop it. Shut it down, turn it off" ('*night, Mother* 36). Language and gestures are critical in each scene as Thelma tries to prevent Jessie from carrying out her plan. Yet, Jessie takes charge of the conversation and her life. In a very critical scene in the play, there is a truce (37) between mother and daughter and even "*brief near-smiles*" (37) Norman uses extensive stage directions in this scene to focus our attention to the significance of the body language of the two women as text and performance come together onstage to reveal emotional truths. The terror Thelma feels at the thought of losing her daughter is masked by banal conversation and ritualized behavior. As the preparation of cocoa and caramel apples, begins, we are reminded, that "*Jessie, who has been in constant motion since the beginning, now seems content to sit* (37). By the same token, Jessie *calmly* gets answers to questions she has thus far not been able to articulate to her mother. Moreover, Thelma, in her desperation to prolong the evening, creates elaborate tales about her friend, Agnes and even admits, "I only told you about it because I thought I might get a laugh out of you for once even if it wasn't the truth, Jessie" (41). Hence, Norman uses text and performance as tools to elucidate the life and death struggle taking place as the clocks on stage mercilessly keep ticking.

Some critics point out that too much emphasis has been given to the physical loss of life in *'night, Mother*. As Demastes points out, "The physical loss of life involved in Jessie's suicide has perhaps been overemphasized by too many critics. Taking Weales's[10] lead in his analysis of Jessie's epilepsy, one should look more abstractly at the suicide being an act of a woman choosing, in one final gesture, to take control of her destiny, especially in the light of the fact that she has already spiritually lost her life" (*Beyond Naturalism* 151). Indeed, the physical loss is something that we know will take place from the first few lines of dialogue uttered onstage; however, the depth of Jessie's psychological malaise reveals itself as the dialogue intensifies and mother and daughter verbally duel to preserve her own sense of the term "survive." Nonetheless, Jessie manages to lead her mother through a maze of emotions that are brought forth amid discussions of trivial details, ranging from the comical and sentimental to emotionally explosive truths, never losing sight of her ultimate goal--self preservation. Norman, through her use of dialogue, conveys Jessie's interest and eventual disappointment in the outside world, and Thelma's contentment with trivial aspects of day-to-day life. When Thelma asks Jessie what she is sad about, Jessie responds, "Oh, everything from you and me to Red China"[11] (30). Moreover, Jessie shows her disappointment in her own life and in the outside world when she tells her mother, "I read the paper. I don't like how things are. And they're not any better out there than they are in here" (30). In contrast, Thelma shows her lack of interest of things outside her home when she states to Jessie, "Why do you have to know so much about things, Jessie? There's just not that much *to* things that I could ever see" (44). Jessie's understanding of her mother's limitations comes forth when she immediately responds, "That you could ever *tell*, you mean" (44).

Jessie understands her mother's limited interests, and she is aware of her mother's need to prevent her from ending her life; therefore she changes the course of the conversation. Yet, she has a script in place and a schedule to execute. Ironically, by changing the nature of the dialogue from the trivial to more personal matters, a genuine bonding takes place between mother and daughter, one that has never taken place before. As the topics lead from trivial issues to more poignant introspective subjects such as Thelma's relationship with her husband and Jessie's history of epilepsy, to Jessie's broken relationship with her husband, Cecil, and her estrangement from her delinquent son, Ricky, we see a connection between the two women. Jessie controls and guides the dialogue with her mother to reveal truths about their lives that have never surfaced before. There is a calm resignation that comes forth in a particularly poignant scene when, in response to her mother's proclamation of all the different things that Jessie could do with her life, Jessie states to her mother, "You know I couldn't work. I can't do anything. I've never been around people my whole life except when I went to the hospital. I could have a seizure anytime. What good would a job do? The kind of job I could get would make me feel worse" ('*night, Mother* 35). And when her mother responds, "It's what you think is true! (35), Jessie replies, "That's right. It's what I think is true" (36). Norman reminds us in the stage direction that Jessie is, "*Struck by the clarity of that*" (36), indicating that Jessie is not only in control of her life at this point, but she is more confident in the decision she has made. In other words, truth is what *she* thinks it is. It is a liberating realization for a woman who has been told what to do, what to feel, and what to think by other people for a majority of her life. In fact, because her mother kept so much from her as she was growing up, she was not given the opportunity

to make decisions regarding many aspects of her life. For example, Jessie grew up thinking that she just fell down a lot because her mother never told her she had epilepsy. As Jessie tells Thelma, "[t]hat was mine to know, Mama, not yours" (70).

Although Jessie voices her opinions, she does not directly blame her mother for her over-protective ways. Jessie's newly-discovered autonomy, energized by the choice she has made to end her life, empowers her to confront issues with her mother without passing judgment. As Robert Brustein points out,

> She [Jessie] is full of recrimination, particularly about Thelma's failure to inform her fully about her epileptic condition, but underneath the bitterness and complaint lies a curious form of symbiotic love. Her suicide is perhaps meant partly to punish her mother, but it is also a means of reaching out to her, and in the agony of their parting there develops a deeper understanding between the two women than they could ever have achieved in life. (160)

As in most mother-daughter relationships, Thelma and Jessie share a love-hate bond. Although Jessie does not agree with many of her mother's past decisions, she feels genuine love for her. Even though the outside world has disappointed both women, they find some level of mutual comfort in each other's company. Yet, for Jessie, it simply is not enough. As much as Jessie loves her mother, she also desperately wants her to understand her pain. Nonetheless, Jessie also wants her mother to have a comfortable life after she is gone. In fact, in a revealing scene Jessie tells her mother that she will "have to be more selfish from now on," relating to Thelma how she should conduct herself at her funeral and when she is no longer around (81). Norman's stage directions inform us that

Jessie sits with her mother as she speaks, indicating a bond and genuine affection. Even though this bond is not sufficient to prevent Jessie from killing herself, it is genuine and transcends the life and death struggle we see onstage. Moreover, our recognition of the insufficiency of this bond to prevent Jessie from taking her own life establishes the fact that Jessie's primary goal in initiating conversation with her mother on that particular evening was to inform Thelma of her decision, and to prepare her for a life without her--something she would not be able to do by just leaving a note. Jessie is no longer content to merely exist in a life that, in her opinion, has no chance of improving. Consequently, upon making her decision, she takes an active role in planning her destiny. Like Li'l Bit, in the final scene of Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, Jessie is in the driver's seat.

Jessie does not blame her mother for her misery and pain. Just as Li'l Bit acknowledges her complicity in the relationship she has with Peck, Jessie is aware of her own complicity in her relationship with Thelma. As Browder observes, "Jessie's isolation and exclusive reliance upon her mother as sole companion are insufficient to provide her with a sense of self, to provide her with a sense of power, a sense of meaning in life: 'What if you are all I have and you are not enough?'" (112). Even so, if Thelma, as an overly protective mother is to blame for Jessie's decision to return home and live with her, Jessie acknowledges that, "[i]f it was a mistake, we made it together" (*night, Mother* 28). Moreover, Jessie's final action is so essential to her definition of survival, that it is impossible to assign fault or blame completely to Thelma. The distinction would be easier to delineate if Thelma intentionally inflicted pain and suffering upon her daughter. On the contrary, Thelma's anguish when she realizes how miserable her daughter had been for such a long time, can be noted when she exclaims in the final scene, "I didn't

know! I was here with you all the time. How could I know you were so all alone!" (88). This is the moment in the play when physical and psychological loss transcends the mother-daughter dynamic, and Norman articulates the loneliness and isolation that crosses all social, political and cultural boundaries. Thelma has to come to terms with the fact that her daughter had been unhappy for such a long time, and, as her own mother, living under the same roof, she never even realized Jessie's misery. Ironically, Thelma, being Jessie's mother, in her protector and nurturer role, can never realize the empowerment her daughter felt at methodically taking control of her own life. Without a doubt, Jessie's unhappiness stemmed from no particular event, but, rather, was a cumulative decline. Even so, Jessie's misery is not the primary focus of this play. The single aspect of '*night, Mother* that reveals itself as the driving force is the fact that Jessie Cates, from the moment the play begins, and until we hear that fatal shot, is in complete control of every aspect of her life. Within the ninety minutes of real time, we witness a woman coming to terms with her life and deciding that the only way for her to *survive* is to complete a task that she has pioneered and executed with such precision, a task that finally gives meaning to her life, something that she has patiently awaited to complete.

Thelma has a different outlook on survival. She has suffered through a loveless marriage, she has been Jessie's primary caretaker, and she even feels somehow responsible for Jessie's epilepsy. However, she has resigned herself to survive by focusing on the subtle aspects of daily existence--phone calls to friends, visits with family, and an unending supply of sweets. Jessie's response to Thelma's "Do you think I've had a good time?"('*night, Mother* 33) reveals her understanding of the disparity in Thelma's outlook on life and her own: "I think you're pretty happy, yeah. You have

things you like to do . . . Like crochet" (33). The fact is Jessie has already analyzed her past and present and decides that her future will be basically the same. She even acknowledges that she might have stuck around if she had found something she really liked--but she did not find anything. Indeed, the pursuits that help Thelma to survive are simply insufficient for Jessie. As Browder points out,

> [. . .] Thelma is left to wonder what she could have done wrong, just as she has wondered all her life how she could have altered the reality of her daughter's epilepsy or failed marriage or any other experience in life she could not have controlled. Thelma's helpless questioning mirrors our own disturbing questions. How could it have been possible for Jessie to feel a sense of anticipation in her life of good things to come rather than the certainty of failure and deprivation? Confronted with such a small universe and a limited set of options, how could she have developed a strong enough sense of self to survive? (113)

Browder brings forth some valid, introspective questions regarding the mother's role in the creation of identity and self in her daughter; however, Jessie's sense of self is so dependent upon her newly-discovered sense of autonomy, that regardless of any role Thelma has played in the creation of self in Jessie's development, these ninety minutes are about Jessie's role in taking charge of her life. Jessie has contemplated ending her life for the past ten years. Despite the disappointments she has faced, and the havoc epilepsy has wreaked in her life, Jessie's final act is validation of self. Norman herself has stated that the main question '*night, Mother* asks is, "What does it take to survive? What does it

take to save your life? Now Jessie's answer is "It takes killing myself." Mama's answer is "It takes cocoa and marshmallows and doilies and the *TV Guide* and Agnes and the birds and trips to the grocery." Jessie feels, "No, I'm sorry. That's not enough" (Betsko 340). The subtle aspects of daily life sustain Thelma. Despite the personal disappointments she has suffered, Thelma wants to live. In contrast, the only way Jessie can survive is by killing herself. Jessie has an identity separate from her mother, and as Thelma, in a final frantic attempt to prevent the inevitable screams, "Jessie! Please!" (89) and a shot is heard, which, Norman reminds us in the stage directions, "*sounds like No*" (89), we realize that Jessie is in control. Her final, defiant act reveals the sense of self that she was not able to articulate or display in life.

Norman's '*night, Mother* has elicited much praise and also created controversy since its March 1983 Broadway debut. As Linda Kintz observes, "Interpretations of this ostensibly simple play have been varied and the complexities of those interpretations are not easily resolved[12]" ("In the Shadow" 198). Certainly '*night, Mother* is cloaked with an outer simplicity--a mother and daughter conversing about domestic and personal matters; however, Norman, by insisting in the stage directions that the clocks onstage run throughout the performance and be visible to the audience, and by introducing Jessie's impending suicide within the first few lines of dialogue, reminds us that the drama that is about to take place may be more complex than we imagine. Thus, it is not surprising that the interpretations would be varied and equally complex. Whether or not we agree with the praise or criticism this play has received, one particularly flattering review captures the power of text and performance and the transnational appeal of an authentic voice that comes to life onstage. As Brustein relates,

> Nothing reinforces one's faith in the power and importance of theater more than the emergence of an authentic and universal playwright--not a woman playwright, mind you, not a regional playwright, not an ethnic playwright, but one who speaks to the concerns and experiences of all humankind . . . Marsha Norman is the genuine article--an American writer with the courage to look unflinchingly into the black holes from which we normally turn our faces. (162)

Regardless of which theoretical orientation we choose to embrace, the dialogue that has been elicited in classrooms, literary circles, and academia, establishes the fact that Norman's *'night, Mother* is clearly not just a story about an unhappy middle-aged woman who decides to kill herself because she is miserable. Norman, by the use of a simple stage setting, candid, yet probing dialogue, and very specific stage directions, has placed emphasis on the text of the play and the body language of two individuals, a mother and daughter, as they carry on a conversation, that despite its outward simplicity, exposes aspects of their past that have directly and indirectly impacted their present choices. The emotional truths that are revealed transcend any theory that we may assign to define Jessie's dilemma. By the same token, the life and death struggle that takes place allows truths to be exposed and articulated. We know from the first few lines of dialogue that Jessie intends to kill herself. Despite that knowledge, as the clocks on the stage indicate the passing of time, we are still caught up in the dialogue between the two individuals.

Although Norman does use the backdrop of the mother-daughter dynamic in *'night, Mother*, and despite the significance of this dynamic in elucidating the thematic

focus of the play, would the hidden tensions and anxieties that are exposed be any less relevant if the dynamic represented father and daughter or mother and son? Are we so preoccupied with gender identity and theories of suitable criteria for canon inclusion or exclusion that we divert our attention from the text that drives this play? Norman exposes themes in *'night, Mother* that are applicable to any human being who has ever suffered abandonment, isolation, insecurity, loneliness, and despair. As Norman observes, "People are just out there wildly and desperately alone, trying to figure out where they are from, who they are, does anybody matter" (Savran "Interview" 190). By the same token, although we hear the inevitable shot signaling Jessie's victory and Thelma's defeat, and we realize that time has run out, Thelma and Jessie, in the midst of their struggle, have made a genuine, loving connection - one they were unable to make before this fatal evening.

Norman's *'night Mother* focuses on an individual who, through her newly acquired autonomy, acknowledges that the only way for her to improve her life is by ending it. However, she gains this autonomy by making a decision to carry out this final, fatal act. The fact that she kills herself is not as significant as the autonomy she has attained. Moreover, the impact of Jessie's decision on her mother does not lessen the significance of the main issue at hand, which is Jessie's definition of survival--what *she* needs to fulfill *her* life. Norman does not ask us to accept Jessie's choice or even agree with it. However, as Anne Marie Drew observes, "We can wish for Jessie that her life view were different . . . We can grieve that only in death was she free, but Norman's work moves us to an inexorable conclusion. In death, Jessie Cates finds life . . . Given that some of us do not find ourselves in either life or death, Jessie's end is no small

triumph" (94). Hence, the image of loss is transformed and modified in the life and death struggle of Thelma and Jessie in Norman's *'night, Mother*, and is used to convey the emotional truths, that, as in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, transcend the realm of abandonment, suicide, and incest to portray a common humanity that is transnational, and captures the essence of theater.[13] As Norman asserts, "In the theater, we have the luxury of fighting one monster at a time" (Betsko 333).

Notes to Chapter Four

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[1] All quotes from *'night, Mother* are from the Hill and Wang 1983 edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references.

[2] See Louis Greiff's article "Fathers, Daughters, and Spiritual Sisters" Marsha Norman's *'night, Mother* and Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

[3] Spencer contends in "Norman's *'night , Mother*: Psycho-drama of Female Identity," that "male and female audience members 'read,' comprehend, and respond to the play in ways fundamentally different. While universal themes of death and desire, of human dignity and human pain, of hope and existential despair are accessible to all, these seem but 'secondary elaborations' of the primary drama that women may cathartically experience in Norman's play" (364).

[4] John Simon is a Serbian-American author and literary, theater, and film critic. Simon was theater critic at *New York* magazine for more than 36 years from October 1968 until May 2005. Since June 2005 Simon has reviewed theater for BloombergNews.com. He also contributes a monthly essay to *The Weekly Standard*.

[5] Frank Rich served from 1980 to 1993 as the chief drama critic of *The New York Times*, and is now an op-ed columnist at the paper as well as senior writer for *The New York Times Magazine*.

[6] Stanley Kauffmann has been active in criticism since 1958. At that time he became the film critic of *The New Republic,* with which journal he has been associated ever since, except for an eight-month period in 1966 when he was exclusively the theater critic of *The New York Times*. In addition to his film reviews, he has written a large number of book reviews for *The New Republic*; from 1969 to 1979 he served as both film and

theater critic for this magazine; and earlier, from 1963 to 1965, he served as well as the drama critic for WNET-TV in New York. He continues as film critic for *The New Republic* but wrote theater criticism for the *Saturday Review* for five years, from 1979 to 1985. He has contributed reviews and articles to many other journals, among them *Horizon, Commentary, Salmagundi, Yale Review, Kenyon Review,* and *The American Scholar*.

[7] Richard Gilman (1923-1996) was one of the leading drama and literary critics of the second half of the 20th century. He was a professor at the Yale School of Drama for 31 years and the author of five books of criticism and a memoir. Gilman died of lung cancer at the age of 83. Mr. Gilman along with Eric Bentley and Robert Brustein was considered to be one of a breed of philosopher-critics, who came to prominence in the 1950s and ’60s. They identified in modern drama the elements of abstraction, alienation and absurdity that had long been associated with other forms of art and literature.

[8] Mel Gussow (1933-2005) was an influential American theater critic who wrote for *New York Times* for thirty-five years.

[9] Dolan states that “[i]n a clear example of reception filtered through gender biases, the male critics’ responses to Jessie were based almost uniformly on her physical appearance onstage, which substantially altered their reception of the play. They collapsed performer Kathy Bates’ appearance into the character’s” (“Feminism” 30).

[10] Gerald Weales observes, “The restrictions implicit in her epilepsy, in the response to it rather than the disease itself, reflects a society of limited possibilities, mandatory roles . . . . [It] is another example of the way in which these women are creatures of not-so-great

expectations, caught in a social and psychological web that gives them very little room to maneuver" ("Really 'Going On'" 370).

[11] Demastes points out, "The phrase "Red China" is compact but fraught with meaning, a perfect example of the approach to language that Norman takes in her playwriting" (*Beyond Naturalism* 151). He also mentions, "Though 'Red China' seems logically absurd in relation to the more personal complaints that surround it (and as a result draws a laugh from the audience), it shows Jessie's awareness that in international affairs, as in all things, she has no control. And it is additionally significant in helping expand the context of the play beyond the confines of the mother's house and daughter's life" (151). Additionally, Weales, in reference to Jessie's comment on "Red China" states, "The sense of helplessness that most of us feel in face of events in the world at large provides a macrocosmic malaise for the smaller space of the play in which Jessie and her mother have few choices about what to make of their lives" ("Really 'going On'" 370).

[12] Kintz explores the various interpretations of '*night, Mother* and states, "It has been described as a 'kitchen drama' that deals with the banal concerns of mother and daughter, making it different from the weightier 'domestic drama,' which also deals with fathers and sons in the domestic space and is particularly beloved of Marxist critics, who trace the rise of the bourgeois individual and the construction of the notion of privacy, often overlooking that it is *his* privacy. But feminists critics have also claimed the play for various interpretations, some insisting that it is a quintessential middle-class liberal drama that has no political edge, others interpreting it primarily from the space of the daughter and finding the mother trivial and absurd, yet others angry that the daughter doubly

punishes the mother both by killing herself, but prior to that, by setting up a second chance for the mother to save her" ("In the Shadow" 199).

[13] The importance of language and Norman's view of the theater are very closely related as when she states, "I want to give the characters a real chance at getting through to the audience. To do that, I had to get rid of all the things that stood in the way, like locale, accents, dialect . . . What I want to present is the theatrical equivalent of *Once upon a Time* . . . which lifts you up off the stage and sends you back into yourself for the reference points" (Betsko 337).

Chapter Five: Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*

Paula Vogel takes the image of loss to another level in *How I Learned to Drive*. Vogel transports us on an introspective journey that challenges our notions of the familiar and the "norm" with the taboo topic of pedophilia, which, in fact, is only mentioned once in the play and that, too, in a production note. Yet, we are literally driven out of our comfort zone to take part in a journey that is as self-exploratory as it is revealing. The Pulitzer Prize-winning *How I Learned to Drive* was first produced in February, 1997, by Vineyard Theatres in New York City. In this provocative and emotionally charged play, Vogel challenges us to examine our ideas of self, society, and boundaries to reveal emotional truths that we have to define for ourselves, that transcend social, cultural, and political realms. Moreover, just as Norman's *'night, Mother* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are not merely stories about individuals who commit suicide, Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* cannot simply be viewed as a story about the exploits of a pedophile. Vogel begins *How I Learned to Drive* with images of one-room revival churches, a porno-drive-in, and boarded up motels. These are the images that make up the scenery of Li'l Bit's life as the play opens with her at seventeen years of age stating, "I am very old, very cynical of the world, and I know it all" (*Drive* 9).[1] However, by presenting each scene non-chronologically, we are left to sort out the puzzle pieces that comprise the complex relationship of niece and uncle. Without absolving Uncle Peck of wrong doing and instead of vilifying him, Vogel's play examines the complexity of human relationships by challenging us to draw our own conclusions. The physical, emotional and psychological loss is experienced by the uncle and niece. We are forced to switch

gears, accelerate, brake, and use caution as Vogel combines text and performance to elucidate the journey of Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck. As uncle and niece navigate dangerous terrain, Vogel simultaneously challenges us to confront and examine our own tensions, anxieties, and preconceived notions of a full range of subjects including the role of victim and victimizer, family dynamics, empowerment and, even forgiveness, as lines are blurred and the terrain constantly changes.

Vogel's play was influenced by her fascination with Vadimir Nabokov's *Lolita*[2] (1955), which, as Bigsby relates, "is also scarcely about abuse and whose moral ambivalence and account of shifting patterns of power and consciousness appealed to Vogel, whose own work has always shown a bias in favour of the oblique, the tangential, the ambivalent" (*Contemporary* 319). Bigsby also points out that Vogel hoped to attain Nabokov's "neutrality" (319) when dealing with similar subject matter. As Bigsby explains, Vogel wondered if it were possible for a woman to approach this controversial subject matter with "a neutrality which she felt was likely to inspire hostile reviews, more especially when the morality of child abuse was seldom out of the news and political correctness threatened to inhibit those who wished to do something more than echo an understandable indignation" (319). Ironically, despite the fact that the play opened in Belgium amidst a high-profile pedophile scandal, and in the wake of a public dispute regarding the ethics of the film adaptation of Adrian Lyne's *Lolita*, and because of Vogel's dramatic innovativeness, the play did not face hostile reviews. As Vogel relates, "In this time of political correctness . . . you have to go against the grain. If the audience don't embrace both sides of an issue, there can be no real political dialogue . . . In my

sense of political, you can never be politically correct. To be political means to open up dialogue, not to be 'correct'" (qtd. in Bigsby *Contemporary* 319).

Vogel's focus on text and performance allows us to view the relationship of uncle and niece from the vantage point of Li'l Bit's memory. By scattering the chronology, by using the Greek chorus to represent various characters from Li'l Bit's past, and by showing us consequences before we see actions, we are forced to reserve our judgment until the end of the performance. By making the characters mime certain actions that would have otherwise resulted in our indignation, Vogel is able to draw attention to the personal crisis of niece and uncle as they explore the nuances of a very complex relationship. As Ann Linden points out, "By combining the familiar with the unfamiliar and identification with alienation, Vogel encourages her spectators to consider the issues she explores in a new, more critical light" ("Seducing the Audience" 234). Vogel uses ambiguity as a device to make us acknowledge the wide range of emotions experienced by both niece and uncle as lines are drawn and crossed as they come to terms with feelings ranging from affection and desire to disgust and anger. Moreover, Vogel's use of ambiguity forces us to examine our own reactions to stereotypical notions of victim-victimizer roles in society. Can we actually fathom the niece's complicity in the relationship? Vogel also turns the table on us by making us react to ambiguous boundaries that are dictated by society.

Indeed, we are given no conclusive answers in this play. However, in Linda Loman's words, "Attention, attention must be finally paid" (Miller *Salesman* 56) to a wide range of possibilities. Although Peck gives in to his insatiable desire for his niece at times, he never forces himself upon her. As Bigsby points out,

> [T]hough Vogel is not going so far as simply to accommodate this particular relationship to the norm, neither is she content to allow moral absolutes to prevent her examination of those driven alike by despair and need, those who allow the intensity of that need to take them beyond the frontiers of the acceptable . . . it is his [Peck's] memory that she allows to travel with her on her journey, not that of those others who degraded her in less obvious ways, not that of relatives who offered her contempt rather than the tainted but faithful love of a man who died alone by surrendering what was not his, finally, to claim. (*Contemporary* 329)

Vogel challenges us with the ambiguous dynamics of this relationship. On the one hand, by making use of the omnipresent voice[3] of the driver's education instructor and by strategically including the classical device of the Greek chorus, we are drawn to the abuse that is being inflicted on a young girl by her lustful uncle. On the other hand, the calm, gentle, compassionate dialogue of Peck as he shows genuine affection for his niece while listening to her and offering sage advice, makes us define for ourselves the extent of the boundaries that have been crossed. Indeed, as we move from one scene to the next, we are exposed to an overly sexed, dysfunctional family replete with a grandfather who lustfully chases a grandmother around the kitchen and openly degrades his granddaughter, a grandmother who on the one hand, discusses sex openly with family members, and at the same time discourages her daughter from speaking honestly to Li'l Bit about the same subject, a mother who "once outdrank a regiment of British officers on a good-will visit to Washington!" (*Drive* 21), and an aunt (Peck's wife), who encourages Peck to comfort his niece, knowing he is "so good with them when they get

to be this age" (*Drive* 15), and at the same time blames her niece for "borrowing [her] husband until it doesn't suit her anymore" (45). Even so, Li'l Bit's extended family celebrates holidays together, shows affection in their own way and even excuses the flaws of other family members as can be noted when Li'l Bit asks Peck if the grandfather has hurt his feelings, and, he responds, "Oh, no--it doesn't hurt me. Family is family" (46).

Vogel provokes us to see the emotional truths that are revealed within the tragically flawed relationships of this bawdy, dysfunctional family, who despite their crude behavior, are also able to laugh at themselves, feel pain, and display insecurities. By the same token, Vogel feels strongly about the role family plays in larger social contexts. In a candid interview, when Vogel was confronted with the issue that European critics feel that American drama does not achieve greatness because American playwrights are more concerned with family issues rather than larger global concerns, Vogel responds, "Rubbish . . . British critics often throw that complaint at me, but Pinter[4] and David Hare[5] also deal with families. It's important that the family be put in social context, that there is a world beyond. The family remains the structure at the heart of most drama because the family, after all, reflects its community's values and the politics of their time" (Holmberg). Hence, we are encouraged to take an introspective journey that involves shifting emotional gears and braking often, as we navigate through the hazardous and tricky terrain of family life. We are also lured into confronting our own fears and anxieties while we observe Li'l Bit cruise, idle, and shift gears as she comes to terms with her childhood memories.

Vogel transforms and modifies the image of loss in this play to not only challenge our notions of family life, but to dare us to confront our ideas regarding exploitation, female identity, and universal truths. When asked if *How I Learned to Drive* is political, Vogel, responds,

> A lot of people are trying to turn this into a drama about an individual family. To me it is not. It is a way of looking on a microscopic level at how this culture sexualizes children. How we are taught at an extremely young age to look at female bodies. One of the tag lines I had in my head when I was writing this play was, it takes a whole village to molest a child. Jon Benét Ramsey[6] was not a fluke. When we Americans saw the video tape of her at the beauty contest when she was five, a chill went up our collective spines. At what age are we sexualizing our children in a consumer culture to sell blue jeans and underwear? . . . Whenever there is confusion or double, triple, and quadruple standards, that is the realm of theatre. Drama lives in paradoxes and contradictions. (Holmberg)

Vogel indeed seduces her audience. She draws us into the complexity of the relationship of Peck and Li'l Bit by building up a particular scene, and just as we think we have enough information to understand what we are witnessing, we are thrown into a scene from the past that makes us question our reaction to a previous scene. There are no comfort zones in Vogel's play. From the first scene to the last, we are on a roller-coaster ride of images, ambiguity, humor, and contradictions, and, just when we think we know what emotional response we feel towards the relationship of uncle and niece, the roller-coaster suddenly shifts gears and goes backwards. By invoking Jon Benét Ramsey, Vogel

asks us to focus on the overtly sexual images of the five year old girl as her dolled-up image became a part of our daily lives for many years, and will continue to represent an aspect of American culture that uses sexy images to sell everything from cars and handbags to furniture and ice cream. As horrified as we were that Jon Benét was found dead in her own home, we cannot deny America's obsession with the blonde-haired, blue-eyed, fully made-up doll-like image who teased and taunted beauty pageant officials as she sang and danced wearing sexy outfits. This image, of course, was juxtaposed with images of the Ramseys (Jon Benét's parents) as they stoically implored us to help them bring to justice the individual(s) who perpetrated the heinous crime. Who could commit such an act? Then, quite suddenly, as the glamorous photos of the lipsticked, rouged, and sexily-clad Jon Benét flashed before televisions, newspapers and magazines, we were forced to change gears and brace ourselves to absorb the breaking news--Jon Benét's mother was being questioned, her handwriting was being analyzed. Could an individual who is considered to be the primary caretaker, nurturer, and protector of her child, commit such an act? This mystery has not been solved, and perhaps never will be. Regardless, our endless fascination with Jon Benét continues. Vogel asks us to come to terms with these types of images. What does it say about American culture? As Bigsby comments, "*How I Learned to Drive*, indeed, is surely in part about an America which struggles to sustain notions of innocence, spiritual concern and family values while flooding its consciousness with sexual titillation; a cheerleader culture of prepubescent beauty pageants, eroticized movies and advertisements, as though sex were a language in which it is necessary to become fluent as soon as possible" (*Contemporary* 320). Hence, Vogel's focus on language and performance, infused with intentional ambiguity,

challenges us to define our own space as we go along with Li'l Bit and Peck on their journey.

Vogel also asks us to define for ourselves the emotional truths, the common humanity that reveals itself as we process the contradictory, overtly sexual, and often confusing images that are part of our daily lives. What happens after we are faced with this bombardment of mixed messages? Do we just casually take our children to the playground, or to soccer practice, have a nice family dinner, and then tuck them in their beds and tell them everything will be just fine? What are acceptable boundaries? How do we individually and collectively define our boundaries? Are these just media created images? Or, is there something larger going on? What should we think of a song that calmly echoes, "She was too young to fall in love, and I was too young to know" (Sam Cooke "Only Sixteen"), or "My eyes adored ya. Though I never laid a hand on you" (Franki Valli "My Eyes Adored You"). As Vogel includes in her stage directions, "*any Sam Cooke will do*" (31). Vogel uses music in the play as part of her seduction technique. As Linden explains, "If Vogel can seduce spectators into empathizing with both Peck and Li'l bit, they can no longer easily deny the contradictions between representations that promote Peck's desire and public discourse that condemns his actions" ("Seducing" 250). For Vogel, this empathy is a critical element because, as she states, "we're trained to be pedophiles in this culture; look at the messages we're receiving. It's all around us" (qtd. in Linden "Seducing" 250). Vogel elucidates the pervasiveness of these messages with the music and images that permeate the play. Her production notes suggest using sixties music "*rife with pedophilish (?) reference: "Little Surfer Girl," the "You're Sixteen" genre hits; "Come Back When You Grow Up, Girl"* (6). Just as Tennessee Williams

utilizes music and an onstage screen in *The Glass Menagerie* to enhance specific themes and to provide commentary on what is going on in the play, Vogel makes use of music and a slide montage to emphasize the significance of certain scenes in her drama. For example, in the production notes for the scene entitled "The Photo Shoot" (in which Peck takes nude photos of Li'l Bit), Vogel mentions that "*Throughout the shoot, there can be a slide montage of actual shots of the actor playing Li'l bit – interspersed with other models á la Playboy, Calvin Klein and Victoriana/Lewis Carroll's Alice Liddell*" (*Drive* 41). Indeed music plays a significant role in Vogel's drama. When asked about the role of music in her plays, Vogel comments, "Music contains a subliminal message that I will never be able to accomplish with words because words always involve the cognitive. Music speaks directly to the emotions" (Holmberg). Hence, Vogel uses music to punctuate specific nuances of Li'l Bit's journey as she explores her own identity and comes to terms with her relationship with her uncle.

As Li'l Bit's memories reflect on her past, she recalls the anguish she felt as a well-endowed young girl who had to suffer through the humiliating and degrading remarks of both family and friends as they joked about her breasts as though they were common property of which they had ownership. Although Li'l Bit's body is eroticized in the play in the manner in which her family degrades her, and in the way the children at school tease her, and, ultimately, when Peck photographs her, Vogel infuses humor into specific scenes to meter the young girl's pain. Hence Vogel uses humor to bring into focus the difficulty many young women in America face as they deal with issues of female identity and selfhood as they are bombarded with sexual innuendo, overly sexual media images, and a society that that promotes the objectified female while at the same

time promoting family values. As Dolan points out, “Vogel's wry, insightful humor captures the pain and awkward pleasure of growing into social awareness and understanding. Vogel's play is about forgiveness and family, about the instability of sexuality, about the unpredictable ways in which we learn who we are, how we desire, and how our growth is built on loss” (“Performance” 128). Li’l Bit’s own grandfather makes degrading comments such as, “If Li’l Bit gets any bigger, we’re gonna haveta buy her a wheelbarrow to carry in front of her” (13) and “What does she [Li’l Bit] need a college degree for? She’s got all the credentials she’ll need on her chest” (14). Consequently, the humiliating remarks from family regarding her breasts make the well-endowed, self conscious young girl even more insecure about her body. Vogel tempers the anguish Li’l Bit feels at being objectified by classmates and family members because of her large breasts by inserting humor with the caption “A Walk Down Mammary Lane,” (*Drive* 35), and Mary Jane jokes.[7] By the same token, humor is used throughout the play to elucidate the complexity of human relationships. For example, Vogel reels us into a particularly poignant scene by making the Greek Chorus, as Li’l Bit’s mother, advise Li’l Bit how to avoid getting drunk with the caption “A Mother’s Guide to Social Drinking” (18). Vogel inserts humor into this emotionally charged scene, where despite her mother’s advice to not order drinks “with Voodoo or Vixen in the title or sexual positions in the name like Dead Man Screw or the Missionary, not only does the young woman get drunk while her uncle continues ordering drinks for her, but we are informed that Li’l Bit was probably conceived when her mother was drunk.

When asked about the function of humor in her play, Vogel comments, “For me combining sadness and comedy heightens both. The collision of tones makes both more

extreme . . . comedy dismantles any protective covering" (Holmberg). Vogel mentions that the technique of combining comedy and terror allows the audience to let down their guard. As she explains, "It [comedy] doesn't diffuse the terror, it diffuses the guarding against the terror" (Holmberg). The comedy and pain can be noted when Li'l Bit states, "sometimes I feel like these alien forces, these two mounds of flesh have grafted themselves onto my chest, and they're using me until they can 'propagate' and take over the world and they'll just keep growing, with a mind of their own until I collapse under their weight and they suck all the nourishment out of my body and I finally just waste away while they get bigger and bigger" (39). We are reminded of her anguish in a stage direction: "*Li'l Bit's trying to joke but feels on the verge of tears*" (38-39). Hence, Vogel brings forth the issue of female identity as Li'l Bit struggles with body image issues, an awakening sexuality, and the deep and mixed feelings she has for a man she considers a father figure on the one hand and an object of love and desire on the other. As Vogel explains, "for me, Peck is the object of female desire, and Li'l Bit is the desiring object" (Green *Women Who* 438). The extent of Li'l Bit's struggle can be noted in a very revealing scene when she meets Peck in a hotel room and Peck asks her to lie down on the bed with him so that they can hold one another, and the stage direction informs us: "*Li'l Bit-- half wanting to run, half wanting to get it over with, half wanting to be held by him*" (*Drive* 52). Although Li'l Bit is ultimately able to reject Peck, clearly it is a difficult choice. As Vogel contends, she sees Li'l Bit as a "survivor" rather than a victim (qtd. in Greene *Women Who* 438).

Ironically, Peck is the only family member who makes her feel beautiful and desirable, and he praises her intelligence. On the one hand, Peck, for his own pleasure

objectifies his niece's body when he asks her to pose for him. On the other hand, he also makes her feel confident and attractive. He encourages her to do well in school, and even though he scares her by sending a series of gifts to her dormitory, anticipating their next meeting, his concern and compassion for Li'l Bit are genuine. Vogel uses ambiguity, throughout the play to give more emphasis to reaction (Li'l Bit's and ours) than on the action itself. Additionally, the miming actions, although they draw attention to the abuse, also make us focus more on the ambiguity of what is actually taking place. Consequently, when asked if she intended to focus on the fact that we can be greatly harmed by people who love us, Vogel retorts,

> I would reverse that. I would say that we can receive great love from the people who harm us . . . We are now living in a culture of victimization, and great harm can be inflicted by well-intentioned therapists, social workers, and talk show hosts who encourage people to dwell in their identity as victim. Without denying or forgetting the original pain, I wanted to write about the great gifts that can also be inside that box of abuse. My play dramatizes the gifts we receive from the people who hurt us . . . She [Li'l bit] received the gift of how to survive. (Holmberg)

Indeed, Vogel does not condemn or condone abuse in *How I Learned to Drive*. She acknowledges that it exists in society. For Vogel, the relationship of Li'l Bit and Peck typifies the paradox, ambiguity, confusion and contradictions that make up American society and ultimately, the human condition, and therefore is the realm of the theater. Although she does not condone the abuse Peck inflicts on his niece, Vogel is more interested in focusing on how Li'l Bit deals with the situation. In other words, Li'l

Bit confronts her fears, anxieties, and pain, then, sitting securely in the driver's seat, the position of power, she drives away. In fact, Peck shows his genuine love for his niece by not only teaching her how to "drive like a man" (35) with confidence but he also teaches her "to think what the other guy is going to do before he does it" (35). Hence, he supplied her with the tools she needed to reject him and ultimately destroy him. As Li'l Bit narrates, upon rejecting Peck's proposal of marriage, "I never saw him again. I stayed away from Christmas and Thanksgiving for years after" (55). Consequently, Peck begins his accelerated decline. He not only gives up his niece, he loses his will to live. As Li'l Bit relates, "It took my uncle seven years to drink himself to death. First he lost his job, then his wife, and finally his driver's license. He retreated to his house, and had his bottles delivered" (55).

Vogel's broken chronology, ambiguous presentation of a taboo topic, all heightened by her strategic use of text and performance that displays America's obsession with its car culture and its motto--power, speed, and freedom makes *How I Leaned to Drive* much more than the story of an uncle who selfishly takes advantage of his young, impressionable niece. As Vogel relates, "The play is a reverse syllogism. It constantly pulls the rug out from under our emotional responses by going back earlier and earlier in time" (Holmberg). We are left with grey areas that we have to define for ourselves. Vogel presents events onstage and steps back to ask the audience how they feel about the issue. For example, Vogel begins the play by Li'l Bit announcing, "Sometimes to tell a secret, you first have to teach a lesson" (9). In this scene we see a seventeen-year old girl "parking off a dark lane with a married man on an early summer night" (9). The girl and the older man are referred to as Li'l Bit and Peck and only at the

end of the first scene Li'l Bit refers to this older married man as Uncle Peck. Thus, we listen to this man and young girl converse in very familiar tones, we hear the girl tell the man not to cross the line as he enjoys the intoxicating aroma of her hair. We also hear the girl give the man permission to fondle and kiss her breasts. Then, quite jarringly, we hear the girl exclaim, "Uncle Peck--we've got to go. I've got graduation rehearsal at school tomorrow morning. And you should get on home to Aunt Mary" (12). Suddenly, our emotions scatter while we try to process the first scene of Vogel's provocative play. Hence, Vogel combines text and performance in *How I Learned to Drive* to catapult us through a wide range of emotions, but provides enough ambiguity to make us brake and accelerate as we are encouraged to go along as passengers on this tumultuous journey.

America is a car-obsessed country replete with its own culture, language and music. Vogel refers to this obsession/love affair throughout the play with rhetoric, images, and music. As Vogel mentions in a production note that precedes a section entitled "The Initiation into a Boy's First Love": *In the following section, it would be nice to have slides of erotic photographs of women and cars: women posed over the hood; women draped along the sideboards; women with water hoses spraying the car; and the actresses playing Li'l Bit with a Bel Air or any 1950s car one can find for the finale*" (32). The scene begins with Peck stating to Li'l Bit, "Of course, my favorite car will always be the '56 Bel Air Sports Coupe. Chevy sold more '55s, but the 56!--a V-8 with Corvette option, 225 horsepower; went from zero to sixty miles per hour in 8.9 seconds" (*Drive* 32). In Vogel's play it is imperative that Li'l Bit not only learn how to handle an automobile with expertise, but more importantly, she learns how to navigate through the rocky terrain of her life in order to become a self-assured, confident adult. Although

driving lessons allowed Vogel to create a journey onstage, Vogel draws our attention through text and performance to the significance of the vehicle itself as an American cultural icon. As Vogel explains, “I did a lot of research on cars in the sixties, and the symbolism is so blatant. The car designs had long, humped headlights and huge tail fins” (Greene *Women Who Write Plays*, 438). From the time Henry Ford[8] rolled out the first Model-T in Detroit, Michigan, Americans have had a love affair with the automobile. Just like Ford’s success, the American car came to represent the American dream--freedom, movement, mobility, independence, prosperity and success.

After World War II (1939-1945), Americans took their shiny cars and moved into the suburbs. In the Fifties, along with the booming economy, the American car culture came into full swing with institutions such as the drive-in movie theater and drive-thru fast food restaurants. Nonetheless, the cars themselves became more personalized and represented everything from power and status--Cadillacs and Lincolns, to a carefree way of life--cruising and convertibles. Cars represented freedom. Without a doubt, the endless miles of American highways and interstates contributed to the power and allure of the automobile. Every decade is associated with a particular style of vehicle and immortalized in song. The Fifties were represented by convertibles and hot rods and songs such as “No Particular Place to Go” (Chuck Berry), “I Get Around” (Beach Boys), “Hitch Hike”(Nova Local), and of course “Drive My Car” (The Beatles). On the more tragic side, there were songs associated with teenagers who met an early demise in driving accidents such as “Tell Laura I Love Her” (Ricky Valance) and “Leader of the Pack” (Shangri-Las). Jan and Dean’s “Dead Man’s Curve” represented the sixties along with the Volkswagen vans/microbuses resplendent with peace signs and the seventies

were ushered in with the muscle cars. Although since the eighties, more fuel efficient Japanese cars have vied for dominance on the American highways, without a doubt, only American cars have been immortalized in song.

From “Mustang Sally” by Wilson Pickett and “Little Deuce Coupe” by The Beach Boys to Prince’s “Little Red Corvette,” America’s obsession with its car culture is reflected in the popular music, movies and magazines that flood the airwaves, movie theaters, bookstores and libraries of every American city. Additionally, the lyrics of the songs reflect some of the tensions, anxieties and fears prevalent in American society. As Wilson Pickett croons, “You’ve been riding all over town, ooh, guess you gotta put your flat feet on the ground, Ride, Sally, ride”, in “Mustang Sally,” we are reminded of a girl who is going a little too fast and needs to slow down. Similarly, the lyrics of Prince’s 1983 song “Little Red Corvette” communicate more about sex than the car itself. The song makes references to “a pocket full of horses, Trojans” (condoms) and “I felt a little ill when I saw the pictures of all the jockeys that had been there before me.” However, the overall connection to the red corvette is that the girl in the song is too fast for him. Sexual innuendo is also a part of Bruce Springsteen’s popular song “Pink Cadillac” as he croons, “My love is bigger than a Honda, yeah, it’s bigger than a Subaru.” Along with sexual overtones, alcohol is another theme connected to some car culture songs, as in the seventies band known as Commander Cody and his Lost Planet Airmen, in the popular country song “Hot Rod Lincoln.” One famous line states, “My pappy said, ‘Son, you’re gonna drive me to drinkin,’ if you don’t stop driving that Hot Rod Lincoln.”

For Vogel, music is a crucial element in her plays. Along with the “subliminal messages” (Holmberg) it conveys, music can also be gendered. As Vogel clarifies, “It

[music] has messages about being a man and being a woman. When you listen to the Beach Boys what comes back is a code of the 1960s. Just like disco music brings back an entire culture of the seventies. So I used music to get to the culture of the 60s. Music is a time capsule" (Holmberg). *How I Learned to Drive* combines the mystery and allure of the American car culture with the provocative appeal of music to elucidate the grey areas of human relationships that transcend black and white definitions. Thus, Vogel is able to dramatize loss in this play in a very unique manner. Vogel's stylistic devices--music, montages, miming actions of the characters, and the omnipresent voice of the driving instructor, combined with her strategic use of ambiguity heightens the complexity of the relationship of uncle and niece, and it also brings poignancy to Peck's loss of self and Li'l Bit's loss of innocence. Nevertheless, Vogel makes us confront our own demons regarding the events that take place on stage.

Vogel brings to focus many aspects of American culture in *How I Learned to Drive*. Combining humor, terror, and comedy in *How I Learned to Drive*, Vogel does not provide comfort or reassurance for her audience. As Vogel points out, "To me a play doesn't need to make me feel good. It can be a view of the world that is so upsetting that when I leave the theatre, I want to say no to that play, I will not allow that to happen in my life" (Holmberg). By introducing a taboo topic as bait, Vogel is able to examine the intricate nature of family dynamics, human need, and cultural norms that transcend a purely American dilemma. The universal appeal of this play is the fact that every culture has its taboos. By the same token, the keen sense of ambiguity that is infused in each scene forces us to examine our own responses, and in essence, define our own

customized space. In other words, the highways and back roads may be American; however, the journey is clearly universal.

Vogel, as Bigsby observes, "is interested in the psychology of both individuals [Peck and Li'l Bit], in their separate, and, occasionally, mutual needs, in the nature of love, destructive and healing, in the resilience and despair that determine actions" (*Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, 416). Without condoning Peck's abuse of his niece, Vogel delves into the psyche of both the abuser and abused without the labels of victim and victimizer. As Vogel herself comments, "I hate the word victim . . . It's a buzz word people use these days. We're all victims just by virtue of being alive" (qtd. in Bigsby *Contemporary* 327). Although Peck does take advantage of his niece, he is also the only family member that listens to her and shows her genuine affection. Ironically, Li'l Bit, before the first instance of abuse takes place, in the face of her mother's concerns of her uncle paying too much attention to her, pleads in defense of Peck: "He listens to me when I talk. And--and he talks to me. He teaches me about things. Mama--he knows an awful lot" (Vogel *Drive* 56). To be sure, Vogel does not exonerate Peck's abuse of his niece; however, she does not label Peck as an abuser. Vogel presents the very complex relationship of Uncle and niece from Li'l Bit's perspective. The complexity of this relationship, elucidated by the pain, anxiety, isolation and confusion that are experienced by Li'l Bit and Uncle Peck in their search for love, meaning, and understanding reveals a common humanity that makes us examine our own attitudes toward family, sexuality, power, and abuse. As Bigsby comments, "Vogel reveals the vulnerability of the child but also the pathos of the man. The young Li'l Bit draws lines which he [Peck] is obliged to respect. The audience do likewise and suddenly find

themselves on the wrong side of that line, forced to reconsider the reactions to the earlier scenes, forced, too, to ask questions about the wider context of this drama" (*Contemporary* 325). Consequently, as we see a shift of power from Peck to Li'l Bit as she literally becomes his *raison d être*. Just as Jessie was empowered to take control of her life in Norman's *'night, Mother*, Li'l Bit, navigates through the cruelties and selfish desires of her uncle as he educates her to ultimately take control of her own destiny. Moreover, the complexity is heightened by the fact that although Li'l Bit genuinely cares for her uncle, there are specific instances when she decides where the line will be drawn and forbids her uncle to cross it: "We can meet once a week. But only in public. You've got to let me--draw the line. And once it's drawn, you mustn't cross it" (*Drive* 47).

The driving lesson is the primary metaphor within *How I Learned to Drive*. The driving metaphors punctuate points of physical, sexual, and emotional maturation as Li'l Bit navigates through rocky terrain, becomes aware of blind spots, and eventually gains mastery of her vehicle and control of her own body and life. Moreover, the broken chronology Vogel employs heightens the tension of the action as it unfolds on stage as Li'l Bit is presented as a seventeen year-old at the beginning of the play, then later as an eleven year-old, then as a "*gawky and quiet*" (*Drive* 29) fifteen year-old, and, finally, she appears onstage as a thirty-five year-old confident woman, forcing us to suspend judgment about what is being presented until the last scene. In her review of the April 1, 1997 New York performance of *How I Learned to Drive*, Jill Dolan observes, "Vogel's choice to remember Li'l Bit and Peck's relationship nonchronologically illustrates its complexity, and allows the playwright to build sympathy for a man who might otherwise be despised and dismissed as a child molester" ("Performance" 127). Indeed, the non-

linear presentation allows us to view the evolving relationship in different stages as Li'l Bit becomes emotionally attached to the only family member who does not degrade or humiliate her as her body develops before her selfhood is realized. The broken chronology also compels us to evaluate our feelings toward Peck and re-evaluate our feelings regarding social and cultural taboos and "norms." As Bigsby explains,

> The nature of the modern family, the fact of sexual preference, the existence of AIDS, paedophilia, may register in her [Vogel's] work but they are not her *subject* [italics mine]. They constitute, she has explained, the atmosphere that her characters breathe. They are not causes she fights, facts which she challenges, or banners she seeks to wave. They are the context within which her characters exist, in search of love, in search of meaning . . . Vogel's is a comedy often generated out of pain, anxiety and confusion . . . There is a drive towards understanding of those too easily contained within the shorthand of moral disapprobation. (*Contemporary* 297)

Although we are introduced to a dysfunctional family that actually doles out nicknames to family members based on genitalia, an uncle who clearly "crosses the line," and a young woman who cannot be labeled merely a victim, we are still privy to a relationship that, although exploitative on one level, is comprised of genuine compassion and love as well. Vogel coerces us to look at individuals, who are often labeled by societal definitions as abuser, victimizer, or villains and blurs the lines to a shade of grey that literally pulls us out of complacency and compels us to look at these people as human beings who are damaged, yet, are also capable of suffering from pain, loneliness and despair and at the

same time have the ability to love, understand and nurture. How can we feel sympathy for a pedophile? What constitutes "crossing the line?" These are the questions Vogel asks us to answer as we are transported on our journey. She also asks us to look at the arbitrary means by which society determines what constitutes a crime--statutory rape at seventeen, but legal at eighteen years of age. This aspect is brought forth in a revealing scene when Li'l Bit's grandmother comments, "It was legal, what Daddy and I did! I was fourteen and in those days, fourteen was a grown-up woman" (*Drive* 26).

By using the driving lesson, and journey as metaphors, Li'l Bit explores her own sexuality and eventually gains control of her own body. However, this education has a price. Although Peck teaches his niece to drive with confidence, he robs her of her self-identity and confidence in her own body. As Ann Pellegrini argues, "Both the fire in Li'l Bit's head and the bodily sensation that she says she can feel only while driving connect her to her uncle across time and across boundaries of life and death . . . She cannot escape her past; this is her burden and her gift" (482). Indeed, just as Williams's Tom Wingfield is haunted by his past, the ghost of Uncle Peck rides along with Li'l Bit on her journey through life. However, the significant difference between Tom's predicament and that of Li'l Bit is that she actually welcomes her uncle's ghost to travel with her, thereby embracing her past, with all the lessons she has been forced to learn, to accompany her on her journey forward. In contrast, Tom's past prevents him from successfully moving forward. Moreover, unlike Williams's fragile Laura, who was emotionally disabled by life's misfortunes, and ultimately by her gentleman caller, we see Li'l Bit in the driver's seat of her car and her life, with the welcomed memory of her uncle firmly taking a back seat.

Vogel reminds us that we see Peck as more than an abuser because we are seeing him through the eyes of his niece. Li'l Bit does not see Peck as a villain; therefore, we are, at the very least, allowed to acknowledge his pain. Her memories drive the play, and she, although damaged by her uncle's abuse, ultimately forgives him and feels genuine affection for him as well. In a particularly poignant scene, as she has a better understanding of the events of her life, she wonders, "Now that I'm old enough, there are some questions I would have liked to have asked him. Who did it to you, Uncle Peck? How old were you? Were you eleven?" (*Drive* 55). The complexity of this relationship as it is revealed in a scattered chronological manner, along with the fact that the scenes that contain abuse are all mimed heightens the intensity of each scene. As Bigsby points out, "She [Vogel] also instructs that the sexual intimacies which Peck enacts should be performed in mime, against a background of sacred music, a distancing effect that takes the edge off the shock and adds a ritualistic element that inhibits instinctual responses" (*Modern American Drama, 1945-2000*, 416). Vogel wants us to acknowledge the full range of emotions felt by both characters. Hence the sacred music and miming actions challenge us to devote our attention to the emotions of the individuals on the stage and deflects Peck's actions. By utilizing innovative techniques and a bare-minimal stage setting, Vogel draws our attention to the common humanity of uncle and niece. We are given an opportunity to view Peck's strengths and weaknesses as he wrestles with his own demons. Thus, we are allowed to see the plight of a loving, compassionate human being who, although he understands that his love for his niece has, indeed, crossed the line, is so weakened, damaged and destroyed by his uncontrollable desire, that to give it up literally kills him. We find out that, as flawed as he is, he is still able to concede his

power, and indeed, equip his niece with the power to navigate any terrain--as he teaches his niece to "learn to think what the other guy is going to do before he does it" (Vogel 35).

As the theme of loss is transformed and modified in Vogel's play, we are confronted with emotional truths, and we are forced to grapple with our own demons as we travel alongside Peck and Li'l Bit as they journey through the pain, loneliness, and heartache of a love affair, that although is never consummated, and as forbidden as it may be, is still indeed a story of love, and, ultimately, acceptance and forgiveness. As Vogel comments, "Whether we call it forgiveness or understanding, there comes a moment when the past has to be processed, and we have to find some control. There are two forgivenesses in the play. One forgiveness for Peck, but the most crucial forgiveness would be Li'l Bit's forgiving Li'l Bit. Li'l Bit as an adult looking and understanding her complicity . . ." (Holmberg).

As we travel along with uncle and niece, we are challenged to view the full range of emotions experienced by these two individuals. Each scene reveals an added dimension of complexity. After all, we are viewing the various stages of a young girl's emotional and physical development, but at the same time we are also witnessing the various stages of a love affair, albeit a forbidden and flawed one, but a love affair nonetheless. Moreover, we are equally challenged to step back and observe Peck, with all his flaws and imperfections, not only as the person who harms Li'l Bit, but also as the man she loves. As Bigsby points out, "what is striking," about Vogel's characters, "is less their remoteness from our experience than the familiarity of the dilemma of those who reach out for what consolations they can find, who struggle to make sense of a world that

seems to deny them what they need most" (*Contemporary* 289-90). Indeed, Li'l Bit's family focuses more on her physical assets rather than her intelligence. In contrast, although Peck takes advantage of his niece, he also acknowledges her intelligence as well as her beauty. By the same token, throughout her formative years, Li'l Bit accepts Peck's compliments, advice, and affection, and at the same time provides him the understanding, affection and physical gratification he desires. Consequently, although Peck's abuse impacts Li'l Bit's life, it does not prevent her from confronting her situation and ultimately moving on. In a particularly poignant scene we are informed that Li'l bit lost a scholarship and was kicked out of a prominent school. We are also told that she resorted to alcohol, she took "a string of dead-end day jobs that didn't last very long" (16), and even contemplated suicide. However, despite all the harm that resulted directly or indirectly from Peck's abuse, Li'l Bit tells us that even in her darkest moment, when "just one notch of the steering wheel would be all it would take, and yet some . . . reflex took over. My hands on the wheel in the nine and three o'clock position--I never so much as got a ticket. He [Peck] taught me well" (16-17). Hence, along with the abuse, Peck also provided Li'l Bit with survival skills. And, ultimately, he loved her enough to let her go. Regardless of how we view Peck, Vogel urges us to put aside our victim--victimizer lenses, and challenges us to acknowledge him as the broken, flawed, yet compassionate and understanding human being who is ultimately consumed by his own demons. Thus, by portraying the complex relationship of uncle and niece onstage, Vogel holds out a mirror and challenges us to see, even for a split-second the common humanity that may be reflected back.

Just as Williams used memory as a device in *The Glass Menagerie* to help Tom Wingfield come to terms with specific events in his past, so Vogel presents the real life lessons and driving lessons that Li'l Bit received in the hands of her uncle as she recalls scenes from her childhood. As a woman in her thirties, she revisits her past without regrets or feeling like a victim. As Bigsby points out, "She learns that her own life consists of everything that has happened to her and a life of blame or regret is no life at all" (*Contemporary* 327). With an omnipresent driver's education instructor's voice announcing instructions and foretelling the hidden dangers that lie ahead ranging from "Safety first – You and Driver Education" (Vogel 9), "Driving in First Gear" (13), "Vehicle Failure" (22) to "Good defensive driving involves mental and physical preparation. Are you prepared?" (35), "Implied Consent" (44), and "Driving in Today's World" (58). Each announcement, made throughout the play, introduces a new life lesson that Li'l Bit receives from her uncle. Vogel addresses the volatile issues of temptation, curiosity, and sexual abuse in family life. Along with the two main characters, Vogel uses the classic Greek chorus[9] to add a traditional flare. The story, set mostly in the 1960s, moves episodically in flashback and flash-forward, showing Li'l Bit from the age of eleven to forty-something. Her remembered life scenes from home, school, and automobile is populated with other characters all played by three actors whom Vogel identifies as Male Greek Chorus, Female Greek Chorus, and Teenage Greek Chorus. This device connects an otherwise contemporary American drama to the ancient classical theater, connecting Li'l Bit's personal experiences to more universal issues.

Vogel's dramatic technique combines classical elements with a keen sense of ambiguity to capture nuances of sexual awakening and the intensity of sexual

deprivation. Her dramatic style completely abandons moral judgments for more complex insights into the cultural taboos so prevalent in our society. As Li'l Bit states in one of the most significant scenes of the play, in which she is eleven years old, and recalls the first time Peck abused her, "That was the last day I lived in my body. I retreated above the neck, and I've lived inside the 'fire' in my head ever since" (58). Even so, Vogel ultimately portrays Li'l Bit as an empowered woman with the courage to go beyond the abuse she has suffered. As Vogel argues, "I had no interest in a movie-of-the-week drama about child-molesting . . . it seems to me that one thing that gets left out when we're talking about trauma is the victim's responsibility to look the experience squarely in the eye and then to move on. That's the journey I wanted to craft here" (qtd. in *Contemporary American Playwrights* 328). Just as Norman's Jessie took responsibility for her own life, albeit in death, Li'l bit accepts responsibility for hers without vilifying her uncle. In fact, as Bigsby observes, "She now drives her own car, accepts her own memories, implicitly confesses to her own collusions, acknowledges her necessary cruelty in abandoning a man whose decline and death she thereby made inevitable" (327). Even Peck never makes excuses for his behavior and accepts complete responsibility for his actions. And, as Bigsby elucidates, Peck breaks many moral and social rules, but never those devised by Li'l Bit" (*Modern American Drama 1945-2000*, 418). Although exploitation, seduction, power, vulnerability and selfishness are aspects of Li'l Bit's life journey, acceptance, forgiveness, compassion and, ultimately, complete empowerment, are what we find that she has internalized as she sits in the driver's seat, smiles at the image of her uncle in the back seat, and maintains complete control of her car and the direction of her own life.

The language of American culture includes terms such as “hooking up,”[10] “friends with benefits,”[11] “booty-call,”[12] and “boot-up.”[13] Internet pornography has made access to an already thriving industry even easier. We now have television news programs with specials entitled “How to Catch a Predator” in which women over the age of consent, with the aid of law enforcement, pose as thirteen year-old girls, and entice men online in chat rooms with promiscuous comments and offer to meet them privately. However, when the men show up, they are met by police officers and a camera crew in place to capture every image and sound bite, then, the unsuspecting men, who finally realize that they have been lured in by the bait, are hand-cuffed and taken in to be further investigated and possibly prosecuted. The men that show up include married men, doctors, lawyers, judges, military officers, truck drivers, college students, and clergymen. All this takes place in front of us on our television sets during primetime viewing while we sit down to have dinner with our families. Is this a high-tech method for catching a possible pedophile, or, is it a way of promoting the problem? Regardless of how we feel about the issue, we are left with more ambiguity than answers. This is the nature of Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*. Regardless of how we feel about the relationship of Peck and Li’l Bit, as Bigsby comments, “For Vogel, there is more, far more, to this relationship than can adequately be summed up in a word not uttered by any of the characters and not in her mind when she wrote it” (*Modern, 1945-2000* 418).

The theme of loss is taken to another level in Vogel’s *How I Learned to Drive*. Vogel challenges notions of self and society as she sends us on an introspective journey--one in which we learn more about ourselves than we do the characters onstage. Without a doubt, American society has a difficult time defining acceptable cultural or social

"norms." Historically, America is the land that many immigrants sought in order to escape persecution. It is the land of opportunity where we can pursue the American dream. But first, we need to define the dream. Can it be customized to accommodate the dysfunctional family comprised of a drunken mother, over-sexed grandfather and lustful, yet compassionate uncle? This is the realm of theatre. It is the realm of the American dramatist. This is Vogel's realm. As Bigsby points out, "For her, [Vogel] theatre is an authentic dialogue with a culture and with the history of theatre itself ('Every time you read a play there is a sense in which you are talking to Aristotle'). At a time when cinema seeks to isolate the present moment, to determine, through its own techniques, how it is read, resisting the dialogic, theatre offers itself as a genuine conversation with self and society alike" (*Contemporary* 292). Indeed, Vogel's use of the classic Greek Chorus, mimed actions, broken chronology, music, driving terminology, and, of course, the omnipresent voice, allows enough ambiguity to surface to force us to suspend our judgments about the actions taking place onstage. Hence, Vogel not only draws us into the dialogue taking place before us, but challenges us to participate and contribute our response. However, by presenting a controversial subject and reeling us in with creative dramatic techniques, we are allowed to put aside our preconceived ideas and thereby participate in the authentic dialogue of uncle and niece as they journey into areas that confront the complexity of human need. Although Vogel never denies Peck's culpability, we are also presented with two individuals who feel alienated and excluded from the rest of society and draw comfort from one another. Without demonizing her oppressor, Li'l Bit is able to confront and come to terms with her relationship to Peck. Ironically, her uncle teaches her to stay five steps ahead of the other person and thereby empowers her

to ultimately discard him. However, although she drives away in the driver's seat, she feels empathy for the man who had to deal with his own demons, and, she not only forgives him, but carries his memory along on her journey forward into the next phase of her life. Although Vogel uses American car culture as a backdrop for *How I Learned to Drive*, she unites the audience with concerns and emotional truths that forge a global community with one device--the taboo topic. She baits us and steps away. What we are left with is a grey area. Nothing is as clear as our own preconceived ideas about a particular topic. We have no comfort zones. We are challenged to identify our own boundaries, family dynamics, and relationships. This is the universal dilemma. Although Vogel's characters embark on an emotional journey, the real journey is experienced by her audience. Thus, as we leave the theater, we are never quite the same as when we first came in.

Notes to Chapter Five

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[1] All quotes from *How I Learned to Drive* are from the Dramatists Play Service Inc. 1997 edition and hereafter will be cited in-text as parenthetical references

[2] Vadimir Nabokov (1899-1977), Russian novelist, poet, and literary scholar is considered to be one of the major, most original prose writers in the twentieth-century. One of his most famous works is the novel, *Lolita* (1955). The novel was first written in English and published in 1955 in Paris. It was later translated by the author into Russian and published in 1967 in New York. The novel is both internationally famous for its innovative style and infamous for its controversial subject. The book's narrator and protagonist Humbert becomes sexually obsessed with a twelve-year-old girl named Dolores Haze. After its publication, the novel attained a classic status, becoming one of the best known and most controversial examples of twentieth-century literature. The name “Lolita” has also entered pop culture to describe a sexually precocious young girl. The novel has been adapted to film twice, once in 1962 by Stanley Kubrick starring James Mason as Humbert, and again in 1997 by Adrian Lyne starring Jeremy Irons.

[3] In Vogel’s production notes she states, “[t]hroughout the script there are bold-faced titles. In production these should be spoken in a neutral voice (the type of voice that driver education films employ). In the New York production these titles were assigned to various members of the Greek Chorus and were done live” (6).

[4] Harold Pinter (1930 -) is an English playwright, screenwriter, poet, actor, director, author, and political activist. Pinter received the Nobel Prize for Literature in December 2005. He achieved international success as one of the most complex post-World War II dramatists. Harold Pinter's plays are noted for their use of silence to increase tension,

understatement, and cryptic small talk. His themes also include erotic fantasy, obsession and jealousy, family hatred and mental disturbance.

[5] David Hare (1947 -), an English dramatist and director, was knighted in 1998 and is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature. David Hare, who arrived on the playwriting scene in 1968, is a dedicated social commentator. His plays, in spite of occasional excursions into the Third World, offer a richly comprehensive portrait of contemporary Britain and its institutions.

[6] "Jon Benét Patricia Ramsey (August 6, 1990 – December 26, 1996) was a six-year-old girl found murdered in the basement of her parents' home in Boulder, Colorado, nearly eight hours after she was reported missing. The case drew attention throughout the United States when no suspect was charged and suspicions turned to possible family involvement. The tantalizing clues of the case inspired numerous books and articles that attempt to solve the mystery. Many details of the case, including her parents' wealth, her apparently violent death, and the fact that JonBenét had frequently been entered in beauty contests, enhanced public interest in the case. . . . Case speculation by experts, media and the parents has supported different theories. For a long time, the local police supported the theory that her mother injured her child in a fit of rage after the girl had wet her bed on the same night, and then proceeded to kill her either in rage or to cover-up the original injury. Another theory was that John Ramsey had been sexually abusing his daughter and murdered her as a cover." Because of contradictory evidence, a grand jury was not able to indict the Ramseys or anyone else for Jon Benét's murder.

"Jon Benét Ramsey." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 1 Jun 2007, 01:43 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 1 Jun 2007

<http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=JonBen%C3%A9t_Ramsey&oldid=134983386>

[7] Li'l Bit relates to the Female Greek Chorus that she feels like a "walking Mary Jane joke" (37). Her female classmates, represented by the Female Greek Chorus, have not heard of Mary Jane jokes, so Li'l Bit provides an example: "Little Mary Jane is walking through the woods, when all of a sudden this man who was hiding behind a tree *jumps* out, *rips* open Mary Jane's blouse, and *plunges* his hands on her breasts. And Little Mary Jane just laughed and laughed because she knew her money was in her shoes" (37).

[8] Although Henry Ford did not invent the automobile or the assembly line system, he revolutionized the assembly line so that cars could be produced that were more affordable to the masses. More than 15 million Model-T cars were built between 1909 and 1927. Indeed, Ford's endeavors had a huge social and economic impact on the twentieth century.

[9] In tragic plays of ancient Greece, the chorus offered a variety of background and summary information to help the audience follow the performance, commented on main themes, and showed how an ideal audience might react to the drama as it was presented. They also represented the general populace of any particular story. In many ancient Greek plays, the chorus expressed to the audience what the main characters could not say, such as their fears or secrets. The Greek chorus had to work in unison to help explain the play as there were only one to three actors on stage who were already playing several parts each.

[10] Hooking up has come to define sexual relationships for most of today's teenagers and young women. It can mean anything from kissing and touching to oral sex or intercourse. Vagueness is its trademark.

[11] The phrase “friends with benefits” was popularized in the mid-1990s by the singer Alanis Morissette ‘s song “Head Over Feet.” The intent of this type of casual relationship can vary: sometimes to relieve sexual frustrations and other times simply as a friendship or part-time relationship, which includes sexual activity when wished.

[12] The phrase “booty call” originated in a comedic routine by comedian Bill Bellamy in the early 1990s. It is used by persons of either gender, and many ethnicities, to request sexual favors by calling an acquaintance that may or may not be romantically linked to the caller.

[13] To boot (as a verb; also “to boot up”) a computer is to load an operating system into the computer's main memory or random access memory (RAM). However it also refers to putting on a condom.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Despite their vast differences, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Marsha Norman, and Paula Vogel share a unity in their vision of an overriding sense of loss, which becomes a significant image on the American stage. As Williams relates in "The Catastrophe of Success," "[T]ime is short and it doesn't return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, loss, loss, unless you devote your heart to its opposition" (*Menagerie* 17). Indeed, the image of loss is modified and transformed by these playwrights and becomes a metaphor for the decline of the physical, psychological, and moral self. These playwrights also use the image of loss to convey, as C. W. E. Bigsby relates, "the slow fading of a vision but in doing so they implicitly make a case for the possibility of change and indeed see in the theatre itself a principal agent of transformation" (*Critical Introduction 2*, 14). The myth of the American dream, illusion versus reality, empowerment, and the complexity of human relationships--this is the realm of the American dramatist. Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel, modify and transform the image of loss to reveal a common humanity that is not only a force in their work, but is also evident in the works of American dramatists as diverse as Eugene O'Neill and Adrienne Kennedy. Moreover, by harnessing the theater's ability to capture the "public issues of a nation and the private anxieties of its citizens" (Roudané *American* 9) on stage, these dramatists, in text and performance have been able to use the theme of loss to "strip the layers and get to the marrow"--in hopes of coming to a better understanding of self (Albee 213). Consequently, these playwrights challenge the audience to travel beyond the boundaries of the given and to define their own space. From domestic drama to the drama of social

and political criticism, Williams, Miller, Norman, and Vogel along with many other diverse American playwrights have taken the genre of American drama from backseat status (secondary to the novel and poem) into the forefront of recognized American literature.[1]

The disillusionment and unrest that characterized the plight of the Wingfields in Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Miller's Loman family in *Death of a Salesman* was indeed a reflection of the radical social and economic changes of the 1940s brought on by the Depression and World War II. As interest in Sigmund Freud's[2] psychology emerged and America faced social, moral and religious crises, Williams and Miller responded to the nation's growing anxieties and tensions in their works. Tennessee Williams employs innovative dramatic techniques such as screens onstage, music, and creative lighting to blend text and performance, illusion and reality to punctuate the psychological loss suffered by Tom Wingfield as the result of abandoning his mother and beloved sister. Williams uses these devices to strengthen the emotions presented on stage that might not be fully articulated by language or performance. Presented as a memory play, Williams also makes use of an innovative literary technique by making Tom both narrator and character in the play. Thus, Williams gives Tom poetic license to try to come to terms with the psychological loss that is the driving force of the play.

Ironically, just as the fire escape that looms in front of the audience in *The Glass Menagerie* provides no escape at all for the Wingfields, the "blown-up photograph" (22) of the absent father that hangs in their living room forecasts the inevitability of Tom's departure at the end of the play. It also serves as a visual reminder of the Wingfield's inability to escape their crippling past. Although Tom tries to inoculate himself from his

physically and psychologically oppressive surroundings by drinking alcohol, smoking cigarettes, writing poetry, and watching endless hours of matinees and double-features, he cannot prevent his destiny. The harder he tries to distinguish himself from his father and his legacy of abandonment, the closer he aligns himself to his fate.

Indeed the Wingfields are as much victims of social and economic injustices as they are of the illusions they create to survive the harsh realities of their lives. By the same token, except for physically and emotionally fragile Laura, they are not helpless individuals who sacrifice reality for the world of illusion. As a matter of fact, Amanda is presented ultimately as a survivor. Consequently, Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* transcends the plight of the Wingfield family and captures the essence of a common humanity. The loss of physical and psychological space is indeed a human dilemma. Tom's realization that he cannot escape his guilt, Amanda's forays into mythic Blue Mountain, and Laura's physical and emotional fragility resonate with diverse audiences from America to Russia. Although Tom's memory drives the play, Amanda has the greatest burden to bear. She has been abandoned by her husband, and she must care for fragile Laura. Amanda's digressions into her past allow her to temporarily forget the misery of her present situation. However, she manages to work menial jobs to care for her family. On top of that, she perseveres and makes valiant attempts to deal with the realities of the present. In contrast, Tom refuses to accept reality and abandons his mother and sister. Ironically, a genuine connection is achieved by mother and daughter in the silent final scene, whereas Tom is unable to make any true connection because of the weight of his guilt.

The theme of loss permeates Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* just as it does Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Willy Loman is the embodiment of the loss of physical space, psychological space, and moral space. Although the American dream, as an ideal, represents the notion that hard work and setting goals can result in the fulfillment of one's dreams, Willy Loman equates the American dream only with material success and superficial aspects such as "physical attractiveness" and "making contacts." As a result, Willy Loman does not realize that he has placed the highest value on nothing more than a myth and illusion. Ironically, these are the values he "lovingly" attempts to pass on to his sons. By the same token, Willy never nurtures genuine values such as love, affection, family relations and, in fact, replaces them with superficial qualities such as "making connections" and "appearances are everything." Therefore, his sons are also encouraged to believe the same myths as their father. The myths that have become the real world for Willy become an endless source of frustration and hopelessness for his sons because they are products of illusion. Willy Loman's blind faith in his superficial vision of the American dream leads to his rapid psychological decline as he is unable to accept the disparity between the mythic dream and his own life.

Although Williams's and Miller's characters have similarities such as difficulty in distinguishing reality from illusion, and a belief in a mythic version of the American dream, some of Williams's characters in *The Glass Menagerie* have the capacity of grounding themselves in reality and therefore maintaining some sense of self. For example, in the final silent scene in *Menagerie*, Amanda gains dignity and beauty as she comforts her daughter, and thus also gains a sense of self. In contrast, Miller's Willy Loman, by placing ultimate value in the superficial aspects of the American dream and

by believing that the most valuable things in life are purchasable commodities, ultimately, sacrifices his own life in hopes of obtaining these qualities. So, since Willy's dilemma cannot be resolved "outside of time," in contrast to Tom and Amanda Wingfield, he literally is left with no "self." Ironically, as much as he longed for security for his family, he dies not knowing that Linda made the last payment on their house.

Willy, like most of Miller's characters, is caught in a philosophic debate, giving his work a quality that transcends social, cultural, and political boundaries. What happens to an individual who believes in a myth that has become the doctrine for his life, that the realization of this dream/myth is to be had at any cost? This is the predicament of Willy Loman. Illusion has become his reality. Whereas Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* brought us "truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion," (*Menagerie* 22) Willy Loman has substituted the myth of the American dream for his reality. Tom can never rid himself of the guilt he feels for abandoning his family; therefore, he travels back to that painful period of his life by recalling specific moments in his mind in an attempt to come to terms with his loss. Willy Loman loves his wife and sons; however, his inability to accept reality with its imperfections makes him create a reality in his mind that cannot be realized in "life." Willy's life is based on lies, exaggerations, and avoidance.

Willy is unable to accept genuine love and affection from his wife, yet accepts gratification from The Woman, and lies and exaggerates his sales figures to his wife and sons. Therefore, the "truth" is too closely aligned with reality for Willy Loman. By the same token, carpentry--working with his hands, is too "natural" for Willy, as a result, he is unable to acknowledge it as a valid or significant profession. Willy's obsession with the superficial "social" world of the sales profession that imbues itself with a pseudo-

familial atmosphere in order to fill quotas, encourage sales, and increase profits, prevents him from making a genuine connection with family and friends who care for him. The ideology that Willy instills in his sons at an early age, that the greatest success and achievements in life are based on a popularity contest, is one aspect of the myth of the American dream. However, Willy has succumbed to this myth with such intensity that he is willing to die for it.

Despite the fact that Willy has a one-dimensional view of success, there is a child-like innocence about him that makes him appear somewhat noble at times. The social environment of the sales world becomes a family environment for Willy. He looks for love, approval, dignity, and validation from outside forces, while he is unable to accept the love and compassion of his wife, sons and friend, Charley. However, Willy's innocence, vulnerability, and absolute adherence to a dream prevent him from being analyzed as merely a victim, dreamer, or fool. After all, what is it about Willy Loman that stirs the hearts of diverse audiences in China, Japan, India, South Africa, Korea, Russia, Mexico and Australia,[3] and many other countries, to make them believe that they are viewing scenes from their own private lives? Arthur Miller, like Tennessee Williams combined poetic language with innovative techniques ranging from lighting and music to transparent walls so that characters could, "enter or leave a room by 'stepping through' a wall onto the forestage" (*Salesman* 12) in order to bring past and present, reality and illusion together on stage at the same time, techniques that had never been viewed by mainstream dramatic theater audiences before. Certainly the questions left unanswered by Williams and Miller give both *Menagerie* and *Salesman* an appeal that transcends social, economic, and cultural boundaries.

The image of loss permeates *Death of a Salesman* in a manner that has elicited critical debates from scholars, critics, and theatergoers since its 1949 premiere. Willy's life is the commodity that he is willing to sacrifice in order to make his myth a reality. In fact, Willy whole-heartedly believes that he will be giving his son, Biff a chance at success with the twenty-thousand dollar insurance money. Certainly Willy Loman was a dreamer and yearned for success and recognition. However, Willy's distorted views of success, love, and a blind devotion to a myth, make him unable to accept or understand genuine affection. Moreover, Willy's inability to accommodate the reality of his life makes the disparity between reality and illusion too great and eventually makes genuine communication between himself and his family impossible. Willy's need to be admired, loved, and respected by his son, Biff propels much of the action of *Death of a Salesman*. However, Willy is unable make a genuine connection with Biff because he himself is so disconnected with reality. There is a transcendent quality in the relationship of father and son. Biff requires Willy's unconditional love and acceptance. He also yearns for his father's blessings before he can go forth with his own dreams. Indeed Biff's desire for validation is a universal need that makes the father-son relationship of Willy and Biff transcend cultural boundaries, and touches the core of individuals in countries in which the profession of traveling salesman does not even exist.[4]

As the theme of loss permeates the lives of the Lomans, it is modified and transformed to incorporate the tragic consequences that arise when truth and reality are replaced by lies, exaggerations, denial, myths, and illusions--when the real American dream is replaced by a distorted myth. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is imbued with a sense of loss and ends in ultimate loss, death. Even so, although it may be too late

for the Lomans to gain a richer understanding of the need for a value base that goes beyond the material and that accepts human life as a priceless commodity, perhaps it is not too late for the audience to supply the element missing in Willy Loman's life, to give value to what Willy was really selling--himself. Willy's twenty-four hour journey captures the past and present, illusion and reality, dream and distorted myth and seizes the hearts and minds of the audience as Willy has to face his ultimate, most formidable enemy, himself. It is at this moment, as we see a certain familiarity reflected in Willy's plight, that we realize the essence of Miller's theatre, a common humanity which, indeed, transcends cultures, languages, and sociopolitical views.

In Marsha Norman's '*night, Mother*, the image of loss is transformed and modified to portray the life and death struggle that takes place on stage in real time as Thelma tries to prevent Jessie from committing suicide and Jessie tries to gain control of her own life by ending it. This battle between mother and daughter allows truths to be exposed and articulated for the first time. Ironically, Thelma and Jessie, in the midst of their struggle, make a genuine, loving connection--one they were unable to forge before this fatal evening. We know from the first few lines of dialogue that Jessie intends to kill herself. Even so, the single aspect of '*night, Mother* that reveals itself as the driving force is the fact that Jessie Cates, from the moment the play begins, and until we hear that fatal shot, is in complete control of every aspect of her life. Within the ninety minutes of real time, we witness a woman coming to terms with her life and deciding that the only way for her to *survive* is to complete a task that gives meaning to her life. Jessie is no longer content to merely exist in a life that she feels has no chance of improving. Consequently, upon making her decision, she takes an active role in planning her destiny.

Jessie has contemplated ending her life for the past ten years. Despite the disappointments she has faced, and the havoc epilepsy has wreaked in her life, Jessie's final act is validation of self. In *'night, Mother*, Marsha Norman explores the power of dialogue--the power of the seemingly banal conversation to bring forth emotional truths. Hence, the plight of Thelma and Jessie transcends national and cultural boundaries and has appealed to many international audiences because loneliness, isolation, and loss are transnational themes. Moreover, Thelma's emotional struggle to prevent her daughter from committing suicide is a plight that certainly has no national boundaries. Just as Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie* and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, in text and performance, reveal emotional truths that transcend social, political, and national boundaries, Norman, as Leslie Kane observes, "dramatizes the personal crises of ordinary people struggling to have a self and be a self" (255).

The image of loss is clearly taken to a whole new level in Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*. Vogel's play challenges us to examine our ideas of self, society, and boundaries to reveal emotional truths that we have to define for ourselves, that transcend social, cultural, and political realms. Moreover, just as Norman's *'night, Mother* and Miller's *Death of a Salesman* are not merely stories about individuals who commit suicide, Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive* cannot simply be viewed as a story about the exploits of a pedophile. By presenting each scene non-chronologically, Vogel invites us to discern the complex relationship of niece and uncle. Without absolving Uncle Peck of wrong doing and instead of vilifying him, Vogel's play explores the complexity of human relationships by challenging us to draw our own conclusions. The physical, emotional, and psychological loss is experienced by the uncle and niece as they each take turns in

the “driver’s seat.” Vogel combines text and performance to illuminate the journey of Li’l Bit and Uncle Peck. As uncle and niece navigate dangerous terrain, Vogel invites the audience members to confront and examine their own tensions, anxieties, and preconceived notions of a full range of subjects including the role of victim and victimizer, family dynamics, empowerment, and forgiveness.

Vogel’s focus on text and performance allows us to view the relationship of uncle and niece from Li’l Bit’s point of view. By scattering the chronology, by using the Greek chorus to represent various characters from Li’l Bit’s past, and by showing us consequences before we see actions, we are forced to reserve our reaction until the end of the performance. Vogel uses ambiguity as a device to make the audience acknowledge the wide range of emotions experienced by both niece and uncle as they come to terms with sentiments ranging from affection and desire to disgust and anger. Moreover, Vogel’s use of ambiguity forces us to examine our own reactions to stereotypical notions of victim-victimizer roles in society. Can we actually fathom the niece’s complicity in the relationship? Vogel also turns the table on us by making us react to ambiguous boundaries that are dictated by society. Indeed, we are given no conclusive answers in this play.

Vogel does not condemn or condone abuse in *How I Learned to Drive*. She acknowledges that it exists in society. For Vogel, the relationship of Li’l Bit and Peck typifies the paradox, ambiguity, confusion, and contradictions that make up American society and ultimately, the human condition, and therefore is the realm of the theater. *How I Learned to Drive* combines the mystery and allure of the American car culture with the provocative appeal of music to elucidate the grey areas of human relationships

that transcend black and white definitions. Vogel challenges the audience to look at individuals, who are often labeled by societal definitions as abuser, victimizer, or villains and compels us to look at these people as human beings who are damaged, yet, are also capable of suffering from pain, loneliness, and despair and at the same time have the ability to love, understand, and nurture. Although she does not condone the abuse Peck inflicts on his niece, Vogel is more interested in focusing on how Li'l Bit handles the situation. Thus, Li'l Bit is portrayed as a survivor rather than just a victim. She confronts her fears, anxieties, and pain, then, takes control of her life and charts her own course by sitting in the driver's seat with her uncle's memory safely in the backseat.

The purpose of this study was to explore the theme of loss in four unique works by four diverse American playwrights in a manner that has not been done before. Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Marsha Norman, and Paula Vogel, modify and transform the image of loss in each work examined in this dissertation to reveal a common humanity that is not only a force in their work, but is also evident in the works of many American dramatists. Another goal of this study was to elucidate the major themes related to the image of loss such as the myth of the American dream, illusion versus reality, empowerment, and the complexity of human relationships to reveal the "common humanity" that is the "essence of theatre." I have also acknowledged the "live spark" of theater performance. Text and performance are critical aspects of any piece of dramatic literature. The audience observing the "live" spectacle and the reader of the text are both invited to define their "own space." Once defined, this knowledge takes the audience on a journey--even if it is only for a transcendent moment--to a place they may not have gone before. Although there are a variety of ways in which to interpret each of

the works presented in this study, this dissertation reveals a unique way in which to interpret not only these works but many of the works that comprise twentieth-century American drama today. This study is the first scholarly work to discuss the theme of loss with these four playwrights and these specific works.

Notes to Chapter Six

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[1] As Roudané relates, "American drama continues to struggle for its identity and sense of aesthetic and ethical purpose. Still, thanks to the pioneering work of Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell, and, among others, Gertrude Stein in the 1920s and 1930s, and the achievements of Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and their many contemporaries after World War II, American drama has moved, in text and performance, toward the center of a national literature. American drama now influences a fundamental understanding of what constitutes "American" literature, expanding as it enhances our notions of canon" (*American Drama Since 1960* 235).

[2] Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), was an Austrian physician who revolutionized ideas on how the human mind works. Freud established the theory that unconscious motives control much behavior. Freud's theories have influenced many diverse disciplines including psychology, psychiatry, philosophy, sociology, anthropology, art, and literature (Marxist and feminist theories and literary criticism).

"Sigmund Freud." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 21 Jun 2007, 16:06 UTC. Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. 16 Aug 2007 <http://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Sigmund_Freud&oldid=139691699>.

[3] Refer to Susan C. W. Abbottson (*Student Companion to Arthur Miller* 8). Also see Rajinder Paul "*Death of a Salesman in India*," *The Merrill Studies in Death of a Salesman*.

[4] As Miller observes, "Parallels exist in the play with Chinese society, I have reason to think, assuming that people want to rise in the world everywhere. And if there aren't as yet traveling salesmen in this country [China], I conjecture that the idea of such a man is

easily enough grasped from the text itself. In any case, the salesman motif is in some great part metaphorical; we must all sell ourselves, convince the world of a persona that perhaps we only wish we possessed" (*Salesman in Beijing* 44).

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