

Roundabout Theatre Company



Summer

and

Smoke

Family Series Study Guide

Summer and Smoke

STUDY GUIDE

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WHAT IS THE PLAY ABOUT?

Tennessee Williams placed *Summer and Smoke* in Glorious Hill, Mississippi. The play opens “at dusk of an evening in May, in the first few years of this century.” In the town square, we meet Alma, daughter of the local preacher. She is a delicate girl who seems conscious of minding her manners as she admires the statue of an angel that stands above the drinking fountain. As she drinks, John, her next door neighbor sneaks up on her. John is the doctor’s son and, in contrast to Alma, has developed a reputation as a disheveled and poor mannered boy. It seems that one of his favorite pastimes is teasing Alma. Even so, Alma tries to take care of him because she knows his mother died when he was little. Alma encourages John to comb his hair and wash his face but he is too rebellious to take her seriously. Instead he steals a kiss from her.

This prologue sets the tone for the rest of the story which takes place sixteen years later. It is the story of Alma and John and their struggle to understand their own human desires in the context of rigid social expectations. The angel of the fountain is named Eternity, and she serves as a constant reminder for Alma to sacrifice her earthly desires in exchange for happiness hereafter. Meanwhile a human anatomy chart in his father’s office reinforces John’s contention that it is better to live for the moment, indulging the senses while you can. And yet, even as each

advocates for his or her own position, we can see that they both feel incomplete without a balance between body and soul. As the play progresses, we learn that they are not the stereotypes society tries to cast them as. Rather, they are struggling for the middle ground that lies between the two extremes.

David Warren, director of Roundabout’s production of *Summer and Smoke*, was inspired by how Tennessee Williams set his very real characters against a surreal landscape. The world of the play is not a literal world. It is a poetic world full of allegory. In the opening remarks of his script Williams asks the production designers to pay particular attention to the sky and he fills the world of the play with juxtaposing images that represent the body and soul. Through these symbols he draws our attention to the questions that Alma and John are struggling to understand — soul vs. body; medicine vs. religion; life vs. afterlife; indulgence vs. sacrifice.

Williams describes the angel, Eternity, as “always present,” as if to remind Alma of the ideal to which she is expected to live. In contrast, he fills Alma with a real human desire for love and passion, making the ideal impossible to achieve. In a way, Alma has been cursed by her angel because it tells her that being human is wrong. She tries to resist her desire but is destined to give in to it. When she does, her fall from Eternity’s grace is painful and complete.

WHO'S WHO?

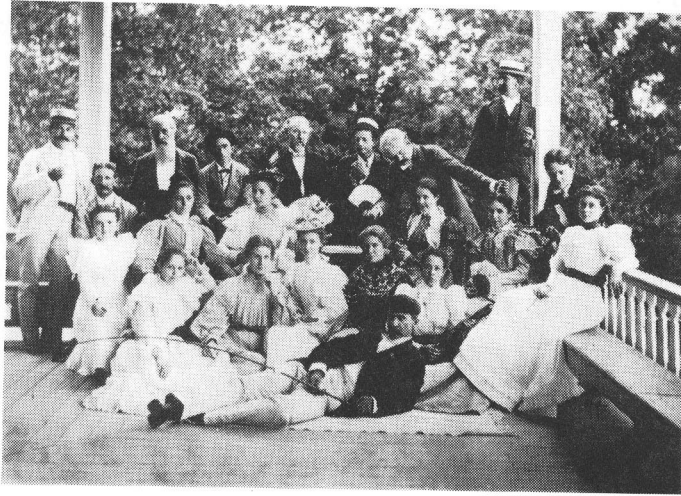
There was a certain charged quality about everyday life in the nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century South. The region's saints were more saintly, its sinners more sinful than those in most of the Anglo-American world. White Southerners were deeply concerned, some were obsessed, with personal righteousness and sinfulness.¹

With the characters Alma and John, Tennessee Williams comments on the conflicting relationship between the archetypal man and woman of the American South.

Alma Winemiller is described by Williams as possessing "a delicacy and elegance, a kind of airiness which is really natural to her as it is, in a less marked degree, to many Southern girls."

Until recent years the idea of "womanhood" in the South was inextricably linked in both history and fiction with the notion of the "Southern lady" or her younger counterpart, the "Southern belle." Few Southern women actually lived the life of the lady or fully embodied her essential qualities: innocence, modesty, morality, piousness, delicacy, self-sacrificial devotion to family.²

For many of these women the brief span of earthly life was chiefly important as preparation for eternity...They prayed for the will to overcome every evil propensity, to be calm and collected at all times so as to be ready to depart from the world at a moment's notice in a state of grace. When women discussed their own tendencies toward sinfulness, they spoke not of active sins of pleasure, but of their inability to be the level-headed near angels that society expected.³



1. Men and Women of the early 1900's

John Buchanan, Jr. is described by Williams as "a Promethean figure, brilliantly and restlessly alive in a stagnant society."

Ever in conflict with evangelical behavior was a complex of masculine beliefs and attitudes that historians have termed Southern honor. This tradition demanded rugged and competitive behavior that usually violated the norms of evangelical morality. Evangelicalism demanded self-control, humility in manner, and harmony in personal relations,

where Southern honor demanded self-assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness. Where home life was generally quiet and peaceful, male culture was often loud and exciting.⁴

Other Characters:

Reverend Winemiller - Alma's father and the local minister. The Reverend has placed a high level of expectation on Alma to live up to the southern ideal of a pious woman. However, he is disgraced by his wife who suffers from a mental affliction that causes her to exhibit childish and uninhibited behavior.

Mrs. Winemiller - Alma's mother. Williams describes Mrs. Winemiller as "a spoiled and selfish girl who evaded the responsibilities of her later life by slipping into a state of perverse childishness." She becomes the voice of reason in the play by speaking the truth that Alma tries to deny.

Dr. Buchanan - John's father and the town doctor. He is described by Williams as "an elderly man whose age shows in his slow and stiff movements." Dr. Buchanan provides comfort to Alma and understanding to John.

Rosa Gonzales - A Flamenco dancer of questionable reputation with whom John seems to spend a lot of time. "Her indolent walk produces a sound and an atmosphere like the Gulf wind on the palmettos, a whispering of silk and a slight rattle of metallic ornaments."

Papa Gonzales - Rosa's father. He owns a casino where John spends a lot of time and money. When John's gambling debt gets out of hand, Papa offers to settle the score if John will marry Rosa.

Nellie Ewell - Alma's vocal student. Described by Williams as "a girl of sixteen with a radiantly fresh healthy quality." As the daughter of "the merry widow" she shows no hesitation in her attempts to secure John's love for herself.

Members of Alma's intellectual club: Roger Doremus (Alma's gentleman caller); Mrs. Bassett; Rosemary; Vernon; Mr. Kramer.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tennessee Williams (*Born Thomas Lanier Williams*)
1911-1983

Williams is considered one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century. Starting with the debut of *The Glass Menagerie* and through his subsequent works, Williams transformed the American stage by introducing innovative dramatic forms and styles, creating a collection of realistic and memorable characters and producing scripts which, according to many critics, lift stage dialogue to the level of poetry.

Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, to a traveling shoe salesman and the daughter of an Episcopal priest. ... In 1929 Williams began studies at the University of Missouri, but left two years later to live with his grandparents in Memphis, Tennessee, because of financial difficulties. There he wrote his first play entitled *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!*, produced in 1935, the same year he entered the University of Washington. ... The publication of his first short story "The Field of Blue Children" in 1938 marked the point at which Williams began to use professionally the name "Tennessee," a nickname given to him in college. By 1940, Williams' first major play, *Battle of Angels*, was produced in Boston.⁵



2. The young Tennessee Williams

PRINCIPAL WORKS:

- Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* 1935
- Battle of Angels* 1940
- The Glass Menagerie* 1944
- A Streetcar Named Desire* 1947
- Summer and Smoke* 1947
- The Rose Tattoo* 1950
- Camino Real* 1953
- Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 1955
- Orpheus Descending* 1956
- Suddenly Last Summer* 1958
- Sweet Bird of Youth* 1959
- Period of Adjustment* 1960
- The Night of the Iguana* 1961
- The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* 1962
- The Two-Character Play* 1967
- Small Craft Warnings* 1972
- Something Cloudy, Something Clear* 1982

INSPIRATION

The biographical details of Tennessee Williams' characters - their mannerisms, their hopes and dreams - are often derived from the characteristics of his family members.⁶ In *Summer and Smoke*, Williams plays out the opposing psychologies of his mother and father.



3. Tennessee's Mother and Father, on vacation in the Ozarks

Like Alma, his mother, Edwina Estelle Dakin, was the daughter of a minister and lived in Mississippi in the early 1900's. She sang in the church choir and lived at the rectory. Like Alma, she tried to live up to the idealized image of the Southern belle; well mannered, well spoken, flirtatious and coy, but always protecting her chastity. Although she was a popular girl in her youth, Edwina didn't get married until she was in her 20's, an age that in those days was considered to be bordering on spinsterhood.

Tennessee's father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, was similar to John in that he was a typical Southern bad boy. As a traveling salesman he gambled, drank and indulged his physical desires. Like John, he lost his mother, Isabella Coffin, to tuberculosis when he was only five years old. The effect of this loss was to turn him off from his emotions and lead him to neglect the emotional needs of his wife and children.

Through the character of Mrs. Winemiller, Williams symbolically represents his sister Rose. As children he and Rose were profoundly effected by their father's drunkenness and frequent absence. Where Williams turned to writing to cope with his loneliness and rejection, Rose began to lose touch with her sanity.

Although the exterior circumstances of the characters may match those of his family, their psychology is closer to his own. Throughout his life he sought to replace the love he missed in his childhood but was continually frustrated in his search. In his attempts to stave off the loneliness that plagued him, he replaced his emotional need with physical desire, filling his life with drunkenness and promiscuity.



4. Rose outside the Catholic sanatorium in St. Louis

THEME

Throughout his work Tennessee Williams has returned again and again to the theme of loneliness and suppressed desire. There is no denying that *Summer and Smoke*, like many of Williams' plays, includes an undertone of sexuality, but this too is a symbol for Williams. The following passage clarifies the issue of sexuality in *Summer and Smoke*:

*So much of Williams' writing is characterized by the opposition of powerful forces or states of Being: Realism and magic; apprehension and hope; attraction and disgust. Williams has been almost as much denounced as celebrated for the intense and troubled sexuality of his writing. And it is true that the rush of sensual and sexual feelings, its very pulse, heat, and aroma pervade his work. But this is only half the story. Sexual desire, he tells us, is the opposite of death, it is the drive to "live, live, live." ... His eye and heart are fixed on Eternity, the symbolic angel that, as a statue, occupies stage center in *Summer and Smoke*; and Eternity, we know, has been the lodestar of many religious mystics and poets. ... Williams' spirit is in constant quest of harmony between the two motivations within the sexual instinct (physical desire and spiritual love.) More than any other of his plays, *Summer and Smoke* sets (the) conflict and reconciliation (of these two instincts) explicitly before us. Alma Winemiller, all delicacy and astral idealism, says to the young wastrel Dr. John Buchanan, "I think you're confused, just awfully, awfully confused, as confused as I am, but in a different way." Alma is confused because she thinks the soul bodiless; John because he thinks the body soulless.⁷*

POETRY

Tennessee Williams is known for his poetic writing. His plays are full of allegory - or symbolic messages - that express his vision of human nature. In his 1962 essay on the work of Tennessee Williams, J.L. Styan makes the following observations:

- *He speaks through his overheated settings, usually inspired by New Orleans and the South.*
- *Music of all kinds, from old gramophone records of the twenties, ...to the hot trumpet and the blue piano, almost any noise can as in the cinema subserve his characters' states of mind, sometimes with ironic accentuation. ... When the sounds are harsh they suggest external realities; when they are soft they identify a thought or gently echo an idea identified before, binding the play together.*
- *Color tones make an insistent contribution, like the sky in *Summer and Smoke*.*
- *Symbolic characters and properties assert themselves ... like the statue of Eternity in *Summer and Smoke*. ... The ramifications of meaning that Williams devises by such means seem inexhaustible.*
- *The weather of nineteenth century melodrama: heat, wind, thunder all the rage of heaven or of the diseased minds of his characters.*
- *These effects add up to an impressive hot-house theatre to accommodate those who people his world: mostly neurotic and lonely women, immoderately romantic, leaning hard on a Southern gentility which can no longer support them.⁸*

AUTHOR'S PRODUCTION NOTES

With the opening remarks of *Summer and Smoke*, Williams provides inspiration for the production designers:

As the concept of a design grows out of reading a play I will not do more than indicate what I think are the most essential points.

First of all - The Sky.

There must be a great expanse of sky so that the entire action of the play takes place against it. This is true of the interior as well as exterior scenes. But in fact there are no really interior scenes, for the walls are omitted or just barely suggested by certain necessary fragments such as might be needed to hang a picture or to contain a door frame.

During the day scenes the sky should be a pure and intense blue (like the sky of Italy as it is so faithfully represented in the religious paintings of the Renaissance) and costumes should be selected to form dramatic color contrasts to this intense blue which the figures stand against. (Color harmonies and other visual effects are tremendously important.)

In the night scenes, the more familiar constellations, such as Orion and the Great Bear and the Pleiades, are clearly projected on the night sky, and above them, splashed across the top of the cyclorama, is the nebulous radiance of the Milky Way. Fleecy cloud forms may also be projected on this cyclorama and made to drift across it.

So much for The Sky.

ACTIVITIES

1. As you watch the play consider the following questions:

- What did the set designer do to bring out the theme of Eternity?
- How did the costume designer bring out the opposing personalities of Alma and John through their style of clothing?
- How has the lighting designer helped to establish the mood of each scene?

2. As you listen to the language of the play, notice the following metaphors and consider how they help to bring out the themes of the play:

The Sky;
The angel of Eternity;
Alma is Spanish for soul;
Fireworks;
The Gulf wind;
A touch of malaria;
A hat with a plume;
A human anatomy chart;
A Gothic cathedral;
The stars;
A cock fight;
The fading of summer;
The winter wind.

3. After seeing the play, watch the newspapers for a review. As you read it consider whether you agree or disagree with the opinion expressed by the reviewer. Then write a letter to the cast telling them what you think. Send your letter to: The Cast of *Summer and Smoke*, c/o Education, Roundabout Theatre Company, 1530 Broadway, NY, NY 10036

http://www.roundabouttheatre.org
FAX (212) 869-8817
(212) 719-9393
New York, NY 10036
1530 Broadway



Notes:

1. Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation and Manhood in the rural South* (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 1.
2. Sarah M. Evens, "Myth Against History: The Case of Southern Womanhood," *Myth and Southern History* (University of Illinois Press, 1989), 150.
3. A. Scott, *The Southern Lady*, (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 13.
4. Ownby, 12.
5. Laurence J. Trudeau, *Drama Criticism, Vol. 4* (Detroit, Gale Research Inc., 1994), 369.
6. For more details, see Lyle Leverich, *TOM; The Unknown Tennessee Williams*, (NY, Crown Publishers, 1995.)

7. Harold Clurman, "Introduction," *Tennessee Williams, Eight Plays* (Garden City, Doubleday, 1979), ix.

8. Trudeau, 370.

Photograph Credits:

1. Hightower and Stanga, *Mississippi Observed* (Univ. Press of Miss., 1994.), 31.
2. Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (Doubleday, 1975), #18.
3. *Ibid.*, #18.
4. Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else Is An Audience*, (Yale University Press, 1993), 31.