

# Chekhov's influence on the work of tennessee williams

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The shape of American drama has been molded throughout the years by the advances of numerous craftsmen. Many contemporary playwrights herald the work of Anton Chekhov as some of the most influential to modern drama. Tennessee Williams has often been compared to Anton Chekhov. When asked about the influences in his life and work Tennessee Williams once said, "The Strongest influences in my life and my work are always whomever I love, Whomever I love and am with most of the time, or whomever I remember most vividly. I think that is true of everyone, don't you?" (Brainy Quote). Williams unquestionably found Chekhov's work to be memorable enough to incorporate some elements of Chekhov's style into his own plays. Through his innate sense of the human condition, Anton Chekhov served to influence the shaping of Tennessee Williams' characters in such plays as: *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The newness of Chekhov was his portrayal of daily life and its encompassing crisis. He illustrated how the average person suffers, their imperfections, without making excuses for the characters. Interestingly, he managed to capture the way that life is a mixture of emotions. In his plays something could be awfully tragic whilst at the same time being amusing. In life like in Chekhov's work a situation that is awful would be amusing because it was ironic or because it had to be to make it through the situation. Chekhov saw this and allowed his characters to be real in this way. Characters in Chekhov's work told the story without Chekhov imposing his voice on the audience. This allowed characterization rather than plot to carry the drama. In *The Cherry Orchard* the plot revolves around a woman and her family who are losing a cherry orchard that has been in the family for generations due to their lack

of funds. The main character, Ranevsky, is unable to move past the problems of her history and deal with the current crisis. The plot follows her character through a very real and sincere problem and manages to combine the misery of her problem with the natural humor and irony of life. Seeing as *The Glass Menagerie* is a play of memories it is fitting to compare the character of Ranevsky in *The Cherry Orchard* to the characters in Williams' play, in particular Amanda is a reminiscent character. *Streetcar Named Desire*, whilst not being a play that focuses on the memories of the characters is similar to *The Cherry Orchard* in plot because it also has to do with losing a family estate and includes the use of wit and irony in a play that seems almost tragic. There is a natural appeal to a writing style, such as Chekhov's where characters can be natural and still holds their entertainment appeal. "Williams himself acknowledged the influence of Chekhov [on his work] (...)" (Vannatta 79). Both playwrights share a similar attitude in regards to characterization, so much so that they face some of the same problems. There is a breach between the character's feelings and their ability to verbalize these emotions. This crack can threaten to become a void, which will leave the audience lost (Stein 10). The hopelessness and the mediocrity of the characters in Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* as well as the characters in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* can be summed up in this quote of Chekhov's on his plays, "Any idiot can face a crisis-its day to day living that wears you out." (Brainy Quote). In Williams' drama *The Glass Menagerie* the delivery of the actors is imperative. Realism is necessary in performance to avoid down-playing expressionist elements, much like the realism Chekhov needed from his actors to extract the essence of his meaning

(Borny 101-117). To create this sense of naturalism in his writing, Williams drew from his life to create his fiction. Chekhov used this same fuel to add to his integrity as a writer. Chekhov had experiences being a physician that put him in contact with a myriad of individuals and social classes (Rayfield Preface xv and p. 106). The duality of the characters in *The Glass Menagerie* is a depiction of how personalities are in real life. Humans feel and act one way in an instance and another way a second later. Williams like Chekhov is capturing how humans can balance different feelings and personality traits at any one time. People can juggle being forgiving and being angry, being hurt and laughing, being happy while crying. The beauty of the work of Chekhov and of Williams is that through their understanding of this fact they create depth to their characters that makes them more appealing to the audience. Another famous work of Williams', *A Streetcar Named Desire*, bears a great resemblance to the substructure of *The Cherry Orchard*. Sentimentality and symbolism in *Streetcar* are like Chekhov's work because the staged action moves toward the conclusion negating a circuitous plot line, dealing with social themes, and the main characters are relatable human beings with recognizable problems but they are all escapists. The characters are meant to tell the story without the imposing voice of a narrator. Naturalism of actions and words, down to the natural gaps in conversation, are stressed to portray scenes in a graspable manner. (Gassner 75-77). Music is a unifying theme in both plays; it is used to carry the characters into their own dream worlds. It is used to relay themes, for instance, in *Streetcar*, "The love of Stanley for Stella describes precisely this rhythm of violence and reconciliation, and it exists beyond Blanche's ken.

The jazz motif which alternates with polka music—in contrast to Blanche's affinity for the romantic waltz—establishes the primitive norm to which each character adapts or suffers a dissonant psychic shock." (Corrigan 84). The rhythm in each author's writing helps to propel the action. " The substructure of the story [Streetcar] has some resemblance to *The Cherry Orchard*, whose aristocrats were also unable to adjust to reality and were crushed by it." (Gassner 76). That sums up how the two plays are on parallel social bases and are born of Chekhov's perceived normal human forbearance. The presence of Anton Chekhov's influence in Tennessee Williams' work is widely recognized not just in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but he held Chekhov as one of his inspirational heroes and lent his own twist on Chekhov's style throughout many of his plays. There are similarities to be drawn to that of Anton Chekhov, between Williams' characters, political/social beliefs, substructure of the stories, and symbolism. Williams saw in Chekhov an ability to truly understand and portray human nature through his revolutionary drama and wanted to emulate that unique talent. Chekhov was a master at understanding the human condition; he emphasized the human ability to be flexible and feeling on a multitude of levels. Chekhov was one of the first to pull away from the highly dramatic monologue style of acting but Williams recognized the fact that making your characters realistic and easily relatable would never be out of style. Works Cited

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