

Study on the Ethical Dilemma of the “Marginal People” in Tennessee Williams’ Plays

Liu Maosheng^{1,*}, Luo Keman²

¹Faculty of English Language and Culture, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, China

²Foreign Languages Collage, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang, China

Email address:

liumaosheng2004@126.com (Liu Maosheng), 729195124@qq.com (Luo Keman)

*Corresponding author

To cite this article:

Liu Maosheng, Luo Keman. Study on the Ethical Dilemma of the “Marginal People” in Tennessee Williams’ Plays. *Humanities and Social Sciences*. Vol. 8, No. 5, 2020, pp. 163-169. doi: 10.11648/j.hss.20200805.15

Received: July 20, 2020; **Accepted:** August 3, 2020; **Published:** August 13, 2020

Abstract: Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is an important playwright in the post-war American theatre. He wrote at least 70 plays in his life, totally winning him four New York Drama Critics Circle Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes and other various theatre awards. Unlike the great realist playwrights such as Eugene O’Neill and Arthur Miller who mainly focus on the tragedies of ordinary people, Williams turned his attention to “marginal people” who live solitarily and vulnerably in the dark corners of society, forgotten and even abandoned mercilessly by us. Taking them as eternal protagonists in his plays, Williams tells the tragic life of these neglected groups. In the light of Ethical Literary Criticism, this paper mainly analyzes the “marginal people” in Tennessee Williams’ the three most representative plays, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, from three aspects: the complicated ethical environments, the ethical identity crises, and the destructive ethical choices of the “marginal people”, the purpose of which is to reveal the root causes of the tragic life of the “marginal people” and Williams’ great ethical concern as a playwright. Williams hopes that we can be kind and tolerant to our compatriots, giving understanding and love to the absurd world and the meaning of life, so that the “marginal people” can be completely saved. At the same time, he also warns that those who are experiencing the marginalized experience cannot give up their own salvation——facing positively and re-embracing the world is the most correct choice.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, “Marginal People”, Plays, Ethical Environment, Ethical Identity, Ethical Choice

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), an important playwright in the post-war American theatre, is considered to be one of the most outstanding playwrights in the history of American drama after Eugene O’Neil. Williams is an industrious and prolific playwright whose writing career spanned nearly half a century, from 1930s-1980s, during which he created at least 70 plays, such as *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), which not only won him various theatre awards, but also firmly established his position in American theatre. As Matthew C. Roudané noted: “Tennessee Williams animated the middle years of the century. In the real sense, then, Tennessee Williams inhabits a central place within American theatre” [1].

The “marginal people” are the kind of typical characters in Williams’ plays. As a newly developed critical method, Ethical Literary Criticism provides a new perspective to interpret these characters. According to this theory, the development of characters is inseparable from social ethics and their fates are closely related to their ethical environment, ethical identity and ethical choice. Therefore, this paper tries to use Ethical Literary Criticism as a supplement to analyze the ethical issues concerning the “marginal people”, finding out the root of their final tragic life from their ethical environment, ethical identity and ethical choice. Williams provides a good chance for us to better understand the “marginal people” in his plays, which shows his ethical concern for the world.

2. Literature Review

The studies of Tennessee Williams and his plays have gained extensive attention both at home and abroad due to the important role Williams played in the history of modern American drama.

The studies abroad began in the second half of the twentieth century. It can be generally classified into four parts. Firstly, some scholars pay attention to Williams' biographical research. The most representative is Donald Spoto's *The Kindness of Strangers: the Life of Tennessee Williams* (1985), which is considered to be one of the most complete and detailed biographies of Williams to date. The biographer records the traces of Williams in a chronicle method, and gives a comprehensive account of the journey of Williams' thoughts through the various stages of his drama creation. Secondly, some scholars focus on the studies of characters in Williams' plays. For example, in *Tennessee Williams* (1978), Signi Falk classifies the characters into southern aristocrats, sluts, desperate heroes and fallen artists, which exert a great influence on the later studies. Thirdly, some scholars try to analyze the themes in Williams plays, especially the theme of homosexuality. The most representative is *Communists Cowboys and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992), in which David Savran, both from political and homosexual perspectives, reveals that the ultimate aim of Williams' subversion of traditional male and female identity is to break down the male power in American society. Fourthly, some scholars are devoted to the textual research of Williams' plays. For example, in *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (1965), Ester Merle Jackson points out that in the process of exploration and practice, Williams presented the complete poetic style and "plastic drama" on the stage of American drama.

The studies at home started comparatively late. It can also be generally classified into four parts. Firstly, domestic researchers make excellent contribution to the study of characters. For example, in Zhang Ying's master thesis "Phantoms of the Drama—On the Absent Gay Images in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams" (2007), she points out that Williams' gay images are coded and "the 'absence' of gay man is intended to highlight their significance, which is actually potent protest against the hegemonic patriarchal discourse" [2]. Secondly, some scholars focus on the theme of Williams' plays. The most representative is Tong Chengchuan's master thesis "A Study of the Theme of Salvation in Tennessee Williams' plays" (2018). Through analysis, he comes to a conclusion that the theme of "salvation" is not only a response to the spiritual crisis of Williams' gay identity, but also to the transitional period from McCarthyism to the cultural movement in the 1960s. Thirdly, some scholars analyze the characteristics of Williams' drama creations. The most representative in recent years is Gao Xianhua's article "Disease Writing in Tennessee Williams' Dramas" (2019). She believes that disease becomes the background of Williams' plays, which promotes the

development of plot and affects the character's actions in the play. Williams released his suppressed emotion through "disease writing" and used the disease metaphor to criticize the crazy totalitarian politics in the United States. Fourthly, some scholars analyze the artistic expressions in Williams' plays. For example, Chen Aimin in his article "Incongruous Urban Landscape: On the Space Construction of *A Street Car Named Desire*" (2019) points out that through taking advantage of theatrical space, the play constructs the vivid landscapes, showing the living conditions of homosexuals, immigrants and other marginalized groups, which make the audience think more about the social problems, such as the conflicts between the local people and immigrants.

From the above analysis, it can be seen that the researches on Williams and his plays both at home and abroad have made great achievements. While in terms of the study of the characters in Williams' plays, the researches on the typical characters—"marginal people" appearing in all Williams' plays is clearly inadequate. Therefore, it is a useful attempt to make a relative systematic analysis of the "marginal people" in Williams' plays by using Ethical Literary Criticism. This paper mainly explores the ethical dilemma and the root causes of the final tragedy of these "marginal people".

3. Complicated Ethical Environments of the "Marginal People"

The "marginal people" are the typical characters in Williams' plays, which include three types: southern belles, homosexuals and the disabled.

"Ethical Literary Criticism holds that literary criticism should go back to historical site and interpret literature in special ethical situation" [3]. Therefore, this paper will combine the ethical environment of the time to analyze the reasons why these three types of "marginal people" are on the edge of society in Williams' three plays: *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

3.1. The Transitional Period of American Society

Williams has long been known for his portrayal of women in American theatre. In his voluminous works, the female image occupies a considerable proportion. Williams once said in an interview: "I understand women, and I can write about women. It's true my heroine often speak for me." [4] The educated and cultured women in Williams' plays are the best spokesmen for the old southern myths of the United States, but they are often distorted, lonely, depraved, and indulged in the past. Roger Boxill, a famous American critic, called them "southern bells" [5].

Before the outbreak of the Civil War, southern bells lived in the plantation of the South, enjoying a comfort, luxury, and extravagant life. They did not have to work hard to maintain their livelihood. By 1961, the Civil War broke out. Compared with the plantation economy of the South, the capitalist industrial economy of the North was the representative of advanced productive force. It is inevitable that the backward

southern social system will be replaced by the North. With the threat of northern capitalist industry and the decline of plantations, more and more southerners had to leave their home and come to the North to make a living. The southern belles were no exceptions.

Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* came to St. Louis, an industrialized city in the North of the United States, living in a vast hive-like conglomeration of cellular living-unit where the middle and lower classes lived after the bankruptcy of the plantation in Blue Mountain. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* lost her plantation in Belle Reve and came to her sister for shelter who lived in New Orleans, an industrialized northern city of the United States mixed with multi-ethnicity. However, the two southern belles have not fully adapted to the northern culture. They cannot forget the wonderful life in the South and cannot get rid of the long-awaited southern culture. They still hold themselves to the standard of a lady. Every day Amanda recalled the days when she had been sought after and welcomed by many gentlemen in the South.

Southern belles are still so beautiful, elegant and noble. However, with the transformation of American society, everyone was involved into the industry. Men like Stanley, Mickey, and Steve in *A Streetcar Named Desire* were all worked in a spare parts factory. Unlike those romantic and chivalrous southern gentlemen who have a lot of spare time to appreciate and please these southern belles, they have no time to think about this due to the boring assembly-line work every day. Meanwhile, these southern belles have not realized that the old southern culture that they were obsessed with has deviated greatly from the mainstream of the northern culture. They were unconsciously left behind in the social transformation. They failed to integrate into the northern culture and could not return to the original southern culture, thus being in a dilemma between the two cultures.

3.2. The Homophobic Society

In addition to shaping the noble, elegant, but marginalized southern belles, there are some handsome boys who have lost their masculinity hidden in Williams’ plays. With good look and elegant temperament, these boys are usually poets or artists, but they also have another unspeakable identity——homosexual.

Historically, American traditional concept based on Puritanism has always discriminated against and suppressed homosexuality. Most people adhered to the Puritan tradition. They opposed any free thoughts, and suppressed any sexual liberation that was “devious from the apostasy”. By the 1930s and 1940s, just when Williams began to emerge in American theatre, the homophobia in American society intensified. As a result, all homosexuals had to be in a very embarrassing situation. In 1943, the Hollywood published ordinances to “expressly prohibit the representation of homosexuality in movies” [6]. Broadway conducted a rigorous review of all scripts to clear out all dramas with homosexual themes, which made Williams only secretly and implicitly wrote his homosexuals into his drama, so that many scholars believed that Williams has never written a work on homosexuality. But in an

interview, he clearly expressed that “homosexuality is an important source of his creation inspiration” [7]. By 1950s, the homophobia reached its peak in American society. The McCarthy government persecuted homosexuals “in hysteria” in order to “establish the masculinity of the imperialist country” and “maintain the patriarchal interests by the way of heterosexuality” [8]. They sent police to search the place where homosexuals often haunted and monitored their private lives. A large number of homosexuals cannot stand such persecution, so they chose to commit suicide or hid in the dark to avoid exposing their homosexual identity.

In such a homophobic society, homosexuals in Williams’ plays never present themselves in a positive and real image in front of the audiences. Allan in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, both of whom died before the play began, never appeared on the stage. Everything we know about them is from other characters. And every time when they are mentioned, the speakers always narrate obscurely, or are interrupted suddenly. Another gay Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, unlike the above two gays who have never appeared on the stage, is actually present in every scene of the play, but he gives us the impression that he was always trying to stay away from the crowd, and everything that happened around him seemed to have nothing to do with him. He was well aware of the society’s hatred and persecution of homosexuals. Therefore, he attempted to hide behind a veneer of hypocrisy to prove that he was in line with the main groups, but once he faced his true heart, his fear, guilt and nervousness were exposed. He is always a lonely homosexual who is not accepted by the mainstream society.

In the homophobic society, homosexuality was an unspeakable secret and a social taboo. Homosexuals were isolated, hated and even persecuted by that society. According to Williams, “I think that society has imposed upon homosexual is a feeling of guilty that makes them somewhat neurotic, that makes all of us somewhat neurotic [9]. There is nothing wrong with homosexuals. It is the homophobic society at the time that lead the homosexuals become the “marginal people” and victims of society.

3.3. The Money-Oriented Society

The third type of “marginal people” in Williams’ plays is some disabled people who with physical and mental disabilities are unable to fully and effectively participate in society on an equal basis with others. They are always considered to be a vulnerable group in society.

Due to the impact of the industrial civilization of the North on the South, the self-sufficient plantation life in the South gradually disappeared. Everyone was involved into industrial production and made money day and night. The Wingfield family in *The Glass Menagerie* was forced to leave the South and moved to an industrial city in the North. The daughter Laura and the son Tom did not join the trend of earning money like other young people, so they lived a very poor life.

The reason is that the daughter Laura is physically defective. The maladies in her infancy made her a cripple, which had brought more or less inconveniences to her life. Moreover, the

physical disability had brought her extreme shyness and inferiority. At school, she did not dare to pass in front of her classmates because she was a cripple. After dropping out of school, she stayed at home, playing her glass animals all day, and did not go out to earn money.

If the inability of the daughter Laura to participate in society as a normal person is due to her physical defect, it seems that the son Tom is physically healthy and has no difference with normal people. However, through close observation, it can be seen that Tom has a serious mental disease. Some scholars have analyzed Tom's eccentric behaviors and ideas, which is oblique hints of the homosexual identity, believing "it is not metaphorical or abstract. Tom is gay." [10] But this article believes that he is more than ~~like~~ a mentally handicapped person. His father left him when he was six years old. The absence of the father makes Tom lack of paternal love and sense of security. The lack of sense of security and the great pressure are enough to make him break down. Besides, he did not work as hard as other young people and try to earn more money. He only wanted to be a poet, so he wrote poems all day in the factory. There is a poem: "Shakespeare said that poets and madmen do not belong to the mortal world. The poet lives in seclusion next door to the madmen, but the madmen come into the poet's garden" [11]. We cannot assert whether Tom is a poet or lunatic, but we can certainly know that he is not fit for this secular society.

The relationship between people was alienated in the money-oriented society. People only cared about money, and no one would pay attention to the disabled. At the end of the play, Tom says to Laura: "for nowadays the word is lit by lightning! Blow out your candles, Laura - and so goodbye...!" [12]. The disabled were incompatible in this money-oriented society, and here no one will give them a little care and love.

4. Ethical Identity Crises of the "Marginal People"

"All ethical issues are often associated with ethical identity." [3] The three kinds of "marginal people" all encounter their ethical identity crises brought about by the social environment separately. With the change of society, Southern belles encounter the change of ethical identity; Due to the unacceptability of the homophobic society, homosexuals encounter the confusion of ethical identity; Due to the inadaptability of the money-oriented society, the disabled encounter the collapse of ethical identity. The ethical identity crisis brought about by the social environment is part of the causes for their tragic life.

4.1. The Change of Ethical Identity

The existence of human beings cannot be separated from their ethical identity. The ethical identity is restricted by the objective ethical environment and moral norms. Its objectivity lies in the fact that changes in the ethical environment will lead to corresponding changes in the ethical identity.

The southern bells in Williams' plays were living in the

transitional period of American society in which the backward southern social system was being gradually replaced by the advanced northern social system. In the plantation of the South, southern belles were once noble ladies, dressed exquisitely and pursued by many gentlemen. As southern belles, both Amanda and Blanche were undoubtedly of noble birth, and were taught to be elegant and graceful since they were brought up in the southern plantation and meant to be noble ladies. In the genteel southern society and plantation, their flamboyant dressing and graceful interactions with gentlemen were normal behaviors of a noble lady.

However, with the transformation of society, the manners of a noble lady were not accepted in the industrial society of the North. They were no longer popular with men as they were in the South so that they were particularly enthusiastic and even took the initiative in seducing the men who appeared occasionally around. It is hard to imagine that Amanda, an "old woman" who has been over forty years old tarted herself up, like a little girl in her early twenties, seeking a husband for her daughter Laura. This kind of dressing does not accord with Amanda's age and identity apparently, instead it is especially frivolous. In the past, the southern belles should be elegant, noble, and dignified, but now the southern belle is more like a despised prostitute, wantonly playing with the charming gesture and deliberately exposing the girlish shyness to attract men.

For Blanche, we are more puzzled about her identity: a noble lady or a prostitute. Obviously, we all know that she was nobly born, and her manners and knowledge show that she is a well-educated lady. But the further the story goes, the more we find that her behavior is the same as that of a prostitute. Ever since she lost her southern plantation and her husband, she has had improper relationships with many men in the town of Laurel and even hooked up with a 17-year-old boy at school. After driven out of the town as "an unclean woman" and "poison", Blanche went to her sister's house where she seemed to deliberately seduce Stanley, her brother-in-law. And Blanche's seduction of her brother-in-law violates the ethical taboo, which leaves the clue for her final tragic life.

In such an environment, the two southern belles became despised prostitutes in people's eyes. It is even more tragic that they do not realize that their identity has changed. They still think of themselves as noble ladies, and use the old southern tradition to standardize their behaviors. However, their "elegant and noble" behaviors in other people's eyes become a kind of deception, "lies, lies, inside and out, all lies" [13]. In the end, Jim and Mitch who had been seduced by Amanda and Blanche all rushed off.

4.2. The Confusion of Ethical Identity

The ethical identity of homosexuals is a focus worthy of study. "The identity of a person is a sign of a person's existence in the society, and a person needs to shoulder the responsibility and obligation entrusted by the identity" [14]. The three homosexuals in Williams' plays, Allan, Skipper and Brick, never stop asking "who I am", which shows their desire for self-cognition.

In the ethical environment of homophobic society, homosexuals, as the marginal group, were not accepted or even persecuted by the entire mainstream. They can only hide themselves, so their understanding of self-identity is becoming increasingly blurred. Because of this, they are often confused about their ethical identity.

There are many categories of ethical identity, and one person can have several ethical identities at the same time. What most confuses homosexuals is their gender identity. Men or women have different responsibilities and obligations in society. In the case of homosexuals, what defines their gender identity? Are they men? It is not only their own confusion, but also a human issue that has been deeply discussed.

Heterosexual hegemony holds that: “the expression of sexual desire is determined by gender identity, and gender identity is determined by biological gender” [15]. The homophobic society in the era of Williams followed a predominant heterosexual tradition. According to the above statement, a person’s biological gender determines his gender identity and heterosexual desire. The gender identity of the homosexuals in Williams’ plays, based on their biological gender, is also male, so they should have a desire for the opposite sex. However, this is not the case. The biological gender of the three homosexuals in the plays is male, but they have a special desire for the same sex, and show no interest in the opposite sex, which seems to contradict the above argument. Therefore, biological gender cannot determine gender identity at all. The issue of “am I a man?” has been plaguing the homosexuals in the plays.

“Wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate-looking” [13]. He is neither like a man nor a woman, which reflects the uncertainty of the gender identity of homosexuals. None of the three homosexuals in the plays showed any masculinity, nor did they show any femininity.

Ultimately, the special sexual desire of homosexuals was intertwined with the traditional sexual concept in the homophobic society at that time, and they were constantly colliding with each other, which make homosexuals feel so confused about their gender identity, and in turn hurt those who love themselves and even violate ethical taboos.

4.3. The Collapse of Ethical Identity

From the perspective of constructing a complete identity, people certainly expect a series of complete ethical relationships, such as “human-nature relationship, human-society relationship and human-other relationship” [14]. The ethical identity of the disabled, the third type of “marginal people” in Williams’ plays, gradually collapsed as their relationship with society and others collapsed.

In the money-oriented society, it is difficult for the disabled, who lack competitiveness in the plays, to adapt to the society. As a result, they gradually become disconnected from the whole society.

Laura stayed at home almost all day amusing herself with the glass menagerie. Even if she went out, she did not go to places where there were many people. She often went to the

art museum, the bird houses at the Zoo and the glass house where the tropical flowers were raised. Compared to society, she prefers to be in contact with nature. The money-oriented society is unfriendly and even repulsive to a disabled person while nature is infinitely acceptable to anyone. In addition to going to work in the warehouse, the only place that Tom likes to stay in is the cinema. He always “went to the movies at nearly midnight” [12]. At that time, there was no one in the cinema. Tom can stay alone, and didn’t need to communicate with anyone and think about the various burden and trifles brought by the life. The most anticipated thing for him is to take a risk like his father. In fact, it is an act of escaping from the society, which means no more responsibility and obligation need to be performed as a social man. Tom cannot adapt to the money-oriented society. To escape is to cut off all relationships with the society. The society is also pitiless, and does not offer kindly assistance to these poor people. Since you cannot adapt to the society, the only result is to be abandoned ruthlessly. From then on, there is no trace of Laura and Tom that can be found in the society.

5. Destructive Ethical Choices of the “Marginal People”

“As long as there are characters in literary works, they will inevitably face the problem of ethical choice.” [3] Based on the analysis mentioned above and from the ethical environment and the crisis of ethical identity, we can see the existence predicament of the “marginal people”, which is the main reason for their tragic life. It is said: “ethical choices are often associated with addressing ethical dilemmas” [3]. However, the ethical choices made by the “marginal people” didn’t solve their dilemmas, but directly caused their imprisonment, madness, death and so on. The ethical choices they made in the end are the fundamental determinants to lead to their final tragic life.

5.1. The Choice of Indulging in the Past

Jeanne Meaglin, a famous American feminist scholar, said: “when a woman faces setbacks, she has only two choices, either facing reality or retreating into fantasy” [16]. The same goes for southern belles. In the face of the dilemma brought about by the change of ethical identity, southern belles have two choices, either actively adopting to the new ethical identity or staying in the past ethical identity. If they choose the former, they need to abandon the original southern civilization and accept the northern civilization. And if they choose the latter, they can retain the original southern civilization but will not survive in the new society. Finally, southern belles choose to stay in the past.

The reality is cruel, and the past is glorious. The southern belles Amanda and Blanche chose to indulge in the past. “Different choices lead to different results.” [3] However, this choice did not bring a great result to the southern belles. The glory of the past was an illusion and destined to be broken. Both southern belles would eventually face a tragic life.

Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* was forever confined in the small and dark rented apartment. The apartment is the “fortress” in which she indulged in the past, and is also the “prison” that eventually imprisoned her. In such a small and rambling apartment, Amanda indulges in the golden past all day, often talking to her children about her youth in the Blue Mountain. At the end of the play, the male guest Jim left, and so did her son Tom. Only Amanda and her daughter Laura were left in the small apartment. They had no ability to earn money, so they cannot afford to the electricity bills. Therefore, the small apartment will face eternal darkness one day, and Amanda didn’t have anywhere to go but to continue to indulge in her past in this dark apartment.

Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* also chose to indulge in the past. She was unwilling to accept the life in the North, which push her step by step to madness. Bathing was a way for her to sink into the past. In the heat of the air, Blanche seemed to return to the phantasmic past from the cruel reality. Just as his wife went to the hospital to give birth, Stanley raped Blanche and sent her to the mental hospital. As a rude and barbaric northern man, Stanley revealed Blanche’s ulterior secrets and raped her, so he was responsible for Blanche’s final destruction to a certain extent. And at the same time, it is also Blanche’s indulgence to the past that ultimately leads her to destruction. If she could choose to let go of the past just as her sister did, she would have a new and better life, rather than being driven mad by the reality of rejecting the culture and customs of the past. In the end of the play, Blanche who is in a state of madness held the hands of the doctor, and walked gracefully out of Stanley’s house. We can imagine that the life in the mental hospital must be miserable. Blanche will not only be deprived of personal freedom, but also subjected to inhuman and cruel treatments. However, this ending was also doomed. Blanche who chose to indulge in the past and did not accept that the present “couldn’t stay here; there wasn’t no other place for her to go” [13].

5.2. The Choice of Escaping from Reality

“Ethical choice includes two aspects. One is human’s moral choice, that is, to achieve moral maturity and perfection through choice; the second is the choice of two or more moral options. Different choices lead to different results, and different choices have different ethical values.” [3]. In the face of the dilemma brought about by the confusion of ethical identity, homosexuals can choose to bravely seek for their own legitimate ethical identity or escape from reality with an uncertain identity. If choosing the former way of life, homosexuals will go through various difficulties and obstacles, but one day their homosexual identity will be legal, and they will live in the world aboveboard; if choosing to escape from reality, homosexuals can get a temporary safety and a comfortable life, but they will live in the dark forever, suffering the torments from their inner world. In Williams’ plays, homosexuals choose to escape from reality.

“Mendacity is a system that we live in. Liquor is one way out an’ death’s the other...” [17].

There are many ways to escape from reality. Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* chose to numb himself with alcohol so that

everything happened in reality had nothing to do with him. The word “liquor” appears at least hundred times throughout the play. Brick was either drinking with a glass of liquor or looking for a drink. As a young man, Brick was addicted to alcohol, living like a walking dead. He no longer thought about whether what he said or did would bring harms to others. His soul and mind were already gone, leaving only an empty body. Brick was not really alive.

The remaining two homosexuals, Allan in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* chose a more extreme way—committing suicide to escape from reality. From the moment the gun went off, Allan could finally escape the cruelty of the real world forever. After being ruthlessly rejected by Brick, Skipper also chose death to completely escape from the cruel reality. The two young men chose this way to end their lives, which was caused by the cruelty of the real society as well as their own weakness. If they had chosen to face up to the reality and fight against the society, would they have a happy ending like Jack Straw and Peter Ochello? Williams gives the example of Jack Straw and Peter Ochello to illustrate that homosexuals have the chance to live aboveboard and happily in the world if they choose another way. However, the present tragic ending makes everyone feel sad for them.

5.3. The Choice of Eluding into the Fantasy World

In the face of the dilemma brought about by the collapse of ethical identity, the disabled can choose to return to society and family to reconstruct their ethical identity or elude into their fantasy world. The former means that they have to overcome their fears and discomforts, but they will be able to integrate into the mainstream society and have a happy and warm family; The later means that they can no longer have secular troubles and fetters, but they will never integrate into the mainstream society and will live alone. The disabled in Williams’ plays choose to elude into the fantasy world.

Laura in *The Glass Menagerie* chose to hide in the Glass Menagerie, which is her favorite glass collection. And as the title of the play, it appears nine times throughout the play. The glass menagerie was a house of animal dolls on the surface, but in fact it became Laura’s fantasy world. Laura chose to imagine herself as a glass animal and elude into the fantasy world. Glass is fragile, which implies that the fantasy world Laura lived in is also fragile. Laura was left alone in her fantasy world. She no longer went out, and no one can come in.

Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* chose to leave to the distance of poetry. Like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, Tom has been stuck in the dilemma of leaving or not leaving. Tom was born with a romantic heart. He liked to write poems, so he wanted to leave his working place and his home, and go away like his father. However, as the only male in the family, his mother and sister needed him to stay at home to make ends meet. But no matter how much his mother and sister needed him, he finally made a desperate choice without hesitation. He chose to leave this home to the distance of poetry for pursuing his inner self. However, when he went to the distance of poetry, can he live

the life he wanted? Can he find his inner self? Obviously, the answer is no. Moreover, the distance of poetry did not really exist, and Tom will not find the true self and realize his life value here. Most of the young people can find the true self and achieve life value only by working diligently in the real world. Expect for the real world, all other worlds are imagined for those who want to escape from the real world. Tom left home and went to the unreal place. In the rest of his life, Tom will live worthlessly in the fantasy world with infinite remorse and guilty for his families.

The glass menagerie and the distance of poetry are all their fantasy world, which seems to be wonderful in that they can find a solace here, but actually it is fictional and fragile. Those who hide in the fantasy world will be completely isolated from the real society.

6. Conclusion

Indifferent, traditional and materialistic ethical environment make these “marginal people” face ethical identity crises. The society not only does not give them understanding and care, but also abandon them mercilessly. When the “marginal people” face crises and dilemmas, they have chosen not to face crises actively and improve their living situation diligently, but have chosen to dwell on the past, escape from reality, and elude into the fantasy world. Both social and personal factors result in the “marginal people” lost in society and themselves, and ultimately lead to their tragic life. However, when we are immersed in the tragic life of these “marginal people”, we should think that the “marginal people” in Williams’ plays are the true portrayal of some people in today’s real society, who are also lonely and vulnerable in the dark corners of society, forgotten and even abandoned by us. Williams was paying attention to these “marginal people” all his life and wrote them into his plays, looking for light for them. Like Blanche said at the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: “I always rely on the kindness of strangers” [13], which how helplessly and strongly expressed Tennessee Williams’ desire for a new and humane ethic—being kind and tolerant to our compatriots, giving understanding and love to the absurd world and the meaning of life so that the marginal people or the disadvantaged groups can be completely saved. At the same time, through the tragic stories of the “marginal people” in his plays, he also wants to warn that those who have the marginalized experience should not give up their own salvation—facing positively and re-embracing the world is the most correct choice. These may be the purposes of the “marginal people” always written in Williams’ plays.

Tennessee Williams portrays the sufferings and lives of various “marginal people” in his plays. As he said: “for love I make characters in plays” [18]. It is out of love that his plays can exist forever, and his characters can live endlessly.

References

- [1] Matthew C. Roudané. *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- [2] Zhang Ying. *Phantoms of the Drama—On the Absent Gay Images in the Major Plays of Tennessee Williams* [D]. Shandong Normal University, 2007.
- [3] Nie Zhenzhao. *Introduction to Ethical Literary Criticism* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2014.
- [4] Stanton Stephen S. *Tennessee Williams: A Collection of Critical Essays* [M]. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977.
- [5] Boxill Rogel. *Tennessee Williams* [M]. London: Macmillan Publisher Ltd., 1987.
- [6] Savran, David. *By Coming Suddenly into a Room that I Thought was Empty: Mapping the Closet with Tennessee Williams* [J]. *Studies in the literary Imagination*, 1991 (2).
- [7] Devlin Albert. *The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams: 1945-1957* [M]. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2004.
- [8] Madison Stephen. *Fags, Hags and Queers Gender Dissent and Hetero-social Bonds in Gay Culture* [M]. Basing-stoke, Hampshire: Macmillan Press Ltd, 2000.
- [9] Devlin Albert. J. (ed.). *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* [M]. London: University Press of Mississippi, 1986.
- [10] Paller Michael. *Gentlemen Callers: Tennessee Williams, Homosexuality, and Mid-Twentieth-Century Drama* [M]. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.
- [11] Yu Guangzhong. *Intensive Reading Poetry of Yu Guangzhong* [M]. Hangzhou: Zhejiang People’s Publishing House, 2017.
- [12] Williams Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie* [M]. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1999.
- [13] Williams Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire* [M]. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2004.
- [14] Nie Zhenzhao. *Ethical Literary Criticism: A New Approach to Literary Criticism* [J]. *Foreign Literature Studies*, 2004 (5).
- [15] Li Yinhe. *Aspects of Queer Theory* [J]. *Social Science Abroad*, 2002 (2).
- [16] Jeanne Meaglin. *Tennessee Williams: Illusion and Reality, Sexuality and Love* [M]. London: University Press of Mississippi, 1977.
- [17] Williams Tennessee. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [M]. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2004.
- [18] Williams, Tennessee. *Collected Stories* [M]. New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 1985.