

#### IV. HUMAN TRAGEDY IN SUMMER AND SMOKE

##### 1. The tragedy of Alma Winemiller

Alma is a preacher's daughter who lives across John's house. She and John, the son of doctor Buchanan, become close friends and often play at the fountain near their houses.

Poor Alma has to manage the household since her peevish mother has a mental breakdown when she was in high school.

She tells about her mother to John and says :

She had her breakdown while I was still in high school. And from that time on I have had to manage the Rectory and take over the social and household duties that would ordinarily belong to a minister's wife, not his daughter. And that may have made me seem strange to some of my more critical contemporaries. In a way it may have-deprived me of-my youth ....<sup>21</sup>

It is not surprising if Alma is different from the other girls because she has a certain cross to bear; what's more she does not have a boy friend although she is already 25 years old. Her mother's childish passion for fancy hats and ice cream contrasts to Alma's adult quality as a child.

When Alma grows up, she becomes a concert singer. Once, she has her nervous attacks after she has finished singing. Since she sings very well, her father does not notice it. Only then she becomes panic. Her heart beats so hard that she feels the hurt in her throat.

Actually, Alma has fallen in love with John since they were children. One summer day, John promises Alma to go for a ride. She thinks that John loves her. Later on, she comes to know that John is a playboy. One of his girl friends is Rosa Gonzales who

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<sup>21</sup> John Gassner, Best American Plays, Summer and Smoke, Crown Publishers, 1952, p. 675

is the daughter of the gambling casino owner.

Alma always peeps John through her window. Once, when she telephones him, her mother mocks her and imitates what she says. She cannot stand her spoiled mother so she warns her mother like a little child. Her mother does not realize that she is the source of Alma's tragedy. Alma spends too much time at home so that she has no time to go steady. She feels very lonely. Therefore she tries to make her mother aware of the situation. She explains her mother in the following quotation :

... You act like a child, but you have the devil in you .... Yes, I'm tired of your malice and your self-indulgence. People wonder why I'm tied down here! They pity me - think of me as an old maid already! In spite of I'm young. Still young! It's you - it's you, you've taken my youth away from me .....<sup>22</sup>

Since Alma is a lady more at home, she is accused of being proud and affectation. Her limited acquaintance makes her love John very much. Therefore, when she hears that John is planning to have a party with Rosa, she becomes jealous. She informs doctor Buchanan who is in the fever clinic at Lyon, He chases away Dr. Gonzales who always carries a gun wherever he goes. John knows that Alma causes his father's death so he gets angry.

Alma : I phoned him at the fever clinic in Lyon as soon as I learned what you were planning to do. I wired him to come here and stops it.

John : You brought him here to be shot.

Alma : You can't put the blame on anything but your weakness. <sup>23</sup>

Alma does not realize that she causes John's father's death. Her intention to call doctor Buchanan is to prevent John's complete involvement with Rosa.

They continue their argument about each other's weaknesses.

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., p. 679

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 691

John defends his aphasia upon the physical side of life by explaining about the anatomy.

Now listen to the anatomy lecture! This upper story's the brain which is hungry for something called truth and doesn't get much but keeps on feeling hungry! This middle's the belly which is hungry for food. This part down here is the sex which is hungry for love because it is sometimes lonesome. I've fed all three, as much of all three as I could or as much as I wanted- you've fed none- nothing.<sup>24</sup>

After John has finished lecturing her, he lets her go, as if he would not need her anymore.

Only then when John tells her that he cannot make love to her does she realize what his feeling for her has been. She is very disappointed so that she becomes ill. But she refuses to go to the doctor. After all she also stops singing. When she receives a Christmas card from John and Nelli, she realizes that John is Nelli's boy friend. While Nelli is one of Alma's pupil singers. She feels more hurt when she sees Nelli's ring. She expresses her feeling in the following quotation.:

Oh, what a lovely, lovely solitaire ! But solitaire is such a wrong name for it. Solitaire means single and this means two! It's blinding, Nelli! Why it ... hurts my eyes!<sup>25</sup>

At last, not knowing what to do anymore, Alma goes with a stranger whom she meets at the fountain. She needs someone to accompany her, since she is lonely and broken-hearted.

## 2. John as a contrast to Alma

John is described as a person whose habit is drinking. He has no mother to take care of him, that's why Alma always treats him as a child. John does not like her ever since they were children.

Amused and bored by Alma's tentative approaches, he prefers

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 692

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 699

Rosa who leads a sordid life. According to Alma, John gives himself to Rosa as a result of his loss at the casino.

John cannot take Alma as his fiancée because he cannot understand her. He is afraid of her soul. As we see in the following quotation :

...I'm more afraid of your soul than you're afraid of my body. You'd have been as safe as the angel of the fountain- because I wouldn't feel decent enough to touch you....<sup>26</sup>

John's confession causes Alma's broken hearted. His hatred grows greater when he knows that Alma causes his father's death.

In the beginning John refuses to study medicine. After the death of his father, he continues his father's research problem.

"Alma and John exchange character positions; she becomes the advocate of the physical life; he, of the spiritual."<sup>27</sup>

Finally, he gives Nelli an engagement ring as a Christmas present and leaves the frustrated Alma with a stranger.

### 3. Symbolism

Williams describes a stone angel with wings lifted and hands cupped as for a drinking fountain and an anatomy chart in the doctor's office as the outward symbols of an inner conflict between soul and body, spirit and flesh. These symbols are represented by the minister's daughter, Alma and the virile, John.

The name "Alma" means soul, while "John" symbolizes the flesh. John who marries Nelli is kept distance from Alma who has her first bodice adventure and has rejected the purity and refinement. She keeps separate from John, flesh being stronger than the spirit. It symbolizes her preference to the physical life and John to the spiritual one.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 692

<sup>27</sup> Signi Lenea, Falk, Tennessee Williams, p. 92