

A Study of the Domineering Mother in Tennessee Williams' *Suddenly Last Summer*

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Abstract:

In the middle plays of Tennessee Williams, there is a marked change in his portrayal of Woman character. The earlier frustrated and neurotic women such as Amanda Wingfield of *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and Blanch du Bois of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) have been discarded by Williams in his middle plays. Middle plays such as *The Rose Tattoo* (1951), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) and *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) establish Williams' women characters as rather healthy in spirit. They are also released from the puritanical influence of geographic binding (Deep South). These women are domineering and in some cases even stronger than men. In this paper, an attempt has been made to study Mrs. Violet Venable, the domineering mother in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

Keywords: Neurotic, Domineering, Mother, Women Character, Williams.

Suddenly Last Summer is considered as the most perfectly realized play Tennessee Williams has ever written. The character Mrs. Violet Venable can also be considered as the perfect example of domineering and vicious woman in the whole range of Williams' Women characters. Mrs. Venable is a unique character representing a very powerful motherhood of determination and stubbornness. It may not be wrong to say that in her sheer manifestation of domineering personality she leaves other Williams' women gasping behind. In this paper, an attempt is also made to uncover the veil over the hideous aspects of her personality which she carefully disguises. In fact, she gilds them with rationalization, so that she appears to herself as the most magnanimous mother. Her destructive and crippling hold over her son, Sebastian, which incapacitates him for decisive action and his subsequent ineffectual attempts to overcome the annihilating fixation is also examined here in this paper.

In the play, Mrs. Venable is shown as a highly imperious and domineering lady. She is immensely proud of herself and her son, Sebastian. She has always had her way and seen people give way before her capricious idiosyncrasies. She, being a very rich lady, does not let anyone dare to cross or negate her wishes. Mrs. Venable seems to virtually manifest everything negative in her character. She exercises a powerful hold over her son and denies his growth by disallowing him any opportunity for independent and responsible action. She denies him any awakening to his potentialities and powers which could possible have come through his sexual abandonment. She does not allow him the liberty of a beloved because she fears that it is a trespass on her own supreme position. She allows him only the company of male friends who are approved and procured by herself. She never allows him to indulge his disposition of flirting with religions. She allows him an ascetic's carefully rationed food and thus keeps him arrested at the oral level. She does not allow Sebastian any exposure of his sexual drive. Mrs. Venable, in fact, controls her son entirely. He is emotionally, psychologically, functionally and sexually in her command.

She also deprecates his intellectual development and any opportunity of introspection in order to keep him subservient to her own wishes. Consequently, Sebastian is a captive in the clutches of a highly possessive and authoritative mother.

The play opens when Mrs. Venable is about to set up the 'Sebastian Memorial Foundation' and she wants to keep the world from knowing the hideous death of her son, Sebastian. However, Catharine, cousin of Sebastian, is trying to disclose the relationship between Sebastian and his mother; and about his hideous death. Thus, Mrs. Venable has stowed the only witness (Catherine) of the frightful scene of her son's death into a Church managed lunatic asylum. She has also instructed Dr. Cukrawicz from the Lion's View Hospital to perform the lobotomy on Catherine. To her, the cruel and callous Catherine is all out to destroy the figure of her poet son. She is overwhelming and haughty to brook any affront to her views and whims too. Esther Merle Jackson in this regard says:

The gifted, intelligent and attractive Mrs. Venable is, no less than the primitive Creatures of the earlier drama, a savage. Indeed, she is more frightening than other Women for she is committed to the annihilation of a fellow human being through the agencies of society (146)

Mrs. Venable's megalomania of Sebastian's greatness prompts her to glorify his pursuits and eccentricities. She has decided to commemorate him and his works by setting up the Sebastian Memorial Foundation. She talks proudly about the hobbies of Sebastian. She recapitulates sentimentally Sebastian's search for God in the Himalayas, in the Encantades, his insistence on personal charm in people, his food habits, etc. She develops a cult figure in Sebastian.

Although Mrs. Venable's attributes the fastidiousness in taste to Sebastian, it would be relevant to point out that Sebastian had too weak an ego even to assert himself in any given situation. Fastidiousness, allegedly attributed to Sebastian, in fact, is her own fastidiousness about taste, qualities, and charms. In this context, it would be appropriate to take note of the words of Catherine. Catherine says that Sebastian led a life of passivity in the following lines:

He! – accepted! – all! as – how! – Things! are! – And thought nobody had any right to complain or interfere in any way whatsoever, and even though he knew that what was awful was awful, that what was wrong was wrong, and my cousin Sebastian was certainly never sure that anything was wrong! – He thought it unfitting to ever take any action about anything whatsoever! – Except to go on doing as something in him directed ... (*Suddenly Last Summer, 145*)

Sebastian, in fact, has given up virtually all resistance, and has surrendered to the mother his freedom to choose and decide. He is but an index of his mother's wishes, desires and ambitions. As Judith J. Thompson puts it:

Sebastian emerges from the sanctuary of his mother's womb like newly hatched turtles, vulnerable and (psychologically) defenseless – consciously desiring to escape from an all consuming mother love, but pursued by his unconscious desire to return to the womb (116.)

The domineering and possessive Mrs. Venable, in this way, exploited the psychological condition of her son. She wanted to perpetuate her own hold on him, and allowing him no outlet or exposure. She also monopolized his attentions and affection to minimize the chances of his being stolen away by any other woman. She says that he lived a celibate life:

My son, Sebastian, was chaste. Not c-h-a-s-e-d! Oh, he was chased in that way of spelling it, too, we had to be very fleet-footed I can tell you, with his looks and his charm, to keep ahead of pursuers, every kind of pursuer!-I mean he was c-h-a-s-t-e-Chaste ... (*Suddenly Last Summer, 110*)

From another angle, it can be said that Mrs. Venable sees her life with her son as a construction; she never thought of her son flowing with the manifold stimuli of existence. In other words, she traps him. Sebastian's life, instead of flowing through a variety of encounters and situation, is cribbed and confined. The mother not only denies her son of a lover of his own, but also an exposure to the world outside. She also restricts even his food habits. She imposes strict discipline on him on the matters relating to food and drinks. When asked, she once again comes out with her incongruous logic, and explains in beautiful words that she allowed him little food to keep him young:

It takes character to refuse to grow old, Doctor – successfully to refuse to. It calls for discipline, abstention. One cocktail before dinner, not two, four, six a single lean chop and lime juice on a salad in restaurants famed for rich diseases. (*Suddenly Last Summer, 109*)

However, the effects of this severe imposition on the son are disastrous. The deprivation of the food and nourishment made Sebastian glut himself through indiscriminate sexuality. Her denial of autonomy to the son in matter relating to food made Sebastian talk about people as if they were items on the menu. In this regard, Catherine's observations are revealing:

... Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that's how he talked about people, as if they were – items on a menu – “That one's delicious – looking, that one is appetizing”, or “that one is not appetizing” – I think because he was really nearly half-starved from living on pills and salads. (*Suddenly Last Summer, 118*)

In the play, Mrs. Venable also does not let anyone know the true position of Sebastian. She would keep him away from people and would jealously guard him. She would think that the pursuers' touch might contaminate him. Now, after his death, she wants to protect his reputation and to keep the world from knowing the true story of his life. Her tirade against Catherine reveals how jealous and annoyed she is at the young girl. And when she came to know that Sebastian was in love with her, she was highly offended and exasperated. She tells outright that while “he, Sebastian, was amused by this girl ... I was disgusted, sickened.” (*Suddenly Last Summer, 128*) Mrs. Venable calls Catherine “a destroyer” while her son was a “creator”. She informs the doctor that when she discovered last summer about her being replaced by Catherine, she had paralytic stroke of the face. It is probably a design of her to forestall the impending tour of Sebastian and Catherine. This is revealed at the time when she shouts:

I DID NOT HAVE A STROKE!-I had a slight aneurism. You know what that is, Doctor? A little vascular convulsion! Not a hemorrhage, just a little convulsion of blood vessel. I had it when I discovered that she was trying to take my son away from me. Then I had it. It gave a little temporary – muscular – contraction – to one side of my face ... (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 127- 128)

Later in the play, Mrs. Venable accuses Catherine of failing Sebastian and not helping him overcome his depressive moments into which he would lapse quite often during his fits of introversion. It was in such moments when his mother would help him overcome because only she knew how to help him. It was probable true. By remaining chaste and celibate up to the fortieth year of his life, Sebastian lost the capacity to have relationship with a woman in other than the “motherly way”. Psychologically speaking, his libido remained circumscribed for so long that he lost the energetic tension of the ego so vital for functioning independently and, as a result, he became weak and sombre. Sebastian, thus, after having lived so long in the clutches of a demonic mother, came to know himself as a sacrificial victim. He reached out to Catherine; and she was hard set to save him out of his hopeless situation. She wanted to cure him back to the life of instincts, the life of the flesh, and the life of concreteness; she tried hard that he should not think of his life as an utter failure and did her best to resuscitate the urge of life in him. So, in the end, Sebastian took an unusually strong step. All the manipulations and machinations on the part of Mrs. Venable could not deter him from launching on the proposed journey with Catherine. Sebastian tried to become the hero by bypassing the wishes of his mother; and went to Cabeza de Lobo with Catherine in order to break his mother fixation. In this connection, Catherine says:

Something had broken, that string of pearls that old mothers hold their sons by like a – sort of a –sort of – umbilical cord. (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 138)

But his captivity too long in her mother’s aggressive and domineering circle had made him passive and inactive. His instinctual power of taking decisions and acting independently was now stultified. He had found independence but could not resolve and plan his movements. He also found out that even the nude white body of Catherine could not excite his sexual feelings. So, he made her procure his “homosexual pals”. In this part of the play, Tennessee Williams clearly hinted that Sebastian was a passive homosexual and he found his active partners in Cabeza de Lobo. Catherine expresses her painful awareness of his impotence and obtuse sexual behaviors euphemistically, “All I know is that suddenly, last summer, he wasn’t young anymore.” (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 139) The mother fixation had rendered him incapable of experiencing any woman as a companion or a beloved. And at the end of the play, the hungry naked people (his sexual partners) who had feasted on his body sexually had now devoured him, and Sebastian “looked like a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed” (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 147). This seems like Sebastian is being punished for ignoring his body for a long time with his celibate life. However, it is pertinent to say that the ugly fate Sebastian received at the end of the play is wholly because of his mother’s savage control over his life.

Tennessee Williams, thus, in *Suddenly Last Summer* seems to present Mrs. Venable as a vicious, domineering and over possessive mother of the contemporary world. Williams drives home the point that it is a voracious, ruthless, cannibalistic world in which

the stronger (like Mrs. Venable) destroys the weaker (like Sebastian) with no mercy, and only the killer survives.

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