

## Offstage Characters in Tennessee Williams' Plays

Danqiu Qiao<sup>a</sup>, Liyao Miao<sup>b</sup>

PLA Rocket Force University of Engineering, China

<sup>a</sup>lynnly218@126.com, <sup>b</sup>153193604@qq.com

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**Abstract.** As the first people who studied drama systematically, Aristotle summarized six elements of drama in poetics. Character is among the six elements. Put it simply, drama is the imitation of actions of people. And character is the artistic manifestation of people in real life. Characters are depicted by appearance, speech, and others' comments. The depiction should be in harmonious with the thought and helps to reveal the theme of works. Classically, characters will appear on the stage, wearing proper clothes and speaking consistent sentences. However, there is another kind of characters: offstage characters. Offstage characters are like the missing or the dead people in real life. They do not accompany the living any longer. They are absent. If the missing or dead people are beloved by the living, their absence will make people heartbreak. The recollection of those beloved makes people march forward or trapped in sadness. In a word, people live under the influence of the absent beloved. Similarly, offstage characters have an impact on the development of plot in the drama. This thesis will explore the manifestation, the function of offstage characters with examples of Tennessee Williams' plays.

### 1. Introduction

The technique of offstage characters has a long history. It is not new. Characters who do not appear on the stage but are still significant have been created by outstanding playwrights in the course of theoretical development. In early Greek drama, off stage characters worked as catalysts for action. For instance, king Laius in *Oedipus Rex* remains offstage throughout the play, but his existence sets the background of the story and explains the causation. During the period of Renaissance, Shakespeare portrays offstage characters in his several plays, such as *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*. It is implied that Lady Macbeth once had a baby, but he dead and did not appear from the beginning to the end. The dead baby is an offstage character. His absence could be the cause of Lady Macbeth's cruelty. A poor mother shocked by the death of her baby, and became numb day by day. It is more obvious in *Hamlet*. From the beginning, we know the former dead king from the mouth of guards and later the murder was uncovered by the spirit. The death of his father was the cause of Hamlet's revenge. The offstage dead king made the plot unfolded. When it came to Strindberg, Ibsen, and Chekhov, the technique of offstage characters was mature. In the meantime, the use of offstage characters is proficient and obvious in American drama. It is easy to find offstage characters in works of Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. In O'Neill's *Desire under the Elms*, the absent Maw stays in the memory of families, reflecting the controversy between father and sons indirectly. In *Death of a Salesman*, the upset protagonist Willy Loman would speak to his brother Ben Loman every time he lost in regret. In fact, his brother was only in his fantasy. He never turned up. When it comes to Tennessee's works, the device of offstage characters has been a characteristic. The dead gay guy usually appears in his plays. They can be a photo on the wall, a name in people's dialogues, or an impression in one's memory. Nevertheless, they are absent, and to some degree, it is just the absence that results in the following suffering of the abandoned. The current thesis mainly studies the offstage characters in Tennessee Williams' plays. With the help of concrete examples, offstage characters will be understood further.

### 2. Theoretical background of offstage characters

To put it briefly, an offstage character refers to an unseen person, having been missing, dead, or

imaginary, who does not set foot on the stage throughout the whole course of the play, but is referred to by the onstage characters because of the profound influence he or she has on the onstage action. They are not equal to nobody. The significance of offstage characters can be explained by verses of Rabindranath Tagore: I leave no trace of wings in the air, but I am glad I have had my flight. Philosophically, everything in the world is in connection. People live in a complex net. Once can be the causation of future. Disappearance or death means that the subject exists in other forms. People tend to recall the past and act according to the past experiences. The offstage characters perform in the thought of onstage characters.

Seen from the perspective of literary theory in the period of postmodernism, offstage characters link close to Derrida's deconstructionism. Deconstruction is a poststructuralist theory. It is largely based on the writings of Jacques Derrida. It is in the first place a philosophical theory and a theory directed towards the reading of philosophical writings. It claims that the proper study of literature is an inquiry into the conditions surrounding the act of interpretation itself, not an investigation of the individual text. There are several ways to interpret a text, among which the term "supplement" is of great importance. Before coming to "supplement", the term "binary oppositions" should be put emphasis on. Originally, it is agreed that meaning is produced by binary oppositions. Binary opposition is composed by two contrary subjects, and one governs another. That is, binary opposition is a hierarchical system. The classical binary oppositions are male and female. People usually reckon that male is superior to female. The view that female is unimportant derives from these binary oppositions. However, Derrida understands meaning from the perspective of supplement, which holds a different view compared with binary oppositions. According to Derrida, the supplement is "an inessential extra added to something complete in itself." He argues that what is complete in itself cannot be added to, and so a supplement can only occur where there is an *original lack*. In any binary set of terms, the second can be argued to exist in order to fill in an original lack in the first. This relationship, in which one term secretly resides in another, Derrida calls *invasion*. Metaphorically, there is a hole and the supplement can fill it, in that way the supplement makes the almost-perfect first subject more present and whole. From this perspective, the supplement does not enhance something's presence, but rather underlines its absence.

Offstage characters and onstage characters are a pair of binary oppositions. Obviously, onstage characters take up the leading place. They appear on the stage and act as the plot develops. In this way we call the artistic form that can be watched and heard as a play. Offstage characters work as supplements of onstage characters. The seeming unimportant offstage characters, who do not appear on the stage, are the source of meaning. Taking them into consideration, people will understand the deep meaning under the surface.

Offstage characters can be regarded as supplements of onstage characters, besides, it is proper to see them as the subconscious of the onstage characters. Usually, offstage characters have close relation with onstage characters. They live in their memories. The emotion exists between the two sides, and is reflected either by affection or disgust. When referring to the offstage characters, onstage characters can not avoid holding views like "I miss him. He was perfect." or "I hate him, a bastard." According to Freud, consciousness is the part people perform out, which is limited by rules and morals. While the subconscious refers to the dark side of human beings, which hides in people's mind. The unspoken desire is in company of strong emotions, such as admiration, jealous and hatred. The attitudes which onstage characters hold to the offstage characters are just their reaction to their own subconscious, the one they want to be. Freud regards consciousness as the iceberg on the sea, while the subconscious is the much larger part under the surface. In a play, the present is just as little as the iceberg on the sea, while the absence matters as important as the big part under the surface.

### **3. Manifestations of offstage characters in Tennessee's plays**

In Tennessee's plays, the offstage characters appear as a feature of his plays. They are presented through an old photo on the wall, or a name in the dialogue. They have already gotten rid of the life, escaped or dead. But the rest still live a desperate life, what is more, tortured by complex emotions.

The themes of Tennessee's plays are mainly about escape and abandonment. People who abandon others, voluntary or forced, are usually male, and tend to be homosexual. They end in suicide or being killed. They can be concluded as dead gay guys. The "dead gay guy" appears in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*, and the one-act *Suddenly Last Summer*. Blanche's husband, Allen, shot himself after Blanche discovered his homosexuality; Skipper drank himself to death after realizing the nature of his love for Brick; and Sebastian was brutally killed while on a hedonistic vacation. All three were gay, and they all were killed by a sort of societal punishment for their homosexuality.

Why Tennessee sets his offstage characters as dead gay guy? Firstly, death is related with the theme abandonment and escape. The dead guy begins a calamitous circle. Their irresponsible death leaves much more bitterness and regret to the rest. The rest may be forced to begin another circle of escape and abandonment. However, nobody can arrive in the Utopia. Fugitive will be tortured by memory in their rest lifetime. Secondly, when it comes to "gay guy", the answer can be found from Tennessee himself. Tennessee is a homosexual, and his works are somewhat autobiographic. His description of homosexual is his true reflection of his subconscious. However, the society and culture were unfriendly to homosexuals at that time. The tragic ending of a homosexual may meet people's moral standard. Thirdly, the absent are all male, and the abandoned are all female. The setting reveals that to some degree, female is the strong side. Facing the arduous life, the seeming strong male give up, but the female always stick on. This is due to a tragic ending. The dead gay guy is already gone, and we only see the effect of his haunting non-presence on the women he left behind. In *Menagerie*, however, we get to see the character before he leaves. *The Glass Menagerie* is the story of Tom, while *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer* are the story of Amanda and Laura, the women he leaves behind.

In addition to a dead gay guy, offstage characters sometimes are made up by onstage characters in Tennessee's plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, mad Blanche always waits for a Mr Huntleigh who only exists in her fantasy. At that time she has already gone mad. A mad person will not control his or her subconscious. He/she acts without limitation. So Blanche makes up a Mr Huntleigh, who should have accompanied her when she was young and beautiful, and who could meet her need for love and material.

#### **4. Functions of offstage characters in *Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire***

The device of offstage characters has been applied by many influential playwrights since the Grecian period. It is used as catalyst of plot development and clues to bring themes to light. It is an obvious feature in Tennessee's plays. In *menagerie*, Tom's father is definitely an offstage character, and it is not difficult to realize that Tom will go after his father. He is a potential absent character. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, offstage characters include Blanche's families, her dead mother, father and Margaret, as well as the imaginary Mr Huntleigh. This part will study how those offstage characters perform in the two plays.

##### **4.1 Direct cause for the onstage action**

Direct cause, which directly produces an event, is responsible for the occurring of an event. On most occasions, offstage characters work as direct cause for onstage action. Many chains of events related to the onstage action are causally resulted from offstage characters. In many instances, the plot of a play would be uncompleted, the climax of the conflict would be lost if such absent characters were to appear on stage. Such offstage characters guide the onstage action and contribute to the conflicts in their respective plays.

Tennessee's offstage characters, such as Mr Wingfield in *Menagerie* and Allan Grey in *A Streetcar Named Desire* all demonstrate the function, serving as the direct cause for the following story. Their left make the more and more bitter life begin, and their impact on the rest stays profoundly and permanently. They begin to exist in a romantic and nostalgic form. Because the onstage characters are heart-broken for the lost, they are easy to indulge in beautiful memory, eliminating the bad part unconsciously. The absent become their hope and comfort.

In *Menagerie*, Mr Wingfield is presented seldom. The playwright does not mention him in detail. We only know that there is a photo of him on the wall, and the only words he left before “he skipped the light fantastic out of town” was a daily greeting: “Hello-Goodbye”. However, his trace is everywhere. On one hand, the most direct consequence is that the family life is trapped in difficulty. They lose the source of material. Tom is forced to give up his dream of being a poet and keep working in a shoe factory, and Amanda is lost in the worry for her daughter’s future. On the other hand, the mental wound is hidden deeply in the mind of the families. For Amanda, Mr Wingfield symbols her golden age, when she was a southern belle, young and charming, enjoying love of pursuers. Mr Wingfield in her memory becomes her spiritual support in the current poor life. Although he abandoned her, every time she thinks about him, she describes him as full of charm. As to Laura, she keeps herself to herself. She stays with the fragile menagerie animals, implying that she is as pure and fragile as those glass animals. Her inability both in physics and mentality derives from the miserable family life. However, her father, the cause of the miserable life, just consoles her. She keeps his records adoringly. For Tom, Mr Wingfield’s influence is much more obvious, later we will unfold this influence.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, much of the onstage action is triggered by the offstage character Allan Grey. When Blanche is dancing with Allan in the Casino, she gives out the secret recklessly that she has seen Allan in the arms of an elder male sex partner. Disgraced by his wife, Allan leaves the casino in a hurry, and shoots himself. Having realized that she provoked her beloved homosexual husband to suicide himself, and to get rid of the harsh circumstances, Blanche immerses herself in destructive sexual relations with unknown soldiers in the nearby military camp. At last, Blanche realizes that she failed to understand her husband's plea to be saved from homosexuality. Blanche regretfully confesses to Mitch "He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of!" Blanche's sanity is provoked by her sense of guilt to Allan, for she once loved him deeply.

#### **4.2 A mirror foreshadowing the fate of onstage characters**

Some unseen absent characters serve as the paragons, bearing the hope and emotions of the onstage characters. For onstage characters, they cherish them and see them as the goal or savor. The offstage characters have been lifted from the truth, for the onstage character own a sense of admiration or a sense of guilt for them. As a result, fates of offstage characters sometimes imply the fates of onstage characters. In *Menagerie*, Tom Wingfield mirrors his absent father when he finally abandons his family in the end of the play. Similarly, in *Streetcar* Blanche's nymphomania mirrors that of her degenerate homosexual husband Allan Grey, and Allan's death foreshadows Blanche's breakdown.

In real life we are sometimes haunted by unseen voices and images that influence the way we think and the action we take. Conscience, morality, greed, jealousy, envy, belief, and psychological impulses like the ego, id, and super ego constitute unsound voices that influence our life considerably. In the case of Williams' *Menagerie* the absent father Mr. Wingfield, who deserted the family a long time ago, appears only as a photograph conspicuously displayed on the mantel. Whenever he is mentioned, a pool of light is shed on his photograph reminding us that though he is absent, he still has profound influence on the Wingfields' miserable lives, especially Tom. The photograph of the absent father is the objective correlative to Tom's wanderlust. The photograph of Mr Wingfield can be regarded as Tom's mirror of self-image and self-esteem. Thus, the father's absence mirrors the son's id, ego, and super ego. At the end of the play Tom follows the footsteps of his father and deserts his family thus leaving behind him an emotionally drained, crippled sister and a penniless mother.

#### **4.3 A bridge between audience and the play**

One interesting function of unseen characters is to serve as the bridge between audience and the whole play, intensifying the empathy between the onstage characters and the audience. Like the onstage characters, the audience is confused with the mystery surrounding the unseen characters, and will be eager to find answers. In this way the audience will understand the following actions

which the onstage characters will take. Gombrich asserts that absence as a theatrical device invokes "the beholder's share" in the sense that it involves the audience's participation by invoking their imagination. The audience will make sense during the course when they explore the offstage characters. Rosefeldt argues that incorporating absent characters into a play's narrative is quite important since, as he points out, "the character's actions are always filtered through someone else's point of view". It is clear that the audience forms a mental image of offstage characters based on how the onstage characters portray them. Or we can say that the exploration of offstage characters in the meantime is the revelation of onstage characters.

Offstage characters are clues for audience to study onstage characters. In *Menagerie*, from the attitude that the rest families hold towards the fugitive father, we can conclude their characteristics. The self-important and pride mother, the fragile daughter and the contradictory and desperate son are all depicted by their attitude to the father. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche's guilty feeling to Allan mould the character, and Mr Huntleigh, a made-up man she regarded as her savior, sets off her sanity.

## 5. Conclusion

Tennessee Williams is good at using offstage characters. Besides *Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we can find his other plays involving offstage characters, such as the dead husband of Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*, Skipper in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and so on. People in real life will not forget their beloved ones, although the beloved have lied in tomb or lost in distance. In the same matter, offstage characters exist in the memory of onstage characters. They are the indispensable part of the whole play. They are necessary for the integrity of structure and plot. Ignoring the importance of offstage characters will lead to misunderstanding of the whole play, and destroy the artistic integrity of works.

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