Catharine’s Honesty That Reveals
the Corruption of Human
Relationship in Tennessee
Williams’
Suddenly Last Summer.

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Abstract

Honesty is one of the elements that every human has. However, not every one is able to keep it, especially when other people do not want him or her to tell the truth. In this situation, it will be a hard thing for some one to keep telling the truth. The writer, however, cannot find this condition in Catharine and that is why the writer wants to know what makes Catharine keeps telling the truth. Catharine is the main female character in the play who is telling the truth about the corruption of human relationship that happens last summer. In order to tell the truth, she has to face many conflicts, especially with Mrs. Venable and her family who do not want her to tell the truth. For Mrs. Venable, Catharine’s honesty will ruin her son’s reputation, while for her family, they will lose the money that Mrs. Venable promises if Catharine keeps telling the truth. In analyzing this play, the writer uses the theory of conflicts since it plays a very important role in revealing the relationship between the characters and the struggle that grows out from the two opposing forces in a plot. Catharine faces many conflicts because of her honesty. The conflicts that happen inform her about the consequences that she and her family will get if she keeps telling the truth. The consequence that will happen is not only toward herself but also toward her family. Because of her honesty, her family lost the
money that is promised by Mrs. Venable, and she has to spend the rest of her life in an asylum. However, considering all the consequences that will happen to her and her family, Catharine keeps telling the truth. What happen to Catharine really amazed the writer and from the analysis that the writer does, she finds out that it is Catharine’s character traits that make her keep telling the truth. Moreover, there is one surprising result from her honesty that is the Doctor’s realization that her story could be true.

Keywords: truth, conflicts, corruption, human relationship

Introduction

Tennessee Williams is one of the most productive writers in the Contemporary American Theatre. He has written almost twenty full-length plays, a large number of one act, several screenplays, a novel, and three volumes of short stories (Vinson 828). This shows that Tennessee Williams is capable to be a playwright, a screenwriter, a novelist, and a short story writer. However, he is mainly famous as a playwright. According to Riley, Williams is one of the worlds most popular playwright and probably America’s greatest living dramatist (Riley 368). Because of his plays, he is considered as the most outstanding playwright in the American theatre (Hughes 171). He has dominated not only the American Theatre but also the International Theatre for more than three decades (Falk 167). Williams’ achievements as a playwright have made him awarded with many awards. In the Encyclopedia of World Drama, it is said that Williams won four awards from the New York Drama Critics Circle Award (1945, 1947, 1955, and 1961), received a second best American play award of the 1947-1948 season, and also two Pulitzer Prize on 1947 and 1955 (152). Tennessee Williams is a unique writer, his plays always have typical characters, such as “the insane”, “the artist”, “the sexual specialist”, “the cripple”, and “the foreigner” (Weale 385-87). These typical characters have made Williams’ plays special and more interesting than other plays. His specialist in characters differentiates him among the other playwrights, and makes his plays unique, worth reading, and discussing (Riley 368). Another interesting thing in Williams’ play is that most of his main characters are women. Williams is genius in describing women, the dialogue and the speech are so natural that people will not believe it if the playwright is a man (Stanton 2). This shows that Williams is good in presenting the female characters, in most
of his plays, female characters are better characterized and more dominant. According to Hirch, it is because Williams often identifies himself more with his women than his men (Hirch 12).

Moreover, his special ability in describing women are influenced by his childhood experiences. At a very young age he was suffering diphtheria that made him more interested in reading than playing what normal children usually did. His unhappy family life also made him more attached with women in his family, especially with his sister, Rose (Bigsby 21). Unfortunately, his sister has to face a lobotomy operation and lived in a sanatorium for the rest of her life (24). The condition that happened to his sister becomes the basic element for Williams to write this play, *Suddenly Last Summer*. Even though this play was not his major play, it was a box office success and not as badly reviewed as the other playwrights expected (Falk 118). That is why this play finally made in the film version, and received many good comments from the critics. Moreover, the two actresses that played as the main female characters in the play received Oscar Nominations (Movie Thing.com). This shows that actually this play is good and interesting to be discussed.

The play talks about the corruption of human relationship that people use other people to achieve their desire and that is what they call love (Falk 118). Williams called this play as “a fable of our times” (Bigsby 63). This means that people can be as savage as animals, and the worst thing is that what happens in our lives. Moreover, Catharine, the main female character in the play, tries to reveal this corruption by telling the truth about what has happened last summer. However, the amazing thing of Catharine is that she keeps telling the truth even though her family is against her. Knowing that as the consequence she will be put in an asylum, it does not make her afraid. It even makes her more determined in telling the truth. Therefore, Catharine’s honesty reveals the corruption of human relationship that happened in the play. Moreover, Catharine’s honesty really amazed the writer, and makes her eager to know what makes Catharine keeps telling the truth. The writer also wants to know what conflicts that Catharine faces in telling the truth and what the conflicts are about. The last thing that the writer wants to know is the result of her honesty.

**Review Of Related Literature**

In studying a literary work, it is essential to apply all the theories that have any connection with the topic of the discussion. Therefore, in doing her analysis the writer uses the literary approach and the psychological theory of honesty.
2. 1 The Literary Approach

2.1.1 Theory of Characterization

Characterization is the first element that makes a story readable and lively (Hatlen 17). Characterization is the creation of images of imaginary person in drama, narrative poetry, novel, and short story (Shaw 71). According to Graham Little in the book *Approach to Literature*, characterization is the creation of people who give a sense of lives’ qualities and possibilities (89). Therefore, characterization is a bridge for the fictional persons to exist as real persons for the reader. (Shaw 71).

In order to make a good story; the author may reveal his character in four ways. First is by appearance, second is by speech, third is by character’s external actions, and fourth is by what others say about a character and the way in which they react to him (Hatlen 18-19). In *A Handbook to Literature*, Holman says that there are three fundamental methods of characterization in fiction. The first one is the explicit presentation by the author of the character through direct exposition. The second is by the presentation of the character in action and the third is by the presentation within a character, without comment by the author (82). The last method is commonly known as dramatic method, the method that is usually used to establish characters in drama. This dramatic method is a technique in which the author makes “objective presentation of characters in action without authorial comment” (Holman 82).

In this play, *Suddenly Last Summer*, Williams uses the dramatic method to establish his characters. In this case, Williams reveals Catharine’s character traits and also her conflicts only from their dialogues and action in the play without any further description. The next step is to figure out the place of that particular character in the work, whether he is a major or minor character. A major character usually dominates the story and has a complex personality traits, is usually called “round character” (Holman 82). On the contrary, a minor character is usually a flat character that has small participation in the story and is characterized by one or two traits only (Shaw 71). Learning these theories, the writer classifies Catharine as the major and round character, while the other characters in the play such as Mrs. Venable, Mrs. Holly, George, and Doctor Sugar are classified as the minor and flat characters.

2.1.2 Theory of Conflicts

The second theory that the writer uses in her analysis is conflict. Conflict is the essence of all stories (Little 3) and so does in *Suddenly Last Summer* in which
conflict plays a very important role in revealing the relationship between the characters. According to Holman, conflict is the struggle that grows out from the two opposing forces in a plot (107). Moreover, Shaw also defines conflict as the opposition of persons upon which the actions of the characters depend in drama and fiction (91). Considering all those factors above, it is obvious that conflict is essential in a literary work, and so does in this play where conflicts play the important role in building the story. The opposition between the main characters as revealed through their dialogues and behavior make this play very appealing, because Williams creates the conflicts provides interest, suspense and tension of this story.

There are three different kinds of conflicts, which a character may be involved in. First is the struggle against nature; second is the struggle against another person. Third is the struggle against society and fourth is the struggle between two elements within a person (Holman 107). In other words, there are three kinds of conflicts. The first conflict is the inner conflict; it is a struggle between desires within a person (Little 83). The second and the third ones are the outer conflicts. They are men against men in which the character faces a conflict with his or her rival and man against society or social conflict (Shaw 91). However, the writer will not use all the theories above, she will use the second theory only, that is the outer conflict, since she does not find the inner conflict in the play. Using this theory, the writer intends to reveal the conflicts that happen in the play, that the main female character, Catharine experiences.

2.2 The Psychological Theory in General: Honesty

In Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, honesty means freedom from deceit, cheating, etc (409). Honesty is one of our most important moral - ethical values. Through these moral - ethical values, one can judge a person’s character, whether he is a liar, a thief, or an honest person. Thompson writes that social relationship between two people or two groups of people cannot be achieved if the people involved in that social interaction are not reasonably honest (538). That is what happened between Catharine and the other characters in the play, which Catharine’ honesty reveals the corruption of human relationship that happens in the play.

ANALYSIS

In analyzing the play, the writer finds out that the reason for Catharine to keep telling the truth is because of her character trait. Catharine has a passion for telling the truth even about herself, although sometimes it is an unpleasant
experience. To Doctor Sugar, Catharine tells the incident that happened to her last winter. A very shameful incident, but she tells it to someone that she has just known. The incident happened at Mardi Grass ball when the boys who took her there got drunk and could not take her home, when suddenly someone offered to take her home. Instead of taking her home, the stranger took her to a lover's rendezvous but when he drove her home, he told her to forget their intimacy because his wife was expecting a baby. However, this really made her angry that instead of picking up her aunt's mink stole, she went back to him and beat him.

DOCTOR: Something happened last winter?

CATHARINE: At a Mardi Grass ball someone boy that took me to it got too drunk to stand up! [A short, mirthless note of laughter.] I wanted to go home. My coat was in the cloakroom, they couldn't find the check for it in his pockets. I said, 'Oh, hell, let it go!' I started out for a taxi. Somebody took my arm and said, 'I'll drive you home,' He took off his coat as we left the hotel and put it over my shoulders, and then I looked at him and I don't think I'd ever seen him before then, really! He took me home in his car, but took me another place first. We stopped near the Duelling Oaks at the end of Esplanade Street.... Stopped! I said, 'What for?' - He didn't answer, just struck a match in the car to light a cigarette in the car and I looked at him in the car and I knew 'what for!' - I think I got out of the car before he got out of the car, and we walked through the wet grass to the great misty oaks as if somebody was calling us for help there! [Pause. The subdued, toneless bird-cries in the garden turn to a single bird-song.]

DOCTOR: After that?

CATHARINE: I lost him. - He took me home and said an awful thing to me. We'd better forget it, 'he said, 'my wife's expecting a child and -' I just entered the house and sat there thinking a little and then I suddenly called a taxi and went right back to the Roosevelt Hotel Ballroom. The Ball was still going on. I thought I'd gone back to pick up my borrowed coat, but that wasn't what I'd gone back for. I'd gone back to make a scene on the floor of the ballroom, yes, I didn't stop at the cloakroom to pick up Aunt Violet's old mink stole, no, I rushed right into the ballroom and spotted him on the floor and ran up to him and beat him as hard as I could in the face and chest with my fist till-Cousin Sebastian took me away.

(IV, 65-66)

Another thing that proves Catharine's character trait is from the other conversation between Doctor Sugar and her, Catharine said that truth is the only thing that she never opposed, it means that she always tells the truth.
DOCTOR: Give me all your resistance.
CATHARINE: Resistance to what?
DOCTOR: The truth. Which you are going
to tell me.
CATHARINE: The truth's the one thing I
have never resisted!

(IV, 68)

The second factor that makes Catharine
keeps telling the truth is because she has
to, she has no choice instead of telling
the truth. It is stated from her statement
toward her mother.

CATHARINE... Don't you see? I won't have
any choice but to tell the truth. It makes
you tell the truth because it shuts
something off that might make you able
not to and everything comes out, decent
or not decent, you have no control, but
always, always the truth!

(III, 45)

The conversation between her and Doctor
Sugar also support this second factor.
Catharine tells Doctor Sugar that she has
to tell the story.

DOCTOR: You will tell the true story.
CATHARINE: Yes, I will.
DOCTOR: The absolute true story. No lies,
nothing not spoken. Everything told,

exactly.

CATHARINE: Everything. Exactly. Because
I'll have to.

(IV, 70)

The next thing that the writer wants to
analyze is about the conflicts that
Catharine faces. In the play shows that
Catharine only faces outer conflict with
her family and Mrs. Venable that do not
want her to tell the truth. Moreover, the
reason for her family to ask Catharine not
to tell the truth is because they will lose
the money that was promised by Mrs.
Venable, it is quite a big amount, a
hundred thousand dollars.

MRS HOLLY: Just don't repeat that same
fantastic story! For my sake and George's
sake, the sake of your brother and
mother, don't repeat that horrible story
again! Not to Violet! Will you?
CATHARINE: Then I am going to have to
tell Aunt Violet what happened to her son
in Cabeza de Lobo?

(III, 45)

GEORGE: Cathie, Cathie, you got to forget
that story! Can'tcha? For your fifty grand?
MRS HOLLY: Because if Aunt Vi contest
the will, and we know she'll contest it,
she'll keep it in the courts for ever! -We'll be-

(III, 46)
MRS HOLLY: Cathie, why, why, why! - did you invent such a tale?

CATHARINE: But, Mother I DIDN'T invent it. I know it's a hideous story but it is a true story of our time and the world we live in and what did truly happen to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo....

GEORGE: Oh, then you are going to tell it. Mama, she is going to tell it! Right to Aunt Vi, and lose us a hundred thousand! - Cathie? You are a BITCH!

(III, 47)

Thus, the conversation that happens between Catharine and Mrs. Venable also shows how her family depends on Mrs. Venable financially.

MRS VENABLE: Your mother's dependent on me. All of you are! - Financially....

CATHARINE: I think the situation is - clear to me, now....

(IV, 55)

The further conversation between Catharine and Mrs. Venable show that Mrs. Venable says that she will put Catharine in an asylum explicitly.

MRS VENABLE: I'm paying to keep you in a private asylum.

CATHARINE: You are not my legal guardian.

(IV, 55)

However, although Catharine knows that she will be put in an asylum, it does not frighten her, she keeps telling the truth.

CATHARINE [SPRINGING UP WITH A CRY]: I can't change truth. I'm not God! I'm not even sure that He could, I don't think God can change truth! How can I change the story of what happened to her son in Cabeza de Lobo?

(IV, 57)

All the outer conflicts that Catharine has do not influenced her decision in telling the truth, she keeps telling the truth no matter what will happen to her family and herself, the only thing that she has to do is telling the truth. Finally, Catharine tells the truth about the corruption of human relationship that happens in the play. Many people shock of knowing the truth, however, the result of her honesty influences not only herself but also others characters. For herself, Catharine has to stay in an asylum for the rest of her life.
MRS VENABLE [off stage]: Lion’s View!
State asylum, cut this hideous story out of her brain!

(IV, 93)

Since in the play Mrs. Venable is the one that takes control, so her words are commands. This sentence shows that Catharine has to stay in an asylum. Other revelation from Catharine’s honesty is that her family lost the money that Mrs. Venable promises. This is showed from George’s last sentence.

GEORGE: Mom, I’ll quit school, I’ll get a job, I’ll-

(IV, 93)

Moreover, the last revelation is from Doctor Sugar. This last revelation is a shocking one because at the end of the play Doctor Sugar says that they should consider that Catharine’s story could be true.

DOCTOR [after a while, reflectively, into space]: I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girl’s story could be true....

(IV, 93)

CONCLUSION

In analyzing the play, the writer finds out that there are two factors for Catharine to keep telling the truth. The first reason is because of her character’s trait and the second that she has to tell the truth, she has no choice instead of telling the truth. Moreover, because of her honesty, Catharine faces many conflicts, especially outer conflicts. The conflicts that she faces are with Mrs. Venable and her family. However, the conflicts that she faces do not influence her decision in telling the truth. She keeps telling the truth although she already knew all the consequences that will happen to her and her family. Furthermore, the result of her honesty is what she has already known. She is put in an asylum, and her family lost the money that Mrs. Venable promises. However, there is one shocking result of her honesty that is from Doctor Sugar. At the end, he realizes that Catharine’s story could be true.
Catharine’s Honesty That Reveals the Corruption of Human Relationship in Tennessee Williams’ Suddenly Last Summer.

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