Work Plan

In all these plays Williams deals with the psychological theme of social isolation, loneliness and alienation of the post modern man and his predicament to hold a grip on life, which largely seems slipping from his hands. Williams other plays will also be included in this research study for a more wider view of the various post thematic concerns. The indepth study of the plays alongwith the critical analysis of these plays would be done.

Methodology

The methodology will include seven chapters in all. The first chapter will be on “Introduction”, including Life and Formative influences on Tennessee Williams. The other six Chapters will be as under:

Tentative Chapters

Chapter 1: Introduction

Life and formative influences of Tennessee Williams

Chapter 2: When Hopes Turn Dupes.

a) The Glass Menagerie
b) A Streetcar Named Desire

Chapter 3: When Flowers of Desire Bloom

c) Rose Tattoo
d) Cat on a Hot Tin Roof

Chapter 4: When Desires Remain Unexpressed

e) Summer and Smoke
f) Something Unspoken
Chapter 5: When Angels Battle Against Human Beings

  g) Orpheus Descending
  h) The Night of Iguana

Chapter 6: When Time is our Enemy.

  i) The Sweet Bird of Youth
  j) The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore

Chapter 7: Conclusion

CHAPTER- II

A man or a woman of the post modern period is an independent entity trying to live the way his soul directs him to do so. But it is a tragedy that his social, political and economic conditions and his egotism do not give him a free hand to live the way he likes. At the outset, he is a man of hopes in the American democracy where he feels that he shall be able to fulfill all his desires and aspirations but in social life due to many problems, he miserably fails when all his hopes turn dupes. In this study the scholar has taken up critical analysis of Williams’ two plays: The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire in a Chapter under the heading: When Hopes Turn Dupes. A brief resume of these plays is given below:

a) The Glass Menagerie(1945) is the masterpiece of Tennessee Williams. It is a poignant and painful family drama set in St. Louis in which Amanda, a southern woman of great but confused vitality is seen frustrated among the dreams of her glamorous past in Blue Mountain with several gentleman callers. But now when she is in her grimness of her reduced circumstances, she becomes a victim to a conflict between her youthful past and crippled present. She persuades her rebellious son, Tom to arrange a gentleman caller for her handicapped daughter Laura, who symbolizes Amanda’s
crippled present. On the insistence of his nagging mother, Tom, unconcerned about her intentions, is constrained to invite Jim O’Conner, one of his colleagues at the warehouse to dinner, giving impression to his mother that Jim is the gentleman caller on Laura. At the news the mother has to work like a Turk in preparation to receive the gentleman caller of her daughter. The so called gentleman caller arrives and is provided with a chance to talk to Laura in privacy. He successfully breaks Laura’s reserves, instills hope, love and confidence in her to remove her inferiority complex which she is constant victim of owing to her handicap. All goes well in Wingfield family until Jim discloses that he is already in love with and engaged to a girl called Betty. This sting in the tail upsets Amanda and Laura and the young Laura lapses again into her former dream world called Glass Menagerie.

b) A Streetcar named Desire (1947) tells a tale of sorrows and sufferings of Blanche du Bois, a thirty years old woman who once belonged like Amanda to a flourishing southern family which has now completely decayed due to their economic crisis and death of their all male members. Blanche visits the New Orleans home of her only living younger sister Stella and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowel Skiy. She is visiting them for a change in mood and a major against her life of isolation and alienation which she was subjected to at her family estate called ‘Belle rev” in the country side of Mississippi State in the south. Staley arranges at his house the game of poker with his friends. On this occasion Blanche happens to meet Mitch and sensing that Mitch is also as lonely as she herself is and that he is superior to others in the party, she begins to think of marriage to him as a refuge from the past which she has already sought in liquor and self delusion about her age, beauty and former admirers like Amanda does in Glass Menagerie. Blanche contents that Stella’s marriage with Stanley and her unborn child are products of shear lust as aimless as the street car named desire, shuttling through narrow streets. In retaliation Stanley tells Mitch that Blanche lost her school teaching job because of her affair with a student, a seventeen year boy and that she has become nymphomaniac in quest of love to compensate for the loss of her homosexual husband by suicide. Once, when Stella has gone to the hospital for delivery, Blanche is at home. Stanley steals an opportunity to come home and forcibly overpower Blanche to cool his sexual lust. Upon her return from the hospital
with the new born baby Stella is told the story by Blanche. But instead of believing in the story Stella calls Blanche in fits of madness. Next day the doctor comes from the mental asylum, Blanche remembers her glorious past in the south and threatens the nurse but Blanche goes with the doctors saying: Where ever you are I have always depended on the kindness of strangers (p.22, p. 25). As she leaves for mental asylum, Stanley hugs his wife and his friends continue the game of poker. With this the ruin of Blanche and the revenge of Stanley are both complete.

CHAPTER- III

Even when the desires remain unexpressed in the personality of the post modern man still many flowers of these desires have an urge to bloom. Therefore, in this research the scholar wishes to take up the following two plays namely The Rose Tattoo and Cat on a hot tin roof under the heading of the Chapter: When Flowers of Desire Bloom. A brief account of these plays is given below:

c) The Rose Tattoo (1948) is considered as Williams’ most positive creation and in memoirs Williams calls it his love play to the world. It revolves around the fundamental desire for sexual love which is deep seated in each one of us. Serafina, a celibate widow infuses religiosity to the act of sex with her husband which to her is as sacred and holy as the prayer offered to God. After her husband’s death, she abstains from sexual involvement out of her deep love for him. But, that is against the natural instinct of a human being. A man/ woman is a free bird at heart having his/ her own universe where they enjoy absolute, unchecked freedom, uncontrolled by any set of rules and laws, where the birds desire is rage free, not moulded or directed by moral code of any kind. The ‘Rose Tattoo’ highlights the truth that man and woman in terms of sex are complimentary to each other. It is this desire of completion which motivates Serafina in the arms of Alvaro. The play is a warm celebration of sexual love. Serafina is a rich and lyrical portrait of an Italian peasant but she is also an embodiment of a credo, the affirmation of sex as the primal desire of a complete existence.
d) **Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955):** Whereas Williams only comedy of sex is The Rose Tattoo treating a perfervid Sicilian woman’s eager quest for love, Cat on a hot tin roof (1955) a play of Pulitzer Prize fame depicts bitter abnormal family tensions in a struggle for control of plantation. Interestingly, it depicts the story of Maggie a hetaira woman whose commitment to her man and to her love is redoubtable. Maggie has been presented as a hetaira woman, aware of the spell she can cast upon man by her bewitching looks and figure. She has exploited men many a time to gain favour, love and attention. She is conscious of Big Daddy’s eyes which seem to pry into her person. She flirts with him now and then knowing that lascivious “Big Daddy harbors a little unconscious lech for me….way he always drops his eyes down my body when I am talking to him, drops his eyes to my boobs an licks his old chops! Ha, ha “(p.113) This charming woman has enticed Brick to marry her. (p.172) She has deliberately exercised her charm on Big Daddy to escape the danger of being cut off from his inheritance in view of Brick’s intemperance with alcohol. She is involved in sex without the knowledge of Big Daddy and Brick with “the best looking man in the crowd – followed me upstairs and tried to force his way in the powder room with me, followed me to the door and tried to force his way in” (p.128 -129). The result she tells everybody that she is pregnant with Brick’s child to save the family property by inheritance.

According to an Indian critic, G. Kataria “cat is the symbol of sensual hetaira as also of the mystery, jealousy, savagery, vindictiveness and guiltfulness associated with Feminine. ‘The Hot Tin Roof’ of the title not only signifies a highly sensual moment, believing intensely in man woman relationships,(who) has been suddenly denied the pleasure of the senses. … “She really becomes a cat sizzling on a hot tin of roof. It also allures to the troubles under the tin roof on which she stands”(sic). Maggie is exclusively a post modern American woman who does not believe in any morality but will do anything to fulfill her ends.

**CHAPTER-IV**

The post modern man has many desires to be fulfilled on this earth but due to social hurdles or some psychological lapse all his desires remain unexpressed. The scholar intends to take up the critical analysis of the plays namely *Summer and Smoke*
and **Something Unspoken** under the heading of the Chapter: **When Desires Remain Unexpressed.** A brief account of these plays is given here under:

e) **Summer and Smoke** (1948) draws a contrast between materialism and idealism. Summer and Smoke centers on a high strung, unmarried minister’s daughter, Alma Vinemiller, the spiritual girl and John Buchanan the doctor who exclusively lives his life on material terms. Alma Vinemiller lives exclusively in a spiritual world and John Buchanan Jr. is absorbed exclusively with the physical world. The playwright draws a contrast between these two worlds and suggests an answer in the young character Nellie who combines the two worlds.

Alma’s character in the play is a symbol is of all that is pure. She has the voice of a nightingale, and is a kind of woman, who loves with her soul and not with her body. She has been in love with John Buchanan since she was a small child. Once when the lover and beloved go for a date she is skeptical about going into the casino which is a place which John feels is quite comfortable for love making. She refuses to go to the cock fight with John so that they are able to talk to each other. Their conversation proves how opposite they are when talking about sex. Alma argues with John that love is what a person brings to it: “Some people bring just their bodies. But there are some….who can bring their hearts to it, also who can bring their souls to it.”(p.261)

John is purely a physical character who is known for being friendly with many ladies and is popularly known as party boy that loves to have good time. When speaking of love, he makes references to the physical aspect of it. He says, “there are other things between a man and a woman besides respect, Miss Alma. There is such a thing as intimate relations.”(p.260)

f) **Something Unspoken** (1958) tells the story of the egocentric, sadistic, homosexual son of a doting mother who is killed and eaten by cannibal natives on a savage island. It is a story about which everything remains unspoken, and the play is a part of desires which remain unexpressed.

**CHAPTER-V**

Man is unaware of the supernatural forces that can go against his well planned intentions. These supernatural forces may be called the angels. The scholar would take
up Orpheus Descending and The Night of Iguana under the heading of the Chapter: When Angels Battle Against Human Beings. A brief account of these plays is given below:

g) Orpheus Descending(1957): Tennessee Williams explores the myth of Orpheus in the context of post modern American life dominated by every type of dirt, filth, social and moral disorder and disintegration of an individual. The handsome hero of Orpheus Descending, Valentine Xavier, wearing his snake skin jacket and caring his guitar comes on his 30th birthday to a small town in rural Mississippi in the south where he manages to get a job as a shoe salesman in general store which is owned by a lady named Lady Torrance, a middle loved starved woman whose husband brute Jabe is dying upstairs of cancer. The playwright tells us in the prologue that Jabe had bought lady Torrance as a wife after she had been jilted by her lover, David Cuterer.

Lady Torrance takes Val as her lover though he performs his role rather unwillingly. When a girl called Carol takes Val out for a ride, on return he tells Lady that he is through with the dissolute life he had led in the past. He also tells her that his guitar is his life’s companion, and when any unclean thing touches him, the guitar helps him to wash him clean (p.37). In relating how he would like to live a clean life henceforth Val described Tennessee Williams vision of a free creative spirit up to this point the play is thematically sound.

When the cancer ridden Jabe comes to know that his wife is in love with Val, he manages to get out of his bed, struggles down the stairs with a gun in hand and shoots down the Lady. Before she dies Jabe tells her the secret that he being the key figure of the mystic crew had been responsible for burning alive her father Wop, the bootlegger.

Soon after Jabe shouts loudly to the people that it is Val who has shot down his wife in his attempt to robbing the store. As the Lady expires on the floor of the store the four men led by sheriff enters. This reminds us of Tom and his three henchmen taking Chance for castration in the play the sweet bird of youth. They seize Val and take him away evidently to tear him into pieces like that Maenads of Orpheus. At the end Carol is
shown fondling Val’s snakes skin jacket and saying: Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follows their kind……... (p.117).

h) **The Night of Iguana (1961)** one of the later plays adapted from an earlier short story presents diverse characters in a mean Mexican hotel who, like its chained Iguana, (an American lizard) are balked and imprisoned so that the onlookers enjoy its discomfiture. The post modern theme about *The Night of Iguana* is that darkness is the most horrible scene that symbolically signifies everything negative on physical, mental and spiritual terms.

**CHAPTER- VI**

Time is the greatest enemy of the post modern man of aspirations. It writes wrinkles on the azure brow of even the sea. It does not spare anyone right from childhood, youth to old age. This theme of tyranny of time would be taken up through the critical analysis of the plays Sweet Bird of Youth and the Milk Train doesn’t stop here anymore, under the heading of the Chapter: **When Time is our Enemy**. A brief account of these plays is given here under:

i) **Sweet Bird of Youth (1959)** was the last play which Tennessee Williams wrote before he turned to what he called serious comedy. In this play Williams describes the desperate efforts of an aging actress and an unsuccessful southern actor to cling to their hopes and their youth and then he confuses their plight with a racial theme and southern politics as per his habit.

The scene of the play is laid in an old fashioned hotel called Royal Palms along with the gulf coast wherein the aging actress Princess Cosmopolis shamed by the fiasco of the recent comeback into films, clings desperately to the vestiges of youth with her last gigolo, Chance Wayne a youngish would be actor whom she picked up in a
Florida cabana giving him the false hope that she would support him to become an actor but in fact using him as merely bellows to cool her lust.

On the other hand Chance Wayne wistfully hopes that the princess would help him with her influence into becoming an actor so that after his success as an actor, he would be living with his beloved heavenly, boss Finlay’s daughter, to whom he had bequeathed the venereal disease which necessitated her hysterectomy which her father feels has ruined her beauty and youth which must be avenged against Chance Wayne by way of castrating him to impotency. Boss Finlay ultimately succeeds in taking his revenge upon Chance Wayne but while the hero is being taken away for castration Chance says: “I don’t ask for your pity but just for understanding—not even that—no. Just for your recognition of me in you, and the enemy, time, in us all.”

j) The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore (1962) is the story of a rich widow, Flora Goforth who has survived four husbands and has retreated to a guarded villa high on a peak of Italy’s Divina Costiera, and begun to dictate her memories in a haze of drugs and alcohol as she fights against death. Her marriages have not been harmonious and happy except the last one. Time has brought her in contact with varied specimens of nature as husbands. Her first two husbands were as ugly as apes and her third husband had looked like an ostrich. But the fourth husband, whose death she is still lamenting, had been the only love of her life. She had loved him deeply and dearly and so she had taken his death to heart, becoming nervous and mentally disturbed. Lost time is lost for ever and it is no use thinking about it because what is past cannot be brought back, but she is unable to forgive herself for putting the car in his hands that drove like the seawind or the storms of the sea. To fight against time she gets everything tape recorded thinking that time would not be able to destroy what is preserved here. Man likes to preserve thinking that he will be able to delude the destructive hands of time through such tactics. Time is against the workings of human nature and man is always anxious to defeat the designs of time. But the time is always victorious defeating post modern man’s purposes and plans.
CHAPTER VII

All ends of the thesis will be tied up in Chapter VII. Side by side with these themes in the major plays of Williams, there are some other themes operative in his plays.

- The first theme which draws the attention of the readers is the theme of loneliness, isolation and alienation. In the crowd of Williams’s characters each individual is first isolated from the society of his own, and then he is alienated by the society, to live alone to die in harness.

- The second theme operative in the plays of Williams is conflict between realism and idealism, physical and the spiritual.

- Then the most important but modern theme taken up by Williams is sexuality as the only satisfying measure for the modern man that can grant happiness to the participants. Marital bond is a thing of the past for the post modern man. One may indulge in sex with anybody in his plays, including enjoying an affair with a gigolo.

- Along with the theme of sexuality, goes on the theme of homosexuality in the plays of Williams. Homosexuality is strictly forbidden by all religions but the post modern society of America has nothing to do with religion. Homosexuality has been legalized in America but its participants are still looked down upon as it is unnatural. Another recurring theme is that of violence by castration.

- Williams gives us a post modern definition of a tragedy. His hero is neither a king nor a queen nor a statesman of a classical tragedy but an ordinary man of the post modern age who invokes the feelings of pity and fear of the audiences. Arthur Miller’s definition of tragedy holds good to Williams. As Miller says “Tragic
feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a person who can lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing, his sense of personal dignity”⁹. This definition of tragedy will be highlighted in the context of post modern themes in this thesis.

**Scope of the thesis**

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) said “poetry at bottom is the criticism of life”¹⁰. A critical study of the plays of Tennessee Williams shows that he also seemed to believe that post modern American drama is the criticism of American life. Although some work at the Ph.D. level has been done in some universities on the themes of Williams but most of the academic researchers have not been able to understand the real import of Williams and they discuss his themes in very ordinary light.

But, the fact is that Williams was not an ordinary dramatist. He was out and out a realist, a naturalist, a psychologist, an existentialist who concentrated upon the ugly contours of the post modern American men and women and highlighted the glaring pimples on the face of the contemporary society. As a realistic dramatist, his temperamental preoccupation was with the revelation of actual, interrelating spirit of American life character and thought with a view to enlightening himself and the spectators and readers. He was an existentialist who believed with Ralph Harper that “his life or anyone’s life is not a problem to be solved but a reality to be experienced”¹¹. That is why he did not like to give any direct dose of moral lesson to the readers. As he said “everyone has agony, the difference is that I try to take my agony home and teach it to sing”¹². He was a part of the agony of his characters and he dramatized their agony as his own, so that the people may learn lessons from the
discomfiture of his characters. Keeping in mind all these facts about Tennessee
Williams, this research scholar has critically examined most of the majors plays of
Williams in the light of the above facts of the post modern thematic concerns.

To this date, no research has been done on this topic namely “Post modern
Thematic Concerns in the Plays of Tennessee Williams: A Critical Study” in any
neighbouring universities, including Panjab University, Chandigarh, Kurukshetra
University, Kurukshetra, M.D. University, Rohtak.