

From *Comedy* to *Tragedy*

—The Struggling Artists in Tennessee Williams's *The Notebook of Trigorin*—

Keiko FURUKI¹

(Received: November 13, 1998. Accepted: November 30, 1998)

When the time comes that nobody can desire me for myself,

I think I would rather not be desired at all.

—Tennessee Williams, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*

Tennessee Williams had dedicated his life-long devotion to Anton Chekhov. He thus revealed his admiration for the distinguished Russian playwright in his *Memoirs*: “I have not been subjected to any influence but that of Chekhov in my profession” (41). Allean Hale likewise points out Chekhov’s influence on the making of Williams the playwright (15). Chekhov’s works ignited Williams’s passion for theatre originally in his early twenties,¹ and it is not so much out of the way to state that the readings of Chekhov had motivated him to conceive the greatest of his works, including *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.² *The Sea Gull*, among Chekhov’s works, particularly spellbound him as “the greatest play” in his youth. As reported in Felicia Londré’s review, Williams was working on the adaptation of Chekhov’s *The Sea Gull* even at his death bed (12). Probably, Chekhovian artists, trapped by the uncontrollable pressure both from the outer and inner world, mirror Williams’s life itself.³ In addition, Williams’s recurrent emphasis on visual effects, symbols or “environment” is closely connected to the concept of “*mise en scene*” of the Moscow Art Theatre for its productions of Chekhov’s works.⁴ Both playwrights stress the importance of the visual, or staging effects, to transform the internal into the outward on the stage. Finally, both among Williams’s and Chekhov’s protagonists, the theme of escape or isolation—from the cities, the real world and its people, and sometimes from their own haunted past—forms a crucial part of their life. Their state of being “confined” within their occupation, family or economical situation obviously elevates their desire for escape—their dream.

As Londré betokens, Williams’s adaptation—*The Notebook of Trigorin* (henceforth *Trigorin*), presents the familiar of his prototypes: Arkadina, with her passion for theatre and fame, fear of losing her youth and constant need for public attention, evokes the images of Alexandra Del Lago in *Sweet Bird of Youth* and Mrs. Stone in *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. Constantine Treplev, the playwright, reminds us of Tom Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* for his constant struggle for achieving his dream. Likewise, the failure of “love” has transformed Nina, a young “provincial” girl, into a fallen woman just as in the case of Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Trigorin the writer, the seducer or the sought after, displays a magnetic quality of

1 Department of Cultural Studies, Faculty of Cultural Studies, Kochi Women’s University

Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*, Reverend Shannon in *The Night of the Iguana* and Christopher Flanders in *Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*. In addition, as in Drewey Wayne Gunn's discussion, the parallelism can even be detected between Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* and Arkadina: both of them vainly search for the "love" they can never receive. Neither of them can "give up a man who has wronged her" (Gunn 314).⁵ Debusscher points out their talent as "accomplished actresses" --Arkadina on the "professional stage," Amanda "in daily life as exemplified by her scene with the Gentleman Caller" (180). Finally, both critics argue that Nina and Laura share the unrealistic attachment to a "dream" and "love" (Gunn 314, Debusscher 181), which is most revealingly staged in the scenes where each of them "gives the man a souvenir before he disappears from their lives" (Debusscher 181).

Both *Trigorin* and *The Sea Gull* deal with the dreamers and their destroyers, presenting "theatre," artistic creativity and "love" as their fundamental subject matters. In this light, both dramas function as the guidebooks for playwriting and acting: Treplev in *The Sea Gull* denounces the conventionality of the theatre, professing that "the theater of today is hidebound and conventional" (109),⁶ and he, as a craving playwright, declares that he should search for a "new form" (109). Yet in the end, Trigorin's conventionality mercilessly takes over the young writer's artistic aspiration. Williams's *Trigorin* also portrays the artists' struggles with the conventional world. He, however, crystallizes the artists' agony and isolation in a more eloquent way. In other words, Williams leads his artists to assert their right to be "creative" more determinedly than those in *The Sea Gull*: Trigorin's speech on his need to be "bisexual" and Nina's final declaration as an "actress" would exemplify this aspect.

Chekhov, who entitles the play as "comedy" despite its apparent gloominess, is far from presenting the artists' struggles as fatal and "tragic." The cynical distance between the playwright and his characters, in fact, allows us to observe its scenes without much emotional involvement. In a letter of 1895 to Alexei Suvorin, Chekhov thus comments on *The Sea Gull*: "The comedy has three female roles, six male roles, four acts, a landscape (a view of a lake), much conversation about literature, little action and five tons of love" (Chekhov 1955, 189). In addition, *The Sea Gull* contains "full of cruel parody" (Rayfield 352) of the classic works of literature, or of the writer's own acquaintance, which completes Chekhov's notion of "comedy" in this play.⁷ His detached way bespeaks his avoidance of individualizing the problems of art and "love." As suggested in his letter, the characters in *The Sea Gull* talk about "love" and "literature" so frequently and self-absorbedly that their agony would seem lessened. Richard Gilman clarifies Chekhov's point, stating that "*The Sea Gull*, then, is a play, a comedy, largely 'about' art and love, creation and the erotic" (263). J. L. Styan displays a similar insight when he argues that "the steady passing" of 'love' in this play generalizes the limitations of all 'love'" (17). The inexhaustible quest for artistic fame and career in the four artists likewise introduces the insufficiency of their artistic creativity. Even Treplev's suicide can hardly ignite the audience's sympathy because of the uncertainty of his motivation. This play, then, as in Styan's term, the comedy, not of the happy ending, but of "the little pains of human pride and vanity (20)," and of human miscommunication.

On the other hand, Williams envelops "tragic" elements through his attempt to particularize the matters of "love" and "art": Trigorin in Williams's version evinces much more sympathetic attitude toward Constantine's search for a "new form." Furthermore, his "bisexuality" adds to his character complexity and

compassion as the needed asset of an artist. Williams also intensifies the agony of Arkadina, who is caught between her profession and motherly duty. Arkadina's fear of aging is not only limited to the loss of her outward beauty. Rather, what she fears most here is the loss of her artistic talent—the destruction of her integrity. Nina is also restaged as an actress with an emphatic aim: Williams extracts the much-quoted line—“I am the Sea Gull....No, that's not it....” (167)—from her final speech. By doing so, he lessens the girlish sentimentalism and melodramatic quality, which have guided her to identify herself with the victimized bird. Finally, the exposition of Constantine's body at the curtain, being juxtaposed with Arkadina's final bow as an actress, heightens his death scene even to the ritualistic: his body is dedicated as the symbol of all the agony of the four artists. The purpose of this paper is, then, to examine the “tragic” elements in the four protagonists in *Trigorin*, and argue how the playwright dramatizes Chekhov's *The Sea Gull* into his own.

As evidently presented in the title, Williams places Trigorin as the central figure in his version. In the original, Trigorin's desultory attitude toward his art and life would make him less insightful and convincing as a writer with an artistic aim. In *Trigorin*, his sensitivity adds “poetic” or emotional quality to the drama. The sexist Trigorin in *The Sea Gull* turns into the bisexual here, which allows him to glimpse the inner feelings of the female characters such as Marsha and Nina. As in his own words; “If I said to you that I think that a writer needs a bit of both sexes in him?” (44),⁸ he insists on the ineptitude of patriarchy in a writing profession. His “softness,” in fact, which refrains him from seeing his vocation as “totally masculine,” generates in him forgiving nature which Chekhov's Trigorin lacks.

Yet Chekhov refuses to portray Trigorin simply as a dazzling, flawless and “fashionable” celebrity as it would appear. After the much acclaimed performance of *The Sea Gull* at the Moscow Art Theatre, Chekhov reportedly advised Constantin Stanislavsky, the director and the actor who played Trigorin, to wear “torn shoes and checked trousers” (Stanislavsky 359).⁹ In essence, also in Chekhov's view, the renowned writer does not utterly symbolize the worldly success. The artist, just like Treplev, is drawn to his internal world of art, and significantly, it is this self-absorption which attracts Nina most compellingly to him. His constant reference to “the notebook” implies that, in fact, he locates his life primarily in his writing—his fictional world. In this respect, Chekhov's notion is not radically remote from Williams's where the writer attempts to depict his heroes somewhat as “crippled.”¹⁰ The crucial difference between the two essentially comes from the degree of the playwrights' distance from their characters.

Remarkably enough, Williams thoroughly alters the relation between the two writers—Trigorin and Constantine. Williams's Trigorin appears on the scene in a much earlier stage than Chekhov's. In *The Sea Gull*, the young writer's experimental work hardly attracts the celebrity's attention. In *Trigorin*, nevertheless, the elder writer exhibits professional enthusiasm toward Constantine's new play even before the performance starts: “I'm looking forward to it, I understand it's in a new form...good-good, very good” (8). These encouraging words reveal how profoundly the writer values the young playwright's artistic expression.

Here in Williams's version, it is also Trigorin who reproaches Arkadina when she heartlessly intrudes into the performance. He sensibly criticizes Arkadina's self-centeredness and arrogance, saying; “Be kind

tonight, it's their night, you've had so many stages, allow them to have this platform, Irina" (17). The maturity and calmness distinguish himself from the ruthless writer in Chekhov's version. In fact, Trigorin in *The Sea Gull* simply dismisses the play's existence itself through a casual judgement; "I didn't understand a word, but I enjoyed watching it" (119). He absorbs himself into his machine-like duty of writing so entirely that he is unable to receive the agony of the other writers. Indeed, he can hardly impress the audience as an imposing artist for his impertinence and lack of sympathy. In Chekhov's version, Dorn, the reserved observer,¹¹ operates as the healer for the damaged youth. In Williams's work, Trigorin, instead of Dorn, plays the role after the fiasco of the performance: "Do you realize how young you are? You have a lot of time to learn the discipline of writing as a craft. You already have the talent, you must simply go on, go on, regardless of frivolous reactions" (27). It is plausible, then, that the elder writer identifies his own youth and agony in Constantine.

What is more, Trigorin treats the young actress, Nina, in a much more humane way in *Trigorin*. Trigorin in *The Sea Gull* carelessly drives himself into the temporary affair with the young, ingenuous girl, "having nothing better to do" (137). Yet, even after the casual dismissal of his young mistress, nothing remorseful attacks his life as a celebrity. For the machine-like, merciless writer, the "provincial goose girl" is nothing else but a "subject for a short story" (137). At the end of Act II in *The Sea Gull*, when Nina informs him her ambition to go forth to an acting career, he displays almost no replication. On the other hand, Williams's Trigorin reveals misgiving about Nina's guileless desire for fame:

I do understand your wanting to leave some day. But I hope that when you leave for the excitement, the lights of what is called the world—cities, theatres, cafes—I hope most earnestly it won't turn bitter and you won't be haunted as I am—by the regrets and—the guilt of abandoning someone or something—that held you in a dream. (47-48)

Here Trigorin certainly typifies the haunted, darker side of his vocation. He fears that the search for public recognition would turn him into a heartless writing-machine. This fear, though temporarily, engenders in him compassion to protect this artless, young maiden. This speech evokes the image of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, who has discarded his family for his ambition. The haunted memory of the beloved likewise resides in Trigorin, which heightens the poignant, nostalgic quality of this work. Additionally, the perfect moment of "kindness" and communion between the two artists, which has been absent in *The Sea Gull*, conceives a moving scene. Here we could detect one of Williams's reappearing subjects—the potent, though temporal, human need for affinity.

Trigorin's benevolence, additionally, attracts the other characters than Nina and Arkadina in Williams's version. *Trigorin* distinguishes itself from *The Sea Gull* primarily for Trigorin's capacity of "love." For instance, at the end of Act I, it is Trigorin, not a father-like Dorn, to whom Marsha reveals her unrequited love toward Constantine. Trigorin in *The Sea Gull*, as a womanizer and sexist, uses women mainly for the "subjects" of his stories. Here in Williams's adaptation, his sexual ambiguity enables him to embrace the hopeless and transitory quality of "love." Trigorin, furthermore, displays his grandeur of "love" in the final scene: in the original, Dorn whispers Treplev's suicide into Trigorin's ear at the curtain. In Williams's adaptation, after the slight pause, his look "turns inward," and instantly "he knows," not only the fact of his suicide but also what has driven him to death, without being ever told. As discussed before, here he

beholds the young playwright as his double: he senses how much one's desire for worldly fame torments, and in the worst case demolishes, one's quest for artistic creativity.

Alvin B. Kernan thus identifies the contrast between Trigorin and Treplev as artists in *The Sea Gull*, commenting; "If Trigorin, the realistic writer, suffers the death of objectivity, Trepleff, the symbolist, suffers equally from too much subjectivity" (105). As in Kernan's examination, Chekhov's Trigorin has discarded his internal world in exchange for the commercial success as a published author. Williams's Trigorin, nonetheless, resides himself between the "realistic" world of public recognition and the "symbolic" world of Treplev. He attempts to "objectify" himself as an artist, yet his hidden yearning to treasure his internal truth also causes him to suffer. The two contradictory elements—the quest for worldly fame and the search for internal world—thereupon, recast Trigorin as a struggling artist.

II

Williams's touch, correspondingly, remodels Arkadina as a "tragic" heroine. In Chekhov's version, she occupies the stage as an archetype of a renown who is totally spoiled by earthly success. In fact, artistic motivation seems quite scarce in Chekhov's portrait of the actress. She would rather cherish her outward appearance and public attention than her artistic talent itself, which undeniably stresses her shallowness. J. L. Styan's point thus clarifies such an aspect of her disposition:

Her work is the constant selling of her self; and if it is true that she does not look to the future or think about her old age, it is because a woman who trades on her looks without other reserves of strength faces a spiritual death when she faces the reality. Thus she reveals her fear of future, and under the apparent confidence there is turmoil. (45)

She thus avoids confronting with the passing of time, since her youthful appearance operates as the sole weapon to secure her position. She triumphantly proclaims: "I make it a rule not to look into the future. I never think about old age or death. What is to be, will be" (124). By thus pretending the outward calmness, she unconsciously limits her own potentiality as an artist. Her desperate attempt to cling solely to "youth" elicits her "comical" aspect because, obviously, one cannot set a high valuation on an aged actress who wants to play only the young maiden's parts.

Nonetheless, Williams likewise presents Arkadina in *Trigorin* as an aesthetic figure who is immovably conscious of "time" as her "enemy." She senses that the passing of time would demolish her artistic talent along with her youthful appearance. The playwright, then, sarcastically accentuates the approaching old age of Arkadina in several places, which has been less frequent in Chekhov's version, such as Trigorin once maliciously mentions her using "the dye pot." As in the portrait of Trigorin, Williams never stages her as a spotless "star." Rather, he articulates her darker side—her passing youth and deficiency both as an actress and mother to underline the agony of recognizing her "end."

Williams also designates Arkadina as a much loner heroine than in *The Sea Gull*. Chekhov's Arkadina hardly appears alone: she is always accompanied by Trigorin and her followers and constantly demands everybody's attention to her. On the other hand, Williams's Arkadina is to face a moment of total alienation at the end of Act III. This is the moment in which she senses Trigorin's attraction toward Nina, her approaching old age, and the guilty feeling toward her neglected son, and "there is dignity and tragedy in her stoical isolation" (69). In this belief moment, we detect her inner turmoil wrapped by her outward

confidence. She, at this moment, senses that the end of her career is unmistakably approaching to her.

Williams embellishes the curtain of *Trigorin* with Arkadina's "graceful" bow. In the original version, the news of Constantine's suicide has not yet reached Arkadina at the close of the play. Her ignorance underlines the play's "comical" aspect for its disregard of the grave incident. Given the fact that Treplev most vehemently wanted to appeal to his mother, her ignorance at this point marks the play's anti-climax. In Williams's version, however, she is directly to face her son's unexpected death. His body, with the ritualistic lighting effect of the "lantern," composes the most dramatic moment of this play. She then moves to the backstage, to the footlight, where she takes her "final" bow to the audience, as if she bade farewell to her life as an actress and a mother. Then "the instinct of nearly a lifetime prevails as she bows. Her face is a tragic farewell to her profession, her life, to her deeply loved son: her victim" (98). The actress faces her limitation as an artist just as she learns her incapability as a mother. Yet notably enough, this is her stage in which she can perform a part of an aging actress and mother, not a young maiden, for the first and last time, without any pretension.

Arkadina's struggle also embraces her capacity of "love." In Chekhov's version, Arkadina treats her lover, Trigorin, mainly as one of her assets. In addition, she disregards her son because he disrupts her public image as a forever-young actress. She hardly displays much sympathy toward her penniless son and ailing brother while she melodramatically cries over the "tragic" fate of "Camille." She, moreover, refuses to admit Trigorin's attraction toward Nina, deeming it as his temporary infatuation. She then utilizes her sexual charm to regain his love, which makes her seem rather "comic," given the age difference between Nina and herself: when Trigorin confesses his fascination with Nina, all she can do is to flatter him in an overly melodramatic fashion:

My beautiful, wonderful...You are the last chapter of my life! [*Falls on her knees.*] My joy, my pride, my bliss... [*embraces his knees.*] If you leave me, even for one hour, I won't survive it, I'll lose my mind, my wonderful, magnificent one, my master.... (147)

As displayed here, she here appeals to her lover as an "ordinary" woman, repeatedly stressing how helpless she would be without his support. She must exercise her "sex"—the "feminine" subordination—to secure her "love." This degrading act would appear incompatible with her status as an actress with a lofty artistic aim.¹²

In a way, however, Arkadina's subsequent aside; "Now he is mine" (148), would reveal more of her tactful, theatrical scheme. Here she performs a scene, based on the Maupassant's passage—the very scenario which she has rejected earlier in Act II:¹³

And it goes without saying that for society people to pamper novelists and entice them into their own circle is as dangerous as for corn merchants to breed rats in their barns. And yet they are loved. Thus when a woman has chosen a writer whom she wishes to capture, she lays siege to him by means of compliments, courtesies, and favors.... (125)

We must detect her double *entendre* beneath her dexterous performance. Here she strives to "act" not only for her "love" but also for her "career." Of course, she requires the famed writer's presence to add value on her profession. More to the point, she has to "act" the given part even though she is to strongly rebuff it in her real life: her fate as an actress depends on how skillfully she can "act" through this scene. Because, if

she can no longer exercise her sexual charm to her lover, how can she play a younger woman convincingly enough to the audience? Yet her complexity is in fact so subtly presented that the audience would easily miss her inner turbulence. Just as seen in the recent Blue Light Theater Company's production of *The Sea Gull*, when aging Arkadina persuades her lover "by mounting him," it would be most unlikely for the audience to glimpse the "artistic" aim of the actress.¹⁴

Williams's Arkadina conveys her theatrical technique in a much more effective way: she triumphantly declares that she is "a woman of the theatre and of the world" (62) to Trigorin, and after the unsuccessful "feminine" attempts, threatens him with her possible disclosure of his bisexuality: "Did you imagine that I was not aware of your perverse attraction to what's regarded as --unspeakable!--Abomination! But I? --Having compassion, I--" (62). The imposing attitude discloses the ego-centric side of her nature. Yet, prominently enough, she here asserts her authority as a gifted actress. Here it is Trigorin who requires her "power" for his "perversity"--his "softness," as he confesses to her; "I am actually a coward--morally flabby--soft--submissive" (63). Here we can detect another of Williams's prototype--an aggressive woman and a submissive man--the seducer and seduced.

Nonetheless, Arkadina's humane attribute would impress the audience as genuine as she thus reveals her mind; "Boris, I know you and I accept you and--this I swear--I love you with my whole heart" (63). She accepts his "perversity" and tries to face him with her honest and even motherly feelings, not with the calculating tactics as in *The Sea Gull*. In Chekhov's version, since Arkadina's career is constructed primarily on her sexual charm, her artistic intention would emerge less visible. Even though Chekhov embraces her artistic value on the stage, it is not openly staged. In Williams's work, on the other hand, Arkadina, as "a woman of the theatre," insists on her remarkable strength of acceptance and endurance. This assertion itself contributes to Williams's primal intention to dramatize this play as a "tragedy" of suffering artists.

III

Williams recreates two other younger artists who confront with the limitation of their artistic creativity; Constantine Treplev and Nina Zarechnaya. Their potentiality as a playwright and an actress in a "new" age, though mercilessly demolished in *The Sea Gull*, is staged more poignantly in *Trigorin*. Considerably enough, however, Chekhov does not picture the young playwright and actress as the totally defeated. Rather, he underscores the cruelty of the world and social injustice which easily crush their potentiality. Yet their inexhaustible search for art undeniably dwells there. Though confused, Nina has determined to dedicate her life to theatre by the end of the play. Treplev ends his life "drifting in a chaos of images and dreams (168)," but at least, his "chaos" discloses how much he suffered for his attempt to realize his artistic theatre. His hatred for conventional theatre, along with his search for a "new" form, foretells his endowment as a writer. Williams's attempt is, therefore, to bring forth their internal more visibly, mainly by dramatizing Nina's speech and Constantine's suicide in the final act.

Indeed, the two Constantine Treplevs both display their passion for theatre when they insist that the theatre needs "new forms." Bigsby further explores this statement in *The Sea Gull*: "The statement is not without its irony given Treplev's own incapacity, but it carried the force of a playwright who was himself dedicated to such innovation" (29). His search for "new forms" conceives an experimental play of Act I. His

serious artistic attempt, however, is cruelly dismissed and ridiculed by the audience at that time. Yet his lines from the play manifest a new meaning when Nina quotes them in Act IV: Nina in Act I hesitates to perform in the play in which she cannot find any "love" nor "living characters." She, however, rather confidently recites the lines now that she locates herself as "an actress." At this moment, Constantine's search for "new forms" is reconstructed in Nina's internal world.

Williams correspondingly attempts to eliminate *comical* aspects from Constantine to highlight his latent gift of a writer. The most significant change in Constantine strikes the audience in the final scene: In *The Sea Gull*, his suicide is reported most undramatically to Trigorin, whom the young playwright has unsuccessfully challenged. The audience, consequently, would visualize the impact of his death on the others rather than his motive itself. Indeed, ironically enough, Dorn and Trigorin must keep his mother away from the news for the fear of causing her serious distress. Yet it is his mother who occupies the son's mind even when his beloved, Nina, finally leaves him, judging from his last words; "It would be too bad if someone were to meet her in the garden and tell Mother. That might upset Mother" (168). Because of this failure of reciprocity and the playwright's ironical detachment, the young protagonist stages himself rather as a pathetic and comical figure. His death, therefore, without any turmoil on the surface, is to offer the moment of anti-climax and melodramatic solution on the stage. In *Trigorin*, on the other hand, Williams contemplates Constantine's death in a much more theatrical way: he dedicates Constantine's body to the final stage, and Arkadina's "bow" redefines his sacrifice as the indispensable. Her career as a celebrated actress is to end with her son's death. Constantine's unredeemed love for his mother is finally rewarded, and the mother and son unite in the valediction to their "art," which is to lessen the melodrama of the scene.

The search for "new" theatre, in essence, is most intensely dramatized in Nina the actress. In the fourth act of *Trigorin*, Williams presents her as an actress with a circumscribed artistic aim. He reconstitutes his Nina by extravagantly revising her conversation with Constantine: the most drastic change, as discussed above, is the elimination of the celebrated phrase; "I am a sea gull...No, that's not it" (167) from her speech. Her sentimentality and confusion have disappeared in Williams's adaptation. Surely, she describes herself as "a confused girl" (40) in Act II. Yet now, her firmly-established consciousness as an artist enables her to accept her total isolation in the hostile environment:

A sea gull. To whom does a sea gull belong? Can they feel love? It must be a thing of the moment, then flight again and even when flying together they seem to be each—alone...

....

Oh, I know the Spartan requirements of an artist, how one thing after another has to be discarded, those things that are just for effect, to please vulgar tastes, such as— sentimentality— extravagances of manner. But suppose the aspiring artist divested himself of all these false adornments and underneath them found there was nothing left that his audience could see? (88)

Her failure to achieve commercial success as an actress, Trigorin's cruel act on her, her subsequent pregnancy and their parting—these afflictions, paradoxically, have planted her a sense of triumph instead of defeat: she never blames Trigorin who has most callously abandoned her. She even tries to pacify Constantine when he criticizes Trigorin's cruelty. She then calmly insists that the blame would be on her because it was she who threw herself at him when he belonged to Arkadina. The tranquility and

detachment here have transformed her from “a confused girl” into a mature artist.

Now Nina, with her artistic aim, tries to persuade Constantine to detain faith in his search for a “new” form in art, unshaken by the degenerated, worldly expectation:

NINA: Don't listen, continue, if it's your vocation, have faith that you'll achieve it. [*Again the sound of Trigorin's laughter is heard.*] It may require a certain brutality of you, things of an unpleasant nature are required in the pursuit of an art. *I am now an actress!* I perform with delight, not terror, I'm enraptured, not sick to death with the uncertainty of it. I act—

CONSTANTINE: Beautifully... you're an artist.

NINA: Not yet, but—

CONSTANTINE: You will be! (93)

As exemplified in Nina's speech above, her triumph affirms that she has not been “a sea gull.” Maurice Valency defines “a sea gull” as the symbol of “the beauty of all living things”—“all the joy and beauty of life which are defaced at every moment by forces so blind and so careless that they cannot be called fate” (155). He then goes on to argue that the symbol bespeaks the theory that “in the wastefulness of nature there is no greatness, no tragedy, nor any trace of the heroic. What happens in the play is a very little thing. It is no more tragic than the plucking of a flower” (155). In Valency's context, Williams sees the “sea gull” rather in Arkadina and Trigorin, who can no longer bear the strain of remaining in an isolated state of an artist. Their feeling of abandonment, actually, is most theatrically presented as the game of “lotto” in the final act—the symbol of circumscribed human fate. Nina alone survives, without any support of fame, wealth nor “love.” She no longer identifies herself as the “plucked” flower.

After all, the two Ninas basically embrace the same intense yearning for their artistic accomplishments, just as in the Trigorins, Arkadinas and Constantines. Actually, Chekhov's own observation of Nina certifies that he entertained no intention of staging her merely as a naive, “provincial” girl. It is a well-known fact that the world premiere of *The Sea Gull*, in the Alexandrine Theatre of St. Petersburg on October 17, 1896, ended in the total fiasco. Yet the one thing which particularly satisfied Chekhov at this performance was the acting of Komissarzhevskaya, “a relatively unknown actress,” who played Nina (Chekhov 1955, 118). The significant feature of this actress, according to Chekhov, is that she could convince the audience of Nina's “acting talent.” Even during the first act, in which Nina seems not to have learned how to act, “when she started the monologue everything became serious and solemn”¹⁵ (Chekhov 1955, 121), and she constructed these lines not as “parody” but as “poetry” which coincided with Chekhov's direction. If Nina were to be designated as a totally talentless girl, her existence would mar the play's intention to offer a comedy of “human pride and vanity.” For, how can one detect “pride and vanity” where no capacity exists?

Indeed, it is originally her admiration for artistic career, not her search for protection, which has led Nina to the frivolous relationship with the famed writer. We could interpret the “I am the Sea Gull...No, that's not it...I am an actress” (167) lines rather as her words of fixed determination than as those of her defeat: here she denies Trigorin's influence and control on her life and insists that she is an “actress” of her own making, not the “subject” of his story. Moreover, she has never loved, nor has she sought support from Constantine. She has been searching for a locus in which she can be independent as an artist. Therefore, Chekhov could not conceal his disgust when he viewed Roxanova, the honored actress who

played Nina at Moscow Art Theatre premiere in 1898, “imitated naivete” in the first act, and “wavered between tearful melodrama and pathological contrivances” in the last act (Chekhov 1955, 124).

In this respect, Chekhov and Williams entertain the identical views concerning Nina’s characterization. In Williams’s case, however, her struggle for the achievement in art develops into the fiercer when she has to encompass “a certain brutality” and “things of unpleasant nature.” Additionally, Williams underlines Nina’s determination to live as an actress by eliminating the lengthy, melodramatic recounts of her past with Trigorin: now she is ready to face her total isolation, holding the faith in her artistic potentiality. Williams also makes her child transfer to “a new world”—America. This association symbolically points out the way to establish “a new form” for the theatre both in Chekhov and Williams, regardless of the age and place in which it is located.

V

Williams also unites each character with the theme of “art” and “love.” It accordingly gives a certain continuity, or wholeness, to this dramatic piece. The four protagonists of *The Sea Gull* are always surrounded by incongruity and dissension. Williams’s locus, on the other hand, is to bring their internal world of art onto the surface, stressing the hopelessness of “love”: their alienated state would reach the audience most functionally when juxtaposed with the matter of “love.” In Chekhov’s version, the “tons of love” appear on the scenes as stereotypes; a famous writer who demolishes a young, innocent girl, an aged actress and her gigolo, a youth who suffers from hopeless love and a naive maiden who throws herself at a middle-aged celebrity. Their “love” relationships, as thus, rise rather as prototypes than individual matters. Their ecstatic feeling for impossible love underlines their excessive self-consciousness, which elicits their comical aspect as Marsha, another unfortunate lover, remarks with self-mockery; “It’s simply nonsense. Hopeless love—there’s no such thing except in novels. It’s of no consequence” (153).

In *Trigorin*, conversely, Williams accentuates the one-sidedness and despondency of “love.” For instance, Marsha in the same scene of *Trigorin* more dramatically presents the speech on her “hopeless love”: “My only hope is finally, at last, Semyon will be transferred somewhere so that never seeing Kostya, I’ll gradually—[*A melancholy waltz fades in*]” (76). To be important, she here features “love” mainly as her personal problem. The individual hopelessness existed among the characters, paradoxically, connects each episode of “love” with the wholeness. Moreover, it also evokes the image of the artists who dedicate their lives to the endless search for “new” art. To clarify this argument, Williams sensibly dramatizes the failure of reciprocity both in “love” and “art” even at the very beginning of the play:

MEDVEDENKO: Masha, tell me, why do you always wear black?

[*She is obviously inattentive to him.*]

You’ve got no reason to be depressed. You’re in good health. Your father’s well-off. [*He takes her hand.*]

MASHA: Don’t, please don’t. I’m touched by your feeling for me but I just can’t return it, that’s all.

MEDVEDENKO: If I were not so wretchedly poor, twenty-three rubles a month!

MASHA: It isn’t a question of money. I could love a beggar if...

MEDVEDENKO: The beggar was Constantine. Isn’t that so?

MASHA: His mother treats him as one—loves him? —Oh, yes, but love can be cruel as hate. She

will despise his play this evening and make no secret of it and she'll be coldly polite, polite as ice to Nina, you'll see. It will be clear that she's what she believes she is, the star that's the greatest in Russia. She probably thinks she's the greatest star of the world. (1)

The diversified aspects of the four artists' life of "love" and "art" are densely written into this opening: Masha's black dress, for instance, predicts Constantine's death. It even alludes to the end of Arkadina's artistic career. Her subsequent speech furthermore discloses the love-hate relationship between the mother and son—Constantine's dilemma as an intent dramatist and Arkadina's overvaluation of her "artistic talent." Additionally, their argument over the money matters guides the audience to the fact that the mother forces her son to lead a penniless life for her self-centered purpose of life—the achievement of her career as "the greatest star of the world."

Likewise, the failure of reciprocity in love occupies this scene: Medvedenko reveals his unrequited passion toward Masha. She subsequently outbursts her yearning for Constantine. Constantine's emotional outbreak never truly reaches his mother nor Nina. This never-reciprocal cycle of "love" functions as the overture of the intricate relations and struggle among the four artists. In essence, this beginning, which is efficiently adapted by Williams, underscores the isolation existed among all the characters, in this play. Stephen Hollis, the director of the Cincinnati premiere of *The Notebook of Trigorin* in 1996, comments on Williams's dramatization: "He'd taken the shell of the play and breathed his own life and poetry into it" (Londré 12). Chekhov's "comedy," despite its sarcastic tone on the surface, has generated compassion into the audience with his description of "tons of" love and "human pride." Profoundly moved by "its feeling for the sad extinction of youth and talent in an oppressive environment" (Spoto 46) beneath its irony, Williams encompasses "tragic" element in this comedy through the unification of each character with the common theme of "art" and "love."

The symbolism and sensitive characters of *The Sea Gull* had kept captivating Williams throughout his writing career. In the summer of 1981, Williams launched forth into the free adaptation of the great classic. It was staged in Vancouver within the year, and in the following year, in Los Angeles (Spoto 46, Londré 12). The Cincinnati premiere of *The Notebook of Trigorin* in 1996, after the interval of fourteen years, was dedicated to commemorate the one-hundredth anniversary of *The Sea Gull* production at the Moscow Art Theatre (Londré 12). Two distinguished playwrights are now reunited in a most dramatic way at the distance of one-hundred years. More dramatically perhaps, the staging of *Trigorin* contributed to the rediscovery of Williams's unknown works, as its start.¹⁶ Moreover, his association with Chekhov, along with the estimation of the lately performed *Not About Nightingales*,¹⁷ has verified another asset of Williams—that of a playwright with profound social conscience.

Notes

1 Hale recounts the beginning of Williams's admiration for Chekhov: Williams began to read Chekhov's works just after his recovery from physical and nervous breakdown, which attacked him on the eve of his twenty-fourth birthday in 1935 (15). See also Spoto, p. 46, 353.

2 For the discussion of Chekhov's influence on the composition of *The Glass Menagerie*, see Drewey Wayne Gunn,

- "More Than Just Chekhovian: *The Sea Gull* as a Source for the Characters in *The Glass Menagerie*" and C. W. E. Bigsby, "Entering *The Glass Menagerie*." Joe Allen Quintus also points out the similarity between Williams's *Streetcar* and Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, stating that both plays deal with "the loss of dear things" (202). Alvin B. Kernan indicates the resemblance between *Streetcar* and *The Sea Gull*, pronouncing that both works present "theatre" itself as their subjects.
- 3 Debusscher offers enough parallels between the lives and artistic motivations of the two playwrights: "Chekhov had been—and Williams still was—a mediocre student in school seeking refuge against pressures from the outside world in the private activity of reading and writing. Williams easily pictured the small town of Taganrog, which Chekhov loathed, as the forerunner of his own hateful St. Louis. And in Chekhov's interest for creatures broken in body and mind, quietly pining away over unfulfilled dreams and unrequited passions, Williams detected a sensitivity much like his own who could explore the dark motivations of characters and their survival strategies" (179). For the parallels between their backgrounds, refer also to Spoto, p. 46.
 - 4 Maya Turovskaya underlines the necessity of dealing with the concept of "environment" or "*mise en scene*" for the productions of Tennessee Williams's plays in Russia: She goes on to argue that "Williams's stage directions are little poems in prose, which cannot be replaced by the stage props," and emphasizes the importance of such devices as music or light for functionally staging his works. (28-29)
 - 5 For the identical qualities between Amanda and Arkadina as failures in love, see also Debusscher, p. 180.
 - 6 Anton Chekhov, *The Sea Gull* in *Chekhov: The Major Plays*, trans. Ann Dunnigan (New York: Signet, 1964). References to this play are inserted parenthetically into the text.
 - 7 Rayfield thus lists Chekhov's "parodies" of this play: "The shot bird symbolizing youth destroyed was aimed at Ibsen's *Wild Duck*; "the young writer Treplev, jealous of his mother's lover, parodies Hamlet and Gertrude. The middle-aged actress, Arkadina, who holds all the men—her brother Sorin, her son Treplev and her lover Trigorin—in thrall, caricatures every actress that Anton had ever disliked..." (352). Carol Strongin names the structure of this play as thus; "it is on the continual ironic parodying of the characters' self-conscious poses" (367).
 - 8 Tennessee Williams, *The Notebook of Trigorin* (New York: New Directions, 1997). References to this play are inserted parenthetically into the text.
 - 9 Stanislavsky, first, was totally puzzled by this suggestion of Chekhov. He insistently characterized Trigorin as "a young writer, a favorite of the women," and played his part in an elegant costume. Yet after a long speculation, he found what the playwright truly meant: "Of course, the shoes must be torn and the trousers checked, and Trigorin must not be handsome. In this lies the salt of the part: for young, inexperienced girls it is important that a man should be a writer and print touching and sentimental romances, and the Nina Zarechnayas, one after the other, will throw themselves on his neck, without noticing that he is not talented, that he is not handsome, that he wears checked trousers and torn shoes. Only afterwards, when the love affair with such 'seagulls' is over, do they begin to understand that it was girlish imagination which created the great genius in their heads, instead of a simple mediocrity. Again, the depth and the richness of Chekhov's laconic remarks struck me. It was very typical and characteristic of him" (359).
 - 10 Turovskaya would clarify this argument by stating; "Williams had a fierce dislike for and fear of power, and even his 'stars' are in some sense crippled or infirm" (24).
 - 11 Rayfield defines Dorn as an autobiographical figure of Chekhov for his objective distance from the others. He also

- reports that Chekhov presents Trigorin as another cruelly parodied version of himself (352).
- 12 For the discussion of Arkadina as the satire of Chekhov's acquaintance, see Rayfield, p. 352.
- 13 David Cole discusses the link between reading and acting in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*, and he indicates how Arkadina and Nina refuse to be entirely controlled by the reading texts. He refers to her "performance" with Trigorin in this scene: "Her position seems to be; 'Yes, I have read the text and, yes, I now take the very action prescribed by the text. But for all that, I deny that I enact the text'" (179).
- 14 For the review of the Blue Light Company production of *The Sea Gull* on Off-Broadway, see Peter Marks, "Theater Review; A Romance to Stymie Women of the 90's," *New York Times* (June 3, 1998).
- 15 Rayfield thus underscores the incomparability of her monologue: "Komissarzhevskaya hit on a solution to the play's most intricate monologue, Treplev's symbolist play-within-a-play which Karpov feared would make the audience laugh. Her fine voice hypnotized the listener, as she worked from her lowest alto to a climax and then lowered to inaudibility as 'all our lives, completing their sad cycle, perish'" (394).
- 16 Stearns informs that numerous numbers of Williams's unknown, or unperformed works are lately being rediscovered, which is to give a new light on the study of his later works. According to him; "the delay was partly due to his protective friend Lady Maria St. Just, a co-trustee of his estate whose 1994 death loosened his intimates' hold on his work" (ID).
- 17 Williams's *Not about Nightingales*, which was written in 1938 and has been unperformed since then, opened March 5, 1998 at Royal National Theatre in London, under the direction of Trevor Nunn. The actress Vanessa Redgrave, who discovered the manuscript at University of Texas at Austin and attempted to bring it onto stage with much enthusiasm, greatly contributed to the realization of its production. This production is to give a new perspective on critical understanding of Williams's works. See Matt Wolf, "Arts Abroad: Finding Out How Tennessee Williams Got That Way," *New York Times* (April 21 1998), and Janice Paran "Music in the Lower Depth," *American Theatre* (May/June 1998), pp. 45-46., for the detail of the reception of this work and its performance.

Works Cited

- Biggsby, C. W. E. "Entering *The Glass Menagerie*." *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Matthew C. Roudane Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997: 29-44.
- Chekhov, Anton. *The Sea Gull*. *Chekhov: The Major Plays*. Trans. Ann Dunnigan. New York: Signet, 1964.
- . *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov*. Ed. Lillian Hellman. New York: Farrar, Straus, 1955.
- Cole, David. "Chekhov, *The Sea Gull*." Ed. Harold Bloom. *Anton Chekhov*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House, 1998: 175-184.
- Debusscher, Gilbert. "Creative Rewriting: European and American Influences on the Dramas of Tennessee Williams." *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. 167-188.
- Gilman, Richard. "The *Sea Gull*: Art and Love, Love and Art." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 91: 2 (Spring 1992): 257-287.
- Gunn, Drewey Wayne. "More than Just a Little Chekhovian: *The Sea Gull* as a Source for the Characters in *The Glass Menagerie*." *Modern Drama* 33 (1990): 314-318.
- Hale, Allean. "Early William: The Making of a Playwright." *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. 11-28.
- Hollosi, Clara. "Chekhov's Reactions to Two Interpretations of Nina." *Theatre Survey* 24 (1983): 117-127.
- Kernan, Alvin B. "Truth and Dramatic Mode in the Modern Theater: Chekhov, Pirandello and Williams." *Modern Drama*

- (September 1958) : 101-114.
- Londré, Felicia . "A Samovar Named Desire." *American Theatre* (November 1996) : 12.
- Marks, Peter. "Theatre Review: A Romance to Stymie Women of the 90's." *New York Times* (June 3 1998).
- Paran, Janice. "Music in the Lower Depth." *American Theatre* (May/June 1998) : 45-46.
- Quintus, John Allen. "The Loss of Dear Things: Chekhov and Williams in Perspective." *English Language Notes* 18 (1981) : 201-207.
- Rayfield, Donald. *Anton Chekhov: A Life*. New York: Henry Holt, 1997.
- Spoto, Donald. *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985.
- Stanislavsky, Constantin. *My Life in Art*. Trans. J. J. Robbins. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1924.
- Stearns, David Patrick. "Tennessee Williams' True Legacy: Recently Revealed Works Herded to Stage." *USA Today* (September 4, 1996): Sec: Life. ID.
- Strongin, Carol. "Irony and Theatricality in Chekhov's *The Sea Gull*." *Comparative Drama* 15 (1981) : 366-380.
- Styan, J. L. *Chekhov in Performance*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971.
- Turovskaya, Maya. "Tennessee Williams in the Soviet Union." Trans. Benjamin Sher. *Tennessee Williams Literary Journal* II: 2 (Winter 1991-1992) : 19-31.
- Valency, Maurice. *The Breaking String: The Plays of Anton Chekhov*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Williams, Tennessee. *Memoirs*. New York: Doubleday, 1975.
- . *The Notebook of Trigorin*. New York: New Directions, 1997.
- Wolf, Matt. "Arts Abroad; Finding Out How Tennessee Williams Got That Way." *New York Times* (April 21, 1998).