

# The Image of Alma from the Perspective of Performativity

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**Abstract:** Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly an outstanding dramatist after O'Neill in the history of American drama. Many of his works are about the description of southern belle, among which *Summer and Smoke* is one of the representative works. Alma, the heroine of *Summer and Smoke*, is a typical southern belle and has obvious characteristics of performativity. Behind her performativity is the domination of patriarchal discipline and Puritan asceticism. Therefore, from the perspective of performativity, this paper mainly discusses Alma's re-evaluation of self in the collision between soul and body, and finally she constructs her true self.

## 1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is an American playwright equivalent to Arthur Miller and Edward Albee. Tennessee's works lay emphasis on the interpretation of the native culture of the American South and the portrayal of southern belles. Of all works, *Summer and Smoke* (1948) is literally Tennessee Williams' most poetic and thoughtful play. The play is divided into 12 scenes and narrates the growth of heroine and the collision between body and soul. Taking Alma, the heroine in *Summer and Smoke*, as the main research object and based on Judith Butler's performance theory, the author discusses how Alma reevaluates her life in the collision between soul and body, explores the real self, and achieves the construction of the real self.

## 2. Overview of Performativity

"Performativity" can be traced back to the 1950s. It was put forward by the British language philosopher J.L. Austin to explain his speech act theory. Austin studies language from the perspective of behavior and believes that language is not only constative, but also capable of performing "performative" behavior. Austin's view of language is very different from traditional language cognition. In Austin's view, language not only reflects the world, but language also has the ability to change the real world. Austin affirmed the performative ability of language, that language to the world is no longer the relationship between signifier and signified, but the active practice of subject to object. Austin affirmed the initiative of language and the situation in which a performative can be effective. He pointed out what is felicitous or happy performative and what is infelicitous performative. Regarding the latter, Austin mentioned literary language, including drama, novels, and poetry. He deems that literary language may be empty or invalid, and emphasizes that speech act theory does not include non-serious literary language.

John Searle, an American philosopher of language, is a student of Austin. His view of language is influenced by Austin, and he systematically discusses the "non-seriousness" of literary language. Derrida deconstructs and critically interprets Austin's view of language. Post-structuralist philosopher Judith Butler has done much in gender studies. Her gender ideology to a large extent is influenced by Derrida and Foucault. The views explained by Foucault in his *The History of Sexuality* (1976) and *Discipline and Punish* (1975) have greatly inspired Butler's perception and construction of subjectivity. Derrida's concepts of "quotation" and "repeatability" have inspired and deepened Butler's perception of gender performativity. Although Butler's theory of gender performance still has its drawbacks and has been criticized since its inception, it is undeniable that Butler's performativity has exerted a profound imprint on women and gender studies, and its scope of influence has been extended to the field of cultural studies and political criticism.

German famous scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte in *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetic* said: “When the term “Performativity” has lost its influence in its original philosophical discipline of language-speech act theory once promoted the idea that speaking is behavior-it ushered its heyday in the cultural studies and criticism in the 1990s.” (Fischer,26) It can be seen that performativity is no longer just a static term in the philosophy of language, but becomes a dynamic research tool and direction with increasing influence in the field of cultural studies and literary criticism.

Alma, the heroine in *Summer and Smoke*, has obvious characteristics of performativity. Under the dual domination of patriarchal discipline and puritanism, she takes her body as a field for performance and constructs her identity as a southern belle. However, people can be view as desire machines. Inevitably, Alma doubts the authenticity of her self in the collision between spirit and body. She finally decides to return to her real self, embrace survival aesthetics, and construct the real self.

### 3. “Performativity” Engraved on the Body

In American literature, southern belle is a very noble and elegant title, symbolizing immaculacy and pulchritude. Every move of southern belle reflects the culture and morality of the old South. However, in fact, southern belle resembles the old Southern myth of The United States, and their qualities have been greatly exaggerated. Southern belle is exaggerated and glamorized images of women. And southern belle is the product of certain historical conditions. Under the slavery plantation economic system in the South of the United States, Puritanism, which strangled the nature of women and emphasized asceticism, shackled the thought of southern belles. The planters designed a template for women to flatter their families. They designed southern women to be southern belles who spoke well, behaved well, and were proficient in many arts. Southern women, for their part, consider themselves subordinate to men, and in order to please man, they have to make themselves more like or even higher than southern belles. Therefore, they must cover up their inner desires, suppress their real emotions, and be obedient to the ruling will of patriarchal discipline and power. Under the “gaze” of patriarchal discipline and power, southern belles gradually internalizes the “performativity” into an instinct, and acquires the sense of identity and existence through performance.

Performance is the progressive tense described by the body. The body is not only an important medium of performance, but also the content of performance, and the performer itself. Alma's “performativity” is embodied in the self-identity construction of the subject in different situations. This identity construction is manifested in Alma from a very young age. At the beginning of the play, the readers are impressed by Williams' description of Alma as a child:

“Alma, who was only ten years old, appeared. She was wearing a sailor shirt with ribbons in her braids. She already had the dignity of an adult; she had a particularly delicate, gentle and spiritual quality, which made her different from other children. She has the habit of holding her hands, with one hand supporting the other, just like receiving holy bread in the sacrament. This is a habit that she will always maintain as an adult.”(15)

Butler said: “The body is not only material, but the continuous materialization of identity. One does not merely have a body, but more importantly does one's own body.” (Butler :98) We can see that Alma executes her body under the structure of patriarchal discipline and laws from her dress and manners. Behavior and posture are the elements that constitute identity and self-awareness, but these elements are performative, so her identity is fictitious, and is constructed and maintained through physical practice and discourse symbols with performativity. This process of execution also constitutes a framework for Alma's self-recognition and self-identification. Alma's performance represses her original libido drive, and the ultimate result of this repression is to turn herself into a symbol of patriarchal laws in patriarchal society and make her become the bearer of this repressive law. Usually, performance takes place outside the body, and the external space produces a series of symbols and meanings that represent one's identity. At the same time, the internal space cannot be ignored. The internal space points to more than a spatial location, it embodies the subjectivity and

the inherent fixity of the self. The internal space and the external space constitute a binary distinction, which stabilizes and consolidates a consistent subject. Alma stabilizes and consolidates her identity as southern belle through performing externally and obeying patriarchal disciplines.

In addition to her pretentious gestures, another performative feature of Alma in the play is her pretentious utterances. "... She's a little premature. Her formality and coyness were evident in her nervous laughter. Her voice and gestures were entertainment for the church for years. She was the rector's daughter. People of her age consider her funny and pretentious..." (24) Language is a way for her to construct the identity of southern belle. Alma likes to employ obscure words and sentences to describe ordinary things in daily life. For example, when she watches a firework display with John, she employs "pyrotechnical display" instead of "fireworks display" to express the firework display. It seems that Alma is the subject of language manipulation. She employs the image of southern belle as a reference to select and control the form, appearance, pace and rhythm of her language. In fact, Alma's language of southern belle is a trap with great adsorption power. It swallows and hides the subject in the language system, and the subject is engraved and transformed by the language. Alma is trapped in the swamp of being southern belle, and the language she employs is subject to patriarchal discipline and power. Alma strives to make herself unique through her words and deeds. It seems that this is a way to find a reasonable sense of existence for her identity.

Performance is an act of reconstruction. Shekner pointed out: "The act of reconstruction is self-performing, as if I were someone else, or performing in a state of ecstasy as if I were outside of myself, or not myself. But that 'another person' can also myself be in another state." (Shekner: 76) Alma's behavior undoubtedly has obvious characteristics of performativity. She constructs the identity of southern belle through performance. Under the discipline and domination of patriarchal power, Alma, in order to get the recognition and affirmation of patriarchal society, abandons her own uniqueness to make herself more consistent with the female image in patriarchal society. The construction of Alma's identity as southern belle is also accomplished through a series of exclusion and negation. Her identity possesses characteristics of performativity, and she carries out disciplined production under the control of patriarchy through the operation of presence and absence on the surface of her body. Alma is restricted to a framework centered on the patriarchal discipline power, and the body becomes a historical text that can be read, and what it writes is the cultural tradition of the American South.

Foucault pointed out in *Discipline and Punishment* that people live under the repressive discipline of various social institutions and discourse and obtain their own subjective cognition. Butler absorbed and borrowed Foucault's ideas, pointing out that suppressing desire is not the only means in the cognitive process of the subject, but also by "forcing the body to accept and express those restraining laws as the essence, style and inevitable existence of their behavior". (171) To a large extent, Alma's image of southern belle is an obedience to the power of patriarchal discipline, performing under the control of patriarchal laws. Alma's body has been transformed into a surface and place engraved with southern culture by the patriarchal power and discipline. Alma's body is completely branded with history. Alma's image of southern belle is not completely formed by herself. It contains elements of history, and it is elements of history that limits the possibility of Alma's self-development. Alma is imprisoned in the framework of patriarchal rule. However, Alma's identity as southern belle is also fragile and unstable, and it is a denaturalized field of performance that can be rewritten.

#### **4. The Collision and Fusion of Soul and Body**

Although the reputation of *Summer and Smoke* is inferior to that of Tennessee Williams's other dramas, the artistic value and ideological connotation of this drama really should not be underestimated. Human beings are segmented in duality, seeking an outlet for release in the collision between soul and body. As the famous American writer and critic Brooks Atkinson put it: "It has deeply explored the painful struggle of the individual soul... Its ability to see through the secrets of person's soul is shocking. *Summer and Smoke* abounds spiritual power on the stage today.

““Desire Machine” is a philosophical concept proposed by French philosopher Deleuze. *Summer and Smoke* can be regarded as a desire machine, full of various streams of desire, nomadic and complex.

As the daughter of parson, Alma was influenced and enlightened by Puritan asceticism since childhood. She entrusts her secular feelings to religious beliefs and chaste “soul”. Alma abides by asceticism, regards herself as the aesthetic object of morality, and strictly implements everything required by morality. Nietzsche believes that “asceticism means an attempt to make oneself 'above' the world, a kind of indulgence in a sacred form. Asceticism is their main weapon in the struggle against chronic pain and boredom.” (Nietzsche:85) Alma regards asceticism as the doctrine of life. She strives for the sublimity of the spirit and the purity of the soul. Asceticism is also the license for her to pursue the “sublimity”. Alma maintains her image as a southern belle while believing in asceticism. She thinks that “it is absurd to let me forget that I am the daughter of a parson. The daughter of a parson is no different from anyone who does not forget that she is a lady.” (26) She followed the “truth” told by her father and religion. Under the moral discipline of Puritan asceticism, Alma regards herself and her life as a career that she insists on for God's most sublime and glorious ideal. She employs her life to produce her own “personal” quality and character. The ideal of asceticism is Alma's glorious desire, and at the same time her way of resting in the void of God.

Alma is keen on pursuing sublime meaning on the religious level, and suppresses and eliminates the secular desires and emotions of human as heterogeneous factors. Asceticism opposes life, denies human's secularity, and regards gaining life as going astray. Isn't this emasculating the existence of human? The two forces of “secularity” and “divinity” are playing game on Alma. Although “secularity” has retreated into the background under the suppression of patriarchal discipline and Puritan asceticism, “secularity” is always waiting for an opportunity to fight back. Alma is enduring spiritual torment and suffering, her life can be viewed as a contradiction!

Alma's pursuit of asceticism reflects her fear of nothingness to some extent. She needs a sense of identity. Alma is proud of her name, which means “soul”. Her name gives her comfort, temporarily separating Alma from the secular world and establishing an eternal connection with the empty God. “Alma: ... For me--well, that's the mystery and the principle behind being--that constant struggle and transcendence, transcendence of the limitations that we are given as human beings. ...” (76) In fact, this allegorical name puts a fixed label on Alma, and it is a discourse practice with religious mystery that can easily lead to a rigid impression. It easily dispels Alma's individual uniqueness and makes Alma tend to be the external representation of this discourse symbol. In Nietzsche's view, Alma is depraved, because Alma denied her vitality, she gave her freedom to patriarchal power and God, and she lost her instinct. In essence, Alma's identity is passively generated.

Alma lacks knowledge of the true self, she has been in a state of chaos. As a human being, the streams of desire in Alma's heart also point to secular emotions under the dominance of Puritan asceticism. Alma's desire exists in an unconsciously nomadic or natural state, and she yearns for catharsis. John, the protagonist of the play, is the outlet for Alma to vent desires and find her true self. John made Alma realize that human has not only soul, but also body. During a debate, John asked Alma to look at the anatomy of the human body. He tried to correct Alma's view of the body. “You have been wrong all the time. You thought you were made of rose petals. Turn around and look at it, it'll do you good! “ (623) Under John's enlightenment, Alma began to focus on her body, and she began to face her desires. Some scholars believe that Alma's self-awakening has turned her body into a gap for catharsis, and this transformation has made pure and reserved Alma more and more secular and full of lust. In fact, this change is the only way for Alma to realize her true self. Alma's turn to body can be regarded as a deterritorialization movement, a kind of “flight” that produces reality and creates life.

In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault showed that there is a interdependent and contradictory relationship between power and sex. Alma's awakening makes her aware of the hypocrisy of the moral system and ethical values she followed in the past. She affirms the importance of the body, and the body returns from the edge to the center. Foucault stated that “nothing is more unnatural and more harmful than suppressing sexual desire” (Foucault, 1986: 134). Alma realizes that the

suppression of sexual desire and the denial of body make herself incomplete, and that her previous self is only a self with performativity oppressed by patriarchal power. Alma's pursuit of sexuality is a flight from the patriarchal order and the puritanic ideology. She breaks away from the Puritan doctrine of "giving up yourself" and returns to the truth of "knowing yourself". Alma retrospects the origin of the body, reassesses her life, harmonizes the blending of soul and body, and finally finds her true self.

## 5. Conclusion

*Summer and Smoke* profoundly reflects the patriarchal power and Puritan asceticism's intoxication and imprisonment on the body and soul of human. We can see Williams' concern for human true self and affirmation of spiritual growth. Nietzsche once said: "People's estimation of the value of life is also based on misunderstandings, but people's survival requires these illusions, so most people may not know this is an illusion, and they will not know it." (Guoju Huang, 164) In the play, we can see that Alma's body has obvious characteristics of performativity. She is in the chaos of self-cognition, struggling in the collision of soul and body. After experiencing a period of life of "performance", Alma realized the truth of life. She chose to break away from the territories governed by patriarchal power and Puritan ascetic thoughts, and realized the flight and de-territorialization of self with performativity. In the end, Alma retrieved the dignity and value of the individual and realized the construction of the true self.

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