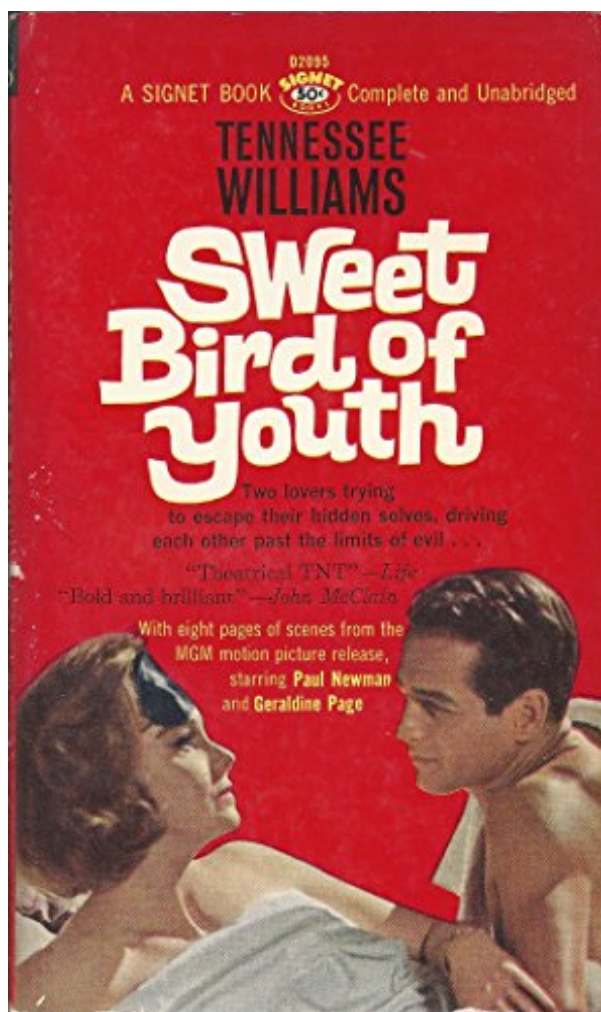
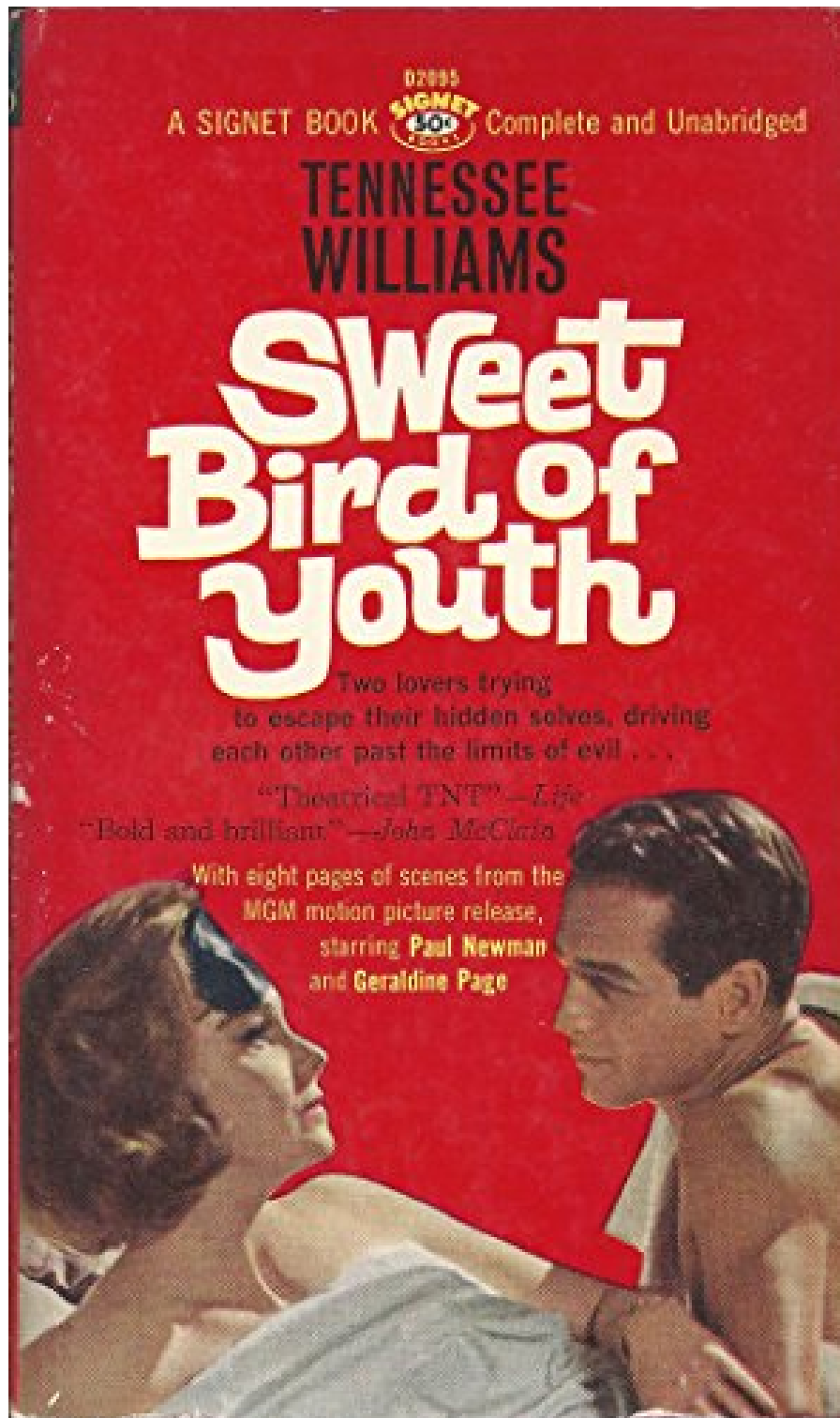


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On the Edge of the Abyss: Lost Youth, Lost Innocence, & Carnage

By Gary F. Taylor

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was well established as a major talent by the 1944 *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*. By the end of the 1950s he was easily among the best regarded dramatists in world theatre. But although Williams continued writing until the year of his death, after about 1960 he found both critical and popular success increasingly elusive.

*SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH* opened in 1959 starring a remarkable pairing of Paul Newman and Geraldine Page and ran for about a year--but subsequent stagings and adaptations have not been as successful. A film version starring Newman and Page tampered with original script and emerged as stodgy instead of exciting; a major 1975 Broadway revival lasted fifty performances; and the play has not fared as well over time as such works as *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* and *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF*. It is rarely studied and rarely performed.

*SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH* concerns a handsome drifter named Chance Wayne who has been picked up by a neurotic and has-been movie star with the unlikely private name of The Princess Kosmonopolis and the stage name of Alexandra Del Lago. After a drug-and-alcohol fueled road trip through Florida, the two have arrived at the semi-resort community of St. Cloud, the location of which is not specified but which from other geographic references seems to be on the Mississippi gulf coast.

It happens that Chance has specifically come to St. Cloud in the hope of reuniting with his teenage love Heavenly Finley. We soon learn that on his last visit Chance gave Heavenly a nasty venereal disease that ultimately resulted in a hysterectomy, and that Chance has been warned away by Heavenly's father local political power Boss Finley, a vicious racist who is behind the recent castration of a black man accused of seducing white women. Heavenly's Aunt Nonnie and Boss Finley's mistress Miss Lucy warn him away; when Alexandra Del Lago recovers from her stupor and finds that her come-back film was a success, she too urges Chance to forget his young love, accept the fact that time has passed it by, and escape with her to California. But Chance refuses to leave, even though he knows that his efforts are futile, and the play ends with the strong implication that he too will be castrated by Boss Finley's minions.

There are several difficulties with the play. The first is that the story is essentially a re-writing of Williams earlier *ORPHEUS DESCENDING*, which was a horrendous failure on Broadway in 1957 but which is nonetheless a noticeably better script. *SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH* is also somewhat awkward in its shifting between realism and theatricality, the plot is somewhat implausible, and the second act is weak. But perhaps

the single most deadly problem facing SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH is that there isn't a likeable character in the entire play, with the possible exception of movie star Alexandra Del Lago, who ultimately accepts herself for what she is and has the good sense to walk away before the carnage begins. And this too is yet another problem with the play: we are never allowed to see the carnage, we are only left to assume it.

All things considered, SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH is not among the genuinely great Williams plays, and indeed Williams would write only one other masterpiece, the 1961 NIGHT OF THE IGUANA, before beginning the rapid slide into alcohol and drugs that sapped his talents. But oddly, the very problems with SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH are what make it interesting, challenging, intriguing; one longs to see a really good staging of it and thereby know for certain if it works better on the stage than it does on the page. Interesting, but newcomers to Williams' work would do better to begin with the more obvious titles.

GFT, Amazon Reviewer

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