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The Eccentricities Of A Nightingale Summer And Smoke Two Plays

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Introduction: Two Sides of the Same Southern Belle

Few playwrights have captured the delicate, often destructive tension between the spirit and the flesh quite like Tennessee Williams. In his body of work, he frequently revisited themes of isolation, desire, and the painful collision between societal expectation and raw human instinct. Nowhere is this creative obsession more evident than in the fascinating literary duality of **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays**. These two works, which share the same core characters and setting, offer an unparalleled glimpse into Williams's own evolving artistic vision. While *Summer and Smoke* (1948) is the more famous and frequently performed of the pair, *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*(written in 1951, but revised later) represents Williams's second attempt to tell the story of Alma Winemiller. By examining these two plays side-by-side, we uncover not just a revision, but a profound reinterpretation of a woman caught between the constraints of Southern gentility and the chaos of her own passionate heart. This article delves deep into the intricate world of these two masterpieces, exploring their differences, their shared DNA, and why they remain essential studies in American theatre.

The Genesis of Glorious Hill: Shared Foundations

Before dissecting the differences, it is crucial to understand the common ground. Both plays are set in the small, stifling town of Glorious Hill, Mississippi, at the turn of the 20th century. The central narrative revolves around **Alma Winemiller**, the hypersensitive, refined daughter of a minister, and **John Buchanan Jr.**, the handsome, pragmatic, and sexually liberated doctor-next-door. At its core, the story is a classic, tragic romance of mismatched timing: Alma, the soul, yearns for a spiritual and romantic connection with John; John, the sensualist, initially pursues Alma's more earthy counterpart (the fiery Rosa Gonzales) before eventually seeking the very spiritual comfort Alma once offered—but only after Alma has undergone a profound and devastating transformation.

The shared themes of **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays** are unmistakable: the division of the human soul into the "stone" and the "fountain" (spirit vs. flesh), the suffocating nature of religious repression, and the tragedy of missed connections. However, the manner in which Williams tells this story is radically different in each version.

The Architecture of the Soul: "Stone" and "Fountain"

One of the most striking shared metaphors is the anatomical chart that hangs in John's medical office. In *Summer and Smoke*, this chart becomes a central visual symbol of the play's central conflict. Alma is fascinated and repulsed by the clinical depiction of the human body—a map of nerves, bones, and organs that represents everything she has been taught to suppress. John, in contrast, sees the chart as a diagram of reality, devoid of

mystery. The play's famous "stone and fountain" dialogue—where Alma declares that the soul is a fountain

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale—is a direct confrontation of the Williams

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, this adaptation from its absents. Williams removed the explicit, clinical symbol of division, opting instead to let the conflict simmer in the language and the actions of the characters. This single change signals a major shift in focus from the intellectual debate of the soul to the raw, psychological pain of the characters.

Major Divergences: A Tale of Two Almas

The most significant difference between the two plays lies in the characterization of Alma Winemiller. In **Summer and Smoke**, Alma is a neurotic, tightly-wound "spinster" whose eccentricities are presented as a minor social oddity. She is fragile, prone to migraines, and desperately clinging to the fading vestiges of her family's social status. Her transformation by the play's end is a tragic hardening—she declares that she has "come around" to John's way of thinking, embracing the "stone" of the flesh, but she is left alone, a hollow victory.

In **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale**, Alma is a far more complex, vibrant, and tragically self-aware figure. The title itself is a clue: her eccentricities are not just quirks, but a central, defining feature of her personality. She is no longer simply a repressed minister's daughter; she is a woman whose peculiar, artistic nature is her gift and her curse. Williams gives her sharper, more witty dialogue, and her downfall feels less like a moral lesson and more like an inevitable tragedy of personality. The name change is also significant. In *Summer and Smoke*, the title references the fleeting, ephemeral nature of passion (summer) and the lingering, hazy aftermath (smoke). *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*places the focus squarely on Alma herself—a nightingale, a creature of song and beauty, who is inherently eccentric in a world that demands conformity.

Character Reconfiguration: Rosa, John, and the Parents

The supporting characters also undergo significant revisions in **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays**.

- Rosa Gonzales: In Summer and Smoke, Rosa is a fiery, stereotypical "Latin spitfire"—a clear foil to Alma's pale, WASP-ish repression. She is loud, sensual, and ultimately a threat. In The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, Rosa is rendered with greater depth and sympathy. She is no longer a simple symbol of sexuality; she becomes a more nuanced character who is also a victim of John's casual cruelty.
- John Buchanan: In the earlier play, John is a confident, almost arrogant skeptic. He is a man of science who enjoys toying with Alma's delicate sensibilities. In the later version, John is softer, more conflicted, and less overtly aggressive. His transformation from sensualist to seeker of spiritual comfort feels more organic, making the tragedy of their missed connection even more poignant.
- The Winemiller Parents: In Summer and Smoke, Reverend Winemiller is a stern, distant figure, and Mrs. Winemiller is a childish, senile woman. In The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, Williams gives the mother a more prominent and disturbing role, emphasizing the genetic and environmental roots of Alma's own "eccentricity." This adds a layer of psychological determinism that is less pronounced in the earlier version.

Thematic Shifts: From Debate to Character Study

The shift from **Summer and Smoke** to **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale** is ultimately a shift in thematic focus. *Summer and Smoke*is a play of ideas. It is a dialectic between the soul and the body, played out against the backdrop of a small Southern town. It is occasionally didactic, with characters acting as proponents of their respective philosophies. The play's structure is built around this debate, and the ending—while tragic—feels like the conclusion of a philosophical argument.

The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, on the other hand, is a character study. It is less concerned with the grand debate of spirit vs. flesh and more interested in the tragic interior life of a single, extraordinary woman. The play is tighter, more focused, and emotionally devastating. Williams cut a significant amount of dialogue,

streamlined the plot, and removed many of the supporting characters' subplots. The result is a cleaner, sharper, and more painful look at isolation and the price of being different. The play is not about a debate; it is about a broken heart.

The Ending: Two Different Tastes of Tragedy

Perhaps the most telling difference between **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays** is the ending. In *Summer and Smoke*, the final image is of Alma, alone on a park bench, having just been rejected by John. She speaks to a traveling salesman, a clear symbolic replacement for John, and we understand that she is preparing to enter a life of meaningless, transactional encounters. It is a grim, moralistic ending—she has become the very thing she once feared.

In **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale**, the ending is subtly but powerfully different. After John's final rejection, Alma does not sit on a bench. Instead, she walks out into the night, alone, but with a sense of tragic dignity. She does not pick up a salesman. She simply walks away, a solitary nightingale whose song has been silenced by an unhearing world. This ending is less moralistic and more purely tragic. It suggests not a fall from grace, but the quiet extinguishing of a rare and beautiful light. This change elevates the play from a cautionary tale to a deep, empathetic portrait of a woman who was simply born in the wrong time, in the wrong place, with the wrong soul.

Why Both Plays Matter: A Writer's Revisioning

Studying **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays** is a masterclass in the art of revision. It reveals a playwright who was never fully satisfied, who understood that a story is never truly "finished" but can always be refined to better capture the truth he sought. For audiences and readers, having access to both versions is a rare gift. It allows us to see the "rough draft" of a great work and then witness the author's own critical analysis of his creation.

Many scholars and critics argue that *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* is the superior work—a more mature, more compassionate, and more artistically cohesive play. It strips away the didacticism of the original and leaves only the pure, aching heart of the story. However, *Summer and Smoke* has its own fervent defenders who appreciate its broader canvas and its more explicit engagement with philosophical themes. The existence of both plays enriches the legacy of Alma Winemiller, making her one of the most fully realized and debated characters in American drama.

The Legacy of Alma Winemiller

Ultimately, the conversation surrounding **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays** is a conversation about the fate of the sensitive, artistic soul in a crude, pragmatic world. Alma Winemiller is a precursor to other great Williams heroines, like Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguana*. She is a woman who lives by the "fountain" of the spirit in a world that values the "stone" of the flesh. Whether she is called "Alma" (meaning "soul") or "the Nightingale," she represents the beautiful, fragile, and ultimately doomed resistance of poetry against prose.

For theater lovers, actors, and directors, the choice between the two plays is a significant one. Producing *Summer and Smoke* offers a chance to stage a classic, well-known work with a clear, dramatic arc. Producing *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* offers a chance to present a more intimate, challenging, and perhaps more emotionally resonant version of the same story. Both are valid, and both offer immense rewards.

Conclusion: A Dual Masterpiece

In conclusion, **The Eccentricities of a Nightingale Summer and Smoke Two Plays** are not simply two versions of the same story; they are two distinct works of art that illuminate different facets of a singular, powerful vision. Tennessee Williams, in his relentless pursuit of truth, gave us a precious gift: the opportunity to

see his creative process in action. We can trace the evolution of his thought, the refinement of his craft, and the deepening of his dramatic ambitious, sprawling, and intellectually thrilling first draft of a masterpiece. *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale* stands as the hauntingly beautiful, emotionally devastating final word. Together, they form a unique and compelling study of one of America's greatest playwrights and his most enduring, tragic heroine. They remind us that the soul, like a nightingale's song, is a fragile, eccentric, and utterly irreplaceable thing.

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