



Myths and Symbols in Tennessee Williams's Drama

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams, the renowned American playwright of the 20th century, is undoubtedly the greatest symbolist of American theater. This paper focuses on how symbols and myths combine in his plays to underscore the major themes and concerns that permeate his work. The principal function of his symbols is to establish an emotional connection with the audience, to create a play so emotionally charged with concrete and general categories of quintessential images, the realization of which brings down the psychological walls of our divided ego, turning the particular into the general, the unknowable into the known, and also making the grotesque acceptable, as another dimension of the human condition. Williams employs two types of symbols- concrete and abstract- to evoke this common reaction. One of the most significant functions of his symbols is to provide his characters with a mythical dimension or stature. Williams viewed his characters not as realistic but as larger than life. One way of making his characters extraordinary was by universalizing the peculiar and the bizarre, by finding those similarities or archetypes in myths, legends or tales that would touch the collective unconscious and would make the personal vicissitudes meaningful.

Keywords: Symbolist, myths, concrete and abstract symbols, larger than life characters.

There is no doubt that Tennessee Williams, the renowned American playwright of the 20th century, is the greatest symbolist of American drama. In his collection of essays, *Where I Live* (1978), Williams points out that his plays rely on metaphorical ways of expression and that symbols represent nothing but the natural and the purest language of a play.

American critic June Bennett Larsen (1977) holds that Tennessee Williams is a direct successor of Symbolists, whose major concern with the battle of man with the void, made them seek shelter in dreams. Their desire to be surrounded by environments similar to the sensitive poetic soul meant refusal of Realism in drama. To communicate through a means that transcended the ordinary language, they created a new language, an evocative one, charged with symbols. These writers were fascinated with the past, especially the Middle Ages. Consequently, very often their works combined mixed dramatic forms, including music too. Symbolist plays centered on dualisms, especially dream-reality and life-death ones. Disapproving of the old concept that art is an imitation of life, the Symbolists claimed that life should imitate art. To them, artificiality was a way to come to terms with life. Theirs was not an actors' theater, because, theoretically, the actors in Symbolist plays were puppets.

Essentially the escape of symbolists from reality was the decadent soul. One aspect of decadence highlighted the taste for the fearsome, sick, and perverted. Another important aspect of the decadent soul was the interest of Symbolists in the mystery of life. They accepted the reality of death and were always haunted by isolation and death. Edgar Allan Poe, in particular as it was presented by the Charles Baudelaire, was the inspiration of many of these symbolist writers. Poe exercised on Williams both a direct and indirect influence through French and German Symbolists. Poe and Williams, both Southerners, shared a fascination with death that has always been characteristic of the South.

Paradoxically, death has served as a vital force for much of the work of Tennessee Williams. He almost wrote constantly during periods when he believed he was dying. Despite the well-known concern of Williams for death, he also believed that it can be postponed: "I almost did not die so many times but I did not die because I really did not want to... I think I can delay death. .. I think most of my works have dealt with death. I am interested in death and sensuality. " (Jennings, 1986). Consequently, some of his works, as they deal with the absurdities of life, are somewhat optimistic. Here Williams departs from the early Symbolists; he does not believe that life is worthless. Most of his characters never abandon life because they always reach out to something and usually someone. One of the words that appears with an unusual frequency in his work is the word "outcry." It is even the title of one of Williams's

late plays for which the renowned writer and critic Clive Barnes (1975) stated that one day it will be described as one of the most prominent Symbolic plays of the twentieth century. Although the outcries of his characters are rarely heard, they nevertheless cry out.

Many of Williams's plays use symbolic titles (*The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*). However, ironically, those plays that reflect more clearly the symbolic aesthetics do not have symbolic titles. Among the best examples we can mention *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Outcry* and *Camino Real*. In the stage directions of *Suddenly Last Summer* (1971), Williams notes that the setting may be just as unrealistic as that of a dramatic ballet. The setting is a tropical garden, part of a Gothic villa of the Victorian era in a New Orleans area known as the Garden District. Mrs. Violet Venable is an elderly wealthy woman who is confined into her magnificent house since she lost her only son, Sebastian, whose death captures the play. Mrs. Venable has invited a young and very handsome doctor at her home to bribe him so that he can perform a prefrontal lobotomy on her niece who has been confined into an institution for people with emotional problems. Niece Catharine arrives, accompanied by her stingy mother and her brother, and a nun, who is ironically called Sister Felicity, who controls every movement of Catharine. The dualism of life and death pervades the whole play.

As the drama unfolds in the afternoon sunshine, Catharine reveals the truth about Sebastian Venable-the truth that his mother wants to uproot out of Catharine's brain. Sebastian is a gay poet who seeks out the beautiful, the talented and the young people, and who uses his mother to procure them until she is disfigured by a stroke. The very last summer of his life, Sebastian asks Catharine to accompany him to a Mediterranean island called Cabeza de Lobo where he changes his refined manners. Using Catharine as bait, he goes to a public beach where his actions antagonize him with a group of hungry boys who devour parts of his body. The analogy between the death of the sea turtles and Sebastian's death is obvious. His death sets the action of the drama in motion. With his drawn-out life, he escapes into distant parts of the globe in search of God, Sebastian has a big resemblance to his late-nineteenth-century Symbolist colleagues. But, ironically enough, he never appears in the play, he is an "unseen" character. However, it is mainly through this character that Williams reveals the influence of symbolic aesthetics, because precisely through the figure of Sebastian he deals with the topics of perversion and death. The end of the play, however, is positive because the doctor takes into account the possibility that Catharine's story may be true.

Whereas *Outcry* (1973), is not just a two-character play, but a play within a play. With its sense of isolation, the dualisms of dream and reality, life and death, the enigmatic nature, and its anticipated end, *Outcry* is probably the simplest example of symbolic aesthetics.

The exterior drama that shapes the internal action focuses on a sister and brother who have been abandoned by other members of a travelling theater company whose leaders they were. They are in a "state theater of an unknown state" (Williams, 1976), not knowing how they ended up there. The troupe actors send them a telegram saying they left because "You and your sister are - *crazy!*" (Williams, 1976). Clare explains to her brother, who had once been confined to a psychiatric hospital that they had abandoned because of his promiscuous and perverted behavior. Felice, as his name implies, is an androgynous male that his sister calls a "hermaphrodite." He insists that they fulfill their commitment by playing *The Two- Character Play*, which Clare declines because she knows that the play is endless. The acting of "the play" constitutes the internal action.

The "reality" of the drama is confused with the inexistent fantasy of the play within the play, as Felice and Clare are the "play" characters. This second interior plot shows sister and brother together in a home where they have been left without food and money. They are so frightened that they cannot leave nor seek the help they urgently need. Very soon it becomes apparent that they are imprisoned due to fear and guilt, which is symbolized by the giant golden sunflowers surrounding the house. It also becomes apparent that they are playing their past.

Undoubtedly, *Camino Real* (1953) was the first major work of Tennessee Williams, which broadly reflected the symbolic aesthetics. In its foreword, Williams wrote that it was his desire to give the spectators his sense of "something unshakeable and unlimited, that swirled like water in the mountains, or as clouds that took the form of a storm, or as images of dissolved and change of a dream. This kind of freedom is not chaos or anarchy. Rather, it is the result of a very careful work, and in this work I have devoted more consciousness to the shape and construction of what I did in another work. Freedom is not achieved by simply working freely."(Williams, 1971).

Camino Real is the epitome of the plastic theater concept of Tennessee Williams. It represents the synthesis of poetry, music, ballet, lighting and spectacle. The action is not limited to the stage. The entire theater room was exploited by Williams and director Elia Kazan.

In line with the isolation feeling of the Symbolists from the real world, the setting of the play is a city surrounded with walls that has a harbor without a designated geographical location called Camino Real. The action exists out of time. From the structural point of view, play consists of a prologue and sixteen scenes. Again as his Symbolist ancestors, William looked back to the past: his characters are a mixture of archetypes borrowed from legends, literature, and history. In addition to the well-known dualities of life and death, the past-present dualism has been added to the dream and reality.

The characters are allegorically divided into dreamers and realists, good and evil. They are all stuck in the desolation of the waste land known as Camino Real. The phantasmagoria unfolds, and a hunchback rings some bells announcing the emergence of legendary characters, all of them dreamers and, consequently, "good". In addition to Don Quixote, there are Marguerite Gautier, Casanova, Esmeralda (from *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* by Victor Hugo), and the poet Lord Byron. Those who embody the evil (the realists) include Gutman, the archetypal soldier of the offensive squad running Camino Real and who, in the role of the narrator, announces the number of blocks in the series of scenes; The Gypsy, Esmeralda's mother and pimp; a group of ordinary officers and people, including the two old and stingy whores Prudence and Olympia (the antithesis of the Marguerite Gautier in *The Lady of the Camellias*), as well as the Street Cleaners in tuxedos who symbolize death.

Recalling the past, with its sense of division, the use of nature, the use of colors (especially of gold and red colors) to evoke emotions, its sense of hopelessness, and its explicit opposition to realism, *Camino Real* bears the signature of the Symbolists. However, this play was Williams' homage to the triumph of the human heart over disaster and misery, anxiety, and despair. Esmeralda's prayer is evidently Williams's prayer for mankind. Also, through the portrayal of Kilroy as a golden-hearted warrior who beats the evil (Gutman) and death, Williams' statement is clearly symbolic. The positive end of the drama, therefore, clearly separates Camino Real from the pure symbolic plays.

The dramatic use of universal evocative symbols by Williams stems from his concept and interest in the mutual relationship between the playwright, the spectator, and the play. He characterizes himself as one of those playwrights who are allowed to just feel. Creative motivation, he believed, has its starting point at the special and sometimes unusual interests of the artist himself. Williams is acutely aware, however, that the unique nature of individual consciousness defines the self and serves as an obstacle that separates the self from the other,

to the extent that "We are all sentenced to solitary confinement inside our skins, for life."(Williams, 1958). Thus, in his interview for the *Playboy*, Williams identifies "loneliness" as his main and most repeated theme. Not merely pleased with the dramatization of this essential state of human existence, Williams offered his theater as a corrective tool for it. He testified of a very personal, even intimate relationship with the people who went to see his plays, and conceived of his plays as the means through which he sought to become one with the spectators.

Williams' basic theatrical concern therefore was to transform his own personal emotions, personified by the illnesses, neuroses, and the peculiar and sometimes strange illusions of his characters into broadly recognized feelings. He would rise above personal concern to that of all people, shift from self-understanding to the general one. Through joint connections secured by mythical symbols and ritual patterns, Williams tries creating a sensitive response of his spectators to his characterization of the lonely, the neurotic, the alien and the persecuted, thus evoking the shock of the recognition through which the spectator takes for granted the characters' psychic conflicts. The main function of Williams' symbols is to build an emotional bridge with the spectator, to create such an emotionally loaded drama with the general categories of archetypal images that their realization breaks down the psychological walls of our divided self, making the particular general, the unknown known, and even the grotesque acceptable as another dimension of the human condition.

Two types of symbols, concrete and abstract, were employed by Williams to evoke this common response. Concrete symbols materialize the psychic reality of characters in essentially sensual forms, which evoke emotions through physical, visual, and auditory sensations. The subjective world of the characters thus emerges on the stage from the stage structures or props, through gestures or significant movements of the actors, from the sounds of music, often by lyrical rhythms of speech, as well as by the effects of light and color.

They constitute what T. S. Eliot (1950) defined as the "objective correlative" of the state of mind or feeling, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that particular emotion; such that when external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience are given, the emotion is immediately evoked. Thus, the objective correlative of the wounded psyche of a given character may lie in the furniture of the stage decor: the retarded development of Laura Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*) in the box of trinkets stuffed with small animals of glass, the suppressed sexuality of Serafina delle Rose (*The Rose Tattoo*) in an urn placed in front of a small shrine, the frigidity of Alma Winemiller (*Summer and*

Smoke) in the form of a massive stone angel or the childish regress of Shannon (*The Night of the Iguana*) in a hammock located at the center of the stage.

Emotions of longing or memories of lost innocence can be evoked through the music or unrestrained voices of children in the play: the repeated bleating of the unleashed goat in *The Rose Tattoo* reminds us of the need to fulfill the physical present, while the constant, monotonous, dragging sound of a lizard tied down beneath a veranda in *The Night of Iguana* evokes disappointments of unrealized desires. The vain effort of a character to restore the past can be embodied by his dress: Amanda's yellow dress and her bouquet with narcissuses (*The Glass Menagerie*), the large bath towel and the Brick Pollitts' crutches (*Cat on Hot Tin Roof*), the Serafina's enlarged corset (*The Rose Tattoo*) or the collar of the defrocked priest Shannon which is never buttoned (*The Night of the Iguana*).

Finally, the awareness of a character can be demonstrated through lighting shades, light pink or dark twilight and early dawn light that personify the character's dreams or obsession with the past, while short moments of radiation can symbolize his/her confrontation with the present. These techniques often used simultaneously create an atmosphere in which the objective correlative of the psychological wounds of the characters constantly bombard the senses and stimulate an overly benevolent response.

Abstract symbols are allusive and non-sensory; they are borrowed from religious, mythical and literary sources and not from objective reality phenomena. One of the most important functions of these symbols is to give the characters a mythical dimension or height. Williams saw his characters not as realistic but as extraordinary, larger than life. One of the purposes of making his characters larger than life was the universalization of the peculiar and the bizarre, finding those similarities or archetypes in the myth, legends or fairy tales that would affect the collective unconscious and give meaning to archetypal personal vicissitudes. However, Williams rarely identified a character with a mythical archetype, because his purpose was not strictly allegorical but alluding.

According to Esther M. Jackson (1965), his characters have become extraordinary through the multiple image method. Each of the characters is a composite figure, taken from the fragments of pagan and Christian prototypes and their diminutive shapes in fairy tales and comic cartoon stories. Using both romantic and ironic ways of characterization, Williams emphasizes the illusory nature of the mythical or divine dimension of the character. Thus, Rosario in the *Rose Tattoo* incorporates Dionysus, the Greek God of wine, Rudolph

Valentino, the famous movie star, and the lustful faun. Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is also Diana, goddess of hunting, moon and nature, and also a "cat in heat". The various images surrounding Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth* include those of Adonis, the god of fertility, a Christ figure, as well as an aged knight of romances. So, when Williams symbolizes the illusions, the disappointments and the romantic aspirations of his characters to overcome their human limitations, he constantly evokes both the animalistic nature and the human needs that keep them standing on the ground.

The method through which Williams gives his characters a mythical dimension is history or evocation of the past, which is usually indicated by the protagonist himself, e.g. at the beginning of the plays *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Orpheus Descending*. This story is often a deified or exaggerated memory of an event or a relationship dressed in idyllic, romantic or religious connotations.

Also, history itself is recounted or dramatized during drama development. In essence, the dramatic events of the second half of each play are the repetition on stage of the story that is shown at the beginning. Thus, Amanda's story of the 17 gentlemen visitors is repeated on stage by Laura and Jim in *The Glass Menagerie*; Serafina's idealized account of her transcendental bond with her husband Rosario is repeated on stage by Serafina and Alvaro in *The Rose Tattoo*; the story of idyllic love and fertility in the summer garden between Lady Torrance and David Cutrere is repeated by Lady and Val Xavier in *Orpheus Descending*. Personal history takes the dimensions of the myth; its repetition is a ritual that happens in parallel with the events of the myth. However, unlike the ancient myths and rituals of the origin, fertility and rebirth or resurrection that these stories tell, the second version of the initial story in Williams' plays rarely culminates in the celebration of fulfilled or accomplished aspirations.

Williams' plays do not just evoke mythical old images and religious rituals; but also transform them during the stage action. Many of his plays rely on the myths of dying gods, but, unlike the original myth, they do not culminate in either renaissance or resurrection. His drama is built as a ritual, but as a ritual that destroys illusions, or as a parody of romantic quest, whose ironic destiny is what Northrop Frye (1971) calls the canceled tournament, the archetypal image of the goal of quest that does not exist. Hence, Williams, from old myths and rituals builds new meanings belonging to an era and culture without a common mythology. Seeking to restore the symbolic meaning to the modern human life, Williams offers a theatrical experience that strives to give a symbolic significance and value to the

purely human relations, however limited and complementary they may appear. In its benevolent portrayal of our ardent desires for perfection, its realistic description of our inner limitations and its absolute insistence on the need to give a religious meaning to the rare and temporary spiritual bondage among humans, Tennessee Williams's work is a myth of our time.

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