

Tennessee William's Contribution to American Drama

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Abstract- Tennessee Williams is a dramatist of lost souls. His milieu is the south, a tense and unreconstructed locale typical only of an environment we all inhabit. In the mythology of his work, the south is an antebellum mansion of faded elegance inhabited by gentle dreamers, misfits, fugitives and outcasts losers who are not meant to win. Always the gothic focus of his work echoes an awareness of loneliness and loss a sense of corruption and the physical violence which is an aspect of southern romanticism. His theme is the plight of the individual trapped by his environment, the loneliness and lack of communication between human beings unable to reconcile the flesh with spirit. It is his special to temper extremes of physical violence, brutality and perversion with gentle, loving glimpses of humanity and a passionate concern for dispossessed people living on the border line of despair.

Index Terms- Mythology, Fugitives, Trapped and Brutality.

WILLIAMS' "THE GLASS MENAGERIE": A NEW EPOCH IN THE HISTORY OF WESTERN THEATRE

When Tennessee Williams' poetic drama the glass menagerie opened in New York in 1945, a new epoch in the history of western theatre began. With this play Williams seemed to succeed Eugene o' Neill as the chief architect of form in the American drama. In the decade which followed, the American theatre was to produce at least one other major dramatist as well as a number of minor playwrights of merit. In 1964, some nineteen years later, it is a matter of general critical agreement that Williams remains one of the pivotal figures in the "American school". Although Tennessee Williams is a writer less highly regarded by many critics than Eugene o' Neill, Thornton Wilder, William Sarason or Arthur Miller, he has, nonetheless, exerted a decisive influence on the development of form in the contemporary theatre. His influence, particularly in relation to the elucidation of character and dramatic action, may be

seen in the work of Europeans such as John Osborne, Harold Pinter and Jean Genet as well as in that of Americans such as Williams Inge, Paddy Chayefsky and Edward Albee.

WILLIAMS, THE MOST POPULAR PLAYWRIGHT AND A MAJOR DRAMATIST

Williams' claims to the status of a major dramatist rests, in large measure, on the significant and popular acceptance accorded four works: THE GLASS MENAGERIE (1945), A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE (1947), SUMMER AND SMOKE (1948) and CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF (1955). While some critics have found greater literary merit in the work of O' Neill, Wilder, Sarason, Miller, Clifford Odets, the fact remains that Williams, since the first decade of his broad way activity, has been the most popular playwright in the life of the American theatre, and one of the most widely performed dramatists in the history of the western stage. Despite the critical controversy which has attended his career in the theatre, Williams has won a substantial measure of acceptance as a serious writer. One of the earliest signs of the gratitude was the prize awarded to the young artist in 1933 by the writers' guild of St. Louis, Missouri. In 1930, he was a recipient of an award given by the group theatre in New York. In 1940 he won the coveted Rockefeller Fellowship for playwriting. In 1944, he was cited for his achievement by the National Institute of Arts and Letters. The work of his mature years has, thus far, won the playwright four Critics Circle Award (1945, 1947, 1955, 1961), two Pulitzer prizes (1947 and 1955), and membership in the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1952).

THE THEATRE OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: A SECOND AMERICAN RENAISSANCE:

The emergence of Tennessee Williams as a major dramatist is a significant development in American

cultural history. Study of details of his career points up significant parallels. In an important sense, the theatre of Tennessee Williams is an aspect of a second American Renaissance, which, like the first, followed a great war. In the same way as the theatre of Eugene O'Neill seemed to emerge out of the heightened national consciousness which marked the close of World War I, so the theatre of Tennessee Williams seems to have been an expression of a new sense of identity which American arts and letters reflected at termination of World War II. Certainly by 1945, the political, social and intellectual climate of America had become more favorable to the idea of a characteristically American drama than it had been any time before. Moreover, by mid century the theatre had succeeded in establishing many of the conditions necessary for popular acceptance of American dramatic kind. Out of the experimentation of O'Neill, Wilder, Saroyan, Odets, Elmer Rice, John Howard Lawson and Paul Green there had emerged a rich and complex American theatrical convention, possessing its own catalogue of themes, character, modes of speech, styles of acting, and patterns of visual design. The conventionalized theatrical language had found a vital complement in emerging art of the *mise en scene*, in a distinctively American system of directing and design which had been given strong impetus in the work of Arthur Hopkins, Robert Edmond Jones, Cleon Throckmorton, Norman Bel Geddes, Mordecai Gorelik, and Lee Simonson. Other conditions affecting Williams marked success as a playwright had their origins in more comprehensive patterns of cultural growth. Like the popular dramatist of Elizabethan age, he found a rich source of theatrical material in the patterns of familiar phrase emerging in his inhabitant land. The triumph of the glass menagerie may be traced in part to his effective use of colloquial forms, chiefly to his ability to deliberate between the world of thoughts and the language of the familiar man. As in the Elizabethan age, the talent for translating into universal language the idealistic perceptions, political event, and societal circumstances of an age brought to the playwright and his theatre a large and varied audience.

THE IMAGINATIVE QUALITY OF "THE GLASS MENAGERIE" WAS DISTINCTIVELY AMERICAN

Although the glass menagerie promised a new epoch in American stage history, it was not as revolutionary as it seemed. For the play shared a significant distribution of characteristics with such earlier works as *THE ADDING MACHINE* (1923), *STRANGE INTERLUDE* (1928), *AWAKE AND SING* (1935), *OUR TOWN* (1938) and *THE TIME OF YOUR LIFE* (1939). Moreover elements of its form could be traced to European antecedents, not only to the work of modern dramatist such as Strindberg Chekhov and Pirandello, but the entire literature of revolt which had its formal beginning in that movement described *strum and drang*. Perhaps the most revolutionary characteristics of the glass menagerie was that in its total concept it reflected an imaginative quality – a vision of reality-which was clearly and unmistakably American.

The presence of this distinctive quality was not accidental. According to Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* had been designed especially for the popular American audience. It was, in the sense, an especially significant achievement; for it opposed Williams to the theatre of purely traditional form. It represented his public commitment to the creation of popular art. With this play Williams fulfilled the mandate of Walt Whitman, uttered almost a century before. He succeeded in the evocation of a living form, created from the emergent American consciousness.

WILLIAMS' "PLASTIC THEATRES"

The opening of the glass menagerie in 1945, like the production of *Le Cid* in 1936 or the performance of *Le Docteur amoureux* in 1658 or the revival of the seagull in 1898 marked the beginning of the new epoch in western theatre history. Apparently Williams was conscious of his role in an historic development. In the manifesto that prefaced the published edition of the play, he wrote, "These remarks are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do with a consumption of a new, plastic theatre which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic convention if the theatre is to resume vitality as part of our culture." For Williams "vitality" was associated with the return of the theatre to its natural function; to joyous and irreverent entertainment, to shock and terror, to symbol making, and to the figurative explorations of

life. He proposed to recover these purposes by re-establishing the creative relationship of the drama to idiomatic forms of expression. Like Shakespeare, Corneille, Moliere and Lope Williams effected his restoration by introducing into traditional structures mode of expression down from all level of experience. Many years before the experiences of the glass menagerie he had begun this process of adopting traditional forms of the vivid, vulgar, and energetic modes of expression which appeared in the cinema, the soap opera, and the radio jingle; at street corners, revival meetings, and political debates; in jazz songs, brass bands, children's games. He wrote of this motive: " In this scene I am trying to catch the quality of really 'tough' Americana of the comic sheets, the skid-row bars, cat-houses, grade B movies, street -Arabs, vagrants, dunks, pitchmen, gamblers, whores, all the rootless, unstable and highly life beneath the middle-class social level in the states."

This essentially poetic motive- that of seeking to interpret obscure realities in a universal language- had been seen in the work of other American dramatist, particularly in that of Thornton Wilder, Clifford Odets, William Saroyan. But Williams, perhaps, had more comprehensive motives than those which had been apparent in place such as the time of your life, awake and sing, or our town. Like O'Neill, he conceived for popular theatre an ancient purpose: the exposure of human suffering.

WILLIAMS' TECHNICAL ACHIEVEMENTS

Much of American criticism stresses that William's technical achievement had been seriously underestimated. Close student of his form find, however, that he conceals beneath sensuous texture of his work a significant ability as a writer of play dialogue and action. These abilities may be traced, in part, to the playwright's extended technical training and wide professional experiences. Throughout much of his career, Williams has worked in non dramatic media as well as in the collection *One Arm and Other Stories* (1948) and *Hardy Candy* (1954). His novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, was published in 1950. Of direct influence of his idea of dramatic form has been his interest in poetry. Examples of his facility in this medium may be seen in the volume *In*

the *Winter of Cities* (1956) and in the new *Directions* series XI, XII, XIII and XIV.

WILLIAMS' ACUTE "SENSE OF THEATRE"

While his technical skills have been of obvious value in William's search for a representative form, his important asset may be something less tangible, an acute "sense of theatre". Williams' clear interest in theatre for performance rather in closet drama has involved him in constant controversy, particularly with critics of traditional schools. In the main, his subordination of literary interests to theatricality-playability-has left him less esteemed among academician than Wilder or Miller; however, it has won for him the enthusiastic support of the theatre itself: Of actors, directors, scenic artist, who have maintained consistently high standards of interpretation for his plays. It has been this theatricality which has given his dramas that broad base of appeal which is vital to a popular art. The theatre Williams is still finding new audiences through the successful transportation of his plays to allied arts-to radio, television, cinema, ballet and modern dance.

WILLIAMS' THEATRICAL DESIGN: THE FRUIT OF ARTISTIC COLLABORATION

Early in his professional career, William becomes allied with a group of artist who for long has been concerned with the development of an American art of *mise en scene*. The circle included the director Elia Kazan, the designer Jo Mielziner, the teacher and the theorist Lee Strasberg. Out of this creative association emerge appropriate dramaturgies for his theatre: an act of directing, acting, production and design congruent with the demands of his texts. This pattern became so popular that this "American formalism" has taken its roots in world theatre as a characteristic art of the *mise en scene*.

REFERENCE

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