TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: TRUTH, ILLUSION, AND THE GROTESQUE SOUTH

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Regarded as one of the greatest American playwrights of the twentieth century, Tennessee Williams (Thomas Lanier Williams III) was born on 26 March, 1921, in Columbus, Mississippi. He was the son of Cornelius Coffins Williams and Edwina Dakin Williams. Alongside his contemporaries Eugene O’Neil (Long Day’s Journey Into Night) and Arthur Miller (Death of a Salesman), Williams’s legacy is tied to his contributions to modern American drama. His most famous plays include A Streetcar Named Desire, Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, Sweet Bird of Youth, The Glass Menagerie, and Night of the Iguana. These works are thematically connected by their reflections of the grotesque South, desire, and truth – concepts that scholars define as central to the classic Southern Gothic genre. Williams’s marriage of these themes, in conjunction with his lyrical realism, not only plays a significant role in our understanding of postwar generational consciousness but also reaffirms his legacy as a playwright and thinker. As Esmerelda Subashi notes, Williams was “attuned to the natural rhythm and melody of Southern speech… especially in the voices of women” (Subashi and Veliaj 2015, 76). Indeed, his Southern background evinces his emotional connection to the workings of the South. Additionally, his realism, which “stressed photographic duplication of the actual,” engendered a style that dominated American theater for four decades (Subashi and Veliaj 2015, 76). The Southern essence that pervades his work reminds us of the inertia of its realism, how seminal Williams is in our study of American drama, and how dramatic writing can play a substantial role in social criticism.

Williams rose to fame in 1944 when The Glass Menagerie opened on Broadway at the Playhouse Theater. One of the first of its kind to be coined a “memory play,” the drama tells the tale of the lowly Wingfield family through the narration of protagonist Tom Wingfield. The play takes place in 1930s St. Louis and draws inspiration from Williams’s own upbringing and domestic life in the South.
principal characters – which include Tom, his mother Amanda, and his sister Laura – are representative of Williams’s own family. Through this work, Williams tackles the disillusion of Southern tradition, especially its effects on the modern woman. His focus on the symbolism and de-romanticization of the Southern belle gave rise to a refreshed mode of storytelling unfamiliar to many audiences. As such, the play won the prestigious New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and was passionately lauded by critics and audiences. In 1946, the opening of A Streetcar Named Desire confirmed his success as one of America’s best playwrights, earning him both a Drama Critics Award and a Pulitzer Prize.

It was Streetcar that famously addressed the imminent demise and fading relevance of the Southern belle during the late 1940s, doing so through its lyricism, dramatized Southern speech, and expressionism. Streetcar relays the story of Blanche DuBois, a former Southern belle who, after losing her familial estate, goes to stay in the New Orleans apartment of her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski – the brute, hellish figure made famous by Marlon Brando in the classic 1951 film adaptation. Blanche’s fading beauty and social clout speak to tensions between the “Old South” and the burgeoning “New South.” Postwar generations of southerners witnessed the dying of “Old Money” traditions and a rise in rugged, and, more significantly, labor-driven, individualism. The juxtaposition of Blanche DuBois with Stanley Kowalski, who together represent the socio-cultural tensions between old and new, plays a role in helping audiences understand the clashing consciousnesses of their America, thereby inviting them to meditate on the ideological shifts that take place among social groups. Moreover, it also showed audiences the predominant impact that this clash had on women by illustrating how a woman could still fall prey to the illusion of a prescribed gender role. Indeed, above all else, Streetcar emphasized a message of truth and illusion with a heightened form of speech that evoked a poetic rhythm. Despite this artful subversion, Williams accomplished a realism that encapsulated the zeitgeist of this period.

In Williams’s work, he employed what was known as “plastic theater” within the very language of his scripts. Plastic theater toyed with conventional understandings of narrative by calling attention to the various elements of production, such as the dialogue, setting, costumes, and lighting, and straying away from passive forms of storytelling to represent the complex nature of truth. This type of production subverts the elements of dramatic theater through first deconstructing them, but then making them anew. Plastic theater was a self-referencing, but nonetheless experimental, practice that underlined theater itself. Williams’s intention behind employing such an experiment was to create meaning outside of dramatic dialogue. As a result, the play’s thematic message was emphasized. Such storytelling trailblazed a new path in American drama. For Williams, the complexity of plastic
theater mirrored the withering path to understanding one’s harsh reality. This avant-garde practice was a non-realistic strategy that dramatized and exploited devices, and thereby helped viewers further explore characters’ psychologies. As Williams himself explains in his essay “The History of a Play,” “Writing since I was a child, I had begun to feel a frustrating lack of vitality in words alone. I wanted a plastic medium. I conceived things visually, in sound and color and movement” (Williams 2009, 15). In short, Williams explored these methods to lend credence to the poetic imagination – an exercise that helps audiences see past pleasure and begin actively reading a narrative.

In his book Where I Live, Williams wrote:
If the writing is honest it cannot be separated from the man who wrote it. It isn’t so much his mirror as it is the distillation, the essence, of what is strongest and purest in his nature, whether that be gentleness or anger, serenity or torment, light or dark. This makes it deeper than the surface likeness of a mirror and that much more truthful. (Williams 2009, 100)

To Williams, writing neither exists in a vacuum nor derives from abstract notions of being. Rather, writing informs the world of human experiences – the honest ones, at least – by recounting the lives of fleshed out, human characters. Honest writing for Williams is contingent on the work’s ability to address something real about the human experience. But instead of mirroring real images, Williams’s realism revealed the elements of truth through theatrical images. By way of plastic theater, Williams successfully addressed raw subject matter that, in its own right, relayed the blistering truth of societal pitfalls but did so without explicitly telling that truth. He explored the Southern gothic genre by reforming theater and mesmerizing audiences with a recapitulation of the dramatic form.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES