

‘Tragedy as Failure’ as pictured in the dramatic World of Tennessee Williams: A Note

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Received June 14, 2015

Accepted July 10, 2015

ABSTRACT

This is an attempt both defining tragedy as a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character with a fatal or disastrous end and tracing the works of the great tragic dramatists like Eugene O’Neill Arthur Miller in general and Tennessee Williams in particular. It clearly examines how Tennessee Williams enters into nostalgic journey into the past proving that the inner conflicts, often bitter struggles end in tragic failure but on rare occasions only giving a taste of victory and how some essential factors contribute to Williams’s tragic vision of life – both internal and external. It projects the way in which majority of men and women quite unable to bear the blows of fate suffer and wither in life and their tragedy in their lives is ‘failure’.

Key words : Tragedy as Failure

The Oxford English Dictionary defines tragedy as “a play or other literary work of a serious or sorrowful character, with a fatal or disastrous conclusion”. In ancient Greece, it was used with reference to lyric songs and later to dramatic pieces meaning “That branch of dramatic art which treats of sorrowful or terrible events in a serious and dignified style opposed to comedy”. According to Aristotle, tragedy is to depict the fall of a great person from a high position and the fall to be brought about by ‘hamartia’ or ‘tragic flaw’. With the many upheavals and drastic changes, it appeared that tragedy had disappeared in the twentieth century. Joseph

Wood Krutch in his “The Tragic Fallacy” points out that tragedy is not an expression of despair but the means by which the people of the great ages saved themselves from depression.

The old concept of tragedy was no longer valid and attempt at creating a modern tragedy only regulated in the production of plays full of sentimentalism and despair. Perhaps one might say that each age has its own concept of tragedy and each artist has his own tragic vision. This is perfectly true of Tennessee Williams. American dramaturgy is entirely a child of the twentieth century and Eugene O’Neill can rightly be called the father

of American drama. He gave death blow to melodrama which had the public theatre in its powerful grip for more than a century and half. Realism was the best weapon to fight melodrama and sentimentalism and devices borrowed from expressionism could be used to provide the right kind of embellishment for the theatre art. O' Neill's vision is truly representative of the general American view of life especially in the twentieth century. As Sinha says,

“The vision of the ‘tragic’ is a major syndrome of Modern American literature and philosophy..... typical of this century, the vision is deeply expressive of the psychic anxiety and crisis mentally of our time. This vision which finds spontaneous exposition in the plays of Eugene O' Neill constitutes the essential substratum of his tragic view of life consequently, the “essential” O' Neill has been explored by identifying his tragic vision as the basis core of his self and dramaturgy” (P6)

The man had suffered a lot in life and the dramatist therefore gives expression to his suffering in the form of tragedy. A survey of drama, especially of tragedy shows that it was in Periclean Athens that tragedy saw its birth, growth and perfection and that again it was in Elizabethan England that tragedy was nurtured and reached heights of glory. Modern tragedy is bound to be different from Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. O' Neill has his own unique tragic vision. Of the

successors of O'Neill, two play wrights stand out, namely, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Each has his own tragic vision.

To Arthur Miller who was a Jew, the Nazi and Fascist atrocities called ‘programs’ must have been an unbearable traumatic experience. Nearer home there was the infernal Maccarthysm let loose. These and other bitter experiences should have shaped Miller's tragic vision. In the case of Tennessee Williams, the vision was shaped more by private personal problems added to the deterioration of the south and the degeneration of the southerners. The war affected Williams also. C.W.E. Bigsby hold as:

“It intensified his feeling of society as a threat and deepened a sense of insecurity rooted in private experience but intensified by the new realities of a post nuclear age. The pieties of Pre-war America no longer seemed capable of sustaining the individual or the culture” (PP 1-2)

Both Miller and Williams are thoroughly dissatisfied with the American type of affluence. America was the largest producer of consumer goods. This changed the American's sense of values. In *Death of a Salesman* Willy Loman is proud of his car and refrigerator and his boss is proud of his wire-recorder. These are the scales by which values are measured today. In Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot - Tin Roof*, there stands

right in the centre of the stage ‘the symbol of modern prosperity – a huge console:

“ a monumental monstrosity peculiar to our times, a huge console combination of radio-phonograph (H1-f1 with three speakers) TV set and liquor cabinet bearing and containing many glasses and bottles, all in one piece, which is a composition of muted silver tones and the opalescent tones of reflecting glass... This piece of furniture, this monument, is a very complete and compact little shrine to virtually all the comforts and illusions behind which we hide them from such things as the characters in the play are faced with” (P2)

Such garish things which are the gods and goddesses of the modern world send Tennessee Williams into a nostalgic journey into the past when the individual was in tune with his environment. Now even the environment was found changing; the countryside being encroached by suburbia and the suburbia being swallowed by the city. Miller with his Marxist overtones began to attract the American audience, calling their attention, not to the obvious external reality but the inner conflicts, often bitter struggles that end in tragedy and failure but on rare occasions giving a taste of victory.

There were many factors which contributed to Williams’s developing a tragic vision of life-

both internal and external. The externals affecting the entire population of the south, the North objecting to slavery and the federal government abolishing slavery, the rise of the civil war in which the North inflicting a humiliating defeat on the south, the ancestors of Tennessee Williams sliding down to poverty, his father’s fondness for the habit of winning and womanizing, the frequent quarrels between his father and mother, unnatural shyness of the son Tom and unhappy and sad outlook of daughter Rose on life – all combined together as ‘external’ and ‘internal forces to produce in Williams a tragic view of life. The cosmos in general, the immediate surroundings appeared to be destructive forces. The psychological makeup within him appeared too weak to cope with the conflict with his neighbor, with society and with fate. He felt that man was bound to fail in a determined world, whether he was strong or weak. Some factors in his life’s experiences also contributed to his feeling of anguish and frustration. “His evolving theme was the individual struggling for freedom overwhelming hopeless odds “(Kataria 7). His early works consisted of poems and short stories. Then he started writing one-act plays. The themes and subject matter of his writings are called out of his memory and are based on his experiences. Even while he turned to writing full-length plays for the theatre, he depended a lot only on his experiences. Even while he turned to

writing full-length plays for the theatre, he depended a lot only on his experiences. He has to his credit publication of 1. Five American Poets (1944), a collection of poems, 2. One Arm and other stories (1948) – a collection of short stories. 3. A Glass Menagerie, his stupendous masterpiece 4. American Blues (1948) – a collection of short plays which won for him a prize and through which he soon blossomed into one of America's foremost playwrights, 5. Mooney's Kid Don't cry, a play which communicates the inarticulate frustration of a young couple who are living in hopeless poverty, 6. The Dark Room which depicts more hopeless and deeper poverty. 7. 27 Waggon Full of cotton, which, written out of his own experiments and observation, contains some of his successful experiments in technique and his penchant for communicating through symbols. 8. You Touched me (1945) 9. A streetcar Names Desire (1947), 10. Summer and Smoke (1948) 11. The Rose Tattoo (1951), 12. Camio Real (1953) 13. Cat on a Hot Tim Roof (1955), 14. Orpheus Descending (1957), 15. Suddenly Lost summer (1958), 16. Sweet Bird of Youth (1959) 17. Period of Adjustment (1960) 18. The Night of the Iguana (1961) and so on till 1981.

Williams was a great admirer of D.H. Laurence and his Freudian novels. As a tribute to him, Williams wrote a one-act play called I Rise in Flames, cried the Phoenix and

a short story You Touched Me in which the heroine Mathilda is to be awakened out of her frigidity. Regarding the next stage in Williams's Career Sievers points out, "After creating the Laura – Mathilda character who is all chaste and unawakered emotion, Tennessee Williams went on to explore her later destiny, as the Blanche – Alma character to whom sex comes too violently after too long a period of suppression" (P376). He calls A Streetcar Named Desire the quintessence of Freudian sexual psychology and it can be considered Williams's masterpiece in the study of the Southern Gentlewoman. In the words of David Sievers, "A Streetcar Named Desire depicts characters who are volatile, colourful, deeply real for our times. With a mastery no playwright has equalled in this century, Williams arranges in a theatrical pattern the agonized sexual anxiety of a girl caught between id and ego-ideal..... unconsciously playing the role of the gracious refined lady of the old south – the same ego-ideal which Amanda held for herself" (P377). The tragedy is that she keeps playing that role even after reaching the squalid, dilapidated flat in the French Quarters of New Orleans. Stanley the sensual primitive is first baffled and then irritated by her airs. He takes it as a challenge and the encounter between a delicate helpless woman who can be a flirt, and the brute of a sensual man begins. In no time the delicate creature is crushed. Though it is a sexual

battle, between the two, the principal battlefield is within Blanche herself. As Stella says it is the “Things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark” that make her life in the slums worthwhile. Blanche also yearns for things that happen in the dark, but she cannot have them there in Stella’s home and so to still the sexual drive and anxiety, she resorts to hot baths and liquor.

Luckily she meets Mitch and plays the role of a coy maiden which unfortunately irks Stanley who reveals to Mitch how she has been bitching around in the immediate past. In their mutual loneliness, Mitch and Blanche had embraced each other passionately; each needed the other. But this dream turns to be a nightmare. Actually Mitch too suffers from an Oedipus complex. The final tragedy comes when she is alone with Stanley whose sexual appetite she has so foolishly whetted. Blanche’s mistake was to tell her sister Stella of the rape. Stanley must get rid of Blanche and with a carefully planned move gets Blanche carried off to a hospital.

His first full – length play *Battle of angels* (1940) was not a success but his very next play *A Glass Menagerie* was a tremendous success. From being a non-entity, he shot into fame overnight and was called a foremost playwright of the times. Encouraged by this success Williams went forth producing masterpiece after masterpiece. An outstanding feature of his works is his amazing talent in portraying

women of all sorts and conditions. His portrayal of the Southern Gentlewomen and Southern Wench is most laudable. In most of his plays, there is a mixture of tears and laughter; but in his master-pieces, the writer with his compassionate heart presents pictures of human failure which arouse our pity and compassion. He adored his mother as a boy but when he grew up, he saw through her and hated her. So in many of his plays, the mother is presented as a domineering, ragging and autocratic woman. He was deeply attached to his sister Rose. “His love for Rose bordered on incest and several of his plays dramatize this desire.... Rose both as a name and symbol constantly recurs in the work of Williams, Probably because his emotional attachment with Rose always haunted him.... The sympathetic portraits of young girls almost always have sensitive Rose as a prototype behind them” (Laura, ALMA, Catherina Holly etc). So in *A Glass Menagerie*, Rose is Laura, Edwina is Amanda and Tom is Tom. Though Amanda is modeled on Edwin and shows traits of the domineering mother, Williams has endowed Amanda with admirable qualities. She is fit to be the tragic heroine of the play. Fate has been cruel to her and she has to bear heavy burdens. But with powers of endurance and rare courage she contends with the outside forces. She is also torn by conflicts and splits within herself, and her memories of the past affluent life and the present hardships she

has to bear. She lives for her children but they are her greatest burdens. The daughter is a dead weight whose incorrigible inferiority complex defeats every attempt made by Amanda to set her up in life. The son is a wayward fellow who is wasting his time writing poetry or running to the movies. The worst blow he gives is to follow his father's footsteps and desert the family, an old mother and a crippled sister. He feels his home to be a prison from which he should escape in order to find his identity.

The inner conflict in the case of Tom is caused by his 'guilt' 'feeling', a common feature of the American Psyche. Though he is physically separated from this family, the family continues to haunt him and spoils his peace of mind. Into the psychological makeup of Williams went not only poverty and affluence but also success and humiliation of failure. As Signi Falk says, "The rebel-dreamer failure type is a favourite with the dramatist. The Tom Wing fields almost seem like autobiographical figures who might have existed before their creator found the golden key to the box office..... Tom's situation is pitiable but his vague longings, his inarticulate hopes and his shiftlessness are so much romanticized that it seems as if the writer were making virtues out of weaknesses" (P

174). Brick of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* indulges in self-pity and finds solace in hard drinking. The men and women portrayed are the self-assured ones who have their own codes of morality and enjoy every pleasure that life offers them, especially the forbidden ones. The majority of men and women on the contrary are sensitive, delicate and too cultured for the barbaric industrial society. Unable to bear the blows of fate, they suffer and wither and fail in life. The tragedy in their lives is 'failure' and nothing else.

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