MEMORY AND DESIRE AND TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' PLAYS

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Against not particularly keen competition, Tennessee Williams incites and sustains more comment in the United States than any other writer largely unknown a decade ago. Interim reports must always qualify their generalizations, but a few notes may point up what his achievements are and, incidentally, why others accomplish less. Williams' fame derives from his plays. The first acclaimed success, The Glass Menagerie, appeared on Broadway in 1945; earlier ones had folded in Boston or gone begging for attention when produced by little theatre groups. Since then three more, A Streetcar Named Desire, Summer and Smoke, and The Rose Tattoo, have boosted his reputation. London, Paris, Vienna, and other European capitals have seen A Streetcar Named Desire. When intimate reviews parody the contemporary stage, they turn to Williams as automatically as they once did to O'Neill, e.g. Touch and Go (1950) in New York and London and The Globe Review (1952) in London. Although he has published in a variety of genres: poetry, short stories, one-act plays, and a novel, the professional theatre remains the area where his talents flourish. Flourish may exaggerate the condition.

That the four hits resemble each other strikingly has been observed. Their extensive similarities have eluded precise definition. Williams, a peculiarly honest writer, himself supplies the key. In prefaces and postscripts tacked on to editions he explains the circumstances under which he composed and his reactions to the results. A discussion of the road fiasco, Battle of Angels, includes a childhood scene when he accompanied his grandfather, a clergyman, on visits:

I remember a lady named Laura Young. She was dressed in checkered silk. She had a high, clear voice: a cataract of water. Something about her made me think of cherries and she was very beautiful. She was something cool and green in a sulphurous landscape. But there was a shadow upon her. There was something the matter with her. For that reason we called upon her more frequently than anyone else. She loved me. I adored her. She lived in a white house near an orchard and in an arch between two rooms were hung
some pendants of glass that were a thousand colors. “This is a prism,” she said. She lifted me and told me to shake them. When I did they made a delicate music.

This prism became a play.¹

Crucial events, experienced or dreamed, frequently fuse primal images so neatly that no detail is accidental and all is charged with meaning. To consider the four plays as emanations from the matrix of this passage illustrates their affinities.

All the leading characters are women who are not well and who, withdrawn from society, seek variegated illusions of happiness. The cripple Laura in The Glass Menagerie collects glass figurines over the protests of her mother, Amanda, who in the St. Louis slum nourishes herself on phantasies from romantic southern flirtations. Laura’s animals, of which she prefers a unicorn distinguished by its prismatic single horn, receive all her affections. Once a “gentleman caller” is lured to the house, but he already is engaged. Amanda and Laura are left with the transparent zoo. A Streetcar Named Desire opens when Blanche DuBois arrives for a vacation with her sister, Stella, in the New Orleans Vieux Carré. Blanche has been a high school teacher, of English inevitably, who, after her young husband killed himself, finds satisfaction only by giving herself to, presumably, any man passing by. She also seeks a delicate beauty: “I bought this adorable little colored paper lantern at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. Put it over the light bulb. . . . I can’t stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action.”² Her sister’s aggressively vulgar husband rudely forces himself on her. The violence precipitates a breakdown, and she is led away to an asylum. Summer and Smoke opposes Alma, a minister’s daughter identified with the purity of the soul, and John, a doctor’s son whose nature is projected by an anatomy chart of the human body in his father’s office. A heavily ironic twist exchanges their views. He marries a younger girl while Alma, embarking on the route whose terminus Blanche reaches, strikes up an acquaintance with a travelling salesman. All the action occurs near the statue of an angel named Eternity. If ponderously gauche to regard so trivial an event sub specie aeternitatis, it is moderately indicative to remember, “Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass, Stains the white radiance of Eternity.” The Rose Tattoo promised innovations, but it merely turns the others upside down or, to keep the prism metaphor, concentrates on the red band of the spectrum, to which its symbols refer. The death of Serafina’s husband, a truck driver, ends an ecstatic marriage. She retires in mourning and attempts to sequester her daughter:
the familiar configuration. When Serafina meets another truck driver who has another tattooed rose, she accepts life again for herself and allows her daughter, Rosa, to marry a sailor.

All these women, then, are exiles in the world which they inhabit, but their heritages drape them, like a Byronic hero, with a superiority to their milieu: the landed southern families of Amanda and Blanche, Alma’s father who was a Rhodes scholar, a trifling anachronism for she was born at least five years before the scholarships were endowed, and Serafina’s husband, a Sicilian baron, a dubious pedigree which, nevertheless, bases her pride in the actual. Their names as well, with the emphases upon the soft a sound, imply distinction. Just as the prism held by Laura tinkled, so mood music, a blue piano or the “Varsouviana,” off stage moans their isolation.

The décor of the plays differs, but a formal resemblance links the four. Parts of the settings may be blacked out, but the initial scene never changes. In both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* action drifts inside from an alley on the right, and scirms further expose the surrounding neighborhood. *Summer and Smoke*, the most contrived, reveals the minister’s parlor on the right and the doctor’s office on the left. Between these two is a park with the statue of the angel. *The Rose Tattoo* shows the porch, front rooms, and the yard of Serafina’s home; at the rear is an embankment on which the highway runs. Such devices do not root the women in any context, but, on the contrary, make more graphic their separation. For realistic plays one conventionally assumes one sees a space somewhat related to the world as one knows it; here, by bringing a piece of that world onto the stage and by stressing its remoteness, the space behind the proscenium arch loses intensity. The Hollywood versions of both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are revealing contrasts with the theatre. When in the film the trolley becomes literal as well as figurative, it is crude and clumsy. (The pun translates more neatly into German, where the actual title is *Endstation Sehnsucht*, but the Viennese refer to it as *Der Triebwagen*.) Outside the houses the camera moves awkwardly. These women have no friends; they go to only public places. Laura Young also stood alone and green in a sultry landscape.

Each of the settings has at least two rooms, dramatically a sound practice; action so constrained demands the possibility of movement back and forth for the fluidity to prevent the passions’ becoming uncomfortably claustrophobic. If this effect undercut, it also dissipates the forcefulness of the conflicts when compared
with the writhings of alienation which Ibsen can unleash in confined quarters. It is perhaps not necessary to mention that the prisms hung in an arch between rooms of the remembered house.

 Granted, then, a rigidity so repetitious, what merits have these plays which enjoy profitable runs, have foreign productions, win prizes, and become seemingly permanent contributions to the theatre? Primarily, in a period of sloppy dramaturgy which settles for momentary impacts, William is a careful craftsman. Quite apart from subject, his talent can immediately initiate the muted struggle of tranquility recalled in emotion and accelerate the pace steadily. Constant application must have taught him this skill; one has only to compare the disjointed Battle of Angels with any of the four later works to be convinced of the increasing technical virtuosity he commands. He keeps revising, not just during the pre-Broadway tours, as expected, but after the New York openings as well. Indeed, the texts of The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire have been printed in several versions. In the basic, but theatrically essential, quality of narrative rhythm they possess a certain merit always at a premium on Broadway, and anywhere, for the stage needs an economical construction, however nebulous thought and language may be. Williams has also been uniformly fortunate in his producers, directors, casts, and translators. Both in the United States and abroad the performances have enhanced his scripts. Competent technique, anything this side of prestidigitation, cannot satisfy, especially where a lack of wit argues that the author is trying to communicate what, for want of a more precise word, may be termed ideas. Three fundamental explorations lend Williams’ plays substance.

 The Glass Menagerie is classified as a memory play, and, although not so designated, the rest are cloaked in a similar atmosphere, the name of the DuBois plantation being, for example, Belle Reve. Memory, perhaps more accurately reverie, implies for Williams that small events, of no intrinsic importance, are resurrected and treasured because through their theatrical magic they illuminate basic experiences. In the introduction to The Glass Menagerie he says that originally a number of non-realistic motifs scored the tones of reminiscence, but a scattered few of these were retained, notably a narrator, Amanda’s son, who introduces, then joins, the action. Touches of the cut whimsey now and then intrude: the father’s flickering picture, Laura’s final pantomime, the scrims, and the music. In the main their full impact cannot be divorced from that of realistic drama. Through this manner he claims a double effect. He can drag out
his eclectic devices from old experiments in expressionism and constructionism, which destroy the stage as a representation of life, but he does not have to beg the predisposed tolerance which imaginative drama frequently asks. Twentieth-century literature at its most impressive always impinges upon reverie, to range through genres and languages at random: Proust searches the devious disappearances of lost time; Pirandello exploits discrepancies between the interpretations of the present and the ambiguity of the past; Joyce concentrates all history as a night’s dream in Dublin; and Faulkner’s ante-bellum ghosts spin the southern fabric of an imaginary Yoknapatawpha county. For these writers the paths of the past do not twist a maze in a vacuum, but their symbolic resemblances culminate in the central design. Williams, perhaps unintentionally, though by his compromises inescapably, sentences his dreamers to live on a dead end street. The narrator dismisses The Glass Menagerie audience, a line deleted from some texts, with, “And there my memory ends and your imagination begins.” Anyone not already pursuing his after theatre plans might well wonder what fare the imagination has been provided and, such are the standards of entertainment, conclude gratefully, none at all.

If the nimbus enveloping the plays is memory, the force driving the characters through them is desire for love or sex. This subject also has been widely exploited by twentieth-century writers, but seldom with such dogged, yet polite, insistence as Williams. Much descends from D. H. Lawrence, one of whose stories he dramatized and who is the hero of the short play, I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix. The sole standard guiding these women is not the wish to be loved but the desire to know a man, or indeed object, who wants their love. Within the cocoon of memory this bent, which might become engrossing, disturbing, terrifying, or ludicrous, looks instead almost pretty. The characters themselves are too special, and, were they not, in their lives they are already buried. They are not made credible in themselves, a minor blemish, and, more damaging, they exist on no formulated level. Their desire thrashes around in a second solitary cell: no moral judgment can be made of it, for it is inevitable, if at times a little silly. Overtones of the Lawrence credo resound fitfully, but none of Lawrence’s puritanical moral bias injects strength or coherence into the rationale. The waifs float by as pitiful specimens of what women can suffer.

The third distinctive attribute rests on the diction, which has been called poetic. If audiences were enchanted by The Cocktail
Party because, since they knew a major poet wrote it, its language sounded like prose, then Williams’ vocabulary is decked out in affectations vague enough to be popularly associated with “poetry,” while it traffics strictly with a prosaic idiom. The heroines, granted their pretensions and propensities, can without strain on probability indulge themselves in a fancy rhetoric which further sets them off from their surroundings. To stress the authenticity of language, in every play cumbersome exposition pointedly catalogues the formal education each major character has had, and school stories keep intruding with a frequency rarely encountered outside class reunions. The men, generally less trained, sullenly speak a cadenced slang which passes at present for sensitive realism. Williams has elsewhere experimented to shape folk argot as poetry; a group of lyrics set to music by Paul Bowles succeeds moderately. So far he has failed to sustain a single authentic style, the sort which distinguishes the poetic dramas of Eliot or Christopher Fry.

These observations are not to imply that Williams ought to obey standards continuing the dreary realistic stage. The objections are that he bases his chief assumptions on its familiar picture-frame and that other efforts are injected for decoration or relief, not for the main substance. One wishes to be sympathetic with him because, after a generation of great literary innovators, to consolidate and refine is a tedious task. Also, he sporadically strives to attain what any future drama nearly demands: new techniques for exploiting the stage, less rigorous concepts of character, and a language to draw upon all modern resources. His repetitious theme might in itself serve a purpose, if he could relate it to a centrally controlled mythos. Unfortunately, the genuinely creative elements crop up erratically; so far they have not fused organically. They remain glancing touches, like blobs of color from a gyrating spectrum which no informing line controls or defines.

The problems confronting Williams are identical with those every intelligent young author in the United States must wrestle against. For a variety of sociological factors, the writer’s position has grown more marginal. The present climate of opinion, which condones when it does not encourage a rampant limiting of expression, denies the romantic ideal of freedom still dominant in creative literature. Any appeal, therefore, to mass standards is rendered hypocritical. During the period of comparative naiveté shortly after World War II Williams linked urban bohemian groups with any quest for independence, but the plea made tan-
gential associations which are now quite unsupportable. On the other hand, if resolute negation is not to claim all, the writer must address himself to some faith. Today that belief assumes the guise of love: the memory of having been loved and the desire to love someone. The drive to relive or experience the emotion becomes so dominant that its direction toward any object and its outlet in any physical expression are celebrated. This subject and its treatment project the writer's divided loyalties. A materialistic society counts love as a means to another end or as one possession among many. In the writer's world, where nothing is stable, it can easily, and logically, head all values. In proclaiming its worth the manifestations have become so special that the more conservative critics berate new writers for ignoring love, but, nevertheless, its rites pushed even to perversions link talents otherwise as distinctive as Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Frederick Buechner, Truman Capote, Paul Griffith, William Goyen, John Hawkes, Wright Morris, and Williams. The potential achievements of this credo lie beyond profitable speculation. It may be observed that almost all interesting titles invoke a sentimentalism which five years ago would have been dismissed as Saroyanesque.

Williams, then, faces a triple hazard: his own tendency to vary one theme, the practical demands of a commercial theatre, and the time in which he is writing. Because he is an industrious craftsman, he may be able to extricate himself. To his credit he anticipated the turn post war literature has taken and skirted its greater excesses. An indicative sign of his own awareness is the conclusion of The Rose Tattoo, where the red shirt Serafina has sewn for the truck driver is snatched by a group of women. A stage direction depicts:

Peppina flourishes the shirt in the air like a banner and tosses it to Giuseppina, who is now on the embankment. Giuseppina tosses it on to Mariella, and she in her turn to Violetta, who is above her, so that the brilliantly colored shirt moves in a zig-zag course through the pampas grass to the very top of the embankment, like a streak of flame shooting up a dry hill.⁹

Serafina, alone of these women, escapes from her house of memory into the outside, the symbolic highway, where desire can be fulfilled. The metaphor of the flame is important. A prism refracts the sun's rays, but a burning glass concentrates them. If Williams can bend his talents into the lens which will focus
his not inconsiderable perceptions, then from the same materials
a new drama may emerge which will, in spite of being

composed like them
Of Eros and of dust,
Beleaguered by the same
Negation and despair,
Show an affirming flame.

NOTES

1. TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, Battle of Angels, Pharos I & II (1945), p. 112. Acknowledgment is gratefully made to Liebling-Wood, the agents of
Tennessee Williams, for their kind permission to quote from his works.

2. TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, A Streetcar Named Desire (New Directions, New

3. An attempt at a full bibliographical compilation here would be pom-
pously disproportionate. Williams’ future editors, if there are any,
will not lack variants. According to Barrett H. Clark and William H.
Davenport, edd., Nine Modern American Plays (Appleton-Century-
Crofts, Inc., New York, 1951), p. 341, three copyrights are held by
Williams on The Glass Menagerie, two in 1945 and one in 1948. One
1945 draft remains in manuscript, presumably. The other 1945 version
appears under the imprint Random House, New York, 1945, and re-
published later by New Directions, New York, 1949, in the New
Classics Series, but with added prefatory matter. The 1948 copy has
been widely anthologized, such as the Clark and Davenport volume.
Their text cuts some directions included in the otherwise similar ver-
sion given by Harlan Hatcher, ed., Modern American Dramas (Har-
court, Brace & Co., New York, 1949). On the other hand, Paul M.
Cubeta, ed., Modern Drama for Analysis (William Sloane Associates,
Inc., New York, 1950) prints the 1945 text. A Streetcar Named Desire
has been published not only by New Directions but also by the New
American Library, New York, 1951, as a Signet Book. Although the
blurb on the paper binding of the latter claims it is “complete and
unabridged,” considerable cuts have abbreviated the script, and a
preface has been added. One is not reassured about future works by a
note in The Rose Tattoo (New Directions, New York, 1951), [p. iv]:
“The Author and Publisher express their thanks to Mr. Paul Bigelow
for valuable assistance in organizing the script of the play for book
publication.”


5. “Production Notes,” in The Glass Menagerie (Random House, the 1945
text), pp. ix–xii.


7. Until recently this play was available only in a deluxe edition. The text
appears in New World Writing (The New American Library, New

8. “‘Something wild ... [sic],’” in Tennessee Williams, 27 Wagons Full of
Cotton (New Directions, New York, 1945), unpaginated.