

The Dichotomous World Of Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams is often identified as a playwright of 'self'. This self alludes to himself and many other wandering souls who are, time and again, relegated to the realms of aberrant or anomalous. These deviances are generally part of constructions of gender, sex, and sexuality and self. His characters are at constant strife with the world as well as with the self. Williams presents a very poignant state of pathos of these characters, which is ingeniously accentuated by the virtue of playwriting, diction and stagecraft. In this article we will try to understand the writer and creator, through his depictions, who was a loner, dubbed as a variant due to his sexuality and gentle nature. The article will explore that how in a hetero-normative world homosexuality leads to homophobia, how assertion of one's needs and pleasure is misconstrued as a disease and how the system fails to understand the spiritual dimension of love and sex.

Keywords- Self, identity, sexuality, homosexuality, deviant.

Introduction

Thomas Lanier William III, popularly known by the pen name of Tennessee Williams, is a renowned American author. Although he dabbled in all forms of fiction writings, his heart and soul was always that of a playwright. In the history of American Drama he is placed between Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Where O'Neill and Miller explored the social, religious and psycho-analytical realms, Williams expounded upon the personal and subjective themes like- sex, violence, relationships, loss, maladjustments, depression, addiction etc. All these themes are reminiscent the personal history of Williams.

Second child of a traveling shoe salesman, Cornelius Williams, and gentle daughter of a clergyman, Edwina Dakin, Thomas or Tennessee didn't have a stable and peaceful childhood. He lived in an uprooted and fractured family environment. Constant

bickering between parents, his own long illness, schizophrenic sister, urban environment- all affected him deeply. He became an introvert who found solace and escape from the drudgery of life in writing. Thus we find imprints of Williams in his characters, characterizations and his social and personal constructs.

In this article we will try to understand the chaotic world of Tennessee Williams, his disenchanted characters, their adjustments/maladjustments. Williams' worlds were full of binaries, of hetero – homo, inside – outside, gender – sexuality, reality – illusion, gentle – violent, country – urbane etc. In every duality one component serves as the backdrop for the other, constructs or deconstructs other. These binaries highlight the inconsistent and irrevocable heterogeneities.

It is important to understand the binary of gender and sexuality. Both these terms are related to sex and identity but epistemologically they are different. Gender should be understood as the identity in the social and cultural context. Its view-point is the positionality, functionality and most importantly the ownership, dominance and power structure of sexes in the hetero-normative society. So we have male and female, patriarchal and matriarchal, masculine and feminine. In such societies, where either of the two sexes is dominant, the third identity gets suppressed, smothered or marginalized. Their non-alignment with the dicta of the society makes them Queer. Thus gender identity or gender role is often construed within the stereotypes devised, designed and assigned by the society. The positionality of gender and sexuality influences and colors our understanding and outlook towards various components of a society.

In the patriarchal society, man is placed in the power position. He is portrayed as strong, provider and protector. Woman is positioned as weaker sex and portrayed as a dependent whose role is that of a care-taker and a nurturer. In Williams' plays we find two kinds of characterizations; one which adheres to the prevalent structure of the society and other, the subversion of it. He etches out both frail and strong women characters which, either depend on the kindness of others or assume the power role and, in the process construct or deconstruct the norms associated with gender.

Williams' famous female protagonists-Blanche, Stella, Heavenly, Big Mama, Alma Winemiller, Vee Talbott, Catherine etc. are all portrayed as weak, repressed and delusional souls who constantly seek guard and support from a male protector. But these fragile characters are juxtaposed with strong women characters, which act as a foil for one another.

In *Orpheus Descending*, Lady is in strong position because of her husband's invalidity and draws a bargain with Val Xaviers, Carol defies the autonomy of patriarchy; Violet Venable is the dominating force in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Her domineering disposition and her money places her at the top. Maxine, a lusty widow in *The Night of the Iguana* is in commanding position because she is capable of providing for Shannon while Hannah Jelkes have strong character which diminishes the stature of Shannon. In *Sweet Bird of Youth* Princess Kosmonopolis, by the virtue of her money, buys the services of Chance Wayne, Flora Goforth does the same in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*.

Sexuality, on the other hand, pertains to self. It relates with self-awareness, self-identification and self-expression. Dictionary defines sexuality as capacity for sexual feelings; a person's sexual orientation or preference and sexual activity. We find these connotations in many layers in Williams' writings. Beings whose sexuality do not conform to the gender identity and role assigned to them by others are then thus termed as 'deviant', 'queer' or 'divergent'.

Williams was a homosexual who preferred to be known as 'androgynous'. He believed that every male have some traits of feminine and vice-versa. It was not appropriate to categorize them in just two categories. His realization about his own sexuality came very late in life. He was not very comfortable with the idea of discussing his sexuality around others. But when he publicly came out of the 'closet' he didn't shy away from owning it. His bold personal projection as a homosexual, hard-drinking, controversial writer was at variance with his depiction of his gentle homosexual characters.

Williams' creative achievements grow out of guarded self-awareness and desire for self-preservation, as well as the constraints of the prevailing values of his day. (17, Fisher)

In his plays, he alluded to 'homosexuality' in form of a theme, a motif or a character, but these references were either marginalized or secondary. He never wrote a full-length play on this topic. On being asked about the same he said-

"I have never found the subject of homosexuality a satisfactory theme for a full-length play. My plays are about human relationships. I have never faked it." (Gussow)

What is interesting to note here is that the person who openly accepted his queerness and was least apologetic about it in heterosexist social construct seldom created strong queer characters. Generally, these characters were either 'absent' or 'shadowed' on stage. They were either dead or closeted. Their existence was endorsed by other dominant characters who garbed these marginalized beings with their own view point. It is in his later plays that these characters started emerging on stage and found their voice. They didn't advocate their preferences rather they talked about the complexity and dilemmas of human relationships. These individuals had certain physical attributes which gave them the air of fragility and distinctness. These characters are beautiful, gentle, and delicate yet they do not verge on being effeminate. Their outward appearances are masculine enough and their sexuality lays trapped beneath this masculinity.

"Sexuality is a basic part of my nature," Williams once said. "I never considered my homosexuality as anything to be disguised. Neither did I consider it a matter to be over-emphasized. I consider it an accident of nature." (Williams)

In *The Streetcar Named Desire* Allan Gray, Blanche's dead husband, was a homosexual who was caught in the act with an older friend. His discovery led to his humiliation and his suicide. In the play, Blanche always refers him with epithets like sweet or gentle boy. Blanche's guilt over his suicide leads to her sexual dysfunction. This leads to her degeneration from pure 'Blanche' to the flirtatious belle of the South. She tries to find solace in Mitch, friend and neighbor of Stanley. She forms a connection with Mitch probably because he reminds her of Allan. Mitch is the romanticized image of Allan, her first love. Mitch is not effeminate but has a gentler and feminine side to his personality.

Roger Doremus in *Summer and Smoke*, Alma's suitor, is an unacknowledged gay man, whom Alma recognizes as no threat to her spirituality. In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick, an aging football pro, suffers from malaise, alcoholism and sexual dysfunction. Root cause of these maladies is suicide of his friend Skipper who was a homosexual. Maggie, Brick's wife, have serious doubts about their close friendship. Brick tries to interpret/misinterpret his relationship with Skipper and present it as a bonhomie homo-social bonding. But the underlying reason for his excessive drinking is his confusion regarding his own sexuality. Where in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, homosexuality is being disguised in homo-sociality, in *Period of Adjustment*, male bonding of Ralph Bates and George Haverstick is placed in the landscape of homosociality. In his long one-act play

Suddenly Last Summer Williams presents a darker side of homosexual, Sebastian Venable, who meets a grotesque end owing to his consumerist approach. Lot in *Seven Descendants of Myrtle* is a tubercular neurotic and a closeted transvestite who is unable to consummate his marriage. In *Small Crafts Warning*, two gay men, Quentin, a middle aged washed up screen writer and Bobby, a young hustler, reflect upon their lives. For Quentin it's deadening coarseness but for Bobby its youthful wonders and joy in his unexamined sexuality. *The Notebook of Trigorin* an adaptation of Chekov's *Seagull* is a story of a well known writer Boris Trigorin, who is a bisexual. His hetero-sexual relationship Irina and Nina is nothing but window dressing of his true desires and it alleviate his boredom. *Something Cloudy Something Clear* is auto-biographical and tells the story of young playwright August dealing with his unrequited love for another man.

Another binary which highlights the angst of these homosexual individuals is inside-outside. It's a conflict between their position and positionality. Allan, Roger, Sebastian, Brick, Skipper and Lot are closeted homosexuals. These individuals do not openly assert their real sexuality. Their masculine appearance provides them a mask to hide their sexuality. They are confined within the closed space of their male body, a closet or a closed room. These closed places provide refuge to them but at the same time these are also suffocating as there is no vent out. Their real self and angst is 'inside'. They want to come outside but are scared of the outside world which has potential to scar them irreparably. But in the later plays, as these characters come 'outside' the confinement, the harsh and cruel treatment of the world disillusion them and drive them to the safety of confinements.

The angst of being homosexual can also be understood in the dichotomy of space and time. The spatial notion of identity does not represent choice or distinction but an analysis of concept of border, concept of marginalization as against elevation. Space has the quality of being 'limited' as well as 'limitless'. In the 'limitless' heterosexist space, the queers have to confine, modify, reorganize and relativize their space. These spaces in context of time are 'memory' and context of refuge is 'illusion'. 'Memory' is created and tinged by 'self' as well as 'others' while 'illusion' becomes the 'personal sanctuary'.

These characters are relegated to past or the background. In most of the plays the characters are physically absent and their reference point is always a memory. Memory is a very subjective and personal term and can be colored by the person's perception and feelings. Thus we see that the imagery of these characters is often painted by others' thoughts and when these fragile disillusioned characters lose their direction in this chaotic world they seek the safety of 'illusion'. Allan, Skipper, Sebastian are nothing but memory.

The term 'sexuality' also needs to be explored in the sense of 'capacity for sexual feelings'. We find that Williams' characters, male and female alike, seek sexual gratification, but not necessarily in baser sense. It seems that they want to satisfy their underlying needs of being loved, being protected, for their own revival or rebirth, to allay their fears and insecurities or to show their defiance. Sex is not just an act to delectate their bodily needs, rather it has romantic and spiritual connotation for Williams' frail characters.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche seeks redemption for her guilt through sexual dalliances, her younger sister Stella satiates

her need for being loved and needed; in *Orpheus Descending* Lady seeks love and regeneration of her sterile life, Carol is repressed, Vee Talbott is a libertine while Val Xavier needs to disconnect from his past and start afresh; in *Summer and Smoke* Alma is sexually repressed soul whose idea of spiritual love is tested by philandering and hedonistic Dr. John Buchanan. Her disillusionment with John leads her on the path sexual liberation.

These gentle and 'othered' characters are often pitted against strong characters. These strong characters become the destructive forces of their lives, often uprooting them and discarding them. Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; Shannon and Maxine in *The Night of the Iguana*; Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*; Mrs. Flora Goforth in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore* have strong sexual appetite. In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Princess Kosmonopolis hires a gigolo Chance Wayne to keep her insecurity and fear of fading youth at bay while Heavenly for whom it was an expression of love, has to pay a heavy price for it. Chance Wayne and Sebastian Venable commodify their sexuality. These characters barter sex for their personal carnal, materialistic and egoistic motives.

Thus, we can surmise that Williams' personages are delicate, beautiful and sensitive people. These adjectives not just mirror their physical appearances but, they also reflect upon the frail mental and emotional state of these characters. These personages are enmeshed in the complex web of difficult situations, expectations and normativeness. They are in constant conflict with the society and with themselves. They are faced with the perpetual existential question – to be or not to be. Williams, on stage, brings to fore the pathos and angst of these characters and tries to strike the cathartic chord with the

audience. He foregrounds the trauma and turmoil of normal as well as queer human beings thus subtly and ingeniously plays up the tropes of sexuality, self and identity.

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