

Art as a Sustaining Force in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams and his protagonists are artists marginalized by their circumstances. They are dissatisfied with their present and keep on pursuing what ought to be. It is because of such traits that they seek survival and redemption in the art. The present paper focuses on how with the force of their creativity they succeed in transforming the unpalatable events of their life into a thing of beauty. These artists unlock the secret corners of their minds through the agency of art or sex considering sexuality and art as the way to personal meanings in the world of confusion and chaos. The paper further explores their lives, full of traumatic experiences, and their struggles to make it endurable with the power of their art. The qualitative analysis of the characters suggests that their tender feelings, which serve them as source of inspiration in their moments of creativity and their imaginative ability, with which they try to avoid their complete breakdown are the main reasons for their survival. Finally, the paper considers the role of their art as the most powerful consolation in their lives.

Keywords: *Williams, psychic history, creativity, sustaining force, motivation*

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams portrays the fragile and marginalized people exposed to their struggle for survival. Creativity becomes a sustaining force for such people. Both Williams and his protagonists are the sensitive souls pitted against the insensitive and indifferent world. They are dissatisfied with their present and try to create a world of their own. The realities of their life are so harsh but they try their best to cope with them with every possible source available to them. They are artists and it is their art that becomes a saving grace for them. The present paper looks at the importance of creativity and arts for the characters created by Williams and their ability to cope with the sufferings and hardships of life and transforming them into enjoyable artistic moments with the help of their creative imagination.

The characters of Williams stand unparalleled for their superb artistry. He uses his genius to make art an important part of their lives. While replying, in an interview, to the question regarding the force working in the making of the tour operator Shannon, previously a defrocked priest in *The Night of Iguana*, Tennessee Williams makes it very clear:

Yeh. I think back of existence there has to be a creative force. Otherwise, there could be no existence. Something has to have created existence. And just like, yuh know, the plainest kind of geometry, consequently there is a creative force. So we could not exist otherwise. Nothing could exist (Rasky, 1986, p.28).

Tom, in *The Glass Menagerie*, can be quoted as the best example of such creative force. Like "Flaubert, [he] is an idealist, frequently frustrated by the shortcomings of the society and the material order" (Porter & Gray, 2002, p.129). He deserts his family for the sake of self realization but fails to escape the nostalgic attachment with his sister and other members of the family. Even his nagging mother and unresponsive and indifferent father keep on haunting him. He shuns stagnancy to bring some change in life but it results in further stagnancy and loneliness. The only solace left in such a life is his memory of the moments spent with the members of the family. When the clouds of loneliness become thick and deep, he tries to enact his life history through his art of story telling. Such is the intensity of attachment that it gives shape to a great piece of art. Like his creator, Tom creates a thing of beauty by transforming the unpalatable events of his life. In the next section, we give an analysis of the raw material used by Tennessee Williams for creating art within the lives of his characters.

2. Discussion and Analyses of Issues

It is not only Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* who enacts his life story but also there are artists in *Out Cry* who create art by using the raw material extracted from their own lives. The art of these artists serves as a therapy in the lowest moments of their existence. The sisters of these protagonists are the source of inspiration for their art which reminds Williams' attachment with his sister Rose. This is what Parker points out in Williams' art when he says that "*Out Cry* deals with the two central and interlocked experiences of Williams's life: his ambiguous, near-incestuous love for his schizophrenic sister; and his compulsive need for theater as personal escape and therapy" (1997, p.71). The play is the product of Williams' alienation in "the nearly fatal confinement at Friggins" (Williams, 1975, p.233) during "the last six or seven years of the sixties.... [Here] the characters are just lost, lost as [Williams] was" (Rasky, 1986, p.33). During this period, which Williams calls as "The Stone Age," (1975, p.212) he was so frustrated and depressed that life seemed to have come apart. He resorted to drugs to alleviate his loneliness but this thing proved counterproductive for his creativity. So, the loneliness coupled with declining creativity aggravated the situation in such a way that resulted in a crisis of confidence. *Out Cry*, on the one hand, portrays that artists are the isolated and lonely figures in the senseless and indifferent modern culture and, on the other; it shows Williams' resentment against those critics who were obsessed with finding faults with his declining creativity. Some

of his comments regarding such critics prove the point especially when he utters that "it was a cabal to cut me down to what they thought was my size" (1975, p.173).

The two artists in *Out Cry*, Felice and his mentally unstable sister, Clare are deserted by their theater company because they have become a useless commodity for the theater. The situation is disheartening but they do not lose heart and try to console themselves by retreating into the art of self-dramatizing. Like Tom and Williams himself, they draw their play from their life and try to enact it. However, in spite of all their efforts, the audience does not appreciate their artistic performance. The hostility of the audience is so shocking that they are completely lost. When the audience locks them, they find themselves as prisoners of theater. Gillen tries to establish some similarity with Williams' own state of affairs when he says: "As Felice and Clare are trapped within the theater...so the playwright, too, is trapped within himself, never knowing if the reality that he perceives is ever understood by anyone" (1986. p.229). The harshness of the spectators represents the adverse criticism of Williams' critics and the locked artists represent Williams himself, for whom the theater is a refuge as well as a prison. The struggling and alienated artists portray Williams' inner struggle to renew the artistic motivation at a time when his personal and professional power was declining. If Williams was disheartened and frustrated from his declining creativity and the cruelties of life, he was also eager to put up a valiant struggle against the adversities of life. So the play reflects two diametrically opposite aspects of Williams' psyche: a resolute and defeated self. It portrays his desire to fight against all odds of life in the person of Felice, and his defeated self which collapses under the strain of life in the person of Clare.

Some of Williams' artists are a strange mixture of liberalism and Puritanism and the same strain can also be found in his own person. Bigsby's comments on Williams and his art are quite apt: "His parents were a traveling salesman and the daughter of the local minister - which may account for the strange mixture of prurience and Puritanism in his work" (1987, p.41). Williams' childhood attachment with his puritanical maternal grandfather and his "growth in the rectory during his formative years," (Leverich, 1995, p.37) inculcated puritanical aspect in him. However, this aspect of his character "came in direct conflict with a side born of the wild, cavalier disposition of the Williams family" (Leverich, 1995, p.38). In some of his plays, he presents the puritan and the liberal aspects of his personality in conflict with each other. The conflict between flesh and spirit in these plays represents a conflict between his irrepressible imaginative thoughts and suppressive Puritanism. Blanche's contradictions in her personality reflect Williams' own; especially when he says: "Roughly there was a combination of Puritan and Cavalier strains in my blood which may be accountable for the conflicting impulses I often represent in the people I write about" (1978, p.58).

Blanche has the imagination of a poet and tries to create poetic beauty in the stifling atmosphere of the Kowalskis. However, the puritan Blanche keeps in constant conflict with the poetic Blanche, resulting in the worst kind of hypocrisy. She is so liberal that she is ready to bed with every young man but she is never ready to accept the homosexuality of her husband. She rejects the homosexuality of her artistic husband due to her puritanical approach towards it and leads him to suicide. The conflict between her unbridled passion for sex and her puritanical approach towards homosexuality can be observed from the dresses she wears. Her red dress represents her red hot passion for sex. This sexual liberalism results in eviction from her school. When the homeless, jobless and friendless Blanche reaches the Kowalskis she is dressed in the white, which tries to hide the blackness of her past deeds. Her white dress, like her constant bathing in hot water, represents her desire for purity of soul. Boxill compares Blanche with her creator in these words: "Blanche's delicate beauty and literary taste, is primarily the playwright himself as a puritan renegade whose audacious promiscuity - in particular with younger men - bears the consequences of ostracism and humiliation in his early middle age" (1988, p.83).

Alma, in *Summer and Smoke*, is the best example of war between body and soul. She is a small-town minister's daughter and, like Williams, is brought up in a rectory. Her upbringing in the rectory urges her to ignore her flesh to fulfill the demands of her soul. She rejects all the gestures of love from her lover, though she is attracted towards him. With the passage of time, spirituality subsides and the power of flesh takes over creating the worst kind of split in her personality. Such a split in her personality reveals "Puritanism in battle with Lawrencian sex" (Tischler, 1961, p.152). Soon it dawns upon Alma that "the spiritual can only be reached via, in union with, the physical" (Adler, 1997, p.116). Though this change of mind does not promise her the warmth of love, she has the courage to break the taboos of the society. Williams' comments about her are worth mentioning: "I think the character I like most is Miss Alma.... You see, Alma went through the same thing that I went through - from puritanical shackles to, well, complete profligacy" (Devlin, 1986, p.216). The same conflict can also be observed in Serafina in *The Rose Tattoo*. She is too puritanical to permit any "man-crazy talk" (*Five Plays*, 150) in her house. She leaves no stone unturned to create a new world of her own by deifying her husband. On the contrary, when it proves to her that the godly figure of her husband had an illicit affair with another woman, she feels betrayed and breaks all puritanical constraints and pursues the demands of flesh with a passionate rebellion.

The erotic attraction and sexual appeal in Williams' plays reflect his own homosexual tendencies because "The literary work...is child of an author's creative life; and expresses the author's essential self. The text is the place where we enter into a spiritual or humanistic communion with an author's thoughts

and feelings" (Selden, Widdowson, & Booker, 2005, p.62). Williams' fictive figures represent his belief that sexuality and art are the ways of expression for the soul. These artists unlock the secret corners of their mind through the agency of art or sex. Tom may not be homosexual but his sexual passivity is indicative of homosexuality. His yearning for the female members of his family has sexual undertones. The artist Val Xavier, in *Orpheus Descending*, with his phallic-like guitar and snakeskin jacket may be considered as the romanticized projection of what Williams would want to become. But his torturing to death shows that Williams could not become what he might have desired. His cruel death reminds of another victimized artist, the homosexual Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Jabe burns Vale alive because of his sexual envy while the village urchins tear Sebastian into pieces because he used them to satisfy his sexual desires. If these artists represent Williams, then their torturers symbolize those critics whose killing criticism was equally torturous for Williams. By presenting the artists in his plays as rootless wanderers Williams, in fact, portrays his own life spent most of the time in the rented rooms. Their sexual, emotional and psychological disturbances reflect the hidden places of Williams' psyche. These artists are either sexually starved or homosexuals, so a kind of self-parody of Williams because it is an established fact that he himself had homosexual tendencies and remained unmarried throughout his life. As their troubled psyche finds relief in their art, Williams also finds relief in the face of the severities of life and makes his life bearable in his writings. Writing was a kind of therapy for Williams as he says, "I guess my work has always been a kind of psychotherapy for me" (1978, p.89). These troubled artists find themselves enmeshed in the disgusting realities of life. They are romantic to the tips but such a trait does not fit in a world which is pragmatic to the tips. So they try to materialize their romantic dreams and seek personal meanings in life through their art. Williams also finds himself in the world of confusion and chaos. It is the world of art that gives him "an escape from a world of reality in which [he] felt acutely uncomfortable" (Devlin, 1986, p.61).

Some incidents of Williams' life run parallel to those of his artistic figures. During the declining days of his career, Williams was writing his *Memoirs*. Just at the same time Flora Goforth, the protagonist of *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, is dictating the memories of her illustrious career as an artist. She is portrayed on the lines of her creator. Her artistic glory is depleted, reminding of Williams' own decline as he declares: "My professional decline began after *Iguana*" (Devlin, 1986, p.235). She is dying of cancer, which reminds of Williams' long time companion, Frank Merlo's death by cancer. Both the tortured artists are in the twilight of their artistic careers. She is on the verge of her physical death while her creator is on the verge of a creative demise as his plays are not well received by the audience and the critics. Like Williams she is also passing through the pangs of loneliness after having enjoyed the pleasures of wealth and fame. She wants to forget her impending tragedy by indulging in sexual activity

with a young but burnt out artist, Christopher Flander. Here the plight of Chris symbolizes Williams' own fear of artistic failure.

The sense of insecurity in Williams' early life, "a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface," (Williams, 1978, p.16) proved a blessing in disguise as it enabled him to create a world of his own. By presenting the insecurity of his artistic figures and their dreams and desires to create an imaginative world, Williams in fact, projects his self through them. Most of his protagonists are dreamers who invent a fictive world when they are confusedly entangled in the quagmire of life and try to sustain it with the power of their imagination. Blanche stands closer to him in this regard. She is never ready to bow down before the forces ready to crush her. She tries to transform her pathetic situation with the magical power of art and tries to resist those forces determined to push her into the darkness of asylum. "In that respect she is clearly close kin to the writer whose strategy she mimics.... And when Blanche says, I want magic... she is in effect defending her own dramatic constructions and beyond that, those of Williams' himself" (Bigsby, 1984, p.61). She does not stop inventing even when the world starts slipping from her hand and love turns into a mirage. Similarly, Amanda, in *The Glass Menagerie*, creates a romantic world of Blue Mountain and seventeen gentleman callers when no gentle man caller is left. Lady Torrance, in *Orpheus Descending*, creates a love garden in miniature when the struggle for existence grows grim. Williams as well as his protagonists remain dissatisfied with their present and keep on pursuing what ought to be. It is because of such trait that they seek survival and redemption in the art of creativity.

The ageing Williams dramatizes his personal impulses in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*. Through the person of Scott Fitzgerald he presents his own experiences, the trials and tribulations of an ageing artist in a society bereft of delicate and tender feelings. Here, Scott is presented as an artist passing through painfully lengthy dry spells in his art of creativity. Once he was a great artist whose art throbbled with the passion for life but presently all his efforts to create a masterpiece of art yield no fruit. He puts his heart and soul in his art but remains incapable of creating work better than the previous one. Under these circumstances he faces a lot of mental strain. Scott utilizes Zelda as a source of his art and this is what Rose serves for Williams as the greatest source of his art. Zelda's final plea is that Scott can no longer be the author of her life: "I am not your book! Anymore! I can't be your book anymore! Write yourself a new book" (*Hotel*, 77). These dialogues reflect Williams' wishes for his "psychic individuation" (Evans, 1976, p.70). It is the individual's desire to rid himself of the overriding attachment with "his primary love-object (usually the mother, or mother-substitute)" (Fisher & Greenberg, 1996, p.23). The theory of psychic individuation states that when a young child is trying to separate his consciousness of self from his identification with his mother, he falls a prey to a

double anxiety: anxiety at losing his sense of identity if he loses his love-object, yet equally his fear of not attaining full individuation if he does not have the necessary aggression to break away. This anxiety happens at the toddler stage, but can recur again and again in later stages; and we remember that at the time of Williams's childhood illness and later in his isolation in St. Louis, his sister, Rose, was the only person in the world who accepted him without reservation, who shared an imaginative world with him, who loved him, and whom he could love with all the emotional intensity throughout his life. Similarly, his art takes inspiration from the person of Rose. Too much dependence on Rose might have resulted in psychic individuation. So, *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* is about the individual who is trying to free himself from too close an emotional dependence on his primary love object.

In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel Williams presents the life story of a defeated artist with such dexterity that "he himself seems to have become one of his own characters" (Lewis, 1970, p.65). He presents his self-analysis by portraying a famous and successful artist who has lost his creative vigor. The artist, like Williams, desires to express himself with the freedom of an aesthete but he fails to achieve spiritual inspiration. He yearns for the vigor and vision of his youth but finds himself in the cruel clutches of old age. His composure and confidence, which took him to the heights of fame, becomes a dream of the past. Williams himself failed to redirect his energies with new dramatic power during the last two decades of his artistic career. That is why he rewrote many of his earlier short stories and short plays and converted them into long plays. In the end, the artist kills himself, reminding of Williams own attempted suicide he tried to commit under the stress of his failure as an artist.

The dramatizing of Williams' personal life has produced some adverse criticism as Alice Griffin says, "the more autobiographical his work, the more [Williams] lost the artistic discipline and control that mark the major plays" (1995, p.8). On the contrary, Leverich's remarks seem more valid and valuable when he says: "with all his sins remembered, Tennessee's overriding virtue was his fervent involvement with life, in living it and in writing about it with passion" (1995, p.xxv).

3. Conclusion

The beauty of Williams' art lies in the fact that it is replete with sustaining force. Williams recollects and remolds certain elements of his personal life and uses them successfully in his plays. His work reflects his psychic history – his fears, love, loneliness, split between liberalism and Puritanism. If seen from the perspective of Freud's dream theory, Williams' plays can be regarded as the camouflaged manifestation of his latent wishes. Freud's dream theory gives the idea that dreams are basically a vehicle for venting tensions, conflicts, and wishes

from the unconscious. They help in maintaining psychological equilibrium by providing a partial means for discharging unconscious impulses. Dreams are outlets for tensions that accumulate specifically in the unconscious. Freud finds similarity between dream and artistic productivity when he says that "Both involved unconscious wish fantasies that, in more or less recognizable form, achieved conscious and manifest expression" (Olsen & Koppe, 1988, p.202). So Williams' plays provide him a pathway to vent the personal anxieties of his life. His imaginative art, like dreams, serves him a safety valve to control the most turbulent excitation in the unconscious. He tries to resolve the most complicated problems of life by resorting to the transcending power of art. He searches for the self and the soul in it because art is regarded as the chief instrument of human reconciliation. His art becomes a source of coping with the unpleasant conditions of life. It helps him adapt himself to the social and personal necessities of life. His plays are a medium of an access not only to the social conscience but also to his innermost thoughts and feelings. By exposing the fear, frustration and other human weaknesses through the person of his protagonists, Williams, in fact, tries to communicate his deep-rooted frustration and fear in life.

A time comes when Williams becomes one with his protagonists. The lives of Williams and his protagonists may be anarchic but they have something to hold on. And that something is their sense of creativity. It is through this act with which they try to transform the anxieties and ugliness of their lives into a thing of beauty. Their lives may be full of traumatic experiences but they try to make it endurable with the power of their art. They have not only tender things but also tender feelings which serve them as source of inspiration in their moments of creativity. It is through this imaginative ability with which they try to avoid their complete breakdown. The best and most powerful consolation in their lives is their art.

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