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The Biographical and Psycho-Social Underpinnings of Tennessee Williams' Characterisation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

Thomas Lanier Williams III, or better known by his Pen name, Tennessee Williams, was one of the most prominent American playwrights during the 20th century. Having written over 25 major plays throughout his lifetime, perhaps what stands out the most in those plays is the unclouded depiction of the contemporary American coming to terms with a society that was witnessing its belief systems eroding away during a time characterised by mass violence of the world wars, cold wars, and stood at the brink of what we call 'modernisation'.

This paper attempts to explicate a further understanding of the inspiration and sources that drove Tennessee's characterisation in his critically acclaimed play titled *A Streetcar Named Desire*, wherein the representation of his cultural and psychological outlook has been subjected to multifaceted interpretations.

Keywords

Modernism, identity, tennessee williams, american literature.

Introduction

Tennessee Williams has been celebrated for the raw and incisive exploration of the human psyche in his works. The world in which Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* was one that was awash with significant cultural and artistic shifts. Advent of modernism pushed forth a newfound focus on the

individual, subjective experience, and the exploration of the darker aspects of human nature. This period also saw the emergence of the noir movement, which was characterised by its gritty portrayal of urban life, moral ambiguity, and complex characters. A man coming from a difficult home, Williams perhaps found a space to embrace grim realities within his characters, the exploration of the interplay between the psycho-social context is the scope of this paper in reference to his play *A Streetcar Named Desire.* The characters moulded by Williams explicate the psychological workings of the 'modern man' who indulges in an inward struggle for identity and belonging, an aspect that John Gassner also comments upon, stating that Williams' plays put forth a "treatment of battered characters who try to retain shreds of their former respectability in a gusty world." (Gassner 4).

More than an intention to portray the social factors that affect the characters in his plays, Tennessee emphasises on portraying the effects of these factors and how the characters go about coping with the flux of changes in their outer life through attempting adjustments in their inner belief systems.

Williams often drew from his personal life for his works, and his plays were akin to a window peering into his life. Tennessee had a rough childhood, with an alcoholic father and a distraught mother, along with his own sister Rose, who was diagnosed with schizophrenia at a young age and underwent a lobotomy; Williams' own life thus had a huge say in shaping the content of his works. The feminine figure afflicted with psychological ailment is perhaps best represented in the characters of Amanda from *The Glass Menagerie* and Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The unhappy women in marriages portrayed through Amanda and Blanche; the chauvinistic and negligent male figures in the shape of Tom and Stanley Kowalski, all serving to reflect William's own childhood experiences of a mother awash with misery at the thought of her sickly daughter, and a (mostly absent) father

figure gripped by alcoholism, piling on to the misery of the household.

Cultural Commentary and Metatextuality in Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

There has been substantial groundwork on the critical appraisal of Williams' plays from a perspective of exploring the psyche of the characters in relation to other characters and themselves; but the context of these plays reflects the cultural context as well as a metatextual extension to the literary genres that were gaining momentum during that era. The early 1940s saw a rise in the genre of detective hard boiled fiction as well as the noir movement, with its cynical male characters in their rogue personas set in a grim setting filled with crime, violence and bloodshed; and this genre was complemented by the 'femme fatale', a mysterious and powerful woman who would lure and exploit unsuspecting men, usually ruining the protagonist for her self interests. Stanley, Stella's husband, is presented to us as the cynical, rugged character who looks as if he walked out of a hardboiled detective novel. Stanley suspects Blanche as she is not clear as to how she lost the ancestral property and had to come to live with her sister Stella; he further gains incentive to be cynical of Blanche when Shaw tells him of Blanche's dubious history.

With regards to the concept of femme fatale, Williams uses it by presenting Blanche as the femme fatale for the misogynistic Stanley Kowalski, who sees her as a deceitful woman bound to cause harm to his friend Harold Mitch, whom Blanche takes an interest in and Harold reciprocates that interest. At once Stanley dissuades Harold from courting Blanche, much to her anger, and decides to violate her physically towards the closing stages of the play.

As far as the moralities in Williams' plays are concerned, there is a layer of ambiguity that pervades the character dynamics; the depth of the relationship between Stella and Blanche is unclear, because on one hand Stella wishes to help Blanche, and on the other hand she ignores Blanche's remarks on Stanley's violent behaviour as well as being unaware of Stanley raping Blanche. Despite being sisters, both Stella and Blanche are closed off from each other, reflecting the individual isolation that began to permeate in the modern times. The romantic relationship shared by Stella and Stanley too is wrought by physical and emotional violence on one hand and Stanley's romantic gestures towards Stella, presenting an unsettling marital representation.

Some critics incorrectly infer Blanche's fate as Williams' way of justifying her promiscuous past, for Williams' use of thematics of sex, violence and adultery was a way for him to break away from his puritanical upbringing as well as present Blanche not as a silent victim but one whose protests went unheard; and Femme fatale, for Williams, is the misogynistic vilification of women who refuse to be bound into the submissive role assigned to them. Blanche's homelessness is also a signifier of the historical state of homelessness of homosexual identities within the heterosexual space, perhaps also echoing Williams' own homosexuality?

Conclusion

A Streetcar Named Desire becomes Williams' tower from whereupon he acutely observes, comments and critiques the panopticon that is his contemporary society, including the belief systems that govern it, and the literary genres that are a byproduct of such discourses.

And so Williams' prowess as a playwright lies not just in his acute observation and description of the inner psychological understanding of a person dealing with loss, loss of belief

systems and identity, but also in how his plays inform and draw from the larger structures of the literary traditions of his time, as well as drawing from his personal life. His plays throw light on the aspect of 'omnichronosity' that resides within literature, for it is at once a record of history, a narrative of present, and a speculation and/or ambition for the future.

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