

Illusion and Reality in Tennessee Williams' Dramaturgy

Book Review

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Man has been in constant search of reality. Philosophers, scholars, writers have all tried to understand and identify its key characteristics. Apparently it should not be difficult to grasp its intrinsic meaning. Yet at times reality defies the logical explanations. What is real for one could well be a mirage for the other. Such is the binary nature of the concept that only through constant endeavour, we can get a glimpse of this ephemeral ideal. This article is also an essay in exploration; albeit it is in the backdrop of Williams' dramaturgy.

Tennessee Williams (TW) is a much misunderstood name. Not everyone likes him. Quite often his works are confused with the type of life the author led. He was born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911. After a chequered childhood, he emerged as a sensational stage performer whose plays dominated the literary landscape of his times. The themes that he raised are today ripe for re-visitation. In this article, it is intended to carry out a textual study of his key plays which became internationally known for their content, characterization, story line and popularity. The plays selected from the rich reservoir of Williams' dramaturgy are 'The Glass Menagerie'; 'A Streetcar Named Desire'; 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof'; 'Night of the Iguana' and 'The Milk Train Does Not Stop Here Anymore'.

The Glass Menagerie is the story of a dysfunctional family. In the words of the author, it is a 'memory play' with 'flashbacks' and falls in the category of 'theatre of the mind'. Central to it are three characters

from one family – mother (Amanda Wingfield), son (Tom Wingfield) and daughter (Laura Wingfield), with a gentleman caller (Jim O' Connor) and last but not least, the absent character of the father of Tom and Laura and husband to Amanda. At the outset we are told that Amanda is not paranoiac but 'her life is a paranoia'. Laura Wingfield 'continues to live vitally in her illusions'. Tom is the narrator of the story and thus we see the unfolding of the play from his perspective. Jim - the imagined suitor, is the only person from the real world and stands as a contrast to the rest. The mother Amanda wants to undo the wrong done by the absent father and is keen for her children to succeed. She is haunted by the ghosts of the past and lives in a make believe world of hopes and expectations. She keeps the framed photograph of her spouse who has travelled far, far away. His last contact was through a telegram which said "hello; good bye". His forever smiling facial expression is a stark challenge to the grim and sombre reality of the family left behind.

The title of the play has metaphorical as well as symbolic value. A menagerie is a confinement of animals in a secure setting. Here we have not real life creatures but "glass" collections. Laura's companions are objects which can neither harm nor excite the normal reflexes in humans. They are delicate, fragile, handle-with-care type of items - horses and one favourite unicorn that is unique because of its horn. The mother and daughter live in a perpetual state of limbo; hoping for hope which will never materialise. As a child the mother waited for gentleman callers and is quick to observe "sometimes they come when they are least expected". A bolt from the blue falls with the mother exclaiming "deception, deception" - the mother feels deceived by her daughter who views her prospects from a different dimension. The mother's exasperation is for the daughter, a survival tactic. Laura abhors typing lessons and drops out as she feels handicapped with her slight limp.

Instead her "reality" is a small world of dreams where she can long for but never attain what others possess. She finds solace in the name given by her imaginary lover who calls her "Blue Roses" mistaking the word "pleurosis". Her son Tom is equally hard hit by his surroundings. He feels guilty bargaining life for "65 dollars a month". He wants adventure and poetry like Hart Crane. His escape is to exit home and leave for a distant land where he hopes to find a new reality of fun and happiness. Tom is a movie lover where the dimmed lights and screen projection, present an ideal vent to his frustrations. He terms the reality facing him as a "2 by 4 situation"; meaning thereby, suffocating and boxed up existence.

The inevitable clash of mother and son "realities" lead to Tom's calling Amanda a "witch". It hurts her but out of maternal love, she addresses him "life is not easy; it calls for Spartan endurance!" Amanda castigates Tom in the following words "You are the only young man that I know of who ignores the fact that the future becomes the present, the present the past, and the past turns into everlasting regret if you don't plan for it". The highpoint of the play is where Tom appraises himself as "the bastard son of a bastard ...". It is this conflict and fascination for father that delineates Tom's worldview of reality. In the encounter with the visitor from the real world, Laura's unicorn has lost its horn and has become like the rest of her collection of glass horses. This metaphorical morphosis indicates the predicament of Laura. She will have to be content with her mundane life as a home girl; sans husband, sans reality, sans future - she will live in the past where time will not progress to present and future. As we head for the inevitable conclusion of the play, Amanda the mother crystallises her critique of son Tom in these words "You don't know things anywhere! You live in a dream; you manufacture illusions!" Tom advises his sister to "blow out your candles

Laura; for nowadays the world is lit by lightning!" The play ends inconclusively and paves the way for a bolder and aggressive confrontation involving illusion and reality.

'A Streetcar Named Desire' is antipodal to 'The Glass Menagerie'. The emphasis is on the brute force of physicality. The protagonist Stanley Kowalski is of Polish descent, born and brought up in USA. The play is consumed by "desire"; it is raw, heated and focused on man's world - poker, beer and harsh behaviour. In such a setting, a character as delicate as Laura of Glass Menagerie is introduced. She is Blanche DuBois, carrying the finesse of French ancestry. The play starts with an epigram:

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice
"The Broken Tower" by Hart Crane

The choice of the lines shows Williams' fascination for the transient nature of love. The reality of love is way different from the reality of life. This will be demonstrated by the moth like character Blanche. She talks a lot and understands her habit "I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth, and this is the truth." So she thinks. Here we find that 50% illusion cannot face the challenge of truth. Quite like Laura she will be vapourised. "When people are soft--soft people have got to shimmer and glow--they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a--paper lantern over the light.... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft and attractive. And I--I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick." The

play *Street Car ...* is a post war angst of the American nation. The country like all other nations was recovering from the havoc and destruction of WWII. The economy was in ruins and life was hard. Jobs were scarce and the society lacked the infrastructure to support single individuals, especially women. Hence the lonely woman was subject to being tossed around and exploited. The seeds of the “# Me Too Movement” were laid in those early days of 1950’s. The play shows a male dominant family with Stanley as the bread earner and provider of a household. He is married to a sensitive lady Stella who has internalized the matrimonial oath, determined to make her marriage work, no matter what. As we discover she would soon become mother to Stanley’s baby. Her apartment is a typical two room survival abode with minimal facilities. The husband is a firm controller of his home. Although not a male chauvinist, he is a close call to it. He is physically active and spends time in bowling alley besides playing poker, which is his obsession. He is working in a factory on a low level assignment but hopes to graduate into a more lucrative post. Much of his time is spent in the company of co-workers, some of whom were his buddies in the military during the war. He appears to be doing well in the role of the hunter and attends to all male household chores, including providing “meat” for cooking. The equilibrium of Stella’s life is shaken with the surprise arrival of her elder sister Blanche DuBois.

Blanche is the opposite of Laura (*The Glass Menagerie*). This is what *prima facie* she appears to be. Appearances can be deceptive as in her case, she ends up in a lunatic asylum. She was sensitive by birth and nature. She was born in a family of reasonable means. However the male of the family indulged in fornication and hedonistic life style. Their excesses adversely affected Blanche’s life. As the elders of the family died with age or other related factors, Blanche was left with no option

but to file for bankruptcy. The estate was lost and she had to move around on jobs as an English language teacher. The epicurean way of life was not restricted to the male elders, as Blanche too had full indulgence in extra marital affairs. One of the many affairs resulted in her marriage with a young “boy”. She turns out to be a femme fatale as her young husband committed suicide, for which she is partially responsible. Distraught and homeless, she has arrived at the house of Stella. Here too she exposes her fallibility to easy living and enjoyment. This overbearing attitude is strongly disliked by the down to earth Stanley who has a very poor opinion of Blanche. She soon develops an affair with Stanley’s friend Mitch. With Mitch she wants a lasting relationship in the form of marriage. In an amorous situation she says “Honey, it wasn't the kiss I objected to. I liked the kiss very much. It was the other little--familiarity--that I--felt obliged to--discourage.... I didn't resent it! Not a bit in the world! In fact, I was somewhat flattered that you--desired me! But, honey, you know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost!” Lost she will be because of counter currents in play. Stanley resents every act of Blanche and has set people to report on her past. Her shenanigans come to light and it is shown that she had crossed all norms of society and was virtually an outcast.

Blanche tries to play the role of a good lady; alas it is too late and the malevolent society will not permit it. Her sensitive side comes to light and in a man’s world she is at the mercy of those who can exploit her predicament. She poignantly expresses her inner feelings when talking to Mitch “That won't be necessary. You're a natural gentleman, one of the very few that are left in the world.” This blossoming love falls on the rocks and she is doomed. Mitch gets secretly informed about her none-too-pleasant past and she is doomed. She boldly admits “Yes, I had

many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan--intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection--here and there, in the most--unlikely places--even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but--somebody wrote the superintendent about it--"This woman is morally unfit for her position!"

Tennessee Williams takes up her case to the court of the audience. The people who flocked to the theatre and subsequently to the Hollywood version of the play, invariably sided with the suffering lady. Accused of being false and untruthful, Blanche rationalizes by saying "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!"

Molested and raped, Blanche is left to the mercy of strangers. She attains martyrdom in her quest to establish the sanctity of reality as she understood it. She speaks in her own defence proclaiming "Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart--and I have all of those things--aren't taken away, but grow! Increase with the years! How strange that I should be called a destitute woman! When I have all of these treasures locked in my heart." Stanley's retort is insult added to injury "There isn't a goddam thing but imagination! And lies and conceit and tricks!"

Writers and their works go through gradual progression. As we move forward in this review of Tennessee Williams dramaturgy, we see a progression – Laura of 'Glass Menagerie' is a weak, shy girl lost in illusions; Blanche (Streetcar...') too has been battered by circumstances and her mind has ultimately surrendered; the third lady to be introduced now is Maggie(Margaret) in 'The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof' – she is all fire

and brimstone. She is a cat, capable of catty behavior. She is the revenge on a harsh society with its laws made to pulverize the weak. She is capable of sharp repartee and creating a truth as she understands it. This is possible because of her audacity. When BIG MAMA (family mother) says: “Fair or not fair I want to ask you a question, one question---D'you make Brick happy in bed?” Sharp comes the reply from Maggie: “Why don't you ask if he makes me happy in bed?” Everyone’s favourite the Cat play is based on a cotton plantation story. The hero (poor soul – TW doesn’t believe in traditional heroes) is Brick – he has been a football player and a sports commentator. Now nursing a leg injury suffered in midnight athletic indulgence. He is married to Maggie but is not sharing the bed and instead opting for the sofa. He cannot stand the “truth” of life around him and has taken to drinking as an escape mechanism. He is totally cross with his wife because he holds her responsible for the death of his best friend called Skipper. Maggie had accused Skipper of having an affair with her husband (gay relationship) which he tried to disprove by attempting sex with Maggie. Failing in his effort, Skipper believes that Maggie was right in her accusation. He decides to finish off his life. This precipitates a conflict situation between Maggie and Brick. Maggie is the upfront type who will not accept defeat. She is also keen that her husband should inherit his share of the father’s property. She can go to any extent. Even claim to be pregnant so to please the family about her credentials. She questions Brick for his lack of interest in her by using her wit and speech – “there wasn't a man I met or walked by that didn't just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed him and look back at me.” Similarly she is clear about the power of wealth and money. She regards money to be the bitter truth. “You can be young without money but you can't be old without it. You've got to be old with money because to be old without it is just too awful, you've got to be

one or the other, either young or with money, you can't be old and without it.--That's the truth, Brick....”

Maggie's version of 'truth' is also an indication of William's craftsmanship. One is awe struck by the sheer beauty and poetic power of the lines. Maggie says "This time I'm going to finish what I have to say to you. Skipper and I made love, if love you could call it, because it made both of us feel a little bit closer to you..." The strangeness of the situation, paradoxical as it might be, making love to another to prove the sincerity for yet another (Maggie's husband Brick) was a forte of the writer. What would be regarded as downright lecher behaviour and a taboo, went well with Williams. The audience was magnetised by his diction and command of situation. "You see, you son of a bitch, you asked too much of people, of me, of him, of all the unlucky poor damned sons of bitches that happen to love you..." Self love and admiration of one's vision is an easy pursuit, no matter how lofty it may be. The playwright who constructed his plays with extreme finesse, depended on his friend and play producer Elia Kazan, to rescue him when his scripted play would sound less convincing. Therefore, we have two conclusions to 'The Cat on a hot tin Roof'. Coming back to the hypnotic lines " yes, there was a pack of them besides me and Skipper, you asked too goddam much of people that loved you, you--superior creature!--you godlike being!--And so we made love to each other to dream it was you, both of us! Yes, yes, yes! Truth, truth! What's so awful about it? I like it, I think the truth is--yeah! I shouldn't have told you....”

Truth for Williams was a complex phenomenon. We simplify it much to our peril. As seen in the preceding paragraphs, the quoted text speaks for itself and sends the message of absorbing the events as they unfold. In essence, illusion and reality are two sides of the same coin. In

the end it hardly matters for it is basically the perspective from which we observe a situation. This is a grey zone phenomenon with overlapping black and white shades. In both cases, life goes on and never stops to eulogise or condemn the players on the stage of life. Williams was not a didactic writer. He did not preach or declaim. For him it was enough to create a close to real life scenario. Gifted with outstanding creative writing skills, he wrote (typed) his plays on varied themes and story lines.

'The Night of the Iguana' comes after the enormous success of his earlier plays. Here we see the opposites of illusion and reality in a new dimension. The play setting is away from the mainland America; confined to a jungle in the Mexican territory. The time is 1940 when Pearl Harbour had not yet taken place. The action takes place in a countryside bohemian hotel "Costa Verde". The central character is of Lawrence (Larry) Shannon - a defrocked priest who is undergoing penance for blasphemy and violation of the oath of his office. He is accused of harbouring heretical views and reportedly blaming the Creator in derogatory terms "cruel, senile delinquent". The ramshackle hotel is owned by a recently widowed lady - not young, not old, Maxine Faulk. Shannon had been a friend of Maxine's late husband Fred and was a frequent visitor. Following his departure from the Church, Shannon has taken up the job of a tour guide which takes him to different parts of the world. He is invariably fond of guiding lady tourists and whenever the situation would allow, Shannon would take advantage of seducing an unsuspecting, albeit willing, young lady member. This carnal indulgence would put him in distress. In his new venture, he has been accused of statutory rape and is likely to suffer consequences which has made him nervous and mentally brittle. He has brought the tourist party to the hotel and taken away the bus key so that

the party does not leave without him. The hotel inmates are a motley collection - a German company of mixed gender with attractive young girls. In comes an old man escorted by his granddaughter. The old man is Nonno and the lady taking care of him is Hannah - "ethereal, almost ghostly...in between thirty and forty; she is totally feminine, almost androgynous..." Hannah is a spinster and is not concerned about her matrimonial dilemma. She is an artist and sells her works as she constantly moves with her grandpa from one hotel to another; an itinerant existence. Williams coined the phrase for the grandpa whom he describes "ninety-seven years young". He is a poet "a minor league poet with a major league spirit".

Central to the play are the characters of Shannon and Hannah. They are both individuals with unrealised capacity. Shannon lives at the "fantastic" level which is the term for illusion. Maxine is the real level entity and the three of them make a fabulous trio. Maxine has felt "vibrations" between Shannon and Hannah and has warned the lady to beware of the vile nature of Shannon, who according to her is good only in words and lacks the strength to face the realities of life. With the pressure of losing his job with Blake Tours and the possibility closing of ever going back to the profession of priesthood, Shannon is close to a nervous breakdown. He is secretly aspiring to warm up with Hannah which Maxine knows would be disastrous for both of them. She warns "I know this black Irish bastard as no one does." The reality of a person is different from the impression that he might make. What Williams is suggesting in a subtle manner is that reality is a harsh and mundane thing. Real life doesn't carry the romantic imagery which we associate with it. The young-old poet completes his final poem and just as the play ends, he leaves this world with Hannah ready to travel till she completes her own journey. There are no happy endings in Williams' dramaturgy.

Yes, what is the role of the elusive "iguana" in the play by that title? The creature is a lizard which is consumed by young Mexicans for its meat. It is tied by a rope and kept under the stage. The reptile constantly gnaws at the rope to free itself. Thus it serves as a metaphor for the human condition. The fact that Shannon frees the iguana by cutting the rope, suggests that at least Hannah has a chance in life. He himself and Maxine can sail through mutual interdependence.

A play with a totally different format is 'The Milk Train Does Not Stop Here Anymore'. Set in Italy it reflects the experimental nature of the dramatist Tennessee Williams. Here we mainly see illusions as the play has a magical setting. A lady in the last throes of her life, is dictating her memoirs so that she has life after her death. The play was staged in 1963 and has a haunting atmosphere. Perched at the top of a cliff is the abode of this ancient socialite by the name of Flora Goforth who was married four times. The play shows a shifting from the traditional real life to an imaginary life which is surreal as well as phantasmagoric. In this magical realism there is a character (spirit) by the name of Witch of Capri, with all tricks intact. She thrives on blood transfusions to keep her ego high. Mrs Goforth says to her "Are you still living on blood transfusions ... it turns you into vampire ... The human system can't stand too much stimulation after - sixty..." The male lead character is Christopher Flanders and he is the precursor to death. He has a unique talent of spotting rich old ladies so that before they die, they leave something in their will for him. It's a kind of baby sitting with old people rather than young. His profession is the making of mobiles, mechanical instruments with an artistic touch. He has brought one for Mrs Goforth. No hiding in this play as the central female is anything but normal. She is half dead but still pretends to be among the living and in fact has the desires of youth. She deliberately wears no clothing in her

bedroom and wants the visitor Mr Flanders to be with her. She has profound fear of her demons that haunt her in her last moments. She is on a diet of multiple pills; one for each hour and each malady. She pretends or thinks her heart can still be cracked by the right kind of man - "The hard shell of my heart, the calcium deposits grown around it, could still be cracked, broken through, and my last husband broke through it, and I was brought back to - what? - Youth..." The theme of life fading away permeates much of Williams works.

There can be nothing more depressing and gloomy than the reality of death which actually is the central character. Was it because of personal depression of the dramatist? Most unlikely; the reason was Williams continued search for the daunting reality. For this purpose he creates an endearing but repulsive individual in the form of Goforth. She takes pride in her past which has little of personal endeavour or hard work. Her wealth is mostly inherited. She says "A legend in my own lifetime, yes, I reckon I am. Well, I had certain advantages, endowments to start with: a face people naturally noticed and a figure that was not just sensational, but very durable, too. Some women my age, or younger, 've got breasts that look like a couple of mules hangin' their heads over the top rail of a fence. This is natural, not padded, not supported, and nothing's ever been lifted..."

Like the previous play carrying the symbol of the reptile Iguana, this play has metaphorical strengths. The focus is on the mythical creature Griffin. The object represents the playwrights search of lasting sustenance in a world which is governed by irrational forces that can pulverise the weak and gentle (like Williams). In the words of Chris "Griffin is a force in life that's almost stronger than death." Lines to follow clear the haze as we get a close glimpse of the unfolding drama. According to Chris "I've lost it lately, this sense of reality in my

particular world. We don't all live in the same world, you know, Mrs. Goforth. Oh, we all see the same things — sea, sun, sky, human faces and inhuman faces, but — they're different in here! And one person's sense of reality can be another person's sense of — well, of madness! — chaos! — and, and —". It could be biographical as Williams was a tormented man. Mortal life had been anything but joy and the prospect of afterlife was an existential threat. He has made a mechanical device and has named it "The Earth is a Wheel in a Great Big Gambling Casino". For him life is a gamble and fate a matter of luck and chance.

Mr Christopher has the nickname "angel of death". He turns up as house guest in his wanderings at places of fortune. Mrs Goforth has her own sense of timing and is in no hurry to pack up from this world. While she can, she likes playing games. Mrs Goforth says "Let's play the truth game. Do you know the truth game?" Mr Flanders replies "I've always made excuses to get out of it when it's played at parties because I think the truth is too delicate and, well, dangerous a thing to be played with at parties, Mrs. Goforth. It's nitroglycerin, it has to be handled with the ...". No matter what, Mrs Goforth doesn't hesitate to call his bluff and believes in "real" things. She says "I can't stand anything false. Even my kidney-stones, if I had kidney-stones, would be genuine diamonds fit for a queen's crown". She has organised a place to serve as an "Oubliette" - a place where people are put to be forgotten. It will be the resting abode of Christopher Flanders (Angel of Death) and Miss Blackie (Mrs Goforth's Secretary) who has protected and shielded the visitor from the ire of her mistress.

The ultimate challenge is the challenge of time. It is a factor against which all else is measured. The vagaries of change compel humans and all things living to succumb before it. Nothing is immortal and before we know, the umpire raises his finger to declare the innings

has ended. This is the reality which is summed up thus "We all live in a house on fire, no fire department to call; no way out, just the upstairs window to look out of while the fire burns the house down with us trapped, locked in it." Man is designed to live in the past. The present is fleeting and the future exists only in the mind. "Has it ever struck you that life is all memory, except for the one present moment that goes by you so quick you hardly catch it going?"