



Tennessee Williams's Lyrical Drama

Tennessee Williams'in Lirik Draması

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331

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ÖZ

Eleştirmenler, akademisyenler ve okuyucular, Tennessee Williams'ı Güney Amerikan'ın tiyatro tarihinde en büyük ve en önemli oyun yazarlarından biri olarak saymaktalar. 20. yüzyılın ikinci yarısının en ünlü Amerikalı oyun yazarıdır. Bu makale, Tennessee Williams'ın lirik dramasını, karakter, sanat ve dil düzenlemesine odaklanarak, özetlemeye çalışmaktadır. Williams, yenilikçi Plastik Tiyatro konseptini, prodüksiyonun tüm unsurlarını - diyalog, aksiyon, dekor, ışıklandırma ve hatta sahne donanımı - gerçeğin birleşik ve sembolik bir ifadesi olarak birleştirmiştir. Williams eşsiz bir şair ve dramaturg idi, üç oyunu ile "The Glass Menagerie"-; "A Streetcar Named Desire"; ve en popüler draması olan "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof" nesilden nesile tiyatro izleyicilerinin hayal güçlerine girip fethetmiştir.

Anahtar kelimeler

lirik drama, öz-lirizm, Plastik Tiyatro, karakterizasyon, şiirsel hayal gücü

ABSTRACT

Critics, scholars ,and readers alike have hailed Tennessee Williams as the greatest Southern playwright and one of the most distinguished dramatists in the history of American drama. He is indisputably the most renowned American playwright of the second half of the 20th century. This article endeavors to make an overview of Tennessee Williams' s lyrical drama, focusing on its main features such as characterization, art, language, major themes represented in his plays, and etc. Williams introduced the innovative concept of the Plastic Theater into the American drama, which combined all elements of production- dialogue, action, setting, lighting, even props - in a unified and symbolic expression of truth. Williams was a very prolific playwright, poet and prose writer but his three plays- *The Glass Menagerie*, his most experimental play; *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his masterpiece; and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, his most popular play- have entered and captivated the imagination of theater audiences for generations.

Keywords

lyrical drama, self-lyricism, Plastic Theater, characterization, poetic imagination

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams, the distinguished playwright, poet, and prose writer has left profound marks on the landscape of American theater. In all his plays, he combines lyrical intensity, stifling loneliness, and mesmerizing violence with great mastery. His works, filled with emotion, address the endeavors of sensitive protagonists to survive in an extremely antagonistic world. He has been hailed as the most prominent Southern playwright and one of the greatest dramatists in the history of American theater.

The American playwrights of the last century were inspired by the intellectual arguments of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, Herbert Spencer, and especially by the psychoanalytic concepts of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The variety of themes and forms of modern American drama reflects these influences. To speak to the world in which the individual is increasingly liberated from the traditional 'anchors' of religious belief, socio-political groups, family relationships, and a given self-image, American playwrights such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams created powerful works about psychological and spiritual conflicts, loss of connection, loneliness, and self-deception, turning their eyes to sexual hedonism.

Facing the problems of the 'lost' individual in a 'mechanized' industrial society, they focused on the human passions, revealed the tensions of the American family, and challenged Victorian / Puritan 'morality'. Whether they accomplished this through shocking hyperboles, ambiguity of images and symbols, or the soul-stirring tone of understatement, their 'messages' were an indictment of a 'waste land' in which the term 'heroic' acquired a new definition. The protagonist was no longer a dynamic and idealistic man who set out to 'save the day'. He/she was a tragic and alienated hero seeking to find his/her place in a devastated 'jungle' society; or an 'ordinary man/woman' trying to cope with unfulfilled dreams through false compensation; or a silent survivor leading a life of 'quiet despair'; a victim of social pressure, animalistic desires, and loss of integrity. Such themes called for new forms of expression. Freud and Jung's theories, as well as innovative visual art models were quite useful in this regard.

Psychological schemes such as the layers of the human soul, the dualism of the 'soul' and the 'body', the illusions created by neuroses, the strength of the association and the simultaneous experience in the stream of consciousness, provided numerous ideas for provocative structural patterns. Assumptions and discussions on Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism served to inspire the explosion of images and evocative symbolism in terms of both discourse and technique. Lighting, music, visual objects, and setting became an integral part of plays, emphasizing characterization, increasing dramatic tension, highlighting the theme, and achieving a higher intensity during representation.

The themes and forms in the works of Tennessee Williams, one of the most prominent American playwrights, display many of the above-mentioned influences and tendencies. Williams, a member of the Southern Renaissance group of writers, which includes such great names as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Penn Warren, would build his themes around the ruined aristocracy of the Old South in tension with the arresting materialism of the reconstructed South.

Many of his female characters, from a psychological point of view, are individuals caught in trap of myths, self-deception, and the pretense of the 'aristocracy' of the 'chivalric' agrarian past. Some of them belong to the series of girls or young women from the South: passionate,

sex-obsessed, and in constant conflict with Victorian / Puritan morality. Some of his male characters are lustful, physically strong; others are 'realistic poets' trying to find their way into the volatile economic profile, altered values, and transformed morals of the New South. Meanwhile, others are boring, unimaginable people, representatives of those who, according to Williams, brought the 'mob mentality' to the American world.

Gifted with understanding the human condition and the talent for unfolding powerful psychological portraits, Williams has created some of the most memorable larger-than-life characters on the American stage such as Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, Stanley Kowalski, Big Daddy, Maggie-the- Cat and Serafina Delle Rose.

With his first big success on stage, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), a memory play, Williams replaced the "exhausted theater of realistic conventions" (Williams, 1949, p. 14) with a theater he considered more vibrant, the Plastic one, which used unconventional techniques to provide spectators with a perspective obtained through a "poetic imagination" (Williams, 1955, p. 17).

Williams's genius lies in his ability to create quite compelling characters that leave behind the Southern setting from which they emerged. The obsessive mother, Amanda, and her extremely timid daughter Lora in *The Glass Menagerie*; the fragile and displaced Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley Kowalski's unbridled sexual energy in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and that of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, as well as Tom's weakness in *The Glass Menagerie* and that of Mitch in *A Streetcar Named Desire* were born as a consequence of the tensions created in the South of the post-Civil War period, but their problems and conflicts reflect all human experience.

MAIN FEATURES OF WILLIAMS'S LYRICAL DRAMA

Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly the most prominent American playwright of the second half of the twentieth century. Since the mid-1940s he has firmly entered the American imagination, and since then has remained an authoritarian figure in theater, film, and popular culture. Lillian Hellman, the renowned American playwright has explained the reasons for this popularity stating that with the advent of his two plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Tennessee Williams "brought to the theater the greatest talent of the post-war generation" and then adding that "Williams's influence on the theater will be there a hundred years from now..." (Van Antwerp and Johns, 1984, p. 255).

Williams felt that art resides in the subconscious. His art represented the individuality, desire, and sexuality for himself and his characters, more openly and boldly than any other playwright before. The renowned British literary critic and writer C. W. E. Bigsby has rightly observed that the basic metaphors of Williams's life and work were "the self as an actor, society as a series of coercive fictions" (2000, p.64). Whereas the distinguished American critic Philip C. Kolin writes that, despite the whims of critical thinking, "Williams's canon towers stands above any other American dramatist's." (Kolin, 2008, p.4).

Although it cannot be said with certainty how many plays Tennessee Williams wrote during his lifetime, we know that he created 75 full length plays, without counting one-act plays and various earlier drafts and later revisions. His best-known plays, among which *The Glass Menagerie*, which introduced the concept of Plastic Theater on the American stage; *A Streetcar Named Desire*, his absolute masterpiece and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* – his most popular play and

biggest commercial success, have entered the imagination of theater goers and have remained there, entrancing audiences for generations.

Distinguished for his lyrical voice that originated in the rhythms of Southern dialect, Williams displayed a kind of 'self-lyricism' that transcended the geographical region of the United States of America where the playwright was born (Williams, 1955, p. 12). His plays have been translated into more than thirty different languages and have been performed in many countries across the world.

Inspired by the tragic life and lyrical poetry of modernist American poet Hart Crane, Tennessee Williams initially expressed his poetic imagination through verse. During the 1930s, Williams published more than forty poems, most of them in small literary periodicals, two of which appeared in the prestigious *Poetry* magazine. However, Williams's growing dissatisfaction with his poetry, the unpromising future of earning a living by writing poetry, and the fascination caused by the public reaction to his first dramatic production, *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* in 1935, signaled the beginning of Williams's eternal connection with the theater and marked an important metamorphosis in the form of his artistic expression. However, something of the poet always remained with Williams, evident to critics, who, over the years, would emphasize the divided nature of the artist in Tennessee Williams.

Renowned critic Frank Durham, for example, emphasizing the poetic elements of *The Glass Menagerie* coins Williams a "theater poet in prose" (Durham, 1971, p. 3). As Durham notes, Williams and other Plastic Theater practitioners avoided verse forms that distinguish traditional poetry, choosing instead "an eclectic but organic union of both verbal and non-verbal elements of the theater" (Durham, 1971, p. 3). Supporting Durham's view, critic Alan Downer feels that the true poet of theater is not necessarily interested in conventional forms and the language of poetry, but in merging all the elements at his disposal - plot, actor, action, stage, lighting, setting, music, discourse - that they serve as a means of revealing the theme, vision, or "its interpretation of human destiny" (Downer, 1951, p. 110). Even early in his career as a professional writer, Williams was overly aware of his inner struggle between the poet and playwright. With astonishing foresight, Williams had noticed about himself what Lyle Leverich calls "the duality of his artistic personality" (1995, p. 334).

But Williams's reputation goes beyond plays and movies. He triumphed in many other genres. Critic Gore Vidal stated that Williams's short stories are "his true memoirs" (Vidal, 1985, p. xx). Had he written only short stories, Williams would have deserved a place of honor in American literature for his "narrative techniques, provocative symbols, lusciously depraved characters, and outrageous plots and settings" (Kolin, 2008, p. 5). Williams published more than 100 short stories, two novels and an extremely provocative novel, *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), which preceded many of the techniques and characters of postmodern literature. Williams unfolded in his prose, even more boldly than in his plays, what tormented him, the devils against whom he fought in his subconscious.

Many critics have pointed out that what is fundamental to the poetic qualities of Williams's language is also its Southern origin. Critic and scholar Marion Migid underlines his long line, which achieves its most surprising effects through a repetition typical of Gertrude Stein, fusing archaisms, the introduction of unexpected 'literary' words and ironically elegant twists of the phrase. It is a stylized reflection of the Southern dialect, which is ... "more imaginative than the

Northern dialect.” (Migid, 1964, pp. 282-283). Esther M. Jackson echoes this idea, emphasizing the fact that the natural Symbolism of the Southern dialect has produced a highly developed iconography. “This Southern aesthetic”, she says, “has endowed Williams’s drama with a kind of basic linguistic structure comparable to that which appears in the early stages of the Greek tragedy” (Jackson, 1965, p. 46).

Williams’s dramatic art is characterized by a psychological Realism that merges with elements of Romanticism, Expressionism, Epic Theater, and Freudianism. His best plays skillfully combine elements of different theatrical styles where we can mention the use of the narrator who occasionally addresses the spectators, or the projection of words or images on a screen set on stage. Williams is also well-known for the very effective use of music, lighting, empty stage, countless symbols, memories, which serve to emphasize the main ideas of the plays.

He gave American theater audiences memorable characters, a fantastic vision of the South, and a series of powerful portraits of human life. He was quite interested in what he called ‘Poetic Realism’, the use of ordinary objects, which, being seen constantly and in the right context, take on symbolic meanings. His plays also address the extremes of human brutality and sexuality: madness, rape, incest, cannibalism, nymphomania, as well as fantastic and violent deaths. Williams himself often made comments about violence in his works, which he considered to be an integral part of human nature; he was aware, too, that the violence unfolded in his plays was very specific to American life. As they did with the works of Edward Albee, the critics who emphasized the ‘excesses’ in Williams’s work often simply attacked his sexuality. Homosexuality was not a topic that was openly discussed at the time the plays were written, but the themes of desire and isolation that are addressed in them show, among other things, the impact of growing up in a world that has a phobia of homosexuals.

If Tennessee Williams continues to hold his firm and grounded place in American theater, it is because of his rather elegant imagination. If we saw *Cat on the Hot Tin Roof* on stage now, we would become acutely aware of how that imagination works. There is a lot of evidence to prove the fact that eroticism for eroticism’s sake is rarely used by Williams in this play. In his works, sexual passions are always hidden and at the same time make the themes of the possessed soul, loss, anxiety and demands for moral integrity more tangible. Eroticism constitutes the scene of defeat and despair but also, in certain cases, of affirmation and generosity.

In 1942 Tennessee Williams believed he had found the solution to the problem of merging Lyricism and Realism, a method of expressing his passion and that of the world in a clear way. Calling himself an “experimental playwright”, Williams aimed to create a new ‘poetic’ form of art called ‘Plastic Theater’ (Williams, 1949, p. 14).

Instead of realism, which emphasized photographic representation of the real life, a style that had dominated the American scene for four decades, the playwright insisted on Plastic Theater, which combined all elements of production- dialogue, action, setting, and lighting, even props - in a unified and symbolic expression of truth. This approach, which can be absolutely considered innovative for that time, was explained by Williams himself in his Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie* showing its validity through the play itself.

Thus Williams proclaimed a new period in drama and a form, visibly and intentionally American, a popular art form that embodies all levels of American culture and life and that is

undoubtedly poetic in all its intentions. The search for a concrete form of expression - a form in harmony with poetic vision - is a motive that manifests itself throughout Williams's work.

Ironically, throughout his career Williams was praised for his 'Realism' by critics such as Eric Bentley, who accepted nothing of value in his work other than a realistic portrayal of circumstances and characters. Perhaps these critics may have been 'deceived' when they categorized Williams simply as a Realist because he grounds his poetic dialogue on concrete details such as proper names, specific places and references, popular songs, and the most used phrases and words at the moment. The fact that the original production of *The Glass Menagerie* and his major plays that ensued were far removed from the playwright's desire for a plastic representation led to misunderstandings and even attacks on his method by many of Williams's early critics. But his purely dramatic perseverance, along with the enthusiastic response of the spectators, brought about the guaranteed success of the writer.

C.W.E. Bigsby, who is the only critic to have written about Williams's works written in the 1930s before they were published, argues that Williams is not a committed writer. He sees in Williams's work not "a political denial of capitalism, but the reaction of a Romantic to the modern" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 169) and this is enough to justify the latter's assessment of Williams in fact as an uncommitted writer. However, in Williams's case, the contrast between politics and the Romantic is not valid, and this has made the critical debate about the meaning and significance of his work quite vague. It is quite ironic that in his afterword to *Camino Real* Williams expresses his loyalty to Romanticism by quoting a few verses from a play by George Bernard Shaw, the great social drama playwright, with whom he is thought to have fewer things in common than with any other playwright. 'Romantic' and 'Revolutionary' would be the right qualifications for a writer who claims to be more engaged than Arthur Miller, who is considered the supreme social American playwright.

Williams's dramatic power stems not only from the content of his plays, but also from the nonlinear structural patterns and technical supporting devices he masterfully intertwines in his plays. His use of symbols such as the animal figures in *The Glass Menagerie*, the use of music, lighting and setting to enable the narrator to move freely in and out of his memory, the names of the 'destinations' of streetcars in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and of course the moving images created by the titles of his plays, make his characterizations and themes more powerful through colorings and allusions, as well as give a third hypnotizing dimension to his plays.

Tennessee Williams brought a wonderful blend of prosaic reflection and poetic passion to the American theater. No other American playwright has created such a distinctive dramatic world, or such powerful characters, in which the need for self-esteem and desperate courage is masterfully intertwined. The fact that they have chosen to theatricalise themselves and the world around them as a defense against the real world, puts the writer's own effort at the center of attention; in this sense, too, Williams was the protagonist of all his plays. Because he always did his best when he addressed his own experience, reshaping it in an attempt to come to terms with what he thought was the pressure of a life distorted by psychological confusion. Like Eugene O'Neill he turned his life into art, and the effect was the same for both writers. His life "became a bad theater; while his theater, a living monument" (Bigsby, 2000, p.57).

Tennessee Williams's art is characterized by a great complexity thanks to the combination of themes and main motives of his plays - South, violence, sexuality - with various dramatic

techniques that combine elements of psychological Realism, Romanticism, Epic Theater, Plastic Theater, Symbolism, Expressionism, Surrealism, etc. All these features of Williams' s art prove quite well that his drama was a clear denial of conventional Realism in theater, which he clearly explained in the Production Notes to *The Glass Menagerie*: “Everyone should know nowadays the unimportance of the photographic in art: that truth, life or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance” (Williams, 1949, p.14).

It is not at all surprising that Williams’s best plays have the most perfect structure - their dramatic progression is marked by austerity, coherence, and a lack of problematic issues that may attract and distract the playwright. They are also almost the most unaffected plays by the intellectual mist, in which Tennessee Williams, like his fellow dramatist, Eugene O’Neill, was very inclined to disappear.

Tennessee Williams never expressed any admiration for the previous American playwrights; however, he was most influenced by the prominent Russian playwright Anton Chekhov. Chekhov, with his elegant combination of the comic and the tragic, his lonely characters, and his dark sensibilities, was a powerful inspiration for Williams’s work. At the same time, Williams’s plays are completely American, both in terms of the setting and the characters. Another very important influence was that of the British novelist D. H. Lawrence, who provided Williams with the description of sexuality as a quite living force in life; Williams alludes to Lawrence in *The Glass Menagerie* as one of Tom Wingfield’s favorite writers. The American poet Hart Crane also exercised a major influence on Williams; the playwright found a great source of inspiration in Crane's tragic life and death, his outspoken homosexuality, and his determination to write poetry that did not imitate European sensibilities. Tennessee Williams also belongs to the tradition of Southern writers who have enlivened the literary language with the lyricism of American Southern English.

CONCLUSION

Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* confesses that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers” (Williams, 1951, p. 165). This was no less true of Williams himself, whose work was a strange mixture of self-discovery and self-concealment. The strangers are the spectators he invites to react to the tormented, alienated and weak characters he brings on stage. Undeniably they are him, and this is not in the sensational sense that newspaper reviewers believe. His art was the means of communication of a pathologically timid man; the difficulty of his characters to reach each other was an expression of his fear that his plays did not convey good communication.

The poetry implied in his work, as well as the reliance on dramatic symbols, testified to the efforts he made to establish indirect contact. Evaluating the direct treatment method as incapable of preserving the details of the thoughts and emotions he intended to embrace, he turned to the allusive one. That was the answer of a poet. And that was how he saw himself.

Sometimes he created a kind of poetry which seldom escaped its origins out of pity for himself, but other times he conceived a deeply touching lyricism which gave his characters and the settings in which they found themselves a meaning he feared his life missed. He was as original as few other writers are. His works communicated to readers through his own voice: a

hypnotizing, lyrical and powerful voice, the voice of one of the greatest playwrights of American drama, undeniably the most prominent one of the second half of the last century.

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