

**EXPLORING VIOLENCE AND TERROR IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S
PLAYS: SUMMER AND SMOKE, SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH,
A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**

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Abstract

The life of Tennessee Williams is a much-explored area and his personality has been under the harsh, scrutinizing light, time and again. In order to survey the relation of man's miseries and misfortune with the vast world in general, an excursion should be made into Williams's Southern culture that breeds abnormality in the facade of a glorious American Dream. Williams's usage of devices like terror and violence in his plays, paint a clear picture of his time, culture, and discrepancies of gender vividly. The plays in focus are "Summer and Smoke", "Sweet Bird of Youth" and "A Streetcar Named Desire".

'It's strange how many people suffer from it, I don't only mean fear of closed spaces and fear of heights, but fear of death and what's worse, fear of life... I've sometimes thought it was the most besetting humour of man, and I asked myself at one time if it was due to some deep animal instinct that man has inherited from that primeval something that first felt the thrill of life.'

(*The Razor's Edge*, William Somerset Maugham)

Terror and violence are the by-products of a mind that is like a quagmire of complex emotions and they get transmuted into physical activities when the need to escape from an extremely uncomfortable world of reality becomes intense. Here I am talking about a man who garbed himself in the cloak of a writer in order to take refuge in another world where loneliness, anxiety, terror and violence could attain a higher level of "sublimation". Williams owed his aptitude for horror and violence to an extremely disturbed childhood. After being abandoned by his father, Williams and his mother had to move back to the town of Columbus, Mississippi which played a significant role in shaping his personality. The period of childhood witnessed a young boy deeply attached to his mother, leading a life completely different from the stereotypical, hence 'normal' childhoods of other boys of his age. Instead of indulging in exuberant bonds of friendship Williams immersed himself in the plays of Shakespeare which helped him to grow an affinity for violence and a madness for Titus Andronicus.

Arising from a world of macabre reality, sprinkled with lurid experiences Tennessee Williams's plays have compelled the readers to think deeper about the abnormal psyche, constantly infected by an internal 'Trojan war'. This internal 'Trojan war' is nothing but the offshoot of Manichaeism Dichotomy. Terror and violence are embodiments of "destructive impulses" which goad the characters to thwart the harmony of existence and drive themselves into clasp of peril. Therefore in order to understand this internal conflict and a violent nature as projected by many of Williams's characters it is important to delve deeper into the whole concept of Manichaeism Dichotomy. Mani's myth begins with the two primeval principles of Light and Darkness coexisting in their own realms and yet independent. As stated in the *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* Volume. 5 of Paul Edwards:

Evil stands as a completely independent principle against good and redemption from the power of Evil is to be achieved by recognizing this dualism and following the appropriate rules of life (149).

In Williams's play the dark or "destructive impulses" are intertwined with some elements of light. For instance, "lunacy", "alienation", "frustration", "death syndrome", "oppressor-oppressed complex", "sodomasochistic tendency", "neurosis", "violence", "terror" are connected closely with elements like- "quest for hope", "urge to live more" and "the disclosure of moral truth by unmasking a quality secret". The union of opposites forms the basis of twentieth century American outlook, the past and the present, self and the society, the old and new worlds, the post-war South and the Reconstruction South. For example, in *Summer and Smoke*, Williams presented a South which was neither the post-war South nor the Civil-war South and ample devices were used to universalize the past. The play reduces realism to the minimum since strangely enough there were crippled souls in numb bodies desperately trying to break into an act of violence. Still the details will not fit into the universal allegory, instead fit very well into an allegory of the South. Alma Winemiller, in relation to her mother, in relation to Nellie, the daughter of the town-prostitute is represented more as the soul of the South, a soul that is tinted with hues of a culture which has its roots in a characteristically 'romantic' past. Manichaeism Dichotomy is visible in Williams's grotesque unravelling of the feminine "Southern" soul. On one hand he presents a pleasant surface, i.e. Alma and on the other an ugly underneath, Mrs. Winemiller. Alma runs every choice of being an exact replica of her mother who is a neurotic patient, a feeble figure pitted against a bleak future.

The character of John Buchanan has germs of violence embedded in him and the excess of his power lies unutilized. The central 'violence' of the play is committed by an outsider, but it ensues because the South is still ignorant of itself. This violence is the slaughter of John's father. Unaware of physical violence and of the evil that "cuddles in the depths of the soul" Alma presents a pristine picture against a grotesque background. Therefore the responsibility for violence in the South lies not just within the "outsider", but everywhere else. In a divided South, cultural past and present are poles apart, and there is nothing that can hold them in proximity. In this play sexual maladjustment becomes the sole reason for destruction and leads to a complete psychic imbalance. Alma, who is also one of Williams's favourite characters embraces a new "abnormal" self at the end of the play and sheds her "puritan" past. It should be noted that the modernist meaning of the word puritan is "something against pleasure" therefore Alma losing faith in the bond of love and following the path of sexual promiscuity like Blanche in *A Streetcar* seems like an act of sacrilege. The transformation is terrorizing since Alma shoved by John Buchanan's infidelity towards her yields to the baseless offer of a travelling salesman. The concluding conversation of the play is really unnerving:

Alma: There's not much to do in this town after dark, but there are resorts on the lake that offer all kinds of after-dark-entertainment.

There's one called Moon Lake Casino. It's under new management now, but I don't suppose its character has changed.

The young Man: What was its characters...

Alma: Gay, very gay, Mr. Kramer...

(*Summer and Smoke*)

Williams has imbibed the staple of his plays from the South which has made his characters aware of their febrile existence. I believe it is the complex Manichaeic Dichotomy and a "confused" South with a paradoxical co-existence of culture and power that has given birth to a strange concoction of "sense of rootlessness", "a diseased mentality", "neurotic proclivity" and an overall schizophrenic existence. Therefore, the South was an 'ideal' fecund bed for nurturing the abnormal psyche that exemplified itself in the external activities of Williams's characters, activities that can be categorized as 'terrorizing' and 'abnormal'. For the readers understanding the psychology of the characters get more perplexing since Williams never really offers a direct solution or cure. In fact it can be rightly opined that a successful treatment perhaps is not possible because medical aid can be sought to cure an individual's psyche but the question remains- can medical aid be sought to cure an ENTIRE 'diseased' culture? It is a culture that breeds a 'waste land-ish' attitude, where a living person is like the "lonely cab-horse" that "steams and stamps".¹

"Freudian plot of ground, because to Williams 'everything' is painful- sexuality, touch, communication, time, the brazenness of fact, the necessity of lie, the loss of innocence. And finally it should be clear that Williams has alternatively been elegist, soothsayer, mythmaker, exorcist or consoler- none of the incarnations final and no one incarnation carried through to finality."(77-91)

Terror is- Chance Wayne, the male protagonist in the play *Sweet Bird of Youth* nursing a fatal ailment since he bore the germs of an incurable venereal disease. Perhaps he had sensed that 'Time' was clasping him in its fatal grip and he screamed: "To change is to live, Miss Lucy, to live is to change, and not to change, is to die." (Act 2, Scene 2, *Sweet Bird of Youth*). Chance Wayne's physical 'ailment' symbolizes another incurable disease called 'love'. Then again the question remains- is LOVE, in this case that pure 'ideal' emotion which binds two people together for a lifetime or is it like a big, dry, barren tree that only makes a lot of ugly noise when swayed by the wind? The latter is the answer. A love that began with intimate moments of 'sweet' violence in a carriage embodying itself in the picture of a fifteen-year-old nude girl surrounded by water that had just begun to "lap over her body like it desired her like I (Chance) did and still do and will always, always" transforms into the savage thirst for blood when both Boss Finley and Tom Junior plan to kill Chance. It is the sheer purity of the pristine image of the girl that makes the name 'Heavenly' impeccably appropriate and ironical too. Heavenly's purity and heavenliness faces sacrilege when she too has to undergo treatment for the venereal disease passed on to her by Chance as a token of love. Her words are so poignant that at times reading the play becomes an excruciatingly agonizing task.

Heavenly: ...I felt worse than embarrassed when I found out that Dr. George Scudder's knife had cut the youth out of my body, made me an old childless woman. I feel as if I ought to rattle like a dead dried-up vine when the Gulf Wind blows, but, Papa- I won't embarrass you anymore (Act 2, Scene 1, *Sweet Bird of Youth*).

She begins to epitomize a hellish existence and is terrorized further by the scathing remarks from people like Heckler who are determined to ruin Boss Finley's "Voice of God" image and his attempt at projecting his daughter as the "fair white virgin exposed to black lust in the South". The gentle Heavenly also rises up in violence against her father and her pitch attains a protesting baritone. She cannot tolerate her father's illicit relationship with an "other" woman. She screams:

Heavenly (shouting): Yes, I am Papa, I am. You married for love, but you wouldn't let me do it, and even though you'd done it, you broke Mama's heart. Miss Lucy had been your mistress... Boss Finley, the daunting father peremptorily hushed her fulminating voice, "I have power, which is not an illusion." (Act 2, Scene 1, *Sweet Bird of Youth*).

The figure of the Boss represents best 'man's divided self'. Sombre, sophisticated and nurturing rich tastes in him, he is perhaps the most feeble-minded character who exhibits unusual or highly disturbed behaviour- a personality deviating to a greater or lesser degree from what we regard as "normal." Miss Lucy's account of physical violence inflicted on her by Boss Finley in order to take revenge for tarnishing his reputation is not just gruesome but also a shameless glorification of sadomasochism (Miss Lucy: I open the jewel box an' start to remove the great big diamond clip in it. I just got my fingers on it, and start to remove it and the old son of a bitch (Boss) slams the lid of the box on my fingers. One fingernail is till blue." Act 2, Scene 2, *Sweet Bird of Youth*). Although the women in this play are aware of their needs and demands, their voice is far less incisive. When they stake their claims to the object rightly demanded they easily loosen their grip. For instance, Princess Kosmonopolis or Alexandra Del Lago found a male gigolo in Chance Wayne not just to quench her thirst for the warmth of youth but also expecting him to wash away her sorrowful past with "love". She agreed to help Chance get his lost love at St. Cloud but could not bear the harsh, insensitive treatment she received from him, when she desperately needed support.

Princess: Talk about a beach boy I picked up for pleasure, distraction from panic? ... You've just been using me. Using me... When I needed you downstairs you shouted "Get her a wheel chair!" Well, I didn't need a wheel chair, I came up alone, as always (Act 3, Scene 3, *Sweet Bird of Youth*).

The root of sense of claustrophobia, confinement and the "oppressor-oppressed syndrome" in these plays can be easily attributed to Dante's *Inferno*:

In Dante as well as the modern artists, one important sense pervades the variations of a personal inferno, it is the sense of confinement and of the ineluctable repetitiousness of torture (436).

Going back to Tennessee Williams's South, he insisted in a *Conversations* interview that he wrote about South not as a sociologist but he wrote about 'human nature'. Williams seems to be indulging in a kind of phallic romanticism, attributing sexual potency to members of the unintelligent lower classes and sterility to aristocrats. The abnormality in the plays suggests that the dramatist viewed the norm of society as being faulty itself. The lost cause of the Civil war and the devastating Reconstruction gave birth to the 'mad music' in his plays.

Hence in *A Streetcar Named Desire* we have Blanche DuBois as the absolute romantic who still believes in purity, honour and gallantry while her own life has become sordid and soiled. Her lies about her past or her surroundings are dreams of beauty. She is a character who is neurotic, melodramatic, extremely crystalline, brittle and too delicate for the new brawling of

modern life. Ironically Blanche appears in the first scene dressed in white, the symbol of purity and innocence while in reality she had been asked to leave the army camp in Laurel and the seedy hotel Flamingo because she was declared as being “out of bounds”. But she is seen as a Moth-like creature, dignified, refined and sensitive. She cannot stand light; she has never had any light stronger than a dim candle and even goes on to cover the naked light bulb in Stella’s apartment with a Chinese paper lantern.

A moth-like life is terrorizing, agonizing and can be equated with living in an *inferno* where the inhabitants are under the constant ‘fear of absolute stasis’ and the speculation of “Death”. Therefore Blanche has to constantly ‘sprinkle’ herself with ‘powder and spray perfume’, gulp down some alcohol in order to cool off her nerves and according to Stanley, turn the Kowalski household into Egypt and herself into the “Queen of the Nile”. In making the female protagonists desire masquerade personas which have the potential to disturb the sexual asymmetry privileging patriarchy, the playwright presents an alternate vision of the future free from “sex-segregated or separatist institutions or modes of living” (243).

“They come together with low, animal moans,” the stage direction of Williams’s *Streetcar* tells us. One wonders how Stella and Stanley ever got together. Scene three presents *The Poker Night* where Williams attempts to play with the audience’s sympathies. Stanley breaks the radio and hits a pregnant Stella. She goes up the stairs to escape a raging Stanley, only to come down to the baying Stanley and is eventually lifted up by him as a sign of victory. Williams claims D.H. Lawrence’s philosophy in his conceptualization of sex, yet in the creation of Stanley, “a survivor of the Stone Age” he forgets Lawrence’s lesson that profound sexual experience civilizes, humanizes, lends grace and delicacy.

Sadomasochism and bestiality are at their peak in the in the rape-scene (Scene ten of *A Streetcar Named Desire*) where light has been used brilliantly. When Stanley approaches the bedroom, “Blanche gets blanched in fear”. The stage direction says: “Lurid reflections appear on the walls around Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form”. She trudges to the phone and asks the operator to help her contact Shep Huntleigh, a man she waits for, the lighting makes the audience shift their attention to “the shadows and lurid reflections” moving “sinuously as flames along the wall spaces”. The bass and treble of music, the “Blue Piano”, cries and noises of the jungle are symbolic. In Scene three, Mitch for whom Blanche has a romantic inclination puts on a red-and-white chequered shirt. Red, traditionally has been associated with “love” and white with “harmony” but Williams opts for a complete reversal of this notion. Stanley pounces upon Blanche and rapes her in brilliant-hued silk pyjamas, reiterating the fact that “brilliant” hues are signifiers of extreme beastly emotions. The pleasure that Stanley derives from trampling on the moth called Blanche is shocking and unnerving.

The ‘eyeing-up’ of the eroticised female body has important links with men’s control of objects through ownership of capital, and connotes an asymmetry in sexual relations, in which women are supposed to make themselves passively receptive and men are empowered to seek out their pleasures (136).

Williams had to create an escape route for his protagonist which would help her transcend a grotesque world to an ethereal Garden of Eden. Blanche turned to alcohol and sexual promiscuity in order to escape the brutalities and lonely void created by her young husband’s death. Her severe feeling of disgust towards her husband’s homosexuality, and a “deliberate act of cruelty” on her part caused him to shoot himself on the dance floor. So love that had earlier been like a sparkling “blinding light” for her became unbearably agonizing later. While she may be compared to the tragic figures of Antigone or Medea with a mind that has been completely

destroyed yet she rises above them for her sheer quest for hope- her final desire to be united with Shep Huntleigh in Dallas. Therefore for Williams, Shep Huntleigh is the only man who can perhaps give Blanche a life of love and respect. However the existence of Shep is highly debatable. In fact it can be said that he is nothing but a figment of imagination, the incoherent ramblings of an agitated mind but nevertheless, he is the ideal man, the annihilator of evil, a pleasant gust of shower in a barren *wasteland*.

It has already been established that probing into the violence and terror infested mind is a complex task since it involves the tedious understanding of a culture with its varied states of mind like psychosis, neurosis and even paranoia. But one very important root cause of this abnormal psyche is also the striking discrepancies in gender. The *Femme Mystique* victory is never achieved because men and women never successfully take up their respective roles in the society. Hence gender inequalities become the unabashed rulers that create a 'void' which demands a lot of aggression (TERROR and VIOLENCE) for the "survival of the fittest".

Workscited

Preludes by T.S.Eliot, line 12.

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