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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: IMPACT OF HIS LIFE ON HIS WORK

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ABSTRACT

The umbilical connection between Tennessee Williams the man and his plays would be quite evident to even the casual readers of his body of works. This has been noted by his critics and acknowledged by the famous writer himself on more than one occasion. While Elia Kazan who directed most of his plays would go to the extent of claiming that everything in his life was in his work and everything in his work was in his life, the playwright himself confessed on several occasions that his work was a kind of psychotherapy for him and that he wrote primarily for some kind of cathartic self-release. The playwright would draw all his power and intensity from the wellspring of his own tormented life which, by the alchemy of his genius he transformed into great art. It was ironical, however, that the 'blue devil' within that he wrestled with and which provided his theatre with so much of immediacy and power and would bring him an unprecedented fame, would ultimately ravage him completely and leave him physically and creatively debilitated. Though deserted by his muse and spurned by critics and audiences alike, he would still continue to work ceaselessly on his craft, compelled, as it were, by the tireless Dionysius in him which egged him on till his end. And when the end came, it was more bizarre than anything in his plays-he died ingesting the cap of an eye medicine bottle! It was life imitating art with a vengeance.

Key Words: Tennessee Williams, stage classics, biography.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams together with Eugene O'Neil and Arthur Miller, forms the famous triad of foremost playwrights of 20th century American stage classics. He is also the most intense and presumably, the most controversial of the three having achieved an unprecedented, stellar rise to fame with his plays most of which not only became runaway Broadway successes but also great Hollywood classics of all time [1-5]. His fall, however, was as spectacular and dramatic as his success---and it fills one with a sense of deep anguish finding

such a phenomenal playwright with such great dramatic power plummeting to the nadir of his career as a creative writer and dissipating his enormous talent in fatal addiction to drugs and alcohol [6, 7]. It is, perhaps one of those cases where, to begin with, the art followed life to provide a set of deeply intense and experiential creations of the artist which went straight to the heart and hit his audience on its solar plexus. This was the phase in which Williams could do no wrong and whatever he touched would turn into an instant potboiler. This phase of his career was studded with crowning achievements bequeathing to American theatre some of the greatest works of all times. The sixties, however, found Williams lose his Midas touch and plunge into a grave personal crisis increasing his dependence on drinks, barbiturates and amphetamines. The death of his close companion and friend Frank Merlo [8] devastated him and left him creatively and emotionally drained after which his life and his career went on a downward spiral from which he could never recover.

Williams would play out the concluding scenes of his career heavily foregrounded by a deep sense of betrayal and frustration. His plays were greeted often with near empty halls and the feeling of betrayal would only be further reinforced by literary critics baying for his blood. Even while his body was ravaged, his mind sundered and his spirit wounded, he summoned the old Dionysus in him to egg him on working on his craft till the end came, and when it came it was more bizarre than any of his plays. On February 24, 1983, at the Hotel Elysee in New York, he accidentally ingested the cap of a medicine bottle and was choked to death, unable or what seems more probable, unwilling to call for help [9]. It was the full turn of the circle with Williams' life coming to imitate his art. He had been prophetic when, back in 1960 at the verge of his precipitous decline he had remarked:

When the work of any kind of creative worker becomes tyrannically obsessive to the point of overshadowing his life, almost taking the place of it, he is in a hazardous situation. His situation is hazardous for the simple reason that the source, the fountainhead of his work, can only be his life[10].

Donald Spoto's biography of Tennessee Williams, the most authentic and insightful to come out so far, makes this astute observation about him and his works;

The story of Tennessee Williams' life...reveals him as a man more disturbing, more dramatic, richer and more wonderful than any character he ever created. His sensitivities and sympathies were broad, his experience of loneliness and loss made him responsive to other's lives. And he succeeded remarkably often, in translating those sympathies and cries of emotional solidarity with the wounded into the stuff of great art---[11]

II. LIFE OF TENNESSEE AND IMPACT ON HIS PLAYS: HIS RISE AND THE PURPLE PATCH IN HIS LIFE AND CAREER

His life as well as his art reflected all the existential confusions of living. "I hope that I have been able to contribute an understanding about people," he said not long before he died. He, perhaps, might have added, 'understanding about life too', and he still would have been true to his life and his art.

It is not fortuitous that the play *The Glass Menagerie*[12] which brought an instant success and unprecedented fame to Williams and made him a celebrity overnight was heavily drawn from his own life and his unhappy childhood. The play developed from his 1943 short story *Portrait of a Girl in Glass* is the story of a little girl Laura Wingfield who is unable to come to terms with the harsh reality around her and withdraws into her own world of glass animals. Resemblance to the actual plight of his own sister Rose is unmistakable. Tennessee would recall his sister's withdrawal into an inner world of darkness; "in her transition to St. Louis, removed from security and thrown into a world of alarm and despair, Rose had hideous inner turmoil in trying to cope with life. She was, fragile and sensitive, and she could not cope." The apartment described in the play is the imaginative recreation of St. Louis apartment in which Williams's family once lived. Rose's room had in fact very little sunlight streaming in, which in the short story *Portrait of a Girl in Glass* is described as bathed in perpetual twilight. Williams and his sister had painted the walls and the furniture of the room white, added white curtains, and had a collection of glass animals. This was their bid to shut out the screaming reality below as also to create a haven of crystal beauty in the midst of squalor. Williams is quoted to have said;

Those little glass animals...came to represent in my memory all the softest emotions that belong to recollections of things past. They stood for all the small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive. The archway where the cats were torn to pieces was one thing—my sister's white curtains and tiny menagerie were another. Somewhere between them was the world we lived in[13].

Williams would, much later while writing his Memoirs recall how his sister Rose would be whipped into a hysterical animation while talking about her date. In all probability it was her suppressed sexuality which made her emotionally unstable and overwrought and would lead to the eventual dissolution of her mind. By the autumn of 1937 her mental condition became so alarming that her parents would agree to prefrontal lobotomy, a surgical procedure still in an experimental stage at that time, to be performed on her to calm her down. It left her in a vegetative state for the rest of her life and Williams, later in his career, would have to commit her to an institution.[14] The familial tragedy trapped in his consciousness like a pinned butterfly, would continue to haunt Williams' fevered imagination throughout his career and would impart to his writings all their poignant power and immediacy.

And so Rose Isabel Williams survived in the twilight world of her own frozen in time. When asked her age she would always say she was 28 and her brother Tom 26. The world stood still for her with the memory frozen like an iceberg---cold, motionless and still. The only intrusion was the unwelcome visits from 'that man Cornelius Williams.' The tragic wasting away of such a youthful and innocent beauty would also remain frozen in the overwrought imagination of her brother who would creatively transcribe this in plays after plays. It was Williams and his sheer genius which could transform a private agony into something so creatively poignant and universal that imbued with it, his great plays would continue to entertain and move every generation of serious theatre lovers. *The Glass Menagerie* would, however, remain his artistic *tour de force*. As Williams himself would later acknowledge, 'I may not have any more nice things to say. I must have known unconsciously that I would never write that kind of tender play again.' Donald Spoto could not have been more succinct and precise when he remarked; 'Stranger plays would follow, works considered by many to be more successful in dramatic content and structure and richness of character. But nothing Tennessee Williams ever wrote after *The Glass Menagerie* has its wholeness of sentiment, its breath of spirit and its unangry, quiet voice about the great reach of small lives.' [15]

Williams' next theatrical triumph *A Streetcar Named Desire*[16] would seek to delve into the polarity and ambivalence of human passion which rages inside the human breast and threatens to destroy our sanity. It is also a testament of Williams' own schism within which he is battling to resolve. He would himself declare more than once; 'I am Blanche Dubois' thus acknowledging his symbiotic connect with the neurotically sensitive heroine of the play. The contrary pulls in Blanche and her swing between sexual attraction and aesthetic repulsion while dealing with Stanley's brute animalism are more than echoes of Williams' own homosexual drive.[17] While fancying the nestling comfort and protective shield provided by his closeness with his male companions, he would soon yearn to break free distrusting all such stable relationships. In Blanche he created his alter-ego and her search for human warmth in her dalliance with 'kindness of strangers' was the mirror image of Williams' own sexually deviant and promiscuous excesses. The polar tension would tear Blanche apart and drive her to insanity. More or less the same fate would await her creator. Notwithstanding the outcome, Williams, we know, would remain solidly behind Blanche and her pitiful attempt to salvage some meaning out of her hopeless fight against the forces of barbarism.

The Rose Tattoo [18] is yet another intensely personal work of Williams which could be seen as an unabashed celebration of his obsessive love for his sister Rose and his male lover Frank Merlo. In this play Rose Williams would be reincarnated as a symbol of vital forces of life. The play is overlaid with rose imagery through which Williams would seek to convey the exuberance and vitality of life. Going back to his childhood, he could wistfully recall that amongst all the siblings, it was his sister Rose who excelled in youthful energy, vitality, intelligence and beauty the end of which would be so wastefully tragic. The play is also an open acknowledgement of his passion for Frank Merlo and the fact that he received so much of vitality and strength

from this relationship. Williams would also be unabashedly candid in celebrating his romantic and enduring relationship with Frank Merlo. It is not coincidental that before he met the playwright, Frank was a truck driver. Williams would fondly refer to him as his 'Little Horse' in appreciation of his dashing good looks and tireless energy. It was also the warmth of the Sicilian climate which prompted Frank to suggest the name of the alfa male character in the play who would play out the role of a Lawrenceian fox and reignite the passion of Serafina. Williams would gratefully accept his suggestion and name him Alvaro Mangiacavallo which literally means Alvaro Eat---a---Horse and again, it is no coincidence that the scripted character happens to be a truck driver by profession.

Elia Kazan who collaborated with Tennessee Williams in directing most of his famous plays was perceptive enough to remark; 'Everything in his life is in his plays and everything in his plays is in his life.' He goes on to add, 'He was so naked in his plays and *Summer and Smoke*[19] is one of the best examples of them.' Williams admitted that the chief protagonist in the play Alma is so close to his heart that he can easily identify himself with her. 'I think the character I like most is Miss Alma... She is my favorite because I came out so late and so did Alma...Miss Alma grew up in the shadow of the rectory, and so did I.' The playwright describes Alma as 'caged by her inhibitions'; and John diagnoses her malady as repressed sexuality 'her true nature...hidden even from herself.' It is a problem of binaries---contrary impulses tugging and tearing at each other within one's own nature and creating an unresolved tension. Williams acknowledges this as his own demon he has been unsuccessfully trying to exorcise;

'If only I could realise I am not two persons. I am only one. There is no sense in this division. An enemy inside myself!'[20]

Williams would continue to be troubled by this division; the puritan in him frowning at his promiscuity and more as it did, he would plunge more and more into a life of reckless dissipation and finally push himself over the edge.

While scripting the character of the Pollit family in his play *The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* [21], Tennessee Williams had his own parents in mind. The raw, masculine appeal of the dying patriarch Big Daddy has many parallels with Williams' own vulgar, uncouth, inebriated and yet sexually virile father Cornelius Coffin Williams. 'Tennessee Williams told me,' Ives recalled years later, 'that he had written this play after his own father and that on opening night he sat in the fourteenth row and saw Cornelius Williams.' Even the title of the play is derived from his father's constant refrain while complaining to his mother; "Edwina", he would say, "you're making me nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof!" It would be left to the alchemy of Williams' genius, however, to transform his familial situation into a universal human condition, depicting, what he would himself describe, and 'the interplay of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis.'

III. TENNESSEE WILLIAMS:DECLINING YEARS AND IMPACT ONHIS PLAYS

Suddenly Last Summer[22] is psychologically the most disturbing of his plays and it would have been unnatural had it not been so. Williams was on the verge of a mental breakdown and was under intense psychotherapy when he produced this shocking play [23]. It was intended by the author to be a kind of self-confessional form of catharsis through which he would try and purge out his own demons he had been wrestling with. He would later admit that if the play had its roots in 'developing tension and anger and violence' in the world it also reflected his 'own steadily increasing tension as a writer and person.' And evidently his yet another desperately frenetic attempt to emotional and perhaps, artistic closure. The parallel between the play and the author's life is hard to miss even for the most casual reader. The protagonist in the play Sebastian who, like the playwright himself, seeks to leverage his art for the purpose of resisting the chaos, internal as well as external, which threatens to tear him apart. The hunger of his desire and the sexual appetite he would try to satiate by ruthless exploitation of defenseless hungry children would happily coexist with his artistic vocation. The playwright is in complete identification with his theatrical counterpart as Williams art too coexisted with his huge sexual appetite which would often send him scurrying to the remotest streets in wild search for sexual partners.

There are other parallels, the most obvious being Mrs. Venable's outraged cry of getting the 'hideous story' cut out of Catharine's brain, an unequivocal reference to a prefrontal surgery to be performed on her.[24] It echoes the painful circumstance under which playwright's own mother Edwina had given her consent to lobotomy carried out on her daughter Rose Williams with such disastrous results. She had panicked when Rose in one of her frenzied outbursts accused her father of trying to violate her sexually. Williams, in fact, has made the play a saga of his own unrequited desire and his private agony at the way he abused his creative freedom and squandered away even that he was lucky to possess and was cruelly denied to his lovable sister Rose. The play also echoes Williams' personal discomfort at so much of public acclaim which he would try to dismiss as 'catastrophe of success.' As Sebastian's mother claims, her poet-son 'dreaded, abhorred false values that come from being publically known from fame, from personal exploitation.' Williams knew only too well the fleeting and transient nature of public fame and would have to also suffer its consequences in the later part of his career.

The Night of the Iguana[25] would be Williams' last great play after which his gradual loss of creative power only accelerated by overuse of alcohol and drugs would leave him a faint shadow of his remarkable past. The play would deal with Williams' preoccupation with the nature of poet's avocation, the relationship between art and religion and Christian theme of love and forgiveness. In the character of the geriatric poet Nonno who is struggling to complete his poem, the playwright would blend the shades of his own feeling of entrapment and his yen for artistic closure, the image of his peripatetic father Cornelius the middle part of whose name Coffin would be literally transposed, and the elderly and priestly dignity of his maternal grandfather. The sketch artist Hannah and her immense forbearance and compassion is the half-realized image of what Williams himself yearned to become. The priest Shannon defrocked for his heretical outburst and acts of fornication pushed to 'the end of his rope' is undoubtedly the self- portrait of sex-hungry stoned Williams himself. With this epiphanic play Williams would come to the rope end of his exploration and, for all intents and purposes, achieve the closure he had been striving for. The objective achieved, it would dry up his creative urge to produce a great play of the same dramatic intensity he had become a byword for. His restless spirit would egg him on to go on writing but it would all be forgettable stuff and his old power would elude him for the rest of his life. *The Night of Iguana* provides the answer for his search and it is the rediscovery of Christ-like faith in human love and compassion despite God's own world having gone awry. It will be left to Hannah to work on the spiritual repair of the de-frocked priest Shannon who would be made to realise the agony of the iguana straining at the end of the rope to free itself from captivity. Shannon is so moved by its plight that he secures its release and the deliverance of the hapless creature coincides with the completion of the aging romantic Nanno's last poem. Each of these 'rebirths' is kinetised by Hannah whom the playwright would describe as a 'medieval saint', Williams' image of a spiritual guru mending 'broken gates' between human beings and touching their lives with compassion. It is the message of Jesus which would heal the wounds and secure deliverance of the 'fugitive' romantics of Williams' disoriented world. This, then, is the playwright's answer to the existential conundrum---man must return to the world of art and the warmth of human contact. The iguana is cut free and Grandpa stumbles on the concluding lines of his poem which had been eluding him so far:

O courage, could you not as well
 Select a second place to dwell
 Not only in the golden tree
 But in the frightened heart of me.[26]

III. CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY

Tennessee Williams put so much of himself into his writings that one is easily tempted to treat them as synonymous. Doing so would indeed be patently unfair to his enormous talent as a creative writer who, through his wonderful plays has given so much of traction and diversity to American Drama. He used his life-experience as one of the metaphors, and an important one. His artistic canvas, however, embodied many other such creative sources to provide his plays with such diversity and power that today he ranks as one of

the greatest American playwrights of all times. It is the measure of his greatness that he could transcend his private agony and navigate so naturally from singular to plural to create a universal art.

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