

Dramatic Devices and Technical Innovations in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

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ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams emerged as the major playwright of the American dramatic scene in the post-war period. Due to the selection of themes, dramatic technique, and innovative skills, he earned distinction and applause from the public. He successfully projected events, ideas, attitudes and collective feelings that characterized life in the post-war American society in a language understood by the common people. Williams created plays for the American theatre which are technically superb because of their plot construction, grand themes, life-like characterization, and stage effects which he produced by the singular use of light, music, sound, and sets which were never tried so well before in America. The present paper deals with the experimentations and innovations in the theatrical technique done by Williams to heighten the dramatic effect of his plays.

KEYWORDS

William Tennessee; Dramatic technique; Dramatic device; Innovations.

Introduction

Tennessee Williams emerged as the major playwright of the American dramatic horizon in the post-war period. He was a prolific writer who contributed some most famous and significant plays like *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, *Summer, and Smoke*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *A Period of Adjustment*, *The Night of Iguana*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Any More*, *Orpheus Descending* and *Camino Real*. Many of his plays received great applause from the

public and earned him the title of a popular dramatist. Williams wrote as a therapist and psycho-analyst and delved deeper into the lives of the common Americans to explore meaning in them. As per Williams' statement, he has written "about disturbed people" (Donahue1962:211), "individuals trapped by circumstances" (Donahue 1962:211) with a "deep feeling for the mystery of life" (Donahue1962:212). Even taboo and forbidden subjects like prostitution, dope addiction, and homosexuality were not left untouched by him. The rootlessness, instability, and moral

bankruptcy of the middle-class American society have been echoed in his writings through a language that could be understood by the general audience. Due to the selection of themes, dramatic technique, and innovative skills, he earned the distinction. His popularity is gauged from the stage productions as well as film versions of many of his plays. He successfully projected events, ideas, attitudes, and collective feelings that characterize life in the post-war American society in a language understood by the common people.

Presented New Ideas: Deviant Themes

Williams is neither a prosaic playwright nor has he used the conventional forms of drama-writing. He has filled American theatre with new ideas and devices. He created some finest plays which truthfully, honestly, and sympathetically reveal some pathetic and heart-rending stories. He was very well familiar with the taste and psyche of his audience. At the beginning of his dramatic career, Williams wrote some shorter plays but in the following years when he matured in age and gained experience, he endeavoured to improve his technique and wrote longer plays. Fedder feels that "his impulse to excess inheres in his vision, not his craft" (Fedder1966:811). Some critics call him a realist and some other naturalists but Williams establishes an equilibrium between harsh realism and poetic expressionism in his plays. Of course, sometimes Williams' plays fall into melodrama when his violence goes berserk. However, his plays *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, and *Suddenly Last Summer* are genuine works of art. Benjamin Nelson rightly remarks:

If we can claim as a function of art the objective formulation of thought, emotion, and experience, the artist who performs this function, from whatever point of view, is fulfilling an artistic purpose

by presenting us material for our particular response to experience (Nelson 1961:291).

Tennessee Williams deviated from the stereotyped themes used by the early Greeks, Elizabethans, and neo-classicist playwrights. He adopted themes out of his own experience as a social being and preferred the subjects pertaining to the common man rather than the privileged few of the aristocracy. He used his acute sensibility to penetrate deeply into his society, its values, manners, conventions, and its vices and virtues. He being well-acquainted with the moral crises of his age, Williams weaved his plots out of the material supplied by the clash of human values, out of the dignity and uniqueness of man, out of the fragile relationships of love, friendship, and sacred social and religious commitments. He abhorred and rejected whatever he thought impeded the way of love, peace, spiritual development, and welfare of human beings. He deftly portrayed human weaknesses resulting from the instinctive and biological forces too strong to be controlled by man's rational faculty. Failures of personality, bohemianism, homosexuality, terror alienation and savagery filled his plays. His plays are the outcome of the social unrest and moral bankruptcy that cropped up in the postwar American society. Williams, a creative writer, could not turn his eyes away from the social ills and evils but depicted them boldly and faithfully in his writings. According to Donahue: "Williams made an effort to explore the beauty and meaning in the confusion of living" (Donahue1964:212).

The life-like portrayal of the poor, the insane, the derelict, the wretched, the frustrated individuals and the weaker sex, and the corruption at various levels in the money-ridden American society made him earn distinction as the most representative playwright of modern America. The sufferings of the individuals issued forth

out of the new materialistic culture of the post-war American society particularly attracted his attention. Women in his plays are depicted as licentious whose wantonness and debauchery sometimes forced them into even prostitution for enjoying wine, wealth, and status. The men folk are morally fragile with their profligacy manifest by homosexuality, drinking, and violence. These people only aspired for wealth and status without any concern for the means to achieve them. Failure to achieve success triggers a sense of guilt in them. Williams portrayed this gloomy and dismal universe realistically and faithfully. Tischler rightly opines: "The genius of Tennessee Williams is his ability to transform this fearful world into living and universal art" (Tischler 1961:302).

Dramatic Devices and Technical Innovations

Tennessee Williams wrote his plays with a definite idea and aim in the theatre before him. Keeping his idea of theatre, he ventured into many devices and theatrical techniques to intensify the impact of his plays. He veered away from traditional drama and embarked on a new path of exploring new possibilities of modern drama. Through innovations of diverse sorts, he tried to make his plays suit his social, philosophical, and artistic commitments conspicuous in his themes. According to Benjamin Nelson:

"His art is often so good that we find ourselves asking him for greater mastery, and deploring his loss of control. We tend to think less of what he has accomplished than what he could accomplish. We continually wonder if his art is great enough not only to sustain itself but to develop further" (Nelson 1961:181-182).

Plots: Full of Intensity

Williams' plots have "the sharpness of contrasts and the consequent intensity of the struggles" (Fedder 1966:797) which

increases tonal power consistently in all his plays. Tom and Laura stand against Amanda and Jim, Blanche stands against Stanley, Maggie, and Big Daddy confronts Brick and Cooper in *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* respectively. He also contrasts human elements like sensual and spiritual emancipation to develop his plot as we witness in his plays, *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*. Similarly, the plot of *Summer and Smoke*, which he rewrote with the title *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*, deals with the conflict between spirit versus flesh. In *A Glass Menagerie*, the dramatist presents a conflict between the dreams of innocent human beings and the bitter realities of the world. The aspirations of human beings are ultimately defeated and life proves to be a brief bloom that ends in failure, loneliness, and disappointments. *A Streetcar Named Desire* also deals with the conflict between Blanche's romantic dreams and the hard rocks of reality comprising immoral and cruel societal forces. Thus, the conflicts intensify the dramatic element in his plays. Such conflicting situations are often created by Williams and his protagonist is depicted as a defeated fellow in the conflict before he makes a start in his life and career. Fedder remarks:

The most effective central characters in Williams, as in all his plays, must earn their right to their dramatic destiny through unified and developing conflict with worthy antagonists. Otherwise, the plays go nowhere dramatically – and the consequent tone, characterization, and theme diminish in credibility, power, and magnitude (Fedder 1966:798).

Poetic or Symbolic Technique

At the beginning of his career as a dramatist, Williams employed his poet-symbolist technique and became the successor of O'Neill as a writer of poetic

drama. Williams has a great love for symbols and his plays abound in the use of symbols to exude a poetic flavour. Even the title of the play *The Glass Menagerie* is symbolic and refers to Laura's illusory world of his fragile glass menagerie in which she retreats when her aspirations to marry Jim, the gentleman caller was shattered to pieces in the cruel world of reality. Tom dreams of writing poetry but ultimately has to withdraw himself from the harsh realities of the ruthless world. Unicorn stands for a phallic symbol that reveals the sexual urge of Laura; the single horn on the head of the unicorn symbolizes the abnormality in Laura caused by her crippled body. The church bells, God, and Sunday are used as a symbol of the tragic world of human beings and the passage of time. The shadow of Jim and Laura on the ceiling represents the ephemeral shadowy nature of Laura's hopes and aspirations. Like *The Glass Menagerie*, the title of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is also symbolic. Having ridden the streetcar named desire Blanche rides a car named cemetery i.e. all her cherished hopes and dreams are shattered to dust and have to be buried. Belle Reve is symbolic of a beautiful dream, Stella stands for a star, and Amanda is depicted in the play as a "moth" or "tiger" according to her predicament.

Williams presents life, reality, and appearances through his poetic imagination and transforms them into other forms than mere photographic appearances. In the production note to *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams gives us a peep into the theory of his dramatic art when he writes:

The straight realistic play with its genuine frigid air and authentic ice-cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, correspond to the academic landscape and have the same virtue of a photographic likeness. Everyone should know nowadays the importance of photographic art:

that truth, life, or reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms, than those which were merely present in appearance (Williams1986:229).

In *Summer and Smoke*, Alma has been depicted as carrying a box of Pills which are used as a symbol of escape. The anatomy chart symbolizes the difference found between the flesh and the spirit. *Orpheus Descending*, *Camino Real*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*: all abound in rich symbols and imagery. According to Norman J. Fedder:

Williams' language has been unequalled in the American theatre in its ability to be both conversationally idiomatic and poetically vivid – true to both the surface appearance and the inner truth. Williams has brought poetry back to the theatre to a more significant degree than T.S.Eliot, Christopher, and Maxwell Anderson by hardly seeming to do so (Fedder1966:800).

Even the dialogues used by Williams are rich in vocabulary, rhythm, image, and range. In these theatrical experimentations, language plays a dominant role. It is well observed:

Williams has brought into the theatre a new freedom of style, ... He can make (Language) express shades of feeling outside the range of most writers – coldness and longing, silence, desolation, dissolution. Between society and the individual, there is a void that Mr. Williams can cross with words that are plain in themselves but radiant in meaning (Quoted by Donahue1964:224).

New Concept of Theatre: Personal Lyricism

Williams' new concept of theatre is basically poetic. However, it is not concerned with poetry as we commonly believe. Perhaps, it is an attempt to express the spiritual or emotional inner world of the protagonist. Williams' form is of expressionistic lineage. Jackson aptly notes:

Williams is concerned with the objectification of subjective vision" (Jackson1966:28), and "regards art as one of the great life force, as an instrument of reconciliation no less important than religion, philosophy, politics, or human love (Jackson1966:28).

Since Williams was a dramatist of poetic form, "search for a concrete expressive form – a shape congruent with a poetic vision – is a motif that appears throughout the work of Williams" (Jackson1966:28). It is the main theme of *The Glass Menagerie* and is also present in plays: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Summer and Smoke*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Camino Real*, and *Orpheus Descending*. The dramatist called this form 'personal lyricism'. He has thrown a sympathetic poetic spotlight on the inner being of his characters to make them humane. He penetrates the inner soul of human beings and reveals it by the use of emotions, thoughts, or poetic imagination.

Williams' Theatricality

Williams deviated from the realistic theatre of Ibsen which treated the stage as though it were an actual reproduction of life, truth, or reality. He uses expressionistic and other unconventional techniques in his plays to capture reality. He recognizes the outward appearances of a person, things as good as masks which he has to unveil the hidden real truth. To achieve this aim, Williams used music, lighting, setting, symbols, costumes, and props on the stage. These theatrical devices are used in all of his plays as an aid in expressing tone or character or theme.

He is against the photographic representation of reality. He very skillfully made use of light and colour to explore his poetic and nostalgic mood. According to Donahue: "Lighting is often not realistic but rather in keeping with the mood of nostalgia, decadence, or illusion which he wishes to create" (Donahue1964:222).

The use of various props in *Battle of Angels* transformed the dull mercantile store into a beautiful entertaining hall. In *The Glass Menagerie*, the illusion of reality is created by focusing dim light on various spots and characters of his choice. Laura looks like a pristine old saint when light is focused on the old gown. The breaking of a glass menagerie in the play foregrounds the theme of illusion vs reality. The off-stage music in this very play creates an atmosphere of moods and gives meaning to lurking ideas. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* when Allan shot himself the "varsouviana", the polka was played to indicate Blanche's desperate state. The setting is also very significant in the plays of Williams. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche covers electric bulbs with coloured lampshades as she is unable to face naked light bulbs due to her touchy and delicate frame and nature. Thus, by the use of light, music, sound, and sets, Williams created technically superb plays which were never attempted so skillfully before him in America.

Conclusion

Thus, through technical innovations discussed in the paper, Williams has added much to the enrichment of poetic-prose and American dramaturgy. Gifted with a deeper insight and acute sensibility to probe the mind of his protagonist, Williams has written some of the most moving plays after World War II. Before him, the basis of American drama was moral and social. Williams enlarged its scope by writing psychopathic plays. He presented to man's predicament in a world of inexplicable happenings. His plays are an amalgam of realism and expressionism. Williams

succeeded in developing his theatrical convention of the catalogue of characters, dialogue, themes, styles of acting, and methods of visual design. He successfully portrayed the inner tragedy of his characters artistically and dramatically.

According to Richard A. Duprey:

Tennessee Williams is an acknowledged master of poetics and an electrifying scenewriter. He is incomparable in creating moods, using every device of the theatre—setting, lights, costumes, and music. Williams and his artistic collaborators, Margo Jones, Jox Mielznier, Jean Rosenthal, Lee

Strasberg, Elia Kazan, and others have given to his plays such as *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Camino Real*, a production form known in world theatre as the “American Method”. This American method is characterized by its distinctive style of directing as well as by its patterns of acting, staging, designing, and lighting. One of the most lasting achievements of T.Ws is his contribution to the development of American dramaturgy” (Duprey1959:19).

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