

THE DRAMATIC WORLD OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Dr. Nitya Nand

Associate Professor, Department of English

Bapu P.G. College, Pipiganj Gorakhpur, India

Tennessee Williams is one of the three major American playwrights; the other two being Arthur Miller and Eugene O’Neil, But if we assess the total range of production and also the Modern American drama, like all great writers, Williams presents a problem that is personal, contemporary and also universal. In depictions of all the Vulgarity. violence, homosexuality. Cannibalism, his view of life seems to be “pessimistic, morbid and tragic”.¹ He is considered as the shrewd observer of moral deformity of his age. But all the charges of morbidity and pessimism are irrelevant and unjustified as a careful study of his plays will bring out.

Williams is perhaps the first American playwright to earn the descriptive title of “popular dramatist”. He is praise-worthy and has great attraction for those whose intention in writing is to seek moral satisfaction rather than a source of great insight into the human condition. To an ordinary reader, the plays of Tennessee Williams are unpleasant. They do not present the morbid aspects of American life. They rather present the morbid aspects of contemporary American life and leave the reader to draw his own conclusions. It is quite meaningless for a playwright like Williams whether his plays are pleasant or not. The thing that matters is that his plays offer a meaningful experience. The subject-matter and its presentation have the secondary importance. The play-goer must be stimulated to think more about his own life and his own experiences. Tennessee Williams’ dramatic world is something unusual to ordinary men. It “reflects on the wonder and mystery of the human condition”² It is certainly dark, tormented and haunted by evil. But this is a description of his work, not a hostile criticism of it. There are several critics who claim that his plays are psychopathic in their subject-matter and characters. The characters seem to belong to the study of psychiatrists rather than to dramatic literature. But the fact is that Williams writes with such power, compassion and insight. With such a gift for theatrical measures and amid such flashes of boarding poetry that his plays become lyric-works of dramatic art of high and distinguished nature. They are the finest drama written in America today and with all due respect to Arthur Miller, Williams Inge and Lillian Hellman, he is at the moment our foremost modern American dramatist. The mystery of his World as Tennessee Williams himself points out is man’s experience of the unknowable and uncommunicable: “ All of these things that you list as a dreadful are parts of the visible, sensible phenomenon of everyman’s experience or knowledge, but the true sense of dread is not a reaction to anything sensible or visible or even strictly, materially knowledge. That we shall have to call mystery which is so inspiring of dread among these modern artists that we have been talking about.....”³

Williams' connections with his art, with his life, and with other people were both loving and selfish, involved and coolly detached, tender and brutal: in other words, he was a human being. His works are a series of variations of the great emotional cycles of his own tortured life. His greatest success lies in translating those sympathies and cries of emotional solidarity with the wounded into the stuff of a great art. He is said to have changed the theatre and the taste of the theatre and to have opened the way in America for dramatists who like Pinter, have explored the complex and hidden psychological drives that motivate people. In continuing presenting of themes. Previously considered untouchable, of derelicts and misfits, outcasts from a materialistic society; and of the thin line between sanity and insanity, he has revealed a broken world not often portrayed.

Williams has greatly been applauded as well as severely criticized by various critics in their books and essays. Each and every aspect of his personality, his writing style, his popular theme of sexuality, his chief concern as a playwright and several other things have been discussed by them. Gerald Weales in his book *Tennessee Williams*, gives a detail of the playwright's life and works. Everywhere in his book. he seems to be admiring him. Also, he has tried to materialize the fiction with the fact as he himself states : "It is quite likely that a writer as self-pre-occupied as Williams is (even his most casual remarks are attempts to explain or to invent his feelings) will use himself extensively in his fictional work. But there is a danger in equating fiction with the fact."⁴ (Francis Donahue) has given a biographical study of the works of Tennessee Williams in his famous book the *Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams*. In the words of Donahue himself the book is "a work of literary reporting. It seeks to capture the spirit of a Bohemian artist struggling with self-doubts, beset by a troubled personal life who has written some of the most compelling works of the modern theatre."⁵ Dosto Rader in his book *Cry of the Heart*, that is in fact a cry of the painful heart that laments at the loss of such a giant dramatist. The book shows the popularity of the playwright in American and elsewhere in the world. His popularity had reached the White House of America which Williams had visited twice and was honored by the *Kenedy Centre for the Performing Arts*. For lifetime achievement. The writer just before the death of Williams went to the White House. "However. a year before Tennessee died". She states, "I visited Mrs. Regan to the White House, and we had a long conversation along in the Green Room after lunch. She asked about Tennessee and Trauman Capote, among other and was visibly upset to learn of Tennessee's physical decline." Both Ronnie and I think (says Mrs. Regan) he is our greatest living playwright and if he (the President) had been so busy making movies perhaps he might have played in one of Tennessee's drama's"⁶ Further, there is an elaborate study made by Donald Spoto in his book *The Kindness of Strangers*. The book is based on Williams personal papers and letters and diaries of the mother Edwina as well as interviews with friends and professional associates Spoto has written a deeply engrossing narrative of the highly dramatic life of a great dramatist. He has not only given a full and accurate account of the playwright's life but has also shown the intimate connection between Williams personal dramas and art beginning with William's birth into a genteel Southern family. Spoto describes the family's move to St. Louis and the year between 1945 and 1961 when Williams saw no less than ten of his plays acclaimed in Broadway. Thereafter he tells the harrowing story of an artist whose talent failed him 20 years

before his death. Success became elusive as pressures on his personal life increased. Addicted to alcohol and pill and suffering from mental instability, Williams was dependent on the kindness of strangers. Another comprehensive study of Tennessee Williams works is done by Roger Boxill in his book *Tennessee Williams*. Beginning with an introduction and biography to his subject. Boxill's book examines William's dramatic and non-dramatic writing for their themes, their patterns, and archetypal characters. He surveys the early one-act plays which comprise a gallery of miniature portraits of the faded belle and sketches of the wanderer and analyses, in detail, his most significant plays along with a discussion of their political, social and historical context. He concludes that Williams was essentially an elegiac writer, whose lyrical naturalism is derived from the adaptation of the modern short story for cinematic stage.

Besides, there are few other important books in which interviews and personal views of the playwright have been described. "*Conversations with Tennessee Williams*," (ed. By Albert J. Delvin) is such a book which encompasses five decades of an intense literary life and ranges from the standard and well known to the more obscure and specialized. The interviews are revealing insights into Williams' works and careers. The three dozen or so interviews in this volume have been chosen, in part to retrace the progress of Williams' long career by marking important dramatic productions and documenting telling moments in his personal and artistic life. In addition, several other eminent critics of theatre like Eric Bentley, John Gassner, Edward Albee, A.S. Downer and others have expressed their views about Williams on their respective books. As a whole the literary career of Tennessee Williams has been widely acclaimed by critics. Williams thus has a wide range of popularity as a writer of plays.

Tennessee Williams is undoubtedly a serious playwright who deals with a problem that is personal, contemporary and also universal. The problem he presents in his plays as an artist, has been scientifically investigated in modern psychology. Of all the younger playwrights, none is more characteristic of his generation, more psychoanalytic oriented or more provocative of popular controversy than Tennessee Williams. He has raised the problem of sex on the stage. But sex, to Williams, is not related to bodies but to minds and naked hearts."⁷

Williams' preoccupation with sexual maladjustment reminds one of the famous modern psychologist Freud though the two are distinctly apart. The problem of sexual mystery which is dominant in the plays of Tennessee Williams comes very close to Freud's discussion of id-ego and super-ego. What Williams presents as an artist; Freud investigates scientifically. In the psychological theory, individual's behavior is assumed to result from the interaction of three key systems within the personality: id, ego and superego. The id consists of primitive biological drives which are considered to be of two types: (1) constructive drives: primarily of a sexual nature which constitute the libido or basic energy of life and (2) destructive drives which tend toward aggression – destruction, and eventual death. It may be worth noting here that Freud used the term sex in a broad sense to refer to almost anything of a pleasurable nature, from eating to concerned only with the immediate gratification of instinctual need. It is completely selfish and unconcerned with realities or moral consideration. Consequently, the second key system – the ego develops and meditates between the demands of the id and the realities of the external world. Here it may be emphasized that Freud viewed id demands-especially sexual

and aggressive strivings- as reflecting an inherent conflict between the animal instincts of the individual and the inhibitions and regulation imposed by society. Since the id –ego relationship is merely one of expediency, Freud introduces a third key system – the super-ego, which is the outgrowth of learning the taboos and moral values of society. As the super ego develops, we find an additional inner control system coming into operation to copy with the uninhibited desires of the id. The relationship between these subsystems of id. Ego. and superego are of crucial significance in determining behavior. Often the instinctual desires and demands of the social world. Sexual tensions and experience as well as problems centering around sexual gratification are important aspects of a person’s life. Sex can be important source of satisfaction and self-realization or a source of anxiety and self-revelation. Sex in man’s biological need and the failure to meet this basic need may obstruct healthy human development.

Love is one of man’s important psychological needs. The need to love and be loved is crucial for healthy personality development and functioning. The love and warmth imparted by the parents is the most crucial and pervasive of all the influences exerted in the home. For the child who feels loved and accepted. many conditions that might otherwise impair development. such as a physical handicap. Poverty or harsh discipline. May be largely neutralized. The need for close ties to other people continues throughout life and become especially important in times of severe stress and crisis. Defining love Freud notes: “Love is a manifestation of the sexual instincts. Its expression follows the development of the libido. with characteristic qualities in each libidinal phase. It undergoes regression or any of the instinctual vicissitudes. It is an uninhibited as a defense mainly against aggressive feelings. In an uninhibited form. Love may be mainly altruistic (for example the love of mankind or the love of an ideal).”⁸

Amidst Uncertainties surrounding man. he needs some anchoring points, some certainties, some faith that will serve either as a beacon light to guide him or as a balm to massage his feelings of frustration and anxieties. Man obviously strives not only to maintain himself, but also to grow, to express himself, to improve, to actualize his potentials and to fulfil himself. Whatever particular form man’s struggle for self- fulfillment may take, but tendencies to develop one’s potentials to find satisfaction in creative self-expression and to find a meaning in life is common to all mankind. It is highly fulfilling to develop and use potentials for art, music, writing or athletics. It is highly frustrating to be denied the opportunity to their development and expression. Man is engaged in a ceaseless quest to extend the range and improve the quality of his satisfactions through the exercise of his creative and inventive capacities.

Williams views on sex and morality are very clear. Sex is a biological need which must be fulfilled. Suppression of sex drives is disastrous and unhealthy. Man sincerity to himself is the highest type of morality in the world of Tennessee Williams. The well-being and fulfillment of man as an individual alone should matter in the world. Sex is a major in the plays of Williams. Thus, the concept of sex in Williams’ opinion is wide in its sense. It is a free. Unrestricted thing that cannot be tied by anything even by a thing like Marriage it is the uninhibited desire that seeks its fulfillment by natural means. But when repressed. It comes out

in its exaggerated form. It has rightly been said that Williams is, “a visceral rather than a cerebral writer”⁹ There has always been a quaint absorption in the old time of hell since it is far above and less despicable than fraud and deceit.

Love and affinity are man’s psychological and social needs which must be fulfilled like sex instinct. Man’s feeling of loneliness in life is inevitable. It can be successfully faced. It is a basic thing Williams’ characters are in continuous search. The love and compassion sought by human beings shows their tenderness and fragility. It is also marked with sensitivity. Williams’ world is of sensitive who too fragile that are often broken when they come in contact with the harsh realities of the world. As opposed to sexual love. Williams calls that love as purification. “We call that the purification”. Says Williams in an interview with David Frost. Wouldn’t you ? I think there is something beyond it just as a know that people at very advanced ages still feel great love for each other.”¹⁰

There are writers and artists who have sought refuge in psychiatry, alcohol narcotics way-in or way-out religious conversion. Williams considers art as an x-ray machine or a clinical device which indicates the normal healthy blood cells and exposes the unexpected hidden dark spots on the plates. The same thing is done by Williams in his writing. He often hides the healthy aspect of human personality and discloses that which is abnormal, unhealthy and tormented. He feels that a large part of the creative work of the author is related to his own personality and the emotions that stir him deeply demand expression. Much of his work comes from his own singular perception and he wants to communicate his own ideas, a loud idea peculiar to his own perception. He wants to break his body in which he is sentenced to solitary confinement. Though he was familiar with the problem of psychoanalysis but sued in his play as an artist. To quote Williams himself, his works “has always been a kind of psychotherapy for me.”¹¹

The plays of Williams reflect the disturbance of his environments as well as his nervous system. It is not possible to find a doctrine or system of faith in such a work though the world of Williams is full of ghastly perversion addictions and meaningless fun it has a charm of his own. In the tormented world of evil wickedness and anguish there are a few gleams of light. The people of this world are not of a gutter world, they are poetic souls who find themselves unable to adjust with the world that is always hostile to them. To Live in their own way sometimes. they are the Bohemians who do not touch the world and want to fly in the sky like a bird as speaks one of William’s characters : “You know there is a kind of bird that don’t have legs so it can’t light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky.....they live then whole lives on the wind, and they sleep on the wind. That’s how they sleep at night. They just spread their wings and go to sleep.....they sleep on the wind andnever light on this earth but one time when they die..... So, I’d like to be one of these birds: there are lots of people who would like to be one of those birds and never be corrupted.”¹²

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