

Tennessee Williams

Marie-Claire Pasquier

This is very significant of Tennessee Williams's sense of poetry or lyricism in the theatre. The fact that he gives us an epigraph to his play, a short quote by a poet, is in keeping with his sense of lyricism in his own writing. And this begins, this poetical sense, begins with the very titles of his plays.

And almost for pleasure, I would like to give out loud a few of the names that he chose for his plays. *The Glass Menagerie* with an oxymoron for a title, if we mean by that that there is an opposition of contrary terms since menagerie represents something wild and animal and glass represents fragility and something mineral. So the expression the glass menagerie is very striking.

And then *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which is even more political because of the clash between a streetcar, which is something urban and modern and old fashioned at the same time, and the very beautiful term desire. But as you know, Desire is the actual name of a district in New Orleans, so that it is what he calls for something as a touch of occasional poetry or accidental poetry. It is pure accident, but he uses the lyricism of this accident.

Then *Summer and smoke*, and summer and smoke gives you the southern atmosphere.

The Rose Tattoo, in French, *La Rose tatouée*. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, which is in French *La Chatte sur un toit brûlant*. The feminine does not appear in the English version or in the original title. And it is a metaphor for the main heroine in the play. The *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is the woman in the play. *Baby Doll*. *Garden District*, which became *Suddenly Last Summer* - in French, *Soudain l'été dernier*.

And one of his best titles, perhaps, *Sweet Bird of Youth*. And what I think is so great about this title is the very rhythm in the title, which is like a short poem in itself, Sweet bird of youth. In French, it became *Doux oiseau de jeunesse*.

Night of the Iguana.

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore. This is one of the few examples in which the title is a full sentence.

Kingdom of Earth, The Seven Descents of Myrtle.

And then a play which was written after Williams's novel. He had written a novel called *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*, and he turned it into a play which then became a film.

And then one of my favorite titles is *Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed*. I repeat this title, *Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed*. I think this is a very evocative title.

And the fact that he's so careful about his titles, as I was saying, indicates that he has a sense of the verbal power of evocation. A stage image is not only visual, it's not only brought by music, but it is brought by the words themselves.

I turn back to the influences on him and the people who were important to him. I have mentioned the young poet Hart Crane. He had great admiration for the Russian dramatist Chekhov. And I think that anybody who writes for the theatre, or who deals in the theatre, cannot help starting from this admiration for Chekhov. This is what he says about the summer of 1934. "That summer, I fell in love with the writing of Anton Chekhov, at least with his many short stories. They introduced me to a literary sensibility to which I felt a very close affinity at the time."

And here are a few words to stress the relationship between writing for the theatre and writing short stories. A short story must be dramatic in a sense that a good play is. And Tennessee Williams, for one, has written quite a number of very good short stories. So I'm not surprised that he is a great reader of short stories. That makes a lot of sense.

Another admiration, or at least people say that it has been an influence on him, is the British novelist D. H. Lawrence. It has often been said, he says, and he does not deny it, that

“D. H. Lawrence was my major literary influence”. So maybe a development could be made about this.

I would like to comment now on one major element in this theatre. I said the lyrical element was important. And lyrical is sometimes opposed to dramatic. But to him, it is not to be contrasted. It is not in opposition. A dramatic situation, a situation of conflict, a situation which will bring a crisis, a situation in which you have antagonism, is a situation which does not prevent the people who live it to have reminiscences about their past and fantasies about their future.

And this sense of imagination is as important to him, imagination to be inside the skin of his characters, as it was to Miller. And there is one thing which makes this character of lyricism very important in his plays. It is the importance of the past. And this is when we come to the meaning and the function of time in his theatre.

One of his plays, that is *The Glass Menagerie*, has been called a memory play. And this seems to be a contradiction, because the theatre, as we know, is necessarily always in the present. Yet, a memory play is a play in which a lot takes place inside the minds of the characters, with flashbacks or turning back to the past. And it is the case in *Death of a Salesman*, it is the case maybe even more so in the play *The Glass Menagerie*.

Here is what Miller says, I'm sorry, here is what Tennessee Williams says about the fact that *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play. I quote from the production notes which have been published with the play. And what he has to say is a whole plea against realism. I'll have to come back to this.

“Being a memory play, he says, *The Glass Menagerie* can be presented with unusual freedom from convention. Because of its considerably delicate or tenuous material, atmospheric touches and subtleties of direction play a particularly important part.”

You will notice the expression atmospheric touches, because the atmosphere, the climate is something which is so difficult to capture in the conventions of the stage, which is totally artificial. So to recapture something of the sense of the sense of heat, for instance, the sense of oppressive heat, as you find it in the South, the sense of streets, people being in the streets, the sense of the outside, the brown River, for instance, at the beginning of the play, which plays is it. Yes, it is the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

To give this sense is something that the dramatist does through all kinds of devices, sometimes the use of music, sometimes the use of images projected on the screen. And it gives maybe his theatre a quality which can be called expressionism. This is what he has to say about expressionism. I quote "Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth."

This is something, if you deal with a Genet who writes a totally unconventional, unrealistic theatre, if you turn to Miller or Tennessee Williams. If you turn nowadays, as we shall soon, to Sam Shepard, whatever the devices they use, they all have one aim, which is to capture the truth.

I was mentioning, I think, at the beginning, the *Histoire terrible mais inachevée de Norodom Sianouk*, as an example of a modern political play. And here again, you have the opposition between reality and fiction, and through theatrical devices, through acting, or even acting out, through dancing, prancing on stage, through music, and through invention, you still capture something of the historical truth, which was not captured by magazines, or essays, or books of history, or newspapers. And that is what is part of the very fascinating experience of the theatre to me.

"When a play employs, this is Tennessee Williams, when a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually, or should be attempting, to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are." This is beautifully said. I wish you would notice this. A more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. Things as they are, are there, heavy as stones, and all you can do is to find a vivid expression.

Here is now the criticism, which he makes, turning it almost into a caricature, of the realistic play. He says "The straight realistic play, with its genuine Frigidaire and authentic ice cubes, its characters that speak exactly as its audience speaks, corresponds to the academic landscape, and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness."

All right, so he is against photographic likeness, but when photography is used on stage, sometimes it is also because photography is not like reality. It has a pictorial quality, and the

theatre of images, which we shall mention, like that of Bob Wilson, for instance, has some of the photographic charm of photographs.

But when Tennessee Williams says photographic likeness, he means the reproduction of reality, without adding anything, without anything subjective in it. And it is true that you can turn back now to a different aesthetic, which is a heightened, I think it is called heightened naturalism, or heightened realism, in which you find settings which are exact to the most minute detail, but the very fact that it is transferred onto a stage gives it a poetic value, as you would have in a doll's house, for instance. In a doll's house, the change of scale makes the doll's house not a real house, but a fantasy, a projection of what your idea of a house is. So that I'm not criticizing what Williams has to say, but I'm saying that the things he mentions are a way for us to reflect on what the aesthetics of the theatre are.

So he turns now to poetic imagination and the importance for him of imagination. I quote "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 or suggest, in essence, only through transformation, through changing into other forms than those which were merely present in appearance."

All right, you can only represent reality if you transform it. And I think we could discuss this for hours, and we would, we could not help but agree with this.

Those remarks, he says, are not meant as a preface only to this particular play. They have to do, the play being, I remind you, *The Glass Menagerie*, they have to do with the conception, and here is a term he brings now, which is a term which never became as famous as the term of epic theatre for Brecht, for instance. But it is an interesting expression of what he means.

"They have to do with the conception of a new plastic theatre, this is his expression, plastic theatre, which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions, if the theatre is to resume vitality as a part of our culture."

You see that his aim here is very close to that of Miller, very close to what people after them will do to, Edward Albee, for instance, "to turn away from the exhausted realistic conventions", end of quote.

I will turn a little later on this sense of time which I mentioned as so important in William's theatre and William's vision of the theatre. But before that, I'd like to give maybe a few indications about the play which we are studying here, which is *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and it's the few indications for the students who will read it on their own.

I would like to concentrate on a few points and, of course, first on the main character, which is the character of Blanche. I am not going to make a close analysis of the play here, but I would like to give one information, which is that the starting point of the play was to Tennessee Williams an image. We would think that the title was the starting point, the image, this clash between streetcar and desire. This is not what he says about it. He says that his image was of Blanche.

A parenthesis here, how shall we pronounce her name? If we pronounce it in the real traditional American way, we say Blanche. So it will be either Blanche or Blanche, which is more in keeping with her gentility and her sense of having maybe remote French origins and therefore a French name and a sense of the aristocracy, her aristocratic past. So she would probably call herself Blanche.

So the image in the author's vision of her was of Blanche sitting alone in the moonlight. And the light of the moon is maybe the true lighting of the play. If we are not in a realistic play, the lighting, the artificial lighting of the stage is very important.

And I think that in some cases, the very warm yellow light gives one sense. Here, the light should be very white, like the name of Blanche and like her skin and her paleness and like the dresses she wears. She wears immaculate or not so immaculate white dresses as Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With The Wind*. And this whiteness, this moonlight white is a glow which disguises reality and which does not give out any warmth. And this is the appropriate light for her.

Blanche is a theatrical heroine for a number of reasons. But the main reason is perhaps that she lives in illusion. She does not only lie to others, she also lies to herself. And what she presents is a mask. She belongs to the stage. Because she puts on too much makeup, she dresses up, she puts on airs, she has something to hide, she's always hiding something. And she's putting on a bold front. She's trying to keep up appearances.

But she has a double personality. While she puts up this bold front, she's basically fragile. And she will break down at the end. And when we come to this question of time, you will notice that the main structure of the play is to delay the final disaster as long as possible. We are rushing towards it at the same time we are refraining from going too fast. And we have this sense of impending doom to take up an expression which is sometimes used for Shakespeare.

So one question we can have about the heroine is she, which was the same question about Willy Loman, is she tragic? Or is she merely pathetic? And what is sure is that she is not a mere pathological case. She has an aura like all of William's heroines, like Alexandra de Largo in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, or like Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, or like Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*.

There can be such a thing as, and here I bring this expression with caution, such a thing as a tragedy of fragility. Then she is tragic. And remember that Laura herself in *The Glass Menagerie* is brittle like glass or like the little animals she keeps on a shelf.

If Blanche can come up to the status of a tragic heroine, it is because she is a myth. This defeated woman who lives in her imagination in a glamorous past, which maybe never existed, but which exists in her mind, and which she has mostly made up, is an image of the defeated South, which cannot overcome the loss of its aristocratic past. And I think, if we think of the reference which is given in the play of *Gone with the Wind*, we understand what that means. Scarlett O'Hara is a myth, even though she belongs to popular literature, and she has turned into a real legend of the South. In the same way, I think that Blanche is also a myth.

Stanley Kowalski, on the other hand, is not only the brother-in-law, lower class brother-in-law, but he represents all the brutality and the coarseness, but also the vital sense of reality of the North, and this is what a northerner represents to southerners.

Then also, Blanche is taken out of trivial or prosaic reality, thanks to the images which Williams uses, either to describe her in words or to present her in stage images, and to present the opposition between the two characters. The opposition between the two characters turns them into sorts of animals. They are no longer human beings, but animals. She is like a moth, but he has, and I quote here, "the power and pride of a richly feathered male among hens".

He is the “gaudy seed bearer”, and there's a glorification at every minute of the play of the male in Stanley.

In a way, you could say that Blanche is a romantic heroine. If there is such a thing as a romantic tragedy, that would be it, because of the lyricism which is so important in the play, because of the pervading presence of music.

And I would like to read quickly here perhaps the opening of the play, which, as I said, tries to bring the outside atmosphere.

“The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses, with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. The corresponding air is evoked by the music of the Negro entertainers at the barroom around the corner.”

I skip a few lines.

“This blue piano expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.” So you cannot give the atmosphere through smells or through warmth, the heat, but you can give it through music, and this is what Williams is very good at doing, using music in his plays.

So you have this lyricism, but the tragic element, or perhaps the more dramatic side of the play, is given by constant contrasts. The contrast between cruelty and refinement, between gracefulness and decay, corruption. The contrast between brutality on the one hand and innocence on the other. Reality is coarse and sordid, or it can be, and this is what we have in the act entitled “The Poker Night”, which represents the coarse reality of the world of men.

It was almost the title, the original title for the play in Williams's mind, was *The Poker Night*, but of course “The Poker Night” is only one element, so he chose a better title when he gave the streetcar on the one hand and desire on the other.

But inside the characters you also have contradictions between, inside the characters such as Stanley for instance, because Stanley is brutal, he's the brutal male, but he's also a lover of women, and he can be tender and gentle with his wife, for instance.

In Blanche, you have elements which are contradictory. She's the white woman, pure, inaccessible, this is the image she wants to present, and she's also the drunk, the prostitute, the low woman, or the fallen woman.

If this is to be a tragedy, the elements of destruction must be, there must be a necessity in tragedy, so the elements of destruction must be in the essence of the character. They must come from internal or external necessity, they must not come by chance.

There are anecdotic elements in the play, such as the homosexuality of Blanche's husband, alleged at least, and this belongs more perhaps to the realm of melodrama. But the defeat of Blanche appears as inscribed in her very character from the beginning, and the final disaster appears and is presented almost as a ritual sacrifice.

There is a contradictory world in the tragic vision of Blanche's fate. There's no longer any historical basis to support her aspirations, but she still has these aspirations, and her memories have a ghost quality.

The sense of time in the play is one example of this sense of time which is so important in all of Williams's plays. He says about this, "whether or not we admit it to ourselves, we are all haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanence".

And maybe this is why he writes plays, because he says a play may be violent, full of motion, and you can say about a play that it is form in movement. This is something else again. Yet a play has that special kind of repose which allows contemplation and produces the climate in which tragic importance is a possible thing, provided that certain modern conditions are met. So this is what is so important in the plays, this sense of the arrest of time;