

## Tennessee Williams: Themes and Forms

American theater grew out of the milieu of sweeping economic, political, social, and cultural changes that occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth. The fallout of the Industrial Revolution and the shockwave of new psychological theories would resonate throughout American culture, making strong impact on a burgeoning American population realigned by surges of immigrants, traumatized by war, and increasingly uprooted in the shift from a primarily agrarian to an urban/suburban society. Ironically, American playwrights in their reach to clarify and give meaning to the turbulent changes of this “modern” world would draw heavily from the sources that had helped effect change. Experimenting in symbiotic relationship with European writers and artists of other genres, American dramatists found inspiration in the intellectual “arguments” of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer and especially the psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The vibrancy of the themes and forms of modern American drama resound with these influences.

To speak to a world in which the individual had been increasingly cut loose from the traditional “anchors” of religion, socio/political alignments, family relationships, and a defined self-image, American dramatists such as Eugene O’Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams crafted forceful statements of psychological and spiritual displacement, loss of connections, loneliness, self deception, and retrogression into sexual hedonism. In confronting problems of the “lost” individual in an industrial, “mechanized” society, they lay bare human passions, exposed the raw tensions of the American family, and challenged Victorian/Puritan “morality”. Whether delivered in the shocking hyperbole of overstatement, the ambiguity of images and symbols, or the heartbreak tone of understatement, the “messages” wrought indictments of a “wasteland” in which the term “heroic” was redefined. The protagonist was no longer an idealistic “doer” who ventured out to “save the day”. He was an alienated tragic hero seeking to “belong” in an eroded “jungle” society, or an “everyman” trying to “cope” through false compensations of “pipe dreams”, or a muted survivor living a life of “quiet desperation”, a victim of societal pressure, animal desires, and loss of integrity.

Such themes cried out for fresh designs in form. Freudian and Jungian theories and the innovative patterns of visual art helped point the way. Such psychological delineation as layers of the inner self, the duality of “anima” and “persona”, the delusions of neuroses, the power of association and simultaneous experience in stream of consciousness provided ideas for provocative structural patterns. The presuppositions and canvases of Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism served as inspirations for the effusion of evocative imagery and symbolism into both diction and technical directions. Lighting, music, visual props, and set design became an integral part of dramatic scripts, deepening characterization, punctuating dramatic tensions, reinforcing theme, and achieving heightened intensity in presentation.

The themes and forms of the work of one of America’s most powerful dramatists, Tennessee Williams, showcase many of the above influences and trends. Williams, on the periphery of the Southern Renaissance group of writers that included such names as William Faulkner, Flannery O’Connor, and Robert Penn Warren, would build many of his themes around the old South’s lost aristocracy in tension with the invading materialism of the reconstructed South. Many of his female characters are individuals psychologically trapped in the myths, self-delusions, and pretensions of the “gentility” of the agrarian, “Cavalier” past. Some are of the Southern “wench” variety, passionate in behavior, sex-driven, in conflict with Puritan/Victorian mores. Some of his male characters are lusty, self-serving, “rednecks”; others are “poet realists” who try to find their way in the shifting economic profile, changed values, and altered morality of a new South. Yet others are dull, unimaginative types, representative of Williams’ view of those who have bought into the “herd mentality” of the American “shoe-factory” world.

Williams' primary genius, however, is in his ability to develop compelling characters that transcend the Southern environment in which they are implanted. The obsessed mother, Amanda, and her overly shy daughter Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, the fragile, "displaced" Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the raw sexual energy of Stan in *Streetcar* and of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the vulnerability of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Mitch in *Streetcar* grow out of the embedded tensions of the post- Civil War South, but their problems and conflicts resonate deep chords of all human experience.

Williams' dramatic power comes not only from the content of his plays, but also from his non-linear structural patterns and the devices of technical support he integrates into his scripts. His use of symbols such as the animal figures in *The Glass Menagerie*, his use of music, lighting, and set design to move his narrator in and out of memory, his "destination" names for trolleys and the end- of- the- line location in *Streetcar*, and certainly the vibrant images in his play titles reinforce, through nuance and insinuation, his characterizations and basic themes and add a haunting third dimension to his plays.

From different perspectives and with varying degrees of emphasis on social themes, America's great dramatists become both the "consciousness" and "conscience" of America, digging deeply into the American psyche, probing the implications of the Freudian "Id", pulling back layer after layer of the social "ego", scrutinizing the probity of the American Dream. But in these processes of thrusting, peeling, and poking, they reveal, in stunning ways, that the American heart is the universal heart.

Increasingly the American dramatist became the "voice" of social conscience.

There were exceptions to these "dark" profiles. Maxwell Anderson would write romantic comedy, George Kaufman and collaborator Moss Hart would develop sophisticated social comedies, Thornton Wilder would capture the nostalgia of main street America. Many in "polite" Victorian England "Puritan" society often found the shocking. Equally shocking to the sensibilities of some were the experimental modes of expression.