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## Images of Horror in the Plays of Tennessee Williams

Irshad Ahmad Tabasum <sup>a</sup>, Qabil Khan <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Govt. Post Graduate College, Bahawalpur, Pakistan

<sup>b</sup> Department of English, University of Management and Technology, Lahore

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### Abstract

The world portrayed by Tennessee Williams is replete with hectic hysteria, repression, deception, sickness, sterility, insanity, castration, cannibalism and lynching. The forces of sterility dominate and castrate the forces of vitality and life. Ethnic intolerance can also be observed in some of his plays. The brutes hold their sway by bullying and beguiling methods, and they do not let love, affection and personal freedom take their roots. Here, life becomes a struggle for survival and longing for domesticity leads to despondency. The recurrent themes of mental instability, insanity, asylum and suicide are a direct comment on the horrors and anarchy of the age, maimed and mutilated by selfishness and brutality. Williams' plays deal with the spiritual anarchy resulting from the social anarchy. He portrays a dark and barren world where every effort to beautify and humanize it turns into a nightmare. He portrays an irredeemable world with its dying and disintegrating civilization. His threatened figures find themselves in a brutal society. They try their best to sustain themselves with the power of their will and imagination but fail in their efforts.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams; plays; horror; American Literature

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## Introduction

Man is pitted against the terrifying realities of life in the dramatic world of Tennessee Williams. This sense of reality shapes and colours the images of his plays. It is a world replete with an atmosphere of hectic hysteria, sickness, a sense which comes from his personal experiences of life, but the desire for the freshness and coolness is also present and the sense of sanity and wholeness is not altogether missing. In spite of all the adversities Amanda and Laura, in *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), try to stand on their feet but are made a horrible example before the realities of life. Their close relatives leave them on the mercy of circumstances. But these relatives end up as lonely as both the women are. Jim brings some hope with him but breaks all their dreams as indifferently as he breaks the unicorn. The irony of the situation becomes all the more mocking when one observes Jim's dreams of progress end in regression. The homeless, jobless and companionless Blanche, in *The Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), dreams of starting her life anew with Mitch but Stanley thwarts all her plans. He makes her such a horrible example that she ends up in an asylum. The horrible act of raping the sister-in-law, however, dislodges the sanity and bliss of Stanley's marital life. So he is deprived of the warmth and love of his wife.

## Analysis & Discussion

The destruction of the aesthetes and the dreamers at the hands of the ferocious forces is not restricted to *A Streetcar Named Desire* only. The brutes hold sway in almost every play of Williams. It is all because of the fact that Williams was writing in an age when the soul and psyche of the individual was badly injured by the brute forces. In an interview, Williams once remarked: "We are living in some terrible times...we live in some frightening times" (Devlin 1986: 152). The world was physically, mentally and emotionally crippled after the violent catastrophe of World War II. America had lost its innocence by killing the innocent people by dropping atomic bombs, giving way to the moral collapse of its own people. Williams himself was well aware of such a collapse. Commenting upon the awful effects of atom bomb, Williams once pointed out: "Civilization, at least as a long-term prospect, ceased to exist with the first nuclear blast at Hiroshima and Nagasaki" (1978:170). These colossal events of horror disturbed him so deeply that their effects can be observed in his various plays in various ways. Williams has portrayed a brutish post-atomic world in his *Camino Real* (1953). Albert J. Devlin calls *Camino Real* as "World War II graffiti" (1997:99). The world presented in this play is so horrible that love, affection and personal freedom are the prohibited commodities. In the foreword of this play, Williams comments

that: "I have represented my conception of the time and world that I live in" (1978: 63). Many Romantics, including Kilroy – "who represents the archetypal, innocent, trusting, good-natured American soldier in World War II" (Balakian 1997:76) – are trapped on the repressive Camino Real. Their helplessness is evident from the fact that they have no way out of escape. The horror is maintained by autocratic Gutman whom Jan Balakian calls as "Hitler" (1997:90). The inhabitants of the Camino Real are caught in such a cynical and bleak situation that it becomes almost impossible for them to come out of the pit. The lives of these marginalized and emotionally disturbed people, consisting of outcasts, rebels, homosexuals, prostitutes, panderers, thieves, starving peasants, dreamers, writers have become a hell because they are living in a police state under the "fear of nuclear war" (Balakian 1997:89). The misery of these skinny shabby inabilities is evident from the appallingly idiotic movements of some of them. Horror is writ large on their faces. There is no escape from the horrible dominion of Gutman who mutilates their bodies as indifferently as their self-respect. Those who try to assert their individuality are made a horrible example for others. They are first mocked, then humiliated and finally dispatched to deadly arms of the Street Cleaners. Here the free soul of Kilroy is pitted against the tyrannical Gutman and his Street Cleaners who maintain their ruthless authority by spreading a reign of terror. Their aversion for humanity and despotic rule can be associated with the imperialistic forces of the world. Whosoever tries to defy them, faces a humiliating death. Kilroy may venture to challenge them but he ends up as a worthless clown. He becomes a prime target of vengeance for showing some spark of valour, honour and sympathy. But his audacity proves counterproductive when Gutman humiliates him and forces him to play the role of a clown. Kilroy asserts his individuality and throws the clown's dress into Gutman's face and leaps into the aisle of the theatre, exclaiming, "Kilroy is a free man with equal rights in this world" (*Camino*, 51). His rebellion against the oppression brings a ray of hope for all those enslaved by Gutman and his protégés. That is why Esmeralda fails to suppress her over excited ness and gives him a hearty cheer at his act of defiance. But his romanticized attitude towards personal freedom is negated when he is captured, beaten up and then handed over to the killing hands of the Street Cleaners. Kilroy's humiliation and death represents "the fate of the romantic in the repressive world of fifties" (Murphy 1992:74), while his resurrection and escape from the bruit forces represents imagination as a source of salvation.

Williams exposes the horrible social and moral perversity of the society in *A Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). The play brims with the inner as well as the outer

sickness. The mendacity of the Pollitts reflects the social scenario of the age. The Pollitts may seem to be the victim of a world of contemptible motives but at the same time they are the part of it as well. They may dislike mendacity and deception but resort to it for the sake of their survival. By portraying sickness in this play Williams, in fact, tries to penetrate into the incurably diseased moral fabric of his society as Bigsby observes:

Big Daddy's cancer stands as an image of that of his society. It has destroyed his kidneys and he has developed uremia, which is a poisoning of the whole body system due to the failure of the body to eliminate its poison.... Clearly this is essentially the disease from which the whole culture suffers. Its lies, its injustices, its evasions, its cruelties, have infected the body politic (1984:87).

The members of the family, who are either physically or morally sick, constantly devise various ways of grabbing power, property and authority ignoring the looming shadows of death and disease. They rely on lies to face the facts of their lives. *Cat* is, in fact, Williams' reaction to the post-war culture of deceit and deception. Devlin's arguments in this regard are worth quoting: "Lawrence wrote especially in his later years in bitter protest of the mendacity of postwar culture, as did Williams in the aftermath of the next Great War" (1986: 107). The very existence of childless Maggie is threatened by the plotting of her brother-in-law and his wife. She tries to sustain herself with the claim of pregnancy but this affirmation is precarious and is based on a lie. The rivalry between Brick and his brother for Big Daddy's estate shows the economic fight for authority of the modern age. Both the brothers try to adopt or help adopt deceptive methods for their material gains. The possessive and authoritative Big Daddy with his "twenty eight thousand acres of the richest land this side of the valley Nile" (*Cat*, II, 60) symbolizes hunger for power and materialism of the age. He represents American mind ready to get an inexhaustible power and possess all that is valuable in the world. This domestic tragedy, in fact, reveals man as an animal struggling for survival in a world where survival is meant for the fittest.

The social decadence of the age is also reflected in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). On the one hand it betrays social corruption and on the other it portrays the individual will to survive in the corrupt and fiercely competing capitalist society. Here mendacity is in league with violence. Castration and sterility are the dominating images of the play. Chance faces a literal castration and Heavenly is left sterile after she is operated upon. So, both of them are left with no hope of regenerating life. Chance may accuse Boss Finley of hating love but his thoughtless

love making brings horrible consequences for himself and Heavenly. Heckler becomes cruel when he tries to punish the daughter for the faults of her father. He publicly exposes and taunts Heavenly of her sterility to draw attention to the evils of her father. When he tries to become a threat to the authority and power of Boss Finley, he is left speechless by Finley's fellows. His denial of voice symbolizes a kind of castration as he fails to attack the opponent with the power of tongue. Heckler's beating and choking may represent the intolerance of the powerful of the age but he is not altogether innocent. He breaks all the norms of morality and becomes blind in his desire for vengeance. He becomes merciless and madly hurts Heavenly just to teach a lesson to her father. This is what makes Bigsby claim that the play is a "response to a cultural neurosis, a sense of lost values and high hopes, which [Williams] witnessed in America in the 1950s" (1984: 104).

Boss Finley's lust for power, his racism, his cunningness and his anti-human behaviour tells the story of a horrible age. He wins power and authority by using deceptive methods. He skilfully hides his hypocrisy, greed, racial hatred and exploitation from the public under the garb of nobility and demagoguery. His lust for power is so great that any resistance is crushed ruthlessly. In his blind pursuit of power, he tries to play god, a god full of hatred for humanity. "Finley presents himself as a new god of his society — violent, vengeful, anti-human, and apocalyptic. This is the god envisaged by Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, a god whose consuming hatred for his creation leaves no space for life" (Bigsby 1984: 105). He lacks sexual drive, as his mistress asserts, but he hurts her severely to show his power and manliness. The impotence of Boss, the sterility of Heavenly, the castration of Chance, the choking of Heckler and addiction of the Princess are the indicators of a culture "dissipated through fear and misuse" (Adler 1977: 46).

The same barbarity and racial hatred can be observed in *Orpheus Descending*. The whole play resounds with barbaric acts like castration and blowtorching. The forces of sterility dominate and castrate the forces of regeneration and productivity. Here Jabe Torrance, the impotent owner of the confectionary shop, is presented as life-denier and life destroyer. "He is death's self and malignant" (*Five Plays*, 372). His racial intolerance knows no bounds. He becomes violent even with those who show some act of mercy for the black people. He, along with his men, burns alive the father of Lady Torrance for the same reason. "The grapevines, fruit trees and little white wooden arbors on the shore of the lake" (*Five Plays*, 296) maintained by Lady's father represent the force of regeneration; and the young couples sitting and enjoying under the

blossoming trees of the orchard in the spring and the summer symbolize love, life and hopefulness. But soon death and destruction outdo and wipe out every semblance of hope springing from the orchard when "The Mystic Crew" (*Five Plays*, 297) flares up at Lady's father for selling wine to the black people. Lady's attachment with the orchard reflects her desire for life and regeneration. This attachment is so deep that she sets up the wine-garden in miniature in her confectionary shop. She wants to make the shop look like an orchard in the spring and redecorates it with "artificial branches of fruit trees in flower on the walls and ceiling" (*Five Plays*, 328). Jabe once again becomes the mercenary of a violent world. He kills Lady and blames Val for the crime. His Klan-group once again plays the game of death and destruction. Val is burnt alive with a blowtorch and his screams remind us of the killing of Lady's father by fire. The shouting men at the end of the play look like the hunters of humanity holding blowtorches in their hands as their weapons and searching for a hunt and Vale Xavier with his wild cries represents the hunted humanity struggling to escape from the clutches of cruelty. So the fire and fury of Jabe reflect him to be the destroyer of vitality and life in the war-torn age.

Williams always believed in the mutual understanding and respect in the multi-ethnic America. His comments in this regard are the proof of his belief: "I think that ultimately when the two races, the white and the black, when their blood is mingled, through the passage of time as has already been accomplished to some extent, I think it would produce the handsomest race on earth, and perhaps the strongest" (Rasky 1986: 70). This fondness for the blacks is perhaps, as the last page of *Memoirs* suggests, because of his devotion to his beautiful black nurse Ozzie when he was a child in Mississippi. This is the reason one can observe an atmosphere of mutual coexistence in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There "is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (*Streetcar*, i, 115) in the apartments of Elysian Fields. However, Williams could not remain oblivious to the negative effects of the racial violence in his days and its repercussions can be observed in his plays. Seen from a socialist point of view, racial hatred in Williams' days represents a social phenomenon which has its roots in economic oppression and imperialism. It serves the specific sexual, political and economic interests of dominant social groups. Racial prejudice usually serves the individuals, but it takes its form from the inherited structure of the social world. Racism is inherent in the way society is organized and it is one of the threatening aspects of such a society. Williams could observe the exploitation of the dominant class as the blacks were treated so badly in the South. They were segregated, humiliated and kicked about very often. Slavery was officially

abolished in America by Abraham Lincoln in the 1860s. The black Americans, however, were not truly free till the 1960s. As a result:

A very unpleasant secret society grew up in the South—Ku Klux Klan. Only whites could join [it].... Their main aim was to make people think that blacks were evil, and to make Negroes so frightened that they would not dare to challenge what the white state governments were doing. Many blacks were beaten up or even killed by members of the Klan (Richardson 1983: 15-16).

Williams portrays this intolerance in his *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *Orpheus Descending*. Both Boss Finley and Jabe Torrance represent the racial disharmony and intolerance of Williams' days. Jabe is presented as the head of the Klan group who kills the blacks with impunity. Boss's men castrate a black man, whose only fault is to be found on the streets of the state capital at night. They act brutally as a warning against those who try to break the boundaries of apartheid. This is what Jabe's men do with the father of Lady Torrance. Thus, "violence and hatred, popular pastimes in American way of life," (Richardson 1983: 49) are presented through the characters of Boss and Jabe.

Williams exposes the exploitive nature of a rapacious world in *Suddenly Last Summer*. The play arouses "an epic vision of savagery of the spiritually starving Western civilization" (Thompson 2002: 111). Here, the predatory birds in "the Encantadas Islands" (*Five Plays*, 242) pouncing upon the defenceless and newly hatched sea turtles suggests the exploitation and annihilation of the weaker by the powerful. The cannibalism of Sebastian and the disembowelling of the innocent young turtles suggest the fall of humanity from its grace to animalism. Here both the victims are presented too weak to offer any resistance, symbolizing the passivity of the helpless before the volatile power of violence. Commenting upon the bestiality of man, Williams argues:

Man devours man in a metaphorical sense. He feeds upon his fellow creatures, without the excuse of animals. Animals actually do it for survival, out of hunger. Man, however, is doing it out of, I think, a religious capacity. I use that metaphor to express my repulsion with this characteristic of man, the way people use each other without conscience (Devlin 1986: 274).

The play also exposes how the powerful exploit the powerless. Sebastian tries to buy the boys to satisfy his sexual desires while his mother tries to bribe the doctor for the lobotomy of Catherine, just to wipe out her memories blemishing the repute of Sebastian. Both of them adopt selfish and greedy methods to realize their

wishes, representing the moral decay of their society. Sebastian is torn to pieces and then eaten up by a group of village boys whom he tries to utilize for his own sexual purpose. Violet Venable insists on cutting out of Catherine's brain the vicious memories of her dead son because Catherine is the witness of the whole incident. She has no qualms of conscience and is ready to pay any price to tear away the memories of cannibalistic death of her son from the mind of her poor relative, Catherine. Violet Venable adopts both bullying and beguiling methods to achieve her aims. She attempts to protect her late son's reputation by hushing his murder. She is bent upon deifying her sullied son. She is just like the hawkish birds swooping on the weak new-born sea turtles, tearing them into pieces. The animal imagery and their struggle for survival in *Suddenly Last Summer*, and the beating, lynching and the torturing of the "runaway convicts torn to pieces by hounds" (*Five Plays*, 338) in *Orpheus Descending*, reflect the primitive animalism in man. The darkness of human heart is evident from the reactions of a group of German fascist tourists in *The Night of the Iguana*. They celebrate when they come to know that England is burning in the flames of war: "These Nazis epitomize the cruelty and violence of the Western world" (Embry 1977:333).

When Williams was writing, the world was at a crossroad. On one hand there was the destruction caused by the nuclear war which was threatening civilization. On the other, there was an intellectual pursuit to find some dignified ways for survival. It was an age when the destruction resulting from the war and the desire to survive ran side by side. M. Berman aptly remarks in this regard: "To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves in the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we are" (1982: 15). The atomic war had badly shaken the whole world. However, there were people, at the same time, who believed that life has to continue no matter what volcanoes erupt. In the decade after the World War II, American society was anxious to return to a traditional social order and normalcy. R.A.C. Parker comments: "The horrors of war, with its separation and instabilities brought longings for domesticity, marriage, and parenthood" (1989: 285). This longing can also be observed in the plays of Williams. But this longing remains unrealized, heightens the gravity of the situation and leads to further despondency. The appearance of Jim, in *Menagerie*, may be hopeful for the marriage of Laura but his departure plunges her into infinite hopelessness. Stella's home may look a safe haven for the homeless Blanche, and Mitch's expression of love may promise her some domesticity. But the safe haven turns out to be a trap for her where she has to undergo unbearable physical and



mental trauma. Stella's child may symbolize hope but an unbridgeable gulf has been created between his parents soon after his birth. Similarly, Maggie may wish for pregnancy but has to rely on an unwilling husband. The child in the womb of Lady Torrance may promise bright future, but he is crushed in the womb without bringing new life into existence. Val Xavier may have brought new life into a sterile and insipid community but the same community burns him alive.

If there are wars and violence, there will be neurotics and if there are neurotics there should be asylums. Williams' plays are replete with violence, neurotics and asylums because the impact of aggressive and hostile situations on his hyper sensitive protagonists is usually destructive. The recurrent themes of mental instability, insanity, asylum and suicide in his plays are a direct comment on the horrors and anarchy of his age, maimed and mutilated by selfishness and brutality. The world found itself in a chaotic situation because of brutal violence and mass murder committed during the wars. In Williams' plays, "insanity and violence stand as appropriate images of moral anarchy" (Biggsby 1984: 104). The disastrous events of his age led millions of people to mental illness. Reuben Fine's research on the effects of the horrible events on the individual psychology reveals that: "In American army a large percentage of the draftees were rejected for mental reasons, and a considerable percentage of those discharged from the service as unable to meet the needs of war were neuropsychiatric cases" (1981: 229). We find many of the emotionally impaired individuals in the plays of Williams. Laura, in *Menagerie*, is verging on the brink of insanity and Amanda's life has been paranoia. Blanche, in *Streetcar*, is demented and led to asylum. Zelda, in *Clothes for a Summer Hotel*, is mentally imbalanced and is confined to an asylum. Clare's father, in *Outcry*, kills her mother because the latter wants to send him to an asylum. Clare herself is declared insane and is deserted by her companions. Catherine, in *Suddenly Last Summer*, is faced with the horrible act of lobotomy after spending some time in an asylum. By portraying such figures, Williams in fact estimates the degree of turmoil in American life resulting from the horrible events. The suicides and insanity in his plays show the social discords of his age because "suicide rates, like mental illness, are higher in periods of social distress than in periods of social cohesiveness" (Fine 1981: 234).

## Conclusion

Williams' plays delve deep into what we may call, in Jungian diction, "the collective unconsciousness" (Evans 1976: 33) of America, revealing not only the

racial memory but also the most distant places of its life. Williams once acknowledged:

The nervous system of any age or nation is its creative workers, its artists. And if that nervous system is profoundly disturbed by its environment, the work it produces will inescapably reflect the disturbance, sometimes obliquely and sometimes with violent directness, depending upon the nature and control of the artist (1978: 119-20).

His plays reflect the racial, social, cultural and political disturbance of American life. They may be regarded as the essence of the spirit of the time. They deal with the spiritual anarchy resulting from the social anarchy. He portrays a dark and barren world where every effort to beautify and humanize it turns into a nightmare. He portrays an irredeemable world with its dying and disintegrating civilization. Death, disease and threatening fire are the ruling symbols of his plays. His threatened figures find themselves in a brutal society. They try their best to sustain themselves with the power of their will and imagination but fail in their efforts. Williams' plays dissect the ugliness of a nightmarish world. Once he remarked in an interview that: "The shocking quality of his work reflects the shocking state of the world today" (Devlin 1986: 46). Various bizarre and brutal elements, like castration, cannibalism and exploitation are the main features of this awful world. Desertion and depression, envy and aggression, lobotomy and rape are accompanied with asylum and insanity. These things reflect Williams' belief that "we're threatened with world extinction through violence" (Devlin 1986: 77). Moreover, the good souls in his plays are badly entrapped in the clutches of bad souls and die out slowly but surely. The trouble is that the good souls are themselves incapable of self-protection and proliferation of their breed and become increasingly disheartened with life. Gradually they become a rarity in a society that grows callous to them. On the other hand the bad souls are united together by their common desire to destroy all that is beautiful and sensible. Blinded by their ruthless desire to dominate, they do not hesitate in using people as human barter. They progress and proliferate in the dehumanizing atmosphere. The weak and the vulnerable in his plays always yearn for some straw to clutch at but they are menaced and mutilated by the powerful storms surrounding them. Some of his protagonists get some moments of fulfilment but soon they find themselves in the deep quagmires.

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