

SYMBOLISM AS A TECHNIQUE TO PROJECT INNER REALITY: A CRITICAL STUDY OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' 'A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE'

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams is one of America's most experimental and explorative dramatists, leads the American drama at the considerable critical level along with Eugene O'Neil, Edward Albee and Arthur Miller. He uses number of dramatic techniques to project his own vision of life and the inner reality of the post-war American life. Among the techniques, the most prominent is symbolism. His work is suffused with symbolism which has been taken as a metaphorical ways of expression. His play, "A Street Car Named Desire is also known for his intense use of symbolism. He used the technique to project the inner reality of the contemporary American life as well as the universal pattern of behaviour. In the play, the characters, the scenes and situations, the names of the places, colour, music, and light have been used to suggest something differ than what it is. The present paper is going to discuss the select play of the writer in respect to symbolism.

Key words: Symbolism, illusion, expressionism, avant garde, archetype, myth, existentialism, anti-realism, alienation, escapism.

Introduction

Tennessee Williams, one of the most celebrated and influential American dramatists, has acquired unique position in the history of American dramatic literature due to his explorative and experimental techniques at the thematic and formative level. At the formative level, he has handled the techniques of plastic theatre, expressionism, existentialism, anti-realism, stream of consciousness, avant-garde, epic theatre and symbolism, and at the thematic level he has gone with alienation, isolation, pessimism, disillusion, escapism, frustration and a clash between illusion and reality. At the same time it should be noted that he does not use innovative techniques to decorate his plays, but to express the inexpressible reality and to explore the dark corner of the American life which came on the wake of the two world wars and the great financial depression. Hence, in his plays

we can find integrity between themes and techniques. It is very difficult in his writing to separate the theme from the technique and technique from the theme. The theme and technique go together to project the dilemma of the life. His themes often merge into techniques and techniques often in themes.

Symbolism and a Street Car Named Desire

Like other plays, Tennessee Williams uses the technique of symbolism to project the inexpressible inner reality of American life in his famous play, 'A Street Car Named Desire'. The play is often recognised for its intense use of symbolism which goes at the various levels including mythic and thematic. The play can be read at more than one level by taking the symbolic technique in consideration. The very title, the names of the characters, the scenes and various

events, music and colour and the names of the places have been represented in symbolic manner to project the internal reality of contemporary American life. He himself would believe that symbols or symbolic technique can be a better way to project the internal reality rather than direct verbal communication. Once, in his interview, he explained that symbolism is a way to say thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words. He would believe that symbols or symbolic projection come with voice when language goes dumb. It can suggest and convince the reality more effectively and impressively than the ordinary language. In 1950, he also stated that art is made out of symbols the way your body is made out of vital tissue. Hence, he has used the technique of symbolism abundantly.

The present paper is going to analyse the symbolic or suggestive technique used by the writer to convey the internal reality in his play, 'A Street Car Named Desire'. But, before going with the analysis in respect to symbolism, I feel sincerely to be going first with the term symbolism or symbol. Generally, symbol or symbolic technique refers suggestiveness at the understanding level. "The word symbol derives from the Greek verb 'symballein', 'to throw together' and its noun 'symbolon' 'mark', 'emblem', 'token', or 'sign'. It is an object, animate or inanimate which represents or stands for something else." (Cuddan, J.A., 1998). It is a widely used term in many disciplines referring to the process by which a person, place, idea, or condition even myth (archetype) comes to stand for some abstract idea, or condition. It is a word or situation which stands not merely

'connotative' but also evocative, emotive and suggestive. "Symbols are nothing but metaphorical ways of expression", (Williams, Tennessee). It is medium or means to transfer inexpressible experience in art to convey the status of mind without word to word expression.

The very title of the play is a symbolic representation by which the writer tries to suggest the journey of human life in a car named desire to self destruction. It is passionate and wayward living which causes much trouble. Blanche Du Bois, a heroine to the play, takes a street car which is desire to Elysian Fields. Her journey from Belle Reve to New Orleans can be taken symbolically as a journey of contemporary American life or modern life from reality to illusion, from unbearable past to ought to be future; and her ultimate end is taken as a disillusion of contemporary American life in which she goes in mental hospital. It is a journey from prosperity to ruin and from hope to hopelessness. She loses her parental house and all wealth under debts shall be taken as a result or impact of the great financial depression. It is a symbolical representation of transformation which came in American life after the great crisis. It can be taken the journey of the decadence of southern aristocracy towards the sluggish, self-centred and passionate materialistic north. Her life in New Orleans is a symbolical representation of dirt of the new life. At the beginning, she does not adjust herself in the new condition but the condition forces her to accept everything. It is a symbolic representation of the American life which did not adjust itself in the condition which came after the world wars and financial depression. The luxurious

living became a rare to the people in new condition. The new atmosphere bewilders the American just like Blanche. She lives in two worlds- one is lost with loss of Elysian Fields and another is coming with her presence in New Orleans. In her mind, there goes a clash between illusion and reality, idealism and realism. She coins her own suitable past to cope the harsh present. The clash between illusion and reality perfectly projects the very condition of American life which was highly affected by the depression and the new values of modernism.

The play also uses the recurrent mythic themes to project the universal pattern of behaviour. At the mythical level Blanche's exile from her hometown to New Orleans due her desire can be taken as an exile of Adam and Eve from the heaven to earth. It is a very human desire which caused his exile from paradise to Earth. "Blanche's story becomes a parable of the soul exiled for its sexual transgression from its paradisaical or heavenly home. She reenacts the entire Biblical epic of human degeneration, from Eve-like innocence to the whore of Babylon. She becomes a symbol of modern existential angst- the alienated soul searching for a transcendent home and inevitably finding in each hopeful sanctuary"(Thompson, Judith J., 2002). Blanche's passionate desires also cause to her exile to fight an age old fight against life. Other mythic parallel we can find in the play is the entire theme is modelled on the Greek legend of Philomela. Judith J. Thompson quoted "Leonard Quirino finds the entire plot of *Streetcar* modelled on the Greek legend of Tereus, king of Thrace, his wife Procne, and her sister Philomela, who plans to visit the married couple."

(Thompson, Judith J., 2002) According to the legend Philomela visits her sister's house believing her sister, Procne, is died. In the story, brother-in-law, Tereus, seduces her and cuts her tongue. Here, we can find similarity between the legend and the theme of the play. The brother-in-law rapes his sister-in-law when his wife is absent has a parallel to Stanley's rape of Blanche, his sister-in-law, in absence of Stella. Stanley's brutality forces her to go to mental hospital just like Tereus' cutting her sister-in-law's tongue. Both, Blanche and Philomela, fail to narrate the brutality done with them. The similarity exposes the inner symbolic technique used by the writer to project the universal phenomenon.

The most important theme of the play- conflict between illusion and reality- has been also projected by the writer by using the technique of symbolism. Blanche's illusion for gentlemen, Shep Huntleigh, who is going to rescue her from her present dilemma, can be taken a symbolic presentation of the American dream. The quest for perfection and ideal was a common habit of the contemporary life, and the same quest is projected by the writer through Blanche's creation. She stands for the age old quest for perfection in imperfection; she stands for life or the vision of life. She stands for hope and despair and illusion and disillusion in contrary to Stanley who stands for reality, animality and male masculinity.

Tennessee Williams has also used the names of his characters in symbolic manner to show the real nature in ironical way. Blanche Du Bois, a central figure's name also suggests the very nature of her living in ironic way. Blanche is a French name which stands for white, and in

general sense the white colour stands for purity, prosperity, virtue and simplicity. But in the drama her name stands in contrast to her real nature or conduct. Ironically, the writer uses symbolical technique to project the complicated living process which comes to on her part. Her last name 'Bois' stands in French for wood which suggests, in general sense, solidity and fixity. In contrary, her real nature is fragile and flexible. The middle name 'Du' refers something noble and aristocratic. But in real sense there is nothing like that in her nature.

The name of the places has also been used in symbolic manner to project reality. 'Elysian Fields' has a mythological reference in Virgil's 'Aeneid'. In Roman myth, it stands for a place in which virtuous dead are rewarded. In the drama, it refers the place of suffering and sorrow. The new place 'New Orleans' stands for northern decadence which came on the materialistic attitude to life. In T.S.Eliot's words it is a modern waste land which is full with dirt, animality, brutality and degenerative sexuality.

In the drama, colour and light have been also used in symbolic way to project the internal reality of the post-war life. Blanche's aversion of light at many incidents shows the attitude of the life which always tries to go away from reality or fact. In general sense, light stands for fact, truth, reality and knowledge. Here, Blanche's attitude to light refers the attitude of modern life to knowledge, truth, reality and purity. She likes darkness which serves for her as a means to avoid reality. In scene third, she covers the bulb with Chinese paper lantern- 'I can't stand a naked light bulb '- shows the internal

condition of her living. Here, the light can be taken as a reality and Chinese paper lantern as an illusion. It is the common habit of the modern life to cover harsh reality by mental illusion. Light stands for consciousness which is unbearable to Blanche. The colour also suggests something deeper. Blanche always keeps which coloured dresses and wears them in occasion when she wants to project herself in critical condition. It can be also taken at the symbolic level. She puts white dress with impression to hide her past or to go away from it. It suggests the common habit of human beings to averse the reality.

Blanche's habit of bathing can be also taken at the symbolic level. She spends long time in bathroom in tense suggests the hopeless condition of human beings to get sustainable shelter. It indicates hopeless attempt to get purity by water which stands for regeneration. The modern man takes water as a source of cleaning dirt rather than its age old purity.

The music in the play can be taken in suggestive manner. The background music is also used as a symbol for emotion. The blue piano and the Varsouviana polka appear on such scenes which are dominated by certain emotions. The blue piano symbolically represents the spirit of life related to the common section of the society. It also appears at the moment when Blanche speaks about her loss and desire for love. In such occasions it symbolically projects her depression, longing and isolation. The Varsouviana also projects a sense of reality against illusion. It is always played when Blanche loses her property and love. It represents her loss as well as her confront to reality of life.

Through the character-sketch of Blanche, the writer projects the world of illusion and by Stanley, the world of reality. The struggle which goes between Stanley and Blanche can be taken a struggle between illusion and reality. Stanley's victory over Blanche is a symbolic representation of the victory of reality over illusion. Through the character sketch of Stella the writer represents the objectivity to reality and illusion.

Conclusion

In this way, Tennessee Williams has used the technique of symbolism to convey the

very mentality and to explore the dark corner of the age and at the archetype level the very dilemma of humanity. The technique also helps the dramatists to project the inexpressible inner reality of life which came on the wake of the two world wars and the great financial depression. It is also clear that the writer does not use the technique to decorate his play in literary sense. He uses them to elaborate the theme and his vision of life. The technique is used to convey the sense of reality and illusion. They are used at the situations where verbal language goes dumb to project the very mentality.

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