
Post -War America and Myth in the drama of Tennessee Williams.

LARABI Sabéha *

Department of English, UMMTO. salihalarabi2022@gmail.com

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Abstract: This article explores the form and meanings that myth and ritual assume in selected plays by American modernist playwright Tennessee Williams. Methodologically, it relies on the anthropological, psychological and literary paradigms borrowed from James George Frazer's, Carl Gustav Jung's and Northrop Frye's major works on myth and ritual. We will attempt to show that in his quest to translate modern man's metamorphosis and tragedy in post World War II America, Williams reterritorializes Greek myth and ritual mainly of vegetation deities. We will demonstrate that compared to his contemporaries mainly Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams stands as the playwright of the 'other America', in that while the former were acclaimed as America's conventional playwrights, Williams was discarded as the playwright who profaned America's cultural and religious conventions.

* l'auteur correspondant.

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By 1920, major American dramatists like O'Neill had concentrated on the theme of the success and failure of the American Dream. Miller and Albee in *Death of a Salesman* (1940) and *The American Dream* (1960) have directly attacked the dangers of a sacred image demonstrating in a variety of techniques the fatal, soul-destroying consequences of unquestioned generalized acceptance of and participation in the principles of a potentially destructive national myth, the myth of the 'Manifest Destiny'.

The Post World War II era illustrates that when popular cultural myths are vocally questioned and demythologized, a critical public consciousness can be stimulated (Jamison and Eyerman,1995). This in fact was reflected in the American cultural and religious life as the American 'Counterculture'. The counter is that the revolution in attitudes and morals were not sudden but were a part of the longer trajectory of changes over the twentieth century in the evolution of modernism. We assume that Williams became known for his profanations against the hypocrisies of the American forefathers. He sought self-determination under new values and standards, hence he declares himself as the vanguard of a new society. Tennessee Williams' major contribution in terms of dramatic technique was to find a theatrical framework by which the audience was allowed into the inner workings of the minds and souls of the characters. Upon closer examination of the post war era, not all aspects of the conduct of the war fit the dramatic archetype. The use of atomic weapons on Japan, and the failure to take action against the concentration camps, for instance, called into question the moral purity and motives of the United States, the supposed protagonist in the war. In the

twenty five years or so following the war the emergence of the cold war, the rising tensions of race relations, the growing awareness of poverty, the wars in Korea and Vietnam, and even a discomfort with the materialism of the 'affluent society' all contributed to a re-evaluation of the American society and erosion of the archetype.

Our investigation of Williams' use of myth will be undertaken on a sample of ten plays that he produced during the 40s,50s and 60s that coincide not only with post World War II era but with the 'counterculture' in America as well. The corpus comprises Williams': *Battle of Angels*(1940) *Orpheus Descending*(1957), *A Streetcar Named Desire*(1947), *Sweet Bird of Youth*(1959), *The Rose Tattoo*(1951), *Camino Real*(1953), *Suddenly Last Summer*(1959), *The Night of the Iguana*(1961), *The Milk Train doesn't Stop Here Anymore*(1963) *Summer and Smoke*,(1948)*The Seven Descents of Myrtle or Kingdom of Earth*(1968), *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel* (1969), *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale*(1970)and his novel *The Roman Spring of Mrs Stone*(1950).

The basic assumption in this piece of research is that American playwright Tennessee Williams permeated his plays of the three first decades after World War II with mythical elements, and he has adapted the mythical symbols, patterns, and motifs to his own artistic needs, fitting them to plot, structure, characters, themes and language. The extent to which these elements affect the meanings will be discussed all along this thesis. Yet, because his critics have failed to recognize the extent of the mythic elements, they have failed to recognize their impact. Even when the more obvious Dionysian and Christian allusions to birth, death and resurrection are recognized, they are nearly always condemned as inappropriate and having little or no organic relationship to the meaning.

Our investigation of myth and ritual in Tennessee Williams' drama stems from a set of major myth influences on the playwright and his oeuvre. The first is Williams' acknowledgement to poet T.S.Eliot, and his *'The Waste Land'* as a particularly lasting influence. Eliot explicitly acknowledges his interest in myth and ritual when he says:

In using myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history....Instead of narrative method, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I believe, a step toward making the modern world possible for art (Eliot: 177-178)

In fact, a year after his famous review of *Ulysses*, Eliot recognized and praised James Joyce's' mythical method as inspiration for modern writers saying that through using myth to manipulate a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, James Joyce pursued a method which others must pursue after him. For modernists like Joyce, Williams, in the case of this dissertation, and for others the use of myth is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. Instead of the narrative method, it became possible to use the mythical method. The purpose was to make the modern world possible for art.(Eliot, :177-178) The reminiscences of Eliot and his *The Waste Land* are noticeable in some of the plays under study like *Camino Real* and others through both poet and playwright's use of 'fertility rites'.

The second major myth influence that we suppose has greatly contributed to the shaping of Williams' myth and ritual infused drama is without doubt the Jungian one. According to Jung, myths fulfill a therapeutic function by opening up human beings to their unconscious, thus preventing neurosis and paving the way to 'individuation'. Because they emanate from the collective unconscious, their significance is universal and timeless. Knowing that Williams spent a year in Psychoanalysis, there is no doubt that his terminology of 'Unconscious mind' and 'images' closely reflect Gustav Jung's psychology that sees the collective unconsciousness as the repository of universal symbols or images that Jung terms 'the Archetypes of the mind'. In one of the plays under study Williams says: "like some archetype of the human unconsciousness, the image haunted our small apartment"(Williams,1971:159). He also says:

I can't deny that I use a lot of those things called symbols, but being a self-defensive creature, I say that symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama. We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images as are our dreams (Williams,1978:66)

The third hypothesis supposes that Williams' readings of Greek drama have shaped his drama for a life's time. In fact Williams acknowledges his reading of mythology in his Episcopalian Minister grandfather's library and his exposition to the Christian myth of Jesus' birth, sacrifice for mankind and resurrection. This has greatly influenced his choice of the myth of Vegetation deities, fertility rites and the ritual of birth, death and rebirth being the most

tragic and therefore the most relevant to modern man's metamorphosis as his philosophy.(Williams,1964)

Finally, we assume that Williams' elaborate use of myth and ritual symbolism stems from his two major influences namely American poet Hart Crane and novelist D.H. Lawrence. Hart Crane is celebrated as America's most influential poets of the twentieth century. His expressionistic style was heavily inspired by T.S. Eliot, yet Crane is also one of the literary history's most tragic heroes. Struggling with his homosexuality in an era of conservatism, he took his own life at the age of 32 by jumping overboard into the Gulf of Mexico in 1932 after being beaten. His body was never recovered but his legacy endures. Tennessee Williams 'fell in love' with Crane's poetry (Williams,1967)

It is worth to remind that the Christ symbolism reinforces the vegetation god themes of death and rebirth in terms more familiar than those of ancient myth. Yet this cannot be understood when the vegetation god element itself is not recognized. But once this element has been recognized, we must ask the ultimate questions: what do the mythic elements mean outside of their mythic context, after they have been displaced from their mythic origins? More specifically, what do sacrifice and rebirth of the vegetation gods mean in the modern world? What does the goddess consort relationship mean in a modern world? What of the sexual abnormalities of Williams' young god like protagonists who are the "mutilated" and the "fugitive kind" are related both to the mythic elements and to the modern world as Tennessee Williams presents it? And finally, Why does Williams in almost all of his plays put an artist as a hero, be he a singer, a poet, a painter or else all endowed with a redemptive power for rebirth?

Probably through his own experiences with psychoanalysis, Williams seems to be clearly aware of this psychotherapeutic function of artistic creation. Indeed, in his self interview of 1957 he even extended his observations to indicate that he suspected, at least, something of the communal nature of the stimuli behind artistic creation, even though they might seem highly individuated. Williams asks himself the questions below:

A...I have followed the developing tension and anger and violence of the world and time that I live in through my own steadily increasing tension as a writer and person.

Q. Then you admit that this 'developing tension,' as you call it, is a reflection of a condition in yourself?

A. Yes.

Q. A morbid condition?

A. Yes

Q. Perhaps verging on the psychotic?

A. I guess my work has always been a kind of psychotherapy for me.

Q. But how can you expect audiences to be impressed by plays and other writings that are created as a release for the tensions of a possible or incipient madman?

A. It releases their own.

Q. Their own what?

A. Increasing tensions, verging on the psychotic.

Q. You think the world's going mad?

A. Going? I'd say nearly gone (Williams, 1972:14)

If we assume that the once conscious organization of the perceived world as anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss terms it has historically receded into an

unconscious set of reflections, then we have arrived at Jung's "instinctual images" or what Freudians might refer to as 'unconscious mythological thought forms'(Freud, 1965). That these structures are not merely of anthropological psychological interest may be deduced from the close relationship created by Jung in the actual psychoanalytic treatment of patients between artistic creation and the bringing into the open these "instinctual images." In a process he called "the individuation process," Jung would encourage each patient to use his own tastes and talents to develop his dream and fantasy material in any number of artistic disciplines 'dramatic, dialectic, visual, acoustic, or in the form of dancing, painting, drawing, or modeling'(Jung:72) If we can see beyond Williams' satiric use of the language: ("a morbid condition," "verging on the psychotic," "incipient madman") here, he has suggested more than an Aristotelian notion of catharsis. He asserts that the world around him resembles a chaos strongly suggestive of that described by Artaud, and thus that his works must appeal to the violent mythic images formed by the instincts of his fellow human beings.

In answering these questions, we must likewise consider what death and rebirth and the god goddess relationship meant in their original contexts, for it is these meanings on which Williams bases his own conceptions of reality. That is to say, it is the past myth from which he constructs a present myth, a "true story of our time and the world we live in..."(Williams,1949: 47).Mircea Eliade notes that 'anguish' before nothingness and death' seems to be a specifically modern phenomenon. In all the other, non-European cultures, that is, in the other religions, Death is never felt as an absolute end or as 'Nothingness': it is regarded rather as a rite of passage to another mode of being; and for that reason always referred to in relation to the symbolisms

and rituals of initiation, rebirth or resurrection (Eliade, 1958:172) In the early religions, he explains, "Death is the Great Initiation." This is true also of Christianity, but, as Eliade continues, "a great part of the modern world has lost faith, and for this mass of mankind anxiety in the face of Death presents itself as anguish before Nothingness." (Ibid:175)

Varying the theme only slightly, Tennessee Williams presents "anxiety in the face of Death" anguish before time and time is Nothingness. "Whether we admit it to ourselves, or not," the playwright tells us, "We are all haunted by a truly awful sense of impermanence." (Williams, 1952) This sense of impermanence likewise haunts Williams' plays. "Death," Eliade continues, "prepares the new, purely spiritual birth, access to a mode of being not subject to the destroying action of Time." (Eliade,1958:180) Escape from time is escape from mortality, and immortality is god like; death is the way to immortality, and thus death is the way to becoming one with God(Ibid)

In restoring to death its primitive significance as a rite of passage, Williams gives particular attention to the mode of death or the death equivalent. Most often it takes the form of an ancient ritual such as crucifixion, dismemberment, immolation, cannibalism, or castration. Throughout his history, man has been preoccupied with death. For the man without faith, death marks the end of all life; for the religious man, it is the beginning of a higher life. Either way it is man's ultimate concern. For Tennessee Williams, nothing can be created without death, and the death and rebirth of the 'Cosmic Male' is, as it will be shown in the discussion part, Williams' major theme.

The selected plays in this article are centered on what were known in ancient times as the "Death Mysteries." Characterized by the worship of a goddess, the death mysteries stood in contrast to the mysteries of birth and

regeneration, which were devoted to the worship of a god. Because the goddess was regarded as the source of all fertility and birth and the god the agent of that fertility, it was the goddess who was worshipped as supreme in the mystery of death and rebirth. It was she who was responsible for life rising renewed from the grave, for it was she who symbolized the earth, the mortal part of nature. The masculine principle, the immortal part of nature signified by the sun, was the object of the Earth Goddess. According to ancient myth, the Earth swallowed up the sun nightly in the west, only to see it rise again in the east.

Williams had portrayed this myth and this relationship of the sun and the earth early in his career in the short play depicting D. H. Lawrence's death. Written in 1941, the final scene of *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix* presents Lawrence watching the sunset moments before his own death. "When first you look at the sun," he declares, "it strikes you blind Life's blinding ..." He stirs and leans forward in his chair. "The sun's going down. He's seduced by the harlot of darkness. . . . Now she has got him, they're copulating together! The sun is exhausted, the harlot has taken his strength and now she will start to destroy him. She's eating him up...Oh, but he won't stay down. He'll climb back out of her belly and there will be light. In the end there will always be light..." (Williams, 1941:54). Eliade explains it,

When the Earth becomes a goddess of Death, it is simply because she is felt to be the universal womb, the inexhaustible source of all creation. Death is not, in itself, a definitive end, not an absolute annihilation, as it is sometimes thought to be in the modern world. Death is likened to the seed which is sown in the bosom of the Earth Mother to give birth to a new plant.

Thus, one might speak of an optimistic view of death, since death is regarded as a return to the Mother, a temporary re-entry into the maternal bosom (Eliade, 1959:184)

Because the primordial concept of the earth involved features both of nourishment and famine, the Earth Goddess was an ambivalent figure. She was both nourisher and protector and devourer; she was both Good Mother and Terrible Mother. Neumann tells us that the death mysteries are mysteries of the Terrible Mother for they are "based on her devouring ensnaring function, in which she draws the life of the individual back into herself. Here the womb becomes a devouring maw and the conceptual symbols of diminution, rending, hacking to pieces, and annihilation, or rot and decay, have their place..." (Newmann, 1960:71-72) And thus "because ritual killing and dismemberment are a necessary transition toward rebirth and new fertility, the destruction of the luminous gods in the journey through the underworld appears as a cosmic equivalent of the birth of the new day." (Ibid:192)The basis of Williams' metaphysics and the ancient religions was the maternal principle. Kybele, Aphrodite, Isis and the other earth goddesses were both beautiful and destructive, both good and terrible. In psychological terms, the idea is an especially interesting one since Williams has said much about his strong childhood ties with his mother, and since he has publicly acknowledged his homosexual tendencies (on the David Frost Show). Burstein's comment that the plays are mostly about incest may not be unfounded, although the plays clearly are not merely parables of possible incestuous drives on the part of the author or even of Jung's universal instinct toward matriarchal incest. Severely condemned by

many critics as sensationalism and exploitation, the sexual abnormalities are nevertheless an integral part of Williams' metaphysics just as they were an integral part of myth in primitive and ancient cults, a religious ideal founded in myth and holding a sacred and transpersonal significance. The essential feature common to all of these sexual concepts is the union of the god and the goddess in varying ways. Homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, all represent, in Williams' work varying degrees of the two sexes. Primarily male, primarily female, or both equally, the individual represents a union of the masculine and feminine principles. The ancient cults regarded such a union as a return to the primordial time of the hermaphroditic round from which all creation was thought to have emerged. As Neumann explains, "The round is the calabash containing the World Parents... The World Parents, heaven and earth, lie one on top of the other in the round, spacelessly and timelessly united, for as yet nothing has come between them to create duality out of the original unity. The container of the masculine and feminine opposites is the great hermaphrodite, the primal creative element who combines the poles in himself..." (Newmann,1958:9)

When asked about the theme of a finished work, Williams generally looks vague and answers, "It is a play about life." (Williams, 1948:) Then he explains: "I have never been certain of what my plays meant very precisely since I have always written mostly from the unconscious..."(Ibid) Adrian Hall, director of the off Broadway production of *Orpheus Descending*, supports this explanation, remarking that Williams works from some "dark metaphysical source," that "he writes out of some really subjective contact with his psyche. He is in contact with himself."(Hall,1964)

Perhaps we should let this stand as an explanation for the flood of archetypal images, symbols, and themes which has made Williams' work rich ground in which to unearth mythic artifacts. Every artist is entitled to an artistic creation. But although mythic artifacts as artifacts are interesting and decorative, they are of less significance than the knowledge of their relationship to the individual or the society that created them, the spirit that informed them. The spirit which informs Williams' myth infused plays is one of universal truth. Drawing upon the myths of the past Williams has created the "true story of our time and the world we live in..."(Williams,1956) Finding a meaning for the modern world reflected in the mythic meanings, Williams has worked, reworked, and molded the myths until they have little outward resemblance to their archetypes; yet he has retained the essential meanings of those archetypes. In his search for a metaphor for man's struggle to attain his original unity, whether it be with his mother or the cosmos, Williams has discovered the language of myth, and he has employed this language fully during at least the three first decades after World War II. In the mythic elements of the divine, gods and goddesses, sacrifice and rebirth Williams has found metaphysics, and through them he has transformed that metaphysics into theatre. He has used these elements to inform every aspect of his work his plot and structure, his characters, his themes, his language, and even the frequently nonrealistic staging of which he was so fond.

In conclusion, it is clear that Tennessee Williams has preferred the use of myth as a major dramatic vehicle to translate modern man's metamorphosis and art's redemptive power as a therapy. And clearly, that vehicle must be studied if we are fully to understand and accurately to evaluate Williams' work. We must recognize the elements of the vehicle, the

types of myth that are employed and the ways in which those types Greek, Christian, Middle Eastern, Oriental, or else. are integrated. We must also recognize the levels on which the vehicle operates.

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