Tennessee Williams' writing reveals a striking preoccupation with the problem of time. Like other modern dramatists, he has juxtaposed past and present, created worlds of fantasy, and employed mythical substructures in order to suspend the irrevocable forward direction of time in his plays. Williams frequently expresses the conflict between real and ideal in temporal terms; time, often as arch-enemy, is ranged with fact, necessity, body, mortality, and locked in combat with eternity, truth, freedom, soul, immortality. Williams' dramas are marked by a thematic obsession with time and its effect on human life to such a degree that his whole career can be viewed from the perspective of his changing attitude toward time. (p. 155)

Three major periods, coinciding approximately with the last three decades, emerge in a consideration of Williams' plays from the standpoint of the time theme. *The Glass Menagerie*, *Camino Real* and *Night of the Iguana* exemplify the characteristic stance toward time that Williams adopts in each period; each of these plays, moreover, employs a different technique to achieve an arrest of time.

The events of *The Glass Menagerie* are enactments of Tom Wingfield's memories; his monologues, addressed directly to the audience, frame the play's seven animated "tableaux" and mediate between past and present. In reliving the events surrounding the visit of his sister's "gentleman caller," Tom conveys to the audience the effect of the past on the present and endows the past with timeless significance. Williams asks for non-realistic lighting in the play, in order to set off the events occurring in memory. A general dimness gives the effect of ethereality. Williams also specifies that "the light upon Laura should be distinct from the others" and resemble the light upon a madonna in a religious painting. At one point, he calls for special light upon Amanda: "the light upon her face with its aged but childish features is cruelly sharp, satirical as a Daumier print." Such lighting reflects Tom's emotional response to the other characters: his memory canonizes Laura and criticizes Amanda. (p. 156)

What is unique about the Wingfields is their retreat from the world of daily existence. Each of them has a fantasy world which is infinitely more real than the world of the St. Louis tenement.... (p. 157)

The play also makes extensive use of music, which, in framing each scene, serves as a mediator between the present situation of the narrator and his memories of the past. There are, in addition, three distinct musical themes played at intervals during the drama: Laura's theme, "The Glass Menagerie," which is light, delicate, and poignant; the nostalgic fiddling associated with Amanda's reveries; and the "theme three" adventure music which calls Tom to his wandering future. The music in all three cases is symbolic of the illusions which dominate the three main characters.

The techniques which emphasize memory and illusion in the drama reinforce the theme of the escape from time which controls the action. The survival tactic practiced by the Wingfields is to retreat from reality into a timeless world of their own making.... Laura's retreat can not be dismissed as lightly as Amanda's nostalgia and Tom's puerile dreams. Withdrawal from the world is a matter of necessity, not choice, for her. (pp. 157–58)

The picture of life presented in *The Glass Menagerie* is a disturbing one: the only defense against the relentlessness and cruelty of life in time is the ultimately unsatisfactory retreat into a world of illusion. None of the Wingfields has the capacity to "fight back." Amanda in her reveries is an incurable romantic whose practical schemes are doomed to failure. Laura is an object of pity; she backs away from life, not because she wants to, but because nature has ill-equipped her to fight for survival. Tom literally runs away, only to learn that his dreams were illusions and that reality mocks him wherever he goes. Williams, however, celebrates the attempt to flee the present as a noble failure. (p. 158)

Mind or spirit, in the form of Amanda's recollections, Tom's dreams, or Laura's fantasy, imposes itself on the recalcitrant material of experience and achieves, if only for a moment, a purity and beauty normally denied to those who are earthbound and timebound.

Most of the plays which Williams wrote during the 1940s depict the defeat of the light of spirit by the darkness of matter. His first play, *Battle of Angels*, is explicitly built on a set of dichotomies: light vs. darkness, imagination vs.
practicality, life vs. death—or, in terms of the plot, the young free-spirited wanderer and the woman he impregnates vs. the woman's moribund husband and the hostile townspeople. If the hero, Val Xavier, has a “fault,” it is pausing to fall in love; his lovers, past and present, prevent his escape from responsibility. When Williams rewrote the play, under the title *Orpheus Descending*, he retained the Manichean structure and added a set of classical analogies. Williams' mythological allusions suggest the utter incapacity for change or progress in the human situation. Like Orpheus, Val is an innocent alien, a visitor from a better world, who is destroyed by the evil forces which pervade this world. The only way to preserve one's purity, implies Williams, is to stay free of human ties.

Williams sets up similar struggles between matter and spirit in *Summer and Smoke* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*.... Body and soul are irreconcilable opposites; in any direct clash, body or matter necessarily wins. In these early plays Williams presents the plight of human beings struggling with their dual natures and hemmed in by their mortality. Those who submit to the conditions of mortal existence are viewed as corrupt; those who defy them in pursuit of a timeless ideal are eventually destroyed by the corrupt anyway. No compromise between pure spirit and base matter is possible in a world in which the realities of timebound existence place limitations on the spirit's capacity to be free.

Most of the plays which Williams wrote during the 1950's assert the spirit's capacity to be free in the face of heavy odds. Time is still the enemy, but those who strive to overcome it are victors, not necessarily on a literal level, but very clearly on a spiritual plane. In changing from a Manichean to a modified Pelagian stance, Williams enlarges the possibilities for heroism. At least, in the middle plays, one's choices are related, not irrelevant, to the outcome of one's life. Although Williams, unlike the Pelagians, does not deny the existence of original sin, he does extol the ability of man to rise by sheer force of will power above the limitations his mortality imposes upon him. *Camino Real* reveals how Williams' attitude toward the plight of humanity in time alters to offer the possibility for greatness to man.

Williams suspends the rules of strict chronology and causality by adopting in *Camino Real* a structure based on association. He writes in the play's foreword that his aim is to give the audience a sense of “the continually dissolving and transforming images of a dream.” (pp. 158–59)

[Like so many of Williams' characters], the characters in *Camino Real* are wanderers, rootless, displaced persons.... Camino Real is a way station, albeit a most depressing one, on the journey from birth to death. Williams uses the opening lines from Dante's *Inferno* as the play's epigraph. The inferno experienced by the characters on the Camino Real is caused by the inevitable change and dissolution which accompany time's forward motion....

As demanded by the stage directions, the legendary characters wear modern clothes with only vestigial touches of the period costume. The combination of contemporary and historical costuming suggests that each character represents a legend or myth that is still operative in the present. The drama indicates which is the saving myth. *Camino Real* is a paean to dreamers and idealists of all ages. The only way out of the plaza is through the Terra Incognita, and the only characters to take that route are Byron, Don Quixote, and Kilroy—romantics all. (p. 160)

*Camino Real* in offering the Terra Incognita as a remedy for the pain of being human, denies the possibility of a resolution in time of the problems posed by mortality. By including the Casanova-Marguerite subplot, Williams avoids complete escapism. Even as Don Quixote and Kilroy leave to follow their dreams, Casanova and Marguerite remain on the Camino Real to find “salvation” in their mutual love. Williams' point is obvious: idealism can conquer the limitations of mortality, love can make them bearable.

Pelagianism provides the philosophic framework of Camino Real.... [The] Pelagian stance in the modern drama is the exaltation in the last act of the energy and competence of man, alone and without aid.... Whether or not the gesture of defiance in *Camino Real* really succeeds in overcoming the limitations of the world, time, and necessity is irrelevant. The act of defiance itself is courageous, heroic, and therefore worthwhile.

A tinge of Pelagianism is also evident in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, in which Williams commends characters who rebel against their present situation, whether with good or bad results. One play of Williams' middle period is noteworthy, both for its emphatic treatment of time as the source of man's problems and for its obvious Pelagianism. Unlike Williams' memory play and dream play, *Sweet Bird of Youth* uses a conventional technique and structure. (pp. 161–62)

In Williams' Pelagian world man exercises free will, but only within the narrow sphere of deciding whether to face reality and the burden of time.... Williams does not suggest that human beings can alter their destinies in time.

Williams' dramas of the sixties and seventies, however, reveal a different approach to the human predicament. His later characters discover the significance of their existence and the possibility of control by immersing themselves in time, rather than by escaping or defying it. In *Night of the Iguana, The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore,*
Kingdom of Earth, and Small Craft Warnings, it is not the "loners," but those who need each other, not the defiers, but the accommodators, who are set up as ideals. And in the later plays there is no doubt that the archetypal sin-suffering-atonement-redemption pattern is fully realized. (pp. 162–63)

The attempt to break down the barriers of time does not so obviously affect Williams' techniques in Night of the Iguana as it does in The Glass Menagerie and Camino Real. Nevertheless, Night of the Iguana resembles Camino Real in that the Costa Verde functions as a kind of Never-Neverland, placed on a hill overlooking, but somehow apart from the time-drenched world below. On this hill each character strives to come to terms with time and the duality of human nature, though earthbound, strives for the infinite. The play is like The Glass Menagerie in that memory is an important part of each character's conception of himself.... More than the iguana is freed before the night is over, for all the characters learn to abjure the past to which they are tied. (pp. 163–64)

Although the classical myth of Orestes defines the basic dramatic situation of Night of the Iguana, the Christian myth provides the key to the resolution of the drama. More is involved in the play's Christian perspective than the simple equation of Shannon tied in his hammock and Christ nailed to the cross, both “atonings” for the transgressions of mankind, although this relationship is clearly implied by Williams. The religious ritual structure of sin-suffering-atonement-redemption works itself out, not in Shannon's assumption of the role of Christ-figure, but in his progress toward a truly Christian outlook on the world. Shannon has always been willing to “suffer” and “atone”; he does it every eighteen months with a vengeance. What makes this encounter different from all others is the new knowledge of what must come after atonement, of what constitutes a redeemed life. Shannon comes to this realization largely through his contact with Hannah.

While Shannon conscientiously sets himself apart from the mass of men in his search for God, Hannah offers him a different approach to this search, based upon her own experience: find God in ministering to the needs of others. (p. 165)

An author who updates myths can break down the barriers between past and present. If he stresses “the eternal return of the same,” the effect of the myth may be to undermine the importance of timely existence. But myths may also be used to define basic human situations or problems confronted differently by each age and existentially by each individual. It is this latter function which the myth serves in Night of the Iguana, the message of which is the necessity of finding one's place in the present. The characters of the play, as Williams says ..., “reach the point of utter despair and still go past it with courage.” Their despair results from the burdens placed on them by their mortality and by the changes which accompany the passage of time. The drama consists in their coming together, enlightening, and helping each other through this “dark night of the soul.”

The characters of Williams' later plays resolve their problems, not by taking refuge in an idealized past or in imaginative leaps, but by courageously accepting present reality and assuming responsibility for the future....

In the first stages of his career, whether he is depicting the defeat of the forces of light by the forces of darkness or exalting the energy of self-sufficient man, Williams adopts an essentially negative attitude toward time. He views the inexorable march of time as destructive of man's work and dreams. The quest in The Glass Menagerie and Camino Real is for what is untouched by time. By contrast, in Williams' later plays the forward march of time—in extending to human beings the opportunity to create anew, to change and progress—is a source of meaning. The courage to become is what the characters of Williams' later plays seek and find....

That the later plays of Williams embody a more satisfying philosophy of living is no guarantee of their dramatic worth. Indeed, Williams' earlier plays are generally considered his best. Yet there is a paradox involved in Williams' attempt in his early plays to fashion for the stage actions which are supposedly devoid of human meaning in order to prove the significance of what cannot be humanly enacted. For it is the plaza which comes to life on stage, and the Terra Incognita which is doomed to remain without artistic form. (p. 166)

Just as the lack of a philosophy that comes to terms with man's temporality and mortality does not necessarily make a bad play, so the embodiment of a philosophy that provides a viable rationale for living does not of itself insure success. All that can be said is that given two plays of similar dramatic merit, the one in which mortality is seen as a source of insight rather than a hindrance to vision is the one that will be more humanly satisfying.... [It] is only from Night of the Iguana on, that Williams' characters have confronted time to find its human significance. (p. 167)

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