The Search for Hope in the Plays of Tennessee Williams
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[essay date 1971] In the following essay, Presley identifies three philosophical dilemmas confronted by Williams's central characters—"isolation, the absence of God, and the reality of death." Presley contends that Williams's most successful plays portray realistic psychological or social tensions rather than theological themes as found in his less effective later plays.]

Tennessee Williams' entrance into the Roman Catholic Church in January, 1969 should be regarded not necessarily as an eccentric action, but as a logical if not decisive step in the playwright's progression toward religion. Throughout his career as a dramatist, Williams has exhibited in his plays an awareness of religious questions. However, his theological dimension has gone unnoticed by most critics who, for reasons mysterious, concentrate upon appearances of sexuality and violence to the exclusion of authentic theological and philosophical concerns. Beginning with The Glass Menagerie (1945) and ending with The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore (1964), Williams' hero travels the difficult road from despair to hope—from the shadows of tragedy to the light of the comic vision. This journey becomes a kind of pilgrimage, especially in plays after Camino Real (1953), characterized by the hero's repetition of familiar affirmations. This aspect of the later works of Williams has great significance in view of the obvious decline in his reputation among critics of theatre. It may very well be that the quality of his later works suffers from debilitating effects of his emerging hope. The great and unfortunate irony of the hero's ultimate redemption is that his religious-sounding ideology reduces his stature.

As early as The Glass Menagerie and as late as The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore, Williams' hero encounters three problems of a philosophical or theological nature— isolation, the absence of God, and the reality of death. Tom Wingfield and Blanche Du Bois, central characters in the early plays, The Glass Menagerie and A Streetcar Named Desire are caught in situations which prevent any semblance of community. There may be the potential of community in the Wingfield home, but it is never realized. Tom understands but refuses to heed the advice of Amanda, his mother: "In these trying times we live in, all that we have to cling to is each other" (scene iv) [The Glass Menagerie]. His escape from responsibility is but another in a long series which began, of course, with the father's desertion. Blanche Du Bois of Streetcar knows what she needs when she arrives at her sister's apartment in New Orleans. She tells Stella: "I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone!" (scene i) [A Streetcar Named Desire]. Blanche is doomed from the start not simply because she will be overwhelmed by the bestial Stanley. Blanche, let us remember, is pathetically torn from within by conflicting emotions: her compassion is defeated by her selfishness; her need for understanding is undermined by her debauchery. Human community is not possible in Streetcar precisely because the people who ought to participate in that community are either unwilling or incapable.

Williams' early works suggest that, beyond human weaknesses, a cause of isolation is the inability of the flesh to coexist harmoniously with the spirit. Tom Wingfield, an avid reader of the instinct-affirming writings of D. H. Lawrence, is rebuked by a religious-sounding Amanda who would have him concentrate on life's "nobler qualities." This thematic clash again comes to the surface in a bit of clever dialogue in the eighth scene of Streetcar. Blanche has been spending hours in the Kowalski's only bathroom—a circumstance which aggravates her already lacerated relationship with Stanley. After one of his impatient remarks, she replies with a paraphrase of Jesus' words in Luke 21:19: "Possess your soul in patience." Stanley immediately counters with: "It's not my soul, it's my kidneys I'm worried about." In the larger context of the drama, these words indicate that Stanley's mind is open not to the beckoning of the spirit but only to the desires and needs of the flesh. Summer and Smoke, written shortly after Streetcar, appears to have been conceived with this theme of the flesh versus the spirit as a problem to be solved. Pathos is the only emotion evoked in this experimental allegory which ends with the sad affirmation that the flesh (summer) cannot merge with the spirit (smoke). The central characters, John (the doctor of bodily ills) and Alma (Spanish for soul), are not saved from their isolation but pathetically confirmed in it.

The second major theological issue in the plays of Williams is the absence of God or a savior. The Wingfields, Amanda in particular, wish for a messiah in the form of a "gentleman caller." Indeed, The Glass Menagerie structurally is held together by the anticipation and arrival of Jim O'Connor. He is, as Tom points out in the opening monologue, "that long delayed but always expected something that we live for." Once Jim comes and leaves, the play's action is complete. Amanda's hopes for deliverance are fruitless since Jim has made previous commitments to the American technological dream, and, of course, a "girl named Betty." In Streetcar, Blanche Du Bois keeps
hanging up until the end that her messiah, Shep Hundleigh (probably imaginary), will appear out of nowhere and rescue her from Stanley and his crude world. The airplane "Fugitivo" is the messianic symbol in Camino Real. It is either death at the hands of the street-cleaners or escape via airplane for the traveler of the road of reality. As Marguerite, the tubercular woman of pleasure, says in Block Nine: the "Fugitivo" is her only "way to escape from this abominable place!" Because of a technicality, Marguerite is unable to board this agency of salvation. Her destiny, like that of the hero Kilroy, is death in a strange land devoid of love and compassion. Probably the most obvious reference to the absence of God in a guilt-infested world comes in Sweet Bird of Youth. Few critics have noted the significant lines of the heckler who shouts in the second act to the crowds surrounding a politician, Boss Finley, called "a messiah from the hills":

I don't believe it. I believe that the silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him is a long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of. I think it's yet to be broken to any man, living or yet lived on earth--no exceptions.

The awareness of death is a third important theme in Williams' major plays. It is in the presence of death that his hero encounters questions about the nature and destiny of his life. Ultimate questions are faced particularly in Camino Real (1953), and in several more recent plays: Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), Suddenly Last Summer (1958), The Night of the Iguana (1962), and The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore (1964). The most serious exploration of human destiny is the memorable heart-to-heart talk between Brick and Big Daddy in the second act of Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Big Daddy traces his son's alcoholism and ennui to the mystery surrounding his friendship with Skipper. Maggie, Brick's wife, had hinted earlier that Skipper harbored homosexual feelings toward her husband. Brick is stung by his father's words and counters with the "truth" that Big Daddy will not have future birthdays since his illness is not, as Big Mamma and Gooper say, a "spastic colon," but something more terrible: incurable cancer. There is no advice, no optimistic outlook, for Big Daddy. His last words are "CHRIST DAMN--ALL--LYING--SONS OF--LYING BITCHES! . . . Lying, dying, liars!" Cat on a Hot Tin Roof, therefore, is a play about different kinds of death in the modern world. Life cannot continue on Brick's side of the family. We know that Brick already has willed a spiritual death; he has "that cool air of detachment that people have who have given up the struggle." Life will continue for Gooper and Mae and their offspring. But, as Big Daddy and Brick indicate in the second act, the kind of existence embodied by these people is mendacious. Death is the final truth of this play.

If one grants the existence of these theological and philosophical aspects of Williams' works--isolation, God's absence, and death--one ought to notice as well solutions to these problems whenever they are proposed by the dramatist. When the major plays are considered as a unit, it becomes clear that few solutions are proposed prior to Camino Real. In this particular play, Williams shows evidence of a search for a solution; the most obvious clue is that Camino Real's style is so unlike that of his previous efforts. Here the author develops an elaborate allegory in an unusual sequence of "Blocks." Technique, as Professor Mark Schorer pointed out in his famous essay on the subject, is an important indication of subject matter: "The final lesson of the modern novel is that technique is not the secondary thing it seemed to Wells, some external machination, a mechanical affair, but a deep and primary operation; not only that technique contains intellectual and moral implications, but that it discovers them." The appearance of Williams' allegorical plays, Camino Real and later Suddenly Last Summer, indicate the playwright's attempt to discover a new subject matter, one containing hopeful affirmations about life's potential.

The "way of reality" and "royal road," two meanings of Camino Real, have many similarities to Dante's road through The Inferno. The play's epigraph comes from Canto I of The Inferno: "In the middle of the journey of our life, I came to myself in a dark wood where the straight way was lost." This particular play, like Dante's allegory of life as hell, is but part of a journey to redemption for the hero. The travelers of the Camino are universal men--the eternal optimist, Don Quixote; the great lover, Casanova; Lord Byron, the Romantic in quest of an ideal; Marguerite, a sentimental courtesan past her prime; and Kilroy, the American Everyman who attempts to hold fast to independence, sincerity, and courage. Kilroy travels the very real road of life which leads to an arid fountain in the middle of the square. He discovers that Don Quixote's map was right: "The spring of humanity has gone dry in this place." Despite the idealism of Kilroy, despite his efforts to defeat the smug and cruel enemies of sensitivity and brotherhood, he is ultimately defeated. After his death at the hands of the "street cleaners," he is taken to a medical institution where interns dissect him. They discover that his heart was made of gold which cannot be destroyed by even the most corrosive forces of modernity. In the sixteenth and last block, a resurrected Kilroy is seen carrying his gold heart under his arm. He joins Don Quixote who is prepared to venture forth again in search of the ideal. After they become partners, Quixote affirms: "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!" Water then rushes into the once-dry fountain. The implication is that the Camino has been redeemed through the courage of Kilroy who is now, like Christ, an eternal force.

The new hopefulness of Camino Real, surely Williams' turning point, does not come cheaply. The price he pays for his new theme becomes evident when one considers the thematic and structural consequences. Camino Real has several weaknesses which are prophetic of his recent efforts. One major problem is his too simple reduction of
complex literary figures such as Don Quixote and Lord Byron. Another limitation arises from Kilroy's sudden apotheosis after his death; this is pure *deus ex machina*. Williams' literary self-consciousness leads to chaos: All at once the viewer is thrust into an incongruous symbolical environment of Dante, Cervantes, T. S. Eliot, Lord Byron, Spanish folklore, and Christian reminiscences. Too much weight rests upon sentiment; the clearest example of this is found in the closing lines: "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!" The "comic" resolution of the play comes through the author's fiat and not through a dramatically believable solution. Thus Williams, by using sentiment in such a way, pronounces the play complete even if the reader or viewer mentally protests.

*Suddenly Last Summer*, produced five years after *Camino Real*, has a similar lack of credibility. The allegorical meaning of the play is explained by the heroine, Catharine Holly; it has to do with the consequences of possessing a daemonic vision of God and man. Professor Paul J. Hurley understands the play properly when he writes: "What his drama proclaims is that recognition of evil, if carried to the point of a consuming obsession, may be the worst form of evil. . . . A daemonic vision of human nature may irredeemably corrupt the one who possesses the vision." The point of this "morality play" is made clear by Catharine. She explains that her homosexual cousin Sebastian, a would-be poet, did what all modern men have a tendency to do: He tried to "spell God's name with the wrong alphabet blocks." Since the question of God is an important one in the drama (Sebastian sacrifices himself to his "vision" of a cannibalistic God), one would expect Williams to pursue the question. Instead of dealing further with this important point, however, the playwright turns his attention to the interrelationship of mankind. Humanity, according to Catharine, may be as desperate as passengers aboard a ship which has struck an iceberg at sea. Everyone is sinking, but that is "no reason for everyone drowning hating everyone drowning." Totally disregarding man's idolatrous nature--his making into God an image of himself--Catharine touchingly affirms a positive life of community in which people accept each other even though they all share the common fate of death. If a major problem of *Suddenly Last Summer* is God's relationship to human experience, then we must conclude that the question is unanswered by the playwright. This play is similar to *Camino Real* in its vagueness about solutions which, although literally present in the drama, do not in any sense relate to the problems which they should solve.

Yes, *Suddenly Last Summer* has a sense of completeness as a "morality play," but the drama nevertheless fails to come to grips with the central issue it has raised.

The two most recent plays in this discussion, as some critics have acknowledged, are explicitly theological. Once again the basis problems of the characters are isolation, the question of God, and death. In *The Night of the Iguana*, Shannon's main problem is "the oldest one in the world--the need to believe in something or someone." Hannah's emphasis upon belief is intended as a solution to Shannon's state of disbelief. Earlier he tells her that "Western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a senile delinquent. . . . I will not and cannot continue to conduct services in praise and worship of this . . . angry, petulant old man" (Act II). While Hannah correctly senses that Shannon has a problem of belief, she is nevertheless incapable of providing an answer to this specific question. The logic of her speeches is that Shannon's problem concerning God may be resolved if he simply reaches out for other people. The clearest illustration of her logic is found in the second half of the passage quoted earlier. Here it is in full:

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SHANNON:

What is my problem, Miss Jelkes?

HANNAH:

The oldest one in the world--the need to believe in something or in someone--almost anyone--almost anything . . . something.

SHANNON:

Your voice sounds hopeless about it.

HANNAH:

No, I'm not hopeless about it. In fact, I've discovered something to believe in.

SHANNON:

Something like . . . God?

HANNAH:

No.
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SHANNON: 
What?

HANNAH: 
Broken gates between people so they can reach each other, even if it's just for one night only.

... 
A little understanding exchanged between them, a wanting to help each other through nights like this.

(Act III)

Later in this act Hannah explains that, while she is "unsure" about God, she is beginning to feel that God may be seen in the faces of suffering humanity.

Hannah's point is that the problem of belief will more or less take care of itself if Shannon will try to live in community with someone. But Shannon's problem is not isolation but belief or lack of it. Hannah insists that he deal with the question of disbelief with the answer for human isolation--community. The logic is reminiscent of that used by Catharine in Suddenly Last Summer; she raises the question about Sebastian's daemonic vision of God and then answers it with a simplistic statement about the importance of caring for other people.

Williams manages to solve the fundamental problem of death in Iguana while Hannah and Shannon are engaged in their discussion; the character involved in this solution, however, is neither the hero nor the heroine, but the heroine's father, Nonno. Everyone in the play knows that he is at death's door. His concern throughout the play is to complete his final poem--one which explores a way of looking at death. The concluding lines of the poem reveal that Nonno's solution to death is "Courage."

O Courage could you not as well
Select a second place to dwell,
Not only in that golden tree
But in the frightened heart of me?

Nonno's struggle to complete the poem parallels Shannon's efforts to understand and justify his existence in view of his conception of God. Nonno's climactic poem lends an air of calm reserve to this scene in which Shannon attempts to find something worthy of his belief. Nonno is the only character who finds a satisfactory answer to his basic question. But the play is not about Nonno. The main character, Shannon, ignores the question which first was most important and commits himself to a life of "community" with Maxine--a person who throughout the play is revealed as incapable of either understanding or empathy. Shannon's question of belief is left unanswered. One might argue that Hannah substitutes the human face for the divine image, in the tradition of Romantic thinkers, and thus redefines the question on belief. If Williams' point is that suffering humanity has replaced God, then he does not make it clear. Shannon's vigorous statements about God as a "senile delinquent" are not refuted by ignoring them.

The point about the illogical resolution of The Night of the Iguana can be made about The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore. The chief difference is that the basic problem of the latter play is death. Furthermore, the ideology of Christopher is more nearly Christian than oriental, whereas Hannah's point of view is an uneven combination of oriental, stoic, and Christian sentiment. Christopher's mission apparently is to prepare Mrs. Goforth for death. (She is about to "go forth.") The epigraph from Yeats's "Sailing to Byzantium," in the context of the drama, implies that Mrs. Goforth is about to sail into eternity. Yet it is not clear whether Williams proposes that the solution to her problem of death is some kind of eternal life. If Christopher is a "bearer of Christ," this would seem logical. Yet the hero's mission has patently selfish origins. He visits Mrs. Goforth, just as he has visited other dying ladies, not primarily because he has a special message for her, but because this activity saves him from a sense of "unreality" and "lostness." An uncritical reading of the play might lead one, as it has led countless reviewers, to claim that the drama is about a "Christ figure" who comes to prepare a dying aristocrat for eternal life. But Williams has not done this in The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore. Mrs. Goforth's death is merely a vehicle for the realization of a vagrant poet's unusual need for psychological comfort.

The play's meaning is further confused by the epigraph from W. B. Yeats's famous poem, "Sailing to Byzantium":

Consume my heart away; sick with desire
And fastened to a dying animal
It knows not what it is; and gather me
The poem does not suggest the same kind of eternal life represented by the image of Christ. Rather, it is Yeats’s special interpretation of art in opposition to nature. The poem suggests the rejection of the natural for the unnatural "form as Grecian goldsmiths make. . . ." If Williams uses Christopher Flanders (the name connotes both Christ and death) to suggest that Mrs. Goforth has entered eternity when the drama closes, as several critics maintain, then the playwright has probably misunderstood the meaning of "Sailing to Byzantium." The basic problem of the drama, death, is left unsolved; unsolved, even though the touching communion scene at the end suggests that something has been resolved.

In the recent plays of hopefulness beyond despair, Tennessee Williams commits several errors—the greatest of which is his misleading suggestion that the dramas have been resolved. The closest either play (Iguana and Milk Train) comes to resolution is in the singular instance of Nonno's discovery of "courage" in the face of death. But it is Nonno's solution and not Shannon's. The greatest problem of the play—Shannon's struggle for belief—is ignored in the drama's resolution.

Since Williams' turning point is Camino Real, it is important to notice that at the very moment he is developing a moral point of view, he is also experimenting with a dramatic structure foreign to his genius as a writer of realistic dramas. The characters of Camino Real are stripped of their authenticity even though their allegorical trappings are rich in symbolic value. Williams' conception of allegory is flawed by its escape from the real. Successful allegory is symbolic in method, but the goal is usually realistic. The unreality of his major allegories, Camino Real and Suddenly Last Summer, is a clear indication that Williams has substituted sentimentality for authenticity. The only conclusion to be drawn from this development is that, despite the playwright's desperate and commendable efforts to the contrary, there are no believable solutions for the terrifying problems of his very complex characters.

That Williams is concerned with important theological issues cannot be denied. Human isolation, the absence of God, and the reality of death are fundamental concerns of Christian theology. Williams obviously recognizes this or he would not consistently use Christian-sounding language and themes in most of his recent works. Yet he has not grasped the fundamental logic inherent in the theological issues. He has not found a way to deal effectively with the problems experienced by his characters, even though he employs dramatic techniques such as false resolutions to suggest otherwise.

The great virtue of the early plays of Williams is that they are believable and concern real people. The early hero's dignity is that, despite social and psychological pressures, he does not ultimately ignore the facts of his life. Blanche's despair is a legitimate and credible response to the nature of her existence. Tom's acute sense of the absence, and death—are left unsolved; unsolved, even though the touching communion scene at the end suggests that something has been resolved.

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Despite the fact that Williams' hero ultimately achieves a limited kind of community, his problems—isoation, God's absence, and death—are not resolved in a convincing manner. Williams’ difficulty is shared by many modern writers who would project theological themes. T. S. Eliot's plays tend to confirm the difficulty of Williams' task. Perhaps the only meaningful action for the hero in isolation would be to wait. But Williams, more often than not, is a writer whose plays are in the realistic traditions of Chekhov and Ibsen, not in the more somber traditions of the "theatre of the absurd" or the "literature of silence." Some argue that Williams' greatest attribute is his ability to produce conventional, realistic drama. Indeed he succeeds most of all when he describes loneliness, frustration, and the unavoidable anxiety of human experience. But in his later works he attempts more than description. He proposes sentimental, religious-sounding solutions which contribute to dramatic distortion and thematic irrelevance. Some might contend that this situation validates the conclusion of the "death of God" theologian, Gabriel Vahanian: "Christian thought . . . no longer is relevant to the situation of our post-Christian age and its cultural postulates." I would like to argue, however, that Williams' failure is not primarily due to his use or misuse of a system of theology. Rather, the major difficulty is his apparent inability to resolve in a logical manner the problems of his characters. Tennessee Williams' recent entry into the Church perhaps indicates that he is doing with his life what he has been trying to do for his characters. Somehow it is easier to be a religious playwright than a writer of religious plays. And T. S. Eliot has taught us by example the importance of knowing where one leaves off and the other begins.