Vision of Tennessee Williams

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Abstract : Tennessee Williams vision in his plays is rich, varied and a romantic rebel fighting against conventions. He is a messiah for the lonely people who want to bring happiness out of frustration in their lives. He hopes to overcome these forces through HOPE. Through his characters Williams portrays the hopelessness but also an illusion of hope which is fragile. We can see his vision prevalent in our society also where people are taking to drugs and leading life that are full of frustrations and guilt. But man is always hopeful and he wishes to live and give the gift of love. His plays reverberate with questions about life that shake and shock us.

Introduction

Every writer worth his salt has a vision of life which he tries to put across through his artistic creations. The theory of 'Art for Art's Sake' has long since lost its credibility and nobody can really believe vision or another. It is not only what a writer affirms his creative faith in the very writing, but also that the essence of his writing indicates the way he looks at life and the universe. A writer's vision may be pessimistic, optimistic or perhaps even millioristic. What is of central value is the way in which a work of art leads its readers to a greater understanding of the world in which they live as well as a greater self awareness.

When we examine Tennessee Williams' vision as revealed in his plays, we realize that although he depicts a world of fugitive people who are deprived of a sense of belonging to life and who seem to be imprisoned in their own private lonely shells, yet he manages to transmit a message of hop through his immense compassion for these lost people. But we also know that compassion alone does not redeem these shattered people from their horrifying and absurd existence. It is obvious that in spite of his bohemian unconventionality he has not been able to understand the real cause of the hellish plight of his characters. At one place he has remarked that America is not a fit country for the sensitive artists, but he does not go into the question why it is so. We know that human life is not inevitably meant for suffering, guilt and loneliness. In spite of what the existentialists says, with whom he seems to share certain conceptions about death, anguish, fate, nothingness etc.

We know that life can become meaningful and happy when a scientifically planned society based on a rational structure of genuine equality to all is established on earth. It is indeed a gross over simplification of the problem when one of his characters, Chicken, says in the play Kingdom of Earth:

There's nothing in the world, in this whole kingdom of earth that can compare with one thing and that one thing is what's able to happen between a man and a woman, just that thing, nothing more is perfect. The rest is crapped all of the rest is almost nothing but crap.

Life cannot be reduced only to sex or to the relationship between man and woman.

In spite of some serious drawbacks in the quality of Williams' vision, we can see his sincere attempt to create some kind of meaning in the chaos of existence.

The Vision

The vision that emerges from a reading of Williams' plays may be aptly described as the symbolic import inherent in a phrase like "The Broken Spectrum". The variegated colours of life are broken into various kinds of experiences which range from terrible and disastrous to blissful and ecstatic. Tennessee Williams was mainly concerned with the reality of a broken world which he has tried to envision and reflect in his plays. E.M. Jackson rightly points out that "Williams, who often described himself as a romantic, is concerned with poetic paradox-with light in dark, good within evil, body against soul, God and Satan. "Play after play reveals Williams' significant theme namely "his search for truth and meaning within the moment of poetic vision."
Confronted with a world of broken dreams and an incomprehensible universe, Williams tried to project a desperately poetic vision in his plays. He was very much concerned with the problem of love, sympathy and understanding in a world in which these are constantly threatened with suppression and annihilation. His following statement provides a good clue to the tenor of his vision: "Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and the premise can provide the impulse to everything he creates. For me the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance." From this statement it becomes clear that the main objective of Tennessee Williams writing his plays is to arrive at an understanding of those forces which make for the forging of closer bonds between man and man and between man and woman. It is obvious that the ultimate aim of everything characters created by him is to explore beauty and meaning in the midst of confusion of living.

Tennessee Williams seems to picture a universe in which people are trying to ascend the stairs that lead nowhere and of human beings who are trapped in a theatre that has no exits. And yet he believes that man has the will to discover the way out. As Clare says in his recent play - out Cry, "I am not paralyzed I am going to find the way out." Williams appears to assert the fact that this 'way out' can be found through a greater awareness of our lives and what is happening to it. As Clare puts it in Out Cry:

The worst thing that's disappeared in our lives is being aware of what's going on in our lives.

Williams' vision however cannot be reduced to any simple formula. It is rich, varied and occasionally full of what may appear to be contradictory assertions and statements. Apart from what has been said above, Williams' vision can also be described as that of a romantic rebel fighting against conventions and demanding for himself a wild freedom which is incompatible with an urban society. These rebellious individuals are lonely people and all of them might repeat Val Xavier's worlds:

Nobody gets to know nobody: We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins for life.

The rebellion against the social milieu is an effort to bring happiness and grace out of frustration in the lives of poor victims like those in The Glass Menagerie, which however seems doomed to failure.

Williams' world has a central mood of evil, cruelty and decay as most of his plays have exploited all forms of sexual perversity in a society of horror, brutality and moral squalor. Even the short stories like One Arm and others have derelicts that are sex deviates and are described with sympathy and understanding. One Arm describes a mutilated Apollo, a boxing champion, who lost the center of his being when he lost his arm. The injury is sexual as well as moral. Rebelling against his mutilation, he knocks about the country looking for its destruction. During his vagrant adventures, he commits a murder and is caught by the police. Just before he is executed, he rediscovers his own meaning of life. The stories, The Angel in the Alcove and the Poet depict frustrated people who have taken to drinking or some other intoxicant to drown their despair and seek some solace. Like the broken Apollo of One Arm, the frustrated characters in the Poet also need some adventures which may help them to go on in life.

Williams' vision of man is that of a lonely and helpless creature surrounded by forces which do not suit him. He cannot overcome those forces but always hopes to do so through one effort or the other. These efforts are made only in imagination and so he is always keeping himself in illusion. Williams has created Laura and Amanda to illustrate the different illusions of man to keep himself away from facts. These illusive dreams indicate the retreat of these characters from the established social order. These false hopes are the make believe answers which seems to provide them with the elixir of life. Amanda lives in the hope of getting her daughter married. The hope is apparently fragile as Laura is crippled and lacks feminine charm. Amanda never allows her thoughts to see his weakness in her daughter because it hurts her as reality always does. She tries to live in sweet imagination which is soothing and comforting for her. This love of illusion and imagination appears to be dominant among those who are uneducated in the real social dynamics and in ideological possibilities of human redemption.

Williams' vision of man is that an incomplete human being. Everyone of us is haunted by loneliness and in spite of apparent completion, our pleasure is always incomplete. Alma, in Summer and Smoke, swallows air to escape blank loneliness. Serafina, in the Rose Tattoo, thinks that adherence to Sicilian morality will help to lighten the burden of loneliness.
The vision of Tennessee Williams owes much to his life experience. He himself has suffered from 'hypochondria, claustrophobia and wanderlust' in an unmarried stage of homelessness. He has suffered from a sense of betrayal throughout his life. Val Xavier in Battle of Angels is almost Williams himself. Val has his guitar to escape the ugly evils of his surroundings and Williams has his writings to give him company in the dark and lonely world. Williams himself has been very lonely and identifies himself with the characters who cannot live alone and who seek to escape on one pretext or the other. Myra, in Battle of Angels, owns the shoe company and Val is only her employee. Her sentiments ripen for him as she needs some sort of elixir to survive. The world around her is without pleasure as she has no company in it. She needs expression of herself through something and that something is her attraction towards Val. Mrs. Vee Talbott feels that her life did not being till she expressed herself through art. Art becomes her companion afterwards. Even the she is bewildered and lonely and desired to express herself to someone who may have the endurance to face it. The overwhelming effect of loneliness sharpens her keenness to become one with the universe.

Tennessee Williams finds man trying to become a part of the universe even though he is humble, frightened and guilty at heart. Man desperately tries to appear otherwise. He does not seem to express himself fully to another human being because ambiguity is an integral part of his nature. His shames and fears remain hidden inside him because he does not believe even in his own essential dignity and decency. Sebastian Venable, in Suddenly Last Summer, needs a companion for his life. His mother also feels the same need. Both try to feel their need fulfilled in each other. They do not express their desire to anyone as they are afraid and ashamed of it. He tries to seek it in Catharine but does not find it. The pain of loneliness grows more and more acute and at last he collapses on the ground. He tries to weep it away in his poetry but writing cannot prove a substitute for company.

Williams' vision of man is not of a barren creature, totally without hope. There is hope in him which is born out of the wish to live. The love of life gives his characters energy to struggle against all the violent forces that seek to destroy them. At the same time Williams' vision of the world finds an all pervading chaos in the whole universe. Man needs a place where he may rest with someone to whom he may be emotionally attached. Even birds built nests to live and rest but they do not live a falling tree for their resting place. Rather, they build their nests with an eye for the relative permanence of the location and also for the purpose of mating and propagating their species. Human beings want this nest to be built in the hearts of other human beings. Man wants to build it in woman and woman wants it in man. They both want to believe in each other for ever. We all wind up with something in life and if we get someone to wind up with, we are lucky. Mrs. Maxine Faulk waits for Shannon expecting him to stay on at the Costra Verde hotel to help her in life. He grasp and pull of him into an embrace expresses her wish to believe that she has someone to lean upon and the loneliness of the world cannot make her just collapse with its bites and scratches. Man tries to go past the point of utter despair, with courage as there is no alternative to loneliness. The only end is inevitable death. In spite of the knowledge of the fact that death is the end of life and man cannot live beyond it, man wishes, tries and makes all possible efforts to live. The wish and hope to live never leave man.

Tennessee Williams finds corruption in most of the aspects of the world. But he appears to believe that man can adjust with things in life only if he is prepared to adjust himself with corruption also. In the one act play, entitled Auto-Da-Fe, the postcard that Eloi gets hold of is a symbol of the corruption and mutilation of the world. Crimes exist because of the deep roots of corruption in the world. Williams, however, doesn't go further to find out whether corruption is man-made or is inherent in the structure. Because of his essentially bourgeois outlook, Williams appears to believe that the world itself is malignant and destructive. While man makes all possible attempts to establish contact with the world outside him, he does not have the ability and power to do anything more than enjoying dreams. The world has become so chaotic that man finds no mercy and understanding left for him. In one of Williams' early one act plays, The Lady of Larkspur Lotion, writer asks an agonizing question:

Is there no mercy left in the world anywhere? What has become of passion and
understanding? Where have they all gone to? Where's God? Where's Christ?

This question reverberates throughout Williams' plays. Its tone is soft in The Glass Menagerie, somewhat full of anguish in a Streetcar Named Desire and almost hysterical in Sweet Bird of Youth. Myra and Val Xavier pose the same question in Battle of Angels, and twenty years later it is repeated by Chance Wayne and Alexandra Del Lago in Sweet Bird of Youth. IN the last analysis, Williams sees man as a sensitive romantic flying on the wings of imagination to escape the bite of reality. But he is also conscious of the great power of the ugly but real world. The individual tries to act as a non-conformist but the antagonistic force is always out to destroy him. Man explores beauty in ugliness by establishing a way of life and tradition which he calls culture and civilization. But time evolves another set of values, order and discipline. The once beautiful past becomes anachronistic and ridiculous in the present.

In the end, however man is destroyed because he really has nothing but illusions. The Lauras, Amandas, Blanches and Kilroys possess dreams and illusions which endow life with whatever meaning and definition it has. But none of them possesses the vitality, the strength and the force to preserve his or her hopes against a hostile universe. Their pathetic defiance in their gallantry: but their ineffectuality will never allow them to triumph. It is only in fantasy that they have a measure of victory. They cannot triumph simply because there is nothing to which they may appeal. The universe is fragmented and man is a part of it. Everything born on earth is incomplete and man is also imperfect but he has the capacity to struggle heroically as he want to live at every cost.

References:


