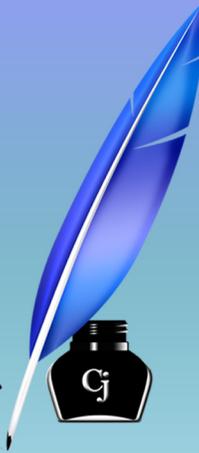


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Language in Tennessee Williams' Plays: A Transformation of Heartfelt Experiences into Artful Experiences

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The lyrical quality of the language radiates the dramatic structure of Tennessee Williams' stage. Throughout his career, he was searching for better and finer "verbal equivalents" for the expressing the inner psyche of his characters. His search compelled him to move away from Ibsenesque realism towards a new dramatic form. Such a process necessarily involved a refining of the stage into what he describes as 'plastic theatre'. Thus, Williams may be said to have "opened up his theatre" by going beyond conventional realism to create a lyrical and poetic theatre. This movement had a due impact on the verbal component in his plays, especially with reference to transforming 'heartfelt experiences' into 'artful experiences'. Language plays a crucial role in such a transformation. To further explore this aspect, 'language' in Williams' plays will be considered from four points of view, which may also be referred to as four ways of realising meaning: Language as Verbal Magic, Language as Character-Building Blocks, Language as Theme Realization, Language as Symbolic Structure. Instances and examples will be drawn from *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *Sweet Bird of Youth*.

Williams virtually began his career as a playwright with *The Glass Menagerie* (1945). Its first stage production had the effect of awakening and bringing new life to the American theatre. Williams' drama became the mirror of a whole generation and its failure of nerve. As a result, he was acclaimed as a trailblazer and a pathfinder both with respect to dramatic form and content.

Like the narrator Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams was nothing short of a stage magician. By poetic drama, he did not imply verse drama alone. The character, plot, situation, setting and language had all to be combined into a harmonious whole to reveal the inner being of his characters. This necessitated a plastic theatre and subtle lyrical qualities of language which necessarily implied the inclusion of the personal element. In subjective drama, where the spotlight is on the inner nature of the character, the audience looks out on the world through the fourth wall, through the illusion-ridden, frustration-driven eyes of Williams' sensitive people. Francis Donahue says in this regard, "His revelation of inner truth, then, is the result of a penetration beneath the surface to reveal aspects of character, emotion, or thought which the realistic theatre, by its nature, disguises" (222).

From Chekhov Williams learnt the importance of bringing out the inner experiences and reactions of his characters, and of creating a mood and an atmosphere. Apparently, the poetic form in which Chekhov reflected his thoughts and feelings made a deep impact on Williams. Indeed, he may have been Williams' forerunner in dramatic expressionism – sound, lighting, and stage effects are used as elements of psychological or thematic expressionism. Where he differed from Chekhov was his ability to depict the clashes of will which were basic to the kind of drama that he was writing. In a sense, he tried to achieve this through his use of language.

Playwrights before Williams have tried to transfer poetic language to theatre. However, in Williams' plays we find the culmination of such attempts – because Williams used the poetry of the theatre to bring out the emotions of the inner self. Rather than being a mere craftsman, he graduated into an artist who took all the features of the theatre – dialogue, character, symbols, scene-settings, music, sound effects, lighting etc – and integrated them into a harmony. Poetic naturalism, hence can be used to describe such theatre of Williams. In such a theatre, 'language' often becomes an inclusive term – to refer not only to verbal speech but symbolical language too. Williams' language speaks louder than words when giving expression to the internal doubts and uncertainties that haunt the self trapped in its private struggle to find a sense of identity.

When we say that Williams liberated the American stage from the constraints of realism, it is to be noted that the point was not to distract the audience from the essential truth of experience, but to provide them with an avenue to penetrate that reality. For this, the new 'plastic' theatre needed to make full use of all the resources available to it – language, symbolism, music, lighting – and bind them into an artistic unity, as conceived by the artist. But, more importantly, by making that reality more intense and symbolic, Williams ensured that it was accessible to his audience.

This does not mean that he did not borrow from his literary and theatrical past. It only means that his drama was so influential and powerful, that it, as good as, remade and reinvented the American stage. By using a poetic language that gives word the form and concretises the abstract, Tennessee Williams liberated the American stage from the constraints of realism.

To give the truth in the pleasant disguise of an illusion, 'the opposite of a stage magician' had to reconstitute heartfelt experiences into artful experiences. To achieve this, the spectator had to be alienated from the false world of appearances and induced to share the discovery or the creation of a world of eternal truth (Esther Merle Jackson 32). This calls for personal lyricism on the part of the dramatist. Williams says in *Person to Person*, "Personal lyricism is the outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitary where each is confined for the duration of his life" (76).

Describing Williams as a "connoisseur of the visual", and a "celebrant of the magical textures of the human body live on the stage", Matthew C. Roudané says, "Williams nonetheless was foremost attached to the word itself. Indeed, of all the creative forms which Williams indulged in – it is his use of language that most animates his stage. Williams celebrates language" (3). What did Williams look for in language? A journal entry made by him throws some light on this question. He writes, "Tony read Thoreau's *Walden* which impresses me enormously, not cold, not Puritan. An Elizabethan richness of language and deep lonely perception. I can use it in a play" (sic) (cited by Lyle Leverich 3).

This entry reveals that Williams rated perception as a significant component in the language of a play. While language retains its essential richness and life, the addition of perception ensures that it works in manifold ways in shaping the larger narrative of the play itself. This can be seen better when language is examined from the following perspectives: Language as Verbal Magic, Language as Character-Building Blocks, Language as Theme Realization, and Language as Symbolic Structure. Such a method is an attempt to understand how language engenders a range of complexities within the framework of Williams' plays. It is from this location that the aspect of poetry enters the dramatic language of Tennessee Williams.

Williams wrote poetry, but he was not a major poet. What is noteworthy is what he brought to the theatre. His drama did not take the verse format of Christopher Fry or T.S. Eliot. Nevertheless, David Mamet chose to describe Williams' drama as "the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language" (cited by Alice Griffin 13). To substantiate such an assessment, one needs to look consider language from the four points of view mentioned above.

1. Language as Verbal Magic:

Subtle lyrical qualities and a speech heightened by figures of speech give the dialogues of Williams a poetic grace. For example, Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie* onomatopoeically describes spinsters as, "...little birdlike creatures without any nest – eating the crust of humility all their life"(140).

In another instance, Williams uses iambic pentameter to give Amanda's lines the natural rhythm of poetry, "Laura, come here and make a wish on the moon,...A little silver slipper of a moon"(167).

Sometimes, we can also see that Williams tries to incorporate the melody of Southern speech into the language of his Southern heroines. The Southern dialect is distinguished by elaborate descriptions and long arias. To a flabbergasted Jim O Connor, Amanda, in *The Glass Menagerie* says:

Well, well well, so this is Mr. O'Connor. Introductions entirely unnecessary. I've heard so much about you from my boy. I finally said to him, Tom – good gracious! Why don't you bring this paragon to supper! I'd like to meet this nice young man from the warehouse! Instead of just hearing you sing his praises so much! I don't know why my son in so stand-offish – that's not Southern behaviour! (179)

In the same play, Amanda's description of that momentous spring stands out for its lyricism. Amanda almost sings her story, using the word 'jonquils' again and again, till it evokes the memories of things past.

A similar pattern can also be observed in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). When Stella asks about the loss of Bella Reve, Blanche DuBois responds:

I, I, I took the blows in my face and body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father!, mother!, Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for funerals Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quite, but deaths – not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go'. (22-23)

The lyricism in these lines arises precisely from the fragmented sentences, punctuated by exclamations which capture the trauma encapsulated within the frame of a funeral.

2. Language as Character-Building Blocks:

Williams sought to find verbal equivalents to the tortured inner selves of his protagonists. Thus, his language is true to both the surface appearances and the inner realities of his characters. His characters reveal themselves as they speak, giving us a glimpse into the

inner emotions, and sometimes, perceptions that dominate their thought patterns. A good example is Amanda's telephonic conversation in which one notes her sense of desperation:

Well, I just now happened to notice that your subscription to the **Companion's** about to expire! Yes, it expires with the next issue honey! – just when that wonderful new serial by Bessie Mae Hopper is getting off to such an exciting start. Oh, honey, it's something that you can't miss! You remember how *Gone with the Wind* took everybody by storm?...Well, this is a book that critics already compare to *Gone with the Wind*. It's the *Gone With the Wind* of the post –World War generation! ... (144)

Jim O' Connor's outburst, "Knowledge – Zzzzzp! Money – Zzzzzp! – Power! That's the cycle democracy is built on!" (195) shows him out as a typically progressive American. In this connection Bigsby remarks:

In *The Glass Menagerie* Williams is careful to distinguish between the constant flow of chatter from Amanda, a neurotic flood of language with which she seeks to still her fears, and the reticence and finally the silence of her daughter. The gentleman caller, who disappoints Laura's hope of another life is learning the art of public speaking, hoping that this will open up a clearer path to power. He believes that language will give him control over a life that otherwise seems to be slipping away from him. (42)

Similarly, Blanche's words in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, offer us a 'full-view' of what went wrong with her life, and what will be her fate, though she appears to be doing something as banal as plucking a grape, an act, which by extension, becomes imbued with meaning.

You know what I shall die of? (she plucks a grape) I shall die of eating an unwashed grape one day out on the ocean...And I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a lean white sack and dropped overboard – at noon – in the blaze of summer – and into an ocean as blue as (chimes again) my first lover's eyes.(116)

The morbid eloquence of William's decadent artists, with their spirit of resignation is best exemplified by Princess Alexandra Cosmonopolis in *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959):

There's nowhere else to retire to when you retire from an art, because, believe it or not, I really was once an artist. So I retired to the moon, but the atmosphere of the moon doesn't have any oxygen in it. I began to feel breathless in that withered, withering country, of time coming after time not meant to come after. (133)

Some of Williams' most memorable character delineations have been in verbal confrontations. For example in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), the following exchange sets out the various critical aspects of Bricks' relationship with Margaret. His responses to Margaret are not only brief, but also reveal a fundamental lack of connection between both of them. Hence, they often emerge as wry rejoinders.

BRICK: I'm not in the movies.

MARGARET: No, and you don't take dope. Otherwise you're a perfect candidate for Rainbow Hill, Baby, and that's where they aim to ship you--over my dead body! Yep, over my dead body they'll ship you there, but nothing would please them better. Then Brother Man could get a-hold of the purse strings and dole out remittances to us, maybe get power-of-attorney and sign checks for us and cut off our credit wherever, whenever he wanted! Son-of-a-bitch!--How'd you like that, Baby?--Well, you've been

doin' just about ev'rything in your power to bring it about, you've just been doin' ev'rything you can think of to aid and abet them in this scheme of theirs! Quittin' work, devoting yourself to the occupation of drinkin'!--Breakin' your ankle last night on the high school athletic field--doin' what? Jumpin' hurdles? At two or three in the morning? Just fantastic! Got in the paper. Clarksdale Register carried a nice little item about it, human interest story about a well-known former athlete stagin' a one-man track meet on the Glorious Hill High School athletic field last night, but was slightly out of condition and didn't clear the first hurdle! Brother Man Gooper claims he exercised his influence t' keep it from goin' out over AP or UP or every goddam' P'. But, Brick? You still have one big advantage!

During the above swift flood of words, Brick has reclined with contrapuntal leisure on the snowy surface of the bed and has rolled over carefully on his side or belly.

BRICK [wryly]: Did you say something, Maggie? (1193)

The sense of disconnect between Margaret and Brick obvious in the last two lines. He has been listening to her, but not paying attention. Hence, 'Did you say something, Maggie?' within this context, speaks volumes about a fundamental lack of harmony between Brick and Margaret. However, in confrontation with Big Daddy, his speeches become progressively longer. Moreover, he seems to be in connection with Big Daddy, though the strain of their conversations increasingly border on the confessional and revelation.

3. Language as Theme Realization:

Williams often provides a universal perspective of his themes through his main characters. When they voice the playwrights' concerns, they become more convincing and persuasive. Amanda laments the decay of the old Southern aristocracy in *The Glass Menagerie* in the following manner, "Well, in the South we had so many servants. Gone, gone, gone. All vestiges of gracious living! Gone completely! I wasn't prepared for what the future brought me" (180).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche prefers romantic illusions to gross reality. She says, "I'll tell you, what I want. Magic! Yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be the truth" (100). While she seems to be reminding us of the narrator Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, she makes her preference for romantic illusions pretty obvious. However, in adherence to the implication of the term, her 'illusions' are restricted to the realm of 'romantic' thereby engendering the frustration that seems to overwhelm her existence.

In a *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the focus of the playwright is on a group of individuals caught in a web of 'mendacity' with Brick's sexual maladjustment at the centre. All of them are sustained by lies as they stake their claims for Big Daddy's wealth. Within this context, Maggie proclaims her agenda when she says, "life has got to be allowed to continue even after the dream of life is – all over..." (1213). Hence on one hand, while Maggie advocates destruction and creation of illusions engendering a fair amount of deviousness, Brick Pollitt becomes the speaker for the narrator when he shares his concerns on mendacity and seeks a way out of that world. He says, "Mendacity is a system we live in. Liquor is one way out and 'death' the other" (1250).

4. Language as Symbolic Structure:

The language used by the characters has a deeper significance as well. It renders a symbolic meaning. The concrete imagery used in the language contributes to the symbolism of the play. For example, in *Streetcar* Blanche tells Stella:

Blanche: What you are talking about is brutal desire – just – Desire! – the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...

Stella: Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?

Blanche: It brought me here – Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be. (58)

On a closer reading we can discern Blanche wilfully complicating the symbolic implications of street car with the notions such as desire, dreams and illusions. Hence, Stella's question functions on various levels, both metaphorically and literally and interestingly, Blanche's response is consistent for all of them. Such an operation of language opens up the avenue for superadding the lyric component in the ordering of reality, for which Tennessee Williams occupies a distinguished position. This makes his drama a highly selective art, aspiring to the state of poetry. Such a metamorphosis of experiences gives his work a distinctive character.

According to Williams, a symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose – which is, to say a thing more directly, simply and beautifully than it could have been said in words. He writes in the foreword to *Camino Real*, "Symbols when used respectfully are the purest language of plays" (66). The question that naturally arises is that in a public art like drama, enacted before a live audience, why should symbols be used? Secondly, what would be the function of such symbols within such a context?

In the poetic approach to theatre, an attempt has to be made to represent the spiritual and emotional 'inner' world of the characters. For this, Williams worked towards a metaphorical transformation of a subjective vision. In order to achieve this, the subjective vision had to be objectified into concrete symbols. This happens sometimes when the symbols provide a thematic direction to the audience. For example, the card game in *Streetcar* is used as a symbol of fate and of the skillful player's ability to make its decree perform in his own favour, at the expense of his opponent's misfortune, incompetence and horror of the game itself. In a way, this suggests the confrontation between Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois.

Symbols in Williams' plays also function as the objective correlative of the characters' subjective worlds. In this category, the constructs or props of the stage set, the costumes, lighting etc. function as objective correlatives. Laura's otherworldliness in *The Glass Menagerie* is suggested by the tiny glass figurines which, like Laura's psychic state, are frozen in time and development. In *The Night of the Iguana*, Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon's attempt to return to infantile innocence is objectified by a womb-like canvas hammock. Similarly, in *Streetcar*, Blanche DuBois' romantic illusions are suggested by the soft glow from a rose-coloured Chinese paper lantern. In *Cat*, Brick's broken ankle is the physical correlative of his psychological fragmentation. The crutch emerges as the objective correlative of his sexual, emotional and moral paralysis.

Light imagery also sets up interesting symbolic overtones. For example, in *The Glass Menagerie*, light is used to suggest Laura's essential nature. Williams emphasizes in the production notes that the light upon Laura should be distinct from that on others, having a pristine peculiar quality such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas. Similarly, light imagery is also used to convey the essential nature of Blanche DuBois in *Streetcar*. The naked light suggests the crude reality of her life which she tries to disguise by using a paper shade. Mitch tearing the paper lantern off the light bulb to see Blanche in a clearer light, symbolically suggests that she is being stripped of her illusions.

Williams also uses mythical imagery to divest the characters of their mythical stature. In this connection, Judith J. Thomson says, "In their movement from inflation to debasement, from illusion to reality, the protagonists of these plays recapitulate the archetypal patterns of a fall, emerging finally as representatives of a modern anti-heroic humanity" (3). We can see such a trope in operation in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* when Margaret is elevated to the Roman Goddess Diana suggested by the Diana trophy (1201). Through association, it engenders the idea that her conception of a child will have to be immaculate in nature. However, during the course of the play, she is, rather ironically, reduced to the status of a 'cat in heat' (1208). Chance Wayne in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, is associated with the Roman God Adonis, and the fairy-tale hero of *Jack and the Beanstalk*. Elysian Fields in *Streetcar* is a modern existential vision of the world. The mythic prototype is described by Virgil in Book VI of *The Aeneid* as the joyful dwelling of the blessed or the happy dead. Judith Thompson views that it is an appropriate place of dwelling for Stella, Stanley, Eunice and the other poker players, the place is indeed noisy, active and filled with macho power. It is veritably not the ethereal heaven that it is often made out to be. Through irony, the myth is divested of its more salubrious import. Further, we can also discern a fundamental conflict being played out within the persona of Blanche DuBois. While she is often associated in the text with 'moth' and 'butterfly'; the traditional symbols connected with the mythical psyche or soul, she is also associated with 'wild cat' and 'tiger', which are symbolic of the manifestations of the body's fundamental and baser instincts. Hence, it is possible to trace the symbolic playing out of the conflict between the flesh and spirit.

We can also see that Williams sometimes uses religious symbolism to suggest the tension between the ideal and the real. In *The Glass Menagerie*, Amanda's disappointment with Laura's failure to fulfil her expectations at the Rubicam's Business School suggests the analogy of the picture of Jesus' mother with her 'martyred look' albeit within an ironical frame of reference. Further, Jim O' Connor's arrival on a Friday has religious overtones for Amanda. Very often in the play, Laura evokes the picture of a saint, nun or a child of God. The accidental breaking of the unicorn by Jim enables Laura to encounter the world of reality, just like the tearing away of the paper shade represents a tearing away of Blanche Dubois' illusions.

Conclusion:

Language, in general, implies words – words that convey a fixed or a connotative meaning. This hold true for prose. However, language on stage means something contrary, as far as the plays of Tennessee Williams are concerned. It was language with heightened lyricism to convey the 'fluidity' of human experience. Poetry in his theatre doesn't have to be, or is mostly not restricted to words. While colloquial speech sometimes emerges as poetic, the implication of the term 'plastic theatre' ensure that the playwright opens the avenue for converting an artful experience on stage into a heartfelt experience through the metaphor of language.

The implication of such an aspect of 'personal lyricism' is that poetic imagination is often used to capture the reality. Within such a 'plastic' and 'visual' frame of reference, language performs a significant role. On an examination of language from the four perspectives mentioned above, we find that meaning often emerges in exhibition of the inner selves of his characters. Naturally Williams reinforced his language by refining the 'plastic theatre' towards this end. His achievement has been to create a lyric drama and a poetic theatre where heartfelt experiences are transformed into artful experiences.

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