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Theoharis Theoharis Constantine



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The kindness of strangers : savage rescue in Tennessee Williams' The roman spring of mrs. Stone

Theoharis Theoharis Constantine

- 1 The exquisite risk in erotic life, the frightened hope that ecstatic touch might bring about spiritual and emotional salvation, is Tennessee Williams' constant theme. His people want the body's love to be a mysterious and reliable joy which holds and releases two souls. Pursuing this indwelling, his characters normally wreck the world around them, and often themselves. The most famous of Williams' ruined ecstasies, of course, is Blanche Dubois, whose exit line in *A Streetcar Named Desire* has become the credo of all the shattered. While she is being escorted by a merciful psychiatrist to a state sanatorium, out of the house where her sister's husband has taunted, tormented, and finally devoured her frightened hope, Blanche, dementedly seductive, tells this latest man on her arm: "Whoever you are--I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." A desperately strategic compliment, an abject boast, an instruction that insanely makes powerlessness hauteur, Blanche's remark condenses and casts away the paradoxes of eros that have occupied great artists and thinkers from Sappho and Plato forward. The classical element here is the collision of indifference, constancy, accident, foreignness, intimacy, and need in sexual love, all of them indefatigable. To speak philosophically, her line points to the paradox that similarity and difference always involve each other, that being at home and being a stranger, to speak more familiarly, come together. When a writer places his characters in a foreign country, especially when the story is a romance, this mysterious twinning and reversal of the known and unknown governs the work. *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened, under the direction of Elia Kazan, in New York in 1947. Three years later, Williams published *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*. In that work, his only novella, Williams sets the narrative of romantic love's risks in elegant, witty conceptual assessments of nature, civilization, and art, and in humanely sage observations of the psychology of aging. Mrs. Stone depends on the kindness of strangers for love, but, unlike Blanche, she

decides to do so. Erotic paradoxes end in savage rescue for her, in Dionysian resurgence that her name and the title's season announce.

- 2 The novella is set in Rome. The time is roughly contemporary with the publication date, 1950, soon but not immediately after the Second World War. Pasolini's Rome, where sexual exploitation dramatizes the economic warfare of capitalism, plays into Williams' depiction of the city's sexual market structured by class distinctions, and bisexual and same--sex exchanges, as well as the standard pairing of men and women. The barbarism of victorious Americans in indifferently vanquished Rome also appears in the story, but for the most part Williams makes these homages to his Italian artistic counterpart in sexual offensiveness and moral critique background to his primary concern. Mrs. Stone passes through existential crisis to authenticity by paying men for sex. One is a gigolo, one is a starving street urchin, and in the passage from the first to the second, Williams includes Pasolini's world only to go beyond it into a poignant tenderness that recalls Cavafy's world of destitute deliverance through innocently criminal surrender.
- 3 Three sections present this passage, all governed by natural symbols: Part One, "A Cold Sun," Part Two, "Island,Island," and Part Three, "The Drift." There is much more summary than scene in the work, with an omniscient narrator reliably analyzing Mrs. Stone's immediate past in the first section, the more distant past of her marriage in the second, and the remote past of her childhood in the third. In all three sections her career as an actress comes under scrutiny as she tries to discover some relation between what Williams calls "the anomalous sequel" of her retirement in Rome after the death of her husband and her previous life. "There were all the various integers and symbols of the long equation, arranged in their temporal sequence across the page, but the equation halted without a summation. To say it halted was, of course, not exact. It was, in a way, still continuing" (RS, 70). The continuity happens in surface worldly events which make up the plot and which interrupt and evoke the reminiscent summary.
- 4 Section one opens on the Spanish steps at the first twilight of a late March day, where the poor young man who will eventually restore Mrs. Stone turns down a sexual proposition from a male tourist to wait for the grand American lady he can see on the terrace of the villa right above him. The scene then shifts to that terrace where Miss Bishop, a journalist, and college roommate whose lesbian attentions Mrs. Stone unwillingly endured once, berates the actress for leaving the stage and coming to Rome to scandalously amuse herself in escapist sexual dalliances. The next scene takes place in April, in a barber-shop, where Paolo, the professional escort whose attentions to Mrs. Stone occupy most of the novella, is seen in vaguely homoerotic camaraderie with Renato, an admiring sidekick, part barber, part page. Mrs. Stone passes the salon, Paolo admires and ridicules her. She hears the laughter, and passes on to window shop. Behind her is the boy from the first scene, who follows her, stops, and urinates close to her in the street, an offense which causes her to run into a nearby hotel, and to remember that she has seen this boy, who always seems to be giving her a silent signal, before. The scene then shifts to a luncheon where Paolo's manager, an aged Contessa, discouraged that Paolo hasn't brought enough money back to her from the American actress, in false friendship narrates for Mrs. Stone Paolo's career as a gigolo to separate the two, and so cut her losses. The Contessa has also previously urged Paolo to leave the insufficiently profitable arrangement. Neither he nor Mrs. Stone consent to be so maneuvered. Later that evening Paolo and Mrs. Stone consummate what till then had been sexless if not chaste acquaintance. The last scene takes place in May. By now Paolo and Mrs. Stone have

established constant sexual contact. In the closing scene they quarrel about Americans' callous indifference to Italian suffering and culture, and Paolo endangers their affair by telling Mrs. Stone she was ridiculous to ask if he loved her. He makes it up to her thinly, as she weeps, telling him her tears are happy relief, but knowing privately that they express some more complex emotion.

- 5 The complex emotion that Mrs. Stone dimly approaches in her weeping over love proffered and withheld at once indicates and conceals the existential crisis examined in the summary of this section and the others. The plot and analysis presenting Mrs. Stone both display classically dramatic structure: an unknown purpose, disguised as a deliberate project, gradually wrecks the project and so transforms the agent. The classical dramatic pedigree suits both the Roman setting and Mrs. Stone's professional life and the disaster that ended it. She left the stage after her advanced age, hidden by her vanity and artistic ruses, made a fiasco of her performance as Shakespeare's youngest heroine, Juliet. Ironies abound in this reversal. It is sufficient here to note the most obvious one: failure to enact passion on the stage brings a disastrously successful passion into her life.
- 6 When Mrs. Stone, and Williams, try to find the through line of her life they enter an ambiguous psychic domain where a struggle to the death is being carried out between idea and fact, convention and truth, fantasy and feeling. The battle ground is sexual life, its resurgence, its implacable demands, what Williams names "A Cold Sun." Mrs. Stone feels herself adrift after leaving the stage, and looks to the affectionate liaison with Paolo for creaturely gratification, for a natural, and therefore reliable stay against the unnerving incoherence of living as a former person in a foreign city. Deciding to accept Paolo sexually

"...Mrs. Stone could not deny to herself what she felt in her body now, for the first time, under the moon of pause which should have given immunity to such feeling but seemed, instead to have surrendered her to it. She felt incontinent longings, and while they repelled her, they gave her a sharply immediate sense of being. If the elevator had descended with the boy, Mrs. Stone would have slipped back into the desolate drift, the indiscriminate flooding, the undistinguished washing along and away of myriad objects in the current of time, jarring together one moment and then swept apart in a steady, formless welter, meaning less than a succession of images in a dream. This suspension was opposed to the drift(RS, 46).

- 7 Comparing her post--menopausal longings to her youthful ones, she realizes that fear of pregnancy had inhibited her sexual surrender in marriage. She decides to take Paolo with the following reasoning: "It had been the secret dread in her, the unconscious will *not* to bear. That dread was now withdrawn. It had gone with the withdrawing tide of fertility, and now there was only the motionless lake and the untroubled moon resting on it, passionless as the acceptance of a shrewd proposition on terms that suited both parties" (RS, 46-7).
- 8 It turns out that the dread has not withdrawn entirely with the tide of fertility, that her heart is no cold moon, and that the motionless lake of physical longing it rules cannot be charted by the shrewd proposition with Paolo. The matronly permission she gives desire when she accepts him approaches and masks the unruly appetitiveness of sexual feeling, whatever the reproductive possibility of such feeling might be. Mrs. Stone's real dread is an acknowledging denial of emotional surrender to ecstatic touch, a hidden, thrilling terror of having nothing and everything to lose. It is this dread she finally faces with the poor boy from the Spanish steps. The static image of the moon on a lake holds that fear, which he repeatedly forces on her, at bay. Paolo's cold attention eventually brings that

fearful boy, whose more authentic need has made him more coarsely resourceful than the pampered escort, directly to her.

- 9 Part Two, "Island, Island," is a sustained comparison of Karen Stone's life with Paolo to her life with her husband, Tom Stone. The narrative analogy propels her further into the natural deliverance which her moon compromise begins, revealing richer complexities in the fear of fertility than she had first understood. There is only one event in Part Two. Mrs. Stone takes Paolo to a tailor, where he gets measured for a "dove flannel" suit. While he preens over the cloth and the ministrations of the tailor, the rival boy comes to the window of the shop and quickly shows Mrs. Stone what he has and does not have under the overcoat covering him in the warm Roman spring. Ashamed to tell the alarming incident to Paolo, she explains the cry of fear the boy provoked as anxiety to keep a dinner appointment, and hurries Paolo hurry away from his mirrors.
- 10 Tom Stone, Paolo, the boy, and Mrs. Stone's sexual contact with all three, converge on the "dove flannel." Three years before she had brought her husband to the same shop where he was fitted for a suit of the very same cloth. He died in that suit, of the heart ailment that plagued their final travelling year together, in a plane flying over the Greek islands to Athens. The section is entitled with the words Mrs. Stone screamed out to the pilot when she knew Tom was dead, "Island, Island," words condensing a vain request she had made to land on one of the islands they were passing over when she first saw Tom was in danger. With imperfect English a stewardess and co-pilot had tried then to calm her: "'Madam' they said to her gently, 'there is no possible landing on that island'" (RS,69).
- 11 Paolo's request that she touch the cloth, which she rejects with the remark "No...I know how it feels", brings the death scene back to Karen (RS, 66). And it also brings back the heart's feeling that had hidden in and finally overtaken her marriage. Tom Stone was devotional but inept sexually; she was cold to the point of aversion. Early in the marriage he weeps over the impasse, and the confessed weakness unites them. "But the pathos had succeeded where the desire had not. She had taken him into her arms with a sudden tenderness and the marriage had then suddenly been set right or at least had been salvaged. Through his inadequacy Mr. Stone had allowed them both to discover what both really wanted, she an adult child and he a living and young and adorable mother" (RS, 62).
- 12 The compromise worked while professional life did, but when that life failed, the classically Freudian surrogacy no longer bound but instead separated them.

The marriage of the Stones was haunted by a mysterious loneliness. All substitute relationships are haunted by something like that. The desiring fingers enclose a phantom object, the hungering lips are pressed to a ghostly mouth. The mother lies in the grave and the child is not born, but in the very act of substitution there is a particular tenderness of pathos. Perhaps if they had not interrupted the pattern of their career-existence in New York, that pathos would have remained something on the very margin of consciousness, amorphous as some child she had never borne, but with the interruption of pattern that came with the long sea voyage, the dissociation from all of the protective distractions of theatres and offices and society, that haunting insufficiency, that loneliness, became as visible as breath that turns to vapor. It became a gray mist floating between them through which they exchanged their eagerly denying smiles at each other and their reassuring light speeches (RS, 65).

- 13 The affair, which Mrs. Stone entered to move past the loneliness of having a child-husband, has given her a child-lover. While sex has become primary, the libidiously

manly Paolo has merely further corrupted the tenderness in Mrs. Stone's habit of erotic substitution. He has turned that haunted yearning into a resource for himself, into a weak parent's desperation to elicit love by indulging every extravagance by which narcissism engorges the monstrous egotism of a loveless child. To drive the point home, Williams has the affair collapse when Paolo flirts salaciously with a younger woman at the table where he and Mrs. Stone are dining. Clearly, the second substitute child will not do. And the third makes his boldest entrance exactly when the sartorial connection between the first two happens. This boy has continuously pitted pure carnality against Mrs. Stone's defensive performance of confused maternal love. While his offer is in its way as destitute as Tom's and Paolo's, the boy displays a Pan-like, innocent ferocity utterly absent in Tom, and present in Paolo only as material and cultural vanity. That difference emerges clearly in the tailor shop scene, and finally overtakes the novella, and Mrs. Stone, in the last section.

- 14 In that section, entitled "The Drift," Williams gathers the symbolic regret of "there is no landing on that island" into repeated metaphoric analysis of Mrs. Stone's aimlessness and desire for stability as circular movement around an empty center. In this last part of the story he circles back first to Karen's childhood, which emerges as a lonely, authority-pleasing time spent in boarding school after her parents divorced. Shunned by her peers for imitating rather than being a child, Karen turns tomboy, excelling at the forbidden roughhouse game called "King of the Mountain," a contest to keep rivals off the height of a terraced lawn. The mystery of her beauty, and the mysterious urge she had to dominate in the game, combined in her career to make her a technically expert but hollow performer. When her beauty faltered with age, the vacancy eventually outstripped the ruses she spun around it. Hence the Juliet fiasco.

- 15 Spinning round the void governed Karen's worldly as well as artistic life. The narrator observes :

Mrs. Stone knew of that ritual. She took part in it herself. She went to the parties; she pursued the little diversions. She moved in the great, empty circle. But Mrs. Stone glanced inward from the peripheries of that circle and saw the void enclosed there. She saw the emptiness. She knew that it was empty. But Mrs. Stone was always a busy woman. She had been continually occupied with more things than a single existence seemed sufficient to hold, and for that reason, the way that centrifugal force prevents a whirling object from falling inward from its orbit, Mrs. Stone was removed for a long time from the void she circled (RS, 81).

- 16 There is no landing from that orbit because there is no island.
- 17 The next time Williams uses the physics image he turns it cosmological, in a secular variation of the traditional mystic insight that macro and microcosms converge in the individual soul. Recalling Mrs. Stone's arrival in Rome, Williams writes :

She knew in her heart that she was turning boldly inward from the now slackened orbit, turning inward and beginning, now, to enter the space enclosed by the path of passionless flight. She knew it in her heart without consciously knowing it. And being a person of remarkable audacity, she moved inward with her violet eyes wide open, asking herself, in her heart, what would she find as she moved? Was it simply a void, or did it contain some immaterial force that still might save as well as it might destroy her" (RS, 81)?

- 18 When, in an episode immediately following these questions, Mrs. Stone meets an old member of the "inner circle," she comes very close to an answer. She has trouble recognizing the former intimate, and to avoid further contact with the woman confesses,

falsely, that she has cancer of the womb which spread after that organ was removed. The lie fills her with a joy and freedom akin to the exultation of mastering a difficult part on stage. Scrutinizing the improvised social evasion soon after, as her driver drives her round and round in the Villa Borghese, "Mrs. Stone had a sense of arrival. This was the center. This was what the frantic circles surrounded. *Here was the void...*" (RS, 83).

- 19 What has she found there? That the void regenerates as well as annihilates. And her regeneration? Discovering the urge to live for herself. She protects and satisfies that urge with the same ironic devices Joyce's Stephen Dedalus used to make self-realization the sacramental work of modern artists: silence, exile, and cunning. Unlike Dedalus, Mrs. Stone cunningly removes herself from threatening worldliness with outright fraud. But that evasion leads her to the redeeming reality that finally centers her drifting. At this point the reader knows more than Mrs. Stone does about the truth hidden in that lie about her womb. Mysteriously, the vigor of advancing life has preserved Mrs. Stone by making her barren. The cancer, which is real enough, spreads outside her, in the cannibalistic lover-son Paolo. She can still give birth to herself; Paolo's rival persistently presents himself to her, after all, as the inseminating child. What Mrs. Stone knows of all this is that she can now create herself, if not stage characters with tragic histrionics. In the closing scenes of the novella, Williams forces Mrs. Stone to pass through a violent self-creation as flamboyant and more dangerous than anything the stage could offer. Her spring becomes pagan, classically Roman then, in the new life offered by the boy, who is Plato's idea of eros incarnate: poverty and resourcefulness.
- 20 On the afternoon his dove-flannel suit is delivered, Paolo and Mrs. Stone quarrel. He asks her who the boy, standing below them on the terrace, is, and why he follows her. When Mrs. Stone refuses to look down to see the figure whose professional taint Paolo fears, he tells her obliquely why the boy is there and why he endangers them both. "'The trouble,' Paolo said darkly, 'is that you have made a spectacle of yourself'" (RS, 89)! He then mocks her attempts to restore fading beauty by dressing well, and tells her the set they move in ridicules her desperate preening. The ridicule has recently turned dangerous, he complains, compelling him to challenge a mocker, who conveniently left Rome before the duel. Paolo's braggadocio turns dire when he tells her she may very well eventually end up murdered by some escort less courteous than him. She responds that the early death would be a convenience. Williams ends the quarrel with a detail that says everything about their contact. To keep the job he's just endangered, Paolo apologetically offers himself to Mrs. Stone, but insists on taking off his grandmother's locket somewhere in the middle of the event. She preserves her dignity by not asserting it here, and suffers the offense silently.
- 21 That evening Paolo escalates the insult, seducing a young woman sitting at the table where he's dining with Mrs. Stone. When she runs out into the street she finds the boy waiting for her, and shows him her face, asking him why, seeing her failing beauty, he still pursues her. The boy retreats, waiting for Mrs. Stone to follow, and Paolo comes out asking why she left the table. She asks him to call her car. Riding in the Villa Borghese, Karen remembers that there are people waiting at her apartment to see the films they've taken of their Roman adventures together, and they turn home. She tries to restore her dignity by telling Paolo she is not a desperate, foolish woman, but a celebrity still appearing in fashion magazines. He counters that his last consort appeared in more advertisements in one month than she did in a year. When they finally reach her palazzo

Mrs. Stone coolly instructs Paolo that love across an age barrier calls for a terrifying loss of dignity.

- 22 The assembled guests include the Contessa, who, drinking on an empty stomach, turns the conversation to that ridicule of Mrs. Stone Paolo complained of earlier. Mrs. Stone and Paolo overhear the conversation from the bedroom, and enter the room, where Paolo seduces an American film actress and where Mrs. Stone courteously sees that the Contessa's glass is refilled. The films are shown, and Mrs. Stone calls Paolo to the terrace, where they argue, and where he breaks off the liaison, after warning her to leave Rome, against whose three thousand year antiquity, her fifty year old decrepitude cannot compete. The insult unhinges Mrs. Stone, who rushes into the darkened apartment, weeping and screaming at the guests. Paolo runs in, strikes her, and the debacle slowly closes with the drunken Contessa rising and falling with her canes in a vain struggle to leave.
- 23 Williams begins the last scene with Mrs. Stone alone, saying to herself "I am drifting, drifting," (RS, 108). As she walks through her empty rooms she feels everything--time, sleep, the sky, being itself--drifting. Everything, that is, except the boy, whom she sees in exactly the place where Paolo noticed him earlier that day, beneath the Egyptian obelisk at the Spanish steps. She looks at her bed and sees a solitude of drifting desolation; she goes to the bathroom, and carries back some water to the bedroom, which is still drifting in vacancy. Forbidding the vast nullity to overtake her, Mrs. Stone goes to the balustrade of the terrace and tosses her keys in a handkerchief down to the boy, who comes into the palazzo. And the story ends. "Mrs. Stone looked up at the sky which gave her the impression of having suddenly paused. She smiled to herself, and whispered, *Look! I've stopped the drift* (RS, 111)!
- 24 From the worldly point of view, this is Mrs. Stone's ruin. There can be no going back to Roman society after this night, and certainly no appearing there with this boy. But who can take the worldly view of Mrs. Stone at the end of this story? Pan savages cultural identity by forcing it to yield to the rite of spring, in which he appears as an implacable but redeeming celebrant of creaturely being. And Mrs. Stone who was so frightened of him for months, now smiles at his approach. That touching view of the paused sky signals clearly that nature mysteriously governs this choice, graciously framing it as a small miracle of renewal. Williams recalls an earlier image for Mrs. Stone's desire here, that of the moon over a passionless lake, which she first used to envision her relation to Paolo. He's changed it considerably though. Now the whiteness appears in the beckoning and then falling handkerchief, and, instead of coldly governing passionless tides, the color which is no color interrupts "the awful vacancy," sends down keys for entry to it. Self-creation is natural yielding to desire here, not social bargaining that turns eros into haggling vanity. The ghost of another, older Shakespearian heroine floats through this Roman story with the mention of that Egyptian obelisk. While Juliet was her undoing, Cleopatra proves to be Mrs. Stone's delivering role. And she doesn't die when she takes a phallic babe to her breast. She lives, for the very first time.

RÉSUMÉS

Dans la longue nouvelle "Le Printemps romain de Mrs Stone", Williams présente l'éveil tardif à la vie d'une actrice américaine qui vit loin de chez elle. A travers des stratégies narratives qui engagent l'ambiguïté, des modes de construction de personnages fondés sur le paradoxe, l'auteur fait traverser à son héroïne deux amours sacrificielles : en passant d'un ami entretenu attiré à un jeune garçon qui se prostitue dans la rue, Mrs Stone laisse derrière elle les conventions d'une vie élégamment décadente pour pénétrer dans le violent univers du paganisme que le titre de la nouvelle semble suggérer. Sa délivrance est, certes, crue, teintée de barbarie. Cette lecture psychanalytique de l'identité sexuelle du personnage est fondée sur la conception classique de la représentation du désir.

AUTEURS

THEOHARIS THEOHARIS CONSTANTINE

enseigne la littérature anglaise et comparée à l'Université de Harvard et est le directeur et rédacteur en chef du Boston Book Review. Il est l'auteur de *Joyce's Ulysses: An Anatomy of the Soul*, University of North Carolina Press, 1988, *Ibsen's Drama: Right Action and Tragic Joy*, St. Martin's Press, 1996, et de nombreux articles. Actuellement, il travaille sur une nouvelle traduction anglaise des poèmes de Constantin Kavafy.