

Myth on Modern American Stage: The Case of Tennessee Williams' Plays

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Abstract: The present paper examines the use of myth in modern American drama mainly in a sample of American playwright Tennessee Williams' plays in accordance with the usual nature of studies on Greek classical tradition. The main focus will be on the relationship between myth and literature. We shall attempt to show how Tennessee Williams, in search of a modern myth, returns to the ancient sources of drama by adopting some Greek and other myths in his effort to confront the crisis of modern civilization and to resolve the dilemmas of twentieth century man. The task is to demonstrate that the ritual legends of the ancient peoples can be considered Williams' prime source of inspiration for the portrayal of man's metamorphosis in modern America.

Key Words: Myth, Modern American Theatre, Literature and Ritualization.

Tennessee Williams is recognized as one of the foremost playwrights to have emerged in the American theatre in the twentieth century. He was part of the rich tradition of the old South and one of the most prolific American literary figures. Williams' 'mythicization' of themes and stage 'ritualization' demonstrates his belief in the Shakespearian perception of the 'world as a stage', where universal truths could be revealed. The questions we are raising are: first, does Tennessee Williams use myth consciously as a dramatic device? Second, is Williams aware of the psychological aspects of myth?

Tennessee Williams' conscious use of myth as a dramatic device is not difficult to establish. The playwright set the pattern with his first published short story in 1928. Based on a passage from 'Herodotus' the story opens with the pagan priests of the city casting themselves against the stones of the pavement in an act of expiation for a great sacrilege which had been committed. They are the forerunners of the sacrificial Christ figures and vegetation gods of the later stories, plays, and poems the mythic figures planted prominently throughout Williams' work. There is the Christ myth in *Orpheus Descending*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*; there is the biblical Lot in *Kingdom of Earth*; there is the phoenix central to *Camino Real* and *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, as well as *I Rise in Flame* Cried the

Phoenix. Additional mythic figures or derivatives are used substantially and obviously throughout most of his plays. A cursory glance will produce a substantial list Dionysus, Apollo, Prometheus, Bacchus, Aphrodite Orpheus, the Elysian Fields; St. Paul, St. Sebastian, St. Valentine, and innumerable variations of Mary and Christ, together with chalices lyres, crucifixes, statues of stone angels and other mythic artifacts. With such evidence there is little need to point to Williams' acknowledged wide reading in his grandfather's classical library, to his exposure to Christian myth through his grandfather's Episcopalian ministry and his brother's Roman Catholic crusading, or to his semester's study of Greek at Washington University. They do however, further attest Williams' knowledge (be it shallow or profound) of particular myths and of certain major mythic symbols which can be employed for literal purposes like plot and structure.

Williams' awareness of the psychological aspects of myth is likewise clear. If myth is the "primordial language" of the unconscious mind of universal man, Williams has certainly had sufficient occasion to assimilate these images, either directly from the psychoanalysts themselves or indirectly from literary influences rich in psychological symbols such as Rilke, Rimbaud, Lawrence, and Proust. His year of psychoanalysis with Dr. Lawrence Kubie, begun in the spring of 1957 also encouraged him to read widely in related subjects and increased his familiarity with psychological symbolism and its meaning.

Myth and ritual criticism has concerned itself with the examination of the feasibility of using myth and ritual as dramatic devices. While some like James Frazer explain it as historical diffusion, others like Gustav Criticism like John B. Vickery's 1966 collection of essays *Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice* is essentially an updating of the Harrison-Cornford-Murray anthropological school. Jung through his archetypes explains it as "the essential similarity of the human mind everywhere."¹

This criticism has offered valuable insights into the literature particularly the drama, of the past and of the present. But when we begin to consider the number of playwrights who consciously set out to use myth as an artistic device, we begin to realize that yet another approach to these authors is necessary. It is not enough merely to recognize the patterns of myth informing the various works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, Sartre, Ionesco, Strindberg

Ibsen, Eliot, O'Neill, and Williams. The patterns, the ritual rhythms are obvious; what must be examined now are the uses to which these mythic elements are borrowed. This is to recognize that a conscious use of myth exists and that, if we are to understand the dramatic impulse fully, we must understand one of the theatre's major devices and the employment of that device, the device of myth.

To date, there has been significant advance in this direction. In 1963 Richmond Hathorn examined handful of major tragedies primarily Greek tracing them to their mythic sources and showing how their adaptations of particular myths were related to primal or archetypal patterns of fertility gods and goddesses, sacrifice and rebirth, and how they were related to the total meaning, the "mystery" which the play expressed. Three years later Nelvin Vos published a study of comedy in which he compares the structure of comedy to the sacrifice- rebirth structure of Christianity, but he neither considers it as a conscious structural device nor evaluates its effectiveness. In more recent years, there has been a successive production of three book length studies of myth in drama: Hugh Dickinson's *Myth on the Modern Stage*, Angela Belli's *Ancient Greek Myths and Modern Drama: a Study in Continuity*, and Thomas Porter's *Myth and Modern American Drama*.

For Dickinson, a significant use of myth consists primarily of the dramatist's accuracy and consistency in adhering to the plot of the Greek myth². For Belli, myth is a source solely of ideas social political, psychological, religious, and philosophical to be imposed directly and generally superficially, on the play. And for Porter, the term "myth" is used so loosely that it can refer to any cultural milieu influencing the action thus Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, for him, a "mythic" play because it deals with the "Southern plantation myth" or the "death of a myth".

In Dickinson's book, perhaps the most interesting and certainly the most subjective of the three critic, there is, as Ruby Cohn points out in the December, 1969 issue of *Modern Drama*, "scant mention of the stage," and, as Cohn also points out, both Angela Belli and Professor Dickinson "view modern mythic drama as part of a French cultural empire into which American tourists are admitted with proper credentials"³. Yet to our knowledge, it is an American, Tennessee Williams, whose myth infused dramas are most frequently staged today. Williams' reputation has long been established in France, and

revivals of his work have scored current success throughout Europe while Eliot's, O'Neill's and a lot of French playwrights' mythic works are primarily read. And it is an American, Tennessee Williams, who uses myth in a highly theatrical way rather than relegating it to a purely thematic function although this is certainly one of its functions or regarding it as instant tragedy in a world hard put to find the makings of true tragedy (the latter of which O'Neill tended to do). For these reasons it would seem profitable to examine some of Tennessee Williams' works in order to discover some of the functions of myth for this prolific and frequently very successful playwright. By considering the myths in relation to certain essential elements of the play i.e., to plot, structure, character, theme, and language it may be possible to draw some conclusions about the uses and effectiveness of myth in the theatre of Tennessee Williams and, indirectly, in the modern theatre in general.

The first task in any discussion of myth is to determine the precise meaning "myth" is to be given. As already noted in relation to Dickinson's, Angela Belli's and Father Porter's books, the term has been employed quite differently by different critics in different times. For most nineteenth century myth scholars and some twentieth century ones (Edith Hamilton, for example), myth was the outgrowth of a natural human impulse to explain the various phenomena of nature; a myth was a primitive scientific theory created in order to understand the origin of man, his cultures, institutions and religious rituals. "Myth," then, referred to any of the theories of origin, ritual cult, prestige, and eschatology, as Samuel H. Hooke classifies them,⁴ whether they arose out of the Near, Middle, or Far East or the Western Greco-Roman worlds. This is essentially an anthropological view of myth. For the metaphysician, however, a myth may be a "true story" or an allegorical one, or both. As Mircea Eliade explains it, "Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial time, the fabled time of the beginnings."⁵ But if myth can be considered in historical terms, it can also be interpreted allegorically, for it is "sacred, exemplary, significant," and it "supplies models for human behavior and, by that very fact, gives meaning and value to life."⁶ As David Bidney has noted, "idealistic philosophers and theologians have, from ancient to modern times, interpreted myth allegorically as symbolizing some transcendental, timeless truth but have differed among themselves as to the nature of the object and

truth so symbolized".⁷ This view is very similar to Hathorn's concept of myth as "literature that directly symbolizes man's position of mystery,"⁸ i.e., the mystery of human existence. A modification of the myth-as-philosophy concept is the view that although "myths offer patterns of feeling and thought, we are likely to find in them not philosophy but [as Eliot says] the 'emotional equivalent' of philosophy. We may be sure at least that myth is never philosophical without being something else."⁹ But whether myth is philosophy or the "emotional equivalent" of philosophy, the important point is that it does stand for something else. Once its element of allegory and symbolism are focused upon, the potential for the use of myth as an artistic device is obvious.

There is a dissenting voice, however, in Joseph Campbell. "Mythology," says Campbell "is psychology, misread as cosmology history, and biography."¹⁰ Turning to the psychologists, we find myth viewed in quite another light. The general opinion of the early psychoanalysts (Sigmund Freud, Peter Abraham, and Otto Rank), is that myths are "group phantasies," wish fulfillments, sex symbolism. The anthropologist critics are not unaffected by this view; Jane Ellen Harrison cites Freud in her definition of myth:

Myth is not an attempted explanation of either facts or rites. Myth is a fragment of the soul life, the dream- thinking of the people, as dream is the myth of the individual. As Freud says, "it is probable that myths correspond to the distorted residue of the wish phantasies of whole nations, the secularized dreams of young humanity." Mythical tradition it would seem does not set forth any actual account of old events that is the function of legend; but rather myth acts in such a way that it always reveals a wish-thought common to humanity and constantly rejuvenated.¹¹

Jung departs from the Freudian analytic interpretations, but accepts the universal psychological basis of myth. And finally, Erich Neumann, in his important studies of the 'Great Mother' and the origins of consciousness, builds upon the theory of the collective unconscious, applying Jung's concept to the 'modern consciousness'. Quoting Jung, Neumann declares:

Myth is the primordial language natural to these [unconscious] psychic processes, and no intellectual formulation comes anywhere near the richness and expressiveness of mythical imagery. Such processes deal with the primordial images, and these are best and most

succinctly reproduced by figurative speech." This "figurative speech" is the language of the symbol, the original language of the unconscious and of mankind.¹²

Thus myth whether it originated as science, history, philosophy or psychology is a way of saying one thing in terms of another. Essentially, myth is symbol, and once this symbolism, with its "primordial images" of the archetypes and language of myth is fully focused upon, the potential for myth as an artistic device becomes clear. For this, we will examine Williams' borrowing and use of the myth of Orpheus in his *Orpheus Descending* considered as archetypal of his myth infused drama.

In 1957, *Orpheus Descending*, the play which Williams had been revising for seventeen years, opened on Broadway. Although the full extent of the mythic device in this play, as in those that followed, has not yet been determined, the play marked a point in Williams' work in which the obvious use of myth as illustrated by Val Xavier, the Orpheus and Christ figure merged with the less obvious but no less significant mythic pattern of the vegetation god who is sacrificed in the name of the earth goddess and who, through his sacrifice, is reborn. In the decade following, *Orpheus Descending* was to be established as an archetype. Its basic Christ vegetation god pattern was repeated in at least five of Williams' later full length plays: *Suddenly Last Sumner*, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and *the Night of the Iguana*, *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, and *Kingdom of Earth*. Examination of the plays three of them major successes reveals that each revolves essentially about god and goddess, sacrifice and rebirth. Although specific Christian and classical myths are frequently referred to there are Christs, Marys, and any number of martyrs and saints, as well as such Greek and Roman deities as Aphrodite, Athena Eros, Venus, Orpheus, Dionysus, Apollo, Prometheus and others. Williams' mythic pattern more often involves a much looser framework. There is something of Frazer's dying gods in these plays for example. There are Attis and Kybele, Adonis and Astarte, Osiris and Isis. But much of the seasonal myth is drawn from outside the realm of *The Golden Bough*. Adonis and Aphrodite, Dionysus and Semele, Tammuz and Ishtar, Dumuzi and Inanna all are vegetation gods and goddesses and all share many of the characteristics of the more popularly known myths. It should also be observed that there is in these myths by their very nature much violence: sacrifice and death

by immolation, dismemberment, and crucifixion; castration, rape, and cannibalism. There is even surprisingly or not, depending on how well we know myths androgyny, hermaphroditism, transvestism, and homosexuality. These provide a good deal of the violence and perversion which permeate Williams' work and are generally condemned as "gothic" at best and sensationalism at worst. A study of his use of myth may also help to explain something of this use of violence and perversion.

Tennessee Williams has selected the use of myth as a major dramatic vehicle. And clearly, that vehicle must be studied if we are fully to understand and accurately to evaluate Williams' work. We must recognize the elements of the vehicle the types of myth that are employed and the ways in which those types Greek, Christian, Middle Eastern, Oriental, etc. are integrated. We must also recognize the levels on which the vehicle operates. An understanding of the myth usage in *Orpheus Descending*, the archetype of Williams' mythic plays, is the first step toward such recognition.

Orpheus Descending opened is one of Williams' major successes. Although in his introduction to the published play Williams claims that a great deal of it is new writing, the plot is essentially unchanged from that which he had conceived seventeen years earlier. As Williams himself points out, "on its surface it was and still is the tale of a wild spirited boy who wanders into a conventional community of the South and creates the commotion of a fox in a chicken coop"¹³ To summarize: Val Xavier wanders into a small town store operated by Lady Torrance whose husband, Jabe, is dying of cancer. Val's animal magnetism attracts all the women of the town from Vee Talbott, the religious fanatic whose "visions" become centered around him, to Carol Cutrere, the rebellious rich girl who finds meaning only in sex to Lady Torrance herself, who seeks Val's attentions and becomes pregnant by him, finding fulfillment at last. But having discovered that Jabe was among the men who had burned her father's wine garden and caused his death, Lady is determined to hold a gala opening of the confectionary she has created while Jabe is still alive in order to "square things away, to be not defeated."¹⁴ In the meantime Sheriff Talbott has discovered Val's effect on his wife's visions and ordered him out of the county. Before Val can leave, however, Jabe attempts to kill him, but kills Lady instead. Val is accused of the shooting and is burned to death with a blowtorch. It is a violent, melodramatic, but

straightforward and uncomplicated plot which holds little hint of mythic influences

Nevertheless, the play is an archetype in itself, for the presence of not one but two specific myths in addition to a whole underlying mythic mechanism makes *Orpheus Descending* the axis of all of Williams' myth inspired plays. In his chapter on Williams, 'Myth on the Modern Stage' Hugh Dickinson selects the original *Battle of Angels* version as the archetype. His choice seems unfair, however, for *Orpheus Descending* is Williams' first mature production in which myth figures so obviously and so extensively. In the original version not only is the Orpheus myth missing or obscure, but the vegetation god myth is altogether absent. The god goddess and sacrifice rebirth pattern which informs all of Williams' subsequent plays is not a part of *Battle of Angels*. Because *Orpheus Descending* is the archetype, then of the mythic plays, it is important to view it in considerable detail and to determine the full extent of the myth usage while, at the same time providing the framework for an understanding of the mythic device in other plays. Williams employs two specific myths in *Orpheus Descending*, that of Orpheus and that of Christ. The title itself announces the classical framework of the play. Although the Orpheus myth was directly alluded to only in the revised version, classical parallels were nevertheless a definite element in the original *Battle of Angels* (first published in 1945). The original of Carol Cutrere was named Cassandra Whiteside, and she made obvious reference to her classical namesake, "a little Greek girl who slept in the shrine of Apollo. Her ears were snake bitten, like mine..."¹⁵ The gift of prophecy signified by the snake bitten ears is retained by Carol, but like Cassandra of the myth and Cassandra of *Battle of Angels* she is doomed not to be heeded. In the earlier version of the play, as in *Orpheus Descending*, Williams had made an issue of the trees on Cypress Hill where Cassandra/ Carol goes "joking." The cypress tree is the tree sacred to Artemis (Diana), goddess of the moon, twin sister of Apollo, and the Lady of Wild Things, and Cassandra/ Carol is a votary of Wild Things as well as being a wild creature herself rejecting all conventional codes and declaring fiercely, "I RUN WITH NOBODY!"¹⁶ Indeed it is her recognition of the wild, Dionysian quality in Val that attracts her to him. Cassandra tells him: "That snakeskin jacket, those eyes.... You're beautiful, you're wild,"¹⁷; and when he accepts the suit of a salesman Carol tells him: "You're in

danger here, Snakeskin. You've taken off: the jacket that said: "I'm wild, I'm alone!" And put on the nice blue uniform of a convict!"¹⁸

One other aspect of Orpheus' and Val's deaths should perhaps be mentioned here, and that is the manner of their destruction. The traditional legends hold that Orpheus was dismembered, although some scholars also indicate a tradition of crucifixion. In the original version of the play, Val was hanged from a cottonwood tree (being changed from, bound to, or nailed to a tree are all crucifixion equivalents). In the final version there is some confusion as to the manner of death. The men talk of getting a rope, which suggests lynching, but they are diverted by the blowtorch, and in the end we hear Val's screams. Being burned to death has no direct relationship to crucifixion, but it is a classical form of sacrifice. Thus, whether by fire or crucifixion, Val, like Orpheus, dies in the manner of a sacrifice, and his death thus involves a suggestion of classical and Christian atonement of suffering for the sins and for the salvation of others. In this respect the Orpheus/ Val parallel is related to the Christ/ Val parallel in which crucifixion and sacrifice figure even more prominently. Let it be noted, however, that immolation even crucifixion has its classical counterparts, although the full significance in terms of myth usage cannot be determined until it has been seen in conjunction with the Christian meanings.

Likewise, the fact that Orpheus was "reborn" or at least could not be entirely destroyed should be mentioned in relation to the classical as well as the Christian myth. The suggestion of Val's "resurrection" is stressed even more in the revision than in the original, the action being moved from Good Friday to Easter Saturday, with constant emphasis on the risen, rather than the Crucified, Christ. As Vee one of the executioners says "I mean crucified and then RISEN!"¹⁹ Although this is obviously a reference to the Christian myth, Williams gives Orpheus his proper homage by suggesting the Orphic associations with magic by means of the old Negro Conjure Man and by the aura of mystery surrounding the "relics" of *Battle of Angels* and the snakeskin jacket of *Orpheus Descending*. This suggestion of magic can also be interpreted, in a limited sense, in terms of the Orphic as well as the Christian religion, for if Williams does not permit Val's head to go on singing as Orpheus' did, he does make a point of the Conjure Man's elevating the snakeskin jacket to be revered in either Christian or classical fashion. (In *Battle of Angels*, the jacket reposes

in the temple of the Val Xavier "museum" where it miraculously gathers no dust and where the Conjure Man likewise elevates it for all to see.) The point apparently is, as W.K Guthrie remarks, that "the end of Orpheus was the beginning of Orphism."²⁰

This is a valid enough observation, for Orpheus was, for the Greeks, a founder of a religion. And Val's concern with corruption purification, alienation, and his longing to be free from the corruptions of the earth constitute the essence of Orphism. "The Orphic . . . believed that the source of evil lay in the body with its appetites and passions, which must therefore be subdued if we are to rise to the heights which it is in us to attain."²¹ Certainly Val's denunciation of his "corruption" by sex, and his vow that he has "done with all that" parallels this basic precept of Orphism. "The belief behind it [Orphism] is that this present life is for the soul a punishment for previous sin, and the punishment consists precisely in this, that it is fettered to the body. This is for it a calamity, and is compared sometimes to being shut up in a prison...²²Val's longing to be like the bird that never lights on the earth until the day it dies expresses his longing to be free of the earth, the source of corruption, and, although he does not say that he believes it to be a punishment for previous sin Val's despair at the imprisonment of the soul in the body is similar to the Orphic concept, and his reference to that imprisonment as a "sentence" suggests a punishment: "Nobody ever gets to know no body: We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins, for life! . . .I'm tell in' you it's the truth, we got to face it, we're under a lifelong sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth!"²³ Val declares, "I lived in corruption but I'm not corrupted" because the guitar, "my life's companion,... washes me clean when anything unclean has touched me," ²⁴ and later says that he was "corrupted" by his life in New Orleans, but he is, like the Orphics trying to "shake off the...trammels of our earthly selves and become... gods instead of mortals."²⁵ Perhaps this is what the emphasis on resurrection signifies that Val has succeeded in his efforts to be purified from earthly bonds.

What essentially does this show? In the first place we have seen precisely the extent to which Williams has adhered to his classical myth: that he has followed, in a general sense, the outline of the Orpheus/ Eurydice legend; that in injecting the Dionysus theme, he has altered Orpheus' kinship with wildness but maintained close

parallel to his artistry and qualities of gentleness and passivity (the latter tending toward homosexuality or bisexuality); that in Val's death he has conjoined the reasons for and the manner of Orpheus' death modifying then on the plot level for the sake of artistry; and that he has suggested a resurrection and establishment of a religion insofar as his intentions and the principles of realism and probability will permit. In short, we have seen that there is a good deal more of the Orpheus myth in Williams play than is recognized by the critics and, more than likely, by the audience. It is important that we recognize the parallels between the Orpheus myth in its totality and Val's story and character for it is impossible to determine the value a myth has in a play without having determined the extent to which the myth has been used.

That this myth has been used consciously has been generally established in above analysis. Williams' extensive knowledge of the Orpheus legend and character in its entirety is also clear, as evidenced by a reading of the poem '*Orpheus Descending*' in which he alludes not only to Orpheus' descent into Hades, but to Eurydice's death by a snake bite on her foot, to Orpheus' renown as a musician with unusual powers, and to his death by dismemberment. His acquaintance with Rilke's work has also been noted, and it is highly unlikely that he was not familiar with the poet's *Orpheus Sonnets*. With this much detail of the myth clearly known to Williams, then, it must be assumed that he was well aware of the parallels I have pointed to. At any rate apart from his awareness or lack of it the parallels exist.

NOTES

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- 2- *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne State Univ. Press, 1969) p. 153.
- 3- 'Myth about Myths' in *Modern Drama* (December, 1969), p. 319.
- 4 - *Middle Eastern Mythology* (Baltimore: Penguin, 1963), pp. 11-16.
- 5 - *Myth and Reality*, trans. Willard Trask (Evanston, Illinois: Univ. of Illinois Press 1963), 1; 5
- 6 - *Ibid.* pp. 1-2.
- 7- '*Myth, Symbolism, and Truth*,' in *Myth and Literature*, ed. John B. Vickery, p. 12.
- 8 - *Tragedy, Myth, and Mystery* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana Univ. Press, 1966) p. 27.
- 9 - Richard Chase, "Notes on the Study of Myth," *Myth and Literature*, p. 73.
- 10 - *The Flight of the Wild Gander* (New York: Viking, 1969), p. 33.

- 11 - *Epilogomena to the Study of Greek Religion and Themis* (New York: University Books, 1962), p. xviii.
- 12 - *The Great Mother*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New York: Pantheon, 1955), p. 115.
- 13 - Quoted in Benjamin Nelson, *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work* (New York: Ivan Obolensky, 1961), p. 89.
- 14-Williams.Tennessee.*Orpheus Descending*.New York: New Directions, 1976) p. 49.
- 15 - Ibid.,p.52
- 16-Ibid., p. 49
- 17 - Ibid., p. 58
- 18 - Ibid., p. 60
- 19 - Ibid., p. 92
- 20 - Guthrie.W.K.p.234
- 21- Ibid
- 22 - Ibid.,p.251
- 23- Williams.Tennessee.*Orpheus Descending*.New York: New Directions, 1976) p.97
- 24 - Ibid.,p120