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The Existential Quest of Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real*: A Study of his Symbolization

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams is one of the most popular dramatists of the modern American Literature and his plays, explicitly, have the ten basic components of existentialism. He has drawn upon all ten element of a unique existential –familiar form to project his concern for those “beautiful people who give up with such grace”. He has an affirmation of life, freedom and the creation of one’s own being, angst, dasein, the call of care, human relationships and spiritual growth, authentic values, and concrete experience into a distinctive dramatic form. That is why he presents a unified amalgamation of these views in his treatment of the dramatic constituents: subject, theme, dramatic action, characterization, dialogue, symbol, set and lighting design, and a vision of reality. This research paper is mainly concerned with Williams’ application of symbols, in his play *Camino Real*¹ presented in 1953.

Keywords- *Religion, Archetypal, Humanism, Existentialist, Fertility*

Introduction

Camino Real is a dream play and its structure and setting are that of a dream. It has a brilliant spectacle of archetypal characters derived from history, legend, literature and some out of Williams’ imagination. They are highly symbolic and serve the purposes of the dramatists with their special singularities and peculiarities. Actually, speaking the characters of this play are the presentation of the fragmentation of individual experiences of three types of people that inhabit the Camino: the Outcastes, the Decadent, and the idealists and dreamers. The Outcastes comprise of the bums, the drunkards, wastrels and the gypsies. Jacques Casanova, Marguerite, Baron Charlus and the Mulligans belong to the Decadents who are the alienated souls while Don Quixote, Lord Byron and Kilroy are the idealists and dreamers who are the counterparts of Williams himself. In the ‘Foreword’ to the play, Tennessee Williams himself

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writes, the play is “my conception of the time and world that I live in.”² Here the writer tries to dramatize the continually dissolving and transforming images of a dream and dreamers into gloomy reality like an existentialist. He has used his symbols for probing deeper into the inner pondering of characters.

The Outcasts prefer to ignore Time and escape into the world of drugs and alcohol. For them life is a scavenger hunt, “in a bazaar where the human heart is part of the bargain.” (p.452) They have lost the challenges of life and their future is dark and gloomy, because they have completely accepted things as they are. They are not in position to peep behind the curtain because they are devoid of any mystery and vision of life. The mendicants, thieves, petty vendors, the gypsies and prostitutes care only for material comfort and superficiality of life. The gypsies indulge in magic crystal gazing, cards and tea leaves which are akin to ritual rites and myth. They feed upon man’s emotion of fear and insecurity. A feeling of desperation and hopelessness lead the inhabitants of *Camino Real* to the gypsy’s place; where Esmeralda, a gypsy’s daughter, carries out the farce of the ritual rite. She is the counterpart of the moon goddess “Hera” who used to take bath in the spring Kanthos every year and renew her virginity. Esmeralda is adorned with a pair of glittering emerald snakes coiled over her breasts on the date of her Virginity ceremony. The gypsy performs the fertility rite by the moon which transforms Esmeralda to a virgin prostitute. The fertility rite begins when Esmeralda chooses “Kilory the champ” (p.537) as her hero. She tosses red roses, the symbol of fertility, love and resurrection at Kilory who becomes the fertility God. He lifts Esmeralda’s veil. The veil symbolizes the blasphemous version of the veil surrounding the Ark in the Holy of Holies³. Williams has introduced the dark degradation of human downfall in the fertility rite.

Kilory suffers this and goes through this degradation to evade the street cleaners. Like other lovers he too proves his sincerity by saying, “I’m sincere” (p.562) four times. After this the rite is completed and the veil lifted. But this self degradation puts him off. Although he is flattered by Esmeralda and is addressed by her as “undefeated champ of the golden gloves...” (p.536) yet his resistance crumbles down. He tastes the ether he realizes, he has been made the scapegoat, he feels “washed up! –finished!” (p.576) Esmeralda is not the hero’s dream but a sham. Campbell remarks:

Where this Oedipus –Hamlet revulsion remains to beset the soul, there the world, the body and woman above all became the symbols no longer of victory, but of defeat ... No longer can the hero rest innocence with the goddess of the flesh, for she is become the queen of sin.⁴

Kilory realizes that he has been duped and tells Esmeralda, “You gypsies’ daughters have ears that only catch the sounds like the snap of a gold cigarette case! Or, pretty please, baby, - we’re going to Acapulco!” (p.558). Being ashamed of himself, Kilory leaves the phony paradise to meet the street cleaners and prefers death to a life of disgrace. In this play the

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Gypsy's den symbolizes these degrading establishments which trade flesh. Like an existentialist Williams has created the imagery of those inhabitants of the modern world who are bent on self destruction.

The Decadents of the *Camino Real* are the second types of inhabitants who struggle to retain a sense of present security by clinging through memory and delusion to the remnants of alleged success or happiness. They are not in a position to "escape the trap of the present."⁵ Both Jacques Casanova and his beloved Marguerite are the travelers of the expensive tourist hotel and Siete Mares. Jacques Casanova is the remnant of that indefatigable great lover and his lady love Marguerite, an analogue to Camille of Paris, the famous courtesan. Like her counterpart Marguerite also, once cast a glow over Paris, but she is now "faded as Lanterns and Legends fade when they burn into day!"(p.488) She is symbolized by the pink and white camellias which Rosita tries to sell her. She falls into reminiscence of those youthful days when there used to be the "five evening out of the month when pink Camellia, instead of the usual white one, let my admirers know that the moon those nights was unfavourable to pleasure, and so they called me –Camille," (p.488-89) but now it's only white camellias symbolizing her faded youth.

The red camellias suggest the menstrual cycle and its inhibitions, to love making while the white connotes the declination of youth and passion. Esmeralda's red roses that she flings at Kilory denote fertility while the street cleaners clad in white pushing a white barrel are symbols of death and depravity. The white Camellia further emphasizes the association of death with whiteness. Marguerite is desperate. She cannot come to terms with her present dying youth, one of the, "aging voluptuaries –who used to be paid for pleasure, but now have to pay! (p.496) Like Balance she seeks refuge under one leaky roof and the other, but her young lovers' fleece her off her riches, and do not give her the warmth of love. She is desperate to leave the Camino "Where there is nothing, but the gradual wasting away of everything decent in us. (p.502) She feels a sense of hopelessness and longs to run away from this God forsaken place through the Fugitivo, but Casanova prevents her from doing this. He has lost all struggles, and surrendered before his fate. He admits to Marguerite that he is terrified of life without her and wishes to live in a place in which "we breathe together." (p.501) The only thing he is sure about is his love for Marguerite, for whom he is prepared to become the "King of the cuckolds" (530) on the *Camino Real*.

Both Casanova and Marguerite symbolize the caged birds "who accept each other, but flight is what they long for." (p.501) Here Casanova seems to be perfectly happy to remain Marguerite's captive, for him the cage is the symbol of security. Marguerite feels trapped and compares herself and Casanova to a "pair of captive hawks caught in the same cage, and so we've grown used to each other." (p.526) She alludes to the hawks, the wild birds, on the Camino which are tamed and kept in cages. This signifies that there is no freedom on the Camino.

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In third category we have three dominant characters. The first is Lord Byron, a romantic poet. He symbolizes the dreamers. He resides at the Seite Mares for a short while and is about to leave, because “the luxuries of this place have made him soft.”(p.503) He longs for freedom from the present world of war, destruction and disintegration and wants to depart as he puts it “from my present self to myself as I used to be.” (p.504) He is a legendary character and recalls the war. He is the modern absurdist caught in the reminiscence of the past glory and left alone to face the alien universe. He is a mythical figure who leaves this world with his birds which is the symbol of his soul caged in him. He cannot survive on this inhuman land where the utterance of the word ‘Hermano’ (brother) is forbidden, where no sympathy is being shown to a poor thirsty traveler, who is shot dead at the orders of Gutman for attempting to drink water at the fountain of Siete Mares. In this play Byron is obsessed by the recollection of Shelley’s heart. While the body of Shelley was burning, his friend, Trelawney, snatched the heart of him out of the blistering corpse. Byron is non –plused and wants to know what one can do with someone else’s heart. He is not in a position to accept Casanova’s embittered allusion that one can “twist it! tear it! crush it! or kick it!” (p.506) His refinement and tender sentiments symbolize the passing away of an era when the heart was “A short of instrument – that translates noise into music, chaos into order....” (p.507) He is in search of that old pure music which has become elusive amidst the glittering, superficial living at the *Camino Real*. So he decides to leave and takes the challenge to walk through the Terra Incognita.

Williams has used the ‘heart’ as a vibrant symbol. For Byron it is a source of inspiration, for Casanova, it is a seat of love but for Kilroy, the protagonist, it reflects his generosity. In the play Kilroy snatches his own heart from the custody of the research team performing an autopsy on his corpse. His action is similar to Trelawney’s act. The playwright has given a romantic connotation to the heart symbol. Kilroy’s heart is “as big as the baby’s head” (p.456) and made of “solid gold.” (p.581) Both these symbols are complex. They are suggestive of an unconscious and a fluid quality of the elusiveness of symbols used in a plastic theatre. Both these symbols are associated with Kilroy, the American Everyman. He symbolizes the American Adam who attempts to hold fast the noble values of life. He arrives at the *Camino Real* leaving his wife –the only true woman, for the medicos have advised him to give up “liquor and smoking and sex!” (p.456) Kilroy, a light heavyweight champion of the West coast has to “retire from the prize ring because of his heart,” but Kilroy the “*CHAMP*” (p.454) is welcomed on the *Camino Real* as a Patsy.

Kilroy is symbolic of humanity with a heart. He symbolizes mankind’s capacity for absurd suffering in behalf of others as well as for himself. He retains his human compassion throughout the play, even when he is dressed as a patsy and cannot speak. He communicates the word brother by blinking his nose. He is very courageous and has the courage to defy Gutman as he tells him, “Don’t give me orders, Kilroy is a free agent.” (p.479) He meets his

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fate boldly and challenges the street cleaners, unflinchingly, “COME ON YOU SONS OF BITCHES! KILORY IS HERE! HE’S READY!” (p.577) Further, Kilory possesses a genuine sense of sympathy rather than a reasoned compassion. This attribute of his transcends him from a patsy to a new heroism sustained by love.

La Merdrecita the blind woman with her son Dreamer restores Kilory’s soul and frees it. She is the only person on the Camino who extends sympathy without fear. Even Gutman is apprehensive about her. He is aware that “Revolution needs good dreamers” (p.450) like her. Despite Gutman’s order, she cradles Kilory dead body as she had that of the survivor, in the manner of a Pieta. She symbolizes the selfless love of a mother, which the protagonist fervently needs. She is Kilroy’s protectress, and his physical and spiritual benefactor. She supports him morally in his search for freedom. The Dreamer, her son is an absurd character. He symbolizes Orpheus in his guitar playing, but here the similarity ends. He is also the counterpart of Damuzi –Tammuz who is depicted as leading his mother and consort Inanna of Ishtar. He utters the taboo word ‘hermano’ without hesitation and incites the inhabitants to a riot. He does this what the people on the Camino Real need, to be awakened to a sense of brotherhood.

Kilory’s murder by the street cleaners is inevitable. He has been at the top of their list, but La Madrecita revives him from his symbolic death, resulting in the rebirth of the hero for the salvation of mankind. In this connection the statement of E.O. James is quite worth quoting –

The young god dies annually in the relation of the seasons and has to be rescued and restored by his mother –lover. It was she who resuscitated him, and by so doing brought about a revival of life in nature and in mankind.⁶

The dismantlement of Kilory’s body at the postmortem table completes the fertility rite. Kilory rushes out with his golden heart and experiences a sense of disorientation. Everything appears “like a dream, it’s just like a dream ... Mary help a Christian! Mary!” (p.582) “The process of dreaming and rebirth are closely relative and both have an ethereal quality of innocence. The final act of Kilory, giving up his golden heart at the Loan Shark, the last and the best of his old life, to the second best beloved in his life, the gypsy’s daughter who still dreams of the champ and faithful to his memory, completes his transfiguration in a new world.”⁷

The fountain of humanity starts flowing with the awakening of Quixote. It is due to compassion, tenderness and honour of Kilory. Kilory’s ghost rises up from the lap of La Madrecita. At the same time the instructor says that “there is no external evidence of disease ... This death was apparently due to natural causes.” (p.579) In the connection of Kilroy’s unmarred death, Turner remarks, “Freedom from deformity is a must for a sacral king. It was an equally stern custom that the public pretend complete ignorance of the ritual murder.” The murder of Kilory by the powerful forces is conveniently ignored even by the doctor. When

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Kilory proceeds to the last part of his journey, his mentor Quixote advises him not to pity himself. He gives a message of tolerance, endurance and love to Kilory leaving him wiser than before and with a promise of fulfillment.

The allusion to the violets has a bath, mythic and symbolic connotation in this play. Turner states, “violets are said to have sprung from the grave of Attis. They promise rebirth.”⁸ Thus, the regeneration cycle is complete in the play. The hero’s quest for truth is fulfilled and renewed. He can now leave the confining, stifling atmosphere of the Camino which has no power to influence him. Harry Slochower is of the opinion “the magical flight of the hero, is the escape from the kingdom of death, pursued by a terrifying figure, personifying Death itself. This experience leaves the hero with a profound sense of spirituality. Kilory, enriched with experiences can now find a way out of the Terra Incognita and achieve his goal”⁹. In the end Quixote’s expression of bewilderment that the violet’s in the mountains have broken the rocks symbolizes resurrection, fertility and freedom. The Camino is finally released off its spell and Kilory leaves on an optimistic note.

Kilory’s escape from the autopsy table with his golden heart signifies the hero’s flight and spiritual rejuvenation. He meets his death at the hands of the street cleaners to gain spiritual upliftment, because street cleaners are death personified and leaves the message of love and brotherhood. Don Quixote and Kilory move in search of another Camino because Death on the Camino Real is no longer salvation, but absurdity.

Thus, the play, *Camino Real* holds up the ideals of freedom, courage and brotherhood through the characters of Byron, Quixote and Kilory. But through the characters of the play Tennessee Williams presents a dark and dreary image of the world, where people have lost their imagination. They find it easier to live in subjugation, as Casanova warns Kilory, “You have a spark of anarchy in your spirit and that’s not to be tolerated here!” (p.487) on the Camino. They have lost their courage to raise voice against tyranny and corruption. They are alienated souls living an aimless existence and their “normality has often been a subject of question.” (p.468)

Thus, we can say that Williams has used symbol as speaking image. He has used concrete symbols to enhance the significance of the myth. They indicate more than the words can do so. His archetypal characters seem to be misfits. But legendary characters are of far – reaching –significance. They do not only express disgust with the reality, but also disbelief. He has blended the other expressionistic devices of light, colour and music to enhance the dream quality and the mythical imagery in the world of confusion, and suggest that the only way out of it is to sustain idealism. The power of love is such that it can break rocks and make violets grow on them.

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