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## **A Rebel with a Cause: Tennessee Williams the Playwright: A Perspective**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Albert Camus, a French philosopher, thinker and writer, along with Jean Paul Sartre gave a philosophical base to French existentialism. Though he would publically disavow any ideological association to this movement which gripped post-war Europe, it was his writings, nevertheless, which would shape much of the future direction that this movement would take. In his book *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt* Camus gave a philosophical construct to the existential conundrum which fueled and sustained this movement. In this seminal work he defines rebellion as the quintessential human response to a seemingly absurd existence. According to him it is an act of simultaneous denial and acceptance: we negate the forces which strike at the root of our existence and, in the same breath celebrate the validity of our existence in our day today living. This is what helps us retain our faith in our own humanity while pitted against the depredations of a subversive social, moral and cosmological order. Though separated by vast intercontinental distances, cultural differences and varying tastes and sensibilities, there is a remarkable degree of convergence of thought between Camus, the French thinker and Tennessee Williams, the American playwright. Camus' rallying call to his 'rebel' finds resonance in the redoubtable fight of Williams' protagonists in play after play wherein these 'sensitive non-conformists' would continue to wage a relentless battle against the inequities of the world despite their foreknowledge that they are doomed to fail. At the heart of their common philosophy, is the need to assert the fact of our existence without succumbing to the forces of negation even when the quotidian reality of life would seem to preclude any hope.*

**Introduction**

'Is there no mercy left in the world anymore?  
What has become of passion and understanding?  
Where have they all gone to? Where's God?  
Where's Christ?' [1]

These questions are hurled, one after the other, by Tennessee Williams through a character in one of his early one-act plays, *The Lady of Larkspur Lotion*. [2] Characteristically, it is an alcoholic writer in the play asking these agonizingly unsettling questions towards the end of the play. Williams did not want to leave any doubt in the minds of his readers or his audience that these questions were his own. By the very nature of the questions he also makes it clear that he is not seeking any answers as the answers are inherent in the questions themselves. They have been fired to resonate in our soul and strike us to the very roots of our existence as, in the typically dark universe of Williams, the only answer could be resoundingly in the negative. The brutal force of questions like these reverberating through the body of the playwright's emotionally power-packed plays would, leave us in a confused and bewildered state forcing us to question our own long-held beliefs. At the same time, it would provide the necessary angst, feeding the creative genius of the writer and be both, the source and, the *raison d'etre* for his art. In the clarion call which, the playwright would also carry as a badge of revolt against the conventional notions of religion and morality, he would strike at many of the shibboleths held by the society as sacred and inviolable. God has indeed turned his face against his own chosen breed while his hapless children are being mercilessly brutalized, tortured and even cannibalized. Rev. T. Shannon, the defrocked minister of church in Williams' *The Night of the Iguana* [3] echoes the playwright's own sense of outrage when he thunders:

*My own personal idea of God...Rev. T. Shannon's conception of God Almighty paying a visit to the world he created. I want to go back to the church and preach the gospel of God as Lightning and Thunder...And also stray dogs vivisected* [4].

The above does indeed sound like Nietzsche's denunciation of Judeo-Christian theology when, he grandiosely announced that God was dead. Nietzsche's declaration had come at the wake of his belief that it was Christianity itself which had killed God by snuffing the Dionysian spirit out of human breast. Every church for him was a stone rolled on to the tomb of man to prevent its resurrection. The theological construct of Nietzsche, therefore, predicates God's demise before the pilgrim soul can embark on any voyage for self-realization and spiritual recovery. Man has to rediscover his own divinity in accepting and exalting his suffering and becoming Dionysius himself. In denying existence of God of Judeo-Christian tradition, Nietzsche comes out as a true rebel. So does Tennessee Williams when he rails against the malevolence of an indifferent and even cruel God who presides over a predatory world. He fully shares Nietzsche's apocalyptic belief that suffering is the core and essence of human existence. What is different, however, is how and in what they see their final moment of grace. Unlike Nietzsche who extolled suffering of Dionysus as he is torn from limb to limb, Tennessee Williams sees the redemptive power of Christ's suffering as the answer to the prayers of the lonely, the frightened and the violated.

### **The philosophy of Rebellion and Tennessee Williams as a Rebel with a cause**

French existentialist Albert Camus in his philosophical treatise *The Rebel, An Essay on Man in Revolt*[5] has defined the concept of 'rebellion' in the context of man's inability to comprehend the meaning of human existence in a seemingly irrational world. According to his philosophical construct, a true rebel is one who responds to the surrounding chaos and absurdity by asserting his freedom of choice and his individuality. Rebellion is most certainly denial of what is squalid and unwholesome in human existence. At the same time it is an affirmation of our right to exist and at our own terms. Rebellion, therefore, can never be destructive and must not be confused with nihilism. While rejecting dogma and authority of any kind, the true rebel is also affirming his belief in the natural goodness of man, his unbounded humanism and most importantly, his essential sacredness. Camus, thus, defines rebellion as a concept of simultaneous denial and acceptance. The artist while envisioning his own world is, through his creative effort, trying to provide an alternative to the 'prosaic and destructive' reality of the world we really live in. The art which he thus produces is an outcome of the process of trying to resolve the tension inherent in the conflict between the real and the visionary world and hence, can be termed as an act of rebellion. It is this which separates the artist from others subjecting him to suffer the fate of a rebel deepening his sense of estrangement and alienation. All creative artists are, thus, rebels of some sort; by creating an alternative vision of reality through the medium of their art, they are simultaneously, negating and repudiating the squalid reality around them. Tennessee Williams would describe this transformative nature of art as the 'spirit of anarchy'. As he puts it:

*...art is a kind of anarchy and the theatre is a province of art...Art is...anarchy in juxtaposition with organized society. It runs counter to the sort of orderliness on which organized society apparently must be based. It is a benevolent anarchy: it must be that and if it is true art, it is. It is benevolent in the sense of constructing something which is missing, and what it constructs may be merely criticism of things as they exist.[6]*

Existentialism as a philosophical creed was a purely European phenomenon which moved a whole generation of modern post-World War thinkers, writers and artists. Its impact was so large and widespread that America, which basked in the self-defined glory of 'splendid isolation', also came under its powerful influence. In fact the sense of disillusionment which had given rise to this creed, struck American sensibility with their own force of taunting irony; the same forces which had built this powerful nation helped undermine those core values which made them feel human. It destroyed the self-professed myth of 'American dynamism' and pinched the bubble of confidence giving rise to the same sense of 'dread' shared by the existentialists. What came to be described as 'American Gothic' was, in some sense,

the American variant of the European phenomenon. It is significant that Tennessee Williams would describe 'American Gothic' as a movement akin to French existentialism except that the "motor impulse of the French school is intellectual and philosophic while that of the American is more of an emotional and romantic nature." The common link between the movements, he says, is a "sense, an intuition, of any underlying dreadfulness in modern experience." This "dreadfulness" he finds impossible to explain. It transcends the horrors recorded in the daily papers, and is rather a "kind of spiritual intuition of something almost too incredible and shocking to talk about, which underlies the whole so-called things. It is the incommunicable something that we shall have to call *mystery* which is so inspiring of dreams among these modern artists...."[6]

### Tennessee Williams and his creed---the 'rebellion' of the 'Fugitive Kind'

Tennessee Williams would, on many occasions, disavow that he worked with any theme in mind and was openly resentful of any bid to appropriate 'labels' to his writings. As he said once:  
*I have never been able to say what was the theme of my plays and I don't think I have been conscious of writing with a theme in mind...Usually when asked about a theme, I look vague and say, 'It is a play about life...'* [7]

When David Mamet characterized Williams' plays as "the greatest dramatic poetry in the American language", he was alluding to the playwright's ability of bringing to American theatre the kind of lyricism unmatched by any other playwright. It would be doing justice to his lyrical talent if we were to describe him as an elegiac writer. He is a poet of nostalgia whose plays are a series of lament for the loss of a tradition he reconstructed as an idealized myth of antebellum South.

In the truest tradition of pastoral elegy, Williams laments the steady erosion of values of an idyllic plantation culture of America's South, a culture which embodied and symbolized gentility, grace and elegance. His protagonists, Amanda, Blanche, Alexandra and a host of others, would carry the dream of this lost culture with steadfast tenacity even while they would be hunted down by the merciless and predatory social order. Their humanism, vibrantly pure and sensual, is their only protective weapon against the onslaughts of a mendacious and crassly vulgar culture. They would withdraw into the comfort of their own solitude to fight the world and its malevolence. They are all the 'fugitive kind' who prefer escape into their own world rather than submit to the dehumanizing effect of a decadent order. Williams, in his plays, would celebrate the 'never say die' spirit of these sensitive non-conformists and their valiant fight to protect their dream. Subsumed by their fate as they would be, it is in their struggle to preserve human dignity that they will assert their freedom. It was during his days of apprenticeship while he was associated with *The Mumpers*, a theatrical group, that Tennessee Williams had come out with his second play which he had named as *Fugitive Kind*. His play *Orpheus Descending*[8] which came much later---towards the second half of his career, was bought by Hollywood for its screen adaptation and was subsequently filmed with Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani in the lead roles. The film was characteristically titled *Fugitive Kind* which was, perhaps, the most appropriate screen title considering the fact that all protagonists of Williams, his so-called non-conformists, could easily be covered under this generic description. His major characters are all invariably fugitives, desperately fleeing from their implacable stalkers, be they Time or Death, operating as agents of a corrupt and vengeful dispensation. Their struggle may seem desperate and their defeat inevitable but they would always face their adversaries with a rare sense of gallantry and courage. Even while they would play out their lives in an atmosphere which would be certainly threatening and even morbid, Williams would view them and their futile struggle with an unbounded compassion and the plays would end with some positive message for the audience. The radiating warmth of his compassion is so ubiquitous that it blurs the distinction between the victimizer and the victim and they both turn out to be equally hapless in the cruel turn of their circumstance. Williams said, "I don't believe in villains and heroes---only right or wrong ways that

individuals have taken, not by chance but by necessity by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents.”[9]

“We are all of us...under a lifelong sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins as long as we live on this earth,” says Tennessee Williams through Val Xavier, his protagonist in the play *Orpheus Descending*.

*Personal lyricism is an outcry of prisoner to prisoner from the cell in solitarly where each is confined for the duration of his life.*[10]

For Williams it is art which has the curative power of redeeming human beings from their solitary confinement. He says in the afterword of his play *Camino Real*:

*My own creed as a playwright is fairly close to that expressed by the painter, in Shaw's play 'The Doctor's Dilemma,' 'I believe in Michelangelo, Valesquez and Remrandt', in the might of design, the mystery orf color, the redemption of all things by beauty everlasting and the message of art that has made these hands blessed. Amen.*[11]

This would be the closest that Tennessee Williams would come to professing any creed.

### **Tennessee Williams and Metaphysical Rebellion.**

*Suddenly Last Summer* [12] as Williams' most consummately realized allegory on human condition would raise the pitch of protest almost to the metaphysical level. Sebastian the poet, is the main protagonist in the play. He maintains a garden filled with carnivorous plants which prey on each other and life around them. It metaphorically projects a world which has gone awry representing Sebastian's vision of the 'fallen world'. His image of God is also congruent with this dark vision and would consist of the horrifying spectacle of baby sea-turtles desperately rushing towards the sea while they would all be devoured by the predatory birds swooping and hunting them down. The gory ritual would end with Sebastian's own gruesome death in tune with his vision: the band of hungry children would prey upon him and feast on his body as he had feasted (sexually) on theirs. Catharine, while narrating this gruesome spectacle, would express her anguish at her inability to 'save' Sebastian from “[c]ompleting----a sort of--  
--image! He had of himself as a sort of!----sacrifice to a !----terrible sort of a -----[God].” Mrs. Venable equates this ritual of destruction to a religious experience, an epiphany close to Revelation. She is certain that at this moment of apocalypse her son Sebastian had seen God; ‘he meant that God shows a savage face to people and shouts some fierce things at them, it’s all we see or hear of Him.’ Catharine is the mouthpiece of the author when she comments, “ I know it is a hideous story but it’s a true story of our time and the world we live in and what did truly happen to Cousin Sebastian in Cabeza de Lobo...”

Robert Rice while commenting on *Suddenly Last Summer* and *The Glass Menagerie*[12] makes a very penetrating observation about Williams' world view:

*The world is a jungle and the alternative to living in it as a wild animal is to withdraw into one's own musings and fantasies, a menagerie where the animals are no longer threatening because they are made of glass. Clearly, either choice is a sorry one, and just as clearly the every day attempt of ordinary people to avoid the choice, to try to live a little in both the jungle and the glass menagerie, is sorry too: it is an eternal compromise and therefore eternal frustration. There is no way out.*[13]

The 'fugitive kind' of Williams, after having gone through almost a ritualistic cycle of violence and suffering, are poised to face up to a teasing encounter between human questioning and the silence of the universe. A heckler in *Sweet Bird of Youth* sums it up beautifully:

*I believe that the Silence of God, the absolute speechlessness of Him, is a long, long, long and awful thing that the whole world is lost because of. I think it's yet to be broken to any man, living or any yet lived on earth...[14]*

The minister of church Rev. Lawrence T. Shannon, Williams' protagonist in *The Night of the Iguana* [15] would even go to the extent of describing God of Western theological construct as a 'senile delinquent' shocking his congregation with his outburst:

*All your western theologies, the whole mythology of them, are based on the concept of God as a senile delinquent and by God, I will not and cannot continue to conduct services in praise and worship of this, this...This... [16].*

Defrocked and locked out of church, he would start conducting tours of God's world, collecting evidence to buttress his own conception of God:

*My own personal idea of God...Rev. T. Shannon's conception of God Almighty paying a visit to the world he created. I want to go back to the church and preach the gospel of God as Lightning and Thunder...And also stray dogs vivisected.[17]*

This is the odyssey of a soul in torment and under the burden of a sense of his fallen humanity and in no way characterizes Shannon's moment of Revelation which would come to him but much later. At this point of his life he does even derive masochistic pleasure in his iguana-like situation when, tied to the hammock the Germans gather around him and torment him 'like an animal in a trap' in the manner of the Mexican boys who torment captured iguanas, poking out their eyes with sticks. His spiritual guide Hannah, looking at him would say:

*Who wouldn't like to suffer and atone for the sins of himself and the world if it could be done in a hammock with ropes instead of nails, on a hill that's so much lovelier than Golgotha, the Place of the Skull, Mr. Shannon? There's something almost voluptuous in the way that you twist and groan in the hammock-----no nails, no blood, no death. Isn't that a comparatively comfortable, almost voluptuous kind of crucifixion to suffer for the guilt of the world, Mr. Shannon?[18]*

Shannon will have to make a real big leap of faith before he can rediscover the spark in those eyes of the penniless dying that are brought to the House of the Dying in Shanghai. And Miss Hannah Jelkes would have to take him under her fold and mentor him for his spiritual recovery. Before she could prepare herself for this role, she had her own forays into the 'blue devils' as it were. As she puts it:

*My work, this occasional therapy that I gave myself painting and doing quick character-sketches made me look out of myself, not in, and gradually, at the end of the tunnel that I was struggling out of I beg to see this faint, very faint, gray light---the light of the world outside me and I kept climbing toward it.[19]*

Her life-encounters had morphed her into empathizing even with the lewd gesture of the balding Australian sales man she had met in Singapore who had asked her to take off a piece of her clothing so that he could "just hold it!" Instead of shrinking back in revulsion, she would describe it as her 'love experience' and in this indecent gesture she could only hear the cry of a lonely heart begging for a morsel of human warmth. These would be some of the lessons she would impart to Shannon in helping him rediscover the power of human connection. She works as a catalyst in bringing about the spiritual recovery of the defrocked priest who, in his enlightened moment, would be moved to realise the agony of the iguana straining at the end of his rope to free itself from bondage. He would don the mantle of 'god', take up a machete and cut the iguana free:

*I cut loose one of God's creatures at the end of a rope. So that one of God's creatures could scramble home safe and free...A little act of grace.[20]*

As the iguana is released from its captivity, Grandpa stumbles on the concluding lines of his poem which had been eluding him so far:

*O courage, could you not as well  
Select a second place to dwell.  
Not only in the golden tree  
But in the frightened heart of me [21].*

Williams' romantic 'fugitives', aspiring for the 'golden tree' must, like Orpheus, descend to the interiors of human heart responding to their cry for a bit of love, understanding and warmth. This, then, is Williams' answer to the Nietzschean dilemma.

### Summary and Conclusion

One could hardly argue that riddled as his plays are with the atmospherics of extraordinary violence and destruction, Tennessee Williams does not essentially have a dark vision of this world. He definitely sees the world around him as tropical jungle with predators at large preying on the sensitive human beings who have difficulty in coming to terms with the harsh realities of life. Their fight against the predatory forces, more often than not, would lead to their destruction and the atmosphere that the plays would evoke would be that of hysteria, violence and brutality. It is, however, remarkable that despite this the plays would hardly leave one in a state of despondency and hopelessness. In the dark rainforest of squalor and ugliness, there are shafts of sunlight creating patches of extraordinary beauty. Williams would clearly articulate his vision of life through his play *Camino Real* and it is not surprising that even though his many other plays would achieve much greater critical acclaim and would turn out to hugely much more popular, this was the play which remained closest to his heart. In the *Foreword* this is what he says about the play, which also reflects his true vision of the world:

*It doesn't say anything that hasn't been said before...but is merely a picture of the state of the romantic non-conformist in modern society. It stresses honor and man's own sense of inner dignity, which the bohemian must re-achieve after each period of degradation he is bound to suffer. The romantic should have the spirit of anarchy and not let the world drag him down to its level...[22]*

Williams' message is that one must not ever give in to despair and abandon the will to fight even though the literal facts of existence would seem to preclude any hope. As he would himself say, "*The Night of the Iguana* is a play whose theme, as closely as I can put it, is how to live beyond despair and still live." [23]. This is the central theme of his plays in articulation of which, Williams would emerge as the poet of the heart working to create poetic stage moments in which the binary of social reality and creative power of the artist would form the referent for the imagination to ultimately provide the last resort for survival. It would also be the ideal versus the real and the arc of tension provided by the binaries of this sort which would sustain the art of Williams and make him a fighting 'rebel' with a cause.

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