

Final Ph. D. Oral Examination. Abstract Paper: Tennessee Williams

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**THE FINAL PUBLIC EXAMINATION
OF**

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on the dissertation (and related topics):

LOVE AND DEATH IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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Lake Shore Campus, Damen Hall, Room 151

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Abstract to Be Distributed for the Final Public Examination

LOVE AND DEATH IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS:

The Dramatist at Mid-Century

Doctoral Dissertation Statement of Purpose and Summary

(written in August 1967)

by John J. Fritscher

Introduction

Literature is itself not only product but expression of its engendering context; its present force, coming from the past, thrusts formatively into the future. The writer writes not in a vacuum, but is collector of his past heritage, spokesman for the present moment, and seminal integrator for the future. Thomas Lanier Williams, the writer in point, personalizes in historic and psychic biography the bent of the American Experience since the first unsettlement of this country. Williams himself is profoundly aware of the parallel between his own biography and the unfolding of the American Pilgrims' progress. Indeed, it may be judged, that the experience with which Tennessee Williams works has certainly been explained more abstrusely, technically, or dogmatically; but yet life humanistically unexamined is not worth literature. To deny such a four-decade interpreter of the mid-century scene is to deny generic esthetic witness in favor of specific sociological clinicians. To anyone lamenting the lack of the latter there can best be offered the

comfort of the intuitive esthetic which includes its own sociology.

This dissertation is apologia neither for Williams nor for America, but endeavors to say something about the latter through the examination of the former. The study concludes that Williams is chronicler of the tension existing between what he considers the truth of the human condition and the paranoid myth of his country. His romantic lyricism pleads for optimum perfectibility of the individual in society; his neo-romantic jaundice, confronted with absurdity, subtracts from society his individuals who, confronted with social alienation, question shaking verities of love and God, life and death.

Chapter One

The first chapter surveys New England Calvinism's translation to the American South where natural theological depravity transmuted to literary Gothicism. The Edenic Garden of America becomes Williams' rain forest where the individual is not, as in Calvinism, in single relation to God, but is merely singular and alienated. Williams sees his ancestry of maternal Puritanism and paternal Cavalierism paralleling the components of national paranoia. He focuses this Angst in his protagonists who are shredded in the great tradition of Calvinism which by dogma kept humans in tension; this tenseness he builds to a questioning inclusive of both the American Experience and the human condition. Calvinism, for Williams, is after-dogma of an a priori human situation: guilt is universal; election to a restored Eden is never a surety. Thus Williams' dramas of human failure inductively characterized Calvinized America; for the failure of every Eden is the American inevitability belying the ethic that the virtuous are here and now rewarded. This matter marries well Williams' evolving form. His early selective lyricism, while it has not yet become the full species of absurdity, is nevertheless maturing toward a Gothic-American form well within the genus of dramatic existential revolt.

Chapter Two

Chapter two explicates Williams' twentieth-century urban metaphor; his concern with cities is reducible to the basic society of two people in communication. If ever the lost Eden is to be recovered, it will be the well-manicured urban-garden recovery where people have broken the bondage of their isolation. For this reason, Williams' time and place are both metaphorically "Southernmost" as waning urbanity faces the archetypal horror not only of the South of the United States, but the south of the human condition. His settings are ubiquitous non-places: parsonages of spiritual journey, movie theaters of narcotizing escape, hotels of literal travelers. The place of progress—the Pilgrim road—is peopled by his dispossessed wanderers. "No shelter" is all his characters' problems—from Amanda to Goforth. The port of *Camino Real* is his quintessential way-station of all evanescence: it is only the moon-out-of-time in Williams' existential geography that gives any solace. The world is condemned property; evanescence has condemned it. Place, up to a point, is commandable; time is not, except in art, where the traditional romantic can freeze for better examination the change generally accepted as a good. Neo-romantic Williams, however, works life's destroyer, time, into the very context of his plays: beds—distractions from evanescence—he harshly reveals as biers. The eschatological time of the pragmatic wasteland ravages any incarnational time of love; thus thematically in time and space, Williams performs always in a Southern Garden-Park before the stone statue of Eternity.

Chapter Three

Chapter three investigates the poet's vocation in terms of Williams' imagery units: the artist is to be the Lawrentian fox of commotion in society's chicken coop. Art is a socially irritating vocation which makes personal evanescence meaningless; art exposes personal corruption and social mendacity in a salvific way. The persona of poet-guru in each Williams play exposes and gives in a self-consuming act of sacrifice. The metaphor is artist versus merchant, and leads inexorably to Williams' hospital imagery of violence. The poet-maker is by Violet Venable's definition a man looking for God and order; his tension arises from the diffraction caused by mercantile society's organized, corporate opposition to the individual. As Chris Flanders tries to do for Sissy Goforth, the poet must try to bring some salvific order through art. Of course, Williams sees all his creative incarnational people fail; for in season and out these are the fugitive kid on his Calvinistic *Via Dolorosa*. His poet-women are fragilities past their time; their images—when not whiteness, glass, music, or lyric animals—coalesce to the dark animal imagery of the wasted garden. The constant fire imagery is metaphor throughout Williams' work for more internal existential smolders. Williams' world, in short, is an orgasmic vision; his lyric moment, through cinematographic juxtaposition of image, imposes the analytical order of poetry on what he sees increasingly as the decaying existential reality.

Chapter Four

Chapter four details Williams' basic alienation metaphors of violence and sex. Williams' neo-romanticism views change not always as a good but as too often a violent corruption. The external violence, often called sensationalism by critics, Williams uses as metaphor of the subtler violence he diagnoses in all mankind: existential rot is like all rot, the alienation of parts within a whole. The violence of the Passion of Christ is sexual-religious archetype for Williams' males journeying through garden-locals of unsatisfactory Ways Out: drugs, liquor, sex. The sado-masochism of act and language chronicles the alienation of persons from other persons, of the isolated from themselves. Williams' violence is about the collapse of the individual particularly in the society of the family. Sex is violent in Williams when it is *use* not *love*. His sex, like his violence, is a social shock treatment and both are literarily functional to this end. The sexual hysteria of his ladies is metaphor for a more basic existential hysteria. Since Williams' view of truth is often his audience's view of violence, his matter and form thus perfectly violate stock responses of judgment and feeling so that his act of theater becomes in itself a very modern act of transgression. As Williams portrays the dis-integration of self in society, one remembers that his very art theory is non-violent. In the end, he turns his existential rage not only on his fellow humans but on the Divine Duplicity he sees as the Western God.

Chapter Five

Chapter five concerns this God and His institutional manifestation as experienced by Williams and his characters. The ceremonial ritual of his plays is explicated to the end that the institutionalized religious ethic sickens his persons' healthy creativity in relation to God as creator. His anti-clericalism becomes more delineated as his characters are subjected to the tension resulting from a preached-about Old Testament God of Wrath versus an esthetically

intuited New Testament God of Love. Williams' own biography is of interest as the God-father projection on *God* is colored by the father-son relationship established by the father. God is ambivalent at best: either the senile delinquent carnivorous in the Encantadas or the sensitive Christ-character bearing love. The wrathful God in Williams' economy often inverts to the castrating bitch, the *vagina dentata*, who cannibalizes existential weakness. Because he is created, each man ultimately realizes his essential passivity; Williams attempts atonement of this existential insult-creaturehood-by dramatizing an acceptance of life that can change the inevitable Divine consummation from use-cannibalism to love-communion. The individual, not the institution, must salvifically become God to another, and he must become it alone and non-institutionally because Providence is not there for man or iguana. Williams' theology in the face of the Double Divine is active acceptance of man's passive limitations; sin in Williams is not an offense against this ambivalent God but is rather any establishment alienation between people which keeps them from meaning God to each other. God exists for Williams, but at long distance from the menagerie He created; and Williams fears that because of His long silence the whole world is lost unless humans each to each give voice to that God.

Chapter Six

Chapter six summarizes Williams' textual posture of love and death. Death, the ultimate alienation, he transfigures to a symbol of the worse death of the living *isolato*. Over Williams' whole *Camino* hangs the pun of the Southern Cross. Sex in such a climate is best performed as an assurance of life. Lady-Myra's irony empties even this hope, for she couples sexually with Death. She, like all Williams' women, awaits the incarnational seed-bearer to redeem both her sexual and existential hysteria. Yet no one in Williams is fully relieved, for death is the ultimate visible expression of mankind's guilt at alienation from its creator. In it the general sin of the human race is revealed. And while Williams is not quite sure of the nature of individual resurrection, like the Deity about whom he is likewise uncertain, he is sure it exists and exists most surely in art. The ultimate art-love-is to help others break through the terror of literal death into a Zen-like acceptance of existence expansion into the wings of the Angel of Eternity; for on Williams' scale, love-not groin-centered, but other-centered-is stronger than death.

Conclusion

The study concludes by recapitulating certain major points based on internal evidence from the plays. The end is to suggest that Tennessee Williams has, indeed, not only matured organically in form and theme beyond mere popular box office, but has become by even the most stringent literary standards a fully credentialed dramatic spokesman for mid-century America. © 1967, 2004 Jack Fritscher

VITA (1968)

John J. Fritscher (Jack Fritscher) was born on June 20, 1939, in Jacksonville, Illinois. He attended primary schools in Peoria, Illinois, and received his secondary education in Columbus, Ohio. In June of 1961, he received a B. A. in philosophy from the Pontifical College Josephinum in Worthington, Ohio. In 1964, he entered a three-year graduate program at Loyola University of

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