

A Brief Study of Tennessee Williams' Stagecraft in His Early Plays

I-li Yang

Instructor

Department of Western Languages and Literature
National Chengchi University

Tennessee Williams is one of the most controversial playwrights in modern American literature. He was born in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911. His first success was *The Glass Menagerie*, produced in Chicago in 1944 and then in New York in 1945. He has enjoyed great popularity ever since. Two of his plays won him Pulitzer Prizes--*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). He also got four awards from the Drama Critics' Circle. Most of his plays--especially the early ones--are concerned with the frustration of the Southern people whom he knows well. His favorite topics are love, death, hate, sex, violence and corruption. When you read Tennessee Williams, you feel like seeing movies. This is because he has a special talent for dramatizing his plays. That's why many of his plays were turned into films. Examples are *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, *The Night of the Iguana*, *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*.

This is a short study of Tennessee Williams' dramatic technique on the stage. Like a magician, Tennessee Williams always takes the audience's breath with this unique technique on the stage. His craft consists in the use of (1) realistic speech, (2) music and other sound effect, (3) lighting and other visual images, (4) setting. These devices make the plays very "dramatic"--appealing to the eyes and ears of readers. Every single thought of the plays, reflected by one of the four devices, is as penetrating as a gunshot. You just can't escape it. Williams' stage-consciousness was rooted as early as in *American Blues* (1939). In the beginning direction of "The Long Stay Cut Short, or The Unsatisfactory Supper," we find colors--blue, green, rose, black, purple, brass; we also find sounds--music, cat-like whinig, sucking noise, and singsong reading. To illustrate this stagecraftmanship of Williams', we shall focus our attention on his three early plays--*The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and *Summer and Smoke*. (1948).

(1) Realistic speech

Stark Young, an appraiser of *The Glass Menagerie*, says:

All the language and all the motifs are free and true; I recognize them inch by inch, and I should know, for I came from the same part of the country, the same locality and life, that Mr. Williams does.²

On the one hand, Tennessee Williams' style is "pretentious, sentimental, pseudo-poetic;"³ and on the other, it is "relentlessly true to the facts."⁴ This is especially true of *The Glass Menagerie*. In the last scene of *The Glass Menagerie*, his stage direction reads:

(Tom's closing speech is timed with the interior pantomime. The interior scene is played as though viewed through soundproof glass. Amanda appears to be making a comforting speech to Laura who is huddled upon the sofa. Now that we can not hear the mother's speech, her silliness is gone and she has dignity and tragic beauty. Laura's dark hair hides her face until at the end of the speech she lifts it to smile at her mother. Amanda's gestures are slow and graceful, almost dancelike, as she glances a moment at the father's picture--then withdraws through the portieres. At close of Tom's speech, Laura blows out the candles, ending the play.)⁵

This is poetry read in pantomime. Here Williams intends to make his play poetic because it is a "memory play." Otherwise every exchange of utterances by the characters is as true as life. When Tom told his mother that they would have a gentleman caller, the mother immediately became exhilarated.

Amanda: For heaven's sake, stop putting on and tell me some things.

Tom: What things do you want me to tell you?

Amanda: *Naturally* I would like to know when he's *coming*.

Tom: He's coming tomorrow.

Amanda: *Tomorrow?*

Tom: Yep, Tomorrow.

Amanda: But, Tom!

Tom: Yes, Mother?

Amanda: Tomorrow gives me no time!

Tom: Time for what?

Amanda: Preparations! Why didn't you phone me at once, as soon as you asked him, the minute that he accepted? Then, don't you see, I could have been getting ready!

Tom: You don't have to make any fuss.

Amanda: Oh, Tom, Tom, Tom, of course I have to make a fuss! I want

things nice, not sloppy! Not thrown together. I'll certainly have to do some fast thinking, won't I?

Tom: I don't see why you have to think at all.

Amanda: You just don't know. We can't have a gentleman caller in a pig-sty! All my wedding silver has to be polished, the monogrammed table linen ought to be laundered! The windows have to be washed and fresh curtains put up. And how about clothes? We have to wear something, don't we?...

Thank heavens I've got that new sofa! I'm also making payments on a floor lamp I'll have sent out! And put the chintz covers on, they'll brighten things up! Of course I'd hoped to have these walls re-papered,,,What is the young man's name?

Tom: What are you doing?

Amanda: I'm brushing that cow-lick down! What is this young man's position at the warehouse?*

Who else will ask about the young man's name and position? Who else will care so much for the appearance of the house? The mother, unaware of the changing time, is going to receive the gentleman caller in the way she used to some twenty years ago. She maintains the vanity of a dignified Southern gentlewoman. In spite of her poor situations, she wants everything polished up so that her shy daughter can have a boy friend. Every word she says is mixed up with the anxiety of a mother and the vanity of a woman.

This time listen to the coquettish degenerate from the South in *Streetcar--Blanche Du Bois*.

Stella: Tell you what, Blanche?

Blanche: Why, that you had to live in these conditions!

Stella: Aren't you being a little intense about it, it's not that bad at all! New Orleans isn't like other cities.

Blanche: I was so exhausted by all I'd been through my--nerves broke. (Nervously tamping cigarette) I was on the verge of--lunacy, almost! So Mr. Graves--Mr. Graves is the high school superintendent--he suggested I take a leave of absence. I couldn't all of those details into the wire... (She drinks quickly) Oh, this buzzes right through me and feels so good!

Blanche: You hear me? I said stand up! (Stella complies reluctantly) You messy child, you, you've spilt something on that pretty

white lace collar ! About your hair--you ought to have it cut in a feather bob with your dainty features. Stella, you have a maid, don't you?

Stella: No. With only two rooms it's--

Blanche: What? *Two* rooms, did you say?

Stella: This one and-- [She is embarrassed.]

Blanche: The other one? [She laughs sharply. There is an embarrassed silence.]

Blanche: I am going to take just one little tiny nip more, sort of to put the stopper on, so to speak....Then put the bottle away so I won't be tempted. [She rises] I want you to look at *my* figure ! [She turns around] You know I haven't put on one ounce in ten years, Stella? I weigh what I weighed the summer you left Belle Reve. The summer Dad died and you left us....

So she rattles on, as if she were the Egyptian Queen and people around were rats underground. Reading these lines, you have got a vivid picture of a dainty lady, revealing herself piecemeal as she goes on talking. This style of Williams' helps the reader and audience alike to look upon the characters on the stage as living people ready to enchant you with their very accent whether they are Southern or not. Let us turn to the words by Stanley Kowalski and you can not deny Williams as a good realist.

Stanley: What's all this monkey doing?

Stella: Oh, Stan ! [She jumps up and kisses him which he accepts with lordly composure] I'm taking Blanche to Galatoire's for supper and then to a show, because it's your poker night.

Stanley: How about my supper, huh? I'm not going to no Galatoire's for supper !

....

Stanley: Yeah. I get the idea, Now let's skip back a little to where you said the country place was disposed of.

Stella: Oh ! --Yes.

Stanley: How about that? Let's have a few more details on that subject.

Stella: It's best not to talk much about it until she's calmed down.

Stanley: So that's the deal, huh? Sister Blanche cannot be annoyed with business details right now !

Stella: You saw how she was last night.

Stanley: Uh-hum, I saw how she was. Now let's have a gander at the bill of sale.

Stella: I haven' seen any.

Stanley: She didn't show you no papers, no deed of sale or nothing like that, huh?

Stella: It seems like it wasn't sold.

Stanley: Well, what in hell was it then, give away? To charity?

Stella: Shhh! She'll hear you.

Stanley: I don't care if she hears me. Let's see the papers.⁸

Stanley speaks a different dialect from Blanche (and from Stella too). From the very beginning, we know that Stanley and Blanche are fire and water; there surely will be a clash between them. Williams' dialogue has always made his characterization precise. No wonder John Mason Brown says that

"A Streetcar Named Desire" is more than a work of promise. It is an achievement of unusual and exciting distinction.⁹

(2) Music and Other Sound Effect

Tennessee Williams went to the movies very often when he was a school boy, and he once worked for the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer motion picture company. The experiences probably open his eyes to the effect of music and other aural sounds in play production. Few playwrights have such advantage.

In the production note of *The Glass Menagerie*, he writes:

A single recurring tune, "The Glass Menagerie," is used to give emotional emphasis to suitable passages.... It expresses the surface vivacity of life with the underlying strain of immutable and inexpressible sorrow. When you look at a piece of delicately spun glass you think of two things: how beautiful it is and how easily it can be broken. Both of those ideas should be woven into the recurring tune, which dips in and out of play as if it were carried on a wind that changes. It serves as a thread of connection and allusion between the narrator with his separate point in time and space and the subject of his story. Between each episode it returns as reference to the motion, nostalgia, which is the first condition of the play.¹⁰

The function of this melody is so obvious that anyone will be deeply touched by the last scene. As Jim and Laura come to a certain degree of understanding, the music flutters in first gently, then when Jim tries to kiss Laura, it "swells tumultuously."¹¹ But as soon as Jim announces his engagement to another girl, it disappears completely--there is only the cracking sound in the sky.

Williams intends this melody to be "Laura's music."¹² It is but clear that it helps character revelation. Also it helps illuminate the theme of the play: how the sensitive is hurt by the coarse. In *Streetcar*, the music "blue piano" serves a similar function. But what is more striking is the use of aural sounds in the play. One of them is the sound made by a locomotive. In the heat of the rape scene, the stage direction says:

(The barely audible "blue piano" begins to drum up louder. The sound of it turns into the roar of an approaching locomotive. Blanch crouches, pressing her fists to her ears until it has gone by.)¹³

The sound by the locomotive symbolizes the sexual drive of the characters in *Streetcar*. This and other aural sounds--such as the low drums in *The Glass Menagerie*¹⁴--have an emotional appeal. Furthermore, Williams is very specific about the voices of his characters. For example, in *The Glass Menagerie*, in order to make his characters speak in the right tone, he makes them laugh in 16 different ways--gallantly(4), ineluctably(4), wearily(19), wildly(25), gaily(78), nervously(83), appreciatively(83), heartily(88), shyly(88), engagingly(89), warmly and charmingly(101), gently(101), girlishly(104), breathlessly(108), bravely(115), and charmingly(119).¹⁵ as a result every rise and fall of the feelings of the characters is shared by the audience.

(3) Lighting and Other Visual Images

Lighting is as important an element as music in *The Glass Menagerie*. The production note reads:

The lighting in the play is not realistic, In keeping with the atmosphere of memory, the stage is dim. Shafts of light are focused on selected areas, or actors, sometimes in contradistinction to what is the apparent center.¹⁶

Let us look at the magic of light in *The Glass Menagerie*. First the narrator Tom steps from darkness, then with the light of a match brings the audience into the world of his memory: All that happens in a lower middle-class apartment in St. Louis. Slowly the interior of the apartment is lighted; the memory of the past is in the same manner put in order. There sits the family--Amanda the mother, Laura the slightly crippled daughter, and Tom the narrator himself. The helpless situation of the family is gradually exposed. The father, leaving his smiling face on the wall, deserted the family long ago; the mother, having once had seventeen callers in her day, is now trying hard to get one for her shy daughter who feels more comfortable with her glass menagerie than with any living thing; while the son, unable to cope with his chattering mother, is all the time thinking of following

his father's example. But the sad truth is that he loves his mother and his sister. However, he finally manages to bring a fellow worker in the shoe company he works in to his home. The gentleman caller happens to be Jim O'Connor--the one whom Laura secretly loved in her high school days. During his visit, Jim O'Connor tries to cheer Laura up by teaching her how to dance; and Laura in return shows him her collection of glass animals. The romantic atmosphere is broken as Jim says apathetically, "Laura, I've been going steady!"¹⁷ Now the situation of Laura is even poorer than it was; this time her hope, symbolized by the horn of a glass unicorn, is desperately broken. Similarly, the family is broken: Tom goes away from his home, Amanda is once again left in misery. As quoted before, "at close of Tom's speech, Lanra blows out the candls, ending the play." The action of the play is pieced together through the use of light. It helps focus attention on the development of the plot. Furthermore, it is very effective to have light fall on the main character or characters in a certain scene. Without the light, the present and the past might be mixed up. Besides light, other visual images, especially colorful ones, play a very important part in dramatizing the play. For example, the glass menagerie reflects Laura's delicateness, and the images on the screen (Blue Roses, the picture of the father, etc.) are but obvious in their function. Let us now turn to *Streetcar* for more evidence. In Scene Three "The Poker Night," "There is a picture of Van Gogh's of a billiard-parlor at night."¹⁸ This arrangement is just right for presenting the character Stanley Kowalski. It is just as Falk says:

The description of the poker scene, inspired by a Van Gogh picture of a billiard parlor, is a good example of the way Williams uaes contrasting colors for dramatic effect.¹⁹

The wild quality of Van Gogh's painting reflects the wild quality of Kowalski's character.

Colors are a unique devise in many of Tennessee Williams' plays. Here is the use of color "blue" in *Summer and Smoke*.

During the day scenes the sky should be a pure and intense blue (like the sky of Italy as it is so faithfully represented in the religious paintings of the Renaissance) and costumes should be selected to form dramatic color contrasts to this intense blue which the figures stand against.²⁰

The blue sky has romanic appeal, accordant with the romantic landscape shown on the picture hung in the rectory interior, but the quality of being intense is more than romantic. "Intense blue" at once suggests tenderness, melancholy and

suppressed passion. Williams' sky is also full of sexual implication. Just as "blue" might suggest "love," so does "intense" suggest "sex." Blue is a beautiful color to look at, but intense blue will hurt the eyes if they stare at it for too long a time. It is sweet to feel love, but it is bitter to repress sex. Tennessee Williams' expressionistic technique is as incomparable as his expressions of intense feelings.

(4) Setting

Williams has a special talent for setting. In *The Glass Menagerie*, his invention is a screen to be used as a memory cue. He explains:

The legend or image upon the screen will strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing and allow the primary point to be made more simply and lightly than if the entire responsibility were on the spoken lines. Aside from this structural value, I think the screen will have a definite emotional appeal, less definable but just as important."²¹

The screen helps the audience to see what the characters recall in their mind. For example, when Amanda calls to mind the seventeen gentleman callers, there is the image of them on the screen; when Laura remembers Jim, there is the word "love" on it. Many critics think it distracting, but Sievers thinks it helpful for the character illumination and action development."²²

In *Summer and Smoke*, setting surpasses the use of music or lighting in achieving "dramatic effect."

Now we descend to the so-called interior sets of the play. There are two of these "interior" sets, one being the parlor of an Episcopal Rectory and the other the home of a doctor next door to the Rectory... There should be a fragment of wall in back of Rectory sofa, supporting a romantic landscape in a gilt frame. In the doctor's house there should be section of wall to support the chart of anatomy. Chirico has used fragmentary walls and interiors in a very evocative way in his painting called "Conversation among the Ruins."

The Stone angel of the fountain should probably be elevated so that it appears in the background of the interior scenes as a symbolic figure (Eternity) brooding over the course of the play. *This entire exterior set may be on an upper level, above that of the two fragmentary interiors.* I would like all three units to form an harmonious whole like one complete picture rather than three separate ones. An imaginative designer may solve these plastic problems in a variety of ways and should not feel bound by any of my specific suggestions."²³

The omission of actual walls is first to present vividly the parts that are only necessary in the play; secondly, it bears thematic interpretation. Seen walls are barriers, but those unseen are endless deserts. The difficulty in communication is not a matter of substance, but of shadow. To unite bodies is much easier than to unite souls. The communication gulf is only a yard between two houses in reality. The best scene to portray this idea is Scene ii where there is a telephone call.²⁴ The stone angel, needless to say, is to the point and in contrast to the anatomy chart. Williams' setting is a good support to his thematic revelation. In the first Broadway production, Williams wanted Jo Mielziner, the designer, "to employ nine different colors in varying combinations to achieve a desired effect."²⁵ All this trouble means that Williams is very special about the effect of setting and colors in the scene. It won't be difficult to imagine the play a failure for "so much time was given to the conscious exposition" of body-soul conflict, as Harold Clurman observes, without this striking staging.²⁶

We have seen in his three early plays how Williams charms his audience (and reader as well) with his superb stagecraft, namely, the use of characteristic speech, of music and sounds, of lighting and colors, and of setting. These devices contribute a lot in either characterization, or plotting, or theme illumination, or atmosphere build-up, thus becoming an essential part to the plays as a whole. No other dramatists before him show as much stage-consciousness as Williams. This should account for the fact that Williams gains ever-increasing popularity as he goes on writing. Williams' stagecraftmanship makes him a real dramatist. He preaches neither philosophy nor religion. He just gives his audience drama--drama in its very sense.

Notes

1. *American Blues*(New York, 1948), pp. 33-34.
2. Stark Young in Francis Donahue, *Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams* (New York, 1964), p. 21.
3. Joseph Wood Krutch in Donahue, p. 21.
4. Robert Warnock, *Representative Modern Plays*(Chicago, 1952), p. 585.
5. *The Glass Menagerie* (New York, 1945), p. 123.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-54.
7. *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York, 1947), pp. 19-20.
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 32-35.
9. John M. Brown in Donahue, p. 37.

10. *The Glass Menagerie*, p. xi.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 112.
12. *Ibid.*, p. xi.
13. *Streetcar*, pp. 149-150.
14. *Glass*, p. 69.
15. The numbers in parentheses are page references in *The Glass Menagerie*.
16. *Glass Menagerie*, pp. xi-xii.
17. Robert Emmet Jones, "Tennessee Williams' Early Heroines," *Drama* II (Dec. 1959), p. 218.
18. *Streetcar*, p. 48.
19. Signi Falk, *Tennessee Williams* (Connecticut, 1962), p. 83.
20. *Eccentricities of the Nightingale, Summer and Smoke* (New York, 1964), p.112.
21. *Glass*, p. x.
22. David Sievers, *Freud on Broadway* (New York, 1955), p. 372.
23. Arthur Gang, "The Desperate Morality of the Plays of Tennessee Williams," *American Drama and Its Critics*, ed. Allan S. Downer (Chicago, 1965), p. 208.
24. *The Eccentricities of a Nightingale, Summer and Smoke*, pp. 151-155.
25. Nancy Tischler, *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan*, (New York, 1961), p. 156.
26. Donahue, *Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams*, p. 49.