

Tennessee Williams' *Dramatis Personae* : A Study in Types

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The dramatic world of Tennessee Williams seems to contain three visible types of characters who can be termed, for a working hypothesis, as the *Naturalizers*, the *Fugitives* and the *Compassionate*. These types, it should be stressed, are flexible because their attributes emerge out of dramatic exigencies and their interactions usually lend to the situational significance of the plays. It would not be in the spirit of this essay to typify Williams' characters into neat groups of black, white, and grey, but to categorize them in terms of their becoming in the limited context of the play. Williams' characters are inextricably linked to their own time and place, and they appear natural in their respective locales as brambles and bandicoots in a tropical jungle.

Williams has a tendency to plumb the dark depths of his characters to find their motivations. There may be moments in each of his plays when the reader or the spectator would be outmaneuvered and even mellowed by the predilections of the playwright. The reader would be asked to make certain allowances against his own grain, to reconsider his preferences and to dilute his disgust for aberrations. In a sense, he may achieve a broadening of feeling and inward candor while judging others. "I don't believe in villains or heroes," declares Williams, "only right or wrong ways individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents" (Day 1978:91-2). On an occasion, Tennessee Williams interviews himself. He reacts to a question he hurls at himself: "Why don't you write about nice people?" "Well," he answers, "I've never met one that I couldn't love if I completely knew him and understood him, and in my work I have at least tried to arrive at knowledge and understanding."

The *Naturalizers* and the *Fugitives* live side by side of one another, and are crammed into one another like rotten apples. Their nature is slowly revealed in the process of their confrontations with others, with society, with corrosive time, with an inscrutable universe and their chosen masks. The *Compassionate* characters, like catalysts, speed up the dramatic action, passively participate in action, help to disclose the inner alchemy of the Fugitive

protagonists, bring them closer to the audience by acting as bridges between them, but are not much affected by dramatic situations.

The first category under the rubric of *Naturalizers* includes persons who do things which bring them immediate pleasure or fortune. They are solipsistic and have the knack of getting their things done. They are calculative, good at manipulation, sly in taking revenge and ruthless in opposition. They act against their own sense of honor and justice, ride roughshod over others, but do not feel the pricking of conscience. They are prompt to naturalize, prompt to patch off the schism. And if they do not feel the existence of something wrong inside, the wrong gradually seeps through their systems and is crystallized into a way of life, an expediency that leaves no room for disagreement, a putrefaction that is taken as normal. It is the common way, the way of the moron, the cunning, the wicked and the fool.

The *Naturalizers*, it should be pointed out, resemble Ortega y Gasset's "mass" which "sets no value on itself—good or ill — based on specific grounds, but which feels itself just like everybody, and nevertheless is not concerned about it; it is, in fact, quite happy to feel itself as one with everybody else." "As they say in the United States," quips Ortega y Gasset, "to be different is to be indecent. The mass crushes beneath it everything that is different, everything that is excellent, individual, qualified and select" (ibid: 12). The adjusted person is one, writes Fromm [1950:75], who has made himself into a commodity, with nothing stable or definite except his need to please and his readiness to change roles.

They are Erich Fromm's "adjusted" persons and Herbert Marcuse's "one-dimensional men ". Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is proud of his efficiency, his luck, his country, his success and his brutishness, but what shocks Blanche and exasperates sensitive readers is Stanley's "commonness":

Blanche: Well — if you forgive me — he's COMMON.

Stella: Why, yes, I suppose he is.

Blanche: There has been some progress since then! Such things as art — as poetry and music ... in some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That they have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we are approaching...

The *Naturalizers* live on the surface, floating and drifting, yielding easily to baser impulses, surrendering to the current that carries them down. Like a swarm of limpets they cling to the rock of congruence more as a matter of habit than of principle. Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Job Torrance in *Orpheus Descending*, Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Boss Finley in *The Sweet Bird of Youth*, Maxine in *The Night of the Iguana*, Mrs. Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*, and Miriam in *In the Bar of a Tokyo Hotel*, only to mention a few, belong to this category. Most often they are successful, crude and savage, pointedly pragmatic but incapable of subtler feelings of friendship and love. They are attached to those persons whom they can use. For these people, death is a sudden shock of horror. They stagger, crawl, and shrink at the very notion of death and are never ready to face it.

Significantly, most of them do not die when the curtains fall. The fear of death, not the death itself, really serves as a gadfly that hovers threateningly close, tormenting a lot before biting. As Kierkegaard (1944:30) observes, "Death is not the last phase of the sickness, but death is continually the last. To be delivered from this sickness by death is an impossibility, for the sickness and its torment ... and death consists in not being able to die." Their fear of death is not different from that of a wolf attacked by blood-hounds; it is desperate, terrible and traumatic. "I fear death," cries Miriam, "I know it would have to remove, wrench, tear the bracelets off my arms. . . So I wait in dread. Terror, yes; I could say terror . . . No inner resources of serenity in me at all" (Williams 1970:36-37). Some of Williams' famous characters are haunted by this terror of decay and death. What these characters such as Alexandra Del Lago, Casanova, Marguerite, Mrs. Goforth, Mrs. Stone, Big Daddy and Amanda Wingfield want is a personal immunity against time. And when they find that such wishes are never granted, they indulge in life with a vengeance.

The *Naturalizers* readily conform to the modes and moods of civilization. They cast their votes, visit churches, earn and squander, but they do so like real-life somnambulists whose eyes, though wide open, are unable to see, whose dark subconscious, rather than their alert minds, dictates their movements. But the fact of their insensitivity does not shield them against a feeling of ultimate estrangement. In them the sense of estrangement is more acute, more complete and more devastating because such a sensation comes to them at the face of defeat. Death, decadence of flesh and gangrene are forms of such defeat (Fromm 1950:75).

Erich Fromm comments on the ultimate despair of such an "adjusted" person: "As long as he succeeds in his efforts, he enjoys a certain amount of security, but his betrayal of the higher self, of human values, leaves an inner emptiness and insecurity which will become manifest when anything goes wrong in his battle for success." Their cunning, their animal surrender, their ingenuity betray them into the hand of an inescapable despair. Their gross nature fails to understand the depth and subtlety of passions that stir within the Fugitive protagonists; their insularity trembles impotently before the universal contexts of life. Unlike the Fugitives, they are not redeemed by their final anguish, because instead of wishing to go beyond their world which, they suspect, is not the best of all possible worlds, they try to grab the bones that life throws at them until their fingers and teeth are broken.

The second category of characters are said to be *Fugitives*. For them the feeling of alienation is not an accident, but a necessity. Sometimes their inner demon, sometimes their surroundings and other people conspiring against them, thrust them to the edge of the escarpment, to the fag-end of existence.

It can be assumed as a general belief that there is presence in each individual which informs him what is the proper thing for him to do. This concept, however, has had a most eventful and ontological journey from Platonic idealism to the Freudian Super Ego. It is variously termed as conscience, Super Ego, the idealized image and the impartial judging agent of God. The sensitive person, Karen Horney (1945:111) says, develops an "idealized image" of oneself, but his actions, his transactions with other people push him away from this centralized, ideal image. As a result, the gap between his ideal self and his real self increases. Karen Horney points out that this "gap" is the cause of alienation. Williams' *Fugitive* is an alienated individual because "he clings to the belief that he is his idealized image." A schism is created when such a person is enamored of contrary forces for profit and pleasure, when he is sundered from himself by a number of diabolical forces external to him and more powerful than him. This person is unable to naturalize his psychic situation. His mind becomes a battleground of nerves. He is embarrassed by his built-in contradictions. The gap between his idealized self and real self makes him a deracinated and divided personality. He is not in harmony with his own self, nor is he able to take this situation as his natural state. He is constantly consumed by a desire to connect himself meaningfully to others around in a genuine bond of intimacy, to achieve amity with his own essential nature and to identify with, what Hegel calls, the Social Substance. "The Social Substance has come into existence and

has been sustained in existence, through centuries of human activity. He (Hegel) regards it as the objectification of the human spirit in which the spirit finds the objective form that is essential to its actualization," Richard Schacht (1970:39) paraphrases Hegel's *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. His thoughts always tend to the center of his being, prompted by an inner search, inspired by an indomitable hope to regress into the past, into a state of prelapsarian innocence. He is often an intelligent, high-strung, avid and thoughtful individual who is bruised, baffled and victimized in a world of temptations and guilt. But he keeps his wounds open. There is the rub. That is why he suffers. In one way, he is unable to raise himself to the mental level of the man of commitment, integrity and true heroism, and in the other, he is reluctant to sink into the smudge of the *Naturalizers*. He is unable to break away completely from either because the possibilities of both camps are within him.

The fundamental characteristics of the *Fugitive* individuals are as follows: he is vulnerable to temptations, but he gets befuddled in the face of disillusionment; he is unable to soak the sense of guilt into his system; he lacks the coarse cynicism of the *Naturalizers* and the faith that transcends cynicism; he withdraws himself from the busy world because its crowds and conceits vex him, but he is not comfortable in his isolation and longs for human contact which turns out to be his undoing; he does not feel settled anywhere and exhibits an uneasiness as if he has drunk gasoline.

Like Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Alma in *Summer and Smoke*, he sometimes relies on the kindness of the strangers when he feels exploited and victimized by his familiar world. Sometimes he is mauled and eaten up by hungry street urchins, like Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer*; sometimes his love relationship with a girl ends up with his castration, like Chance in *The Sweet Bird of Youth*; sometimes like Val Xavier he is burnt alive by a blow torch and sometimes like Kilroy(*Camino Real*) he is transformed into a patsy and ends up as a tomcat.

The *Fugitive* has certain ideals, but he sells them cheap. He is somewhat vaguely convinced that there is something important to be done, that he is secretly connected to something. Such allegiance wavers precariously between the connection of a missionary to his scriptures and of a witch to her mysteries. He either considers others unworthy of his confidence or he himself is not sure of his ideals; he never speaks out his secrets, but is most eloquent in condemning other people, their way of life, their mendacity and their civilization. In this

context, Williams' *Fugitive* finds his prototype in Baudelaire's "dandy" who is a saint or a sinner for his own sake, who is a "hero and anti-hero at once" because he "thirsts for heroism in an age that is mediocre" and refines his "sensibility to a fashionable heroism which is a diluted insolence" (Sypher 1962:37,41). Sypher continues his discussion on Baudelaire's concept of "dandy". "Dandy" is a middle-class aristocrat who disdains mediocrity. "His life is a role" (ibid:36). "He is an existential hero manqué" who resists "the inauthentic", but fails to gain "the authentic" (ibid:41).

Brick in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* furiously condemns the mendacity of others, but what escapes the audience is the reason why he loses his temper when Big Daddy accuses him of mendacity. Val compares himself to a bird that has no "legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky" and speaks a lot about his inability to get entangled, but does not hesitate to steal, gamble for money, and act as a gigolo to a highly sexed elderly lady (Williams 1976:Act-I Sc.2:70). Williams (1950a) describes this bird in his novel, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone*: "Speaking of birds, said Mrs. Stone with an effect of composure, is it true that the rondini don't have legs and that is the reason they stay in the air all the time? No, said Paolo, they stay in the air all the time because they don't want to mix with American tourists" (ibid: 70). Alma whose name in English means 'soul' shows some spiritual pretensions, but finally ends up as a nymphomaniac.

Williams' *Fugitive* does not make himself understandable to others, hence lends himself generously to the "wrong" understanding of others. Gerald Weales (1974:388) makes this point in one of his long essays: "If Williams' (man)kind is fugitive, then something has to be in pursuit. His characters are menaced by three things: by other people, by themselves, and by the universe." The *Fugitives* are pursued by other people who try to use them mechanically, by their own fear and guilt, by the universe which sets hounds of time on them. He confronts the world with childlike curiosity or mischief, but the world swoops over him like predatory birds on young turtles. He is frequently corrupted, but he still retains, or he makes us believe so, his purity. The flame in the center of his being does not die out; it sustains him, protects him from outside cold and darkness though at the same time burns him slowly. When through with the outside world and "others", he recoils into the private chamber of his heart, and through with his monotonous privation he gasps for fresh human contact, thus makes himself available like a shuttle-cock.

A short story of Williams precisely deals with such dual allegiance The Young Man in "The Portrait of a Lady in the Glass," who becomes Tom in *The Glass Menagerie*, leaves his mother and sister, and goes away in search of his security, peace, freedom and ways to actualize his creative powers. But he is constantly reminded of his family, his home. He feels guilty for his action, his selfish betrayal, his behaving like his father who had also deserted his wife and children, but he does not come back. This exactly is the mentality of the *Fugitive* who, by his very act of choosing, alienates himself from his family, from his society, but is not at peace with his newly discovered state of freedom. He plunges towards temporary distractions in a desperate attempt to forget his inner conflict, but they turn out to be mere palliatives. There is always a desire to return. He is neither seriously repentant nor can he brazen it out. This split is an innate and vital pointer to his being. Another aspect of his nature is his obsession with an order, sometimes moral, sometimes spiritual, sometimes social, sometimes vaguely general, which eludes him teasingly. He gropes for a form, a pattern that can give relevance to his actions and coherence to his thoughts and feelings. His love for order clashed with the disorderliness of his life-style; his adoration of "ideals," clashed with his freaked temperament; as a result, these conflicts do not allow him to live up to his own expectations; his sense of purity and his proclivity for the profane — all these qualities create an unhappy situation in his psyche and wear him to a frazzle.

The third category, the Compassionate characters, is very frugally introduced into the arena of action. Strictly speaking they are neither predators nor victims; they are noble witnesses, though their compassionate nature gives them an appearance of partiality for the Fugitive protagonists. Hannah Jelkes in *The Night of the Iguanas* is the paradigm of this type. Shannon calls her "Thin-Standing-Up-Female-Buddha." She tells Shannon in Act 4: "Nothing human disgusts me, unless it is unkind, violent." She understands people, so she forgives them. Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, Stella in *A Streetcar*, Blackie in *The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, Carol in *Orpheus Descending*, Aunt Nonnie in *The Sweet Bird of Youth*, Doctor Cukrowicz in *Suddenly Last Summer*, Leonard in *Tokyo Hotel*, Bertha in *I Rise in Flames*, Monk in *Confessional*, Father de Leo in *The Rose Tattoo*, Old Man in "The Strangest Kind of Romance" and The Writer in "The Lady of the Larkspur Lotion" are such Hannah-like, Horatio-like characters who cling to those bedeviled *Fugitives* with love, sympathy, candor and quiet understanding. They give us an attitude to reconsider human possibilities and weaknesses. The presence of such characters is the sound of water beneath the desert bed

of Williams' bizarre sensationalism and perversions. This probably helps Christine Day (1978:xii). to discover in Williams "a tenderness towards humanity, a sympathy for human frustration that, perhaps, can result only from a personal understanding of human weaknesses." Day describes Williams as "a distiller of complexities of human nature" and discovers in him a "realism/idealism dichotomy."

The *Compassionate* characters are what Williams wishes his audience should be; they think what Williams wants his readers and spectators should think while reading or watching his plays. They are to his plays as Horatio is to Hamlet. They share with the *Fugitives* their sensibility, their inner conflicts, and their refusal of the status quo. Their cool and reflective temperament, their profound sympathy, their love for humanity, their capacity to accept defeat with fortitude often disarms antagonism. Such qualities appear more radiant when they are projected against a backdrop of cruelty and crudity of the *Naturalizers* and their miserable victims. Their very presence not only proves Williams' consummate theatricality and attitude towards a segment of population who, though they do not feel at home in a mindless set-up, are capable of retaining sanity and warmth of love for their fellow sufferers, but also infinitely enriches his plays.

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