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"A Streetcar Named Memory!"-The continuous presence of the past in Tennessee Williams' "A Streetcar Named Desire"

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Abstract:

Experience of time, in terms of a character, plays a mammoth role in comprehending her/his worldview. As the self is constituted by memories of past events, "the past" itself plays a significant role in making and sometimes destroying a character. In the play, " A Streetcar Named Desire" by Tennessee Williams, "past" appears in different forms something as a lost dream and sometimes as a nightmare. At the same time, there is an inherent ghost motif, concerning the memories of the central character Blanche's dead husband Allan. Using concepts like "duration" as propounded by Henri Bergson and Phenomenology, this paper seeks to examine the very presence of the past in the play.

Keywords: character, time, memory, duration, phenomenology

"A Streetcar Named Desire", a play by Tennessee Williams deals with certain integral issues which is manifested in a psychic dimension. In order to understand the characters properly it's necessary to look at their experiences of the theatrical events and what are the factors that constitute and manipulate it. The plot of the play itself features Blanche Du Bois, a southern Belle who comes to her sister Stella Kowalski in their apartment at the Elysian Fields region of New Orleans. Blanche finds herself an alien in the new place and unable to cope up with the situation there. Under the garb of self-fashioning, what Blanche has hidden, is an extreme emotional void and economic instability arising out of the loss of Belle Reve, their ancestral house. Meanwhile, we can notice a tug of war between Stanley, Stella's husband and Blanche keeping Stella at the centre. Stanley however discovers the vile promiscuous life Blanche has led after her husband's death, as well as the consequences it has led her to. Blanche tries to seduce and convince the sensible young man, Mitch, Stanley's friend to marry her, even at the cost of concealing her real age. But when Stanley discloses her past amorous adventures to him, he declines to marry her. After getting rejected by Mitch and losing all soothing illusions of her life, at the most unstable point of her existence Stanley rapes her. Unable to digest the shock and horror of her predicament, Blanche becomes insane. At the last scene, therefore, we see a crumbled, mentally unstable Blanche, going to asylum with the doctor whom she calls "stranger".

However this summarization, misses much of the theatrical as well as thematic complexities of the play, one of which is the presence of the past in the entire play.

Dead figures, be it animate or inanimate, influences the integral action of the whole play to a great extent.

To understand this past as a driving force, we can make use of "la durée", a concept propounded by Henri Bergeson. Bergson formulated this idea on the inadequacies of the thesis of Herbert Spencer.

According to him, time itself can transcend the limitations of science and mathematics. (Bergson) Though scientifically, time may remain constant, but in individual experience it might slow down or speed up. Therefore, to Bergson, the 'inner life' of a man is neither unity or measurable multiplicity but a kind of duration. (Bergson) This duration, according to him, is inexplicable and can only be shown via images, which can never showcase "the complete picture". (Bergson) Bergeson's theory of duration, however poses a challange to the apparent linearity of time and prefers the phenomenological experience of time over the scientific explanation of it. Indeed phenomenology, too forms a great deal of the theoritical framework from which we can understand the presence of the past in the play.

According to Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy,

"Phenomenology is the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view. The central structure of an experience is its intentionality, its being directed toward something, as it is an experience of or about some object. An experience is directed toward an object by virtue of its content or meaning (which represents the object) together with appropriate enabling conditions.

Phenomenology as a discipline is distinct from but related to other key disciplines in philosophy, such as ontology, epistemology, logic, and ethics. Phenomenology has been practiced in various guises for centuries, but it came into its own in the early 20th century in the works of Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and others. Phenomenological issues of intentionality, consciousness, qualia, and first-person perspective have been prominent in recent philosophy of mind." (SEP)

Thus phenomenology, as a study of consciousness, focuses mainly on how the world is perceived than what it is all about.

Now if "time" is taken as the object of study and looked at phenomenologically the coexistence of past and present can be treated as a very important thing.

It is important to notice that, past plays the role of the principal driving force behind the progression of events. Blanche ruminates much about her past in Belle Reve, her and Stella's ancestral house which has been lost, Stella makes a compromise between her past and present, Stanley tries to excavate Blanche's past in order to know the truth about her as well as Mitch rejects Blanche after coming to know about Blanche's past from Stanley.

In case of Blanche's past in Belle Reve, the memory of it fills her with an aristocratic spirit. She is able to forget her current destitute condition, by harking back to the times spent there. Thus past comes as a tender and nostalgic dream when we think of Blanche's ancestral home.

If the play is about the confrontation between Blanche and Stanley, "the past" itself comes in different forms to constitute and intensify it. In this case memory plays a mammoth role to experience their life as a "duration", in the duration of the play.

Though it's not explicitly an integral part of the play, we find Blanche disturbed by the memories of his dead husband Allan from the very beginning, though she tries to conceal it initially. The Varsouviana Polka here becomes an important tool through which the past remains forever present in her life. It was a tune to which she and her husband had danced for the last time in her life. Earlier that morning Blanche had seen him in bed with an older man. She says in Scene Six,

"He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery--love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking--still--that thing was there.... He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me--but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty--which wasn't empty, but had two people in it... the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years...." (Williams)

Her discovery that her husband Allan was a homosexual, was something she couldn't handle personally. Though after that she tried to pretend as if nothing happened and the three of them went out for dancing together, in midst of that Varsouviana polka, she told her that she knew everything and he "disgusted" her.

"Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way.
[Polka music sounds. In a minor key faint with distance.]
We danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later--a shot!
[The polka stops abruptly.]
[Blanche rises stiffly. Then, the polka resumes in a major key.]
I ran out--all did!--all ran and gathered about the terrible thing at the edge of the lake! I couldn't get near for the crowding. Then somebody caught my arm. "Don't go any closer! Come back! You don't want to see!" See? See what! Then I heard voices say--Allan! Allan! The Grey boy! He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired--so that the back of his head had been--blown away!

[She sways and covers her face.]
It was because--on the dance-floor--unable to stop myself--I'd suddenly said--"I saw! I know! You disgust me..." And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this--kitchen--candle..." (Williams)

This suicide of her husband, his disastrous end, in a way makes him frighteningly immortal in her life. We see the Varsouviana Polka playing at different phases of the play itself when Blanche is feeling guilt and grief for her husband's death. The first time it plays in scene one, when Stanley meets and asks her about her husband in Scene one of the play. Infact Stanley also becomes, another agent of her dead husband. Arthur Ganz in his essay, "The Desperate Morality of The Plays of Tennessee Williams" correlates the characters of Allan and Stanley,

"Although Kowalski's primary function, to destroy Blanche, is clear, there are certain ambiguities evoked by his role. By becoming Blanche's destroyer, Kowalski also becomes the avenger of her homosexual husband. Although he is Williams' melodramatic exaggeration of the Lawrentian lover, the embodiment of admired male sexuality, it is appropriate from Williams' point of view that Kowalski should to some degree be identified with the lonely homosexual who had been driven to suicide..." (Ganz)

This comparison between Allan and Stanley takes us to another function of past : i.e. the past as ghost. Stanley is virile, strong and exuberantly masculine in nature, much a foil to Allan who is dead. It seems therefore, in order to bring justice to his life, Allan returns in a much more demonic form of Stanley after his death. But here also, even as an agent of justice for a dead weaker man, the stronger Stanley too commits a terrible crime at the end. However, looking at the stark contrasts between the two, we cannot deny the motif of the spectre of the past destabilizing the present of Blanche.

Stanley too, isn't free from the past. As Blanche's present ia haunted by her past Stanley's insecurities about his immigrant past comes to the surface in scene seven of the play, when Blanche calls him a polack:

"BLANCHE: I've said I was sorry three times.
[The piano fades out.]
I take hot baths for my nerves. Hydro-therapy, they call it. You healthy Polack, without a nerve in your body, of course you don't know what anxiety feels like!

STANLEY: I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack. " (Williams)

This proves the fact that under the garb of strength, Stanley is haunted by his past in tbis new land as well.

In a drama, the phenomenological view of world predominates over everything, and taking Bergson's idea of duration into account, we find that the experience of time in the play is quite

subjective here, often laden with an inseparable attachment for the past defying the scientific interpretation of it. In this context however Blanche's lines "I don't want realism. I want magic!" gains a different theatrical significance.

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