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Literature and Mythology: The Myth of Dionysus in Tennessee Williams' Battle of Angels and Orpheus Descending: Translating Repression

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Tennessee Williams is recognized as one of the foremost playwrights to have emerged in the American theater in the twentieth century. He was part of the rich tradition of the Old South and one of the most prolific American writers who turned out plays, film scripts, short stories, and poems, articles on theater, memoirs, and interviews.

His early work consisted of poems, short stories, or one-act plays. As he later admitted, his "longer plays emerged out of earlier one-act plays or short stories, written years before he worked over them again and again." (Jackson, 1965:55). Most of his poems, published in *Five Young American Poets* (1944), were revised and incorporated in a later volume, *In the Winter of Cities* (1964). His collection of short stories *One Arm and Other Stories* (1948) reflects, like his poems, Williams' wandering years in grim apartments and city streets inhabited by lost souls. His short plays in the collection *American Blues* (1948) won a prize and an introduction to the literary agent Audrey Wood.

Williams' emergence as a major was initiated with the opening of his poetic drama, *The Glass Menagerie*, which was greeted with great enthusiasm in 1945 in New York City. This play promised a new epoch in American stage history, and its opening has been compared to mark the beginning of a new era such as the production of Corneille's *Le Cid* (1636), Molière's *le Docteur Amoureux* (1658), or Chekov's *The Seagull* (1898).

From then on, Williams tried for many decades to create works that appealed to the public. His dedication to writing is remarkable, and he has repeatedly called it his reason for living. The main motive behind his prolific creation was to interpret reality in a universal language. Like O'Neill, he chose for popular theater an ancient Greek myth that dealt with the exposure of suffering; and the South offered him the background for the portrayal of man's primordial suffering in an unfriendly universe.

Williams' use of myth aspires to a symbolic representation of human suffering in our time. The critics seem to agree that three major schemata appear behind Williams' mythic structure: "the ritual myth of the theater, the literary myth of the twentieth century American, and the Freudian-Jungian myth of modern man." (Ibid: 75)

The ritual legends of the ancient Greeks and particularly the archetypal myth of the "dying god", who bears the name "Dionysus" for the Western World, can be considered Williams' prime source of inspiration. The Christian ritual and the passion plays were later reenactment of the Dionysian "sparagmos", that is, death by dismemberment or lynching, which is probably the most appropriately chosen example of the archetypal myth of suffering. As for the psychological systems of Freud and Jung, they are both concerned with the apprehensions of modern man and explain them in the light of their archetypal significance with reference to the Dionysian cycle of birth, sparagmos and rebirth.

Where Freud and psychoanalysis provide Williams with an insight for the description of archetypal suffering in humanity (Oedipal and locasta complexes, for example), Jung's more poetic nature also shares with the playwright the belief that art's role is as a reconciling symbol mechanism by which the conflicts of life might be resolved. (Jung,1963: 37). The Dionysian myth for both its ritual of "sparagmos" that portrayed the archetypal image of suffering, as well as the genesis of theatre which sprang from that ritual, gives to the presentation of the "katharsis" or the process of purification a means of relief from existing tensions and conflicts.

Williams' use of the Dionysian myth is evident in his theater. A very interesting sample of this use can be found in *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*. Both plays present various treatments of the ritual and the myth in the playwright's effort to give a universal meaning to the plights of modern man.

Battle of Angels (1940) is one of Williams' favorite plays. The use of Dionysus in the play expresses the playwright himself who believed that *Battle of Angels* was "coming directly from his heart as an expression of fundamental human hungers." (Hiersh,1979: 9). It has been often labeled as "the root of Williams' plays, a powerful mixture of sex, violence and religion." (Ibid: 69). He revised it on and off for seventeen years before its mature version, *Orpheus Descending*, appeared in 1957.

Val Xavier, the play's wandering hero, is described as a young Dionysus, symbol of primitive male sexuality: "he is about 25 years old. He has a fresh and primitive quality, a visible grace and freedom of body, and a strong physical appeal." (Williams, 1950: 132). The snakeskin jacket that he carries also corresponds to one of Dionysus' epiphanies.

Val's arrival disturbs the conservative Southern community and has the same effects as Dionysus' arrival in Kadmeia: the male townsfolk despise him while the deprived matrons are irresistibly attracted to him. Myra, Cassandra, and Vee represent different types of female characters whose attraction to Val emphasizes the general sexual appeal of the Dionysus figure.

Sandra, a Southern counterpart of the legendary Cassandra of Troy, speaks of the situation of the women: *Don't you know what those women are suffering from: sexual malnutrition! They look at you with eyes that scream "Eureka"*. (Ibid: 136). The epithet "Bacchantes" is appropriate for these women not only because of their sexual

hunger, but also due to their love for ecstasy, music, dance and liquor - tastes that distinguished Dionysus' revels. (Frazer, 1923: 435).

The legendary Cassandra, Sandra's ancestor, was Apollo's priestess. As Sandra says, "The first (Cassandra) was a little Greek girl who slept in the shrine of Apollo." (Williams, 1956:135). This Cassandra had her doctrine contradicted and was advised to become Dionysian by dancing, getting drunk, and "raising hell at Moon Lake Casino." The moon, Dionysian symbol, replaces the Apollonian sun as Dionysus was son of Zeus and of Semele (moon) daughter of the king of Thebes. All the women - Cassandra's descendants - during the process of their emancipation replace the worship of the Apollonian sun with that of the Dionysian moon. Both Sandra and Myra, dream of happiness in the orchard across Moon Lake. There is a lunar allure over the decor dominated by moon colors - silver and white. Myra, enraptured with the music, exclaims:

*Me out for? Silver and white! Music! Dancing! The orchard
across from Moon Lake (...) I'm whirling; I'm dancing faster and
faster! I'm surrounded by people. (Ibid: 180).*

The fact that Myra is "surrounded by people" is very important to her. The free contact with the others guarantees her emancipation, as it did in the case of the Maenads who escaped from the family hearth to dance amidst a crowd of revelers on the Grecian hills. (Frazer, 1923: 230).

Myra wishes to be liberated in this manner and be an active participant in the Dionysian revels. Her elation is interrupted by the reality of Jade's presence, her old husband, who reminds her of her reluctant attachment to a marriage of convenience.

The women (Sandra, Myra, Dolly, Beulah) also reveal their Dionysian temperament during their conversation on Mardi Gras, a carnival originating from the Dionysian rites, during which the participants enjoyed, as in the primitive festivities, Music, dance, and sexual liberty. The women's dream for an everlasting "Mardi Gras situation" is put into words by Sandra:

Myra: How is Mardi this year?

*Sandra: As marvelously as usual. If I were refawning the world I'd make it
last forever. (Williams, 1950:154).*

It is not surprising that later Myra sees in Val the movements of a "carnival dancer." (Ibid: 165) He is the Dionysus who sets the town's female population to dancing. Val has actually taken up a job as a shoe-fitter and his touch has, indeed, set the women in Two Rivers County to a Maenadic dance. (Ibid: 160)

Dionysus' escort consisted of minorities, primarily of the Maenads and then of the deformed little monsters of mythology: the goat-footed Pan, the Satyrs, the Silenoi. (Frazer, 1923: 530) In this manner, Val, except for the infatuation that he causes in the other sex, has a positive attitude towards black men. Val's treatment of a gifted black guitarist irritates the

sheriff and the other townsmen who express their possible fear that Val had come down to organize the Negroes (Williams, 1950: 185). At this point; one of the men cries out:

You know what I do when I see a snake? (...)
I get me a good stick to pin it down with. Then I scotch
it under the heel of my boot- scotch its goddam yellow
gizzards out. (Ibid: 186).

This threat as well as Vee's vision of Val at the lynching tree comment on his imminent sparagmos. But in *Battle of Angels* Val's end comes somewhat abruptly; all that is left of him is the snakeskin jacket, "this vividly mottled object, which though inanimate, still keeps about it the hard, immaculate challenge of things untamed. (Ibid: 234). The account of Val's lynching-"sparagmos" is given later in the Epilogue by the women who stare at the snakeskin jacket that has remained miraculously fresh and clean throughout time. It has been called "a souvenir of the jungle," "a shameless flaunting symbol of the Beast untamed." (Ibid). The fact that the snakeskin jacket was placed in a museum and was not affected by time signifies that while Val himself died a human death; his memory survived throughout time. Snakes were regarded as incarnations of the dead. On the other hand, the serpent relates to the myth of Dionysus' birth and his metamorphoses. (Graves, 1959: 103).

Williams' early universe deals with man's primitive state of consciousness. In *Battle of Angels* the analogues of the mythological archetypes give archetypal meaning to various drives of modern man. *Battle of Angels* uncovers the Dionysian consciousness in Modern America. In the southern city of the play, this consciousness is translated into the violence of lynching-"sparagmos".

The Dionysian symbolism becomes richer in the later version of, the play, *Orpheus Descending* (1957). This title is more suggestive of the mythic element in the play. Val-Orpheus is no longer a writer, who tells the truth, but a musician, like his legendary counterpart (Williams, 1957: 194). In either case, he always remains an artist. Like Dionysus, Val represents both fertility and sexual power while at the same time he is intellectually and artistically gifted. The dance of the Maenads did not remain a mere exaltation of the new religion and the sexual liberty that Dionysus granted. It greatly contributed to art as the song and the dance of the rites led to the making of tragedy.

Val's artistic inclinations reflect Williams' belief in the artist's abilities that shake and reform the world. Val brings salvation through both his male sexual identity and his art. His journey to the southern town Two Rivers County parallels that of Orpheus in the underworld. Val brings music, enchantment, and fertility to the community. The violent reaction is inevitable; he will act as the "dying god" in the necessary primitive ritual.

The "dying god" and the mutual re-enactment of the dying process is probably the most popular rite of passage in world mythology. Williams' dying Dionysus seeks to expose the savagery still extant in the twentieth century man. The collective unconscious which governs the characters and the mob, in particular, recalls Jung's theories of a universal and impersonal nature, a nature which is identical in all individuals.

In *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending*, Williams makes use of many symbols of mythical association which give archetypal meaning to the personal plight of modern man. The predominant myth of Dionysus' "sparagmos" relates to most of the mythical symbol and ritual patterns that Williams uses to elaborate the plays' imagery.

There is the Dionysian idyllic wine garden in the orchard on Moon Lake. Its grape vines and fruit trees are as fertile as the youthful couples who frequent it. The passion of David for Lady bears fruit in her conceiving. When the Mystic Crew burns down this Dionysian grove, everything collapses. Lady's father, the creator of the wine garden, is burned alive in his effort to save his property. His violent death is a ritual sacrifice that presages the similar fortune that awaits the protagonist. The importance of the Dionysian garden for Lady signifies the necessity of its existence for every individual. The burning out of the garden and its owner is a Dionysian "sparagmos" which marks the end of the spring followed by a physical and moral wasteland. Lady has an abortion and marries 'death' represented by Jabe Torrance, an old sterile man, one of those who set fire to the garden. Lady will keep on trying to recreate the wine garden. Val's arrival, as a new Dionysian god, naturally concurs with Lady's effort to turn the confectionery into a Dionysian grove:

Electric moon, cut out silver-paper stars and artificialvines? Why it's her father's wine garden on Moon-Lake She's turned this room into! (Williams, 1975: 124).

In this artificial grove, she tries to reenact with Val her Dionysian ritual, and their passion leads again to fertility and conception, but as seasons change, the ritual of the "dying god" takes place. Val-Orpheus is burned alive, Lady's father and Lady herself is murdered as she attempts to protect Val. Unfortunately technology cannot replace nature's wilderness. As Carol, David's sister, exclaims:

This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts, for each other, but now it's sick neon, it's broken out sick, with neon, like most other places... (Ibid: 127).

The stories that Lady has told are also allegories related to her dream of restoring the wine garden. The allegory of the barren fig-tree which suddenly bears fruit is a Dionysian symbol of Lady's rebirth in the fertility as the fig tree stands as the symbol for sexual intercourse. The story of the monkey who was too old to dance and dropped dead is also an allegory of Lady herself trying in vain to revitalize her youthfulness. But "the show is over, the monkey is dead. (Ibid: 125).

Williams named the second version of the play *Orpheus Descending* and critics have invented several interpretations relating to the mythological Orpheus. Like his mythological prototype, Val is a wandering minstrel and his guitar correlative to the Orphic lyre. When he arrives at Two River County, Val's ideals are those of Apollonian Orphism: civilized behavior and peace. It is interesting to note that the name "Orpheus" is derived from "ophruoeis" which means on the river bank (Graves, 114). It is that Orpheus had preached homosexual love (Ibid: 113). However, the Dionysian Maenads who inhabit the town will not

let an Apollonian Orpheus in peace among them. Cassandra, the ex-Apollonian priestess, who has herself become Dionysian, foresees Val's doom.

Val chooses Lady Torrance to be the play's Eurydice. Eurydice was the serpent grasping ruler of the underworld (Ibid: 128). Their relationship is fatal for him. After impregnating the female, he will become the male sacrifice offered to the goddess of the underworld. Lady-Eurydice remains permanently in the underworld while Val-Orpheus is executed by Jabe, Lady's husband, who is also the play's Pluto, Death King of the underworld. Val is inevitably led to a violent analogue of Orphic "sparagmos": immolation by blowtorch administered by the males of the town.

The mythological Orpheus, priest of Apollo, refused to honor Dionysus and preached the evil of sacrificial murder (Frazer, 1923: 434). In vexation Dionysus set on him the Maenads who murdered Orpheus and tore him limb from limb. In Williams's collection of poems, *In the Winter of Cities*, there is also a poem entitled, "Orpheus Descending", which starts with Orpheus's descent to the world of the dead and ends with Orpheus's dismemberment:

*Now Orpheus, crawl, O shameful fugitive, crawl
back under the crumbling broken wall of yourself, for you are not stars, sky-
set in the shape of a lyre, but the dust of those who have been dismembered by
furies. (Williams, 1964: 28).*

From then on, Orpheus does not appear in mythology in conflict with the cult of Dionysus, but as the principal in Dionysian rites who suffers the same fate as the god. (Graves, 1959: 114) In this manner, Williams' Orpheus identifies with Dionysus. As Dionysus' artistic vocation was more human and less sublime, Val's guitar, in the same way, has both the power of a mythic orphic lyre and of an earth-bound phallic symbol. As an artist, Val has also a personal vision of freedom: a bird with legs that has to keep afloat on its wings but which, because of that, is protected from the hawks which cannot see him when he flies against the sun (ibid:32). That winged serpent is another Dionysian symbol, which illustrates Val's Dionysian nature. The snake bird is a spring migrant employed in erotic charms symbol of the artist who is fluctuating between heaven and earth naturally. When Val dies, he leaves behind him the snakeskin-concrete symbol of his own earthly nature.

In Williams' plays, art and violence are related in a particular way. Vee Talbott, the sheriff's wife, has become a painter as a result of her witnessing violence "from seats down front at the show".

*Val: You live in two River County, the wife of the county Sheriff. You
saw awful things take place. Vee: Awful! Things!*

Val: Beatings!

Vee: Yes!

Val: Lynchings!

Vee: Yes!

... (Williams, 1976: 124).

Battle of Angels and *Orpheus Descending* trace Val's tragic progress as a young artist (writer/musician) who sets off the above chain reaction of human cruelties. Val's death is the climax of an entire complex of transgressions which, in the private and public consciousness of the community, required a victim. The need for a victim is an archaic drive which has not been left out of the civilized man. In private consciousness, it finds expression in murder (Jabe), while in the public consciousness in group violence (lynching, for example).

The sacrificial victim is usually an outsider and a newcomer. The "niggers" who suffered lynching as a common practice are outsiders from another continent. Papa Romero, Lady's father is also an immigrant, a "wop from the old country." (ibid: 113). It is interesting that the sacrificial victims are mainly life-giving forces and symbols of fertility; the blacks labored in the Deep South for the fertility of the land. Papa Romero worked to create a wine garden, also a symbol of life and fertility. In his turn, Val is the potent young male who revitalizes every female.

At the end of the plays, Val leaves behind his snakeskin jacket. The serpent epiphany of Dionysus corresponds to winter in the calendar of the tripartite year, and, in fact, with Val's "holocaust" spring ends and winter follows in the Southern town.

Battle of Angels and *Orpheus Descending* tell about the advent of Val-Dionysus, the revival that he brings to the Southern city, and end with his death-"sparagmos" that is commemorated by the inclusion of the snakeskin jacket in the local museum.

It is clear that, through the rite of his theater, Tennessee Williams universalizes man's existential struggle from the American point of view. His choice of the Dionysian myth reveals the playwright's optimism in a world where violence and death should be always followed by the hope of rebirth. Depending upon different circumstances in Williams' life, his works reflect the absence of rebirth, or renewal.

Williams' mythicization and ritualization of themes demonstrate his perception of the world as a stage, where universal truths could be revealed. Williams deals with the Dionysian double as it is mirrored in modern man's dilemma: his choice between life and death, body and soul, and all the dichotomies that American arts and letters reflected at the end of World War II.

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