

TRIUMPH OF HUMAN VALUES OVER NIHILISM: A STUDY OF WILLIAMS' PLAY BATTLE OF ANGELS

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Tennessee Williams (1911-1983), one of the distinguished American dramatists in twentieth century, covered a life span of nearly seven decades. He belonged to an unsettled family arising out of parental differences towards life. He suffered much - owing apparently to the socio-economic consequences of two World Wars and the Great Economic Depression of the 1930s. Further, an early childhood plagued by illness - a near-fatal bout of diphtheria left him in later days lacking in boyish sprightly robustness.

It is in this perspective; one can fruitfully examine Williams' ideas on life and reality. His is an individualistic approach; and as such, he did not want himself to be thrown overboard by the evil-propelled destructive forces. The irrational violence associated with ideological fanaticism of modern terrorism and nihilism that rose in political firmament in nineteenth and twentieth century is an expression of the destructive spirit of our times. By virtue of his heightened poetic sensibility, Tennessee Williams has been able to convey even the sordid aspects of life in a softened hue. The playwright believed that the poetry of life in no case be bestialized. Without the sublimatory effect of love, the sexual-act is beastly.

His tendency to explore darkling and sordid themes of modern humanity has made him aware of the utter isolation of men and women trapped in unspeakable conditions of social life. Usually, his dramatic characters face the difficulty of communication; still theirs is a solitary search for human values in the tension-ridden, chaotic world of today.

Two of his plays, *Battle of Angels* and *Orpheus Descending* have a common theme, which is concerned with the exploitation of women in the well-entrenched conventional atmosphere. Too much gross materialism engendered by the social vested interest makes women abnormal, getting them alcoholic or theirs becoming subdued and getting oppressed by social suffocation. *Battle of Angels* by Williams is a highly symbolic play. There is a small town in the southern U.S.A. An unusual drama, possessing a high degree of somberness and occasional flashes of hope and happiness, gets unrolling after the arrival of a freedom-loving man, known as Valentine Xavier whose name implies the personal traits of both love and saviour Val Xavier has a peculiar charm over well-established women and others. At the same time the male members associated with these women *Sandra Whiteside*: Cassandra-type aristocratic nymphomaniac, *Vee Talbot*: a painter and religious eccentric, as also wife to the local Sheriff; and Myra, in her mid-thirties, is trapped in a

loveless marriage to Jabe Torrance the owner of the dry goods store. He is much older a man to Myra and is said to be suffering from cancer,

Into this socio-cultural setting of a small town comes the young, virile, itinerate poet, Val Xavier. He finds a job at the Torrance's shop. The racial tension prevails in the town; for Myra's father who did not accept the racial taboos of the town was burnt alive inside the Casino owned by him. Jabe Torrance, smitten with jealousy towards Val Xavier, told his wife, Myra that it was he who was responsible for her father's death. He then shoots her holding Val Xavier responsible for her death. Then, Val is hung and burnt by the sheriff's posse. To Myra -- before being hung, Val Xavier told: 'You can't understand that it is to be hounded by somebody's hate.', on which, Myra commented: " Terrible, hopeless, twisted kind of love."¹³⁸

In modern civilisation, such type of experience is becoming quite common. 'A terrible, hopeless, twisted kind of love' considered worse than the straight-forward hatred. The twisted form of love has become very much common because being burdened with too much cleverness, we have lost the natural track of truthful expression. Cleverness disfigures hearty feelings. In her appreciation of Val Xavier, Sandra Whiteside -- one of the women to come under his influence said: "You -- savage. And me -- Aristocrat. Both of us like things whose licence has been revoked in the civilized world. Both of us equally damned... Because we both want freedom of course, I know you were really better than me. A whole lot better. I'm rotten. Neurotic. Our blood's gone bad from too much interbreeding. They've set up the guillotine, not in the place de Concord, but here, inside our own bodies!"¹³⁹ It is a criticism of civilized life, for the social convention has stifled our natural freedom and individuality. Men and women get guillotined within themselves right in the very centre of our metropolitan cities.

In the see-saw, tense equation of social life arising out of the ceaseless conflict between the creative individuals with sharp sensibility, and the obtrusively headed leaders behind the social convention, the stakes are generally loaded against creative individuals, on account of their being unorganized, and also lacking in wealth. As a consequence of this unequal battle, creative men and women are left with only two choices -- either to betray themselves or to continue the silent battle in pain and agony. This see-saw battle is all the more arduous for women so situated. The conflict and tension in Myra Torrance, Sandra Whiteside and Yee Talbot grew all the more after the arrival of Val Xavier in the small town of the South; for he was considered the main enemy of the social vested interest -- wedded to a policy of corruption, parasitism and exploitation.

They play *Orpheus Descending* (1957) is a revised version of *Battle of Angels* (1940) and it is almost similar to the earlier play, excepting that Myra now is to be known as Lady, and Sandra as Carol Cutrere. However, in the revised play, the identity of Val Xavier is also changed. In the earlier play, Val was a wandering poet, in the new play, he is a musician, wielding guitar. He has been cast in the image of the ancient Orpheus in Greek mythology. "... In the myth Orpheus

descends into Hades to rescue his beloved Euridice from death's kingdom, where Pluto reigns. The gods grant Orpheus this visit because of the beautiful music he makes with his lyre, music that charms even wild beasts. The legend counterpoises transcendence through love with flight and defeat by death. After winning Euridice, only to lose her again as he departs from the underworld. Orpheus meets his death at the hands of maenads, women playing a wild bacchic rite. When he rejects they tear him limb from limb."⁴⁰

Williams has used symbolically of Orpheus in his play in which one finds that the love of Val Xavier for Lady is essentially a triumph of life over death. Until the arrival of Val Xavier, Lady was dying a slow death out of mental depression. There was a big gap between the wave-length of Lady and that of her husband Jabe Torrance, the proprietor of Torrance Mercantile Store. His greed for money-making and hidebound acts made his wife, Lady sulk silently. Under the prevailing situation, Lady looked at Jabe Torrance as a monster, not mean who is responsive to the delicate side of life. Val Xavier provided Lady a new dimension of life. For Val Xavier, his guitar was a priceless possession. At one stage, he was impelled to say that the guitar-playing 'makes me clean like water when anything unclean has touched me.'⁴¹ As a superb man of creativity, he exercised an elemental impact on the tired and subdued sensibility of women. The three female characters: Lady Torrance, Carol Cutrere and Vee Talbot were entranced in his presence. The play makes it clear that Val Xavier, the guitarist, was a man of simplicity and purity. To play cleverness was foreign to his genius. Williams knew that those who want to be pure, must first become simple. On the basis of Val Xavier's character, one can safely infer that Williams believed in the sublimity of life. To strive for a sublime life experience in a world surrounded by the thick miasma of darkness is not an easy proposition: but as Val Xavier did so, he needs to be appreciated and commended fulsomely. In conclusion, it may also be stated that the gross materialism that runs through the lanes and by lanes of the world of social convention provides a subsoil for breeding nihilism, terrorism and violence. As such, a man of creativity has got to be keenly aware of the conventional value-system. To conform to it is to invite the slow deterioration in life strength; and, alternatively, even when one tries to come out of its stranglehold -- as was the case with Lady and Val Xavier -- one is put to death. Jabe Torrance, husband to the Lady, had killed his wife earlier; and then, he had instigated the mob to blowtorch Val Xavier. Jabe Torrance's nihilistic acts pitted against the simplicity and nobility of Val Xavier are convincing and bring about the desired effect-profession of truth and establishment of human values.

REFERENCES:

1. Williams, *Battle of Angels*, (New York: New Directions, 1945) p. 315
2. *Ibid.*, p. 316