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Desire and Decay: Female Survivorship in Faulkner and Williams

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Tennessee Williams often constructed his female characters within the context of their relationships to men, yet he did so with an astonishing attention to women's particular sexual, social, and familial roles in the South in the early twentieth century. In this regard, Williams's work may be profitably examined alongside another Mississippi master, William Faulkner. Indeed, an analysis of Williams's women in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948), and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) might even suggest a comparison with female characters in the major novels of Faulkner. Yet Williams's plays of the 1940s and 1950s examine womanhood and sexuality on a more intimate, psychological scale than within Faulkner's scope of attention. It is almost as though Williams inherits Faulkner's southern female model and dissects it. One might even argue that Williams's female characters, in an intentional authorial maneuver, engage in a dialogue with Faulkner's on the failure of patriarchy and the decay of a bygone culture—the result of which is, in Williams's plays, a specialized, regional *survivorship* for women who struggle valiantly against cultural forces of decay and death.

¶2

Although the two authors had little actual contact, despite being born only fourteen years and less than one hundred miles apart, Williams clearly admired the older Faulkner. He came to Faulkner's defense in a 1935 letter written to Josephine Winslow Johnson while visiting Memphis for the first time:

Recently visited William Faulkner's home. In his home-town they call him "The Count" because he's so stuck-up. Seldom recognizes anyone on the street. But I think he's just absent-minded, like me and most other great writers. He's now conducting an air-circus. Does stunts in his airplane with a parachute-jumper every Sunday afternoon. So everyone in Mississippi thinks he's crazy... (Devlin 76)

Williams's comments at age twenty-four reflect a younger-brother kind of respect for a maverick elder in his field.

¶3

Albert J. Devlin and Nancy M. Tischler, editors of Williams's collected letters, note that as he was working on a revision of *Battle of Angels* in 1939, he was also reading Faulkner's *The Wild Palms*. They claim that "Faulkner had realized the same kind of fugitive love that Tennessee Williams was trying to make 'plausible' in *Battle of Angels*. Both used the folkways of the Delta and its periodic flooding to ground their tales of extravagant love" (218). This insight reveals an interrelationship between the works of the writers, as well as a possible influence of Faulkner upon Williams. Both writers use the violence of natural disaster as catalyst for explosive encounter.

¶4

On the decay of southern culture, Williams commented that it was "out of a regret for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it" (Holditch x). Unlike Faulkner, who by and large explores southern modernity on a societal, ideological level, Williams seems to be interested in its personal, psychological implications. For Williams, the historical past demonstrably exists, yet it ultimately becomes secondary to his characters' personal pasts. The departure Williams makes from the Faulkner literary inheritance with respect to characterization of women is a psychological approach, whereas Faulkner's is regional and social.

¶15 Faulkner's physically ill and malcontent women exist in a web of cultural and social decay without much overt explanation within the text of why they are so, or what made them so. In contrast, Williams's women are given subjective voice to declare the social and cultural causes of their physical, mental, and spiritual decay. It is the decline of Belle Reve and the deaths of family and plantation community members to which Blanche attributes her ruin, and it is the neglect of men and society, and the loss of their respective attentions, that Amanda Wingfield blames in *The Glass Menagerie* for her own wasting away as well as the perceived wasting away of her daughter, Laura. This is an important distinction between Faulkner and Williams: Faulkner's women reflect the economic and sociological problems of the New South, while Williams's women reflect the psychological ramifications of those same problems.

¶16 Each author created a number of female characters with discernable endurance, yet Faulkner emphasizes a ruddy degree of physical strength—for example, in Eula Varner and Caddy Compson—exceeding that of most Williams women. While Maggie's determination to secure financial stability, Stella Kowalski's steadfastness toward her husband, and even Blanche's fleeting moments of self-defense may be indicators of female strength, the Williams women are most often described in their progressively weakening condition—they are fragile victims of systematic and personal destruction. Arguably, it may be a Faulknerian vein woven into their fabric, then, that gives them the strength to endure the crumbling or shifting southern culture around them. If Williams is interested in the cracks, Faulkner is interested in the foundation.

¶17 The "cracks" in Williams's female characters are often fault lines in their sexual identity. Female sexuality is a source of fluctuating strength and weakness in women within Faulkner and Williams. Stella and Blanche are interdependent experiments in female sexuality within a social-psychological framework, meaning that the entire script of *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be analyzed purely according to the two women's varying sexual responses to the virile Stanley. They are related to such "earth goddess" figures in Faulkner's novels as Lena Grove and Eula Varner, discussed by many critics in relation to sexual representation and desire. Cleanth Brooks sees Lena and Eula in the contexts of the earth goddess model and the fertility figure model. Brooks's frame fits neatly around Williams's Stella—a character whose trajectory in the play is incomplete without pregnancy. In this respect, Lena, Eula, and Stella are all women defined by their outward effect on men.

¶18 The case of Faulkner's Lena, a pregnant and solitary wanderer, centers on her search for the father of her child and her acceptance of Byron Bunch's love. Although Lena's circumstances differ from the domestic coupling of the Kowalskis, both she and Stella share an almost pigheaded loyalty to their respective men and an acceptance of masculine protection. In contrast, Brooks identifies the young Eula Varner as an alternate kind of Faulknerian goddess—the object of desire, rather than the acquired object of desire. Especially as the play progresses, Blanche is neither the object of desire nor the acquired object of desire. In her maturity at the time the action of *Streetcar* begins, she fails to exude Eula's spellbinding power. The reader/audience is assured that Blanche had the capacity for sexual conquest of men in her youth. She in fact exerts it to a degree on Mitch until he sees through her. (Paradoxically, he tries to ravish her only after her true history that Stanley "writes" is revealed.) But Blanche is not the only woman among Williams's characters who struggles with a sense of lost sexual power.

¶19 Williams's Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is proud of her ability to turn the heads of male onlookers. The sexual pull she exerts on other men is a weapon she wields to convince her estranged husband Brick that she is still attractive. Maggie, like Blanche, is well versed in using conscious sexuality as a weapon. Yet it is essential

to see in these characters that they mourn the loss of sexual power. Maggie both apologizes for and defends her sexuality. She abhors what she sees as conventional southern motherhood embodied in her fecund sister-in-law Mae. Yet she freely defends her growing sexual desire for Brick and her wish to have a child with him on her own terms. Williams's Blanche, Maggie, and Stella—as well as Faulkner's Eula and Lena—comprise two types of symbolic femininity within the context of the South: the fertility figure of attraction, and the sexual figure of adversity. With the latter, Faulkner and Williams are creating a rhetorical tension between two roles for women: woman spurned by man due to her desires, and woman as sexual predator.

¶10 Cleanth Brooks makes a claim for Faulknerian women that holds true for Williams's female characters as well—that they are ultimately figures of strength even within the context of illness, failure, and cultural decay. It is women's ultimate role in the work of these two southern writers to play the survivor. Critic Suzanne Pedretti Brown discusses Caddy Compson of *The Sound and the Fury* in terms that align Caddy with women in the plays of Williams. Caddy is a survivor even in childhood, much like Blanche DuBois. Caddy is the belle, the apple of the family's eye. Her willfulness and the strength of her personality lead to her social demise. Faulkner's appendix to *The Sound and the Fury* imagines the adult Caddy in a Blanche DuBois kind of exile. When time and age are considered, it is easy to imagine that young Caddy could evolve into the Blanche figure who arrives in New Orleans out of desperation; her appearance, hidden from harsh lighting, is symbolic of the crumbling of a bygone pre-war culture and comfortable way of life.

¶11 Note the hauntingly Belle Reve-like reference with which Faulkner critic Donald Kartiganer interprets Faulkner: “*The Sound and the Fury* portrays family tribulation as a decline from greatness: idiocy, madness, alcoholism, promiscuity, and theft as symptoms of a tragic Fall of Southern Princes” (Kartiganer 324). This “tragic fall” mentioned by Kartiganer is similar to the fall Blanche experiences from her Belle Reve life as she becomes a pariah. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley accuses her of atrocities that echo Kartiganer's list: idiocy, madness, alcoholism, promiscuity, and theft. Although written for Faulkner, Kartiganer's argument is valid for Williams.

¶12 Like Blanche, the anachronistic Amanda Wingfield is a desperate survivor of a bygone era. She reigns over the family in *The Glass Menagerie* with a faux voice of authority similar to that of Blanche DuBois, yet Amanda's situation promotes the scrutiny of social rather than sexual roles. Her futility and pride in her past translate into aggression, anxiety, and a need to dominate her children.

¶13 Williams's Amanda is similar in this sense to Faulkner's Mrs. Compson in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929). Mrs. Compson is ill and aloof—yet attempts to control with rigidity and selfishness the younger family members through whom she lives vicariously. Amanda mothers like Mrs. Compson, crushing her daughter with exaggerated tales of the triumphs of her youth as a noted beauty, while claiming the attentions and duties of her son in the role of caretaker over her. Both mothers in the Compson and Wingfield families are suffering from a social and sexual decay—against a backdrop of disintegration of a cultural framework experiencing transition. With Amanda, Williams creates a character like Faulkner's Mrs. Compson, but with additional psychological layers that enrich the characterization.

¶14 Williams critic Signi Falk discusses Williams's intention to document such survivorship amidst cultural decline. Falk identifies a threadbare or “seedy” quality inherent within female southern gentility in Williams. Falk's use of the word “seedy” is critical as a symptom of decay: witness the phony nature of Blanche's finery and Amanda's disintegrating gowns and faded jonquil memories. Both Faulkner and Williams attempt to

explain in their mother figures a degree of shameful beauty and wasteful bounty—as though the women that they knew and the women that they wrote had no positive place in an emerging society that had no use for the belle or the matriarch.

¶15 Ultimately, Faulkner’s and Williams’s themes of decay result in a rhetorical examination of death in their respective novels and plays. Complex struggle against death is a crucial dynamic in the characterization of Williams’s women—particularly Blanche and Amanda. Age itself is a form of “death” to their younger selves. Critic Felicia Londré notes that in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche rails against death in a rhetorical sense. Only when Stella has gone to the hospital to give birth is Blanche confronted by the death figure of the Mexican flower seller who calls, “*flores para los muertos*,” or “flowers for the dead.” Thus, Williams sketches Stella as a birthing figure, embraced by the future, and Blanche as hovering on a threshold of imminent psychological death.

¶16 Death encircles women in Faulkner as well: in *As I Lay Dying*, in the funeral of *The Sound and the Fury*, in the dead ancestors of Joanna Burden, and in the dying figure of Charlotte Rittenmeyer in *The Wild Palms*, among others. The presence of the coffin in *As I Lay Dying* seems to be evoked by Williams in Blanche’s *Streetcar* speech on the stifling series of deaths at Belle Reve, where bodies were “So big with [disease], [they] couldn’t be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish!” (Williams 261). Blanche wants to escape death by fleeing to her sister’s home in New Orleans, but death symbolically follows her.

¶17 The subject of loss in the major works of Faulkner and Williams is of central importance, and both writers were clearly driven by a need to articulate that loss beyond their female characterizations. An early poem of Williams’s—“Mornings on Bourbon Street”—invokes death-as-educator:

*He thought of the rotten-sweet odor the Old Quarter had,
So much like a warning of what he would have to learn.* (Leverich 286)

The poem is a touchstone for the cultural and psychological landscape that drives the thematic loss found at the heart of Faulkner’s and Williams’s writing. There is isolation and disconnectedness from those who have gone before. Death figures in dramatic action—stripping loved ones and social fabric away. In a social process of decay and disintegration, protagonists in Faulkner and Williams are not heroic in conventional terms. Rather, to be able to weep “for remembrance” alone, as Williams writes in “Mornings on Bourbon Street,” is heroic. Indeed, both authors, in different ways, suggest that grief is heroic.

¶18 In the single comment on Faulkner in his 1972 *Memoirs*, Williams makes a haunting reference to a personal encounter with his fellow Mississippian:

...He had come up to Philadelphia when we were there working on *Cat*, and I had gotten to know him there. He never talked to me. I thought he disapproved of me...I felt a terrible torment in the man. He always kept his eyes down. We tried to carry on a conversation but he would never participate. Finally, he lifted his eyes once in response to a direct question from me, and the look in his eyes was so terrible, so sad, that I began to cry. (170)

Williams’s commentary here on an anguished Faulkner, made years after his youthful description of “the Count,” implies a bond between them. Ultimately, Williams found Faulkner a tormented genius—misunderstood, suffering, and probably akin to himself.

¶19

Many critics discuss memory as a major theme in Faulkner. Robert Hamblin writes: “One can hardly overstate the degree to which Faulkner’s fiction is intertwined with memory. Like a host of other American writers...Faulkner indulges in more than a modicum of nostalgia” (12). Memory is also eerily prevalent in Williams, as memory and nostalgia are the last refuges for Williams’s female survivors. In Williams, the real obstacle for Blanche DuBois, beyond Stanley’s animosity, is her own memory. It is the memory of those who have died, leaving her alone, that twists her mind into fragmentation. *The Glass Menagerie*’s Amanda Wingfield is trapped within an existence built only on memory of her past—unable to participate in the present, and jeopardizing Laura’s ability to do so. Moreover, the opening monologue, spoken by autobiographical narrator Tom, literally tells the audience that the play is memory. Overt nostalgia is dominant in Williams, arguably more so than in Faulkner.

¶20 Nostalgic examination in both Faulkner’s and Williams’s narratives results in heroic characters being ironically defined within the context of failure. Faulkner critic Ellen Douglas attributes Mrs. Compson’s failure to “whining self-pity, selfishness, capacity for self-delusion, lovelessness, and obsession with respectability” (Douglas 156). While this is strong censure, it is equally applicable to Williams’s Amanda Wingfield. Although Amanda is given more presence in *The Glass Menagerie* than Mrs. Compson is ever afforded in *The Sound and the Fury*, each mother dominates her children with her own psychological fears.

¶21 Douglas finds Faulkner’s women to be failures in a variety of ways—not deplorable in themselves but failingly simple and pathetic in the way they are characterized. Her argument is useful in linking Faulkner and Williams, however, because for both authors it is crucial to understand that the reader/audience does not have to *like* a protagonist in order to consider this person the traditional hero of the work. One does not have to admire Blanche in order to root for her at the end of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Rather, as in Faulkner, the fact that the failing woman is struggling to survive is reason enough to find her heroic. Douglas goes on to cite more shortcomings of Faulkner’s heroines: she calls Lena of *Light in August* (1932) “the most mindless of all Faulkner’s females” and Eula Varner “so lazy she literally won’t get up off her butt to go any place except to the table” (157). It is fair to say that Williams’s Blanche and Amanda have a laziness in their expectation of what others will do for them. Yet ironically, they are very active verbally, often on the offensive. Ultimately, Faulkner and Williams treat these women as heroic in their determination to maintain life and fertility against a backdrop of decay and death.

¶22 In sum, it is remarkable that Faulkner and Williams frame women characters so similarly in rhetorical context and dramatic action. While it is widely accepted that these two writers are mutually steeped in regionalism and modernist American struggles, close examination of women in Faulkner’s novels and Williams’s plays reveals striking commonalities. Textual connectivity between women in Williams and Faulkner exposes women’s sexuality as an adverse force against, and victim to, cultural decay and death. Heroic survivorship is steeped in tragedy; matriarchy fails along with the loss of the past and its heritage.

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