

Tennessee Williams: Vagabond Poet

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Just before Mardi Gras, 1939, Tennessee Williams left New Orleans and “lit out for the Territory.” As he climbed into the old Ford with Jim Parrott, he had a vision of himself as a vagabond poet in the manner of Vachel Lindsay.

Earlier, in his studies at various universities and in his omnivorous reading in his grandfather’s library, he had fallen in love with the Romantics. From Wordsworth he garnered the image of The Poet as a creature with a special sensitivity, whose life became the substance of his writing. From Shelley, he chose poetic sensibility. From Byron, the moral anarchy following the path of his “crooked foot.” In addition, Tom Williams had been reading biographies and letters of twentieth-century artists: the letters of Vincent Van Gogh, the biography of Hart Crane, the letters of Katherine Mansfield, and the recent collection of D.H. Lawrence’s letters, edited by Aldous Huxley. He had also read the curious biography of Vachel Lindsay which Edgar Lee Masters had recently written.¹ This book touched him deeply, probably because it was filled with familiar characters and places, and it matched his own mood.

Lindsay would have been a natural interest for Williams. As Allean Hale has noted, most young people growing up in St. Louis were well aware of the career of Sara Teasdale. Williams himself had won the Teasdale prize and notes in his introduction to his poetry, reprinted in *Where I Live*,² that he thought of himself as a minor Romantic—in the mode of Nonno in *The Night of the Iguana*. What has been forgotten over time is that Sara Teasdale was very close to Vachel Lindsay and even considered marrying him at one point. From 1913 until 1931, they maintained their deep friendship. When Lindsay killed himself, Teasdale was devastated. Already depressed and soured on life, she herself committed suicide two years later. This romantic connection must have been a matter of intense discussion among literati in St. Louis in the decade when Williams was involved with the Poets’ Workshop. Lyle Leverich says that Teasdale’s suicide affected Tom deeply.³

The Lindsay biography must have resonated with Williams because of the clear and numerous parallels: birth into an old and proud family with a strong

religious heritage, headed by a powerful father who kept encouraging the errant son to find a sensible way to earn a living, while the mother insisted he find a vocation and nurtured in him a love of the arts, encouraging the development of the sensitive side of the growing boy.

Edgar Lee Masters' idiosyncratic biography focuses largely on the wandering years of Lindsay. He quotes at length from the letters and from his journals. (Surely, these letter-writers and journal-keepers had their impact on Tennessee Williams's own compulsive chronicling of his moods and activities.) In three separate periods in three different regions of America, Lindsay sought to live on his poetry: to sell his poems—and recite them—in return for room and board. He carefully documented each penny spent and earned (or contributed), each stop and contact along the way. Like many others in that period, he was trying to find a way to connect with the “common” man, the “real American.” He first set out as a “tramp poet” in 1906, finding himself stranded in Florida. He hiked and rode freight 800 miles through Macon, Atlanta, Asheville, Greenville, and the Cumberland Gap, ending in Kentucky, carrying only a razor, a toothbrush, a comb, soap, a bandanna, and a poem, “The Tree of Laughing Bells.”⁴ (This pattern alone must have inspired something of Williams's own stripped-down mode of vagrancy.) Somewhat later, Tennessee Williams himself was to cover a great deal of this territory by one means or another, much of it on bicycle. Lindsay's second tramp was in 1908, when he went to New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky. The third, in 1912, was to Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado, to preach his “gospel of beauty.”⁵

On his westward journey, tracing—at times—the path of the Okies to California, Tennessee Williams felt the pinch of the Depression. Jim Parrott, who was providing both the car and the funding, often earned a bit of money by playing with local musical groups. When Jim's clarinet was stolen, they had to stop in El Paso to earn a few dollars for gas. One scrap of a draft letter that has survived is addressed to the editor of the El Paso paper, asking if he will pay for a poem. Lyle Leverich thinks this is a form letter that Tom used more than once. Like Lindsay, Tom thought he could survive from one donation to the next, but also like Lindsay, he discovered that he had to seek help from home. Tom did have to beg his mother for enough money to finish the trip, and she responded immediately with one of the many small checks she sent his way, making sure he was never really a pauper. In a sense, both young men were playing at poverty.

At this moment, Tom Williams was searching for a “hero” whom he could lionize and emulate. It was this vagabond existence, which lasted until August of 1939, that Williams romanticized and made the basis of his public biography and his youthful persona. I believe that he used—at least in part—the experience and image of Vachel Lindsay as the basis for this created “Tennessee-the-vagabond-poet.”

The letters of this period testify to this emerging persona—letters home to members of the Mummings group, to an old professor at Iowa, E. K. Conkle, and to his agent, Audrey Wood.

He shaped his letters with a conscious plot pattern, selecting colorful events, and ending with the hope of success. In a sense, he was writing his autobiography. Because of annotations, we know that he went back over letters and journals, and we know that he used these materials later for *Memoirs*. We also know that he saw letters as a form of fiction. One of his earliest letters to Audrey Wood, dated May 5, 1939, fixes in place his explanation of his new name and the “story line” he was to use for his early career. Toward the end of the letter, after telling her about a number of his works and his various places of residence, he concludes:

Right now I’m doing chores and picking squab for my board on a pigeon ranch in Los Angeles County and have just returned from a 400 mile bicycle tour of rural Mexico and southern California coastline—I would like to settle for a year in a cabin that I discovered in a lonely arroyo down there, live a completely primitive, regular life and devote myself to writing one long, careful play. That is really my only ambition right now.

(Notice that, having discovered that there is no market for poetry, he now characterizes himself as a playwright, not a poet. He continues, however, to cultivate the primitive image of the hermit in the canyon, dedicated to his art. He has, in fact, found his own persona that deviates from Lindsay’s.)

A subsequent letter to Audrey Wood, describes the play he now has “in mind.” He wants to know if she thinks it is “practical,” and then describes his idea:

It is a biographical play about Vachel Lindsay but would concern, in large, the whole problem of the poet or creative artist in America or any other capitalistic state. Have you read Master’s [sic] (Edgar Lee) biography of Lindsay? If you have you will know what a

wealth of dramatic material his life contains. Nobody with a desire to create has ever put up a braver, more pitiful struggle against the intellectual apathy and the economic tyranny of his times! He was, as you know, for many years a tramp selling his poems for two cents—from door to door. But my play would center, I think, upon the closing chapter of his life—in Springfield, Illinois. That old yellow frame house intrigues me as a background for a poet's tragedy!

The house in question is probably the Lindsay homestead, a sketch of which appears in Masters' book. Since such plays as *Our Town* and *Desire Under the Elms* had used the American home as a setting with great success, Williams thought this all-American Victorian frame house, so typical of the mid-west in the early years of this century, would work well. Williams did later use such a home—in fact two of them—for his setting in *Summer and Smoke*. In his letter, he then goes on to describe the house he visualizes: "The high-ceilinged rooms, the awkward, ugly furniture it must have contained—what marvelous stage sets they'd make!"

"Then I'd weave into the plot the personality of a younger writer—some unknown like myself—who had approached Lindsay, perhaps, for confirmation and help." Williams was fascinated with the passage of time, the evolution of the artist, the awareness of his own transformation. This overlay of personae was to help him deal with the experience, akin to reading one's own journals over time. Tennessee then laughs at his own idea, having Lindsay proclaim, "To you from failing hands we throw the torch, Etc.—(I'm 'hamming' this dreadfully but I want you to get the idea!)" Later, in *Small Craft Warnings*, this self-ridicule was to erupt, in a scene of the young/old homosexuals, both of whom are self-portraits, the younger man derived from Tom-the-vagabond-poet.

"The play," he told Audrey, "would terminate, of course, with Lindsay's suicide—that awful, grotesque crawling upstairs on hands and knees at midnight! (See Masters, 361.)—but would strike some positive, assertive note—I mean I would not want it to be just another futilitarian tragedy about a beaten-down artist."⁶

Acknowledging that this project may be "altogether too big" for him to undertake, he insists that his personal experiences have given him "some insight into Lindsay's problems," and he finds the "idea very hard to dismiss."

He did not, in fact, dismiss it. The University of Delaware has a document that appears to fit the description of the play outlined in this letter—with interesting

variations. This 25-page typescript (using at least four typewriters) is called "Suitable Entrances to Springfield or Heaven (A Play in Homage to the American Poet Vachel Lindsay)." The cover page indicates—in his handwriting—that it was never produced. It is "an old ms. revised for Art Center," which "could go with *Steps Must be Gentle*"); under combo title 'Two American Poets.'"

The play combines Lindsay's suicide, which Williams moves off-stage, with the failure of a young performer who has a knife-throwing act. (An image for Tennessee Williams's type of writing?) It brings together two kinds of performers, of different ages, both of whom have caused their wives pain and have found diminished audience enthusiasm for their performances. A particularly striking insight for such a young playwright is the recognition that the artist has two deaths, one of his genius and the other of his body. The death of the genius is a tragedy; by comparison, the death of the body is a comedy. Commenting on his declining audience appeal, Vachel tells his wife: "Exit of an old clown discharged from the circus for being no longer amusing [—] gone in the head, sick in the body and deathly tired in his heart." The young sword-thrower had also found himself on the decline, unable to win over his audiences with his act, partially because of his wife's illness and his sympathy with her as a target.⁸

An apparently early form of the concluding scene is written as ghost play, with Lindsay's spirit hovering over the anguished young couple, sprinkling flowers on them, and blessing them in the final scene as two of the "misunderstood." The "later" version—or at least what I surmise to be a later (and grotesquely ironic) version, drafted on a different typewriter—ends with Lindsay's ghost as the Goddess of Springtime [Springfield?], entering the railroad station as Salvation Army music plays; he is chanting "General William Booth Enters into Heaven," and sprinkling paper flowers among the unwitting passengers, who glumly go on with their lives. It is a very curious play, almost camp, in the second version.

In the process of crafting this play, Williams had apparently abandoned the artist as far too quirky for his more serious purposes. Lindsay simply was not the right artist for him. In his next letter to Audrey, Williams says that he used the Lindsay play in his application for a Rockefeller Fellowship, but now has concerns: "The many grotesque elements in Lindsay's character, such as his purity complex, his indiscriminate missionary zeal and childish preoccupation with fairies and flowers make him a very complex and difficult subject for a psychological drama—perhaps you feel it is not a practical undertaking."⁹ this appears to be an invitation to shoot down his idea. He wrote to her again on July 16, indicating that

he had returned to *American Blues* sketches, this time a “coast-town bar-room” which he was contributing to the “gallery of American scenes that I’m trying to accumulate.”¹⁰ Notice that he has continued his shared zeal for Lindsay’s populist American character, speech, and culture, but he has turned from the man himself.

He admits to Audrey, “I have shelved the Lindsay idea for a much more compelling impulse to dramatize D. H. Lawrence’s life in New Mexico. I feel a far greater affinity for Lawrence than Lindsay and the elements of his life here in America are so essentially dramatic that they require little more than a re-arrangement to be transferred directly to the stage . . . I intend to run down to Taos, New Mexico, on my thumb before long—I understand Frieda Lawrence still lives there.”¹¹ Tennessee Williams is clearly on his way to writing a Lawrence biography, eventually reduced to the death, which he developed as *I Rise in Flame, Cried the Phoenix*. He had a very different play in mind, but it never materialized. He did however, dedicate his first long Broadway-bound play, *Battle of Angels*, the story of Valentine Xavier, the vagabond poet of the Delta, to DHL, not to VL.

And so ends the Lindsay saga. Williams had read about the artist, empathized with him, lived out some of his experiences, shaped his own understanding of himself through Lindsay’s words, then outgrown him and moved on to a more mature possibility. He was still trying to understand how to live as an artist and how to picture that search. The artist image as the eternal seeker was to be his subject for a lifetime.

Lindsay’s influence may appear to have been brief and insignificant, but in fact was lasting. The protagonists of Williams’s plays, starting with Val Xavier, are clones of Lindsay, the “fugitive kind.” Val is the only one who explicitly preaches the Gospel of Beauty, while wandering the countryside, like Carol Cutrere, as a “lewd vagrant,” but others have this same quality of the wandering poet, a Christ-like figure. Lindsay’s poetry, built on American imagery and set in American locales, using rollicking American rhythms, was a real influence, especially on his Blue Mountain Ballads. Ironically, the life and work of Vachel Lindsay have now all but disappeared from American literature texts, but they live on in the poetry and plays of Tennessee Williams.

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Notes

¹ Edgar Lee Masters, *Vachel Lindsay: A Poet in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1935).

² Tennessee Williams, *Where I Live: Selected Essays* (New York: New Directions, 1978), 1.

³ Lyle Leverich, *Tom: The Unknown Tennessee Williams* (New York: Crown Publishing, Inc., 1995), 140.

⁴ Michael Yatron, *America's Literary Revolt* (New York: The Philosophical Library, 1959), 82.

⁵ Ann Massa, *Vachel Lindsay: Fieldworker for the American Dream* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), 9.

⁶ Tennessee Williams to Audrey Wood, nd [c. June 2, 1939], np [Laguna Beach, California], 2 pp. TLS, Humanities Research Center, Austin.

⁷ "Steps Must Be Gentle" is in Volume 6 of *The Collected Plays of Tennessee Williams*.

⁸ Tennessee Williams, "Suitable Entrances to Springfield or Heaven," typescript at the University of Delaware. Notice that this old clown image suggests an early inspiration for the Bird-girl in "Gnadages Fraulein."

⁹ Tennessee Williams to Audrey Wood, nd [c. June 25, 1939], np [Laguna Beach, California], 1 p. TLS, Humanities Research Center, Austin.

¹⁰ These were to become published version of *American Blues*, as distinguished from the plays submitted to the Group Theatre under this same title. The play he is describing sounds more like *Small Craft Warnings*, written two decades later, than the plays in the collection.

¹¹ Tennessee Williams to Audrey Wood, July 16, 1939, Laguna Beach, California, 2 pp. TLS, Humanities Research Center, Austin.