

Symbols as Literary Tools in Delivering the Theme of Spirit versus Flesh in Tennessee William's *The Orpheus Descending*

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Abstract

Tennessee William as one of sterling modern American playwrights is well-known for crafting psychologically deep plays dealing with multilayered realities of American life, yet these plays appeal to anyone regardless of cultural hitches. The playwright shines in the firmament of American drama for evincing lyricism not only in language but also on stage. In addition, drama critics have extolled him for the masterful manipulation of symbols in the architecture of his plays. Symbols in his plays not only bestow extra literary layers, but also play a pivotal role in delivering themes. Accordingly, the current article endeavors to demonstrate how Tennessee Williams puts forwards the theme of conflict between 'flesh' and 'spirit' in his *The Orpheus Descending* by utilizing symbols.

Key Words: Theme, Symbol, Flesh, Spirit, Conflict

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1. Introduction

1.1. Plot Summary

The Orpheus Descending tells the story of a handsome guitarist, Val who comes to Two River Country, small town. Near a dry-goods store, he meets Vee Talbot, who is a visionary painter and sexually unfulfilled woman in her forty, exhibitionist Carol Cutrere, who once had taken part in civil rights campaigning and arrested for vagrancy, as well as Lady Torrence accompanying her husband after his cancer surgery from Memphis. Spreading their supper in the store, Beulah and Dolly in the beginning of the play supply the viewers/readers with background information concerning Lady Torrence. She, Beulah says, was daughter of

an Italian immigrant who changed his orchard into wine garden where lovers could make love and drink alcoholic beverages. In her eighteens in his father garden, Lady fell in love with David Cutrere, the son of a rich planter, who jilted her in order to marry rich girl when Jabe and his mob set her father garden to fire due to his illegal selling of wine to some black people. Having no choice and unaware of Jab's role in the her father's death, she unwillingly marries sick Jabe just for the sake of his money. In very outset of play, Val realizes Carol's attempt to seduce him as she asks to repair his car, thus he rejects her demand. Looking for job, he asks Lady to employ him in her store. To attract her attention, she shows his guitar on which there are signatures of famous black blue singers. Under influence of his intimate talk about the legless bird which does not touch the earth and his some strange skills such as staying awake for two days and having high body temperature than normal humans, she accedes to take him into employment and give him a place to sleep in the store, but she makes it clear that she is disinterested in sexual affairs if he advances. The presence of Val enlivens the dead and barren life of Lady, refreshes that of Vee, and gives an edge to the life of rejected Carol. He makes Lady pregnant and become reason for her optimism, inspires visionary Vee, and becomes a peephole for Carol to see a ray of hope in her aimless life. When Sherriff sees Val touching Vee, and she is kissing him, he gives him an ultimatum: either leave the town or accept the death at the hands of his angry group. Under Sheriff's duress, Val makes the decision of going away of the town; his decision disturbs Lady who is about open to her new section of her store: confectionary decorated with glass birds and artificial fruits hanging from a tree to bring back the memories of burnt wine garden of her late father. Val insists that he has to leave, but Lady says that he made her pregnant and implores him to stay with her till her husband dies so that they will leaves the place together. Jabe's nurse who sees them and informs Jabe of the secret relationship and intention. Gaunt and sick Jabe comes out angrily and shoots, and wounds Lady. Then he cries and claims that Val fired his wife. Hearing his cry, some men came and one of them burns Val with his blowtorch. Carol takes Val's snake jacket from the black conjure man in order to remember his wild freedom after his tragic death.

1.2. The Short Introduction on the Theme of Flesh versus Spirit

The struggle between 'flesh' and 'spirit' is as old as human beings because in human's essence, generally there are two kinds of desires: spiritual desires related to spirit and physical ones associated with flesh. The spiritual desires motivate and pave the way for the human kinds to walk in the right path of lofty ideals including knowledge, peace, humanism,

altruism, and so forth in order to create a world on the basis of equality and friendship. While the physical or instinctual impulses tempt the human beings to lead promiscuous, ungodly, destructive, and irresponsible life. These sorts of desires are dark ulterior motives behind wars; will to power, confusion, greed, cruelty, terror, insecurity, dictatorship, and so forth. The above mentioned inborn forces in human beings are resembles to Freud's 'id' which is dominated by pleasure principle and the origin of anti-social actions, as well as 'super ego' which is governed with morality and priority (Abrams, 2005). The dichotomy between flesh and spirit is a common subject in myths, rituals, literature, religions. So many writers and philosophers explored it from different perspectives. In American literature Tennessee Williams explored the theme in question in his plays in particular "*The Orpheus Descending*". Bernard (2007) notes that the theme of conflict between flesh and spirit appears in most of his works regardless of their genre and is relative to his symbolism. According to Bernard, Williams links the duality of flesh and spirit in himself and his characters to his mother and father side. He regards his mother side as spirit because they are puritans but he considers his father line as flesh in the view of the fact that they were Pioneers coming America for materialistic aims. Moreover, in the view of Williams, Bernard states, the advantage of this theme is its universality, so it will appeal audiences all over world regardless of their various literary tastes. Williams examine this conflict in his *The Orpheus Descending* explores within Southern community. He also renders the more complex by adding mythic and religious dimension to it. In the play, Val, Carol, Vee, Lady are agents of spirit in the sense that they are aspiring towards to better community; Val wants to save Lady from the talons of his cruel husband who destroyed his father's wine garden, purchased her as an commodity, Carol defend Black people and criticizes racial discrimination, Vee express her sympathy with Val who is treated as an 'other' in the play, and Lady devotes herself entirely to fight with corruption caused by her husband. On the contrary, Jabe, Sheriff, and other males practice racism. Jabe and his gang burn the wine garden of Lady's father to punish him just for selling alcoholic beverage for some black people. Just as Jabe, Sheriff in the play never permits a Negro to stay in the town. Accordingly, the theme of clash between flesh and reality is interconnected to the fabric of play in question.

2. Textual Analysis

2.1. The Role of Symbol in Delivering the Theme of Flesh versus Spirit

It is sensible to define the words: 'flesh' and 'spirit' and elucidate those who symbolize 'spirit' and 'flesh' as useful information for understanding the main discussion of this section.

According to *Webster's New World Dictionary (1995)*, spirit means "life, will, consciousness, thought, etc., regarded as separate from matter." In the play in question, spirit is related to spirituality, freedom, art and purity; therefore, it has positive connotations. In same manner, Quirino (1998) notes that the spirit generally in Williams means the desire to go beyond corruption. In the same dictionary, flesh is defined like this, "human body as distinguished from soul and human nature in sensual aspect". In the play, flesh is associated with corruption, racism, materialism, sexual suppression, and physicality, thus it has negative connotation. In her book: *Human Predicament in Selected Plays of Tennessee Williams*, Eyvazi (2009) notes that Val represents spirit while Jabe embodies flesh. In the play, the legless bird along with Vee's vision and painting which clearly supports that Val stands for spirit. While Jabe's racism and marriage to Lady confirms that he is the symbol of flesh. Firstly, the legless bird indicates that Val is symbol of spirit. Val in his conversation with Lady divides human being into three categories: those who are purchased, those who are sold, and those who are like legless birds. These kinds of birds,

Don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on it wings in the sky... they [were] transparent the color of sky... [and they are] near to sun, [they] don't have no legs at all and they live whole their lives on the wing, and sleep on the wind ...never light on this earth but one time when die (p.20).

Cirlot (2001) asserts that any winged bird is the symbol of spirit and soul. Similarly, Ferber (1999) notes that birds are associated with gods because of their ability to fly. Moreover, that these birds are near to sun shows that they belong to heaven rather than earth because the sun, according to Cirlot, is the eye of Ahurmazda in Persia, in Greece the eye of Zeus, in Egypt eye of Ba, and in Islam of Allah. So from what is said it can be concluded that bird is symbol of spirit and is related to spirituality. Bigsby (1984) states that when Val speaks about the legless birds, he in fact is speaking about himself. Thus Bigsby equates the bird with Val, so if he is identical with it, the bird is symbol of innocence which is free from corruption. Clum (1998) writes that for Val to be uncorrupted means not to be contaminated with materialism. In same vein, Eyvazi (2009) mentions that the legless bird reflects "Val's otherworldliness, his search for bliss, and more importunately his obsession with freedom, wild and unbridled" (p. 129). Accordingly, Val is the symbol of spirit in the play.

Another example which indicates that Val is symbol of spirit is Vee's vision and painting in which she sees Jesus rising towards heaven, "I saw two HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST...the blazing eyes of Christ risen" (p.45). The notion that her Jesus in her painting is

like Val supports the idea that for Vee Val is Christ or Holy Spirit. Moreover, according to Cirlot (2001), eye which is closely related to the sun symbolizes spirit; it is not accident that Williams capitalizes the eyes and Vee repeats them twice in her description of her vision because he wants to put more emphasis on Val's spirituality. As a result, it is safe to conclude Val is incarnation of spirit. In contrast to Val, regarding his racism and marriage to Lady represent, Jabe represents flesh. Jabe is racist because he and his mob burnt Lady's father wine orchid, where young couples go there so as to make love, when they found that Lady's father had sold liquor to a black man during Prohibition when manufacturing and selling spirituous and intoxicating liquors were forbidden in the U.S.A. Jabe's and his mob's act of burning her father's wine-garden just for the sake of selling an alcoholic drink substantiates that they related to flesh and physical plane rather than to spiritual plane on the grounds that they "they pride in following irrational and cruel value of their community without serious consideration" (Eyvazi, 2009, p.127). As a result, he is embodiment of flesh for practicing racism which is an unjust, inhuman, and cruel act belonging to realm of earth instead of Heaven

The next evident which confirms that Jabe is the symbol of flesh is his marriage to Lady. When her father along with his wine-orchid was burnt, she had no one on the earth to relay on except David, her boyfriend on whom she had a huge crush, but he married to a society girl to survive economically. Running out of option, she accedes to the humiliating marriage proposal of Jabe. In fact, Jabe buys her as if she were a commodity; Lady herself points to this reality when she condemns David for forcing her to marry Jabe, "you sold yourself. I sold my self. You were bought. I was bought. You made whores of us both!"(p.30). If for Val, according to Clum (1998), freedom means to be away from the materialistic system of ownership, Jabe is in the center of materialistic system in the view of the fact he sees Lady as a commodity rather than partner for the rest of his life. Thus, Jabe is incarnation of flesh considering marriage to Lady because his behavior is After defining 'flesh' and 'spirit' as well as showing Val as a symbol of spirit and Jabe that of flesh. It is sensible to show how Val and Jabe push forward the theme of conflict between flesh and spirit. A close reading of the play indicates that the struggle between flesh and spirit is one of main themes of "*The Orpheus Descending*". Val's death and his snakeskin illustrate the theme of the conflict between flesh and spirit.

As representative of flesh, Jabe is a materialist, that is to say, he sees everything in the terms of commodity and business. Since he is a possessive materialist, he feels fear of losing her

precious object, Lady, when he finds out that his wife is pregnant by Val. But Lady, who loves Val, hates him absolutely, and advises his nurse to kill him peacefully by injecting more morphine in to his vein so as to marry with her lover, Val. To guarantee his sense of security and dispel his fear, he appears with his revolver, and kills his wife with his gun. Then he rushes out and cries that Val murdered his wife. Hearing him, his friends come and burn him to death with a blow torch. In fact, Jabe, the embodiment of flesh, proves his involvement in massive corruption in the town by slaying his wife and Val; on the contrary, Val, agent of spirit, wants to ascend the gross corruption by helping Lady and fleeing the city. On the surface, Jabe is victorious in his battle against spirit, Val. But his triumph is just illusion; this is indicated by his act of clutching artificial 'palm' tree. Ferber (1999) mentions that in Greek and Latin literature palm is the symbol of victory. But Jabe holds an artificial palm tree; therefore his conquest is not real one because fugitive Carol, who treasures his snake skin, will follow Val's path, "fugitive kind can always follow their kind [Val]" (p.58). Her Following Val' way means that the struggle between flesh and spirit will continue even after Val's death. In other words, since the snakeskin belongs to Val, it is the token of spirit symbol. In addition, Sullivan (2003) notes that Val's snakeskin is the symbol of rebirth. Therefore, Val's death does not mean the end of struggle because his spirit is reborn in Carol. Accordingly, Williams adroitly delivers the theme of the struggle between flesh and spirit with Val's symbolic murder by Jabe's mob, and his snake jacket.

Conclusion

In short, Williams develops the theme of spirit versus flesh in his *Orpheus Descending* with snakeskin as a symbol and the symbolic murder of Lady and Val by Jabe. In the play, considering, his identification with the legless bird which represents spirit and Vee's depiction of him as Jesus Christ, Val stands for Spirit; on the contrary, Jabe due to his racism and marriage to Lady against her wish is the emblem of flesh. When Jabe discovers that his wife, Lady is pregnant by Val, and she asked his nurse to kill him with more injection of morphine to marry Val, he appears with his revolver in the upper floor, and kills his wife. Placing blame for his wife's death on Val, Jabe cries that Val robbed his store and killed his wife. Hearing his cry, his friends come and one of them burns Val by a blowtorch. On the face of it, Jabe seems triumphant but his firm grip on artificial palm tree shows that his victory is not real because the fugitive Carol, who treasures and his snakeskin, symbol of rebirth, will follow his path. Thus, the conflict between flesh and spirit will not end. Williams

therefore by utilizing the snakeskin and Val's death by Jabe as symbols, delivers the theme of the conflict between flesh and spirit.

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