

# Williams and Will: Worlds Colliding in Hamlet and A Streetcar Named Desire (emagplus 75)

A Level teacher, Philip Smithers draws interesting parallels between the tragic worlds of Hamlet and A Streetcar Named Desire, arguing that the impetus for both plays is born out of the tensions between two sets of values and world views in contexts when these are being put under particular stress.

*A Streetcar Named Desire seems as close to Hamlet as any American playwright is likely to come*

*Thomas P. Adler, Streetcar – A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism, 127*

Thomas P. Adler goes on to write that this comparison is due to Blanche and Hamlet's 'psychological complexity and the moral and ethical dilemma' with which both are faced. I would like to take this comparison further and examine them from Fintan O'Toole's contention that

## Writer

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*successful tragedy is not particularly common in the long history of the theatre. It gets written only at certain times, times when there is an overwhelming tension between two sets of values, two world views, two ways of thinking about how individuals relate to their societies*

*Fintan O'Toole: Shakespeare is Hard, but so is Life, 19*

This idea that tragedy is a result of the collision between two world views, is examined in both texts from the perspective of the change in how people viewed themselves and the world; a change from one set of values to another. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* this is enacted through the transfer of power from Blanche (representing a lost southern aristocratic world) to Stanley (representing a newly ascendant northern post-war industrialism): in essence, between old and new. In *Hamlet* this transfer of power and values is from an old mediaeval, feudal world to the world of realpolitik: a 'new capitalist world' (O' Toole, 26); it was a play 'born at the crossroads of the death of chivalry and the birth of globalisation' (Shapiro, 1599 A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare, 309).

## Hamlet – the Start and the Structure

Regarding *Hamlet*, this tension between two worlds is evident from the beginning when Horatio explains the reason for the soldiers' 'strict and most observant watch'. Old Hamlet, dealing with a threat to Denmark by marching off to battle in an epic style, feudal duel (which took place

thirty years earlier) is starkly juxtaposed with how Claudius, in disarming Young Fortinbras by appealing to his uncle Norway, deals with a threat to Denmark. He has 'no time for, chivalry, honour and all that medieval stuff' and 'shows his mastery of new Renaissance or Machiavellian art of what would be realpolitik' (Bradshaw, *The Connell Guide to Hamlet*, 98): the new way to deal with conflict is not with weapons but with words. This tension between two worlds is also reflected in the structure of the play; as Frank Kermode writes 'Hamlet is a play obsessed with doubles of all kinds' (*Shakespeare's Language*, 100); conflicts between individuals and ideas abound: Hamlet/Young Fortinbras, Claudius/Old Hamlet, Hamlet/Laertes, Hamlet/Claudius, Hamlet/Gertrude, Hamlet/Ophelia, Old Fortinbras/Old Hamlet, Catholicism/Protestantism, Ptolemy/Copernicus, fate/free will, relativism/absolutism, feudalism/capitalism, aristocracy/common people: in short, a conflict between old and new.

In Hamlet a ghost from the past returns in his feudal 'warlike form' to exhort his son to 'remember' him. In its description of being

*Doomed for a certain term to walk the night...  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away*

*Hamlet, Act 1 Scene 5 lines 15-17*

clearly it resembles the Catholic Church's doctrine of purgatory. Hamlet, a man of intelligence or 'wit', educated at Wittenberg University which is associated with Martin Luther and the beginning of the Protestant reformation is

presented with a dilemma: how can he, a Renaissance man, abide by his 'dear father's' chivalric code and avenge his death? He is seen as 'tragic because he is caught in a double-bind between, on the one hand, the loved father whose ghost demands a medieval revenge that Hamlet's modern mind wants to, but cannot accept, and, on the other, the modern state that he wants to believe in but knows to be corrupt' (McEvoy, Shakespeare The Basics, 213).

## Streetcar – The Opening Scene

Ahern and Hooper note that Streetcar's tension comes from the 'past rising inexorably to the surface where it will erupt explosively into the present' (A Student Handbook to the Plays of Tennessee Williams, 104). In the opening scene of Streetcar this collision between two worlds is equally apparent when Blanche, 'daintily dressed in a white suit', cuts an incongruous figure amongst the 'warm and easy intermingling of races' in the 'cosmopolitan city' of New Orleans. A 'white suit with a fluffy bodice' is clearly unsuitable attire in a place where 'red stained packages from a butcher's' are being thrown around. Blanche, carrying with her a past of guilt, sexual transgression and intolerance in a façade of gentility and sophistication

*realises these values are not valued by the Kowalskis who control the world outside the magic bubble of the Tradition which, after World War 2, has become more and more a delusion*

*Murphy, The Theatre of Tennessee Williams, 79*

## Shakespeare's Conservatism?

Jonathan Bate writes

*the balance of probability is that Shakespeare's own instincts and inheritance were cautious, traditional, respectable, suspicious of change...conservative*

*Soul of an Age, 75*

and this conservative view is evident in the play when Claudius and Gertrude insist Hamlet 'cast thy nightly colour off', claim that his refusal to cease grieving over his father is to 'persevere/In obstinate condolment' and a 'course/Of impious stubbornness'; he should do this because the 'common theme' of life '[i]s death of fathers' and that 'this must be so' (1.2. 106). This is placed alongside Hamlet's new progressive view that there is 'nothing good or bad but thinking makes it so' and when he replies to Horatio that 'there are more things in heaven and earth...than are dreamt of in our philosophy'. Hamlet is a tragedy whose register is 'in the interrogative mode' (Parker, Shakespeare

Reread: The Texts in New Contexts, 132). Rather than accepting the feudal view that 'this should be so', Hamlet is occupied with the search for knowledge: even given proof of the afterlife in the guise of his father's ghost, he still questions what awaits us when we die: 'the undiscovered country from whose bourn/ No traveller returns, puzzles the will' (3.1. 85-6). As is patently clear when, having heard the Ghost's instruction to 'remember', Hamlet thinks it 'meet' to 'set it down', he is not your traditional Senecan revenger, he refuses to rush, Pyrrhus-like, to enact bloody vengeance; he needs 'grounds/More relative than this' (2.2. 535-6).

## Hamlet's Letter – A Changed Perspective

In examining the tension between past and present, one moment deserves careful study: when the content of Hamlet's letter to Ophelia is read aloud for all to hear. Here, the tension is between a past pre-letter Hamlet and new post-letter Hamlet. As Shapiro (334) has noted Hamlet's 'lame verse' gives us a 'glimpse of a Hamlet who has not been shocked into complexity'. Hamlet professed his love for Ophelia in swearing by the Ptolemaic model of the universe - 'doubt that the stars are fire' (2.2.120) – when, as Shakespeare would have known, this model had been blown out of the water by the Copernican model that posited the sun, and not man, at the centre of the universe. This disrupted the whole feudal idea of the Great Chain of Being that decreed everything has its place and 'must be so'; it made people see themselves anew. If everything was, as John Donne writes, 'all in pieces, all coherence gone', it meant a completely new way for people to view themselves in relation to the world. If there was no order in the world then a man could make his own way and was not

destined to settle for the life into which he was born; he could be a 'self-fashioning individual' (McEvoy,11) as Shakespeare himself was, gaining gentleman status for himself and his family. This disruption and questioning of the whole social fabric of the world is played out in Hamlet; he leaves this past pre-letter self behind and embraces this new world view; he questions this Ptolemaic model when he says how even 'a king may go a progress through the guts of a beggar' (notice the progress of 'g' through the sentence) and in doing so concludes that, no matter who you are, the same fate awaits us all: as Shakespeare would later write, even 'Golden lads must...come to dust' (Cymbeline 4.2. 327-8). Previously held absolute assumptions are questioned further still in the graveyard scene where 'the entire system of heraldry and hierarchy is turned on its head' and the

*suggestion that status conferred by grants of arms is neither God-given nor natural' but is 'exposed as a tool of oppression*

*O'Callaghan, Hamlet Language and Writing,  
159*

Hamlet clearly refers to this when, after picking up a skull, he claims it is 'my lady Worm's, chapless, and knocked about the mazzard with a sexton's spade: here's fine revolution' (5.1. 66-7) and when speaking to Horatio: 'the age is grown so picked that the toe of the peasant comes so near the heels of our courtier'. It is not an absolute but a 'relative world...in which almost nothing is predictable' (O'Toole, 25).

# An Uncertain Future

The plays were created in worlds where what awaited was uncertain: in Shakespeare's world, Elizabeth, without an heir named, was nearing her end; people could see 'a new world coming into being, a world in which individuals had much more opportunities to make their own way; where new forms of power were competing with old ones' (McEvoy, 209). It was like '[a]lmost overnight...everything familiar to Elizabethans had been upended' (Shapiro, 371). For Tennessee Williams, the 'twentieth century and beyond was traumatised by war and other apocalyptic events' (Adler, 127). Arthur Miller wrote that

*Everything was up for grabs. They were all for Number One. The death of Roosevelt was a major blow to the psyche of the country. The father was dead. It meant that the axis of concentration turned violently and very quickly away from the society to the self. It was a difference in the idea of the individual.*

*Quoted in Lahr: Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh*

The past can offer comfort and stability but it is clear Stella recognises Stanley is the better option in a new world where 'everything is up for grabs'. Stella 'perhaps was wise to recognise him as the best available alternative to the decadence of Belle Reve' (Hooper and Hern, 112); she realises that Blanche is not for this new world. With Blanche dragged off to an asylum, the past becomes irrevocably the past from which no traveller will return. In Hamlet we are left with a bleaker, more tragic world when Fortinbras

instructs Hamlet's body be carried 'like a soldier', in full defiance of his other identities, a world where 'there is no guarantee of being understood' (Duncan-Jones, Times Literary Supplement, 22/04/16). For Fintan O' Toole it is a 'truly tragic world' (68) but the world that awaited could equally be described as a change 'in the idea of the individual'.