

ФИЛОСОФИЯ И ТРАДИЦИИ ТЕАТРА АБСУРДА В ПОЗДНИХ  
ПЬЕСАХ ТЕННЕССИ УИЛЬЯМСА

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**Аннотация.** В статье автор предпринимает попытку анализа влияния театра абсурда, авангардного европейского направления в культуре и искусстве, на позднее творчество американского драматурга Теннесси Уильямса. На философском, идеологическом уровне он разделял мнение абсурдистов, опиравшихся на идеи экзистенциализма, о духовно кризисе, вселенском одиночестве человека, а главное – о смерти богов, богооставленности людей в современном ему мире. Приводится ряд пьес, в которых американский драматург затрагивает различные вопросы религии, доказывая, с одной стороны, ее несостоятельность, а с другой – острую потребность человека в вере. Под воздействием тенденций театра абсурда претерпевают изменения также и структурные элементы драматического произведения, а именно форма, сюжет, конфликт, средства создания персонажей, декорации, символы. Особое внимание автор уделяет изменениям, которым подвергается речевая составляющая поздних пьес американского писателя, в частности такому драматическому элементу как солилоквиум и его функциям. В заключении автор приходит к выводу, что экспериментирование Теннесси Уильямса с новаторскими трендами нельзя рассматривать как исключительно копирование авангардных приемов, так как американский драматург сохраняет преданность своему творческому канону.

**Ключевые слова:** театр абсурда; экзистенциализм; духовный кризис; американская драматургия; Теннесси Уильямс; богооставленность; структурные элементы пьесы

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THEATER OF THE ABSURD PHILOSOPHY AND TRADITIONS  
IN LATER PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

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**Abstract.** The paper analyzes the influence of the Theater of the Absurd, an avant-garde European trend in culture and art, on the later plays of American playwright Tennessee Williams. On a philosophical and ideological level, he shared the opinion of the absurdists, who drew on the ideas of existentialism, about the spiritual crisis, the universal loneliness of people and, most importantly, about the death of the gods – godliness – and abandonment of people in the modern world. A number of plays in which the American playwright addresses various issues of religion, proving, on the

one hand, its inconsistency, and on the other, the urgent human need for faith. Under the influence of the trends of the Theater of the Absurd, the structural elements of the dramatic work also undergo changes, namely form, plot, conflict, means of creating characters, scenery, symbols, etc. The author pays special attention to the changes that affect the characters' speech in Tennessee Williams's later plays, in particular to such a dramatic element as soliloquy and its functions. In conclusion, the author states that Tennessee Williams's experimentation with innovative trends can not be seen as exclusively copying avant-garde techniques, as the American playwright remains faithful to his creative canon.

**Keywords:** Theater of the Absurd; existentialism; spiritual crisis; American drama; Tennessee Williams; godliness; structural elements of a play

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The term “Theater of the Absurd” was coined by the English critic, academic scholar and professor of drama, as well as a friend and kindred soul of the representatives of this trend, Martin Esslin, with whose encouragement the works of a whole pleiad of playwrights were unanimously called in the press “anti-plays” or plays of the absurd. The author of the fundamental study “Theater of the Absurd” (1961), which launched the theoretical study of this phenomenon [1], sees the origins of it in the whole complex of artistic trends, ranging from the ancient theater of pantomime to Artaud's theater of cruelty. However, the main contribution to the development of this trend, of course, was made by existentialism, which highlighted the absolute uniqueness of human existence, inexpressible by the means of a language, and laid the foundation for the further development of the Theater of the Absurd.

The major concern of existentialism is the problem of the spiritual crisis in which people find themselves and the choices they make to get out of this crisis. Signs of crisis can be fear, existential anxiety, odium, boredom. This philosophical trend emerged as a result of disillusionment and pessimistic mood towards scientific, technical as well as moral development of society, which resulted in world wars and the establishment of totalitarian regimes. The tragic experience of two world wars, which revealed the inconsistency and impermanence of social and human values, questioned all existing beliefs and especially acutely revealed the precariousness and meaninglessness of human existence.

It was Martin Esslin who established the connection between the post-war world reflected in the works of Sartre, Camus and other philosophers, and the Theater of the Absurd, but also proved that the sense of absurdity of human existence, feelings of alienation and meaninglessness became even more acute: “The war, having ended, settled somewhere in the inaccessible parts of the soul in the form of impenetrable hypochondria. Man became even greater in his loneliness” [2] (hereinafter translation by the author of the article – A. K.). The absurdists believed that people are in total discord with reality; that their life is absolutely aimless; that they are in a state of constant concern, anxiety, and danger, only with the difference that “the lines which were used rather acrimoniously by Camus and Sartre’s characters, now have become eloquently indifferent when uttered by Eugène Ionesco and Samuel Beckett’s characters” [2].

In addition, the emergence of the Theater of the Absurd was a kind of reaction to the disappearance of religion from modern life, to the “death of gods”. The absurdists made an attempt to return the significance of a myth and a ritual rite to the modern world, to enlighten and redpill modern people, to instill in them the lost sense of primal fear and suffering and the feeling of all-consuming awe by means of an existential shock that can kick a person out of their trivial and mechanized existence, which has lost touch with spirituality.

In the last twenty years of Tennessee Williams’s (1911-1983) work, his sense of human loneliness and alienation in the modern world, the transience and isolation of people became more acute. Freed from the shackles of convention, the writer rebelled against the existing system and the commercialization of the theater industry, claiming that he didn’t want “naked bodies in my plays. I want naked minds and naked hearts” [3, p. 137]. This feeling was aggravated by the fact that the playwright began to speak more often about the collapse of the traditional values system, about people’s loss of spirituality, about godforsakenness.

Throughout his life and artistic endeavor, Tennessee Williams’s attitude to faith issues was rather ambiguous and sometimes contradictory. Brought up in the

spirit of the Anglican Church teachings, the American writer at a difficult moment in his life was converted to Catholicism. In his “Memoirs” the playwright admits the following: “I have never doubted the existence of God nor have I ever neglected to kneel in prayer” [4, p. 44], but further mentions with a touch of irony that he “believed in angels more than... in God and the reason was that... had never known God – true or false –but that... had known several angles... human angels” [4, p. 57-58]. In a 1981 interview, Tennessee Williams stated that his works were “full of Christian symbols. Deeply, deeply Christian” [3, p. 334].

In terms of religion, Tennessee Williams’s major concern was the question of the relationship between the true faith and the dogmas imposed by the church. In Tennessee Williams’s plays and fiction many characters, representing the church, visible or invisible, are described by the playwright rather in cynically:

- the extremely refined, even missish pastor in “You Touched Me!”;
- abusive Father de Leo in “The Rose Tattoo”;
- appearance-concerned reverend Winemiller in “Summer and Smoke” and “The Eccentricities of a Nightingale”;
- venal reverend Tooker in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”;
- the lustful Lutheran minister in “Kirche, Küche, Kinder”;
- a sexually obsessed just-out-of- the seminary young Lutheran minister in the short story “One Arm”;
- corrupt spiritual rivals in the novella “The Knightly Quest” Father Atchison, rector of St. Mary’s Cathedral, and Reverend Dr. Peters, a Methodist Episcopal Church priest, whose reconciliation was facilitated by “checks for five thousand dollars each” [5, p. 442];
- as well as Mrs. Venable’s unfavorable comments in “Suddenly Last Summer” about clergymen, biblical texts and religious dogmas.

Rejecting the imposed by religion dogmas, the playwright promotes the idea of acquiring faith and spirituality through close personal contact with the Divine Princi-

ple, which is possible, according to the writer, via interpersonal relationships between people and the return to traditional values and moral attitudes.

In the early 1960s, having experienced a personal tragedy, Tennessee Williams felt particularly acutely the loneliness and transience of people in the modern world, and that triggered an even stronger need for faith as a way to reconcile people with the unjust reality. The evidence of that can be found not only in the later works, where characters are in search of the meaning they have not found before and redemptive divinity, but also in numerous interviews with the American playwright:

“Frost: Do you think there is something?

Williams: Yes, I do, strangely enough.

Frost: Do you call him God?

Williams: What other word is there? Godot, I suppose.

Frost: Not that a human being can define god if he is God, but what do you understand by God?

Williams: Whoever is responsible for the universe. Including us, you know... Where does our responsibility begin? ... With ourselves. We have to take that responsibility, it's a terrible one, but we have to assume it... We have to see that we are behaving in some sort of a decent fashion toward our fellow creatures, animal and human...» [3, p. 140-141].

It is obvious that Tennessee Williams uses a play on words, replacing the English word “God” with the similar-sounding French word “Godot”, which is used in the title of Samuel Beckett’s acclaimed play “Waiting for Godot” and which, according to many researchers, denotes the author’s concept of God. Thus, the American playwright pays tribute and admiration to the representatives of the Theater of the Absurd, whose perception of God Tennessee Williams shared in his last twenty years.

It is worth mentioning that Edward Albee, so revered by Tennessee Williams, in the article “Which Theatre is the Absurd One?” declared similar perception of the Divine by his compatriot and the absurdists. It is significant that Albee, when drawing such a parallel, relies on Tennessee Williams’s own opinion: “The notion that

God is dead, indifferent or insane – a notion blasphemous, premature, or academic depending on your persuasion – while surely a tenet of some of playwrights under discussion, is, it seems to me, of a piece with Mr. Tennessee Williams’s description of the Deity, in *The Night of the Iguana*, as ‘a senile delinquent’” [6, p. 9].

The “senile delinquent” notion belongs to the play’s protagonist, the locked-out-of-the-church reverend T. Lawrence Shannon. Having experienced the injustice and cruelty of people, the character openly challenges the official institution of faith from the church pulpit, accusing his fellow citizens of a perverted perception of God and religion, and also curses God, that “angry, petulant old man... blaming the world and brutally punishing all he created for his own faults in construction” [7, p. 369]. But, having denied the philistine idea of God and the supreme moral law, Shannon, balancing between bravado and despair, living a double life – real and imaginary, did not abandon faith, opposing the crowds’ God to his own: “I want to go back to the Church and preach the gospel of God as Lightning and Thunder... (*He points out suddenly toward the sea.*) That’s him! There he is now! (*He is pointing out at a blaze, a majestic apocalypse of gold light, shafting the sky as the sun drops into the Pacific.*) His obvious majesty – and *here I am* on this... dilapidated veranda of a cheap hotel, out of season, in a country caught and destroyed in its flesh and corrupted in its spirit by its gold-hungry Conquistadors that bore the flag of the Inquisition along with the Cross of Christ” [7, p. 370]. His tormented state of mind, his hopelessness, his view of human relations as eternal and insurmountable alienation reveal the playwright’s own inclination to the aesthetic views of the European Theater of the Absurd representatives.

A number of later works include religious themes. Thus, “The Night of the Iguana” explores “the oldest [problem] in the world – the need to believe in something or someone – almost anyone – almost anything... something” [7, p. 408]; the play “The Mutilated” uses the image of the Holy Mother who brings peace and salvation to the characters; the plays “The Milk Train Doesn’t Stop Here Anymore” and “Kingdom of Earth (The Seven Descents of Myrtle)” reflect upon the complicated

conditions people find themselves in in the world, on the loss and rediscovery of faith. But the most intense in terms of religious themes is the play “Small Craft Warnings”, in which the playwright tried to show the complexity of the human relationship with God. The work has a powerful allegorical charge, turning it into a parable about love, loneliness, redemption and salvation (for more details, see 8).

In the last twenty years of his life, Tennessee Williams experiences changes not only in his philosophical and aesthetic views, the tone and emotional atmosphere of his works, but the structural elements of his plays are subjected to reconsideration. One of the most important features, that resemble the Theater of the Absurd aesthetics, is their form. Most of the American playwright’s plays, who abandoned realistic methods and techniques, acquire a more abstract character; it is difficult to say where the play begins and where it ends, and sometimes it seems that the action in the plays is absent at all. Plenty of Tennessee Williams’s later plays are characterized by experimental “one-actness” typical of the Theater of the Absurd. Full-length, multi-act plays might be described as a set of intersecting episodes united in an integrated whole.

Later play’s characters are more the embodiment of some abstract ideas than real people, they acquire a more symbolic nature. The characters of some plays are designated by numbers or simply by indicating their gender (for example, the plays “The Frosted Glass Coffin”, “I Can’t Imagine Tomorrow”); sometimes the names of characters are very similar in sound and spelling and differ only by one letter (for example, the Kanes and the Lanes from the play “The Demolition Downtown”, Polly and Molly from “The Gnadiges Fraulein”). This fact allows us to claim the closeness in the perception of a human being in this world by Tennessee Williams and the absurdists: people have lost their individuality, they are only tiny sand grains in the universe, one of thousands of its kind.

The abstract nature of Tennessee Williams’s later plays is manifested in the scenery offered by the playwright. In most of those works there is no detailed description of how the stage should be decorated. If the playwright emphasizes any de-

tail of the stage design, it indicates only the great importance of this element for the development of the action and understanding of the play, its specific symbolism.

Tennessee Williams has always emphasized the symbolic aspect of his plays. However, in the last twenty years there has been a significant evolution in the author's use of symbols. Symbols in the early works harmoniously fit into the action and stage design and do not overpower the action. The symbolism of the later plays acquires a grotesque character, which allows to speak about the Theater of the Absurd aesthetics, namely, its focus on spectacularity. Thus, the principles of Tennessee Williams's "plastic theater" in this period are maximized, brought to the limit. The details of artistic design, though few in number, now come to the forefront, dominate the stage. Like representatives of the Theater of the Absurd, Tennessee Williams uses amplified details, facial expressions and gestures, which often also have a deep symbolic meaning.

Under the influence of the Theater of the Absurd traditions, some later plays also lose the main component of traditional drama – dramatic conflict, but this "conflictlessness" is only superficial. The plays represent a versatile consideration of a problem or reasoning on a given theme in the form of a dramatic dialog.

The influence of avant-garde European tendencies on the later plays of Tennessee Williams, undoubtedly, reflected in the writing technique, which in most cases resembles the structure that the representatives of the European Theater of the Absurd are notable for. The American playwright resorts to the frequent use of illogical and incomplete statements, pauses, the characters' picking up the lines of other actors, etc. Like Beckett, he places emphasis not on what is said, but on how it is said.

Despite the shift in emphasis, in his later plays Tennessee Williams still tries to get as close to the truth as possible, but not by imitating real human communication, but by recreating and exploring the psychological processes occurring in the souls and minds of his characters. He begins to realize that "poetry doesn't have to be words. In the theater it can be situations, it can be silences" [3, p. 99].



Later plays' characters suffer more and more from the fear of isolation, confinement, madness, loneliness. They flee not only from cruelty and violence of the surrounding reality, but also from communication, which becomes an obstacle in interpersonal relationships. Language becomes a real torment for them, they are sentenced to solitary confinement, and the salvation is either silence or death. Owing to new linguistic devices incorporated in his later plays Tennessee Williams tries to recreate the psychological state of the character, trapped in the deadlock of his own self, rather than the life situation caused by social factors, emphasizing that there is no place to escape from or to escape to.

Soliloquies – a soul-searching talk with yourself – is one of the most vivid examples how functionality of traditional linguistic devices and the linguistic structure of a play are altered. Patrice Pavis, the French theater theorist, defines soliloquy as “a character's discourse addressed to himself”, as the characters' inner speech, “thinking aloud”. “Even more than a monologue, soliloquy gives the character the opportunity to reflect on his mental and moral situation... The form of soliloquy allows to reveal to the audience the soul or unconsciousness of the character, which makes soliloquy epically significant, endows it with lyrical pathos and the ability to turn into an independent fragment...” [9, p. 353]. Pavis distinguishes two main functions of a soliloquy in dramaturgy. Firstly, this technique is used when the actor is either facing a moral or psychological choice, or is in search of his or her own self. Secondly, a soliloquy has the function of objectifying thoughts that without its help would remain unspoken.

Tennessee Williams's later plays' characters are even more lonely and isolated in the modern world. To emphasize that he resorts to the use of soliloquies which allow to aggravate that condition. In terms of structure, there is nothing in such internal monologs that can't be presented in a dialogic form. They do not contain anything that might reveal the dark sides of the human soul, something that people try their best to conceal. While a soliloquy implies a division into the outer and inner world, in Tennessee Williams's later plays such a distinction is absent. Nevertheless, harmoni-

ously fitting into a play's structure, they turn into a kind of lyrical digressions and reflections on a given theme. Thus, each of the characters, whose role includes a soliloquy, becomes a carrier or an embodiment of a certain idea, which is alien or just matterless to others. This particular function of a soliloquy in Tennessee Williams's later plays is dominant, and can be regarded as a distinctive feature of the works created in this period (for more details, see 8).

Summing up, it is relevant to emphasize the fact that Tennessee Williams's adoption of some Theater of the Absurd artistic elements is not a mere copying of them, rather "an enlightenment on how to say what you have to say in short forms" [3, p. 99] and a strive to perfect the new methods brought to the theater by the modernists. In addition, a deeper and closer analysis of the later plays of Tennessee Williams allows to reveal that the overlap with the Theater of the Absurd is only formal, and the ideas that the American playwright seeks to express through new theatrical techniques are different from the ideas of the anti-theater representatives, because their goals and objectives are fundamentally opposite.

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