

## **Chekhov's Imprints in "A Streetcar Named Desire"**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This essay is based on a comparative analysis of *The Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov and *A Streetcar named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. The main objective of this essay is to give a complex analysis of these pieces revealing similar forms and ideas, recurrent motifs, symbols, theatrical devices used by both playwrights, and show their place in the aesthetic systems of both artists, and in the world picture they draw in their dramas. Unlike many other modern interpreters of classics who often use well known plots to express totally different if not the opposite meaning, Williams remaining an original and imaginative playwright follows the path laid by Chekhov, developing in his works a similar poetic style, widening and enriching the scale of expressive devices, which is shown on the basis of comparative analysis. And the major affinity is not even in the likeness of particular plots, characters or artistic means but in the fact that both artists tend to depict concrete situations in a broad historical and philosophic perspective. Therefore, their plays acquire a symbolic meaning, becoming emblems of the time, epoch and human life as such. This, as I try to show, is the major thing Williams learnt from Chekhov.

*Keywords:* Artistic means, style, comparative analysis, drama, motifs, symbols

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is impossible to overestimate the impact of Chekhov on the development of world drama, American in particular. Chekhovian intonations and overtones are distinctly

present in the dramas of O'Neills and Hellman, Sherwood Anderson and the young O'Neill. Edward Albee and David Mamet were the ones who often spoke about being influenced by his works. As Juan Zhao points out, "Chekhov had an immediate and direct impact on such Western writers as James Joyce, Katherine Mansfield, and Sherwood Anderson; indirectly, most major authors of short stories in the twentieth century, including Katherine Anne Porter,

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Franz Kafka, Ernest Hemingway, Bernard Malamud, and Raymond Carver, are in his debt” (Zhao, 2010).

One of those who were under the long lasting spell of the Russian dramatist was Tennessee Williams, who kept calling himself Chekhov’s student and even carried his portrait in his breast pocket (McAdam, 2012). Though his words of admiration for Chekhov were many a time referred to by critics, this influence as such has not been so far properly studied. This may be due to the fact that at first sight the plays of these playwrights seem strikingly different — in situations, in the marked national color and typically American or Russian character types. And still when carefully considered, their works under this disparity reveal great essential affinity, which in my opinion is much more relevant than direct analogy of plots or characters.

## METHODS AND MATERIALS

This essay is based on a comparative analysis of *The Cherry Orchard* by Chekhov and *A Streetcar named Desire* by Tennessee Williams. Both American and Russian scholars have noticed some similarity between these plays (Dissanayake, 2009) but mostly did not go further sporadic remarks (Andrews, 2013) or general observations (Hern & Hooper, 2015; Zhao, 2010). The main objective of this essay is to give a complex analysis based on close reading of these pieces revealing similar forms and ideas, recurrent motifs, symbols, theatrical devices used by both playwrights, and show their place in the aesthetic systems

of both artists, and in the world picture they draw in their dramas. In spite of the fact that there is not a very great time distance between them (Chekhov -1860-1904, Williams 1911–1983) they belong not only to different cultures but also to different epochs. Chekhov lived on the eve of the crucial turn in the history of Russia and was among those who anticipated the shortcomings of this process. Williams spent the major part of his life in a world shattered by wars and revolutions, striving to comprehend their consequences for an individual. Their social and aesthetic views, their philosophical foundations and genre structures of their works may be different, but still such a comparison is not incidental. Each of them possessed to the highest degree an acute sensitivity to the ills of the time and desire to help an individual in his/her search for place to belong in the disintegrated world. We cannot say for sure whether Williams had *The Cherry Orchard* in mind when writing *A Streetcar named Desire* or the affinity of many basic aspects of the two dramas was due to the general influence Chekhov had exercised on the American playwright. What is of real interest is the very fact of this artistic interaction and those aesthetic results that it produced. The essay is based on the method of comparative literary analysis introduced by Dionis Durishin in his fundamental monograph “The Theory of Comparative Literary Studies” (Durishin, 1979) and further developed by such Russian scholars as Amineva, Ibragimov, Nagumanova, and Khabibullina (2014), and Bekmetov (2015).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I would like to start with some general remarks. Both playwrights portray society on the turn: for Chekhov it was the old Russia of the gentry, passing into history, for Williams — American southern culture, 'gone with the wind', and for both the old order was associated with spirituality ruthlessly destroyed by materialism and pragmatism. Both artists acknowledged the irrevocability of this process, both realized the ambiguous nature of the past, and still both (Chekhov less, Williams more) preferred it to the present. As one of the most renowned scholars of American theater C.W.E. Bigsby wrote about *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

“Like Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* (...) it focuses on a culture on the turn, an old world, elegant but reflexive, inward turned and inward turning, in process of surrendering to a new order, lacking the civility of a passing world but lacking, too, its neurotic, enervated products” (Bigsby, 1994).

For both of them historical and social processes are relevant only to the extent they influence the fate of an individual. The key theme for both is the theme of loss and disillusionment. Equally both believe that it is only kindness and tolerance that can help individuals to survive. That is why this decaying and dying world is so aestheticized, and there is so much sad dignity in their defeated heroes, and especially heroines (it is interesting to note

that the most remarkable characters in the plays of Chekhov and Williams are women). And if Chekhov's characters have some hopes for the future, which they envision as a vague romantic dream, hoping that people in some fifty years or so will solve their burning problems; Williams, having almost reached this mark, trusts only the intrinsic resources of an individual. Maybe, that is why he refers in his works to the whole stock of literary archetypes and symbols to impart dignity and grandeur to the fates of his characters.

The dramas of both playwrights are exceptionally poetic. They are permeated with symbols, which often blend into a chain of indirect associations and implications. The speech of the characters in the moments of spiritual elevation becomes poetically aphoristic. Williams who wrote poetry throughout his whole life saturated his dramas explicitly and implicitly with the imagery from his poems. Chekhov who never wrote poetry constructed his plays according to the principles of poetic composition — the tension is growing not due to the development of the action but due to emotional gradation. Williams like Chekhov thought that poetry does not need necessarily to express itself through words, in the theater it may be expressed in the situation, in the atmosphere, even in silence, and therefore both resorted to all kinds of extra textual means to create lyrical implications, so important in the plays of both. Proceeding from Chekhov's innovations and developing them Williams makes every element of the performance

suggestive and loaded with meaning. We cannot fail to remember in this respect Chekhov's famous gun, which if hanging on the wall in the first act should necessarily shoot in the last one (Gurland, 1904). In Tennessee Williams' plays everything 'shoots' — musical accompaniment, mechanical noises, symbolic setting, color and light.

Now I shall try to prove these statements by a comparative analysis of the two most popular and characteristic plays of these dramatists — *The Cherry Orchard* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The very first thing that strikes you is their marked diversity. On the one hand, Russia of the beginning of the 20-th century, on the other — America of the end of the 1940s; an old manor house, Russian gentry, peasants, nostalgic overtones, unuttered sadness, and the outskirts of New Orleans with its multicultural inhabitants, overpowering sexuality, hysterics, heartrending anguish. And still these plays have a lot in common. Unfortunately, the critics do not go any further than general remarks; however, I will dare to do so.

Firstly though there is a quite significant time distance between the two plays, the fates of the heroes are basically determined by similar factors — the ruin of the old order and development of a new one. Here we should also note the similarity of the social processes, which took place in Russia after the Peasants' Reform of 1861 and in American South after the Civil War. But if Chekhov's heroes are at the beginning of the decline, the heroine of Tennessee

Williams Blanche Dubois is at the very end of this process. Therefore, while Chekhov's characters still have some vague hopes, even though they are illusory, Blanche has reached the bottom line, beyond which there is nothing but total decay, madness and death. That is why Williams' play is marked for greater emotional intensity.

As I have already mentioned, both playwrights are not so much concerned with the social processes as with the consequences that they have for individuals, therefore I do not think we should over exaggerate Williams' interest in them as some scholars do, see, for example E.M. Jackson, who states that Williams' basic achievements lie in the sphere of social problems that his dramas refer to (Jackson, 1966). Yes, indeed, Williams often touches upon burning problems of his time — immigrants, racism, decay of the old South, Depression, poverty, but still I would rather side with M. Koreneva, who writes, that for Williams "acquisition of happiness is not connected with solving social problems but rather lies beyond them" (Koreneva, 1970). To my mind this is quite true for Chekhov as well. Society for both playwrights can rather destroy an individual than help him/her to survive.

Both dramas in question focus on women characters — Ranevskaya in *The Cherry Orchard* and Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar* — whose fates become symbolic representations of certain historical and social tendencies. Here we can also trace a certain similarity of the structure: in both cases there are titles, which become the

central symbols of the play embodying its dramatic essence, which later split and multiply in its situations. In the opening scenes of both plays the heroine comes to her relations after certain dramatic life experience. Both heroines finally lose their last hope for revival and depart into the void. In both cases the conflict is determined, on the one hand, by the clash of the old and the new orders of life, and on the other — material and spiritual systems. In both cases the one who embodies the antagonistic force, which finally destroys the heroine, is a man. Being utterly different as personalities, Lopakhin and Stanley perform much the same role in the conflict. Lopakhin does everything he can to save Ranevskaya, while Stanley destroys Blanche with 'deliberate cruelty'. However the dominating feature of both is materialism, which in the case of Stanley is intensified by his sexuality. They both in their own way perform violent acts. In the case of Stanley it is physical violence when he rapes Blanche, thus conforming his 'might in right' attitude, symbolically it marks the final destruction and desecration of the illusory myth that she was till the very end clutching to, and effective destruction of herself. The sounds of the ax cutting down the cherry orchard have the same effect on Ranevskaya — they mark the destruction of her world, her hopes, and her soul. So in both cases the material, physical action is relevant mainly because of its consequences for the human soul.

Still more interesting, to my mind, are the implicit allusions to *The Cherry Orchard*, which permeate *A Streetcar*. To

start with, it is the orchard itself that actually germinates in the name of the heroine — Blanche Dubois: "It's a French name. It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together mean white woods. Like an orchard in spring!" — she explains to Mitch (Williams, 1984). This, of course, could not have been left unnoticed by the critics (McAdam, 2012).

The attribute, which is closely associated both with the cherry orchard and with the name of the heroine, is color white. It becomes one of the leitmotifs of both plays symbolizing lost purity, hopes and nostalgia for the past. "O, my childhood, my purity!" exclaims Ranevskaya. "In this nursery I slept, looked out of the window and happiness woke up with me every morning, and then the orchard was just the same — white all over!" (Chekhov, 1948). And further "Look, there deceased mother is walking in the orchard dressed in white", "the white tree is bending down like a woman. Masses of white flowers, blue sky!" (Ibidem, p. 321). And finally, it is the color of the tombs in the cemetery, which the cherry orchard borders on.

In Williams' plays the white color is still more productive. It is present already in the name of the heroine — Blanche. She appears in the poor quarters of New Orleans in a white suit — "there is something about her uncertain manner as well as her white clothes that suggest a moth" (Williams, 1984). This brings to memory Williams' poem "Lament for the Moths", where he creates an image of a moth as a symbol of fragile, exquisite beauty doomed to extinction in the cruel world:

*A Plague has stricken the moths  
 The moths are dying,  
 Their bodies are flakes of bronze  
 On the carpet lying.  
 Enemies of the delicate everywhere  
 Have breathed a pestilent mist  
 into the air  
 Give them, o, mother of moths and  
 mother of men,  
 Strength to enter this heavy world  
 again,  
 For delicate were the moths and badly  
 wanted  
 Here in a world by mammoth  
 figures haunted  
 (Williams, 1964)*

All through the play *Blanche* is desperately trying to preserve her nonexistent purity. As in Chekhov's play the white color is associated with nostalgia for the past — the white manor house with white columns, the family mansion of the Dubois "Belle Reve", which just as the cherry orchard was sold for debts before that having turned into a cemetery, where all *Blanche's* frivolous relations were buried. Thus, here, too, the white color of purity and hope turns into the color of the tombs.

But if the title of Chekhov's play is directly alluded to in the American play, the title of the latter seems to have nothing in common either with "The Cherry Orchard" or with Chekhov's works in general. However this isn't quite so. Firstly, in both cases the eponymous key images were borrowed from reality and have quite a concrete meaning. The cherry orchard is

a material object, which can be sold and bought or cut down. The streetcar named *Desire* was the name of the route, which for a long time existed in New Orleans. Now let us go back to the notion of *desire*, which is so crucial for understanding of all Williams' plays — is it so alien to Chekhov? The word *desire* in both languages — Russian and English — means basically two things: a) a strong wish and b) sexual urge or appetite. It is evident that in its first meaning desire is a characteristic feature of the characters of both plays — they all desire to preserve their world, their identity, to find peace and consolation. In both plays these desires remain unsatisfied as the heroes are inadequate to reality and are finally doomed. In Chekhov's plays desire may sometimes turn into obsession: "To Moscow! To Moscow!" (*Three Sisters*). But the second meaning of this word, which greatly motivates the actions of all Williams' characters, is also not alien to Chekhov's heroes. In Chekhov's times it was not customary to talk openly about sexuality, however, the nature of human desires was much the same, and Chekhov was perfectly aware of it. Therefore, he actually stuffed his plays with all kinds of love chains. If we could put all his plays together we would have one monumental drama reigned over by *Desire*, which always remains unsatisfied, where everybody is passionately in love, and as one of his characters, doctor Dorn (*The Seagull*) says, "How nervous, how nervous everybody is! And so much love around!" (Chekhov, 1948). The same words can be attributed to *The Cherry Orchard*, which

can be called a play about unrequited love. Indeed, even all the minor characters are in love. Yepikhodov loves Dunyasha, who in her turn loves the servant Yasha; Simeonov-Pishik is definitely attracted to Charlotte, who is totally indifferent to him. Petya loves Anya who is more attracted to his ideas than to him; Ranevskaya keeps loving her unfaithful Parisian sweetheart, who actually robs her. Varya loves Lopakhin who, from his very childhood not willing to acknowledge this fact, loves Ranevskaya. Thus we see that both Chekhov and Williams write about desire, though one paints it in water colors and the other in oil.

But most obviously the similarity between the two plays can be traced in the main characters — Ranevskaya and Blanche Dubois. Both before their first appearance on the stage had painful experience — first and foremost, the death of a beloved person. In the case of Ranevskaya — her son, in the case of Blanche — her young husband. It is interesting to compare their laments about these sad circumstances, — the wording is almost identical:

Ranevskaya: "Grisha, my boy, my boy perished, drowned" (Chekhov, 1948).

Blanche: "The boy, the boy died, he was just a boy. Alan, Alan! The Grey boy!" (Williams, 1984).

They both had many other losses in the past, as Blanche puts it, "the long parade to the graveyard!" (Ibidem, p. 26). If Ranevskaya really comes from Paris and is dressed like a Parisian, Blanche for the local folks looks as if she had, come, from

Paris, producing a striking contrast to the surrounding with her manners and elegant clothes. "It looks like you raided some stylish shops in Paris", comments Stanley (Ibidem, p. 38). Talking to her clumsy suitor Mitch, Blanche now and then uses French words: "I want to create --*joie de vivre!* We are going to be very Bohemian. We are going to pretend that we are sitting in a little artists' cafe on the left bank in Paris", she says to him. "*Je suis la Dame aux Camellias! Vous etes Armand!* Understand French? (...) *Voulez vous coucher avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quelle dommage!*" (Ibidem, p. 88).

Though they have both been severely beaten by life they still live in an illusory world and cannot or do not want to adjust to reality. Having no money to live on, Ranevskaya asks for the most expensive food at the restaurant, gives a gold coin to a beggar and generously tips the servants. Lopakhin's practical proposition to cut the cherry orchard into plots and rent them out, which could actually save the situation, seems to her sheer nonsense. She rejects reality and does not want to face the truth. "You should not deceive yourself", says Petya. "You should at least once in your lifetime face the truth!". "What kind of truth?" retorts Ranevskaya. "You see what is true and what is not, and to me it seems that I have lost my eyesight!" (Chekhov, 1948).

The same is true for Blanche. When Mitch strips the light bulb, which Blanche covered with a Chinese paper lantern — her childish attempt to escape from reality — and declares that he is for realism,

she violently protests: “And I don’t want realism! I want magic. I don’t tell the truth, Hell what ought to be truth” (Williams, 1984).

These heroines have also much in common in their psychological characteristics: when the action of the play starts they both are on the edge of nervous breakdown. It can be easily traced through the authorial remarks in the first act, the function of which is to give an insight into the emotional state of the heroine:

Ranevskaya: “cries”, “kisses Anya’s hands, laughs, covers her face with her hands”; “speaks through tears”, “jumps up”, “paces back and forth in agitation, kisses the wardrobe”.

Blanche: “sits in a chair very stiffly, with her shoulders slightly hunched, her hands tightly clutching her purse”; “catches her breath”, “speaks with feverish vivacity”, “shaking all over”; “her head falls on her arms”. All through the play her behavior will be accompanied by such remarks as “wildly”, “shrilly”, “hysterically”, “nervously”, “hectic” etc. Just as Ranevskaya, Blanche keeps talking about her nerves.

Both heroines eventually become hostages of their sensuality, and both leave to face their final destruction. There is an interesting detail: if Ranevskaya really receives a telegram from her lover and associates with it her last hope, Blanche invents a telegram from a rich suitor, which seems real in her dimming mind. But as a matter of fact, Ranevskaya’s telegram or at least the hope associated with it is not more real than the imaginary telegram Blanche invents.

Ranevskaya and Blanche are doomed in this pragmatic world, haunted by “mammoth figures”, which leaves no place for delicate souls, and both artists deplore this old aristocratic culture replaced by gross mercantile values. It is remarkable how this idea of doom is expressed in the plays under analysis: in both of them there appears a bizarre figure, which, though being quite real becomes ominous in the context of the play. In “The Cherry Orchard” it is a drunken stranger who appears from nowhere in the orchard and begs for money; in “A Streetcar” it is a blind Mexican woman who sells flowers for the dead — “flores para los muertos”. Both figures effectively become messengers of the hostile reality, which the heroines are trying desperately to escape.

As has already been noted, both playwrights extensively use music and different sounds to create the appropriate atmosphere in their plays. This is also true for “The Cherry Orchard” and “A Streetcar Named *Desire*”. In both plays music serves as a lyrical comment on the action, intensifying the atmosphere of the scenes, revealing the inner state of the main characters; sometimes it serves as a flashback (the melody of ‘Varshavyanka’, which for Blanche is associated with her husband’s death), sometimes as a foreshadowing (cats’ screams predict Blanche’s fight with Stanley). In the first act of “The Cherry Orchard” we hear birds singing, shepherd playing his pipe — all this contributes to the general atmosphere of spring and hope. The second act is almost wholly accompanied by sad melodies of the



guitar, which intensify its nostalgic mood. In the third we hear a Jewish orchestra, which has come to play at the party, and its joyful music, on the one hand, serves as a counterpart to Ranevskaya's desperation, and on the other — accompanies Lopakhin's triumph.

The music in "A Streetcar" may be called one of the main characters of the play— it is 'the blue piano' as Williams calls it — the music that expresses the spirit of life that goes on there. Sometimes it is nostalgic, sometimes — full of passion and desire. Like in Chekhov's play the music is alternated or sometimes ousted by other noises, the major function of which is to predict the inevitable destruction — it is the noise of the ax cutting down the orchard in the first case, and the noise of the approaching locomotive and 'jungle voices' — in the second. And in both plays we come across sound-symbols, which are very important for understanding the final message. In "The Cherry Orchard" it is twice repeated sound of a burst string coming somewhere from the sky, sad and dying away as the longing for the past. In "A Streetcar" it is the sound of the cathedral chimes in the last act as a lament for Blanche, her lost soul, her pure longing heart.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, unlike many other modern interpreters of classics who often use well known plots to express totally different if not the opposite meaning, Williams remaining an original and imaginative playwright follows the path

laid by Chekhov, developing in his works a similar poetic style, widening and enriching the scale of expressive devices. And the major affinity is not even in the likeness of particular plots, characters or artistic means but in the fact that both artists tend to depict concrete situations in a broad historical and philosophic perspective. I agree with Juan Zhao, who thinks, that "Williams saw in Chekhov an ability to truly understand and portray human nature through his revolutionary drama and wanted to emulate that unique talent" (Zhao, 2010, p. 38). Therefore, their plays acquire a symbolic meaning, becoming the emblems of the time, epoch and human life as such. This, in my opinion, is the major thing Williams learnt from Chekhov.

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