



**HAL**  
open science

## Tennessee Williams's Complex Allegiances to Romanticism

Valérie Systemans

► **To cite this version:**

Valérie Systemans. Tennessee Williams's Complex Allegiances to Romanticism. *Alizés : Revue angliciste de La Réunion*, 2005, 25-26, pp.186-198. hal-02344089

**HAL Id: hal-02344089**

**<https://hal.univ-reunion.fr/hal-02344089>**

Submitted on 3 Nov 2019

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

## *Tennessee Williams's Complex Allegiances to Romanticism*

If there is one recurrent element in the corpus of literary criticism of the work of Tennessee Williams it is that he is a “romantic” writer. However, this term has such varied and heteroclitic meanings that, in the absence of serious explanation, its application to Williams’s work may lead to serious confusion. For example, the word “romantic” is sometimes used as the contrary of “realist,” as a way of implying Williams’s predilection for the realm of feelings and sensations rather than thoughts, as a synonym for “conservative” when it serves to describe his nostalgic attachment to the South, or as a way of linking him to a well-known tradition of literature.

Strictly speaking, Romanticism is a literary movement that took place in Britain and throughout Europe from the outbreak of the French Revolution through the first three decades of the nineteenth century (Abrams 127). The term was later used to qualify the so-called American Renaissance that started at the beginning of the nineteenth century. When a contemporary writer is deemed a “romantic,” the underlying assumption is that Romanticism can also be used as a concept that transcends a specific period of literary history. But what conceptions are attached to a label that has become so commonplace that most critics do not even define it? In Williams’s case, it stands as an equivocal concept that assimilates him to supposedly consensual writers while linking him to revolutionary traditions — revolt being maybe the most essential characteristic of the Romantic Movement. We believe that Williams can be described as a “romantic” writer because the fundamental tension that we perceive in Romanticism — the tension between the self and the world — is an essential characteristic of his work. In fact, Romanticism corresponds to a certain vision of the world, a vision that places the self in the centre and that refuses the constrictions of norms and values imposed from the outside. As Henri Zerner nicely puts it: “le romantisme adopte un égocentrisme multiple, une conception du

monde où chaque individu est le point de référence essentiel.”<sup>1</sup> This very conception is one of the keys that may lead us to understand how Williams’s romantic posturing is linked to his belief in social and spiritual transcendence in a way that may force us to review the commonly-held belief that he is an apolitical writer. A good starting-point to study this complex and polemical question is an analysis of the concept of Romanticism in Williams’s early play *Not About Nightingales*.<sup>2</sup>

*Not About Nightingales* was written at the beginning of Williams’s career in 1938 but never produced during his lifetime although the dramatist considered it a good and powerful play.<sup>3</sup> It was finally published in 1998 and, by an ironical twist, it was nominated for the Tony Awards as best new play sixty years after it was written. It reveals a virtually unknown Tennessee Williams, a writer spiritually close to Clifford Odets and John Howard Lawson, engaged in fighting social injustice and passionate in his violent denunciation of society. Inspired by a true story that took place in 1938 in the Penitentiary of Homelsburg in Pennsylvania, *Not About Nightingales* dramatizes the events leading to a hunger strike in a prison, and the inhuman treatment received by the prisoners in retaliation. Four convicts are boiled alive in a steam-filled room. Although the play was described by a number of theatre critics who saw the production in 1998 as a theatrical shocker very much in the “propagandistic mode of the thirties” (Dalglish), it is nonetheless very different from the rigid didactic plays that were common at the time. In fact, Williams freely uses the conventions of the period and incorporates many heteroclitic elements that give a distinctive flavour to his play. To be more specific, what he incorporates in his play *is* precisely the romantic tradition: *Not About Nightingales* explicitly deals with the romantic inheritance and evaluates it against the background of social protest plays in a way that provides suggestive insights about the creativity of the playwright and its relationship to Romanticism. That

---

<sup>1</sup> See the article on « Romantisme » in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*.

<sup>2</sup> The edition used is the Methuen Drama one (London: Methuen Drama, 1998). All page references integrated into the text are to this edition and in brackets.

<sup>3</sup> Ideological reasons may explain the lack of interest in the play. In fact during the Cold War, the literature of the thirties was deemed very suspicious.

is why a consideration of this early play is long overdue as there seems to be a reticence or even a resistance to acknowledging that Williams may have been more socially engaged than is commonly assumed.<sup>4</sup>

The title chosen for Williams's fourth long play conveys an indescribable feeling of puzzlement as it begins in an unusual fashion with a negation as the first word of his title. Williams's play may *not* be about nightingales but then we wonder what it is about. The spectator is not given any clues regarding what to expect. The particularity of the title suggests that Williams deliberately builds his play on a strategy of uncertainty, leaving the title as a blank space that may eventually be filled. The title is emblematic of the reflective dimension of this early work in which Williams questions the status and the purpose of writing. The title could be said to be oxymoronic in the sense that it suggests the absent presence of nightingales. The oxymoron indicates a transgression, a reversal of common norms and values that is particularly apt in a play that wishes to criticize the existing state of things. Creating uncertainties and suggesting transgression, the title also functions as a statement of intention, being as it is, a clear expression of refusal. Thus, some of the founding elements of the romantic posturing — uncertainties, transgression and revolt — already appear in the title. However, the way Williams formulates his relationship to Romanticism is not one of strict adherence; on the contrary, it oscillates between the opposite polarities of acceptance and rejection. The title remains enigmatic during a good part of the play as Williams seems to be deferring its explicitation for quite a long time. Not until the second part of the play does the spectator learn about its meaning. In the play as published, this corresponds to the first episode of the second act.<sup>5</sup> By entitling this episode "Not About Nightingales," Williams creates a mirroring effect and plays with echoes and repetitions — the repetition of the title

---

<sup>4</sup> Trevor Nunn's production of the play in 1998 was highly successful but this has not been followed by academic enthusiasm for the play. It seems that the vision of Williams as an apolitical writer is so deeply ingrained that critics prefer to ignore the issue of the social protest plays that Williams wrote in the thirties.

<sup>5</sup> Originally, the manuscript did not propose this division into acts. This is a choice made by the editor.

several times during the scene parallels with the first scene thanks to a process of repetition of situations and utterances — thus building a self-reflective structure that aptly frames a scene pregnant with interrogations about the purpose of writing. In this scene, the hero, Jim, throws away John Keats's poem "Ode to a Nightingale" with "disgust" (98), and expresses his intention to write "not about nightingales" (99). The title indicates the hero's refusal of the romantic tradition, so well embodied by the English poet, who was actually one of Williams's favourites. Jim's rejection is expressed in a crude fashion:

**Jim:** It's sissy stuff — "Ode to a Nightingale!" Don't those literary punks know there's something more important to write about than that? They ought to spend a few years in stir before they select their subjects! (98)

It is worth noting that Jim stands as an embodiment of one of the aspects of Williams's controversial personality, that of the tormented poet who wishes to start a revolution. In this context, the reference to "sissy," a term that Williams's own father used to depreciate his son, may not be innocent and could lead us to question the link between Williams's choice to write social protest plays and the affirmation or denegation of sexual identity. But beyond a question that would lead us into the intricate realm of psychoanalysis, let us analyze Jim's statement by replacing it in the ideological background of the thirties. This investigation rapidly shows that Jim's point of view reflects the dominant conception of the proletarian literature of the time. In an interesting fashion, the very image of the nightingale was an ideological reference in the passionate and troubled context of the thirties. One of the most outspoken advocates of proletarian literature at the time was Joseph Freeman who exposed his conception of art in the introduction that he wrote for a famous anthology of proletarian literature published in 1935:

Moreover, in an era of bitter class war such as ours, party programs, collective actions, class purposes, when they are enacted in life, themselves become experiences — experiences so great, so far-reaching, so all-inclusive that, as experiences, they transcend flirtations and autumn winds and stars and nightingales and getting



drunk in Paris cafés. It is a petty mind indeed which cannot conceive how men in the Soviet Union, even poets, may be moved more by the vast transformation of an entire people from darkness to light, from poverty to security, from weakness to strength, from bondage to freedom, than by their own personal sensations as loafers or lovers. (Freeman in Hicks *et al.* 11)

Freeman implicitly refers to Keats through his allusion to “nightingales” and “autumn winds” that recalls two of the most famous pieces of the English poet, *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) and *Ode to Autumn* (1819). Jim’s reference to Keats is far from being anodyne in this context and links him to a certain ideological position in line with his status as a proletarian writer. In fact, Jim fits exactly the description of the proletarian writer, being as he is a young man with no education working in a factory. In Freeman’s discourse, the image of the nightingale as a derisive symbol of Romanticism recurs:

It does not require much imagination to see why workers and intellectuals sympathetic to the working class — and themselves victims of the general social-economic crisis — should be more interested in unemployment, strikes, the fight against war and fascism, revolution and counter-revolution than in nightingales, the stream of the middle-class unconscious, or love in Greenwich Village. (Freeman 16)

Even though Freeman dedicates himself to exposing the principles that justify the validity of proletarian art in his introduction, he is somewhat cautious in his approach to the theoretical debate that was the object of lively discussion at the time. His focus upon themes rather than upon modes of perception and representation reveals a certain uneasiness in dealing with matters of representation. As concerns the themes, Williams seems to have followed Freeman’s recommendations and shows his interest in “unemployment, strikes, the fight against war and fascism, revolution and counter-revolution” as he portrays a hunger strike in a repressive and tyrannical environment that is explicitly associated with fascism.

In a larger sense, Williams reveals his affinities with the spirit of the so-called “popular front.” In 1935, the USSR officially

launched the doctrine of the “popular front” in order to resist the rise of Nazi Germany and the aggressive imperialism of Japan. This new political orientation that favoured a policy of alliances with liberal democracies had an impact on the theory of revolutionary aestheticism both in the USSR and in the United States. Committed artists were encouraged to focus on the fight against fascism while the portrayal of the class struggle was deemed secondary (see Levine). But if Williams integrated certain elements of leftwing orthodoxy in his play such as a topical theme, stock characters and a variation on the structure of the pendulum that includes the conversion of a character to revolutionary commitment, he also created a distinctive play. In the text quoted above, Freeman tends to oppose revolutionary art to the interest in “nightingales, the stream of the middle-class unconscious, or love in Greenwich village,” which are explicit allusions to Romanticism, Freudianism and the Bohemian spirit. Interestingly enough, Williams incorporated all these elements in *Not About Nightingales* and especially in the other plays that made his success and led critics to consider him an apolitical writer. In doing so, the dramatist was not choosing one term of the alternative proposed by Freeman but rather accomplishing a synthesis of elements that the latter deemed irreconcilable. Williams aimed at being both a romantic and a revolutionary; the recurrence of the term “revolutionary” in his *Memoirs* is significant in this respect.

Still, it would be erroneous to consider the literary leftwing movement of the thirties as proposing a unified and coherent theory of art (see Levine). Some theoreticians writing for *New Masses*, for example, stood in contrast to Freeman’s positions in trying to rehabilitate Romanticism by establishing a distinction between “bourgeois Romanticism” and “revolutionary Romanticism.” However, the definitions of “revolutionary Romanticism” they proposed, the one suggested by Ollie Pageant being a good example, reduced Romanticism to a particular blend of realism with its focus on “the present struggles of the workers” (Levine 147), wrongly defined as Romanticism because of its utopian connotations — “the outlines of a future beautiful life” (Ibid). But this particular blend of Romanticism was certainly not the one that Williams tried to express in his writings.

When Williams wrote *Not About Nightingales*, he must have been acquainted with the debates about the role of art and the choice of a suitable form for revolutionary purposes. He frequented radical circles, notably the St Louis Union of Writers and had followed a seminar at the University on experimental drama conducted by one of the creators of the Federal Theatre Project, Harold Mabie, a close friend of Hallie Flanagan. Moreover, his mentor at the time was Willard Holland who directed a very radical theatre group, the Mummers. In fact, Williams intended his play to be produced by them. It comes therefore as no surprise that his play reflects this theoretical debate. In earlier versions of the play, he had actually included longer developments on these issues, but the rather naïve way he presented them may have been the reason for their suppression in the final version<sup>6</sup>:

**Jim** (struggling for expression): Makes me — want to say things — just like they are — exactly — like a guy that's trying to figure out his financial standing will put down a lot of figures on paper and then try to add'em all up to get exactly what it all comes to!! Y'see?

— Yes! You're a naturalist, Jim. [...]

— Yes. You've refused to romanticize your environment.

— uh?!

— Reality! That's what you're after! An exact reproduction of things as they actually are. No compromise, no evasion! For you it is not an escape mechanism, this business of writing, it's not even an attempt at arbitration, a skirmish or a manoeuvre — it's a deliberate, desperate front-line attack! with all colors flying — Isn't it, Jim?!

**Jim** (stupefied): Yes — !

**Eva** (breathlessly exultant): *Ahhhhh!*<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> The final version as published is actually a controversial matter as the editor included scenes from different typescripts and favoured one version as the final one with little argument to justify her choice. In the dialogue that follows, the original typographical dashes have been replaced by the names of the characters to facilitate the reader's task. As regards the words that are underlined, it is a faithful reproduction of the original version.

<sup>7</sup> The typescripts are available for consultation in the Harry Ransom Center, University of Texas at Austin. This dialogue is an extract from the version clas-



Williams thus inscribed a reflection upon literary modes of representation, establishing a formal opposition between Naturalism and Romanticism. Naturalism, as defined by Zola, is based upon an observation and a detailed and “exact” reproduction of things and phenomena in order to discover the roots of social evil and eradicate it. William’s heroine seems to be paraphrasing Emile Zola’s *Le Roman Expérimental* (1880) in his exposition of the principles of Naturalism.

While the two main characters of the play articulate the traditional debate between the vision of art as a weapon — “blowing things wide open,” as Jim phrases it (100) — associated with Naturalism and an aesthetist and escapist vision of the work of art associated with Romanticism — according to Eva, Keats “wrote about beauty as a form of escape (100) —, the playwright achieves in his play a synthesis of visions often deemed incompatible.

Thanks to the title he chose, Williams appears to be refusing the romantic inheritance, conforming in that sense to Freeman’s recommendations. In dedicating the play to Clarence Darrow, famous for his defence of union activists and his militancy against the death penalty, he clearly states his intention of writing a social protest play. Furthermore, as we mentioned before, Williams establishes parallels between himself and his dramatic hero, Jim, who defends a conception of art as a weapon. Both Williams and his dramatic character are rebellious poets engaged in a painful quest for identity and trying to write in order to escape from claustrophobic situations. The naturalistic strain associated with the conception of art as a weapon is clearly identifiable: Williams’s play minutely conveys the atmosphere of prisons by reproducing, for example, the slang of prisoners and includes reflection about the impact of environment and heredity. Jim’s diatribe on guilt in the last episode of Act II is significant as it bears the marks of both naturalist and romantic influences. In

---

sified as 30-6 (Box 30 – Folder 6) in the Tennessee Williams’s collection. The whole collection organized in four sections contains 93 boxes that include type-scripts, composite and holograph manuscripts, correspondence, bibliographies, clippings, scrapbooks, academic papers, business records, galley proofs, photographs and artworks.

his desire to refuse definitions imposed by society, he proves to be a romantic while he refers to genetics and heredity — “When they mix up all the little molecules we’re made out of” (127) — he signals his affiliation with the naturalist conception of human beings. Here he is close to the insight developed by Henri Peyré in his article on Romanticism<sup>8</sup> suggesting that the most ferocious anti-romantics are only picking lovers’ quarrels over Romanticism.

While Williams feigns criticism of the romantic inheritance, he actually writes a play imbued with this very spirit. The dedication to Darrow is phrased in a very poetic and metaphorical way that would not be disapproved by romantic poets: “The play is dedicated to the memory of Clarence Darrow, The Great Defender, whose mental frontiers were the four corners of the sky” (xxv). Jim, the character that most strongly denies the romantic conception of art, is, as Eva implies, a romantic: “You see he [Keats] was like you” (100). Jim is a solitary rebel refusing the constrictions of society and conformism, trying to reinvent the world through new definitions — there is a constant exploration of language on his part and a refusal of established definitions. In a very romantic fashion, he aspires to get free through “intellectual emancipation” (38) and literary creation.

It is noteworthy that a play that pretends to state its refusal of the romantic tradition includes one of Keats’s poems *When I have fears that I may cease to be* (1818). This inclusion of a romantic poem at a very dramatic moment — the prisoners are about to be sent to the torture room — is an unorthodox theatrical device (the actors of Trevor Nunn’s 1998 production confessed that they feared the scene). Though implausible, the scene was nonetheless effective on stage. It actually serves to dramatize the very romantic tension between the world of the ideal and the world of the real while giving poetic expression to the prisoners’ fear of death.

In a similar way, *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) provides intertextual clues to reading the play and is thus an integral part of its meaning. While at the beginning of Keats’s poem, the nightingale is presented as a real bird, it progressively comes to symbolize joy, the beauty of nature, the world of the ideal or even the artist himself.

---

<sup>8</sup> See the article on “Romantisme” in the *Encyclopaedia Universalis*.

Thus the title of Williams's play can be read as a complex statement of intention: refusing to write about joy, the beauties of nature, the world of the ideal or about himself, he elaborates a violent and virulent play of denunciation based on horrendously real facts.

We can also trace intertextuality on a much less obvious level. *Nightingales* pursues Keats's reflection on the effect of the dream on the dreamer that finally leads him to action. The play is pervaded by the dreams of the different characters – Butch's dream of better conditions in the prison, his dream of meeting Goldie again, Jim's dream of getting free, Eva's dream of constructing a future with Jim – which are incentives for dramatic action. Dreams are preludes to action in a way that gives an activist coloration to the romantic emphasis on dreams. As Williams wrote in a later play: "Revolution only needs good dreamers who remember their dreams" ("Camino Real" 139). It seems that for Williams the first step towards awareness and revolutionary commitment is the faculty to dream. So if his characters are dreamers – Butch, Jim, Eva – they are also, by implication, potential revolutionaries. Butch, for example, becomes in the play the typical revolutionary leader. This contradicts the usual statements about Williams that define him as apolitical because his plays have a certain dreamlike quality and are peopled by dreamers – Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Chance in *Sweet Bird of Youth* or Val in *Orpheus Descending* for example.<sup>9</sup> In *Not About Nightingales*, the reference to Keats is thus a way for Williams to suggest that dreams are not necessarily synonymous with passivity. Intertextuality in *Not About Nightingales* has to be understood as a device that helps Williams to re-contextualize Romanticism, to replace it in the context of the 1930s debates about the role of art and to expose its paradoxes and contradictions. One of the contradictions of the romantic posturing is that it is constantly divided between contradictory impulses: the individualistic strain that derives from his emphasis on the self and the desire for collective action inspired by his dissatisfaction with the present and his desire to change the world. Jim, the supposedly anti-romantic yet romantic writer, is an embodiment of these contradictory impulses.

---

<sup>9</sup> Here, Williams is close to the positions defended by the surrealist movement.

As Keats's ode is structured around the nightingale and its symbolical meaning, so is Williams's play. In effect, the whole play revolves around the opposition between the canary and the nightingale, which become symbols for imprisonment and freedom. "The Canary" is the nickname that is given to Jim by the other inmates because he acts as a stool-pigeon for the director of the prison, Boss Whalen. This opposition gives a particular flavour to the play thanks to the puns and crude images that derive from Jim's nickname and the persistent bird calls that punctuate Williams's play. Moreover, the dramatist conjugates the real and the metaphorical dimension in a way reminiscent of Keats's writing. Locating the dramatic action in a very repressive jail, he deals with the literal dimension of imprisonment but he also transforms this jail into a universal metaphor of the confinement to which human beings are condemned. The dialectics between the inside and the outside – the figure of the closed island as opposed to the fluidity of the sea, the insistence upon the cells as cages and the bars that divide the theatrical space – are echoes of the romantic questioning about the division between the self and the world. The reflection upon time – the circular structure of the play and the reference to a mythical past with the inclusion of the reference to the Lorelei<sup>10</sup> – is also imbued with romantic overtones.

Finally, we can say that for Williams romanticism is not only compatible with a literature of commitment but is even an essential part of it. The romantic posturing with its emphasis on the self is not necessarily apolitical. On the contrary, it is here closely linked to the revolutionary spirit as it focuses on revolt and includes a rejection of norms imposed from the outside. While the 1930s debate about the pertinence of Romanticism in social protest plays lost its clarity because of the semantic vagueness associated with the term and the tendency to classify it as a "bourgeois" concept, Williams wrote an effective romantic social protest play. In *Not About Nightingales*, he combined realism and even naturalism with romanticism without losing his objective of writing a social protest play attuned to the spirit of the popular front. One of Williams's greatest achievements

---

<sup>10</sup> According to a German legend, Lorelei was a siren that lured sailors to their death.

is to have integrated the theoretical debate in the very texture of his play.

Christopher Bigsby who, to his credit, was the only critic who had mentioned Williams's plays written in the thirties before they were published, argues that Williams is not really a committed writer. He sees in Williams's work not "a political rejection of capitalism but a romantic's reaction against the modern" (Bigsby 169) and this is enough to justify his evaluation of Williams as a not really committed writer. I am convinced, however, that the opposition between political and romantic is not valid as far as Williams is concerned and that it has obscured the critical debate about the significance of his work. It is ironical that, in his afterword to "Camino Real" (Williams in Ray and Woods, 69), Williams expresses his allegiance to Romanticism by quoting some lines from a play by George Bernard Shaw, the topical social dramatist and playwright with whom he is supposed to have least in common (Hirsch 108). "Romantic" and "revolutionary" would be adequate qualifications for a writer who claims to be even more committed than Arthur Miller, universally considered to be the archetypal social dramatist.

I think I'm more of a social writer than Mr. Miller, which would surprise him a great deal. He's more of a polemicist, but I think I have more deeply rooted feelings than most directors I know.<sup>11</sup>

Valérie Systeman<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> Williams made this statement during the rehearsals for *The Red Devil Battery Sign* (quoted in Roudané, 233).

<sup>12</sup> Université de La Réunion, Faculté des Sciences, 15 rue René Cassin, 97400, Saint Denis cedex (France).



## REFERENCES

- Abrams, M.H., *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (Orlando: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1993).
- Bigsby, C.W.E., *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth Century American Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).
- Dalglish, Darren, "A Curtain Up London Review: *Not About Nightingales*." Available on <http://www.curtainup.com/nighting.html> (July, 7, 2003).
- Hicks, Granville, North, Joseph, Gold, Michael, Peters, Paul, Schneider, Isidor, Calmer, Alan, eds.; with a critical introduction by Joseph Freeman. *Proletarian Literature in the United States; an Anthology* (New York: International Publishers, 1935).
- Hirsch, Foster, *A Portrait of the Artist: the Plays of Tennessee Williams*; (Port Washington: Kennikat Press Corp., 1979).
- Levine, Ira, *Left-Wing Dramatic Theory in the American Theatre* (Ann Arbor: Umi Research Press, 1985).
- Roudané, Matthew, C. ed.; *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
- Williams Tennessee, *Not About Nightingales* (1938), (London: Methuen Drama, 1998).
- Williams Tennessee, "Camino Real" in *The Rose Tattoo and Other Plays* (London: Penguin Books, 1976).
- Williams Tennessee, "Afterword to Camino Real," in Christine R. Day et Bob Woods, eds., *Where I Live: Selected Essays : 1944-1978*; (New York: New Directions, 1978).

