Real and Imagined Places in the Plays of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard

Gabriella Varró

*"We are wont to imagine rare and delectable places
in some remote and more celestial corner of the
system, behind the constellation of Cassiopeia's
Chair, far from noise and disturbance."*
—Henry David Thoreau (1854)

*"We still find a certain reverence for myth in the
modern as a means of preserving an unknowable
(and by transference; a sacred) motive for myth."*
—E. Gould (1981)

The present analysis proposes a comparative study of the plays of two American playwrights, those of Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard, while contextualizing each author's oeuvre within contemporary theories of space and myth. My contention throughout this essay is that these authors translate two determining global phenomena into the realities of their respective locales: (a) the devaluation of sacred, all-encompassing mythologies, the gradual diminishing of what we could call mythic consciousness and, (b) the cultural, social, artistic relevance of the concept of contact zones. The subsequent analysis will proceed in four steps: [1] define the regionalist leanings of the playwrights selected; [2] describe the mythic underpinnings of the respective regions that recur as leitmotifs and source of iconography in the drama texts of these authors; [3] point out the overlaps between these mythic dimensions and contemporary theories of space as they bear relevance in the dramatizations of clashing myth constructs, [4] and finally, a brief note

about the benefits of the contact zone model in reading drama texts will be added.

[1] Regional Leanings in Williams' and Shepard's Works

Despite the fact that literary modernism tended to be international in its orientation and hypothetically aimed at avoiding reverence for the regional, there are numerous examples to the contrary in 20th-century American drama. This fascination with the most immediate locales rather than with international, exotic settings, the preference for the national and homespun over distant lands, the prioritization of the particular rather than the universal have lingered on in American drama even after the mid-20th century. The two most obvious examples to prove this are Tennessee Williams and Sam Shepard, whose oeuvres are interwoven with typically American regions.

Williams is often-times labeled in the criticism as the dramatist of the American South, the poet-playwright of the land of the cavalier mythology, southern belles and poor whites. Being born in Mississippi, Williams' engagement with the South turned out to be a lasting badge, which he could not, and did not wish to, shake off. In *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* Louise Davis cites the author as saying: "I write out of love for the South [...] It is out of regret for a South that no longer exists that I write of the forces that have destroyed it" (43). His more than superficial entanglement with the complex mythologies of the region became apparent with his first great success, *Glass Menagerie,* which won him the New York Drama Critics Circle Award in 1944. From that time onward Williams returned to the conflict between the Old and the New South in several of his plays such as his 1947 *A Streetcar Named Desire,* as well as his Pulitzer Prize winning *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), both of which weave the web of myth and history of the region further.

Shepard's dramatic oeuvre alternates between two main geographical regions of the USA, namely the agricultural midlands (the Midwest) filled with grotesque and absurd potentials in most of the author's plays, and the legendary American West with its cowboy heroes, wild horses, and vast desert lands, depicted as at best anachronistic, yet constantly and forever longed for and re-imagined in contemporary America. "No other playwright," contends Leslie Wade, "has so

582

consistently utilized Western locales, characters, and imagery, for such wide and popular appeal" (285) as Shepard did. Both the Midwest and the American West, especially the desert areas of California, Nevada and Arizona supply landscapes in Shepard's plays that are invariably juxtaposed to the industrial and urban centers of the country. From his surrealistic fantasies like *Mad Dog Blues* (1970), *Operation Sidewinder* (1971) through the cycle of his family plays: *Buried Child* (1978), *True West* (1978) and *Curse of the Starving Class* (1980), to his mystical *Fool for Love* (1983), and some of his most recent plays like *The God of Hell* (2004) these two landscapes dominate the Shepardian universe.

Beyond the common string of this obviously strong attachment to specific geographical settings the two authors share more than a passing likeness as they create their elaborate fantasy worlds, and elevate the real, physical places out of the context of the particular. When Sacvan Bercovitch describes the inspiration that writers of the American soil draw from the diverse geography of the land he adds: "America as myth or idea supersedes its identity as a geographical reality, whether envisioned as a desert paradise, a purifying wilderness, a theocratic garden of God, or the redemptive West" (186). Whether we consider Williams' dramas or Shepard's plays Bercovitch's assertion appears to ring true as both of these playwrights mould the actual properties of their respective locales and the conjoining iconographies into the myths of their own making. Moreover at the apropos of the landscapes that supply their immediate inspirations they also reflect upon global tendencies, two of which: the decline of the mythic, and the formation and relevance of contact zones with regard to their specific locales will be addressed here in greater detail. These authors then are regionalist with a difference, since they simultaneously act as recorders of regional peculiarities, cultures, histories, and myth-makers, who add their own unique visions to America's regions through the abstractions and mythological filters of their art.

[2] Mythic Underpinnigns

In the history of the United States there were two outstanding regions that generated more mythic stories, legends, iconic heroes than others, namely the American South and the Wild West. Suffice it to consider the extensive popular iconography that one can immediately

evoke at the mere mentioning of these geographical areas: from the iconic figures of the confederate soldier, the southern colonel, the master of the plantation, the stereotype of the dancing and singing darkey to Buffalo Bill, the Malboro Man, and innumerable versions of the American cowboy in Hollywood films. These landscapes accordingly attracted writers from relatively early on (with Cooper and Bret Harte being the best-known 19th-century literary mythographers) not simply because of the vivid imagery these places brought to mind, but also because of the strong ideological and symbolic undercurrents that made these locales fascinating.

The ideologies that readily fed these national mythologies are manifold and complex. It is fair to say that entire books are devoted to explicating each of these mythical constructions individually. Within the confines of this short essay I can volunteer but for a fragmentary elucidation of these ideologies.

To start with the mythic construct that Tennessee Williams was also intricately caught up in, some words about Southern mythology will follow. The myth of the South is far from a unified set of stereotypical constructs. It merges myths as diverse as the Myth of the South as a New Garden of Eden, the Myth of Southern Uniqueness, the Plantation Myth, the Myth of Reconstruction, as well as the Myth of the New South (Virágos 83+), and each of these mythic dimensions of southern history were fed and fuelled by respective ideologies, ideas promoted by the dominant groups of southern society. Contemporary critics of southern mythology see the term "Lost Cause" as the source of southern ideologies of exceptionality and uniqueness. The term itself was coined by Edward Pollard at the end of the Civil War, and his popular book The Lost Cause chronicled the Confederacy's demise (Internet 1). The term quickly caught on, and it came to mean more than the military defeat of the South, to also include a "defeat of the 'Southern way of life'—a phrase that generally referred to the South of the antebellum period, when plantation slavery was still intact" (Internet 1). Since the Civil War the concept of the "Lost Cause" has been combined with additional beliefs of southern distinctiveness, with novel ideologies of "civil religion," "the Confederate Tradition," which in the extreme retrospectively idealized the region as a model for racial, gender and class relations.

Quite interestingly, the ideologies that energized the Myth of the American West were profoundly similar in character, in that both basically supported the underlying theory of "exceptionalism." Yet, while

584

with the mythologies of the South we can talk about the exceptionality of a particular geographical region, the Myth of the West was founded on the belief that the entire American nation was somehow unique, superior, as well as specifically chosen and ordained by God to carry out a specific mission. Virágos, Hungary's leading myth critic asserts that the real ideology behind Manifest Destiny, the myth of the frontier as well as the Myth of the West lay in a very simple need: territorial ambition (109). "This ideology," Virágos further argues, "was bound up with a number of support preference models: geographical predestination, world leadership, the cult of élan, [...] the Puritan sense of mission, etc. Even so, however, the ideology was overly selfish, pragmatic, voluntaristic—and blatantly aggressive" (109). Whereas the historical foundation for the Myth of the South was provided by Pollard, the idea of national distinctiveness was substantiated, among others, by Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis. The thesis argued, as is well known, that due to the territorial expansion of the US, at the junction of civilization and savagery the real, unique American national character and temperament were born.

The association of the American South and West with a set of stories, type figures, motifs, and nostalgic imagery is partly a result of histories told, histories witnessed, and histories invented, this latter including the region-specific history that literature makes. Another common thread that connects and relates these very diverse myths to each other is the residue they create in the national consciousness in the form of popular imagery, cliché, and stereotype in sum: a regional iconography. Wiley Lee Umphlett explains our romantic-nostalgic insistence on prolonging these mythologies partly by social reasons: "Perhaps as our society grows increasingly technological and complex as well as more impersonal, we long for simpler, more innocent times when our lifestyles seemed less encumbered with the kinds of doubts and problems that appear to overwhelm us today" (7).

[3] Dramatization of Mythic Confrontations in the Zone

Myths, whether they belong to a group, a nation or shared by the entire human race, have life cycles; they emerge, reach their zenith and then they subside. Modernism, Williams' era, was especially hit by the realities of dissolving stability, lack of firm centers, the disappearance of sacred mythologies. The restorative urge, the yearning for a higher

discourse, a point of stability primarily characterizing the modern, is also, however, true of Shepard the postmodern playwright, since the games played with myths in his plays also come to counter-balance this lost mythic consciousness in a way. Williams and Shepard chart modern and postmodern variations of the survival of the mythic in an age when the overarching mythic stories have lost their currency.

Both Williams and Shepard come to their respective mythologized settings at the point when the myths that made these regions unique are in their stages of decline. It is not simply that the falsehood that the original region-specific myth was built around is exposed (Virágos 91),—a reality that we could analyze in the case of both of my selected examples—; but there is also a challenging new mythology that is springing up in the wake of the earlier, previously privileged one. These regions, to simplify matters to the extreme, become then contact zones for people of disparate belief systems representing the already declining, turned increasingly anachronistic and the novel (emerging), challenging set of ideologemes.

Mary Louise Pratt in her book (*Imperial Eyes*) applied the concept of "contact zone" to describe colonial encounters independently of the center ↔ periphery model to signify "the social spaces in which disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination (...)" (4). Later, James Clifford reinterpreted Pratt's term for the context of the museum as a special place where cross-cultural exchange regularly takes place. As Bernard Scott Lucious explains further, Clifford extends Pratt's concept by "shifting the focus from the periphery (the "frontier") back to the centre ("the nation"), and from foreign to domestic spaces, [thus] he calls attention to the location of contact zones within the nations and empires" (139). In a sense we can see this Cliffordian rephrasing of the "contact zone" model when we consider our respective examples. Which are then the beliefs clashing in the dramas of Williams and Shepard, how do they localize the concept of the "contact zone" in their respective works?

Williams' dramas are metaphorical illustrations of the clash between the Old and the New South, and their conjoining mythologies, iconologies. The Old South, which is typically idealized, nostalgically longed for, breeds fragile, misunderstood, misplaced and neglected characters, who can find no ground in the modern, materialistic, capitalizing world of the once fertile and abundant, agrarian South. Amanda and Laura Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, Brick Pollitt are all brought into contact with the forces of the present only to be baffled by

the recognition that the codes and symbols that they traditionally applied to decipher the world around them no longer work. They all live in a dream manufacturing illusions (Williams 311) as Amanda says in *Menagerie*. Quite tellingly, while Amanda sees clearly the relevance of her utterance with respect to her children, she fails to realize and internalize the import of the same for her own life. The demise of these other-worldly characters, acting most of the time as ghosts of the past haunting the present, is easily predictable. It is a process that is also irreversible simply because the ideals they uphold, the myths they have been hanging on to, have lost validity in the modern world. Their dreams are all shattered to pieces, just like the horn of Laura's unicorn in *Menagerie*, by the pretenders, who come to claim their territory in the present of the dramas. The husband of Amanda, who "fell in love with long distances" (235), Laura's realistic gentleman caller, Jim O'Connor, Stanley Kowalski (from *Streetcar*), Gooper and Mae (from *Cat*), are all true survivals, because they do not let their emotions get in the way, they only mind the main chance, and last but not least are energized by new ideologies and myths of materialism and practicality. As Bigsby notes: "The South that Williams pictures is either disintegrating, its moral foundations having been disturbed, or being taken over by the alienated products of modern capitalism" (44–45). The characters of the Old South, as Bigsby further contends, are situated on a "no-man's land stranded between the real and the imagined, the spiritual and the material, a discordant present and a lyric nostalgia" (45).

Shepard too brings together characters in his special western "contact zones" who have divided sentiments about the once heroic western mythology. Like Austin and Lee, the two brothers of *True West*, or Hoss and Crow, the competing rock stars of *The Tooth of Crime* (1972), or Eddie and May the characters of *Fool for Love*, Shepard's protagonist pairs represent harsh opposites that tie them to disparate histories, myths and ideologies. The forces that jeopardize the sustainability of the Western myth in the present are many and varied. Sometimes the challenge comes from a representative of modern/postmodern culture, like in the case of Crow, whose advantage over Hoss lies in his ability to move between codes, traditions, languages. At other times the author himself parodies the outdated clichés of the western, like in *Fool for Love*, where driving long distances takes the place of real heroism, lassoing the bedposts replaces the herding of cattle and wild horses, and the shoot-out scene is made ridiculous when a former girlfriend of

Eddie's enters the mythic all male encounter by shooting at him from her car. Although Shepard does observe the displacement of the Western myth in contemporary America, his characters, just like the author himself, are engaged in a constant longing for this unattainable yet idealized time of male prowess, the heroic ideals of self-reliance, rugged individualism.

There is a marked difference, however between Williams' universe and that of Shepard. While Williams' characters encapsulated in the old world mythology make no attempt whatsoever to cross over to the other side and mix with the symbolic enemies, Shepard's heroes of the mythic West and their postmodern replicas from popular culture, the metropolis or consumer culture respectively, both try to adapt the tools of survival of the other side. In this sense Shepard's characters who meet in the contact zone of the West do manage to share codes, even trade places for a time. Yet, the ones who are the bearers of outdated cultural codes are either killed off (Hoss's suicide), parodied (Eddie), or forced to adapt to the shape shifting game (both Austin and Lee).

Beyond the comparison of the surface features of the characters in the respective plays (highlighted above) the contact zone concept also lends itself to a more detailed study of the diversity in the cultural codes that come together in the zone areas. An analysis of the complete semiotic, cultural, historic arsenal applied by these dramatists could certainly lead to more refined and complex interrogations into the exchange patterns which transpire in the zone. Here, for the shortage of time, I will enumerate but a few additional layers of these dramas with some selected examples, noting that the examples brought and the analysis ensuing could understandably be substantiated further.

One of the most apparent dimensions that makes the characters' inner properties (as well as their cultural motivations, feelings, mythic imbedded-ness, etc.) obvious in a theatrical setting is costume. The stage directions of Williams' regarding Stanley's (Williams 128) and Blanche's (Williams 117) outer appearance are especially instructive in this respect, since through the protagonists' physical appearance alone we get plenty of hints about the disparity of cultural codes they are bound to represent. Similarly, the dress code differences of *Tooth* make the characters' gestures, beliefs and actions altogether more intelligible. Hoss's rock star attire and Crow's Keith Richard-like, rather surrealistic heavy metal garb are sure indicators that they are to denote different ages, customs, and codes of behavior.

There are also numerous possibilities to highlight the differences of codes between characters, character groups meeting in the zone when we turn to language and speech patterns used. Think of the strongly poetic diction of Blanche [e.g. "Don't you love these long rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn't just an hour—but a little bit of Eternity dropped in your hands—and who knows what to do with it?" (173)] and the coarse and rude verbal and nonverbal language that typifies Stanley. From the Shepardian universe the contrast of the perfectly intelligible and traditional language of Hoss creates a harsh contrast to Crow's unintelligible, super-modern, slang-like speech (e.g. Crow: "Eyes stitched. You can vision what's sittin'. Very razor to cop z's sussin' me to be on the far end of the spectrum" [227].).

Another set of signifiers that might add greatly to the audience's understanding of juxtaposing frames of reference applied in the contact zone are the accessories of the characters. One could indeed construct an independent analysis exclusively devoted to this dimension of the plays, since they speak volumes about cultural and historical coding, and the attached sustaining mythologies. The glass unicorn of Laura with and without the horn (in *Menagerie*), the unlit rooms of Blanche versus the Belle Reve plantation (in *Streetcar*), the Chevy Impala versus the Maserati (in *Tooth*) send crucial messages about the representatives of cultures, who gather in the zone, about the declining or emerging myths they symbolize respectively. The iconic atmospheric repertoire tied to the characters of outdated vs. novel morals is also very telling. The soft musical (the Glass Menagerie, and the Varsoviana) and lighting accompaniment of *Menagerie* and *Streetcar*, for instance, speak of the fragility and fine tapestry of an era gone by.

A similar clashing of cultural and mythic codes could be analyzed on the level of personal histories, cultural backgrounds, mythic layering of the characters and their regions, which, however, was partially mentioned in my subchapter 2. The end result is nonetheless always the same. The patterns established in relation to the general analysis of the characters could be followed up on and repeated with each of the semiotic levels selected. Namely, that the representatives of Williams' New South mythologies overwrite and silence, or annihilate the characters representing the old codes, whereas Shepard's postmodern trickster figures incorporate the mythic patterns of the previous cultural traditions, and thus maintain it somehow in an altered form.

[4] Conclusions: Benefits of the 'Contact Zone-Model'

Why is it significant to know the contact zone model to understand these dramas better? What does it add to our initial interpretation of the texts? The model emphasizes both the polar nature of the myth constructs that are referenced in these plays, as well as adds to a better understanding of the spatial and temporal aspect of the forces (cultural, social, historical, ideological etc.) that lurk in the background and push the characters toward open confrontation. The contact zone concept brings the clashing of cultural codes into the focus of attention.

In Williams as a result of this oppositional structuring, the meeting of the forces of the past and the future brings about a speeded showdown. The encounter serves as a catalyst pushing the figures of old southern aristocracy closer to the edge. The drama, the catharsis occurs only because these contradictory forces are brought together. The moment of contact works as a spark that sets the events off and brings Blanche, Laura and Brick faster to their decline. Blanche is taken away to an asylum, Laura and Amanda are left in their oblivious condition confined to their suburban tenement, and having confronted his Ibsenian life-lies Brick again falls back into his original condition, in essence unchanged. The old myth is surpassed to give way to the soulless myth of capitalism. In Shepard's dramas, on the other hand, the clash of disparate cultures and their representatives in the contact zone stimulates not simply an exchange of cultural codes, but in a way the elements of the mythic past are learnt by the postmodern shape-shifters of Shepard, who survive exactly because they can adapt and recycle the diverse cultural languages. Crow and Lee can especially be regarded as modern day trickster figures, who navigate between the symbols of different cultures easily. The old myth then does not die out completely, but is adapted to fertilize such cultural domains, as popular culture, which in its iconography preserves elements of the earlier "sacred" narrative. In a way the survival of mythic constructs in postmodern texts like Shepard's indicates that although on the level of the real culture the existence of myths like the frontier, or Manifest Destiny is denied, through the filter of popular culture iconology their prolongation and enjoyment is accepted and allowed.

Witnessing the perishing myths of the American South and West, both Williams and Shepard invent strategies to preserve remnants of the regional iconography, to enable these myths to survive in the creative realm of art. That Williams' sentiments are with the outgoing values of

the Old South is well proven, among other things, at the end of his *Menagerie* when Tom's elegy-like sentences beg for a release from the haunting memories of the past, "Blow out your candles, Laura—and so good-bye. ..." (313). Shepard, too, is quite unable both as a private person and as a writer to let the candle of remembrance for the West go out. Posing in cowboy hat on the cover of magazines, taking the role of the rugged western hero in numerous films, and populating his dramatic universe with popular cultural icons of the West, Shepard and his art are living mementos of the Western myth. Yet, these authors do not simply erect living monuments to the long-gone mythologies but in a way continue the writing of mythic stories, which in turn feed back into public consciousness. Thus the contours of the real and imagined places blur, giving way to endless yarns of stories and myths, whose reality and created-ness can never be ascertained. The contact zones that once charted clear boundaries between opposing principles, cultures, beliefs, ultimately become sites of intermixture and shared codes. The myths of these physical landscapes are further enriched by contemporary rewritings that are returned and incorporated into the myths and legends of American regions mapping private as much as public geographies.[1]

Works Cited

Bercovitch, Sacvan. The Puritan Origins of the American Self. New Haven, Conn.: Yale UP, 1975.

Bigsby, C.W.E. A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama. Part II. New York: Cambridge, 1989.

Davis, Louise. "That Baby Doll Man. Part I." *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Ed. Albert J. Devlin. N.p.: U of Mississippi P, 2000. 43–49.

Internet 1.: "Encyclopedia of Alabama" http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/face/Article.jsp?id=h-1643

Lucious, Bernard Scott. "In the Black Pacific: Testimonies of Vietnamese Afro-Amerasian Displacements." *Displacements and Diasporas: Asians in the Americas*. Eds. Wanni W. Anderson and Robert G. Lee. Rutgers, NJ: State U, 2005. 122–156.

---

[1] The concept of private geography has been borrowed from Gerri Reaves' book: *Mapping the Private Geography: Autobiography, Identity, and America*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

Shepard, Sam. *The Tooth of Crime. Seven Plays*. New York: Random House, 2005. 201–251.

Umphlett, Wiley Lee. *Mythmakers of the American Dream: The Nostalgic Image in Popular Culture*. New York: Cornwall, 1983.

Virágos, Zsolt. *Myth and Social Consciousness: Literary and Social Myths in American (USA) Culture*. Unpublished Academic Doctoral Thesis. Debrecen, Hungary: 1998.

Wade, Leslie L. "Sam Shepard and the American Sunset: Enchantment of the Mythic West." *Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*. Ed. David Krasner. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2004. 285–300.

Williams, Tennessee. *Sweet Bird of Youth, A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie*. New York: Penguin, 1959.