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Hysni Kafazi
University of Szeged

One Myth, Three Genres: The Development and Transformation of the Myth of Orpheus in Tennessee Williams's Oeuvre

Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) often found inspiration in mythology, from his first short story to numerous poems that allude to Greco-Roman myths. Notably, his first professionally produced play, Battle of Angels *(1940) is based on the story of Orpheus and Euridice, a myth that consistently resurfaces in Williams's works. This paper traces the development of this myth across Williams's oeuvre in three different genres, from the play Battle of Angels to the poem* "Orpheus Descending" *(1952), the revised theatrical version titled* Orpheus Descending *(1957), and finally the movie* The Fugitive Kind *(1960). A comparative analysis of the nuances of the myth of Orpheus in these works reveals that Williams utilizes the universal recognizability of the myth, and gradually employs it with a philosophical perspective, transposing Orpheus' journey to the Underworld to a modern context to depict the condition of man in modern times.*

Keywords: Orpheus and Eurydice, Tennessee Williams, adaptation, modern theatre.

Introduction

American playwright Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) made his debut into the literary scene with the short story "The Vengeance of Nitocris" (1928), a retelling of an Egyptian legend documented by Herodotus. Greco-Roman sources and mythology would keep informing Wil-

liams's prolific body of work in the years to come. His oeuvre alludes to mythical figures in poems such as "Sonnet for Pygmalion," "Testa Dell'Effebo" and "Androgyne, Mon Amour," where the latter becomes the title of Williams's poetry collection of 1977, the last published in his lifetime.

This inspiration and reliance on mythological characters and motifs seems to stem from Williams's belief in a common fund of images and shared understanding. In his preface to *Camino Real* he states that 'we all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images.'[1] Critic Agnès Roche-Lajtha connects this notion to Jungian archetypes, claiming that 'the whole of mythology could in fact be taken as a sort of projection of the collective unconscious.'[2] This explanation serves Williams's intention to reach the widest audience possible, particularly through his drama. Indeed, he further claims that archetypes, not referring solely to characters, serve as symbols, that have 'only one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully that it could be said in words.'[3] The influence of Sartrean ideas is felt as well at this point. In "Forgers of Myth," Sartre states:

> We believe our theater would betray its mission if it portrayed individual personalities, even if they were as universal types as a miser, a misanthrope, a deceived husband, because, if it is to address the masses, the theater must speak in terms of their most general preoccupations, dispelling their anxieties in the form of myths which anyone can understand and feel deeply.[4]

[1] Williams (1953: xxxiii).
[2] Roche-Lajtha (2011: 59).
[3] Williams (1953: xxxiii).
[4] Sartre (1976: 38–39). This lecture was originally published in 1946.

Hence, Williams relies on the wide recognizability of myths and timelessness of mythical situations, as they 'comprise all of the most fundamental of man's experiences.'[5] He reinforces their effect by 'integrating them into a personal symbolic world, … becoming the backbone of his dramas.'[6] This way, besides drawing inspiration from mythological characters, motifs and situations, Williams utilizes them as symbolic mediators for his intended messages.

No myth has been as everlasting in Williams's oeuvre as that of Orpheus. It first emerges in the form of *Battle of Angels* (1940), his first professional theatrical production. The myth reappears in the poem "Orpheus Descending," originally written in 1952 and published in the collection *In the Winter of Cities* (1956), which would give the title to the revised version of *Battle of Angels*. The play *Orpheus Descending* (1957) would then be adapted for a last time for the big screen into the movie *The Fugitive Kind* (1960). Traces of the myth are present even in later plays, such as *Something Cloudy, Something Clear* (1981), where the main character is depicted working on a play about Orpheus.[7]

This obsession with the myth of Orpheus is not surprising when one considers the recurrent themes and motifs of Williams's drama. The descent into an underworld of sorts, the human struggle to live and find meaning in life, artistic effort as a response and solution to this struggle, and ultimately the purpose and reception of art, are as integral to Williams's work as they are present in the myth of Orpheus. Therefore, the story of Orpheus and Eurydice becomes for Williams a suitable and fertile source.

[5] Barnes (1955: 121).
[6] Barbera (2018: 116).
[7] Kaplan (2010: 152).

Adapting a myth

A note should be made here regarding the phrasing used in this paper in relation to Williams's works as adaptations of the classical myth. Terminology on adaptation is already complicated and loose, even more so in reference to myths.[8] An additional problem stems from myths not having a certain original source. In this case, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is reported to have been first formulated around the late 6th or early 5th century BC; however, the earliest surviving text that delineates this story appears in book four of Virgil's *Georgics*, dated 29 BC.[9] Yet, it is not definitely known whether this rendering of the story was ever part of the Greek mythos, and if it were so, the intersections with the myth remain unclear. Another famous version of the story appears in books 10 and 11 of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Terence Dawson claims that all subsequent adaptations take these two works as points of reference.[10]

With the myth being of unknown origin and source, it is difficult to establish whether any version is an adaptation or not. In Dawson's terminology, the myth is considered a '*pre*-text,' that becomes an adaptation as soon as it is written or reproduced.[11] He suggests that instead of defining the entire story as a myth, it is more accurate to define as such the textual reproduction of a certain sequence of events that informs the story as a whole.[12] Consequently, any later version of the myth becomes an adaptation of a series of adaptations, where only certain events remain unchanged. In the myth of Orpheus there are four such events: the death of Eurydice and her descent into the underworld, Orpheus' grief, Orpheus'

[8] Hutcheon (2006). The use of terms such as adaptation, (re-)interpretation, (re-)creation, appropriation, or salvaging varies according to critical perspective and authorial intention.
[9] Dawson (2000: 247).
[10] Ibid.
[11] Ibid (246).
[12] Ibid.

journey to the underworld, and finally his attempt to retrieve Eurydice back to the world of the living.[13]

The categorization of Williams's works as adaptations in this paper is based on Dawson's suggestion, for Williams preserves the necessary events of the myth of Orpheus. Although he takes liberties in their depiction and modifies their order, the 'spirit, meaning, and importance' of the original story is preserved.[14] With no definitive original text claims about the original source of the myth or Williams's fidelity towards any particular version would be futile. Instead, the focus of this analysis is to trace Williams's treatment of the myth across various genres, not only as an interpretation of the myth itself, but also as consecutive reinterpretations of his own preceding adaptations, that create a sense of intertextual and intermedial communication between his works.

Common features in Williams's adaptations

Williams's cinematic and theatrical variations of the myth intersect at several points. Their most notable quality is the reordering of the classical sequence of events. Val, Williams's Orpheus, appears in a quest to save his own self by moving into a new setting. It is during this relocation that he meets the symbolic Eurydice, with whom he eventually falls in love. As a direct consequence of this relationship, Orpheus' initial goal of saving himself transforms into the goal of saving Eurydice as well in the process.

Another common aspect of these variants is the presence of multiple "Eurydices." Myra in *Battle of Angels*, renamed as Lady in the subsequent adaptations, holds the role of the central Eurydice as Val's main point of interest and eventual lover. This is further emphasized by dialogues that

[13] Ibid.
[14] Yacowar (1977: 7).

imply her symbolic death following her past tragedies and the isolation of her present marriage. However, secondary characters like Vee Talbot and Cassandra/Carol[15] can be read as Eurydices, too. They are both revived upon contact with Val/Orpheus. Vee experiences her own artistic and philosophical renaissance after her conversations with Val. Likewise, upon his impact, Cassandra/Carol's philosophy of death changes into one of life.

Moreover, Williams's adaptations preserve Orpheus' reluctance in approaching women, as Val rejects the advances of Carol, or even Myra/Lady in the initial scenes of the story. However, Val's death does not come from the hands of these rejected women, as happens in the earlier renditions of the myth, but by their husbands and other townsmen instead. While his rejection is hurtful most notably to Cassandra/Carol, but also to Myra/Lady in the beginning, it is diametrically misunderstood by the townsmen as a perverse attraction to the females of the community. As a result, threatened by Val's influence on their women, the men ultimately execute him.

Lastly, Williams's adaptations include confusing details in reference to the Orphic myth. While in the story, a snake becomes the reason for Eurydice's death, in Williams's works it becomes an identifier of Val himself. He is nicknamed "Snakeskin" because of the jacket he wears, the only remnant of his existence in the end. This association of Eurydice's saviour to her cause of death increases the ambiguity of Williams's choices of characterization in reinterpreting Orpheus.

The convoluted adaptation: *Battle of Angels*

Battle of Angels is Williams's first attempt in adapting the myth of Orpheus. It is nevertheless a cluttered adaptation for several reasons. The

[15] The character of Cassandra in *Battle of Angels* is renamed Carol in Williams's subsequent works.

allusion to the original myth is obscured not only by the fact that it is never explicitly mentioned, but even more so by the convoluted nature of the play, where several references coexist and intersect to create a heavily multi-referential work. The story is set in the Deep South of America against a social backdrop that echoes major topical problems, including displacement, immigration, racism, and cruel punishments to those who challenge social conventions.

The mythical pattern of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, apart from being reordered, is mixed with other mythical references. Most notably, the character of Cassandra, a young woman disowned by her community, is an obvious allusion to the mythical prophetess of the same name. In fact, she is the sole explicit reference to a mythical figure, where besides the name, most of her lines have striking nuances of prophecies. She randomly fires a gun at 'a bird of ill omen' in one of her first scenes in the play.[16] She claims to wear dark glasses to hide the 'secrets' in her eyes.[17] Near the end, in what is the most explicit reference to the mythical character, Cassandra exclaims that "[her] lips have been touched by prophetic fire," to follow up with her last prophecy of "a battle in heaven. A battle of *angels* above us! And *thunder!* And *storm!*"[18]

The combination of two different myths becomes even more complicated with the addition of religious references. The title of the play, mentioned in Cassandra's prophecy, is drawn from "The Legend," an older poem by Williams, that alludes to the Apocalypse in the Old Testament. The poem implies the hopelessness of humans in a world where even angels are fighting each other in heaven. However, this heavenly battle seems to have reached earth, as Jabe, Myra's patronizing husband, is depicted in the play 'like the very Prince of Darkness.'[19] Yet, he

[16] Williams (1958: 137).
[17] Ibid (161).
[18] Ibid (216).
[19] Ibid (229).

is also portrayed as a Hades-like character. Myra calls him '*Mr. Death*,'[20] not only because he is almost dying, but also because he brings death wherever he appears, his movements sounding 'like bones, like death.'[21] As such, Jabe's satanic depiction is simultaneously imbued with nuances of Hades.

Val is even less free of the intermingling of mythical and religious connotations. Apart from Orpheus, he is also represented as a Christ-like figure. Although the poetic nature of Orpheus is preserved in Val's depiction as a writer, the book that he is writing is described as a book of life, a book that teaches the truth and frightens those who read it.[22] Thus, the biblical connotations are inescapable. Moreover, Vee paints Val as Christ on the cross, not only depicting him as a Christ-like saviour, but also foreshadowing his death on Good Friday. In fact, the Easter symbolism throughout *Battle* also contributes majorly to its Christian allusions.

In addition, *Battle of Angels* is overcrowded with biographical and social references as well. The setting of a shoe store as a version of hell is closely related to the author, whose own experience in Continental Shoemakers in his youth would be a tedious and hellish period that frequently resurfaces in his works.[23] Moreover, the southern setting, the depiction of Myra as an immigrant, racism, derogatory speech against outsiders, as well as instances of southern superstitions and beliefs, make the references of the play so intermingled that the allusion to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice gets almost entirely lost. This illustrates Williams's inclination towards 'a kind of modern myth' that 'is not an organic form,' but instead 'synthetic.'[24] His vision is not unicentric, but instead combines several points of reference to display the complicated circumstances of

[20] Ibid (231).
[21] Ibid (226).
[22] Ibid (194).
[23] Notable examples are *The Glass Menagerie* and *Stairs to the Roof.*
[24] Jackson (1966: 54).

man and his aim to reconcile them. While Williams's initial experiments in displaying this vision do not prove very successful, as in *Battle of Angels*, his intention gets more polished in subsequent works.

A poetic intermezzo

Amongst a flow of new dramatic material, a little poem became crucial in redirecting Williams's focus toward a more refined adaptation of the myth of Orpheus. The poem "Orpheus Descending" (1952) is Williams's first and sole explicit allusion to the myth. The poem is divided into two parts, where the first describes a version of the underworld with a 'suffocatingly weighted' atmosphere that 'can never be lifted.'[25] Although there are occasional glimpses of a 'lesser dark,'[26] escape is impossible. The poetic persona addresses Orpheus directly by asking 'Orpheus, how could her wounded foot move through it,' implying the presence of Eurydice and the snake bite that caused her death.[27] In this sense, Williams's poem seems to preserve the typical pattern of the myth and is perhaps its closest adaptation.

However, the second part presents a new diversion, not in terms of backstory, but in Williams's treatment of the myth with a more philosophical approach that points to characteristics of the human nature. Continuing to address Orpheus, the poetic persona comments on desires and goals that are 'only longed for and sought for a while and abandoned.'[28] The poem then points to man's 'passion … for declivity' and 'the impulse to fall,' despite the desire to rise up.[29] Lastly, the speaker condemns Orpheus, the 'shamefaced fugitive' to 'crawl back

[25] Williams (2002: 14).
[26] Ibid.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Ibid (15).
[29] Ibid.

under the crumbling broken wall of [himself].'[30] The complexity of this second part of the poem, therefore, depicts a twofold conflict of man in the world: on one hand, he has to fight a useless battle against external deterministic forces that rule his life and the world at large, whereas on the other, man has to battle his own often paradoxical impulses and face their consequences.

It is exactly this depiction of man between two worlds, the external and internal, that marks an important shift in Williams's use of the myth. First of all, he seems to have detected that the myth suffices to convey a universal message without being intermingled with other references. Secondly, it sheds light on the relevance of myths across time. As in Williams's poem, the myth remains pertinent because it depicts a universal truth, that of human nature. The appeal of myths according to Hazel Barnes stands exactly in their insights to 'intrinsically human' experiences and emotions; however, the solutions to these universal situations are given 'by way of suggestion only and never with clearly delineated solution.'[31] It is the ambiguity of myths and their proposed solutions that gives way to the opportunity of further reinterpretations.

A further reason why myths are adapted is because the writer 'wants to reinterpret these for his own time,'[32] setting the myth in circumstances that can be recognizable to the audience, rather than merely symbolical. Barnes argues that myths hold a particular appeal for 20th century existentialist writers, who, despite their paradoxical outlook as an antithesis of Hellenic ideals,[33] subvert the old solutions to present the hopeless position of man in modern times.[34] Leaving their characters with no ideal or value compass, existentialists put mythological charac-

[30] Ibid.
[31] Barnes (1955: 122).
[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid (127).

ters like Sisyphus or Orestes in situations where only their actions and individual choices matter. Williams's interest in existentialist literature and the new direction of the poem "Orpheus Descending" informs his subsequent adaptation as well.

A second attempt on stage: *Orpheus Descending*

The title of the poem survived in Williams's second theatrical adaptation of the myth. The playwright admits to have worked 'stubbornly'[35] for seventeen years to revise *Battle of Angels* into *Orpheus Descending*, a version with 'seventy-five per cent' new material.[36] Although the cluttered nature of *Battle* is not entirely polished, Williams seems to have refined and strengthened his allusions in this new version. There are obvious changes, such as the modification of character names, where Myra completely loses her name and becomes Lady, whereas Cassandra becomes Carol. Hence, the ties to additional mythological sources are lost, and the focus is primarily set into the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice.

An added allusion is Val's portrayal as a musician, never letting go of his guitar, his 'life's companion.'[37] This modern version of Orpheus' lyre holds the function of revival and purification, as 'it washes [Val] clean like water when anything unclean has touched [him].'[38] Moreover, engraved with the autograph of Woody Guthrie, a famous American singer of the time, the guitar symbolizes the role of art in Val's life as a tool that gives meaning and purpose to his existence.

Val's poetic speech is not Christ-like; instead of spirituality, it focuses on earthly life and the ways that humans cope with the burden of existence. This is evident in his conversations with the three Eury-

[35] Williams (1958: vi).
[36] Cf. Phillips (1980: 202).
[37] Williams (1958: 37).
[38] Ibid (37).

dice-like characters. As he visits the cemetery with Carol, this setting of the underworld inspires her to echo the advice of the dead to 'live, live, live, live, live,'[39] emphasizing the necessary determination to keep on living, without drawing any implications to what happens after death. This conclusion aligns with Carol's earlier question, 'what on earth can you do but catch at whatever comes near you with both your hands until your fingers are broken.'[40] In her case, the solution is to keep living, sometimes even wildly, to look for closure in people, to attempt to create relationships no matter how temporary, and to move away from places that make life impossible.

Vee, on the other hand, finds a different solution. While she continues to paint religious imagery as she did on *Battle*, the focus of her exchanges with Val shifts from his nature as a savior to the purpose of art instead. In her most significant dialogue with Val, Vee comes into the conclusion that 'existence didn't make sense' before she started to paint.[41] As such, she finds purpose in her painting, in a similar way to Val's attachment to his guitar. Art becomes a distraction from the circumstances of life, but in doing so, it also becomes a return to the essence of individual existence, a deliberate choice and a tool that ensures authenticity to one's life.

Val's conversations with Lady are more complicated, as they revolve around numerous notions. Val expresses his ideas on the importance of constant movement like a legless bird that has to fly incessantly in order to keep living. Later on, he formulates his version of true existence as 'a lifelong sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on this earth.'[42] At this point, Val seems to have lost all belief towards any kind of interpersonal rapport. Indeed, when

[39] Ibid (28).
[40] Ibid (21).
[41] Ibid (66).
[42] Ibid (47).

Lady proposes the notion of love as a solution to loneliness, he rejects it as 'the make-believe answer.'[43] Love is to him a form of bad faith, a way of jeopardizing authentic existence and lying to one's self, a distraction from the ultimate truth of loneliness.

Lady's revival becomes a major turning point for Val's beliefs. His presence causes Lady to gradually open up. She confesses her past and claims that she 'wanted death' after the loss of her child, but instead chose another version of death, that of lovelessly marrying a much older man.[44] Now, Val's presence has infused her with a new desire for life. While she is aware that 'Death's knocking for [her],' she resolutely exclaims '*I won't wither in dark!*'[45] Her pregnancy with Val's child becomes the utmost manifestation of her revival, even more so considering that she had thought of herself to be barren. Hence, Lady confesses that 'I have life in my body, this dead tree, my body, has burst in flower! You've given me life, you can go!'[46] While she has found a new purpose and a refreshed desire to keep on living, she has also revived Val in the process. Their interactions have gradually caused Val to see life with new eyes. This fits the reimagined mythical pattern of the play. Val had come to town to save himself, and he succeeds, although temporarily. However, interpersonal relationships have been crucial in this process. While he gives new life to the three "Eurydices," interacting with them has transformed him and his outlook on life as well.

From stage to big screen: *The Fugitive Kind*

Orpheus Descending was set to have a grand cinematic adaptation in 1960 under the title *The Fugitive Kind*, directed by Sidney Lumet, star-

[43] Ibid (48).
[44] Ibid (61).
[45] Ibid (109).
[46] Ibid (113).

ring Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani. Although the screenplay was a collaboration of Williams and Meade Roberts, the latter would state that Williams's involvement was of major importance. Roberts states that from the first meetings in 1958, everybody involved in the cinematic adaptation intended 'to do [the film] strictly on the terms set forth by the playwright,' and that this was the goal of the director and all the actors.[47] While Williams was dissatisfied with the outcome, many consider the film to be 'the best version of the basic material.'[48]

The shift towards realism in *Orpheus Descending* is even more pronounced in *The Fugitive Kind*, where 'the element of allegorical abstraction … is subordinated to the physical realism of the film.'[49] The movie portrays Val is as a man with faults, rather than a symbolic savior figure. Yet, the ties to the myth of Orpheus are stronger, as cinematic techniques effectively produce visual allusions to the mythical references. An obvious example is the change in Lady's appearance throughout the movie to visually complement her gradual revival, where she shifts from a disheveled look with uncombed hair and black clothes, to lighter costumes, until she appears in her last scene looking much younger, wearing Christmas ornaments on her hair and wearing a sensual dress that reveals more of her lively body.

The camera shots play a significant role as well. While in both theatrical versions, Val and Lady are oblivious to the fact that Jabe has been watching their secret encounters in the confectionery, the movie draws more attention to his presence. Apart from two scenes taking place in his room (something that does not happen in the plays), the camera repeatedly focuses on a little window upon the confectionery, where Jabe peeks every time. These shots put him in the position of an all-seeing

[47] Cf. Phillips (1980: 206).
[48] Yacowar (1977: 60).
[49] Ibid (62).

god, observing the two humans that are trying to trick him, awaiting in patience to execute his final punishment. Thus, the allusion to Jabe as a Hades-like figure is more pronounced compared to the plays.

Another crucial scene is Lady's death, where the camera shots again draw stronger allusions to the myth. Lady dies while climbing up the stairway, as a final depiction of her attempt to get out of the shoe store, her version of the underworld. As her husband shoots her, she falls down the stairs, illustrating Eurydice's final fall. Moreover, the condition of not looking back, a critical moment in the myth of Orpheus, is uttered only in the movie, as opposed to the plays. Sheriff Talbot warns Val to leave the town before sunrise, but he disobeys. The camera again emphasizes this precise moment. As soon as Val hears the gunshot while trying to extinguish the fire in the confectionery, the camera captures Val staring back towards the sound. In the same instance, Carol desperately begs him not to go back, reiterating the condition of the gaze. Val fails, and that becomes the demise of him and Lady, where Lady drops dead in the same hell she was trying to escape from, whereas Val is forcefully pushed into the fire by the angry townsmen.

Hence, despite the realism of the film, the allusions to the myth are presented in a much stronger and impactful way, where textual references are complemented with visual ones. In addition to the camera shots, the composition of certain scenes also contributes to this effect. To further emphasize Val's resurrective effect upon the three ladies, he is shown touching them whenever he says something profound. He strokes Carol's hair as he utters 'Fly away, little bird,' encouraging her to leave the city in order to live the life she wants. Similarly, he caresses Vee's cheek as he compliments her outlook on life, saying 'you've made some beauty, Miss Talbot, out of this Dark River country,' implying that her artistic endeavor is the solution to cope with her circumstances, while at the same time giving meaning to her existence. In another

scene, during his speech on absolute solitude, he holds Lady's hands in his own.

The movie follows the same path as *Orpheus Descending* in portraying philosophical, rather than spiritual notions, including the search for belonging, man's effort to escape solitude, existential angst and the attempts to cope with the burden of life, as well as art as the artist's solution to this anxiety. The movie emphasizes this latter point in greater detail. Apart from the aforementioned role of painting in Vee's quest to find meaning to her existence, Val's creative efforts are shown, too, as he sings "Blanket Roll Blues," a song written by Williams – in fact, the only lyrics he ever wrote in his life. Moreover, Lady's process of reconstructing and decorating the confectionary are portrayed as an artistic effort as well. Indeed, the first reaction that she gets from the nurse, the first person seeing the new confectionary besides Val, is that it is quite 'artistic.'

Conclusion

Tennessee Williams, in all his versions of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, strongly alludes to the myth, by offering however a new interpretation. While the mythical pattern is reordered in the plays and the cinematic adaptation, the main events are preserved. The myth gets a progressively greater attention with each version, while at the same time integrating with the modern setting in a more refined way. *Battle of Angels* unsuccessfully combines the myth with several other mythical, religious, biographical and social references, resulting in a cluttered outcome. The poem "Orpheus Descending" redirects the focus of Williams's reinterpretation into the myth and its universal qualities, a focus that is preserved in the play *Orpheus Descending* as well. The film *The Fugitive Kind* provides a better visual representation of the myth, where

despite the realistic setting, cinematic techniques bring Williams's version closer to the original story.

The discussion whether Williams's versions of the myth can actually be considered faithful adaptations is somewhat futile, considering that not only is the terminology of adaptation vague, but also because a myth is not a fixed literary source. What is important to consider is that Williams takes advantage of the universality and recognizability of the myth, and further imbues it with a modern outlook, while also preserving the critical moments and the spirit of the story. Hence, in an age where classical solutions and ideals may not be valid anymore, Williams puts the myth in a modern context to display the circumstances and condition of the modern man.

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