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## CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' THEATRICAL REALISM IN SELECTED PLAYS

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### Abstract

From the standpoint of critical and popular success, Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is undoubtedly the most important playwright to emerge on the American stage scene in the post-World War II period. As a highly original playwright with a knack for creating vivid and impactful characters, he is not easy to classify according to conventional literary standards. He is a regionalist whose interest in the South is incidental to his central interest: human character, personal emotions, personality crisis. He is a naturalist who has created some of the sordid sets and most debased characters in modern dramatic art, and yet he has a fairy-tale touch that imparts an air of fantasy to his most realistic works. This essay starts with a reflection on how difficult it has been for critics to categorise Tennessee Williams' dramatic oeuvre, especially in respect to "Realism," using specific phrases. However, it is evident from reading the playwright's production notes that his purpose was to stray from the dramatic conventions of descriptive realism in his 1944 play *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) which he refers to as the manifesto of what he terms Plastic Theater.

Keywords: Theatre, Realism, Select Plays, Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

### Introduction

"Everyone should know in these times how unimportant photography is in art," he wrote in the preface to *The Glass Menagerie*, "that truth, life, or reality, is an organic thing that the poetic imagination can represent or to suggest, in essence, only through transformation, changing into other forms those that were merely present in appearance". This is a clear rejection of traditional realism in the theater. On the other hand, while his interest in exotic settings and strange and perverted characters could be considered romantic

qualities; his objectivity, his total detachment from his characters and their struggles, set him apart from romantic playwrights like William Saroyan or Maxwell Anderson.

The hesitation of specialists when classifying the dramatic production of the American Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) seems to be a constant. As common as the attribution of realistic qualities to the author is the marking of a deviation by Williams from the protocols of Realism; commentaries such as those by J. L. Styan (2003, p. 1) sometimes advance to the next stage by highlighting the

slippery nature of the realist epithet. "It is axiomatic that each generation feels that its theater is in some way more 'real' than the last".

The paradigm Styan is dedicated to his analysis is that of drama as description, which is opposed to drama apprehended only in narrative terms. As David Lescot (2012, p. 155) notes, drama as description, proposed by Denis Diderot's tableau, works as a focus on a fraction of the world, a cut similar to the frame in a painting, "which imposes itself on the spectator as a visual and silent presence" (Lescot, 2012, p. 176). Even if, in the end, Styan states that, in practice, on stage, the result achieved in the clash between dramatic generations and their predecessors is nothing more than a new convention, the researcher focuses on the idea of Realism as a movement or school in the which the intended referent is the real, the one that Lescot (2012, p. 156) exemplifies with Gerhart Hauptmann, whose dream, in *The Weavers*, "would be less to narrate the action of Peterswaldau's workers than to represent their environment and the objective conditions of its existence, a project that we would gladly translate into non-dramatic terms such as description or hypotyposis"; and also with André Antoine's notorious proposal that modern staging in the theater should achieve the same function that description plays in the novel.

The small collection of critical hesitations that will follow is based on this idea of hypotype or descriptive Realism, to which, as soon as its examples have been enumerated, we will oppose another apprehension of Realism: that which, through an experimental or artificial way, investigates the underground. of reality. In addition to presenting this unorthodox conception of Realism, which we will associate with Tennessee Williams, our aim is to demonstrate that critical hesitation can reach an indisposition reaction to the playwright as mentioned above, based on the mistaken reading of his work, especially on the non-acceptance of his work.

Signi Falk (1966, p. 21) defends the thesis that Williams is part of the Southern Renaissance: "the emergence during the mid-twentieth century of a rich and varied literature on the [US] South". We are

interested here in the evidence that the aforementioned movement, to which Williams is connected, appears under attributes constantly associated with descriptive realism, as revealed by the researcher's enunciation about its origins: "A kind of regional loyalty to tradition, a nostalgia for a model of aristocracy, a non-urban life that was rich in promise, an awareness of distinct personalities, customs and beliefs typical of the southern region". When enumerating authors that fall under the name and exemplifying the group's theme, Falk (1966, p. 22-24) continues to cite ideas associated with "realistic" paradigms, such as the record of "his own life", "direct observation of life and people", dedication "to the individual in a hostile environment" and "to the social problems of their region". In dealing with the collection *Twenty-seven Wagons Full of Cotton and Other One-Act Plays* (1945), Falk (1966, p. 46) states that Williams operates "in a realistic style", generating sympathy for delinquency, crime and the unconventional.

Styan (2003, p. 137) grants the 15th chapter of *Modern Drama in Theory and Practice: Realism and Naturalism*, entitled "Realism in America", to two American playwrights, "both writing essentially in the realistic mode"<sup>2</sup>: Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Styan compares the two, respectively, to Anton Chekhov and Henrik Ibsen, names usually referenced in the debate on Realism in the theater, but who also receive the mark of deviation: Szondi (2001, p. 35-53) points out both as confronters, authors that put the traditional drama in crisis, respectively, by the renunciation of the present and by the analytical technique.

However, even when framing Williams in the Southern Renaissance, Falk (1966, p. 27) states that his latest productions "seem to be excellent material for some future biography", referring to an incorporation of the author into the text, one of the characteristics pointed out. by Szondi (2001, p. 59) as those of the dramatist of subjectivity. Falk (1966, p. 26) further states that Williams' work, like Faulkner's, "ranges from realism to involved symbolism". Styan, on the other hand, when dealing with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), cites the non-realistic scenarios, the epic and memorialist character of the play and compares the mechanisms

developed by Piscator for projecting images and captions on the scene to those suggested by Williams (2000a, p. 394-465) in their production notes.

Sábato Magaldi, when also commenting on *The Glass Menagerie*, wisely expresses how arduous the exercise of criticism that proposes to categorize Williams' theater is, but not without the negative value judgment and the remission of its interest to the descriptive exercise of reality:

Like all good theater, from Aeschylus to Brecht, the play is included in the category of poetic realism. This hybrid expression seems to be borrowed from eclectic inconsistency. Still, it is the only one to encompass the requirements of artistic treatment of a reality that, otherwise, he would be content with the style of the report. (Magaldi, 2012, p. 353)

In an article with the suggestive title, "Camino Unreal", Eric Bentley analyses a montage of the play *Camino Real* (1946) produced by Elia Kazan. By expressing his displeasure with Williams' text, he begins an analysis that reveals the difficulty in classifying the playwright under inflexible concepts. For Bentley, *Camino Real* is the apex of the spurious in Williams' dramatic production. the ghostly aura. "Blanche Dubois' background was diaphanous walls and voices disembodied as Saint Joan's. [...] The only difference is that *Camino Real* doesn't even intend to realism. The unreal which formerly crept up on us here meets us head on ". An example of what Bentley claims can be found in scene 10 of the play, in which Blanche is attacked by her brother-in-law Stanley. The protagonist's internal lack of control invades the space through lighting and sound. The walls become transparent to give the view a fight between a prostitute and a drunk in the middle of the street, parallel to what is about to happen in the residence, between the brothers-in-law. The voices of passers-by become animal grunts; the "blue piano" notes, in crescendo, become the oppressive noise of an approaching locomotive (Williams, 2000c, p. 542-555). However, once again, the paradigm under which Williams is judged is that of descriptive Realism, even if, at the height of its flexibilization (which coincides with the only positive

judgment), it is understood as a convention: the portrait of recurrent unhappy women and dialogues incapable of reproducing the discourse of men of reality.

We will follow the traces left by this "other criticism", the one that perceives the displacements of form as positive, and by the author himself. We are interested in "the odd rules of Williams's brand of expressionism" (Sheehy, 1991, p. 79), as well as the characteristics that *Downing Cless* (1983, p. 41) locates when comparing *Camino Real* to the Brechtian epic theater: "the play's structures of alienation and contradiction, its pervasive incongruities, which both frustrate and entice theater artist".<sup>10</sup> Our intention is to affiliate Williams to a structured or formal Realism, understood as the bearer of an experimental form that, at different levels and at different intensities, it deforms the real to access its underground, its gears.

Going into Williamsian poetics, we can say that although the same American playwright places the beginning of his almost professional theatrical activity in 1934, the beginning of his full professional activity will be *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), the play that works as a starting point starting point of his dramatic production, which remained constant during the fifties, quite active in the sixties, and with great ups and downs in the seventies until the author died in 1983. Although in the eighties, in 1987, the actor Paul Newman directed it as a posthumous tribute to the recently deceased teacher.

Williams carefully informs us of all this in his *Memoirs* (Williams, 2008 [1972]), which have the advantage of providing innumerable data on the relationships between his dramatic production and the reception by the public of different generations and "tastes" when his success According to the author, rhetorically, it has already come to an end. As well as indicating to the student of his texts the evolution of his conception of literature, of his readings, from Homer's Iliad to Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*, clearly revealing the intellectual and human journey that has sustained works of the importance of *The Night of the Iguana*, and *The Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

It seems indisputable to me that both Miller and Williams represent the greatest commitment of this North American generation due to the strong "experimental interest" that I have mentioned. Or in other words, for literature with capital letters, such as "Off-Broadway" theater, albeit from very different but never antagonistic positions. A strong experimental interest, then, to which recent North American criticism has given slightly different, or somewhat confusing, labels, such as Williams's "passionate theater" and Miller's "social theater", so characteristic of a way of understanding literature in general and the theater in particular, however controversial it was, until the end of their lives.

All in all, and as I will briefly try to show, it seems irrefutable to me that the position against the discussed, debated, and often fantasized "realism" is what defines the artists of this generation to which I refer on both sides of the Atlantic<sup>3</sup>, and that Williams' position is often presented as eclectic, that is, very inclined to reject the "isms" throughout his dramatic production in a way that is not entirely radical, but rather gradual. Which injects his literary and dramatic production with a good dose of eccentricity, often difficult to systematize critically, and easily detectable and unmistakable.

It is really curious that a book published, and I quote, "for mercenary reasons", "the first literary work that I undertake in exchange for a material benefit", as its author states in the preface to his *Memoirs* (1972), turns out to be of such importance when assessing Williams's dramatic experience, and above all, of his poetics. Or, of his continuous experimentation on a let's say "conventional" dramatic basis that he himself explains with more or less clarity, as we will see immediately, which is superimposed by a whole framework full of "innovations" as he calls them, collected both from previous literature, substantially European, and from contemporary North American theatre.

Of this, we should immediately highlight the figure of the admired Eugene O'Neill, whom Williams admires more than he says he admires, admitting his tendency to "pathos" in drama, "being pathetically eloquent", which comes to camouflage the German expressionist lesson, as well as its

influences from silent films also of German origin, which have had such an impact on the theater of Luigi Pirandello, for example, one of the authors with the greatest impact on the international dramatic scene of the 1920s. and thirty of the previous century.

His favorite narrators cannot surprise us at all. He comments, between anecdotes and memories, how very present the southern narrative is, the southern seam is deep and so absolutely familiar to Williams: Sherwood Anderson, Williams Faulkner. And of course, he tells us about the great triumphant American literature in bookstores and also in Hollywood: Francis Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, as well as his personal relationship with most of the authors he cites, mostly from admiration and Recognition of great teachers.

However, a complete edition of the diaries that Williams kept during his formative stage is missing, as he himself informs us in the first chapters of the *Memoirs*, which would undoubtedly be of invaluable help for the elaboration of the sources. more direct and very particularly of the influence on the whole of his work of the poetry of Hart Crane, considering that his literary beginnings are those of a poet, and that lyricism is one of the most defining characteristics of his art throughout all its production. In fact, in poetry, the powerful image of Crane dominates, who comes to present himself for Williams [1972] as one of the few authors whom he never abandoned, for reasons that he himself explains to us with very heartfelt words at the end of his *Memoirs* and that I reproduce for its important documentary interest:

A poet like the young Rimbaud is the only writer who now come to mind, who managed to escape from words to penetrate the sensations of being, through a youth shaken by rebellion, to which they gave eloquence. absinthe nights And also, surely, Hart Crane. Those two poets touched a fire that consumed them alive. And perhaps it is only through such self-immolation that we who live can offer you all the truth about ourselves within the reasonable limits of a book (Williams, 2008 [1972]: 386).

Despite the fictional character inherent in the autobiographical, diaristic, and memorial genre masterfully studied by Roland Barthes among other great critics (1983 [1967]), I consider the few allusions that Williams makes in his *Memoirs* about his "workshop" to be very important. of writer. I believe in this sense that the effort to clarify the insertion of his theater in the traditional Aristotelian canon is of fundamental importance. And above all with regard to likelihood, and very possibly to other, of course, debatable aspects of Aristotle's Poetics, which is proposed as a model, or at least, as the only alternative for the tragedy that he cultivates. In fact, one of the debatable elements that would lead us to the contemporary and parallel theater of Bertolt Bercht is undoubtedly the katharsis, which in his work is often annulled to "leave a cool head" and thus favor critical analysis of the problems of the world that interested him.

#### **His expressionist theater**

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) took his name from his southern identity (Mississippi). Owner of a very acute sensitivity, having suffered a very difficult childhood because of a puritanical family, he dedicated himself to writing about events and people he had met, but also about his life, or as he himself put it in an interview, "my work is emotionally autobiographical" (Arder, 1981).

The North American South had suffered an acute process of industrialization that had begun during the First World War and deepened in the Second World War, generating the displacement of traditional social actors due to the incorporation of new sectors from the immigration process. Therefore, our playwright reflects a key conflict in American society in the 1940s: traditional southern values confronted with the new ones that the industrialization process installed. This appears in many of his pieces, where his poetic language breaks with realism-naturalism. In the same interview, quoted above, he says, "but I don't think that anything that happens in life should be omitted from art, although the artist should present it in an artistic and not an ugly way" (Arder, p. 192). Later, he adds "I am a poet. And then I put the poetry to the drama

[...] Poetry is poetry. It doesn't have to be called a poem, you know" (p. 194).

In his way of writing, the poetic image predominates, essentially expressionist, showing the oneiric in some pieces, where a dramaturgy of subjectivity appears (Sarrazac, 2013, p. 30): it reveals the feelings of the hero or heroine, their inner thoughts and its contradictions. With this insertion of the intimate (Balaudé, 2013, p. 111) he addresses his frequent topics: social prejudice, the situation of women and the marginalized, greed, alcohol, sexual desire, and death.

The dramatic structure reflects a mythical-symbolic universe, showing another way of reflecting reality. On the one hand, its scenic conception, the treatment of space, the pre-eminence of non-verbal auditory and visual signs of expressionist extraction. On the dramatic level, the construction of female, tragic and controversial characters with the incorporation of symbolic characters or characters from classical mythology. To exemplify the experimental nature of his theater, we address works that belong to different stages of his production: *The Glass Menagerie* (1945).

#### **Unrealistic setting**

In both works he emphasizes a derealization of the scene. We stop at a very important metatext of his, since his subjectivist worldview with expressionist roots clearly appears. Also, we continue with the comparative analysis of Orfeo descends.

We refer to his "Author's Notes for the representation of *The Glass Menagerie*", included in the edition of Losada that we follow. Prior to the characterization of the scenic elements, the author makes a series of observations so that the director – and the readers of the edition – understand the non-mimetic character of his theater, where things are represented from the perspective of the soul. His interest in the internal universe of the characters already appears in the name of the piece "comedy of memories", where Tom tells the story of his family. Its evocative nature poses a fragmentary dramatic structure, to the point "that it can be

represented with an unusual liberation from all conventionalism" (Williams, 2007, p. 9).

Later, he explains the features of his poetics:

Expressionism and all other unconventional theater techniques have only one valid goal: a closer approach to the truth. When a piece employs techniques it is not - or certainly should not be - trying to evade its responsibility to deal with reality or to interpret experience; intends or should at least intend to find a closer angle of approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are, or at least try (...) truth, life or reality is something organic that the poetic imagination it can only represent or suggest, in essence, through transformation, transmutation into forms other than those existing simply in its appearance (Williams, 2007, pp. 9-10).

Evidently in his Preface he attacks the theater of his time, which followed a canonical realism: "a conception of a new and plastic theater, which must replace the exhausted theater of realistic conventionalisms if dramatic art is to regain its vitality as an integral part of our culture" (2007, p. 10). For this reason, stage signs are fundamental, since they fulfill different dramatic functions within this non-naturalistic proposal, where many of its resources come from cinema and the visual arts: music, lighting, scenery and characterization signs of the characters.

Through *A Streetcar Named Desire* —his masterpiece par excellence— Tennessee Williams consolidated his bleak poetics and demonstrated his critical and revolutionary capacity. In the first instance because of the fact of evidencing and harshly judging the social and political dynamics of a world where, as he himself said, "the spring of humanity had dried up", and secondly because he had the audacity to touch on issues that for the time they were totally irreverent —a transgression that caused several fainting spells and earned him numerous criticisms and censures—, but which allowed him to genuinely penetrate the crudeness of the human condition, becoming a pioneer of a more mature way of conceiving theater —and even the

cinema—, mainly in his country, but also in many others that received the work with a certain scandal, but recognizing his genius.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as mentioned at the time by the American critic and director Harold Clurman, Williams portrays the flagellation and oppression of the "poetic instinct" and the "aristocracy of sentiment" by a mentality that "provides soil for fascism, seen not as a political movement, but as a way of being". This, in addition to serving as a condemnation of the context of the contemporary world, which chose to wave the banner of brutality and trample on what could be considered the most sublime state of being - the one that elevates above all things the richness of the intellect, the beauty morality, the abundance of the spirit and the tenderness of the heart—, represents a prayer for the fragile and vulnerable individual, that is, according to Williams, that subject humiliated and marginalized for not being able to fit in with the norms of society, that pattern that it constrains the freedom of being and pretends to deny its diversity. This is what gives the work a universal value, and therefore the possibility of generating a dialogue with later times, since it offers its reader/spectator the opportunity to assign a value or meaning to it in relation to any despotism, whether social, political or even domestic, and turn it into a hymn of struggle against any act of submission, prejudice or intolerance.

Specifically, in our time: the recent 21<sup>st</sup> century, it is the tyranny exerted by patriarchy, capitalism and globalization —the systems that represent the backbone of the current world order— that allows us to empathize with the discourse of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. and assign a value according to our expression needs. Thus, it is the possibility of linking the theme of the dramatic text with particular circumstances of today's world, which proves its validity. Among these circumstances is the subjugation that machismo — ideology supported by the patriarchal system— still exerts on women and groups of sexual diversity, groups that, with their struggle for emancipation, have also exposed the inequality and oppression exerted on others. minority groups, placing the recognition and attention to diversity as one of the

great challenges facing the current 21st century; which, of course, gives great value to Williams' speech today. In the aspect of inequality, intolerance and segregation, she also considers herself an enemy of the incessant process of current globalization, which represents the main cause of the wars of cultural extermination and gives rise to racism and xenophobia. Similarly, another of the circumstances that proves the validity of the studied play, since it gives meaning to Williams' critique, is the alienation that prevails in our time due to capitalism, which based on consumerism and the insatiable hunger for power and wealth, serves as the cause of the decline of reason and humanity today; Added, of course, to the fact that it does not cease to endow our reality with fragility, a reality that, being more ephemeral every day, constantly threatens the stability and, therefore, the integrity of today's individual, making it prone to face the same tragedy that besets Williams's heroine.

Aware of everything that A Streetcar represents, both Woody Allen and Pedro Almodóvar, with their respective films *Jazmín Azul* and *Todo Sobre mi Madre*, using the essence and theme of said dramatic text as a foundation, discuss the reality of today's world, thus generating two rereadings of Tennessee Williams' masterpiece. In this way they grant the Williamsian drama a new value that enriches the perspective with which it was originally conceived, their films being evidence that, since the dramatic work has the quality of continuing to engage in a dialogue with today's reader, A tram called *Desire* is still valid and retains a very important place in world literature. In general terms, what gives great value to the discourse generated by Tennessee Williams through *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and the reason why it is so important to take it into account today, is because through this dramatic text the playwright reveals that neither the human being nor his spirit can be pigeonholed — constrained— to a pattern of normality. Man is diverse by nature, and the human spirit has unlimited ways of manifesting itself, each and every one of them just as valuable and dignified. With the imposition of normalities, the only thing we have achieved is to restrict other possibilities of being that can be just as fruitful for society. In fact, it is precisely

the selfish and incessant intention to deny and destroy the diversity that by nature constitutes the human being, which is leading our species to decline... which has increasingly moved us further and further away from the greatness of which humanity could ever account for. For example, this intention is the main underlying cause of wars and conflicts between human beings; which in turn has saturated our present with violence and has prevented us from reaching a true era of splendor and sublimity.

### **"The Glass Menagerie" (1945)**

In an alley in Saint Louis, Missouri, during the interwar period, we meet the four characters<sup>1</sup> that Tennessee Williams brings to life in the "*The Glass Menagerie*", a play of American realism, premiered in New York in March 1945 Through Tom's initial monologue, the author manages to introduce the cast of the play in a few words: "I am the narrator of the comedy and also one of the characters. The others are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura, and a marriage candidate who appears in the final scenes. He this is the most realistic character in the piece, for being the emissary of a world from which, in a certain way, we were separated".

The study carried out above shows that it is feasible to apply certain elements of Heidegger's thought to the work "*The Glass Menagerie*", written by Tennessee Williams. Although the points of contact between the play and the notions of the German philosopher acquire more notoriety in the character of Laura, this should not obscure the possibility of tracing Heidegger's philosophy in the personality traits and situations inherent to the rest of the cast. In fact, it is possible to risk thinking that an investigation that incorporates another cut of theoretical-philosophical tools, would give rise to the emergence of different and deeper lines of analysis, novel with respect to what is exposed in this work. In order to highlight the extra-literary interest of this study on "*The Glass Menagerie*", it is necessary to emphasize that as a work of North American realism, it transcends the mere illustration of the particular conditions of a dysfunctional family. It is a piece crossed by the historical conditions of a United States in full conversion, after the Crisis of

1929. In the play, the threatening feeling of being left out of a world that is undergoing profound changes afflicts, to different degrees, to the cast members. It is conceivable that this situation could have been part of the biography of many Americans who lived through that time of transformation; perhaps for this reason the play became a post-World War II commercial success, winning the prestigious New York Theater Critics Circle Award, and a film adaptation. "*The Glass Menagerie*" and Pure Worldliness Johanna M. Fedorovsky An ahistorical analysis of "The Glass Menagerie" would not provide more than a very partial version of the facts, where probably the only way to explain the Wingfields' maladjustment to the times that ran, would be the way psychologist. The ability to reflect the concerns and life in general of a sector of American society in the 1940s is what makes the analysis of the piece written by Tennessee Williams especially attractive. The exploration of "*The Glass Menagerie*" from the Heideggerian philosophy could provide keys to approach the small portion of history that the work covers. However, none of this should be done uncritically, since it would be an error to linearly extrapolate to reality the valid conclusions for a fiction.

#### **"A Streetcar Named Desire" (1947)**

Modernity brought with it technological innovations in various fields of knowledge, with in fact a revolution and a rupture with pre-established standards. Man, in this new context of changes and innovations, found himself unadaptable and presented himself, from then on, averse to the new era. Based on this assumption, this article intends to analyse how dramatic fiction, specifically the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* by the American playwright Tennessee Williams, discursively presents its characters in this new context of changes and inadequacies, based on Freudian reflections arising from the studies "The Civilization Discontents" and "Future of an Illusion". It was also necessary a theoretical survey about the constitution of the character as a fictitious entity and a diachronic approach with unique examples of character constructions in the history of western theater. Heraclitus was, at the very least, astute in declaring that "being is and at the same time is not". In fact,

the representation of the being as a complex individual who is moved by his passions has always been and will always be a theme for literary art, especially for dramatic art whose central focus is on the mimetic representation of the characters' agon. These, the characters, who since Aristotle's Poetics have assumed a primordial role – if not essential – for the representation of human characters that, as Aristotle taught us, can be of a high character – such as in Sophocles' tragedies and Homeric epics – or of inferior character--as in the comedies of Aristophanes. Socrates also once listed that we have moral, absolute principles on which we build our existence. Literature, or the art of the word, which although negative for Plato as it sharpens the senses - therefore the non-rational - has the role of questioning and problematizing our moral principles and pointing out our flaws as human beings. And it does so through the purely intentional construction of characters, fictional entities that lead the action, if not, determine the paths and outcome of any work of fiction. Dramatic art – along with the lyrical and the epic – gave the character a prominent role as an epistemological problem, since it is from this that fiction becomes more clearly evident. (Rosenfeld, 1996, p. 18) In the dramatic text, from the Greeks to contemporary playwrights, the construction of characters has always been the subject of studies in literary criticism. In this article, we focus on analysing the way in which the American playwright Thomas Lanier Williams, or as he is better known, Tennessee Williams, built his characters in a certain historical-social context in which the Freudian discoveries gave subsidies for the attempt – no less hermetic – of understanding being and being-in-the-world. For that, it will be necessary to concatenate a theoretical discussion about the function and constitution of the fictional entity called character, in addition to listing examples of heralds in the constructions of characters in Western theater, so that, from then on, we can reach to the configuration of Tennessee Williams' characters, specifically from the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and the meanings that they imprint in the context in which they were inserted.

Our next step was to reach ethical-philosophical propositions about elements that



move actions, examining the concept of volition developed by Hegel to discuss actions, contexts and circumstances that affect the decisions of dramatic characters. It was through the union of these concepts, the junction of these critical approaches, that we proceeded to our reading of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It is true that we have not exhausted the topic, as that was not our intention. What we intended was just to initiate discussions on the subject, as mentioned earlier. Thus, as we could see, when using classic bases to compose his play, Tennessee Williams brings in *Streetcar* a plot marked by involving and exciting conflicts that, through intense crises, transform his play into a modern tragedy that continues to be a success, having become a masterpiece of world dramaturgy.

Through what we know, when we examine the plot of the play through the dialogues and actions of the main characters, both Blanche and Stanley are transformed while living under the same roof. In this sense, it is important to affirm that the actions strongly linked to the free will of the characters promoted circumstances so that their formative trajectories were modified with each event. Thus, the same Blanche DuBois that we know at the beginning of the plot, no longer represents the same personality at the end of the play. Similarly, Stanley Kowalski does not remain the same from the beginning to the end of the drama.

This transition occurs due to circumstantial factors that led both to exercise their will in the face of the new conflicts that challenge them. Modern conceptions that represent, in the play, the valorization of desire and freedom of action, show that the antagonisms of the main characters occurred because of divergent behaviors and attitudes, causing a chain of conflicts, arising from the misunderstandings and intolerances between both characters. The Kowalskis' residence, an environment permeated by discord and violence, becomes a scenario that favors and reinforces conflicts, motivating other situations that walk towards a growing crisis of social coexistence. Thus, the gravity of the clashes within the home made life in the domestic environment unsustainable, due to antagonistic ideological forces, compelling a final clash that promotes, from the confrontation

between the antagonistic characters, a realignment of dramatic forces, producing a new relationship pattern (Lawson, 1960, p.167) which, however, is appealed only in the tragedy of madness.

It remains for us to comment on some important factors that triggered the tragic in the play: the conditions for Blanche's tragic downfall occurred due to her "tragic error" in criticizing Stanley, without being aware of his presence, a fact that motivated her brother-in-law to put her out of her house and her family. Another contributing factor to the tragic in Blanche's life arose from the realization that Harold Mitchell would no longer marry her, a revelation that dashed her hopes of finding shelter, revealing her helpless condition. And, finally, through her frailty, both physical and mental, she is overwhelmed by the force of Stanley, who rapes her, a fact that culminates in her pathetic condition and drives her to madness. As far as Stanley is concerned, her only objective was to remove Blanche from her home, re-establishing her domination over her private life, her family, her space and her belongings.

Thus, in the case of a fiction that represents reality, *Streetcar* expresses a modern tragedy that, from a formal point of view, receives Aristotelian influence from tradition, for example, maintaining itself as a plot with a beginning, middle and end, using of a complex action, the situations arise logically well-articulated, valuing the unity of action. There is also the presence of tragic error, anagnorisis, peripeteia, catastrophe and pathos. For all these reasons, in our understanding, Tennessee Williams, in *Streetcar*, surpassed and reinvented classical dramatic forms, reaching the literary aesthetic status of an avant-garde dramaturgy in the mid-twentieth century. Through the creation of characters that sustain the dramatic action, through their strongly particularized "ethos", Tennessee Williams' skill is reaffirmed in a dramatic text constructed through an articulated plot, inspired by the imitation of everyday life that represents a moving and shocking modern tragedy.

### **Conclusion**

As previously discussed, towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup>, the

crisis of modern drama took place. We observe this in the various European avant-gardes, such as in the expressionist movement. Theatrical Expressionism arose in Germany as a poetics that showed a dissatisfied vision with respect to the contemporary world, presenting its mystical, pacifist and anti-authoritarian vision, through a non-naturalistic scenic proposal, where a dramaturgy of subjectivity predominates.

We observe that this has expanded towards America, both in the North and in the South of this continent. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, it influenced the American theater at the time of the Great Depression in key authors of that time (Elmer Rice, O'Neill) who criticized American society. Later, after the Second War, a new generation of authors renewed the scene. One of them was Tennessee Williams, who developed a modern theater, incorporating techniques from different arts, with the aim of breaking with traditional realism.

This is what we see in *The Glass Menagerie* and in *Orpheus Descends* –pieces from different periods– where Tennessee Williams deals with the problems of the southern zone: loneliness, the situation of women, sexuality and puritanical hypocrisy, with a highly poetic perspective of the scene, where artistic languages reveal the subjectivity of frustrated modern man. We consider that his plastic theater, highly innovative, is in force in the theater of the 21st century. Precisely because, in the current scene, the fusion of the arts is crossed by the audiovisual story, where theatrical proposals appear beyond mimetic representation.

In conclusion, I am convinced that this "harmony" that I defend for his dramatic pieces, more tending towards simplicity than filling, amplifies the desired dramatic effect. That is to say, the extreme situations to the point of delirium that each of his characters live, since if they are sure of something, as is Williams, it is that "after all, nobility in life gives them the courage to overcome with dignity to the terrible tests", a harsh sentence without a doubt with which the North American playwright concluded his *Memoirs* and that could be taken from any of his works. Williams achieves his most brilliant expose of human nature in its entirety

in this drama by just slightly distorting the actual surface when it is absolutely necessary. The vital foundation in recognisably real reality is consistently upheld, allowing the viewer to believe Blanche's vivid accounts of her visions. "Knowing when and how to combine the resources of realistic and theatrical talent" is crucial to solving the aesthetic problem in theatre, according to John Gassner. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the blending of reality and theatricality is done with skill.

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