



## Symbolic creatures: spirituality and evanescence in Tennessee Williams's plays and short stories

### Criaturas simbólicas: espiritualidade e evanescência em peças e contos de Tennessee Williams

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#### Abstract

The aim of this research is the interpretation of William's poetic contrivance concerning the use of animals, mythological beasts and symbolic creatures in plays and short stories. Through an interdisciplinary lens we juxtapose different cases such as the Iguana in *The night of the iguana*, birds and sea turtles in *Suddenly last summer*, griffin in *A milktrain doesn't stop here anymore*, cat in "The malediction" etc. These symbolic creatures are allusions of fantastic characters' *anima*, meaning the irrational part of the soul. In religious imagery these symbolisms are widespread. The symbolic creatures are the subtext of spirituality and evanescence in Williams' work.

**Keywords:** Christ; Church; God; Orpheus; Animal.

#### Resumo

O objetivo desta pesquisa é a interpretação do artifício poético de Williams quanto ao uso de animais, bestas mitológicas e criaturas simbólicas em peças teatrais e contos. Através de uma perspectiva interdisciplinar, nós comparamos diferentes casos, como a iguana em *A noite do iguana*, pássaros e tartarugas marinhas em *De repente no último verão*, o grifo em *O trem da manhã não para mais aqui*, o gato em *A maldição*, entre outros. Essas criaturas simbólicas são alusões à *anima* dos personagens fantásticos, significando a parte irracional da alma. Na iconografia religiosa, esses simbolismos são amplamente difundidos. As criaturas simbólicas constituem o subtexto de espiritualidade e de evanescência na obra de Williams.

**Palavras-chave:** Cristo; Igreja; Deus; Orfeu; Animal.

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“Who, if I were to cry out, would hear me/among the angelic orders?”

Rilke

Motto in *Summer and smoke*

## The Williams Paradox

Tennessee Williams proved to be larger than life; undoubtedly his work will survive in time, not just as his legacy, but as his Gospel where he narrates his holy life. He is a playwright who talks about his life through his heroes. The fictitious characters in his plays, short stories, novels and poems are holy sinners and that is not an oxymoron. Sin is the only road to repentance and sanctity. However, Williams' paradox arises from a confusion of level and meta-level. It creates a situation in which a statement is true, if false; and false if true (Watzlawick, 1965; Watzlawic; Jackson, 2010).

Autobiographical factor is the primary characteristic in Tennessee Williams theatrical plays.<sup>2</sup> There can be no doubt that his life and times formatted a dramaturgical platform. Abundance of people, ideas and incidents triggered off his creativity. Family affairs, in particular, were his permanent inspiration (Williams, 1963). Williams was inspired by his own life and artistically transformed it into plays. The connections between his life and plays created a chaos of ambiguities and endless discussions.<sup>3</sup> His life is full of weird contrasts. A homosexual son, suppressed by a puritan mother, depressed by a life full of quilts, writes about fragile personalities who face a cruel and violent world. Williams built a whole universe where his real life turns into a theatrical combat between cruel humans, such as Stanley Kowalski, and sensitive people who believe in magic and

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<sup>2</sup> See indicatively Diyab, H. **Crossing the margin: minorities and marginality in the drama of Tennessee Williams** (PhD Thesis), University of Leicester, 2008; Hale, A. Tennessee Williams: The Preacher's Boy. **The Southern Quarterly**, University of Southern Mississippi, v. 38, n. 1, p. 10-20, Fall, 1999; Hayman, R. **Tennessee Williams. Everyone else is an audience**. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993; Konkle, L. Puritan paranoia: Tennessee Williams's Suddenly Last Summer as Calvinist nightmare. **American Drama**, New York: Center for Advanced Study in Theatre Arts, v. 7, n. 2, p. 51-72, Spring, 1998; Tennessee Williams [Les Nouveaux cahiers de la Comédie-Française], Paris, 2011; Porter, D.; Prince, D. **Pink triangle**. The feuds and private lives of Tennessee Williams, Gore Vidal, Truman Capote and famous members of their entourages. New York: Blood Moon Productions, 2014; Siegel, R. The metaphysics of Tennessee Williams. **American Drama**, (New York: Center for Advanced Study in Theatre Arts), v. 10, n.1, p. 11-37, Winter, 2001; Spoto, D. **The kindness of strangers**. The life of Tennessee Williams. New York: Da Capo Press, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> See indicatively A. L. Erikson, *The Writer and his Rose: the Relationship of Tennessee Williams' autobiographical artist and fragile female character, and its presence in the life and work of a troubled genius*, (unp. Master of Arts in Theatre, University of Colorado), Colorado 2010 - E. Jackson, *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams*, Wisconsin 1965 - P. Lefebvre, "Tom et Tennessee", *Tennessee Williams* [Les Nouveaux cahiers de la Comédie-Française], Paris 2011, 13-19 - L. Leverich, *Tom. The unknown Tennessee Williams*, New York - London 1995 - B. Nelson, *Tennessee Williams: The Man and His Work*, New York 1961.

unicorns, such as Blanch Dubois and Laura Wingfield.

Williams' sister, Rose, is reflected clearly in characters, such as angelic Laura Wingfield in *The glass menagerie* (1944) or persecuted Catherine Holly in *Suddenly last summer* (1958). His mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, was his model to depict stubborn and autocratic Amanda Wingfield, diabolic, wicked, emotionally mutilated, Violet Venable and many others. Tennessee Williams developed his dramaturgy based on his distorted psychology. B. Murphy (2014, p. 159) writes,

In 1967, London critic Herbert Kretzmer confessed, 'I understand very little of it [he means *Outcry* (1967)]', suggesting that 'it would need a psychoanalyst - and preferably Tennessee Williams's own - to offer a rational interpretation of the enigmas that litter the stage like pieces of an elaborate jigsaw' ([Clifford Terry,] 'William's Play Foggy to London', *Chicago Tribune* (13 December 1967): C5).

This approach involves Williams' psychological background. Can psychoanalysis interpret fictional characters? According to A. Rasmi (2022, p. 145-146),

Today, the psychoanalytic critique of fictional characters that deals with the exchange of literature and psychology is very important. Although the recognizing of human personality, [sic] is generally difficult, however, today the characters of literary and fictional works are criticized psychologically like real human beings, because the characters of literary and fictional works are the thoughts of poets and writers and since the poet is always influenced by her thoughts and his psychic world influences his works, then psychoanalysis of their works can be effective in recognizing the actions, behavior and mindsets of the creators of the work and its contemporaries.

There is an abundance of successful examples. A. Psilopoulou explains the motives of female characters in Modern Greek novels using the theories of S. Freud and J. Lacan.<sup>4</sup> P. Armstrong juxtaposes Lacan and Shakespeare in understanding Hamlet.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, fictitious characters are reflections of the author's inner world. As such, they are subjects to psychological interpretation and analysis.

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<sup>4</sup> A. Ψιλοπούλου, **Διακειμενικότητα και γυναικεία γραφή στο σύγχρονο ελληνικό μυθιστόρημα: Μεταξύ συρμού και αποβάθρας, Χυδαίες Ορχιδέες και Θηριόμορφοι της Έλενας Μαρούτσου**, MA-thesis, Open University of Greece, apotheosis.eap.gr. [A. Psilopoulou, *Modern Greek Novel: A Comparative study between three novels by Elena Maroutsou*] MA Thesis, Open University of Greece.

<sup>5</sup> Armstrong, P. *Watching Hamlet watching: Lacan, Shakespeare and the mirror/stage*. In: Hawkes, T. (Ed.). **Alternative Shakespeares II**, Routledge: London, 2003.

## Sowing the dragon's teeth: the Iguana

According to W. Scott Griffies (2022, p. 502), "Williams was operating in brain circuits below the level of 'higher' reflection or interpretation-receptive circuits and therefore he was unable to make use of a traditional ego psychological model".

In 2003 Paul Tosio published his Master's dissertation, entitled *An object relational psychoanalysis of selected Tennessee Williams play texts*. Tosio emphasizes that "[o]f all Williams' plays, *The night of the iguana* is one of the most profoundly psychological. It presents a portrait of the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon who is inwardly tormented" (TOSIO, 2003, p. 98).<sup>6</sup> In *The night of the iguana* (1961) the Mexicans capture the iguana and have her in captivity using a rope. Lawrence Shannon is also tied on a hammock. And he defines himself "as a man at the end of his rope who still has to try to go on, to continue, as if he'd never been better or stronger in his whole existence" (Williams, 2000, p. 343).

Tennessee Williams poetically connects the fate of the iguana with the fate of the main character, according to his stage directions:

The Germans troop up from the beach. They are delighted by the drama that Shannon has provided. In their scanty swimsuits they parade onto the verandah and gather about Shannon's captive figure as if they were looking at a funny animal in a zoo (Williams, 2000, p. 400).

The playwright shows the very soul of his hero in audience's face. More specifically, Williams aims to demonstrate the irrational part of Shannon's soul, his animalistic instincts, his passion for young girls, his rebellion against a mighty, tyrannical God. So, the Iguana is not accidentally chosen by Williams as a metaphor. Let us take a closer look in to one of the dialogues between Hannah Jelkes and Shannon:

HANNAH: What is a -what- iguana?  
SHANNON: It's a kind of lizard- a big one, a giant one.  
[...]  
HANNAH: Mr. Shannon, please go down and cut it loose!  
SHANNON: I can't do that.  
HANNAH: Why can't you?  
SHANNON: Mrs. Faulk wants to eat it. I've got to please Mrs. Faulk, I am at her mercy. I am at her disposal (Williams, 2000, p. 421-22).

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<sup>6</sup> See also Levin, L. *Shadow Into light: A Jungian Analysis of the Night of the Iguana*. *The Tennessee Williams Annual Revue*, v. 2, p. 225-250, 1999.

The reptile represents a mythological archetype of evil.<sup>7</sup> It seems that, to understand this play, one is required to decode symbolism and allegories by studying *The night of the iguana* in conjunction with two biblical texts: Genesis and the Revelation. Genesis informs us that on the fifth day of Creation the sea washed ashore terrible monsters; dragons like crocodiles and other reptiles. However, “God saw that it was good...” (Genesis, 1:18)<sup>8</sup>. In their interpretation of Genesis, the Fathers of the Church explain that God allowed these creatures to exist because they are the bearers of Evil and that Good cannot triumph unless it is confronted with Evil. According to H. Maguire, Fathers of the Church such as Anastasios, and Procopius of Gaza ascertain that saints become spiritually established when they face the monsters of the fifth day.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, in the Revelation, John describes the end of the world in reference to the presence of the dragon but also to the all-powerful woman who shall vanquish him forcing him in the end to retreat [“...a woman clothed with the sun...”], (Revelation, 19: 7-8). Hannah Jelkes may be a reference to the Virgin. The main character, the defrocked preacher, must get through his own night, and confront his passions that are cryptographically depicted in the form of a reptile, the iguana. Reverend Lawrence Shannon’s support is Hannah Jelkes, the woman who has managed to subjugate the “blue devil”. This is a dilemma between Vice and Virtue. In other words, this is a tug of war between Hannah Jelkes and Maxine Faulk. Logically, Shannon should kill the dragon/iguana/demonic side in order to be able to save his soul. Consequently, Shannon, in alignment with the hagiological archetype, Saint George, should be victorious against evil forces in order to find absolution. However, his road to light passes through a paradox. In this battle the dragon should defeat St George. Lawrence/Laurentius must be consumed by the flames of his passions on an imaginary griddle in order to redeem his soul through martyrdom. The puppet of the devil, Maxine Faulk, finally pushes him to moral destruction but also to spiritual recognition and ascension. J. Thompson (1987, p. 176-177) explains the paradox:

<sup>7</sup> See Maguire, H. **Earth and Ocean**. The terrestrial world in early byzantine art. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987; El-Shal, O. Le symbolisme égyptien dans la vie religieuse copte. **Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta, Proceedings of the Ninth international Congress of Egyptologists** (Edited by Goyon, J. C.; Cardin, C.), Leuven: University of Leuven v. 1, p. 627-640, 2007.

<sup>8</sup> All passages from the Bible come from: <https://www.biblehub.com/> [Accessed on: 08 Oct. 2023].

<sup>9</sup> According to Maguire (2007, p. 28-29), “[...] byzantine authors also associated the Nile with the waters of Creation. For example, a sermon by Anastasios links the rise and fall of that river, the gathering of the waters and the creation of dry land described in verse 9 of the first chapter of Genesis. The sixth-century commentary by Procopius of Gaza includes such typical Nilotic animals as crocodiles and hippopotami among the ‘creeping things’ created from the waters on the fifth day”.

at the end of Shannon's 'dark night of the soul', he descends a naturalistic version of St. John's mystic ladder of love, upon which 'to go down is to go up' [...] He proceeds in contrary motion, in flight from the presence of God; but like St. John, he finds that the way down leads up.

**Fig. 1** – Hannah Jelkes, *The night of the iguana*, Cyprus, 2018, direction by A. Demosthenous



Source: Author's personal collection.

### **Blue devils and reasonless fears**

According to the Oxford dictionary, "anima" is the soul, especially the irrational part of the distinguished from the rational mind.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, Tennessee Williams uses animals as symbols and projections of human instincts, soul, and invisible and inexplicable substance. Demons, monsters, animals. In his Notebooks he wrote on January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1940:

<sup>10</sup> Oxford Languages, "anima". Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/> [Accessed on: 10 Aug. 2023].

Sorry to report I feel rather dull due the blue devils of defeatism which nearly always rear their ugly little faces in reaction to some period of triumph or elation. Will have to beat them out once more. They're such a damned nuisance – which is stronger, my will or these reasonless fears? I must ride them down like a nest of snakes, trample them under my heels! (Williams, 2006, p. 181).

In these beasts Williams reflects the monstrous dimension of human existence. In a parallel universe, the renowned Greek poet Constantinos Cavafis in the poem “Ithaka” writes: “You won’t meet the Laistrygonians and the Cyclops, the wild Poseidon unless you bring them along inside your soul, unless your soul puts them in front of you”.<sup>11</sup>

Regarding reasonless fears and mythological creatures, let us turn our attention to an indicative example. In *The milktrain doesn't stop here anymore* (1963), Mrs. Goforth lives in her palace on a hill in a place called Divina Costiera, the divine shore. She is dying of a cancer she refuses to acknowledge, and she sits in isolated splendor. Flora “Sissy” Goforth was transformed into a greedy, materialistic, promiscuous female dying Griffin. She cares only about her wealth and property. Gradually, she became an evil creature. Mrs. Goforth explains: “Evil isn’t a person: Evil is a thing that comes sneaky-sneaking into the heart of a person, and takes it over: a mean intruder, a squatter” (Williams, 2000, p. 555).

In his stage directions to *The milktrain doesn't stop here anymore*, Williams (2000, p. 496) makes it clear: “the flag in the estate of Mrs. Goforth is bearing her personal emblem, the griffin”. What is a griffin? Christopher Flanders will answer this question for us: “A force in life that’s almost stronger than death” (Williams, 2000, p. 542). This creature is a combination of two animals: half lion and half eagle.<sup>12</sup> This play is a nightmarish fairytale full of strange creatures. According to A. Saddik (2015, p. 88),

The play is rife with such monstrous constructions: wolf-like watchdogs - lupos- that guard Mrs. Goforth’s mountain fortress; a sea full of ‘Medusas’ that sting; a ‘Witch’ whom Williams describes as a ‘creature out of a sophisticated fairy tale’ living on blood transfusions; and a cold snapper dish for supper that the Witch refers to as a ‘monster of the deep’ with ‘a horrid expression on its face.’ Even the sun is an ‘angry old lion’ (WILLIAMS, Tennessee. *The Milktrain Doesn't Stop Here Anymore*, In: *Theatre of Tennessee Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1976, 7, 20, 42, 44, 45, 86).

The psychedelic atmosphere supports the parabolic character of the plot.

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<sup>11</sup> Ithaka by C.P. Cavafy, edited by E. Keeley. Available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org>

<sup>12</sup> BASIC, R. Between paganism and christianity: transformation and symbolism of a winged griffin, *Ikon*, Brussels: Brepols Publishers, v. 2, p. 85-92, 2009.

Christopher is an allusion of Saint Christopher, a Catholic and Orthodox figure that helps humans in their passing from one place to another or from one dimension to another. According to Gilbert Debussher (1974, p. 455),

The presence of saintly figures in the play's texture indicates that the playwright conceives of his central characters' predicament as somehow comparable to that of their patron saints. By scenically integrating or verbally recalling the central scene of their martyrdom, Williams emphasizes through comparison less the sanctity of his characters than their scapegoat overtones.

**Fig. 2** – Christopher Flanders, *The milktrain doesn't stop here anymore*, Cyprus 2022, direction by A. Demosthenous



Source: Author's personal collection.

Many of Tennessee Williams' heroes are scapegoats. In close relation with his Calvinistic background, he demonstrates the example of crucified Jesus in various versions.

The example of Christ, of an outcast who is persecuted by the ruling class, seems to give a different dimension to the situation. The pain uplifts, it becomes an imitation of the Eucharistic sacrifice, of the *melismos*, the fragmentation of the Holy Child offering itself to save the souls of men. In this Holy Mystery of the Church, the congregation consumes Christ's body in order to become one with Jesus. In ancient Greek mythology God Zagreus



or Dionysus was attacked and dismembered by the Titans. Despite his dismemberment, Dionysus/Zagreus was resurrected. The resurrection of Dionysus/Zagreus is an analogy of Jesus' resurrection. Dismemberment/*sparagmos* led to his cult in the context of Orphism (Barnabé, 2003).

Anguish also appears in *Orpheus descending* (1957), where the protagonist, Val Xavier, is in danger of being dismembered by the dogs used by the sheriff to bite to pieces escaped prisoners from the neighboring prisons. This is also an allegory since Val talks in the same play about a "lifelong sentence to solitary confinement inside our own lonely skins for as long as we live on the earth!" (Williams, 2000, p. 42-43). The dismembering of the body and the suffering of the flesh lead to salvation. The atrocious martyrdom of saints supports this position. What leaves no margin for multiple interpretations, however, is the extremely revealing short story *Desire and the Black masseur* (1948). The hero of the story is Anthony Burns, the thirty-year old outcast on fire who seeks redemption. Williams states clearly: "For the sins of the world are really only its partialities, its incompletions, and these are what sufferings must atone for" (Williams, 1967, p. 92).<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Debussher (1974, p. 455) emphasizes,

The hagiographic references are part of a set of devices intended to draw the readers' and spectators' attention away from the surface of the play. They bring to the action the suggestion that the events occurring on the stage are merely the limited, contemporary reflection of an original, time-honoured pattern of larger significance. They are signposts to the deeper and broader resonances of plays that have too often have approached as flatly realistic.

The Cypriot production of *The milktrain doesn't stop here anymore* (direction: Anthoullis Demosthenous) emphasized on the spiritual aspect of the play. The play is a parable full of hidden allegories. In the beginning of the play some verses from the poem of William Butler Yeats "Sailing to Byzantium" are cited: "Consume my heart away; sick with desire/ And fastened to a dying animal/ It knows not what it is; and gather me/ Into the artifice of eternity" (Williams, 2000, p. 489).

The question is clear: will Mrs. Goforth sail to Byzantium? In the end, she repents for all her sinful past by giving her precious rings/chains to Christopher. Furthermore, she suffers a martyr's death, and that is why Williams rewards her with sanctity.

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<sup>13</sup> See also: SADDIK, A. J. The (Un)Represented Fragmentation of the Body in Tennessee Williams's "Desire and the Black Masseur" and *Suddenly Last Summer*. **Modern Drama**, University of Toronto Press, v. 41, n. 3, p. 347-354, 1998.

Consequently, her funeral is not just a departure from the earth. Mrs. Goforth is finally sailing to Byzantium, going forth. In the end, the Griffin disappears, and she becomes a holy Byzantine empress in a catafalque according to Williams (2000, p. 580). She abandons her gold to accept a spiritual treasure in a symbolic universe.

The last image of the Cypriot staging of the play is a reference to the Byzantine iconography of the Dormition of Virgin Mary, and it is also based on the Byzantine chant (*apolytikion*) of the ecclesiastical feast for the commemoration of the event: “O you Apostles from far off, being gathered together in the village of Gethsemane, lay my body in burial”.<sup>14</sup>

**Fig. 3** - The ending of Mrs. Goforth, *The milktrain doesn't stop here anymore*, Cyprus, 2022, Direction by A. Demosthenous



Source: Author's personal collection.

**Fig. 4** - The Dormition of Virgin Mary, Panayia tis Asinou, Cyprus, fresco dated from 1105/1106



Source: Ahimastou-Potamianou, M. **Byzantine frescoes**. Athens: Ekdotiki Athinon, 1994, p. 56-57.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. <https://dormitioninconcord.wordpress.com/> [Accessed on: 10 Aug. 2023].

## Religion and dogma

Tennessee Williams' life was a riddle. His intensely autobiographical work could not but receive multiple interpretations. Even though scholars and journalists saw him as a promiscuous, immoral, homosexual who jumped at every opportunity to parody religion in his plays,<sup>15</sup> the reality is completely different. Tennessee Williams was a true believer.<sup>16</sup> His faith was identified with a perpetual pursuit of God. Being raised in a strict family of Protestants, it was taken for granted that anything religious or metaphysical in the work and beliefs of the playwright derives from the Episcopal Church. Given that in 1969 he converted to Catholicism and his brother was a kind of Roman Catholic preacher, some of his ideas could have also been derived from this ecclesiastical framework.

Apart from Calvinistic and Roman Catholic ideas, however, his work also contains theological approaches from the Eastern Orthodox world. In an interview given in 1966, Tennessee Williams was asked if he was involved in any particular religion. He replied that he had a Russian icon by his bed. This icon was a birthday gift from a friend who lived in London.<sup>17</sup> The connection of faith in God and the correlation with a specific religion assigns particular importance to this piece of information. Williams described the manifestation of faith in God through his relationship with an orthodox Russian style icon. How was it possible however for the American playwright Tennessee Williams to have knowledge of the theology of the Orthodox Church? This gift may have been a coincidence, but perhaps not. He chose not to name the person who gave him the icon in

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<sup>15</sup> As John Lahr (2014, p. 99) indicates, "Alma, like Williams, had engineered an escape from 'the cage of Puritanism'. Once she has cast off her parents and the rectory, the serenity she finds is not the peace of heaven but the bliss of pickups and pills. 'The prescription number is 96814,' she says at the finale. 'I think of it as the telephone number of God!' In Williams's renovated consciousness, revelation is gratification. The body is spiritualized: offering the promise of a communion that brings resurrection in the flesh, not the afterlife. 'And still our blood is sacred,' he wrote in 'Iron Is the Winter.' 'To the mouth/the tongue of the beloved is holy bread'."

See also, Saddik (2015, p. 349): "The story ends with the masseur throwing the bones of Burns's body into a lake as a mock-baptism..."; and Parker, B. (2000, p. 657): "...the play (Suddenly Last Summer) provides a 'demonic' parody or inversion of martyrdom, whether this is interpreted at a sexual level of the Sebastian myth or at its original religious level".

<sup>16</sup> See indicatively Williams, T. **Notebooks**: "Sunday, 22 March 1936 Sunday. A swell day- Went to Holy Communion at St Michael's Church at Christ Church Cathedral- enjoyed service latter..." (2006, p. 51); "Sunday, 30 August 1936... Maybe if I look hard enough into this fog I'll begin to see God's face and can manage to find my way out" (2006, p. 53); "Monday, 31 August 1936... I do believe in God. I know that I do" (2006, p. 69); "Monday, 23 November 1936... I am praying tonight. After all is quite a necessary thing" (2006, p. 110), etc.

<sup>17</sup> See Devlin, A. J. (Ed.). **Conversations with Tennessee Williams**. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997, p. 127.

order not to turn the attention of the paparazzi who stalked him on that person. As a deeply secretive individual, he wished to keep some aspects of his personal life secret. However, this person could be none other than Maria Britneva, also known as Lady Maria St. Just.

The first clue leading to this person is the published correspondence in accordance with which Williams was in London, where she lived, on his birthday in 1965.<sup>18</sup> According to John Lahr (2014, p. 157), “Britneva exerted an almost immediate power over Williams”. The correspondence between Tennessee Williams and Maria Britneva reveals a spiritual relationship that extends to becoming familiar with the rituals and mysteries of the Russian Orthodox Church. It is indicative that Williams appears to be requesting Maria: “Do burn a candle for me in the lovely Russian church” (Williams, 1990, p. 72).<sup>19</sup>

Maria was with her sister Sandra as she was dying.

Tennessee went to fetch the Russian priest. Tennessee spoke of the incident much later. He said ‘I’ll never forget, when I brought the priest into the room, seeing you bending over little Sandra-you were holding the Russian cross to her lips’. After Sandra’s funeral Tennessee wrote a poem (Williams, 1990, p. 46-47).

Most definitely, his contact with Maria brought him closer to her faith. His request also shows that he deeply respected orthodoxy and perhaps through the “mediation” of his Russian friend he was empowered. She honored him by naming him godfather of her first child. The first gift of Williams to his goddaughter was in no way a haphazard choice, it was the *Duino elegies*, by Reiner Maria Rilke (1875-1926) (Williams, 1990, p. 146-147).

The thinker-poet Rilke, who was led to orthodox mysticism, may have been a decisive influence on Williams. Even though he presented remarkable evidence of his literary skill early on, Rilke was only included in the world of great poets after 1899. In that year he travelled to Russia and returned radically changed. There is no doubt that what excited and finally defined Rilke was none other than orthodox spirituality.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “March 12, 1965 I’m writing to inform or warn you that I am flying to London on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of this month, three days before my unfortunate birthday...” (Williams, 1990, p. 191).

<sup>19</sup> The same request appears in different dates throughout their correspondence. See, for example, again on page 362, when he writes “please light a candle for me”, and continues “there are people who make you believe in God.”

<sup>20</sup> Fedder, N. J., **The influence of D. H. Lawrence on Tennessee Williams**, The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1966. According to Professor Henry I. Schvey (2012, p. 88), “In his recent memoir *My friend Tom*, [Jay] Smith persuasively argues that Williams was more committed to poetry than theatre during his time in St. Louis, and the three young men -Williams, Smith and Mills, who was evidently their leader- created a ‘Literary Factory’ in the cool basement of Mills’s Westmoreland Avenue home during the sweltering St. Louis summers. Smith further notes that Mills introduced Tom to the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke...”

William's theatrical "sermon" finds evident corresponding analogies in Rilke. Besides, works by Rilke, such as the *Duino elegies*, have been found in William's library with extended hand-written notes (Heintzelman; Smith-Howard, 2005, p. 88). Spirituality and evanescence is dominant in Rilke's work.

In 1963 Williams was marked by the tragic death of his companion, Frank Merlo. In his letter dated 23 September 1963 to Maria Britneva he states something that is exceptionally enigmatic: "I think our Russian church-service worked to the extent that he never lost his dignity and pride" (Williams, 1990, p. 187).

Williams identifies, as regards faith, with the orthodox Maria and he even tells her, almost in code, that the two of them managed to convey to Frank Merlo the principles of the Russian Church that helped him maintain his dignity. Either through prayer or influence what finally counted for Williams was that Merlo died looking like a saint (Williams, 1990, p. 187).<sup>21</sup>

In addition, Tennessee's two great loves had been his work and his sister Rose:

In his will, he entrusted the care of both to Maria. After a ceremony at his graveside, and before the interment, the mourners drove back to St. Louis. Maria took a car to the cemetery. The sextons were lowering the coffin. Alone, Maria buried her friend (Williams, 1990, p. 392-393).

Tennessee Williams ended in a tomb in Calvary Cemetery instead of the sea. He wanted to end like the new-born sea-turtles in *Suddenly last summer*, and Lucio in "The malediction" (1948). "Tennessee Williams's desire regarding his burial was unequivocal - he wished to be buried at sea. He said this often, and even spelled it out with precision in a codicil to his will written in longhand June 21, 1972", as quoted by H. Schvey (2021, p. 181).

### **Birds and turtles - invisible perpetrators and fatal victims**

Characters like Lawrence Shannon, Christopher Flanders, and Sebastian Venable are holy outcasts closely connected not only to their patron-Saints but also to Williams himself. It is Williams himself who chose them. To be more precise, Sebastian Venable is

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(Schvey, H. The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!: Tennessee Williams and St. Louis. In: Veterian, M. L.; Diaz-Kostakis, A. (Ed.). *A streetcar named Desire: from pen to pop*, Paris: Les Éditions de L'École Polytechnique, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> In addition, she wants to limit his overreactions by referring him to the Bible and Rilke.

an allegory of St. Sebastian and Tennessee Williams as well. As Violet Venable explains: “Sebastian was a poet! That’s what I meant when I said his life was his work because the work of a poet is the life of a poet and – vice versa, the life of a poet is the work of a poet, I mean you can’t separate them...” (Williams, 2000, p. 102).

Williams was also a poet. According to N. Tischler (1965, p. 59):

The life would appear on the surface not to be satisfying. Yet, in a short story called ‘The Poet’, Williams describes a Christ-figure, a wandering poet, who finds dignity on earth and salvation in heaven through his vagrant freedom, an existence closely akin to that of the ruminant beast. In such a life resides the anarchy, the dissociation from the intolerable bonds of human affection, the detachment that Tennessee Williams has found essential to his needs as a human being and to his integrity as a poet.

Sebastian Venable, in *Suddenly last summer* was looking for God, “a clear image of Him” (Williams, 2000, p. 107), as put by Violet Venable. Williams implies that in order to meet God you must turn to people and nature. The alter-egos of Sebastian, then, are the newborn sea turtles:

Over the narrow black beach of the Encantadas as the just hatched sea-turtles scrambled out of the sand-pits and started their race to the sea... to escape the flesh-eating birds that made the sky almost as black as the beach. And the sand all alive, all alive, as the hatched sea-turtles made their dash for the sea, while the birds hovered and swooped to attack and –swooped to attack! They were diving down on the hatched sea-turtles, turning them over to expose their soft undersides, tearing the undersides open and rending and eating their flesh (Williams, 2000, p. 105).

He sees before him the cruelty of the earthly world. On the beach of the Galapagos Islands, out of the innumerable turtles that will hatch only one in a thousand will find the sea. The rest will become food for the black flesh-eating birds. The hatching was preceded by the endless and painful struggle of the turtles to lay the eggs. The Creator-God creates the visible world, nature, through hard work. The journey to the sea is the journey of the persecuted man who is trying to avoid his fate, that is to say, to become prey to sin. The sea is redemption, the hereafter, Paradise. That atrocity led Sebastian to collapse because it foreshadowed his own ending. It seems, however, that the theological message of Williams’ apophatic dogmatics is that God allows atrocity in order to show an alternative route to vindication. In *Suddenly last summer* the flesh of Sebastian Venable feeds the hungry crowd. Why does Williams use all these symbols? The psychoanalytic perspective is indicative.

Tennessee Williams use of language in this play manifests the semiotic vividly in the exchanges of dialogue delivered especially by Mrs Venable and Catherine as they allow the reader to experience the emotions and effect that both characters are undergoing. He has been criticized for excessive use of symbolism and metaphoric language... (Hezaveh; Abdullah; Yaapar, 2012, p. 10).

Catherine Holly makes the parallel explicit:

Sebastian started to run and they all screamed at once and seemed to fly in the air, they outran him so quickly. I heard Sebastian scream, he screamed just once before this flock of black plucked little birds that pursued him and overtook him up the white hill... When we got back to where my cousin Sebastian had disappeared in the flock of featherless little black sparrows, he was lying naked... They had devoured parts of him. Torn or cut parts of him away with their hands or knives ..., they had torn bits of him away and stuffed them into those gobbling fierce little empty black mouths of theirs (Williams, 2000, p. 147).

The sea-turtles hold the same symbolism as the griffin and the iguana, that of the protagonist's anima. It seems that there is an apparent inconsistency between the spiritual and evanescent anima and the fleshly materialization of its persecution (whether in the guise of saints, martyrs, or homosexuals like Williams) which has to do with Christianity's demeaning of the flesh- whether in the self-inflicted penance of the martyrs and saints or the social and physical castigation of homosexuals (which in Williams's dramatic self-presentation merge). To be more precise, the soul would seem to be both immune to the seductions of the flesh and yet it is also deemed corruptible by it.<sup>22</sup>

Sebastian was a carnivorous black bird and a sea-turtle as well. He acts as a perpetrator and victim at the same time. His anima combines good and evil. This dual scheme is clearer in *A streetcar named Desire* (1947). W. S. Griffies (2007, p. 123) stresses the argument:

Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski are the symbolic externalization of a core object-dependent victimized self within Williams, while Stanley represents a sadistic, victimizing, aggressive self. They are opposite poles of an object-relational split that resulted in a compulsion toward victimization paradigms both in William's life and in his art.

The contradiction is part of Williams' dramaturgy. The case of *The rose tattoo* is indicative. According to J. J. Thompson (1987, p. 53-54),

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<sup>22</sup> This is a remark by Prof. Johan Callens after a proof reading of my paper. Many thanks to Professor Callens.

The structural imagery of *The Rose Tattoo* (1950-1951) is more cohesive, though less evocative, than the fragmented images drawn from diverse myths, legends, and fairy tales found in many other Williams plays; for this play is concerned with union and reconciliation rather than disintegration and alienation. Accordingly, the rose tattoo, central symbol of the play, is an emblem of the union of spirit with flesh [...] The other half of the symbol, the tattoo, also suggests both mundane and mystical meanings [...] Its religious connotations derive from its approximation both to stigmata, those sympathetic scars resembling the wounds of the crucified Christ, and to the brand of Cain, mark of infamy and disgrace.

The most prominent religious allegory in *The rose tattoo* (1951) is the rose itself. This symbol constantly recurs in Williams's writings. We find it in *The glass menagerie*, *A streetcar named desire* and especially in *Suddenly last summer*, when Catherine Holly mentions that Sebastian Venable, the character/martyr, looked like "a big white-paper-wrapped bunch of red roses" (Williams, 2000, p. 147), which had been torn and crushed following the attack Williams was always looking for the rose in his work. A rose is carved on his tombstone. Serafina oscillates between decay and incorruptibility. The one who saves her is Alvaro. He is the one who is willing to act as the redeemer by getting a tattoo on his chest, the same as that of Serafina's dead husband: a rose.

**Fig. 5** – *The rose tattoo*, Cyprus 2020, direction by A. Demosthenous



Source: Author's personal collection.

In the short story *Desire and the Black masseur*, Anthony Burns goes through Lent and the Holy Week in a culmination of pain. Pain is the element that leads to the defeat of the flesh. In order for the matter to cease to exist it must go through an ordeal. At the time that the body of Anthony Burns is consumed by the black masseur, the fire consumes the



physical substance of a neighboring house. Matter includes the element of dirt. Sin comes from the flesh that distorts the soul. The flame is not the destructor but the purifier. The fire engines trying to put out the fire are the enemy. Williams states with relief that their power could not exceed the power of the fire. The collapse of the walls and the ascent of the fire in the sky refer to death, when the human body ends up in the earth while the soul ascends to the heavens. This contradictory shape where the fall is at the same time the ascent is also the shape of redemption in the metaphysical theology of Williams.

Williams sends the message that the souls of the sinners are not doomed. He says that even the “hatchlings”, the sea turtles that succumb are purified by the torture of sin. The Paradise belongs to the sinners who were dedicated to higher values such as music, poetry, art and, suffered martyrdom. Sex and promiscuity are not the road to perdition. This ascertainment is not found in Calvinism or Roman Catholicism. It is found in a leading Father of the Eastern Church: Gregory of Nyssa (Lander, 1958). Nyssen believes that through his death on the Cross, Christ saves the whole of the world. In addition, this Father of the Eastern Church believes that death is a kind of benefaction, given that a limit and an end set upon sin and thus the perpetuation of evil is obstructed.

According to Lander (1958, p. 92),

On the philosophical level Gregory of Nyssa’s ultimate answer to the great anthropological problem of the body’s relation to the God-like mind on the one hand and to passion and death on the other seems to be the following: Even though bisexuality of the body was given to man in foresight of sin and death, the body of Paradise was still very close to spirit. It was and is a man’s sin, his turning away from true beauty and goodness, that made and makes the body not only actively sexual but also a source of evil.

In this way, death presents a dual beneficial action since sin is stopped from continuing its catastrophic work and man, as the bearer of the sin, is redeemed from all the sufferings of carnal life. Thus, the literary-theatrical projections of Tennessee Williams, like Anthony Burns, Sebastian Venable, Val Xavier and others, meet a ritual death, as a happy end of a deeply painful life. Death is not the extinction of man but the dissolution of the material elements that compose him.

Gregory of Nyssa (1996, p. 33) preaches:

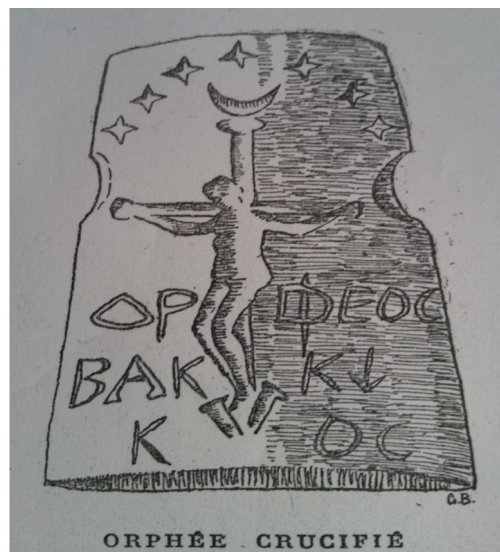
This sentient part, however, does not disappear, but is dissolved. Disappearance is the passing away into non-existence, but dissolution is the dispersion again into those constituent elements of the world of which

it was composed. But that which is contained in them perishes not, though it escapes the cognizance of our senses.

## The scheme of the anima

Anima is eternal. Evanescence is not the end. Tennessee Williams includes the Resurrection as a repetitive pattern in his main plays, like the *Sweet bird of youth* and *Orpheus descending*. Lent, the Holy Week and especially Easter are characteristic literary mechanisms of parallel action in *Desire and the Black masseur*. *Orpheus descending* is the Passion Week of a symbolic martyr, and Val Xavier is an allusion of mythical Orpheus, a musician who dies as a martyr<sup>23</sup>. Besides, the obscure engraved representation of Orpheus had no other purpose but to remind the persecuted Christians of their fate: the martyr's life, the atrocious end, and mainly the vindication after death (Moatty, 2003).

**Fig. 6** – Artifact (amulet/seal) with Orpheus hanging on a cross, 200-300 A.D.



Source: Kaiser Friedrich Museum at <https://www.diadrastika.com/>.

<sup>23</sup> Egan, R. B. Orpheus Christus Mississipiensis: Tennessee Williams' Xavier in hell. **Classical and modern literature: A quarterly**, Indiana: CML, v. 14, p. 61-98, 1993.

In the mind of Tennessee Williams, musicians, poets, artists, homosexuals are refined and cultured human beings, but also fragile and vulnerable. Their spirituality is linked in a unique way with their lasciviousness. Desire leads to suffering. Their passion was their martyrdom. Musician Val Xavier, for example, was an outcast who suffered social rejection in order to gain afterlife. On the other hand, Williams (poet and playwright) understands his homosexuality as a constant torture. See **The world of Tennessee Williams (with an introduction by Tennessee Williams)**, edited by Leavitt, R. F., New York: Hansen Publishing Group, 1978: "Basic to the work of Tennessee Williams is the confusion which results from the repressiveness of Southern Calvinism with its flesh denying patterns of Puritanism on the romantic Cavaliers: flesh denied becomes flesh perverted. His enormous sense of guilt, the result of his own youthful rebellion against his mother's Puritan code, has never ceased to obsess him" (Leavitt, 1978, p. 14).

The Holy Week during which Val's drama climaxes leaves no doubt about the parallelism with Christ through Orpheus. Vee, in her holy ecstasy, reveals the future to Val:

I thought I would see my Savior on the day of His passion, which was yesterday, Good Friday, that's when I expected to see Him. But I was mistaken, I was -disappointed. Yesterday passed and nothing, nothing much happened but -today- this afternoon, somehow I pulled myself together and walked outdoors and started to go to pray in the empty church and meditate on the Rising of Christ tomorrow. Along the road as I walked, thinking about the mysteries of Easter veils! - seemed to drop off my eyes! Light, oh, light! I never have seen such brilliance! It PRICKED my eyeballs like NEEDLES! [...] Well, and then- I heard this clap of thunder! Sky! -Split open!- And there in the split-open sky, I saw, I tell you, I saw the TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST RISEN! Not crucified but Risen! I mean Crucified and then RISEN! (Williams, 2000, p. 76-77).

References to crucifixion are constant in Williams' work. In a short story entitled "The malediction" Williams wrote in the 40's, Lucio, a migrant from Italy has no one else in the world but his cat called Nitchevo. Overwhelmed by despair and exhaustion he decides to end his life in the river of a city that is described as a nightmarish dystopia.

Lucio spoke to the cat as the stream climbed about them. 'Soon,' he whispered. 'Soon, soon, very soon'. Only a single instant she struggled against him: clawed his shoulder and arm in a moment of doubt. My God, My God, why hast Thou forsaken me? Then the ecstasy passed and her faith returned, they went away and away with the river (Williams, 1967, p. 57).

The cat here is Lucio's anima. Independent and free of commitments but destroyed by human wretchedness. Williams connects the passion of Lucio and the Passion of Christ recalling the scriptures and the last words of Jesus on the cross (Matthew 27:46 *My God, my God, why you have forsaken me?*). In his *Notebooks Tennessee* Williams writes: "Today a funny little fellow named Verbeck came running into the house in search of a lost black cat..." (Williams, 2006, p. 135).

According to the editor M. B. Thornton,

Verbeck may well have been the model for the man in the short story 'The Malediction' and the one-act play 'The Strangest Kind of Romance'...The epigraph of 'The Strangest Kind of Romance' is the last stanza of Hart Crane's poem 'Chaplinesque': The game enforces smirks; but we have seen/ the moon in lonely alleys make/ a grail of laughter of an empty ash can,/ and through all sound of gaiety and quest/ have heard a kitten in the wilderness (Williams, 2006, p. 136).

Fig. 7 – Lucio as crucified Jesus. *The Malediction* (dramatization of a short story), Cyprus 2021, direction by A. Demosthenous.



Source: Author's personal collection.

In his book *Theatrical bestiaria*, Dr. George Pefanis deals with the concept of animality and its interaction with humanity on stage.<sup>24</sup> In particular, Pefanis touches on many issues related to the limits between humanity and animality. The author adopts the terms “human animal” and “non-human animal” so that the animality as a common denominator can be viewed as an alternative to the all too radical division between traditional concepts of the “human” and the “animal”. In the long story of theatre, these two elements inevitably meet and coexist. The author's proposal is to view theatre through

<sup>24</sup> Γ. Πεφάνης, *Θεατρικά Bestiaria. Θεατρικές και φιλοσοφικές σκηνές της ζωικότητας* [Pefanis, G. *Theatrical Bestiaria. Theatre and philosophy on animality*], Athens: Papazisis Publishing, 2018.

the perspective of anthropozoology, which is analyzed from the point of view of theatre philosophy. Despite his wide and deep analysis, Pefani's theory fails to encompass Williams's iguana, cat, sea-turtles etc. The intentions of Williams behind his use of animal imagery go beyond the scope of Pefani's research. The definition of the Williamsian animal can be found in the so-called Williamsian theology.<sup>25</sup>

According to Andrew Goatly (2006, p. 32), "We create artifacts with symbolic meanings and thereby establish cultural environments that in turn shape the human mind, for example, cave paintings and mathematical symbols".

In the symbolic world of Christianity, which millions have inhabited for centuries, there is an imaginative construction. According to Gordon Kaufman, human beings have created religious symbolism as a necessary part of their attempt to orient themselves in the world (Kaufman, 1981). In early Christian art we can see Jesus Christ depicted as a lamb. In the San Vitale mosaics there is a lamb with a golden halo that surrounds its face in the type of Agnus Dei (Lingran, 2022). In the gospels, John (the Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (John 1.19-34). The Lamb is the symbol of absolute chastity and supreme sacrifice.

## Epilogue

Williams's dramaturgical use of animals was conceived at an early stage of his carrier. Gradually it turns into a pattern. We can spot similar patterns in other writers, such as Philip Pullman. In his novel trilogy *His dark materials*, he sketches a world where men are bound to their daemons (Gooderham, 2003). A daemon is physical manifestation of a person's "inner self" taking the form of an animal (Colàs, 2005). By analogy to the real-life structure of Catholicism, the trilogy's world is dominated by the leadership of the Church known as The Magisterium. Lord's Asriel daemon is a leopard, meaning that he is a valiant man; Marisa's Coulter daemon is a monkey, meaning that she is a devious person; while the leader of the Magisterium's daemon is a lizard, meaning that he himself is very sneaky, cunning, indescribable, and malicious.

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<sup>25</sup> Presley, D. E. **The theological dimension of Tennessee Williams:** a study of eight major plays (Unpublished PhD Thesis). Emory University, 1969. More recently Walls, A. The martyr in Williams's *Suddenly last summer*, *The mutilated* and *The remarkable rooming-house of Mme. Le Monde*. **The Tennessee Williams Annual Review**, New Orleans: Historic New Orleans Collection, v. 17, p. 93-114, 2018.

In the same vein, Williams uses animals as symbols and projections of human instincts, soul, and invisible and inexplicable substance. There is no exact definition because the intended meaning is obscure, but it can be interpreted as the material reflection of a theatrical character's anima. Williams uses the animals to reveal to his audience the daemons of his protagonists, thus showing his mastery in going deep down to the powerful abyss of the anima.

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