# Proper props: circulating objects in *The glass menagerie* and *A streetcar named Desire*

# Adereços adequados: objetos em circulação em *The glass menagerie* e *A streetcar named Desire*

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**Abstract**
Building on recent theatre scholarship theorizing the role of stage properties, this article parses the function that objects acquire in Tennessee Williams's plays *The glass menagerie* and *A streetcar named Desire*. Reconsidering these works through the role of objects such as clothes, baggage, letters, and bottles, allows for a deeper understanding of the issues embedded in the signifying economy of the two plays. A diachronic and synchronic overview of the meaningful and recurring props to be found in these works shows how certain objects circulate in a cultural landscape where gender and sexuality dominate the dramatic discourse of the era. Williams's theatre thus proves preoccupied with a reductive sense of objectification that belittles and disparages human beings in general and women in particular. Through a subtle indictment of the materialist and consumerist world of 1940s America, these plays give objects the power to evidence gender inequalities and hegemonic sexual politics.
**Keywords** Luggage; Clothes; Gender; Eroticism; Consumerism; Memory.

**Resumo**
Este artigo, fundamentado em recentes estudos teatrais que teorizam sobre o papel dos adereços de cena, analisa a função que esses objetos desempenham nas peças *The glass menagerie* e *A streetcar named Desire*, de Tennessee Williams. Ao reexaminar essas obras através da representação de elementos como roupas, bagagens, cartas e garrafas, é possível obter uma compreensão mais aprofundada das questões significativas inseridas na dinâmica simbólica das duas peças. Uma visão diacrônica e sincrônica dos adereços significativos e recorrentes presentes nessas peças demonstra como certos objetos circulam em uma paisagem cultural onde gênero e sexualidade dominam o discurso dramático da época. O teatro de Williams, portanto, revela uma preocupação com uma noção redutiva de objetificação que diminui e menospreza os seres humanos em geral, e as mulheres em particular. Ao lançar uma crítica sutil à sociedade materialista e consumista dos Estados Unidos na década de 1940, essas peças conferem aos adereços o poder de evidenciar desigualdades de gênero e políticas sexuais hegemônicas.
**Palavras-chave**: Bagagem; Roupas; Gênero; Erotismo; Consumismo; Memória.

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*We travel carrying our words*

Ofelia Zepeda

## Introduction

Tennessee Williams's dramatic uniqueness has often been identified with the paradigm of struggles between silence and voice, between repression and declaration, as many of his characters throughout his career are ostensibly either garrulous or shy and silent. Yet, these characters are not the only means for delivering messages or for disguising them. Theatre objects have a power to communicate that can rival, deny or support spoken words in a sometimes unheeded flux of information. Stage props, in their fluid condition of symbols, lexems, semiotic elements or material signifiers, and, as such, conveyors of messages, have only recently received critical attention by drama and theatre scholars. Historicizing the role and use of props through the centuries has been the aim of critics working in this field.

Andrew Sofer's *The stage life of props*, one of the first systematic studies in the field, has investigated the power of stage objects to take on a life of their own in performance. Distinguishing between production analysis (the possibilities a text offers) and performance analysis (the actual, material performance of a specific production), he goes on to suggest a universal definition of the prop. His attention therefore focuses on the prop as "a discrete, material, inanimate object that is visibly manipulated by an actor in the course of performance" (Sofer, 2003, p. 11), a description I embrace in this article.

With the spreading of the study of stage properties, Shakespeare's theatre has received significant attention in that it has allowed specific objects, such as the skull and the handkerchief, to name the most blatant, to become transnational and transhistorical metonyms for the plays they're identified with. Alongside his theatre, early modern drama, a literary output that could not rely on the illusionistic devices contemporary stages can boast, has attracted investigation of the role of props. Jonathan Harris and Neil Korda's *Staged properties in early modern English drama* is a collection of essays debunking the myth of the bare Elizabethan stage by focusing on several case-studies of specific plays of the time. "Objects in the early modern stage," they maintain, "were often intended not merely to catch, but to overwhelm the eye by means of their real or apparent costliness,

motion and capacity to surprise" (Harris; Korda, 2006, p. 4). Their work also points to the roots of 21st century prop scholarship as to be found in the burgeoning interest in material culture that developed after the 1980s (Harris; Korda, 2006, p. 15-16).

Sophie Duncan's study *Shakespeare's props: memory and cognition*, as the title promises, offers a cognitive approach to the Bard's deployment of stage properties. She addresses the absurdity of the oblivion most stage objects have had to suffer both in their textual or performance analysis, and in their physical (i.e. storage) life, while "a handful of iconic props – weapons, skulls, handkerchiefs, and body parts – have become visual shorthand for their plays and key to their iconographic dissemination" (Duncan, 2019, p. 23). Engaging 21st century intersections between neuroscience, literature and the theatrical genre in particular, Duncan suggests that stage properties should be read not so much as substitutes for characters' bodies but as volatile extensions of their minds. Such props "are not assimilated into the mind but become triggers and sites of cognitive activity in their own right" (Duncan, 2019, p. 24). In other words, "their status as detachable portable minds carries them from cognitively attended objects to extended cognitive subjects" (Duncan, 2019, p. 28).

Eleanor Margolies' wide-ranging study *Props* is a recent example bringing together theoretical and practical approaches to textual and material properties. Her study ranges from Ancient Greece to 20th century America, where the object, via Stanislavski's theories as adopted by Lee Strasberg in his Method, paradoxically tended to disappear. Though it had the utmost import as a "trigger of emotions" in the famous sensory acting exercises, the object could be simply imagined, in the actors' working practice, thus losing its physical presence (Margolies, 2016, p. 33-35).

**Memory reified**

Building on the previously mentioned works, this essay aims to identify and investigate some of the most meaningful properties in Tennessee Williams's first two world hits and their syncronic and diacronic circulation on American stages. It is exactly at the time when the Method was being taught in New York City and applied to dramaturgy by Elia Kazan from the Group Theatre, that Williams opted for the disappearance of cutlery and food in his 1945 play *The glass menagerie*. Though other props are present and

pivotal in the play, among which the eponymous glass collection, the telephone, the typewriter, the Victrola and the potrait of the father, in terms of objects the author worked at a blending of realism and poetic evocation. In keeping with his idea of a new dramatic language, he specified that, in the opening dinner scene, "eating is indicated by gestures without food or utensils" (Williams, 1971b, p. 146).

His famous manifesto, in the form of production notes to the play, elaborated on the lesson that expressionism had taught playwrights in the U.S., merging its heritage with a desire for poetic realism. The result was a "fundamentally realistic aesthetic subverted by suggestions of a mediating consciousness, […] more accurately described as 'subjective realism'" (Murphy, 1992, p. 10), in which gestures and (missing) props would help blur the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. The few statements preceding the actual play are extremely meaningful in regard to my present research on stage objects, especially where Williams writes that:

> When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not […] trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually […] attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are. The straight realistic play with its genuine Figidaire and authentic ice-cubes […] corresponds to the academic landscape and has the same virtue of a photographic likeness (Williams, 1971b, p. 131).

Despite his naive disregard of the potentialities of photographic art, Williams is here saying something revelatory about his idea of a theatrical language where "reality is an organic thing which the poetic imagination can represent or suggest, in essence, only through transformation" (Williams, 1971b, p. 131). This is a memory play, and as such, a particularly meaningful site for parsing the value of stage objects. The interrelation between stage objects and memory has proved essential in Sophie Duncan's reading of Shakespeare's props, as, for instance, in her observation that "Ophelia and Hamlet both reach for ways to reify memory through material items" (Duncan, 2019, p. 37).[2] Thus *The glass menagerie* as a whole can be considered as a reification of Tom's memory.

While memory is a weapon in Elsinore, it is a burden in the American South, be it the St. Louis of *The glass menagerie* or the New Orleans of *A streetcar named Desire*. This is one of the most evident features of Williams's theatre, as regards both the characters'

[2] In particular, boxes and books, and by extension chambers and closets, as "containers", are considered by Duncan as brain-like archives with a revelatory power.

personal level and society at large. In order to break free from the cage of his sadly conventional family life, Tom needs to discard his memories and dump them on to the audience in the form of the narration/enactment of the play. The dumping is easier if the burden is lighter, which explains the omission of food and cutlery in the very beginning of the recollection. Weight is associated with memory also for Laura, who "lifts the heavy annual" (Williams, 1971b, p. 156) containing her past.

Indeed, Tom does not handle many objects throughout the play. He fumbles a lot with his clothes (universally considered as props by scholars): his shoes, his overcoat, his muffler. In Scene Three, while his arm is caught in the sleeve of the coat, "[f]or a moment, he is pinioned by the bulky garment" (Williams, 1971b, p. 164). At the beginning of the following scene, while trying to enter the apartment, he drops the key, establishing a disconnection with an object that not only symbolizes access, but as a matter of fact contains a memorized code to that aim. Not surprisingly, he even forgets his key when coming home with Jim. His desire to not enter that stifling space is objectified by the falling or missing home key.

While Jim is "pretty clumsy with things" (Williams, 1971b, p. 223) and Tom complains that he has "got *no thing*, no single thing – […] in my life that I can call my OWN!" (Williams, 1971b, p. 161), Laura and Amanda use objects to their own needs, be it the telephone or the glass animals. At the end of Scene Five, Amanda holds a brush with which she means to fix Tom's hairdo (the stage direction reads "she attacks his hair" (Williams, 1971b, p. 184) and Laura "appears with a dish towel" (Williams, 1971b, p. 189). Their handling of everyday objects epitomizes the domesticity they both desire and that Tom is fleeing from. One more visible prop that will virtually help Tom in this escape is the newspaper he handles while sitting on the sofa in Scene Five. With its big headline reading "Franco triumphs" (Williams, 1971b, p. 178), it has the only purpose of projecting him far away from his environment.

An evident gender gap separating women's and men's desires and lifestyles is mirrored in the stage props. In the Wingfields' apartment Tom holds cigarettes and stubs of movie tickets, while Amanda repeatedly enters the stage holding food, a bowl of dessert (Williams, 1971b, p. 147), a pitcher of fruit punch and a plate of macaroons (Williams, 1971b, p. 231). "I'm not made out of glass," declares Jim (Williams, 1971b, p. 224), while Laura is constantly compared to glass, both in terms of fragility and of religious light.

Glass clearly objectifies gender inequality. It is the material that Tom smashes at the end of the play when he throws his glass of lemonade on the floor. The action prefigures Stanley crushing plates and cups at Blanche's birthday dinner in *Streetcar* with an even more evident intention to hit the symbolic feminine attached to them.

Reconsidering *The glass menagerie* through its stage props allows for an understanding of the play's preoccupation with the objectification of feelings, bodies, and identities. Issues of identity are evident throughout the play, in that characters struggle to be something else than what they are or fail to comply to expectations or are presented as disembodied ideals. Amanda considers herself Laura's sister and Laura fails to conform to the stereotype of the Southern Belle. Tom dons the uniform of a merchant sailor in order to be consistent with his idea of himself and Jim is presented as an "archetype of the universal unconscious" (Williams, 1971b, p. 159).

Objects have anthropomorphic or zoomorphic features and bodies are easily objectified. Laura leans against the arm of the sofa (Williams, 1971b, p. 230) and plays by the clawfoot of a table (Williams, 1971b, p. 151), not to mention her glass figurines. The breaking of the unicorn clearly signifies Laura's transformation from "stiff" object (Williams, 1971b, p. 225) to unique human being, as Jim assures her "You're one times one!" (Williams, 1971b, p. 227). On a completely different tone, Jim is introduced by Tom as someone "with the scrubbed and polished look of white chinaware" (Williams, 1971b, p. 190). In a theatre with strong homosocial undercurrents, men are objectified as desirable, women either as victims or as outright despicable.

**Carrying the burden**

The average American theatregoer was not seeing characters interacting with imaginary objects for the first time when the curtain rose to show the Wingfields' apartment. Besides the more experimental theatre companies that catered to limited audiences, a Broadway production had surprised audiences with Thornton Wilder's *Our town* in 1938. The characters opened imaginary windows, carried invisible milk bottles (but their clinking was heard), a doctor toiled with a heavy, not to be seen, black bag.

Bags, suitcases, trunks, baggage, luggage: few differences distinguish these terms as they all refer to something we carry with ourselves while moving from a place to another.

They immediately denote movement, be it exile, displacement, pleasure, vacation, work. Bags are often used as evocative props: if they stay closed, zipped, or locked, they hide or protect a secret. If they're opened, they offer an insight into the private and personal life of the owner. They can be absurd, as one of the suitcases Lucky carries in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, first thought to hold important and useful items, then revealed to contain only sand. In Oscar Wilde's *The importance of being earnest* (revived on Broadway in a successful production in 1947, the year of Williams's *Streeetcar*), a handbag exposes Jack Worthing's social origin as acceptable for Lady Bracknell, thus strongly attaching to a prop matters of class as well as the power to create and resolve dramatic conflict.

Foreshadowed by the valise she appears with at the beginning of the play, Blanche's trunk in *A streetcar named Desire* is fully visible and as participant in the dramatic action as no other prop in William's theatre. The trunk is "baggage, furniture, and character all at once, a heavy and unwieldy onstage presence that mirrors her [Blanche's] own frail but nonetheless steely phisicality" (Harlan, 2018, p. 24). Indeed, it is also the repository of dreams, memory, documents. It is the DuBois's mansion, Belle Reve, objectified on stage.

A feminist reading has suggested that Blanche and Stanley struggle for mastery over each other in an attempt to acquire authority, to establish the truth and hence history. The critic noted how the trunk replaces Blanche in Scene Two, while she is bathing and is absent from the scene except as a singing voice.

> Curiously, it also defends itself against Stanley's attacks as successfully as Blanche does when she comes on stage, chiefly because it contains more than Stanley can fathom and resists his attempts at reduction. Blanche declares, 'everything that I own is in that trunk', and, for the time being, both owner and object successfully tell their story (Vlasopoulos, 1986, p. 155).

The struggle does not end there, and Stanley will end up ravaging Blanche as he has done with the trunk. In this scene, he turns into the customs officer appraising his sister-in-law's baggage on the frontier between past and present, between fibs and reality, between suspected immorality and hegemonic standards of family life. In "the back of that little boy's mind" (Williams, 1971a, p. 282), as Blanche says, there might also be a hint at the misogynist objectification that the English language had for long inscribed in the word "baggage", as it could be used to identify "a disreputable and worthless woman, often one

considered to lead an immoral life […]. It also meant a silly, saucy, artful, or sly woman" (Harlan, 2018, p. 47).[3]

According to Marvin Carlson's theories (2001), theatre is a "memory machine", where spectators tend to experience stage events as a repetition of something already seen, as a repository of cultural memory, as a recycling of past perceptions in imaginary configuration. The material objects that characters interact with remind audiences not only of real objects in everyday life, but also of other similar props in previous or contemporary productions. Thus Blanche's luggage deserves a closer look in a synchronic and diachronic perspective.

Considering her situation of displacement, purported poverty and "dependency", her hand-carried valise immediately conveyed the poor migrants of the post-1929 crisis, the dispossessed victims of the Depression. From former Broadway stages, though, spectators' memory could fish for figures more similar to hers. Disorderly women "with a past" had appeared in two of the most successful American plays of the 1920s, Eugene O'Neill's *Anna Christie* and *Rain*, adapted from Somerset Maugham's short story for Broadway by Clemence Randolph and John Colton. Both characters traveled with baggage that clearly indicated a loss of home, a sense of flight and of precariousness.

For Anna, "a suitcase stands in the middle of the floor" at the opening of Act IV (O'Neill, 1998, p. 48), marking the moment she'll quit prostitution in favor of marriage. That suitcase is a visible reminder of her troublesome past, just as Sadie Thompson's past travels with her from Hawai'i to the South Seas in *Rain*. The story of this woman, who apparently fled a police raid in Honolulu's red-light district, played uninterruptedly for over two years on Broadway (Wainscott, 2004, p. 137). Forced to stay quarantined in Samoa because of a cholera pandemic, she calls into the only available inn where a missionary would wage a moral war against her. She is surrounded by young soldiers, "carrying Sadie's luggage – an oddly assorted multitude of objects hastily thrown together in shawls and large handkerchiefs. There is one very old and battered suitcase" (Colton; Randolph, 1948, p. 20). As the play's heroine is much more seductive and roguish than Maugham's fictional character, the old and battered valise is not only the container of her past, but also a double of the original Sadie.

[3] The epithet was used to define another famous Southern Belle: "Scarlett is a flighty, fast bit of baggage" (Mitchell, 1936, p. 864).

American stages had also witnessed, in the first decades of the 20th century, productions of Anton Chekhov's plays, where servants more often than not bustle about the stage carrying luggage. One of Williams's favourite writers,[4] in his theatre Chekhov deploys bags that resonate with Blanche's trunk. This is not a coincidence, nor does it have to do with "sinful" women. The convergence between Blanche's luggage and the many suitcases carried around in *The seagull*, *Uncle Vanya* and *The cherry orchard* is to be found in the sense of loss and displacement due to the decadence of the old worlds Williams's South and Chekhov's Russia were witnessing and mourning. The atmosphere of disappointment of *The seagull*, the feeling of mismatched relationships in *Uncle Vanya*, and the crumbling of the old aristocracy in *The cherry orchard* all contribute to a sense of relocation, denoting a space of temporality, insecurity and discomfort objectified by suitcases and trunks.

Usually considered a twin piece with *Streetcar*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* opened on Broadway two years after Williams's masterpiece. The two plays are often paired as the mid-century triumph of American theatre finally finding its voice and imposing it on world stages. They are also read as *the* plays that denounce false myths of their culture: the Southern belle and the self-made man. The main characters of the two plays share issues regarding mobility, as they are both forced away from their protective environments, Belle Reve for Blanche and his route as traveling salesman for Willy. At the end of the decade of the 1940s, "it was as though the individual were in a temporal void, a mood caught by Saul Bellow's dangling man, in the novel, and by Miller's Willy Loman and Williams's Blanche DuBois in the drama" (Bigsby, 1992, p. 75).

Few human conditions are so directly identified with temporal void as that of traveling, either on account of social displacement, exile, estrangement, or for leisure, as the origin of the word vacation lies in the Latin verb *vacare*, meaning "to be unoccupied". An abundant presence of baggage in various shapes and kinds in *Death of a salesman* is one more confirmation of its proximity with *Streetcar*. Willy, who declares "I still feel – kind of temporary about myself" (Miller, 1961, p. 40), first appears on stage with two large sample cases, a pride and a burden at the same time. These are quite different from Bernard's "overnight bag" (Miller, 1961, p. 70), a symptom of the young man's success, as he can

[4] "That summer [1934] I fell in love with the writing of Anton Chekhov […]. *The Sea Gull* is still, I think, the greatest of modern plays" (Williams, 1975, p. 51). Critics have repeatedly elaborated on this affinity: see Bigsby (1997) and Debusscher (1997).

travel for pleasure whereas Willy cannot travel anymore not even for work. The most successful character in the play borders on the mythical: Willy's brother Ben is the very epitome of success and self-confidence, always on the go, his figure speaking of "far places", Alaska, Africa, or simply the United States of the American Dream. He never fails to appear with his valise and umbrella (Miller, 1961, p. 34, 66), a sort of uniform of the businessman, a sign of being or going "elsewhere", not in the stifling environment Willy feels trapped in, and a sign of having "something" to carry.

There is a moment when Ben's appearance seems to elicit a sense of optimism and Willy's son Biff enters the stage with a suitcase that points to upward mobility (Miller, 1961, p. 67), but that movement is cut short. The same prop will reappear when the young man goes to Boston and finds out about Willy's cheating on his wife. The stage directions alert on the presence of Biff's suitcase three times: for three times the characters interact with the prop (Miller, 1961, p. 92, 94, 95), its role in marking the demise of the Loman family quite evident. It's luggage that speaks of estrangement, betrayal, abandonment, and disillusionment.

**Clothes make the woman**

Such a wide range of semiotic landscapes for luggage in the first decades of 20th century American stages dramatises the collective cognitive investments of the era in terms of bags. When bags are opened, though, their contents become the focus of attention and in Blanche's case what is pulled out of the trunk has, in turn, a high symbolic potential as well as significant dramatic agency: clothes, papers and jewels.[5]

The latter speak of the duplicity of class (the purported rich Blanche versus the impoverished Stella married to a proletarian worker), inscribing Stanley's fight with Blanche into an economy of personal resentment on the man's part and of theatrical make-believe for the heroine. Whereas he is convinced they bespeak the fraud his sister-in-law has perpetrated on him and his wife, they are immediately revealed as worthless by Stella. Soon forgotten by Stanley and not appraised as he has intimated, the rhinestone pieces reappear when Blanche dons them by the end of the play, distinctively defining her as worthless. The previously committed estimator of riches, Stanley has no hesitation in

[5] On the contrary, when containers stay closed, they can point to a sense of entrapment, as in the case of Byron's luggage consisting mainly of caged birds in Williams's *Camino Real* (Ghasemi, 2011, p. 215).

belittling and vilifying his antagonist who is wearing a tiara and silver slippers with brilliants: "Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on!" (Williams, 1971a, p. 398). Stanley proves more interested in the fast devaluation of the stones and of their owner than in a real assessment of what he might have lost.

Together with what Stanley at the beginning believes is "[t]he treasure chest of a pirate" (Williams, 1971a, p. 274) out of the trunk come dresses galore. Williams makes abundant use of clothes in this play that's all about seduction, love, sex, desire, and bodies. The men are either in their working clothes (meant as a sexy outfit for Stanley nonetheless),[6] or in pop-colored leisure or sport clothes. Blanche and Stella more often than not dress or undress in plain sight or slightly screened. Red, scarlet-red, green and blue hues of satin or silk confirm the attention the audience is meant to bestow on the appearance of characters, on the socially acceptable objectification of their bodies. If props were not enough, the dialogue confirms it, as Stella requires of her husband to "admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness!" (Williams, 1971a, p. 271).

But such a process is carried further: clothes can replace people when they are not worn. Stanley's gaudy pyjamas lie across the threshold of the bathroom as a sexual trophy after the love night following the fight with Stella, and they are brandished in a premonitory, almost ominous manner, shortly before he assaults Blanche in Scene Ten. In the pivotal Scene Two Blanche's dress, a flowered print, is laid out on Stella's bed, when Stanley ravages the trunk while Blanche is in the bathroom dissolved as a mere singing voice. The coincidence of the presence of the dress and the woman's absence exactly when the trunk is vandalized is quite revealing of the fragmentation of the female identity in Williams's early plays, where a recurrent preoccupation with voice points to the difficulty of coping with the materiality of a body burdened by hegemonic expectations. On the other hand, a male character – Amanda's husband – can be disembodied and objectified on stage by his portrait (clearly resonating with the General's portrait in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*) as a sign of his successful escape.

Even Amanda and Laura undergo signifying dynamics in matters of clothes: when her mother sends her out of the apartment to buy groceries, Laura is wearing Amanda's coat, "inaccurately made-over, the sleeves too short for Laura" (Williams, 1971b, p. 169). It

[6] On the novelty of the seducing power of men's attire in Williams, see Gontarski (2021, p. 9-32).

is the language of the prop saying that Laura can never be like her mother, nor even like her mother wants her to be. Amanda, instead, is so confident of the power of her outlook despite the passing of decades (that she denies every time she calls Laura "sister" or flirts with Jim as if it was she he has come to see), that the dress she wears while preparing for the arrival of the gentleman caller has accumulated more history than the woman herself. Indeed, she goes on and on and on telling the circumstances of her youth tied to the times when she had worn that "[s]omething" she has "resurrected from that old trunk" (Williams, 1971b, p. 193).

While these episodes reveal a mother-daughter relationship and a confusion of social roles, the reification of women's identity is denounced by way of objects used to pretend they're body parts. Preparing her daughter for the long-awaited encounter with Jim, Amanda produces two powder puffs, wraps them in handkerchiefs and stuffs them in Laura's chest. The reification of bodies proves a sign of the times in Tom's description of his mother's efforts to rope in subscriptions to a glamour magazine:

> the type of journal that features the serialized sublimations of ladies of letters who think in terms of delicate cuplike breasts, slim, tapering waists, rich, creamy thighs, eyes like wood smoke in autumn, […] bodies as powerful as Etruscan sculpture (Williams, 1971b, p. 159).

A clear indictment of what the consumerist culture was inducing, this magazine is not a prop, only evoked and not present on the stage. As popular printed matter, it prefigures another publication that audiences would see at the beginning of Scene Four of *Streetcar*, when from one of Stella's hands "dangles a book of colored comics" (Williams, 1971a, p. 310). Since this scene marks the triumph of a working-class, instinctual and satisfying way of life as opposed to the flimsy poetic world of old Southern gentility, the modern, colorful comic book imposes itself over the grey (a color connected to Blanche's dead husband, Allen Grey) and sterile universe of Blanche and her literature citations. It also points to the utmost importance the third material coming out of the trunk, paper, acquires in this play.

**Paper dolls with glass bottles**

Letters, tickets, notebooks, lanterns and tissues are some of the most meaningful props adding communication to the dramatic dialogue, and they're all made of cellulose.

The slip of paper Blanche reads when looking for her sister's address in New Orleans becomes her passport into a "new mechanistic, deterministic world" (Kolin, 1997, p. 456), signifying the randomness and disconnectedness of her life journey just as does the valise. Her ticket back to Laurel, Stanley's birthday gift, concretizes Blanche's cognitive activity by objectifying her constant memory returns to the past, previously prompted by the Varsouviana.

Inside the trunk, both love and material possessions have been turned into paper: her love letters and the many legal documents stating the loss of Belle Reve. All has been objectified, the material and the immaterial, and the trunk serves as the archive of a possibly chaste, unrequited love as well as of "brutal" fornications. This play, so intrinsically embedded in sex and desire puts those papers and their origin on the same level. Desire and decay, sublimation and depravity end up flying down on the floor, moths in the hands of the ape.

Immaterial paper is often mentioned in the play,[7] in the form of the Paper Moon Blanche sings about or the Paper Dolls in the chants of the "Negro entertainers in the bar around the corner" (Williams, 1971a, p. 305). But paper activates material relations in *Streetcar* that are meant to indict the male gaze as chauvinist and destructive. It is not a case that in Scene Four Blanche tries to write a letter asking for help on a sheet of Kleenex with an eyebrow pencil. No other props could be a more explicit fetish objectifying the hegemonic canons of female seduction. The seduction that fires back for Blanche and becomes vulnerability – shortly after indicated by her crushing the mirror in which she sees herself. If Stanley has known where to hit from moment one, Blanche knows what to hide from: the ocular investigation the two males want to conduct on her. Paper won't always be helpful, though: the paper lantern she has used to cover the light bulb in order to be less visible is so endowed with her cognitive agency, that when Stanley by the end of the play wants to hurt her further, he tears it off, with the effect that "[s]he cries out as if the lantern was herself" (Williams, 1971a, p. 416).

Often unsuccessfully, objects in fact are used to hide other objects in these two plays. New fabric hides old furniture in *The glass menagerie* in order to conceal poverty and the passing of time from the eyes of the gentleman caller, while another lantern becomes a

[7] Paper as an overarching element leads Kolin (1997, p. 456) to affirm that "Blanche encapsulates herself in paper; her epistemology is limned in paper. […] She is deeply invested in the economy of the arts, teaching sacred texts of a 'literary heritage', quoting poetry, and preaching the sanctity (and snobbery) of literacy. Her universe is paper, bibliothecal."

precedent for Blanche's as "a colored paper lantern conceals the broken light fixture in the ceiling" (Williams, 1971b, p. 191). This preoccupation with light and visibility informs both plays, so much so that objects can be said to struggle to reveal something while characters try to hush them. Blanche herself will claim "I've got nothing to hide" (Williams, 1971a, p. 280) because she knows very well her antagonists want to pry into her most intimate personal life.

The target of this investigation is Blanche's ability – and tendency – to seduce, as the two male protagonists believe it has been "indecently" (in their sexist mindset) used in the past or as it is being used on them.[8] All of the objects Blanche has been connected to, clothes, paper, jewels and luggage are either tools for her acts of seduction or the results of the same acts. But there is a prop that Blanche, in turn, is seduced by, and that is the bottle. Even more than paper, though neglected by critics, the other omnipresent objects in *Streetcar* are glass bottles. Coke bottles, beer bottles, whiskey bottles are in almost every scene and visibly, if ambiguously manipulated by characters.

This does not simply have to do with Blanche's (as well as Stanley's, Mitch's and the other men's, or Tom's in *Glass*) evident proneness to drinking. Given Williams's "weakness for symbols" (Williams, 1971b, p. 145) in Tom's words, and considering the sexual innuendo that builds from the first to the second play, it is impossible to overrate erotic symbols attached to these props. Much more so since Stanley, shortly after having ridiculed Blanche's sign as Virgo, and having accused her of promiscuous sex encounters, appears "with a drink under his belt" (Williams, 1971a, p. 335). Blanche has just talked to her sister about her desire to be engaged with Mitch, and Stella assures her this is going to happen, but she warns her: "It will, honey, *it will*. ... But don't take another drink!" (Williams, 1971a, p. 336). Another drink does – immediately – come along, in the guise of the Young Man collecting for the Evening Star newspaper, who mentions drinking a cherry soda, to which Blanche responds: "You make my mouth water" (Williams, 1971a, p. 338) and then advises him to "run along, quickly! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good – and keep my hands off children" (Williams, 1971a, p. 339).

Collating the other occurences of bottles in these plays doubtlessly indicates that temptation strongly relates drinking to sex. It can occur as a way of speaking, as when

[8] "Blanche is branded a temptress, a deceiver of men, a Circe" and, when called a tiger by Stanley, she is linked "with a predatory creature associated with lust" (Kolin, 1993, p. 26). Williams is clearly indicting hegemonic male chauvinism when identifying a woman's sexual desire either with danger or with fragility.

Blanche at the beginning of the play warns her sister to "put the bottle away so I won't be tempted" (Williams, 1971a, p. 255), but the proximity of the two elements is recurring and revealing. While flirting with Mitch, Blanche grabs a liquor bottle and is at her most explicit, even though in French: "*Voulez-vous couchez [sic] avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quelle dommage!* – I mean it's a damned good thing. … I've found some liquor! Just enough for two shots without any dividends, honey..." (Williams, 1971a, p. 344).

The characters' interaction with glass containers is not limited to sheer drinking. In two instances the female protagonists react to the spilling of liquids in a fashion that could hint to sexual pleasure. With an "old-fashioned cut-glass pitcher" in her hands, Amanda feels "rejuvenated" for the presence of Jim, and "tosses her head with a peal of laughter, spilling some lemonade" on herself (Williams, 1971b, p. 232). Blanche has a similar reaction when Coke spills on her skirt: "Blanche laughs shrilly and grabs the glass, but her hand shakes so it almost slips from her grasp. Stella pours the Coke into the glass. It foams over and spills. Blanche gives a piercing cry" and then "continues to laugh a little" (Williams, 1971a, p. 334).

Besides keeping a bottle near his crotch, Stanley himself acts in a similar way, with the difference that this time the gesture is performed wittingly, with the bottle as a threat and a peace token at the same time, with sexual innuendo at its highest point:

> [*The bottle cap pops off and a geyser of foam shoots up. Stanley laughs happily, holding up the bottle over his head.*]
> STANLEY (cont.): Ha-ha! Rain from heaven! [*He extends the bottle toward her*] Shall we bury the hatchet and make it a loving-cup? Huh?
> BLANCHE: No, thank you.
> STANLEY: Well, it's a red-letter night for us both (Williams, 1971a, p. 395).

A few moments later, he's raping her while she tries to defend herself with the bottle top. In these plays sexual pleasure, if not sexual organs, are represented by proxy, and the proxy is the glass bottle, one more prop in the rich list of objects crowding the willliamsian stage.[9]

[9] This is clearly Freudian territory, too wide to be tapped in this article. Considering how literary criticism has developed after the 1950s and how theatre studies in particular have changed even in the past few decades, it is hardly surprising that the two studies applying psychoanalysis critcism to American theatre do not mention a single prop when dealing with Williams's plays (Sievers, 1955, p. 370-388; Davis, 1994, p. 60-102).

## Conclusions

Shortly before being carried away at the end of the play, Blanche imagines herself as baggage thrown into the ocean in what proves the utmost objectification. Prompted by grape (a real prop), her demise goes back to a bag (an imagined prop at this point), as she fantasizes, "I'll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard" (Williams, 1971a, p. 410).

From the valise of the opening scene to the trunk, to the last imagined sack, baggage is the main trope of the play (and of its contemporary pieces): it does not protect, does not hide, it encapsulates and is used to dispense with. Such staged luggage, in fact, denotes deviations from the social or family norm, and the weight that the system imposes on those who transgress, be it prostitution, adultery or simply female seduction. This belittling and objectifying effect of purported guilt is very clear to Stanley, who dismisses Blanche's vulnerability sarcastically replying to his wife "Delicate *piece* she is" (Williams, 1971a, p. 376) (my emphasis). While there is no doubt that Williams's women are the victims of this patriarchal system, at times they do speak the same materialist language as their antagonists, as when Blanche wants to reduce Stanley to his procreative cells. After symbolically spraying him with her perfume atomizer in an attempt at seduction, she claims that her sister cannot "just *suppose* that any part of a gentleman's in his nature! *Not a single particle, no!*" (Williams, 1971a, p. 322) and thinks of him in terms of reproductive atoms – linking them to material possessions – when she maintains "he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve" (Williams, 1971a, p. 285).

The lightness of particles and atoms clashes with the constant concern with the weight of people in their objectified status and of props containing memory. This is mirrored in the widespread materialism informing the world Williams portrays in *The glass menagerie* and in *A streetcar named Desire*. Such materialism is an indictment of gender roles and sexual politics in the American society of the times, of Southern myths of gentility, and of a tendency to reify people, feelings and identities as a result of the growing weight of consumerism. The "drugstore Romeos" (Williams, 1971a, p. 302) Blanche complains about are pitched against the need for "Superior things! Things of the mind and the spirit!" (Williams, 1971b, p. 174) Amanda asks Tom to cultivate, while he feels trapped in the dehumanizing production system of the shoe factory.

Considering how stage props circulate in his plays and on contemporary stages and how they resonate intertextually allows for a deeper understanding of the issues at stake in Williams's theatre, as well as of his signifying techniques. These objects and their "seductive power" (Sofer, 2003, p. 19) lend themselves to a reading of the cultural landscape of social anxieties and dramatic economies that were intertwined to give shape to two American classics.

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