



Absent presence: homosexuality in three plays by Tennessee Williams¹

Ausência presente: a homossexualidade em três peças de Tennessee Williams

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.13958677

Abstract

Having as a corpus three plays by Tennessee Williams, *A streetcar named Desire*, *Suddenly, last summer*, and *Cat on a hot tin roof*, this text seeks to observe, using historical-social analysis and literature review, how the absent homosexual characters become present and how, even absent, they constitute breaking points in the works. The analysis is undertaken aiming to understand Williams' discourse when dealing with homosexuality in the plays. We concluded that, even with absent homosexual characters, Williams manages to make them present through the characters' speeches, bringing to light the issues that victimized them to be discussed.

Keywords: Theater; Gay; *A streetcar named Desire*; *Suddenly last summer*; *Cat on a hot tin roof*.

Resumo

Tendo como *corpus* três peças de Tennessee Williams, *Um bonde chamado Desejo*, *De repente, no último verão*, e *Gata em telhado de zinco quente*, este texto pretende observar, utilizando a análise histórico-social e a revisão de literatura, como os personagens homossexuais ausentes se tornam presentes e como, mesmo ausentes, constituem-se como pontos de ruptura nas obras. A análise se empreende com vistas a entender qual foi o discurso de Williams ao tratar da homossexualidade nas peças. Observou-se que, mesmo com personagens homossexuais ausentes, Williams consegue os tornar presentes por meio dos discursos dos personagens, fazendo com que as questões que os vitimizaram sejam discutidas.

Palavras-chaves: Teatro; Gay; *Um bonde chamado Desejo*; *De repente no último verão*; *Gata em telhado de zinco quente*.

¹ Text originally published in Portuguese in this journal (v. 7, n. 2, 2023), with the Portuguese title provided on this page. Available at: <https://www.periodicos.univasf.edu.br/index.php/dramaturgiaemfoco/article/view/2542>. Accessed on: September 17, 2024.

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Introduction

This text begins with an excerpt from Eagleton (1983, p. 2), who says that “perhaps literature is definable not because it is fictional or ‘imaginative’, but because it uses language in a peculiar way”. Furthermore, he points out that “the ‘world’ of a literary work is not an objective reality, but what in German is called *Lebenswelt*, reality as organized and felt by an individualized subject” (Eagleton, 1983, p. 82). The author organizes his world and transposes it into text form. Best described by Candido (2006, p. 63), it is postulated that “art, and therefore literature, is a transposition of the real to the illusory through a formal stylization, which proposes an arbitrary type of order for things, beings and feelings”.

Tennessee Williams’ work has been studied, mostly, as a reflection of his time and his own life. According to researcher Mie Ishida (1974), anyone who reads Tennessee Williams’ production can come into contact with a slice of modern North American reality. Henry Shvey (2011) focuses on the way in which Williams associated himself with Aristotelian tragedies, observing that the playwright had a tragic vision of the world around him, presenting himself, play after play, in characters who suffered for various reasons, who commonly included addiction, depression, conditions of violence to which they were subjected, or mental health problems.

According to Philip Kolin, Williams was verbose when expressing himself about unrequited loves that wander like ghosts in his works, symbolic objects that oscillate between the “sacred and the profane” (2002, p. 131-132). In this sense, we realize that specialized research on the author, over the years, has been grouped into two fronts. Scholars such as Shvey (2011, p. 75) and Kolin (2002, p. 131) observe how Williams’ personal traumas and pains appear symbolically projected in his pieces. Ishida (1974, p. 75), Betti (2011, p. 32) and Banach (2010, p. 55-56) conclude that Williams’ dramaturgy is capable of making the audience get to know a culture, a place and an America located in time-space. According to Kolin (2002), Williams brought unrequited loves to his texts, which remain objects of desire.

Maria Sílvia Betti points out that the author’s texts are “[...] imbued with an indisputable critical breath, in relation to the ideology of the American way of life, and extend the form of conventional modern drama far beyond the limits of the representation

of autobiographical reminiscences” (Betti, 2011, p. 32). Thus, the stories told are always seeking to discuss, in front of the public, who these people who lived on the margins of society or the great idealization of American life were.

Considering the issue of homosexuality in light of the scenario outlined by these researchers, we come to the studies of Lajosy Silva (2007, p. 151), who states that “if we consider the representation of homosexuality in theater between the forties and sixties, we only have suggestions of representation that are peripheral within the narrative”. According to the author,

In Tennessee Williams’ plays, there is a lot of dichotomy and tension between what is visible/shown and what is invisible/narrated. This same dichotomy describes Tennessee Williams’ lack of freedom to talk about homosexuality, since he uses the act of mentioning as opposed to the act of representing something (the gay characters on stage) that was unrepresentable in his time (Silva, 2007, p. 152).

Silva’s speech is complemented by Guacira Louro’s considerations (2010, p. 27),

Things get even more complicated for those who perceive themselves as having interests or desires that are different from the heterosexual norm. These have few alternatives: silence, dissimulation or segregation. The production of heterosexuality is accompanied by the rejection of homosexuality. A rejection that is often expressed through open homophobia.

Williams’ plays feature illustrations of characters who live in conflict and fragile people covered by a system that victimizes them. This is how it is with Stanley and Blanche, in *A streetcar named Desire*, or as with the characters Violet Venable and Catherine Holly, in *Suddenly, last summer*, and, finally, between Brick and Big Daddy, in *Cat on a hot tin roof*. Southern American society gives these characters the same treatment given to Williams, an outsider. But Williams does not treat his characters and texts in a political tool. For Hooper (2012), the portrait painted by the playwright is much more of a melodramatic and sentimental lament than a moralizing structure that could be used as an educational instrument. Williams was visceral and gave his characters the voice of subordination. The author’s writing is a cry from someone who experienced the pain of social constraints and who transposes the political-social structures in which he lived into the text. His characters are victims like fragile moths that do not accept the dominance of powerful and dark figures who try to trample them, making them fit into molds to satisfy

social structures. The conflict, therefore, is not between good and evil, but between power structures and inadequate people.

Williams' characters, according to Lemos and Izoton (2014, p. 54),

... are reluctant to participate in a dominant and repressive society. These characters, even if not always homosexual, carry at their core, implicitly, a similar feeling. Simply because his protagonists are always in a difficult social situation, because they are mistreated, because their sexual lives have been a little different from what is socially normalized (like Blanche, in *A streetcar named Desire*). With implicit information, his plays have symbolic meaning but at the same time are safe to be presented without the author having to come into direct confrontation with the audience.

Thus, these characters who appeal to the public's empathy are those who struggle not to give in to the structures that bind them to socially imposed sexist and patriarchal models of behavior. The characters' escape, like Williams', is in art, abstraction, alcohol and other vices. The illusions that the victimized characters build help them to live far from a suffocating and unacceptable reality. Even domineering characters, such as Stanley, Violet Venable and Big Daddy, use the illusion of memories to maintain appearances in an intolerable reality. As considered by Betti (2011, p. 338),

His plays, the vast majority set in the southern United States, deal with characters victimized by inadequacy to the standards imposed by the competitiveness of capitalist society, social prejudice and the repression imposed on sexual drives and explicit or latent homosexuality. The distinctive mark of his work is the lyricism associated with the representation of loneliness, social alienation and marginality.

Williams revisited his family drama several times throughout his plays. The tragedy that struck his family, with his sister Rose being diagnosed as schizophrenic shortly after reporting sexual abuse perpetrated by her father - and being lobotomized as a result - haunted the playwright forever.⁴

In this regard, Candido is emphatic: a literary work is the product of the interaction between what an author experiences and his interaction with the society in which he lives:

Every work is personal, unique and irreplaceable, as it arises from a confidentiality, an effort of thought, a burst of intuition, becoming an 'expression'. Literature, however, is collective because it requires a certain

⁴ On this issue, there is evidence in writings such as those found here: "Most prominent among these supposedly delusional statements are her accusations of sexual immorality among her family, especially the notion that her father, Cornelius Coffin 'C. C.' Williams, had made sexual advances toward her (Spoto, 1985, p. 59)" (Morton, 2012, p. 8).

communion of expressive means (the word, the image) and mobilizes deep affinities that bring men from a place and a moment together in order to reach a 'communication' (Candido, 2006, p. 147).

It is possible to see, therefore, that the author's works are intrinsically linked to what he lived in his private life and to the things he witnessed and experienced as a social being:

Literature is essentially a reorganization of the world in terms of art; the task of the fiction writer is to construct an arbitrary system of objects, acts, occurrences, feelings, represented fictionally according to an organizing principle appropriate to the given literary situation, which maintains the structure of the work (Candido, 2006, p. 187).

What Williams does is to use his play as a communication between his inner self and the audience, so that both will understand what the author is trying to say, as everyone is inserted in a context that the message is assimilated. And this is interesting to note, since Williams' texts have the quality of being able to be understood in different cultures and times. According to Hooper, Williams' treatment of homosexuality is almost homophobic, since the characters in the plays are denied, dead or missing (2012, p. 71). For the scholar, this is a problematic view, as Williams needed public empathy, at the same time as he dealt with issues that were dear to him. Therefore, he was unable to free himself from the web in which he was trapped: these characters could not be happy when experiencing sexuality in public. For Hooper (2012, p. 73), it is a form of internalized homophobia. For Toledo and Flores, Williams' ambivalence means something else, it refers to

Williams' impossibility of expressing homosexuality, showing it in ellipses. The author thus presents be and not to be in the face of oppression, also in a political context circumscribed by restrictive laws. It seems like he tries to represent an innocent slice of the American lifestyle, but what Williams brings is a critical vision using the corrosion of irony, revealing society's values towards homosexuality, something that shouldn't even be mentioned (Toledo; Flores, 2018, p. 48).

In our interpretation, the post-war United States was not a favorable scenario for homosexuals, therefore, Williams also needed verisimilitude so that his plays would be popular with the public. The author's path, when dealing with such controversial topics, was taken as if Williams were walking on a knife's edge. We cannot help but to think that, however, the author did it brilliantly, since, even if homosexuality was not treated with

happiness and frankness, it was present in his texts and was discussed. Thus, studying the discursive intricacies which Williams uses to address homosexuality will be useful so that we can understand how he approached the topic and how he made himself understood, between the lines. In other words, even if secretly, what was Williams' speech when dealing with homosexuality in the plays *A streetcar named Desire*; *Suddenly, last summer*, and *Cat on a hot tin roof*? In this way, reading can lead us to understand how language used – and the discourses – enable the understanding of characters who are present in their absence.

Absence and presence in three plays

The big issue addressed in *A streetcar named Desire*, in our analysis, is the character Allan Gray, the late husband of Blanche DuBois. The play prevalent theme is escape through illusion. In the play, the characters of Stella (Blanche's sister), Stanley (Stella's husband), and Blanche's suitor, Mitch, interact. Blanche hides behind lights, trying to make her surroundings fill with colors and make her face not looking so old. She lives in fantasies of happier times, avoiding thinking about difficult moments that can define her mood. However, the shadow of past events and the pain that fills her life envelops her more and more, whether because of living in an abusive relationship with her sister and brother-in-law, or because of losing her faith day after day.

Blanche's happy marriage memories are what she wants to keep in her memory and in her daily life. Her husband Allan was kind, and she was in love with him, but there is something else that Blanche thinks about him, and that is how he was:

'There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking—still—that thing was there' (Williams 114; Scene 6). These and the lines that follow provide the only insight we have into the character of Blanche's dead husband, Allan Grey. What do these lines mean? Was her husband just young and naïve? Did he just happen to have a soft and gentle demeanor? More information from Blanche requires us to conclude that her dead husband was gay and engaged in homosexual experiences. Blanche's confession about her husband is the only scene where a homosexual character is somewhat prevalent, not physically, but certainly in the minds of the audience; we neither see nor hear Allan on stage but can picture him in our minds (Piccirillo, 2018, p. 1).

According to Piccirillo (2018), Blanche's performance and the way she deals with illusions are behaviors Williams represented the lives of homosexuals who needed, in the 1950s, to live a façade of a life to survive inside their closets.

When Blanche talks about the episode with her husband, she simply informs that she entered a room that should have been empty, but it was not, and that there were the boy she married and an older man, a friend of his. There is no indication of what they were doing or whether they were in a bed, but Blanche says that what she told them caused him to kill himself. Exposure to the truth, something that Blanche would go through in the play, is the breaking point for Allan, and he kills himself.

For Costa, Allan's absent existence in the play is extremely important both as a starting point and for the development of Blanche's character, who blames herself for her husband's fate (Costa, 2014, p. 81). What happens, according to the researcher, is that Blanche goes from homophobic to the position of victim of a heteronormative society. In this way, throughout the play, she begins to identify with Allan. Although Allan is not present, this character's sexuality is of crucial importance.

Suddenly, last summer is a play that develops according to the memories that two different people have of the same man, Sebastian Venable, who died under nebulous conditions. On each side of the dispute are Sebastian's mother, Violet Venable, and his cousin, Catherine Holly, and, among them, psychiatrist Dr. John Cukrowicz.

Despite not being present in the play, that is, not being a character on stage, Sebastian is the focus of the story, and both the entrance monologue and the one that ends the play describe his personality, his actions and the way he lived. These descriptions, however, are quite sublimated in that they often do not clearly reveal aspects of Sebastian's personality. How Sebastian saw people and what interested him is the information that reaches the audience in a poetic way. Regarding this phase, Toledo explains that

By taking a more detailed look at the plays from this Japanese phase, a greater understanding of some of Williams' works can be gained. *Suddenly, Last Summer* (1958) (The Theater - Vol. 3 343-423), in fact, marked this phase in a distinct way. The character Sebastian Venable still does not appear on stage, like some of the homosexuals featured so far. His name is based on the Catholic saint and is inspired by the novel *Confessions of a Mask* (*Kamen no Kokuhaku*, 1948), published in 1957 in the United States. In this novel, a boy reports his first ejaculation after being excited by seeing an engraving

of Saint Sebastian half-naked and with arrows piercing his body (Stokes 58) (Toledo, 2022, p. 139-140).

In the opening scene, the grieving mother speaks with pride about the garden with carnivorous plants and the relationship she had with her deceased son. The information makes no sense. The mother informs the psychiatrist that her son was chaste, even at the age of forty or more, as she says they both refused to grow old and were always surrounded by young, beautiful people. According to her, they were

... before you hear whatever you're going to hear from the girl when she gets here. My son, Sebastian, was chaste. Not c-h-a-s-e-d! Oh, he was chased in that way of spelling it, too, we had to be very fleet-footed I can tell you, with his looks and his charm, to keep ahead of pursuers, every kind of pursuer! – mean he was c-h-a-s-t-e! – Chaste... [...] This sounds like vanity, Doctor, but really, I was actually the only one in his life that satisfied the demands he made of people. Time after time my son would let people go, dismiss them! – because their, their, their! – attitude toward him was – My son, Sebastian, demanded! We were a famous couple. People didn't speak of Sebastian and his mother or Mrs. Venable and her son, they said "Sebastian and Violet, Violet and Sebastian are staying at the Lido" [...] every time we appeared, attention was centered on us! – everyone else! Eclipsed! (Williams, 2014, p. 164-165).

The relationship between mother and son is one of emotional control, so Violet's universe revolves around her son and his needs. Without wanting to lose control of her object of desire, she takes him away from people believing that she alone is enough to meet her son's needs.

At the same time, the son's desire to see God through the death of turtles, as seagulls eat their insides, disgusts his mother. The religious issue still appears in other moments of the play. When thinking about her son as a poet and what that means, Violet says that "his future recognition! [...] That he did want, he wanted it after his death when it couldn't disturb him; then he did want to offer his work to the world" (Williams, 2014, p. 156). In other words, Sebastian did not want to expose himself and hoped that people would only know his truth after his death. Venable, the widow, says her son saw God while watching the turtles being torn apart. After the episode, he retired to a Buddhist monastery, and his mother accompanied him, even receiving a telegram informing her that her husband was on the verge of death. She forgets about her husband to focus on her son. After what she calls a kind of outbreak, her son returns to the gala halls accompanied by her. But she says they were still "in a world of light and shadow... [...] But the shadow

was almost as bright as the light” (Williams, 2014, p. 162). In this regard, Walls discusses that one of the recurring themes in Williams’ works was martyrization and that the dual aspect of light and shadow to relate to the notion of what is divine and what is earthly (Walls, 2018, p. 93). Walls describes Williams as a very religious man, as he was the grandson of a pastor: “In his plays and short stories, the martyr becomes a central emblem of the desperate need for human compassion and connection - compassion and connection tantalizingly glimpsed in *Suddenly Last Summer*” (Walls, 2018, p. 94).

We see the parallelism established in the various allusions to the act of devouring another being. Parallels appear in Williams’ work in a very insidious way, and an example of this is the name of Sebastian’s carnivorous plant: Venus Trap. The name⁵ derives from the fact that the plant looks like a vagina, in other words, a love trap. The act of eating other people also appears in Catherine’s speech, when she talks to the doctor about how her cousin felt:

We were going to blonds, blonds were next on the menu. [...] Cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blonds, he was fed up with the dark ones and was famished for blonds. All the travel brochures he picked up were advertisements of the blond northern countries. [...] Fed up with dark ones, famished for light ones: that’s how he talked about people, as if they were—items on a menu.— ‘That one’s delicious-looking, that one’s appetizing,’ or ‘that one is not appetizing’ (Williams, 2014, p. 177).

Still, at Playa San Sebastian, in Cabeza de Lobo, Sebastian’s final destination, he used Catherine as bait, making her wear a white swimsuit made of very thin fabric, which seemed to leave her looking as if she was naked. She’s not clear when she says “I knew what I was doing. I came out in the French Quarter years before I came out in the Garden District.” (Williams, 2014, p. 211) – therefore, it is not possible to understand exactly what he was doing, attracting people to the shy Sebastian, who was surrounded by “bands of homeless young people that lived on the free beach like scavenger dogs, hungry children. (Williams, 2014, p. 211). Hours later, Catherine would meet him near the changing rooms, with “hungry young people that had climbed over the fence from the free beach that they lived on. He’d pass out tip among them *as if* they’d all-shined his shoes or called taxis for him...” (Williams, 2014, p. 212, our highlights). Sebastian sought to satisfy his hunger by using hungry people, until the mob became too hungry, and he began to become afraid.

⁵ “Background Information on Venus Fly Traps – Venus Fly Trap naming and history”. FlyTrapCare.com. Available on: <https://www.flytrapcare.com/venus-fly-trap-information/>. Last access: 25 May 2024.

When trying to escape through the streets, Catherine asks Sebastian and her to return to the restaurant, but he says that the hungry children must have shouted the waiters “vile things” about him.

The children caught up Sebastian and killed him, cannibalizing parts of his naked body. Note that Sebastian is, before this, dressed all in white from head to toe, and the children are like black birds. When found, he is naked, with parts of his body devoured and eaten. Sebastian lays like “a big white-paper wrapped bunch of red roses had been torn, thrown, crushed! – against that blazing white wall...” (Williams, 2014, p. 221). The rose appears in the Bible in two passages. Firstly, it is present in Sharon, as a flower of the fields, a place where fear will disappear and the blind will see again (Bible..., 2024 – Isaiah, 35:1-2). Biblically, the color red refers to the blood shed in penance for sins, the blood of Jesus. For Catholicism, the rose appears as a manifestation of God or the saints.⁶ Therefore, Sebastian, inspired by Saint Sebastian, is torn to pieces and immolated on the Playa de San Sebastian, being transfigured into a bouquet of roses.

One of the possible analytical solutions for the poetic image that ends the piece would be to juxtapose the image of Saint Sebastian immolated with that of the rose, which is the manifestation of the divine. When he is cannibalized by his own desires, Sebastian finds God.

In *Cat on a hot tin roof*, we have a family governed (or managed) under the tutelage of the patriarch Big Daddy Pollitt, who faces a crisis imploded by his terminal cancer. His two sons, Gooper and Brick, are in the middle of the conflict led by their respective wives. There is the theme of preference between children, as Big Daddy prefers Brick to Gooper; the fertility of Gooper’s wife, May, and the infertility of Brick’s wife, Maggie; the failed marriage of Big Mama and Big Daddy; the dispute between relatives over inheritance; and the decline of patriarchy, plantations and the southern way of life.

About *Cat*, John Bak (2004) describes a Williams who was being questioned about the protagonist’s sexuality. He is questioned by newspapers and says that Brick should be treated as heterosexual, and even edits a final version of the play with more assertive indications about the character’s sexuality. But, according to Bak, that was a time when congressmen were carrying out a kind of witch hunt for artists who were talking about homosexuality (2004, p. 226-227). According to the researcher, perhaps it would have been

⁶ LAFAYE, Jacques. **Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: the formation of Mexican national consciousness, 1531-1813.** Chicago: University of Chicago Press. 1987. p. 55.

more interesting for Williams to leave the subject subliminal. For Bak,

Perhaps he [Brick] questions his own sexual identity based on what others have told him homosexuality means. He may drink to hide these facts from everyone or to avoid contemplating them himself, either out of disgust for the world that has underwritten them, guilt in his role in choosing to sustain them with regards to Skipper, or fear that what his society and his family are intimating may in fact be true. [...] I will argue, collectively essential to understanding the angst-ridden truth behind Brick's existence and the strength of Williams's play. For at the heart of Brick's reticence to name his relationship with Skipper is his inability to understand what homosexuality is or how it is precisely defined or even vaguely knowable (2004, p. 227).

Furthermore, John Bak treats Brick as an essentially nihilistic character, who, being honest, refuses to lie or falsify information, as it is customary in the Pollitt family. At the same time, when asked by Big Daddy about what is making him sick, or even who is lying to him, he is unable to articulate an answer. According to Bak, it is difficult for the audience to understand what the truth is behind Brick's thoughts, as he does not articulate it. What remains is the impression that the character does not know that he is homosexual or if it was the author's proposal that this was the character's dilemma (Bak, 2004, p. 232). Let's see what Brick says during the heated discussion with Maggie:

MAGGIE: [...] Why I remember when we double-dated at college, Gladys Fitzgerald and I and you and Skipper, it was more like a date between you and Skipper. Gladys and I were just sort of tagging along as if it was necessary to chaperone you! To make a good public impression-
[...]
BRICK: I married you, Maggie. Why would I marry you, Maggie, if I was - ? (Williams, 2016, p. 65).

Bak also states that this interpretation may even have been a product of the time in which the play was produced, since, in the 1950s, people lived with a manufactured appearance and it was very dangerous to be homosexual. For Lemos and Izoton (2014, p. 60),

[...] in the 1950s, the United States was going through a period of extreme hostility towards homosexuality; Corporate employees used to fill out questionnaires regarding their sexuality and the media was constantly monitored and censored under the Comstock Act of 1873, which did not allow the dissemination of obscene material.

Being masculine was a matter of asserting yourself or feminizing others:

With a political discourse delineating hard from soft, penetrating from penetrated, and a national conscience reflecting its uneasy melange, many American men like Brick who did not know with which to identify often found themselves trapped in what Richard Vowles pertinently calls 'that shadowy no-man's land between hetero and homosexuality'. Publicly, Brick is the archetype of heteromale America, with his good looks, his strong athletic build, and his fawning wife cheering him on from the sidelines as he scores the winning touchdown in the championship bowl game. Privately, he is its anathema, with his suspiciously intense relationship with his best friend Skipper, his refusal to sleep with the seductive Maggie, and his emasculating alcoholism that has resulted from one or the other, or both (Bak, 2004, p. 233-234).

What it seems, for Bak, is that Brick does not realize that the way he and his friend Skipper treated each other was not socially normalized after a certain age, that is, adult men no longer sleep in the same room when they are traveling. Perhaps his regret is that he didn't realize this before it was too late. In any case, Bak states that what could be causing the discomfort is still the possibility of Brick looking at the past and recognizing homosexual traits in his and Skipper's behaviors, this becomes evident when Maggie says, even over Brick's protests, what actually made Skipper kill himself:

We drank together that night all night in the bar of the Blackstone and when cold day was comin' up over the Lake an' we were comin' out drunk to take a dizzy look at it, I said, 'SKIPPER! STOP LOVIN' MY HUSBAND OR TELL HIM HE'S GOT TO LET YOU ADMIT IT TO HIM!'-one way or another! HE SLAPPED ME HARD ON THE MOUTH! -- then turned and ran without stopping once, I am sure, all the way back into his room at the Blackstone.... --When I came to his room that night, with a little scratch like a shy little mouse at his door, he made that pitiful, ineffectual little attempt to prove that what I had said wasn't true-- [...] --In this way, I destroyed him, by telling him truth that he and his world which he was born and raised in, yours and his world, had told him could not be told? (Williams, 2016, p. 66).

What seems possible for Brick would be to differentiate the homosexual act from homosexual identity; but is that enough for others? Note the description of the action made by Williams now when Brick is confronted by Big Daddy:

Brick's detachment is at last broken through. His heart is accelerated; his forehead sweat-beaded; his breath becomes more rapid and his voice hoarse. The thing they're discussing, timidly and painfully on the side of Big Daddy, fiercely, violently on Brick's side, is the inadmissible thing that Skipper died to disavow between them. The fact that if it existed it had to be disavowed to 'keep face' in the world they lived in, may be at the heart of the 'mendacity' that Brick drinks to kill his disgust with. It may be the root of his collapse. Or maybe it is only a single manifestation of it, not even the most important. The bird that I hope to catch in

the net of this play is not the solution of one man's psychological problem
(Williams, 2016, p. 110, author highlights).

During the discussion that follows, Brick denies Big Daddy's suspicions. The father notices how much his son changes when he has to deny what happened, expressing his concern about the fact that Brick starts to scream and sweat as if he had run. The explanation he gives for the emotional outburst is what he calls disgust at insinuation.

When Big Daddy suggests that Brick and Skipper might have been in love, Brick refutes this and asserts his homophobia. In this way, he recalls the memory of Skipper's phone call. Big Daddy then talks to Brick about the result of that phone call, since, for him, the story that Skipper killed himself because he simply couldn't have sex with Maggie wasn't well told.

BIG DADDY: You hung up?

BRICK: Hung up. Jesus! Well—

BIG DADDY: Anyhow now! -- we have tracked down the lie with which you're disgusted and which you are drinking to kill your disgust with, Brick. You been passing the buck. This disgust with mendacity is disgust with yourself. You! -- dug the grave of your friend and kicked him in it! -- before you'd face truth with him!

BRICK: His truth, not mine!

BIG DADDY: His truth, okay! But you wouldn't face it with him!
(Williams, 2016, p. 118).

The discussion does not end appropriately, as Brick uses Big Daddy's illness as a way to distress him when he feels cornered.

Nevertheless, if stating that he is not gay was not enough, Bak asks: "what needed to be done to make the wife, the father and the family sure of that?" The possible answer, according to the researcher, would be to perform heterosexuality (Bak, 2004, p. 244). For Bak, the lack of definition in the text, given the subliminality of what is said, causes everyone to be placed in a situation in which they are like Brick's family, listening behind walls, lurking, whispering about other people's sexuality and classifying the people. Therefore, Bak ends his analysis by saying that no one can define Brick as this or that, just by what he states, as it is not possible to understand what the other thinks. In reality, what we can think is the play dialogues with the idea that aspects that escape our consciousness and our social performance can sneak in and out of our hearts without us knowing or realizing it.

Some considerations

The analyzes undertaken demonstrate that the texts carefully composed by Williams deal with homosexuality in a way that reveals, while hiding the characters, the way society saw and treated them. Savran observed that

Throughout Williams's work, his homosexuality is both ubiquitous and elusive... Williams insisted, with some justification, that he could not stage his homosexuality directly or candidly during the 1940s and '50s, believing that 'there would be no producer for it' given the homophobic program of the Broadway theatre (Savran, 1991, p. 58).

According to Piccirillo (2018), homosexuals were considered, by psychiatrists at the time, threats to society and criminals as well as murderers, rapists and pedophiles. This is what the representations of the New York Times articles analyzed by her reveal (2018, p. 4-5). Until the 1950s, homosexuals could be held in mental institutions for treatment: "By being compared to rapists, perverts and psychopaths, homosexuals were placed in a category that was considered socially unacceptable, open to charges under the law, and subject to institutionalization" (Piccirillo, 2018, p. 5).

The veiled way in which Williams deals with issues of interest to him thus indicates a care and fear of repression and social exclusion. At the same time, the way in which homosexuality appears in the texts, absent and present, makes the audience feel encouraged to rethink and revisit the statements, seeking, between the lines, keys to understand and implement the texts through the readings. Therefore, we can see that, even if he was not an activist or campaigner for gay rights, Williams provokes, despite the fact that it was not intentional, the public to think about the history of homosexuality and the personal dilemmas common to these people in a heteronormative society.

The light show created by him is transformed into a text that shows and hides, in a delicate way, the pains and dilemmas of people who could not speak openly about what they were experiencing. Thus, these ghostly victims of a heteronormative society in the 1950s found and continue to find audiences around the world who will listen to their stories, even if they are not told by themselves.

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Translation submitted on: June 4th, 2024

Translation approved on: September 25th, 2024