



**Conflict and familiar drama in
Cat on a hot tin roof
from Norbert Elias' perspective of
Social Figuration¹**

**Conflito e drama familiar em
Cat on a hot tin roof a partir da
perspectiva de Norbert Elias de Figuração Social**

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DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.14018041

Abstract

This study aims to consider the family represented in *Cat on a hot tin roof*, a play written by Tennessee Williams in 1955, as a social configuration, a theory proposed by Norbert Elias, in his studies, such as *The civilizing process* (1993; 2011), in both volumes; and *Established and outsiders* (2000). Our proposal is to justify how this social configuration marked by such a Pollit family presents power relations along the lines proposed by Elias, that is, in a multilateral and non-hierarchical dynamic that focuses on each member as Big Daddy's dinner hours are consolidated. In this sense, this study intends to analyze how the functionality of dissolving this power between that family members occurs. As a previous result, we understand that Eliasian theory can be applied to the family as a social institution of power, although entirely possible as a material reality.

Keywords: Family; Conflict; Power relations.

Resumo

Este estudo tem como pretensão considerar a família representada em *Gata em teto de zinco quente*, peça escrita por Tennessee Williams, em 1955, como uma configuração social, teoria proposta por Norbert Elias, em seus estudos como *O processo civilizador* (1993; 2011), em ambos os volumes; e *Os estabelecidos e os outsiders* (2000), entre outros. Nossa proposta é explicar como essa configuração social, marcada pela família Pollit, apresenta relações de poder nos moldes propostos por Elias, ou seja, em uma dinâmica multilateral e não hierárquica que se concentra em cada membro conforme as horas do jantar de Big Daddy vão se consolidando. Nesse sentido, este estudo pretende analisar como se dá a funcionalidade de dissolução dessa teia relacional entre os membros dessa família. Como resultado prévio, entendemos que a teoria eliasiana pode ser aplicada à família enquanto instituição social de poder, essa sendo parte da ficção, embora totalmente possível enquanto realidade material.

Palavras-chave: Família; Conflito; Relações de poder.

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/2559>. Accessed on: September 17, 2024.

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Introduction

Cat on a hot tin roof is a play written by Tennessee Williams in 1954. It premiered on Broadway in New York at August 1955. There are at least three recognized versions of this play: the first one, the original, written in 1954; the 1955 version, released on Broadway, with suggestions from director Elia Kazan; and the third one, written for the *revival*, also on Broadway, directed by Michael Kahn, in 1974, explains Jason Zinoman (2003).

The second and last versions present significant changes in relation to the first one, especially regarding the third act, more specifically the end. In the first version, before the Broadway debut, we have a warmer and more receptive Brick to Maggie's advances, as if the events of the dinner night. Moreover, the awareness of Big Daddy's condition, and Big Mama's position in demonstrating her appreciation for him, had influenced his thinking about the real place of his relationship with the "cat", that is, how important she would be in giving his grandson to the father he always dreamed of, still according to the same critic, Jason Zinoman (2003), for *The New York Times*.

Sometimes, Brick's awareness through his evasive response to Maggie when she says she loves him: "I do love you, Brick, I do! BRICK [smiling with charming sadness]: Wouldn't it be funny if that was true?" (Williams, 2004, p. 91). Even though the answer is evasive, answering it, and showing a kind of condescension, through her smile, demonstrates that, in some way, this relationship can have a future and the lie can become truth.

In the second version, there is a colder and more indifferent Brick, who remains that way until the curtains close. Maggie lies about the pregnancy and suggests to him that they have sex that night to try to cover up the lie they had told Big Daddy: "I told a lie to Big, but we can make that lie come true" (Williams, 2014, p. 118). Even with all of the "cat's" attacks, this Brick doesn't give in and the curtains close without any reaction from him, unlike the first version. It is an alien and empty Brick.

In the third version, when Williams had 20 years to mature the play and Elia Kazan's suggestions, he managed to unite the two versions, demonstrating to the public an unknown at the end: Brick was surrendered by the "cat" and would he believe in this relationship again or not? At the same time as we have an indifferent Brick, who does not respond to Maggie's advances, we also have a character who shows himself idealizing a future with his wife. This possibility of analysis that follows these three versions, with

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different endings, is just another way of reading Williams' work with the singularity it presents: the author's ability to reinvent himself in the face of public and critical reception - in case of the play, made by critic Kenneth Tynan, in 1955, according to an article in *The New York Times*, from 2003 - and the possibility of working in constant multilateral dialogue with theater directors, in short, an author reflecting a plural society such as Norbert Elias (1993), who supports this study, understood it, even considering the controversies of the time.

In view of this, it is worth highlighting that the version used to carry out this study is from 1955, considering that Tennessee Williams was a kind of an *outsider*, even more so at that time - a concept to be detailed later in this study - by his environment. That is, according to Toledo (2019), in his thesis on the author, presented to the University of São Paulo, the 1950s were not open to issues of homosexuality due, above all, to McCarthyism - a kind of patrol that aimed to curb "communist advance", and the ideals of the left - and conservatism.

In this way, due to his fame and success, Tennessee's sexual orientation became evident, even if he did not publicly come out as homosexual - only doing so in 1970. Therefore, even with all his visibility, he would still be an *outsider*. His environment, for not being able to have the freedom to be an openly homosexual author - including the film adaptation of *Cat on a hot tin roof*, from 1958, tries to hide this trait from Brick. It is also assumed that he never received a Nobel Prize for his sexual orientation, which makes him an *outsider* in the field, even if he *is established* in his art, concepts that are fundamental in Norbert Elias' theory (2001) to understand relationships that are based on power games.

Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller and Eugene O'Neill are considered by Betti (2005) as the triad of classics of modern North American literature, thus justifying the great importance of preserving memory, history, and all possible relationships that exist between Williams' dramaturgy and other human knowledge, such as sociology.

Tennessee Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. As Toledo (2019) states, in 1920, the author was gifted a typewriter and this encouraged him to publish his first writings. In 1929, upon enrolling in journalism school, he dedicated himself to his first play, *Beauty is the word*, but he was forced to interrupt his career and work with his father in a shoe factory. He only returned to writing in 1935, releasing his first staged play: *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!* It is also important to highlight that he won the Pulitzer Prize for two of

his works: *A streetcar named Desire* (1948) and *Cat on a hot tin roof* (1955). He also won a Tony Award for *The Rose Tattoo*, in 1951.

Harold Bloom, in *Tennessee Williams*, considers him “The most literary of our main playwrights [...]” (Bloom, 2007, p. 2). For the critic, he had some precursors who formed his literary persona: Hart Crane, D. H. Lawrence, and Walt Whitman. Still according to Bloom (2007, p. 3), “Hart Crane [for example] made Williams a more dramatic lyric playwright than he could have been”. He also claims that in *Cat on a hot tin roof* there are characteristics of autoeroticism and narcissism depicted in the character Brick who is a kind of alter ego of Walt Whitman. This relationship demonstrates the multilaterality of the agreements that Williams signed with his predecessors and successors in the dramatic genre, another of the points present in Elias’ theory on social figurations: the dynamicity of societies that occur through groups that form within them.

In Brazil, the reception of his works is considered by Silva (2022), in a dissertation also presented to the University of São Paulo, with a less realistic and more subjective approach to Williams’s pieces. He even goes so far as to say that *Cat* is marked by a non-political bias in the author’s work, however, the present study, by establishing itself in power relations, and showing that there is a relational game between the members of that family nucleus, demonstrates the opposite. Williams’s political bias is more subtle, being portrayed by the clash between feminine and masculine discourse, as well as the power grabs of the patriarchy and what it represents, but it is still present.

Anyway, the first production of the play took place in Brazil in 1956, by the Teatro Brasileiro de Comédia, directed by Maurice Vaneau. In 1976, *Cat on a hot tin roof* was directed by Paulo José. In 1998, the play was directed by Moacyr Góes. Meanwhile, in 2016, by Grupo TAPA, there is a stage production directed by Eduardo Tolentino. It is also worth highlighting that Augusto Boal was a great link between American theater and Brazilian theater, helping to adapt the play on national territory, according to Silva (2022).

Cat on a hot tin roof narrates the celebration of Big Daddy’s birthday as the axis of this social figuration that is fostered there, this being one of the points of this constellation. The ambition for his heritage reaches the central conflict, leading all family members to an explosion of feelings of different natures and disagreements. The play, as Kolin (1998, p. 10) stated, “dared to challenge the political and sexual mores of the Eisenhower Era and captured the anxieties of the Cold War Era”. This is yet another justification for the political bias to be present, even if in a more timid way.

Part of the plot takes place in Maggie and Brick's room. The couple has a troubled relationship and an inactive sex life. Brick is always drunk, which directly influences his marital life. There is a suspicion of a secret homosexual relationship between Brick and his best friend, Skipper, who committed suicide, which could have triggered the addictions.

The tone of the story follows this level. Family relationships are quite troubled, showing the real interests of family members in Big Daddy's inheritance, who is possibly affected by cancer. From this brief perspective, the objective of this article is to highlight some questions about the relationships that are built in Williams' work, from the perspective of Norbert Elias. These questions will be guided by the sociologist's theory that corresponds to that of social configuration, also called social figuration – so they will be used as synonyms in this article – and the power relations that make up this social circle, as a family can be considered. Let us begin, therefore, with a brief presentation of who Norbert Elias is and a brief notion of his vast theory, and then move on to the power relations that are established within the family nucleus written by Tennessee Williams.

Norbert Elias: basic precepts

Norbert Elias is well known in the field of Social Sciences and his analyses help us understand the field of Sociology and History as a whole, taking into account the elasticity of its concepts. Although not widely used in the field of Literature, Arts and Linguistics to analyze the dramatic genre, thinking about its theory from these perspectives also ends up being an analytical mode different from what has been seen until now. Recognizing Elias as a great theorist who embraces the possibility of understanding the most varied fields of human knowledge is a plural and multidisciplinary perspective of understanding Western culture and what it represents.

As stated by Federico Neiburg (2000), in the introductory notes of *The established and the outsiders*, Elias was a disciple of Karl Mannheim, a sociologist also greatly influenced by the ideas of Karl Marx and Max Weber. He tried to bring concepts that tried to overcome the dominant traditions in the sociological field. As he studied medicine, this gave his writings a very systemic characteristic, which often led to him being accused of being a determinist, with this interpretation of his work being a huge mistake, as the biological aspects, for him, would be just one of many individual facets of an interconnected society, that is, they would also be dependent on social aspects. That is, it is

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not biological aspects that determine an individual's personality and posture, but rather their coexistence in society and the way they behave in the groups of which they are part.

Furthermore, we can highlight another element of his theory. For him, *outsiders* are individuals stigmatized by society. In the book *The established and the outsiders* (2000), the German sociologist shows how a working-class village in England had rivalries: the social group that was established before lived in conflict with the social groups that came later. The first inhabitants developed strong social relationships and formed a cohesive group over time. With the arrival of the migrants (who were also workers like the first ones) the struggle began: the first group began to stigmatize the group that arrived later, who, surprisingly, accepted the discourse of their rivals, truly feeling inferior to them.

The first group used gossip to defame those who came later. This rivalry, contrary to what Marxist theories point out, had nothing to do with the class struggle and were not economic disputes between rich and poor: it was a war game of tug between those who came before against those who arrived later due to the social control of that web of relationships that was established there (Elias, 2000, p. 19-50). Thus, we realize that Eliasian theory also serves as a revisionist to Marxist theory.

In these terms, Norbert Elias' sociology is also known as figurational. That is, for him, every space occupied by "individuals", in their social functions, is a space where rivalries and power games always exist. Groups and individuals, for him, are always forming "webs" entangled by power, which keep individuals together and force them to fight against each other symbolically. In this sense, the individual is formed by the society of which he is a part and also helps in structuring that same society. This amalgam between society and the individual is called *social habitus* (Elias, 2000, p. 19-50). In relation to each other, individuals structure themselves, but they also help to structure society itself.

Therefore, society and individuals never overlap, but the relationship between them maintains an unstable balance in this direction, that is, power relations are not hierarchical, they are multilateral. Each individual has their place and exercises specific power in the society in which they live. In his theories, Elias also conceptualizes what he calls the *Civilizing Process* (1993, 2011). In two works with this title, divided in two volumes, the author established the idea that in the transition from the medieval period to the Modern and Industrial Eras, individuals were increasingly deprived of their passions, adopting postures considered ideal for living in society. That is, a more animalistic side is

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abandoned for a more civilized notion. The French courts are seen as the ultimate example of the idea of the logic of prestige: more educated, accustomed to arts and culture. For these reasons, relationships between established people and *outsiders* are always a stigma for the second group: uncivilized, rustic, savage, rude, among other adjectives that are used to define this group that arrives later (Elias, 1993, 2011).

Given this brief notion, we can move on to the analysis present in Tennessee Williams' book. Elias' theory will be detailed in a few moments, but its basis must be understood by reading this introduction in detail.

The family as a social configuration in *Cat on a hot tin roof*

For Elias (1994, 2011), any connected human group is necessarily a social figuration. However, to make the concept broader, he did not name each of these figurations, but stated that they start from a simple couple, that is, two individuals, reaching the broader figurations, which form the United States. Therefore, any group that is established within a specific society can be considered as a structure of such configurations, having a center of power – marked by centripetal forces – of which centrifugal forces, constituted by the other members that are part of it, surround themselves of this situation. That is, by the first we mean the forces that are directed towards the center, which are also attracted by a central element. Meanwhile, centrifugal forces spread in several directions, without leaving the main axis.

In this sense, we can propose an analogy with a galaxy, in which there are specific planets that are located in the center for the sake of position, but which are highly dependent on the other elements that make up that universe, such as minor planets, stars, meteors, dust, in short, components that make the situation of that space cohesive, just like a group. If there is a central element in this universe, like a sun, for example, it is totally dependent on these smaller elements, and other, according to Elias (1994, 2011).

With this perspective in mind, a family can be compared to such a galaxy, and can be framed within this notion of social configuration. In this sense, Big Daddy would be one of the centers of power. He would be the axis that guides everyone around him, especially because he discovered cancer, which made the brothers decide to stay in his house waiting for his death and hoping for the inheritance. We can also say that other parallel relationships are established in this nucleus, also demonstrating axes of power

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that are fostered between family relationships, such as that between Brick and Maggie (Margaret); Big Mama (Ida) and Gooper; Big Daddy and Maggie himself; the “neckless” children and Maggie, in short, all acting as centers of power and orbitals at the same time.

From the relationship between Brick and Maggie, we see conflicts as the driving force behind the couple. When we analyze it from a distant perspective, we don’t understand why they stay in this relationship considering that it seems that all sentimental strength is exhausted. Alcoholism, the shadow of his friend’s suicide and Brick’s loving indifference are factors that condemn this relationship to failure. Even with her insistence on maintaining some feeling, he doesn’t seem to respond to any of her advances. In the opening scene, in the couple’s bedroom, we notice some of these features:

You were a wonderful lover.... Such a wonderful person to go to bed with, and I think mostly because you were really indifferent to it. Isn’t that right? Never had any anxiety about it, did it naturally, easily, slowly, with absolute confidence and perfect calm, more like opening a door for a lady or seating her at a table than giving expression to any longing for her. Your indifference made you wonderful at lovemaking--strange?--but true.... You know, if I thought you would never, never, never make love to me again--I would go downstairs to the kitchen and pick out the longest and sharpest knife I could find and stick it straight into my heart, I swear that I would! (Williams, 2014, p. 12).

Indifference is the feeling that drives Maggie’s speech about her relationship with Brick. This gives him the power to choose how to treat his wife: well, badly, or with indifference. From his wife’s speech, it seems that the crumbs of the relationship sustain her in some way, the few words he says seem to be enough. Furthermore, she highlights that the very feeling of indifference makes his possible sexual performance even better, further reinforcing the power he holds in relation to her.

On the other hand, if he maintains this relationship, in a way, he also needs her. Therefore, the power she exerts over him also ends up being visible if we think in these terms. This means that there is a bilateral power relationship between them. This is one of the points of Norbert Elias’ theory (2011). Those centrifugal forces that we mentioned previously are marked by multilateral directions, therefore, nothing prevents them from taking a central direction. In other words, power follows both a central and rotating direction, which circles around such a central force, which could be Big Daddy himself, Maggie, Brick, it all depends on the relationship that is established and what is intended to be abstracted with this relationship.

One of the resources that Brick uses to sustain the power he establishes over Maggie is seduction, in addition to the indifference that has already been highlighted. He pretends not to be interested, but at specific moments he attracts her in such a way that he suggests that he still has a strong sexual (and loving) desire for her:

MARGARET [intensely, fearfully]: The way y' were lookin' at me just now, befo' I caught your eye in the mirror and you started t' whistle! I don't know how t' describe it but it froze my blood!--I've caught you lookin' at me like that so often lately. What are you thinkin' of when you look at me like that? (Williams, 2014, p. 10).

This dialogue would be considered by Elias (1994) as a power game that is established in this relationship. It would be an example of tension that occurs in the involvement between individuals who are organized in the same social web. It is a game full of tensions that become firmer as daily contact is established: the coexistence between the couple. This game of disinterest marked by Brick in relation to Maggie is what, in fact, keeps the couple together. It is the power he exercises over her, which makes her not aware of her place in that social web, since she is closer to the central power, Big Daddy, than other family members, for example, and submits to all kinds of indifference on the part of her husband.

In fact, Maggie feels lonely, even though she has a large network of individuals who are established in Big Daddy's mansion. She is part of that specific constellation, she is part of that family, she is married to one of the heirs – even a successful one, as she dedicated a large part of her life to sports and was successful in her career – she is loved by Big Daddy, but, even so, she feels lonely, and this is due to the fact that she is rejected by Brick:

BRICK: Did you say something?
MARGARET: I was goin' t' say something -- that I get -- lonely.-- Very!
BRICK: Ev'rybody gets that..
MARGARET: Living with someone you love can be lonely -- than living entirely alone!-- if the one that y' love doesn't love you [There is a pause. Brick hobbles downstage and asks, without looking at her:]
BRICK: Would you like to live alone, Maggie? [Another pause: then -- after she has caught a quick, hurt breathe:]
MARGARET: No!--God!--I wouldn't! (Williams, 2014, p. 11).

Therefore, even though Maggie is established in that environment, formally speaking, by having a legal bond with Brick, that is, marriage, she is also an *outsider*, according to the patterns that Norbert Elias (1993) explained to us. That is, in addition to

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being subjected to patriarchal power, first by Brick, second by Big Daddy himself, she also submits to the power of the matriarch, who clearly rejects her. She also does not have the support of the other member of the family, Mae, who through gossip tries to weaken her, in short, she is someone who later arrives at the house and does not get her place.

The sociologist did not foresee in his writings an individual who was established and *an outsider* at the same time, considering that, for him, the *outsider*, over time, as the relationships he followed, would become an established person and would pass to be part of that specific social configuration. However, Maggie, being part of a family structure, has something that Elias (2000) did not consider: feelings, focused on the psychology of the environment. So, Maggie feels like an *outsider* precisely because, sentimentally speaking, she feels excluded by Brick's indifference towards her. As we can see in the previous dialogue, she feels lonely even with his presence, which is justified by her lack of interest in maintaining this relationship. Therefore, she is excluded due to her husband's indifference, who does not provide her with a psychological basis, and is also excluded physically, as she is unable to occupy the mansion and integrate into the family.

In fact, Maggie does not try to rebuild herself in any other way, such as becoming self-sufficient, ending this relationship, or even seeking independence, she continues in every way trying to restore this failed relationship, especially through the sexualization of her body:

Other men still want me. My face looks strained, sometimes, but I've kept my figure as well as you've kept yours, and men admire it. I still turn heads on the street. Why, last week in Memphis everywhere that I went men's eyes burned holes in me clothes, at the country club and in restaurants and department stores, there wasn't a man I met or walked by that didn't just eat me up with his eyes and turn around when I passed him and look back at me. Why, at Alice's party for her New York cousins, the best lookin' man in the crowd -- followed me upstairs and tried to force his way in the powder room with me, followed me to the door and tried to force his way in! (Williams, 2014, p. 24).

In response to this, Brick says he doesn't care, that he wouldn't divorce Maggie because of betrayal or anything like that. After that, she reminds Brick that Big Daddy is dying of cancer, which seems, in some way, to give an awareness to his son, who insists on the idea that the diagnosis is incorrect and that Big Mama will break the news that night to his father. However, Maggie knows that that news is not true, that in fact Big Daddy is dying and that everyone is around him precisely because of that fact. It is, then, one of the

neuralgic points of that constellation that is collapsing and whose main power must pass on to someone, which is why everyone is desperate, not only for the inheritance but also for the power that represents one of the central points of that institution.

In terms of being *an outsider*, the children in the house themselves recognize Maggie as such:

[A little girl, Dixie, bursts into the room, wearing an Indian war bonnet and firing a cap pistol at Margaret and shouting: 'Bang, bang, bang!' Laughter downstairs floats through the open ball door. | Margaret had crouched gasping to bed at child's entrance. She now rises and says with cool fury:] She now rises and says with cool fury] (Williams, 2014, p. 30).

Dixie, who is one of the "neckless monsters", Brick's niece, playfully attacks Maggie with a gun. That is, he recognizes her as a stranger who is not part of that family, and therefore one of the weakest links. This behavior is even reinforced and rewarded by Brick soon after, as he hugs and comforts her after the "attack".

Another power relationship that is also clear, since it is one of the consequences of the greater power relationship, is that of Big Daddy and Big Mama:

[Everyone laughs very loudly. Big Daddy is famous for his jokes at Big Mama's expense, and no one laughs louder at these jokes than Big Mama herself, although sometimes they are very cruel and Big Mama has to pick up or move something to cover the pain that the loud laughter causes. It doesn't cover well. On this occasion, a happy occasion, because the dread in her heart has also been dispelled by the false report about Big Daddy's condition, she laughs, grotesquely, timidly, in Big Daddy's direction and advances on Brick, very quickly and briskly] (Williams, 2014, p. 33).

The form of power that is established in this relationship, which also keeps Big Daddy at the center, is the jocular attitude. Big Mama, without reacting, ends up laughing at what he says, because of the happiness she felt for still believing that the diagnosis was false. However, through the dialogue, we understand that this kind of attitude between the patriarch and the matriarch was already traditional, it was something that consolidated family dinners and celebrations, the adjective "famous" accompanied by the verb "was" mark this hypothesis of analysis.

In addition to this relationship of strength that is established between Big Daddy and Big Mama, there is another game that is established between them and Brick. If we see a Big Mama submissive to the patriarch at first, when the son enters the room and starts to participate in his father's party, we see a more furious and aggressive mother to defend

him. On one side, there is a father who furiously insists that his son stop drinking. On the other hand, there is a mother who does not accept this rude gesture from the father. Elias (1993) would call this relationship an “unstable balance of forces”, which means that the forces, the power, are never established in just one place. It is floating. It varies in focus depending on the interests that are established from individual to individual. In this case, the mother does everything to defend her son, including fighting for the omnipresent power of an authoritarian father and one of the axes of power in that family organization.

In fact, Big Daddy is aware of the matriarch’s desire to take control, so he notices these moves towards power:

BIG DADDY: Oh, yes, I do, oh, yes, I do, I mean it! I put up with a whole lot of crap around here because I thought I was dying. And you thought I was dying and you started taking over, well, you can stop taking over now, Ida, because I’m not gonna die, you can just stop now this business of taking over because you’re not taking over because I’m not dying, I went through the laboratory and the goddam exploratory operations and there’s nothing wrong with me but a spastic colon. And I’m not dying of cancer which you thought I was dying of. Ain’t that so? Didn’t you think that I was dying of cancer, Ida?” (Williams, 2014, p. 39).

In addition to talking about control, he also uses the term “boss” to refer to the position she sought to take in this relationship. This reinforces a voluntary movement that, in fact, Big Mama was consciously trying to take power and Big Daddy realized this also consciously. These webs of power are traced as the family is also organized, demonstrating the small powers that are established in the relationships between siblings, household members, and nephews. This conscious seizure of power was not very specified by Elias (2011). He saw relationships in a purely social way. He briefly touches on this subject when he talks about *psychogenesis*. However, he does not believe that there is an innate “spirit” or “psychology” that takes care of individuals, as their relationships are purely social. However, in the previous dialogues, we realized that there is more than a social relationship that is established between family members, there is also a desire for power and what it represents.

BIG DADDY: I went through all that laboratory and operations and all just so I would know if you or me was boss here! Well, now it turns out that I am and you ain’t -- and that’s my birthday present -- and my cake and champagne!-- because for three years now you been gradually taking over. Bossing. Talking. Sashaying your fat old body around the place I made! I made this place! (Williams, 2014, p. 40).

In this way, power seems to be shaken. It is not condensed into just one figure. It is diluted within the family and manifests itself in the one that is most appropriate at the moment when it is most needed. Therefore, thinking beyond psychology, Elias' theory (2011) can be incorporated into family dynamics and the relationships that originate from this nucleus.

We cannot fail to mention one of Tennessee Williams' greatest assets in this play. In addition to the power being materialized in the story itself, through its characters, it also appeared in the organization of the scenes on stage, with the connection that the actors demonstrated with each other, and the tension that they should portray in each act: "The following scene should be played with great concentration, with most of the power leashed but palpable in what is left unspoken" (Williams, 2014, p. 61). This means that power, in his perspective, would be represented by the "unspoken", by a force that passes through the members of a stage, enacting a complex story. This approach can be analyzed through the perspective of Elias (1994) when he states that power is not a hierarchy that passes from one person to another, but rather acts multilaterally, being diluted by the characters who inhabit the same social web, in this case, a family or even a stage.

In one of the deepest dialogues between Brick and Big Daddy, we notice another dilution of power: between Brick and his friend, Skipper. As we have already mentioned, there seems to be a romantic involvement between the two, which even caused the former to start drinking due to the grief of his friend's suicide. This also culminated in his lack of appreciation for sports, which ended his career. In this sense, the father also begins to suspect that there was a romantic relationship between them. In this way, the power that Skipper exercised over Brick, in life, was due to the romantic relationship, which should be kept secret; and in death, he continued to operate, as it left him a hostage to addictions:

BIG DADDY: I'm just saying I understand such --
BRICK [violently]: Skipper is dead. I have not quit eating!
BIG DADDY: No, but you started drinking. [Brick wheels on his crutch and hurls his glass across the room shouting.]
BRICK: YOU THINK SO, TOO? (Williams, 2014, p. 62).

One of the central themes that weaves through the story is precisely Big Daddy's illness: does he have cancer or not? Initially, it was certain that it was a laboratory error that led to the idea of an erroneous diagnosis of the disease. However, in the third act, the family doctor enters the scene and denies this theory, focusing on what has been known for a long time: the patriarch really suffered from the disease, based on the analysis of [Dramaturgia em foco, Petrolina-PE, v. 8, n. 2, p. 296-313, 2024.](#)

samples of the affected tissue. Again, we see yet another power relationship established there, not from someone who is present in the nucleus, but from someone who necessarily affects the perception that the members of that nucleus have of each other.

In this sense, knowledge is the same as having power over something. Therefore, the doctor has the power because he knows the truth and is the messenger of the news that will shake that family again. A dramatic atmosphere is created to prepare Big Mama and her family to receive news that was already common knowledge:

BIG MAMA [fiercely]: You told me and Big Daddy there wasn't a thing wrong with him but --

MAE: Big Mama, they always --

GOOPER: Let Doc Baugh talk, will yuh?

BIG MAMA: --little spastic condition of - [Her breathe gives out in a sob.]

DOCTOR BAUGH: Yes, that's what we told Big Daddy. But we had this bit of tissue run through the laboratory and I'm sorry to say the test was positive on it. It's -- well -- malignant.... [Pause.]

BIG MAMA: -- Cancer?! Cancer?! [Dr. Baugh nods gravely.] Big Mama gives long gasping cry.]

MAE and GOOPER: Now, now, now, Big Mama, you had to know....

BIG MAMA: WHY DIDN'T THEY CUT IT OUT OF HIM? HANH? HANH?

DOCTOR BAUGH: Involved too much, Big Mama, too many organs affected.

MAE: Big Mama, the liver's affected and SOS the kidneys, both! It's gone way past what they call a--

GOOPER: A surgical risk.

MAE: --Uh- huh.... [Big Mama draws a breath like a dying gasp] (Williams, 2014, p. 77).

Big Mama seeks out Brick and refers to him as her only son, which leaves Gooper (older brother) at a loss as to what role he plays in the family. Another power relationship is traced in the family: there is greater power that is exercised between the first child in relation to the second child, marking the mother's preference. Ironically, Gooper is the firstborn. So it's a matter of the mother's preference, where there is a reversal of roles. To get out of the situation, she says that Gooper is a responsible son, father of five children, but she doesn't want him to tell her the news of the illness - which she already knows about - because she never liked Big Daddy. Maggie also insists on reinforcing the news, but she refuses because she claims that she is not of the same blood as hers. She insists on the idea that she only wants to hear the news of the patriarch's cancer from Brick. Thus, power relations are reaffirming themselves, and placing Big Mama at the center, gaining greater prominence, even, than Big Daddy, since it is she who chooses the strongest

relationships that she will maintain, and the weakest relationships that she will remove from her core.

The strongest power, in the relationship with Brick, it is concentrated close to his core, after all, he is her favorite son. Then there is the relationship with Gooper, her firstborn, admired by his family, but insufficient to gain their favor. Finally, on this scale, there is the presence of Mae and Maggie, both together. Maggie is not preferred because she is married to Brick. She has the same weak relationship with Big Mama as Mae. Power proves volatile precisely through Maggie. If for Big Daddy she is preferred, even in relation to Mae, for Big Mama she is not even considered part of the family. Again, the unstable balance of power forces shows itself in these cases.

Finally, we can see yet another power relationship that remains in constant flux from the possible arrival of a new member in the mansion: Maggie and Brick's son. When it is announced, the first person to doubt the veracity of the pregnancy is Mae, who inquired Maggie. She couldn't be pregnant because her room is next door and she can't hear them having sex. Anyway, Maggie insists that this is Big Daddy's birthday present. The veracity of the pregnancy is revealed, as we pointed out at the beginning of this study. In addition to asking for a lawyer, probably to review his will, he also requests to go up on the roof to see, for the last time, the land he owned. This means that family relationships were also volatile due to the money the family had, the great trigger for the game of interest that circulated within the walls of that mansion.

MARGARET: Announcement of life beginning! A child is coming, sired by Brick, and out of Maggie the Cat! I have Brick's child in my body, an ' that's my birthday present to Big Daddy on this birthday! [Big Daddy looks at Brick.]

BIG DADDY: Get up, girl, get up off your knees, girl. [Big Daddy helps Margaret rise. He bites off the end of a fresh cigar, taken from his pocket bathrobe, as he studies Margaret.] Uh- huh, this girl has life in her body, that's no lie!

BIG MAMA: BIG DADDY'S DREAM COMES TRUE BRICK: JESUS!

BIG DADDY: Gooper, I want my lawyer in the mornin'.

BRICK: Where are you goin', Big Daddy?

BIG DADDY: Son, I'm goin' up on the roof to the belvedere on th' roof to look over me kingdom before I give up my kingdom -- twenty-eight thousand acres of th' richest land this side of the Valley Nile (Williams, 2014, p. 114).

The use of the term Nile Valley demonstrates the full magnitude of the land that Big Daddy held at that time, which also justifies, in a way, Gooper and Mae's race in search of

inheriting what was possible, after all, they knew that on the scale of power they were not preferred: on Big Mama's side, the preferred one was Brick; on Big Daddy's side, the favorite was Maggie. This means that the couple, even being part of the family, even being in the mansion, living there, even giving grandchildren to the patriarchs, were *outsiders* in their own environment. Established and *outsiders* at the same time, just like Maggie. Maggie still had an advantage: she was preferred by Big Daddy who appreciated her in a certain way. In other words, on the power scale she would still be more established than Mae, for example, who was sometimes left aside, ignored and mistreated by Big Daddy.

In this way, we imagine a constellation, as Elias demonstrated in much of his work. The family proposed by Tennessee Williams is a fragmented constellation, in which several power cores are surrounded by several orbits of minor planets. However, this does not mean that these planets are of less importance in this configuration. They act to establish their presence, whether by conquering the great centers of power - Big Mama and Big Daddy - or by producing five children or even having the possibility of pregnancy. In this sense, it is a power marked by money, indifference, loving relationships, conventional or not for the time, the acceptance of these relationships, in short, it is a power that dissolves while it is volatile, fluctuating, does not remain bilaterally with any member of that family nucleus, is diluted multilaterally and each individual takes a position when it suits him or her.

Conclusion

In order to conclude this study, we understand that power, for Norbert Elias, that is multilateral, and is not only concentrated in small daily relationships, it is a much larger situation than that. In this sense, the family can be understood as an institution in which power is volatile and organized as members move within this social space. In this way, when reading a work of theater, by one of the great authors of the 20th century, Tennessee Williams, from a sociological notion, it is still a novelty for the study of Arts and Letters, considering that by for a long time, Eliasian theory was used only in the field of History and Social Sciences, with difficulty being applied in fictional works, with its focus being palpable reality. However, fiction is also a representation of reality, which is a universe that can materialize. Therefore, we hope that this study, which could have many other pages of analysis with the same intonation, can contribute with a new possibility of

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approach as well as serve as motivation for other researchers who seek to relate Social Sciences to the dramatic genre.

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⁴ The references are in Portuguese, relating to Norbert Elias, because these were the ones consulted for the development of this work and subsequently translated into English.

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Translation submitted on: September 18th, 2024

Translation approved on: October 27th, 2024