"Isn´t it funny what tricks your memory plays?":[1] dramaturgical structures of traumatic memory in the plays of Tennessee Williams

"Não são engraçadas as peças que sua memória prega?": estruturas dramatúrgicas da memória traumática nas peças de Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

Tom Wingfield begins *The glass menagerie* by standing in a uniform that denotes his participation in WWII. The story Tom tells the audience is not about the trauma of war, but of a different traumatic moment in his past: his abandonment of his sister, Laura, and his mother, Amanda. When scholars and theatre makers talk about trauma in Williams plays like *Menagerie*, they tend to focus on Tennessee Williams's trauma and memory instead of Tom Wingfield's. This ignores the powerful dramaturgical ways that traumatic memory forms the internal logic of plays like *Menagerie, A streetcar named Desire*, and *Suddenly last summer*. This essay takes the traumatic memories of Tom, Blanche, and Catherine seriously to show how their traumas are mimicked and reflected by the overall dramaturgical structures of their plays. After placing this argument in the context of trauma, memory, and theatre, I move to an analysis of how the traumatized characters are situated vis-à-vis the audience and world of the play to show how these different relationships impact how their trauma is represented. Then I build off of these character studies to a look at the overall impact of the character's trauma on the play's dramaturgical arc, focusing particularly on how trauma interacts with the play's style of theatricality. These close readings show how the traumatic memory is important to the internal dramaturgical logic of the play beyond biographical resonances, creating a fruitful dramaturgical starting point for future productions.

Keywords: Trauma; Memory; *The glass menagerie*; *A streetcar named Desire*; *Suddenly last summer*.

Resumo

Tom Wingfield começa *The glass menagerie* vestindo um uniforme que denota sua participação na Segunda Guerra Mundial. A história que Tom conta ao público não é sobre o trauma da guerra, mas sobre um momento traumático diferente de seu passado: quando abandona sua irmã, Laura, e sua mãe, Amanda. Quando estudiosos e produtores de teatro falam sobre traumas em peças de Williams, tais como *Menagerie*, eles tendem a se concentrar no trauma e na memória de Tennessee Williams, em vez de nos de Tom

[1] Williams (1971, p. 213).

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Wingfield. Isso ignora as poderosas formas dramatúrgicas pelas quais a memória traumática compõe a lógica interna de peças como *Menagerie, A streetcar named Desire* e *Suddenly last summer*. Este ensaio leva em consideração as memórias traumáticas de Tom, Blanche e Catherine para mostrar como seus traumas são imitados e refletidos pelas estruturas dramatúrgicas gerais de suas peças. Depois de colocar esse argumento no contexto do trauma, da memória e do teatro, passo para uma análise de como os personagens traumatizados são situados vis-à-vis o público e o ambiente da peça para mostrar como essas diferentes relações impactam no modo como seu trauma é figurado. Em seguida, desenvolvo esses estudos de personagens para observar o impacto geral do trauma do personagem no arco dramatúrgico da peça, concentrando-me particularmente em como o trauma interage com o estilo de teatralidade da peça. Essas leituras atentas mostram como a memória traumática é importante para a lógica dramatúrgica interna da peça, além das ressonâncias biográficas, criando um ponto de partida dramatúrgico frutífero para futuras produções.

Palavras-chave: Trauma; Memória; *O zoológico de vidro*; *Um bonde chamado Desejo*; *De repente, no ultimo verão.*

The glass menagerie's narrator Tom Wingfield stands in his merchant sailor uniform as he directly addresses the audience at the play's start. This stand-in for playwright Tom *Tennessee* Williams explicitly says, "The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings" (Williams, 1971b, p. 145). The theme of memory is also present in the stage directions preceding these initial lines of dialogue and throughout the dialogue in the much later gentleman caller scene. Much has been said of the function of memory in this most famous memory play, particularly about the ways that Tom's retelling of his time with his mother, Amanda, and sister, Laura "can usefully be placed next to the memory constructions of Jung, Halbwachs, Williams James, Bartlett, and T. S. Eliot" (Favorini, 2007, p. 47). Why might this sailor be looking back at the end of Word War II, remembering an earlier time and more domestic problems? Might Tom have returned stateside with physical and/or mental injuries from his time at war? And, if so, how might these play into the way *The glass menagerie* is structured? The theme of memory's presence and reliability is omnipresent in Williams's work, but the scholarly and practical discussions around it have tended toward the thematic and biographical rather than the dramaturgical. Yet memory is not purely poetic in plays such as *The glass menagerie, A streetcar named Desire*, *Suddenly last summer, Vieux Carré, The two-character play*, to name a few.

It is no accident that many of these plays perform a poetic exorcism of Tom's older sister, Rose Williams, before her lobotomy. Tennessee's guilt over not being able to protect Rose haunts his writing, but the plays that depict Rose and Tennessee are not purely biographical accounts of this trauma. Three plays in particular show the variety of how trauma is portrayed within the narratives themselves: *The glass menagerie* (1945), *A streetcar named Desire* (1947), and *Suddenly last summer* (1958).

The glass menagerie focuses on Tom's memory of a St. Louis household run by an overbearing mother, Amanda Wingfield, and his shy, disabled sister, Laura. Amanda forces Tom to get a gentleman caller from work to come home for dinner in the hope that Laura might have a romantic prospect, but when it is revealed that the gentleman he chose, Jim O'Connor, was spoken for, these hopes shatter. Tom then leaves to join the merchant sailors. In *A streetcar named Desire*, Blanche DuBois travels to New Orleans to visit her sister Stella after losing her husband, Allan Gray, to suicide and their family home, Belle Reve, to creditors. Blanche is shocked by Stella's lower-class home and husband, but she tries to make a romantic connection with Stanley's friend, Mitch. Stanley rapes Blanche while Stella is in the hospital having Stanley's baby, and Blanche is subsequently committed. In *Suddenly last summer*, Mrs. Venable invites her niece, Catherine Holly, to her home to force Catherine to either recant her story about her cousin Sebastian's death or to undergo a lobotomy. Mrs. Venable has brought a doctor to the house to prove Catherine is lying, but even under the effects of a *truth serum*, Catherine's story is that Sebastian was devoured by the young men and children of Cabeza de Lobo.

In all of these plays, the themes of difference, asylums, and medical precarity do indeed relate to Rose Williams, but the biographical aspects of Tennessee Williams's personal trauma and guilt do not help a production team explore the plays. But these plays also speak to the nature of traumatic memory—whether rosy in retrospect, accidentally failing, or purposefully repressed—as a dramaturgical force that shapes the structure of the surrounding play. These plays provide opportunities to explore the ways that theories of traumatic memory can map onto dramaturgical structures. Building off of the work of trauma studies scholars such as Cathy Caruth (1995), my dramaturgical analysis moves beyond the autobiographical implications of Rose-avatars in *The glass menagerie, A streetcar named Desire*, and *Suddenly last summer* to look at how the characters' experiences with trauma—war, assault, death, abandonment—are reflected in the plays'

stylistic choices. After delving into scholarship on traumatic memory and the connections between memory and theatre, I next turn to theatrical representations of traumatic memory in these three plays. My analysis first focuses on the traumatized character's relationship to the world of the play and the audience, from Tom's seeming ability to control aspects of the narrative to the audience's ability to hear the *Varsouviana* in Blanche's mind to the theatrical distance between Catherine and both other characters and the audience. After seeing how the traumatized character fits into the play's overall style of theatricality, I next turn to the way that this character fits into the play's style as a whole as I read Tom's dramaturgical choices, the structural changes in what the *Varsouviana* means throughout *Streetcar*, and the juxtaposition between truth and reality in the staging elements of *Suddenly*. By studying the trauma within these plays, without needing to connect it to biographical realities, we can more fully appreciate how Williams explored traumatic memory through the internal worlds of each of these three plays.

"COMMIT THEM TO MEMORY":[3] TRAUMA AND MEMORY

Memory, and remembering, takes on a strong significance in both psychological and theatrical practices. In a great deal of theatre productions, memorizing lines and movement [blocking] is a core part of early rehearsals so that these aspects of the play can move out of active remembering in the moment. If the actors feel confident enough in the lines and movements of, *Streetcar*, they can then spend their energy on the nuances of emotional depth and motivation for Blanche, Stella, Stanley, Mitch, and others. In fact, it is often the case that actors failing to remember certain lines in their parts have not fully incorporated those sections of text into their understandings of a given character or scene. This view of theatrical practice lends itself to early psychological concepts such as Sigmund Freud's (1950) famous essay "Remembering, repeating and working-through". The process of rehearsing a Williams play could literally be said to follow this series of steps: the actors memorize their parts [remember], rehearse the action in collaboration with the other members of the cast and the production team [repeat], and, in doing so, transform the play from words on a page into a compelling story that reveals why we have watched these characters in these specific moments [working-through].

[3] Williams (1947, p. 44).

So, despite the fact that most contemporary psychology has moved beyond Freud, there are some important aspects of the early understanding of trauma and memory that continue to map onto theatre practices today. Freud's description of the process of remembering, repeating, and working-through also seems to show the power of *acting* or, at least of *acting out.* He writes that

> The greater the resistance, the more extensively will acting out (repetition) replace remembering. […] We have learnt that the patient repeats instead of remembering, and repeats under the conditions of resistance. We may now ask what it is that he in fact repeats or acts out. The answer is that he repeats everything that has already made its way from the sources of the repressed into his manifest personality–his inhibitions and unserviceable attitudes and his pathological character-traits (Freud, 1950, p. 151).

Now, if we make a small but important shift in our analysis of this process by applying it not to the *actor* but to the *character*, then this passage begins to apply to the work of this essay. It is not the *actors* who need to work through the events of these Williams plays, but in fact the *characters* who continually remember and repeat the events to try to work-through their traumas. Each production of these plays provides these characters with difference performers to bring them to life and different cultural circumstances, but they each provide another opportunity to work-through the circumstances of the plays.

The repetition itself is never a pure copy of the original event, either in performance or in the reality of traumatic memory. As trauma studies scholar Cathy Caruth notes,

> […] insistent reenactments of the past do not simply serve as testimony to an event, but may also, paradoxically enough, bear witness to a past that was never fully experienced as it occurred. Trauma, that is, does not simply serve as record of the past but precisely registers the force of an experience that is not yet fully owned (Caruth, 1995, p. 151).

The characters in these plays, even the narrator Tom, reveal more details than they could realistically have taken in during these moments. The plays provide the opportunity for them to see the larger picture. Now, I must pause here to note that I do not mean to make light of the trauma experienced by actual people by applying these concepts to fictional characters. Instead, I hope to reveal how the dramaturgical structures of these three Williams plays mimic actual experiences of, and responses to, trauma to show another possible explanation for their continued cultural relevance.

To this end, I am not interested in biographical readings of Williams's own psychology through his work. However, I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the writing that has been done about Williams's own trauma and his psychoanalytic treatment in 1957. W. Scott Griffies, M.D. concludes that, for Williams,

> Writing was a means of surviving the traumatic emotions of his childhood, which included intense marital conflict, verbal violence, rejection, loneliness, and loss. It helped him regulate inner terrors that overwhelmed his sister, Rose, who had no such outlet, and led to her descending into psychosis (Griffies, 2022, p. 494).

Although Williams's motivation is not necessarily important here, the fact that he knew about how trauma manifested does lend some experience to these traumatized fictional characters. This is further evident in the fact that plays like *Streetcar* have been taken up by scholars studying medical humanities and trauma. Fred Ribkoff and Paul Tyndall write,

> Instead of diagnosing Blanche, it is more useful to consider the ways in which the play anticipates and corroborates developments in psychological and psychoanalytic discourse. […] In fact, *Streetcar* adumbrates elements of trauma theory, specifically symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD): 1) involuntary reliving of the traumatic event(s); 2) dissociation; 3) self-destructive behavior; 4) guilt, shame, denial, and the compulsion to repeat the story of trauma, and 5) the shattering of the self (Ribkoff; Tyndall, 2011, p. 326).

There are several notable aspects of this attention to Blanche's behavior here. The first is that many of these behaviors can also be found in *Suddenly last summer*, and other Williams plays. The second is that there is serious attention played to Blanche's symptoms without any discussion of how these behaviors are portrayed in the dramatic text itself. In other words, sometimes we watch Blanche's behavior and can identify her response as others in the real world might while, at other times, the audience experiences Blanche's internal reality in ways that would not be visible to peers or doctors in a real-life scenario.

Building off of this groundwork, I turn now to close readings of these three Williams plays for a better understanding of how their dramaturgical structures represent various aspects of traumatic memory in ways that both mimic actual traumatic memory and also create theatrical patterns for staging trauma. Although Williams had his own experiences with trauma, these plays stand alone in their representations, and deserve attention beyond the metaphorical ties to Williams's own relationship with his sister.

"I'M *SICK*, I'M *SICK!*—OF BEING *BOSSED* AND *BULLIED*":[4] STORYTELLING AND SYMPTOMS

And so, I return to Tom, at the start of both this essay and *The glass menagerie*, who is self-aware of the frame of memory that distorts the play he is presenting to the audience. Tom's role as narrator enables us to see not only what parts of the story he chooses to include, but also how he frames those inclusions. As Williams's stage directions note, Tom "[…] is an undisguised convention of the play. He takes whatever license with dramatic convention is convenient to his purposes" (Williams, 1971b, p. 144). Tom also admits that his memories of Amanda and Laura are tinged with sentimentality, while the gentleman caller, Jim,

> […] is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from. But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for (Williams, 1971b, p. 145).

Tom's most interesting inclusion is therefore the scene between Laura and her gentleman caller, as his *memory* here is pure fabrication of a scene he was not present to witness.

Why does Tom make the choice to create a scene of genuine connection between Laura and Jim before he knows [remembers] that the two will not be together? As Caruth writes, "The danger of speech, of integration into the narration of memory, may lie not in what it cannot understand, but in that it understands too much" (Caruth, 1995, p. 154). Tom understands all too well that Laura had limited chances for contact with people outside of her family, let alone someone who might actually see, appreciate, and respect her. So, he cannot bear to tell the story of his abandonment of her without first denying that his leaving occurred on the heels of another disappointment without a silver lining. In Tom's version, Laura gets to have the moment that she hoped for before it was all taken away. But Tom's "refusal of understanding, then, is also a fundamentally creative act" (Caruth, 1995, p. 155). He creates a beautiful scene for Laura that could have possibly sustained her after Tom went so far away.

Exactly how far Tom has gone from his family is made clear when he appears in his uniform at the top of the play, especially in 1945 when the play first premiered. Tom has likely seen action in the war, which means that it is possible that he might experience

[4] Williams (1971a, p. 372).

PTSD or some other form of traumatic response to combat. Throughout his telling of *The glass menagerie*, Tom seems to focus on a simplified, romanticized past, but he is intruded upon by both recent events and the guilt that accompanies even the nicest memories of his sister. He mentions Spain's Guernica twice, contrasting it with his impression that, in St. Louis,

> there was only hot swing music and liquor, dance halls, bars, and movies, and sex that hung in the gloom like a chandelier and flooded the world with brief, deceptive rainbows. . . . All the world was waiting for bombardments!" (Williams, 1971b, p. 179).

Tom's perception of St. Louis as a trivial place in a dangerous world can be read as a denial of the impact of his departure, but his memory will not allow him to fully escape responsibility. In his closing monologue, he says,

> I would have stopped, but I was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. Perhaps it was a familiar bit of music. Perhaps it was only a piece of transparent glass. Perhaps I am walking along a street at night, in some strange city, before I have found companions. I pass the lighted window of a shop where perfume is sold. The window is filled with pieces of colored glass, tiny transparent bottles in delicate colors, like bits of a shattered rainbow. Then all at once my sister touches my shoulder. I turn around and look into her eyes. Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be! (Williams, 1971b, p. 237).

This language can be seen as an involuntary retelling of traumatic events, as mentioned in conjunction with *Streetcar* above. In fact, Tom also describes triggers, both aural and visual, that catalyze this remembering. He does not seem to have war flashbacks, or at least he does not mention any. Perhaps this story is the easier one for him to tell because he has more distance from it. Despite his attempt to gain control over these memories, Tom's narration reveals a complex pattern of negotiation with trauma that is still not worked through. And regardless of his apparent curation of the play's events, *Menagerie* ends with Tom's admission that he cannot escape these memories despite wanting to leave them behind.

Although Blanche is not technically the narrator of *A streetcar named Desire*, there are signs that the audience is meant to be aligned with her perception of the world. The most overt evidence of this connection is that the audience hears the auditory hallucinations that accompany her remembering, repeating, and working through of her

young husband's death. The stage directions note that the *Varsouviana* plays at a variety of volumes at six distinct moments in the play, including the very first scene and the final moments of the play (Williams, 1947, p. 28, 68, 115, 136, 139, 166, 171, 174). Instead of Tom, who is able to speak directly to the audience to explain that he keeps being transported back to a traumatic moment, Blanche does not have the theatrical gift of direct address. Instead, the audience is left to analyze the pattern of the tune's appearance until the start of Act III, when Mitch appears after having stood Blanche up at her birthday party:

> BLANCHE. […] How is your mother? Isn't your mother well?
> MITCH. Why?
> BLANCHE. Something's the matter tonight, but never mind. I won't cross-examine the witness. I'll just—[*Touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.*]—pretend I don't notice anything different about you! That—music again . . .
> MITCH. What music?
> BLANCHE. The polka tune they were playing when Allan—Wait!
> [*A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.*]
> There now, the shot! It always stops after that.
> [*The polka music dies out again.*]
> Yes, now it's stopped (Williams, 1947, p. 141).

In case any audience members missed it before, the connection to the repeated song is now made clear: Blanche is reliving the song that was playing when she told Allan that she knew he was gay and was disgusted by it, which resulted in his running out and dying by suicide. The shot has not accompanied the *Varsouviana* sound cue in the previous versions but, by this point in the play, Blanche feels that she is once again in a familiar scenario with a disastrous conclusion.

As is the case in *Menagerie*, there are compounding traumatic events here from different temporal moments. Tom's guilt leads him to relive his departure from St. Louis in the shadow of his experiences in Word War II, while Blanche is haunted by her guilt over Allan's suicide even in the moments before this trauma is compounded by her rape by Stanley. Although Blanche is clearly experiencing a downward spiral as the possibility of marrying Mitch evaporates, Ribkoff and Tyndall point out that her reaction to the music in this moment is different than it is at the start of the play. They write,

> Instead of being physically sickened by the memory of Allan's suicide, as she was at the beginning of the play when Stanley asked her about her husband, she now seems to be analyzing the pattern of her post-traumatic disorder. When she refers to the tune by its title and acknowledges the

> sequence of sounds and events within this post-traumatic reenactment, she is trying to make sense of her disordered consciousness. […] In fact, she is analyzing what Judith Herman calls 'normal human responses to extreme circumstances' manifest in 'traumatic syndromes' (Ribkoff; Tynadall, 2011, p. 330).

Making this aspect of Blanche's traumatic response visible, and having her acknowledge its pattern to Mitch, shifts this moment from being about the traumatic event itself to Blanche's response to her own trauma. She cannot manipulate the world the way Tom can, but she also experiences triggers. Any moment where she is either directly reminded of Allan Gray or of the hopeless circumstance of losing an opportunity to move forward brings her right back to that original moment of trauma. And yet she has learned that these moments will pass and so she perseveres. The *Varsouviana* rises to a crescendo as the final words of the play are uttered, but the curtain falls before Blanche hears the shot. The repetition is not quite over, which perhaps means that Blanche's story is not finished quite yet.

There are several similarities between Blanche's circumstances and Catherine's from *Suddenly last summer*. For example, both women are telling a story that the surrounding family members cannot bring themselves to witness, let alone believe. Those family members would rather commit them than deal with the potential revelations in their stories. However, unlike Blanche, Catherine has the opportunity to tell her story on stage, where Dr. Cukrowicz [Dr. Sugar] seems to believe her. But Catherine arrives on the scene later than Tom and Blanche, resulting in a very different framing of the traumatic narrative. Whereas Tom is the person introducing and telling the story of his sister's life and Blanche is the character the audience follows from practically the start to finish in *Streetcar*, *Suddenly last summer* shifts the roles around significantly. The overbearing mother, here called Mrs. Venable, is now the first family member the audience meets. And she is not happy. This play's gay man, her son Sebastian, has been killed before the play's action begins, like Allan Gray, except that he did not die by suicide. Catherine was his cousin, not his wife, but she was similarly unable to save Sebastian from his death at the hands [and mouths] of the inhabitants of Cabeza de Lobo. Mrs. Venable tells Dr. Sugar that what she knows of Catherine's story about Sebastian's death is "a hideous attack on my son's moral character which, being dead, he can't defend himself from. I have to be the defender" (Williams, 1971a, p. 361). She proceeds to discuss how *chaste* her son was, as she is apparently more concerned by the implication that Sebastian was gay than the idea that

he could have been turned on by a group of the young men and boys he had been sexually pursuing.

Mrs. Venable's attempts to influence Dr. Sugar precede Catherine's arrival. Catherine eventually appears and asks Sister Felicity, the nun accompanying her from the asylum for a cigarette before promptly using it to burn the Sister's palm. It is unclear if Catherine's disturbed nature is the cause or result of her confinement. When Sister Felicity accuses Catherine of burning her deliberately, Catherine says, "I'm *sick*, I'm *sick!*—of being *bossed* and *bullied*!" (Williams, 1971a, p. 372, author's highlights). But is Catherine *sick*? That is, of course, the main question of the play. After a lengthy set-up, Catherine repeats her story in a lengthy monologue with only occasional interruptions from the other characters. She recounts the events of the day of Sebastian's death, increasing in intensity as she seems to be reliving the events. She says, "I'm going on. I have to wait now and then till it gets clearer. Under the drug it has to be a vision, or nothing comes…." (Williams, 1971a, p. 416). Despite the word *vision*, her memory also includes aural landscape. Although it is not the *Varsouviana* Catherine hears, the sound that she repeatedly describes is an "Oompa, oompa, oompa!" (Williams, 1971a, p. 417, 417, 421) like a tuba. Before the final invocation of the oompa oompa and several other aspects of the soundscape the stage directions note that "The percussive sounds described are very softly employed" (Williams, 1971a, p. 420). Although this is not the same as playing the same song, these sounds do share something in common with the repetitions of the *Varsouviana.* Not only are both sounds associated with the upbeat energy of a band [either polka or brass], but also the presence of these sounds in the theatrical space lends credence to the impact of these traumatic events on Blanche and Catherine.

Mrs. Venable is, of course, unmoved by Catherine's reaction to recounting this experience. She thinks the story sounds too fanciful from start to finish. However, as Caruth (1995, p. 154) notes, "The impossibility of a comprehensible story, however, does not necessarily mean the denial of a transmissible truth". Catherine's story might not be unfiltered truth, but that does not mean that her narrativizing of it does not convey the truth of what happened to Sebastian Venable. In fact, Catherine's hesitance to tell the tale until the end of the play, as well as the repeated intrusions of sounds and visual cues, bear the hallmarks of traumatic memory. Dr. Sugar sees this too, leading him to the final line in the play: "I think we ought at least to consider the possibility that the girls' story could be

true…" (Williams, 1971a, p. 423). The curtain falls before the audience can see if Mrs. Venable is willing to concede.

All three of the traumatized characters in these plays navigate their traumatic memories in different ways through the text, particularly in how these characters experience their relationships with the worlds of the play and the audience. Tom has the most immediate relationship with the audience, but he is still experiencing triggers and hallucinations like the *Varsouviana* for Blanche or the *oompa oompa* sound for Catherine. The repetitions in all of these memories show that these characters are still in the process of working through their trauma, and their respective narratives provide opportunities to help them in that processing.

"THE SCENE IS MEMORY AND IS THEREFORE NONREALISTIC":[5] THE [DRAMATURGICAL] STRUCTURE OF MEMORY

Now that we have a clearer sense of how the traumatized characters of Tom, Blanche, and Catherine fit into their respective plays, I want to pull back from the character level to look at the entire structures of *The glass menagerie*, *A streetcar named Desire*, and *Suddenly last summer*. As before, I will begin with *Menagerie*, which also has the most obvious structural association to memory, as it is a memory play. As Attilio Favorini writes,

> As a 'time art' (like music, dance, and literature), rather than a 'space art' (architecture, painting, sculpture), theatre has a formal affinity for memory. […] [T]heatre seems particularly thick with memory. From rehearsals to memory plays to theatrical memorabilia to theatres themselves—which constitute the exoskeleton of theatre's memory—theatre can be fruitfully contextualized as an activity of remembering (Favorini, 2007, p. 30-31, author's highlights).

Although theatre has connections with memory in both its writing and it's production processes, as I noted earlier, the memory play itself is a dramatic style that leans into the ways that theatrical conventions can both mimic and expose the *tricks* our memories can play. Although *Streetcar* and *Suddenly* are not memory plays, they both stage the memories of specific characters, meaning that all three plays have something to say about that way that the conventions of trauma, memory, and theatre are represented

[5] Williams (1971b, p. 143).

on stage.

The Williams stage direction that titles this section reveals a key aspect of how the playwright saw memory and theatrical style. Memory is nonrealistic in *Menagerie*, as it is in *Streetcar* and *Suddenly*, and yet it is the site of emotional truth. Part of the nonreality of the representation of memory in all three plays is also aural: the fiddle in the wings in *Menagerie*, the *Varsouviana* in *Streetcar*, and the *oompa oompa* in *Suddenly*. But the nonrealistic touches of memory are somehow subtle enough in all three plays that they are often performed like slice-of-life realism. Representing *Menagerie* as this form of realism requires that people ignore that dim lighting, the lack of silverware, the presence of title projections, and metatheatrical awareness that Tom experiences as a character aware that he is in a non-realistic play. Furthermore, I have seen five separate professional productions of *Menagerie* and have never seen the title cards used.

The resistance to remembering, repeating, and working-through the antirealistic aspects of *The glass menagerie* is fascinating. It is as if somehow, the play's emotional reality is so powerful that people are willing to bend the actual dramatic form of the play to mimic the way the play makes them feel. But doing so denies Tom the trauma buried within those memories. If a production smooths out the edges of the play's distancing effects too much, then it could seem as though Tom's memory is faithful. But it is not, and Tom knows it is not. If his memory is accurate, then how can one justify the gentleman caller scene? Perhaps a director might put Tom in the room somehow, but doing so would completely disrupt the intimacy between Jim and Laura in that moment. For the world to be "lit by lightning" (Williams, 1971b, p. 237), the play must be filled with the kinds of moments that stand out because they would startle Tom on a dark street. The images of a flash—both of the lightning and the candles that Laura blows out at the end of the play—relate to a *flashback.* And yet the flashes in the play occur at the end instead of the start. The play is Tom's attempt to conjure these memories without a trigger, to use the theatrical form to try to wrangle his guilt into a linear narrative that both acknowledges and minimizes his role in his sister's suffering. Caruth writes that, "The attempt to gain access to a traumatic history, then, is also the project of listening beyond the pathology of individual suffering, to the reality of a history that in its crises can only be perceived in unassimilable forms" (Caruth, 1995, p. 156). Tom cannot quite process and/or incorporate his experiences at war or his personal familial trauma, a fact shown by his inability to truly

try to get inside of Laura's head or experience. This is why *The glass menagerie* still uses Laura's suffering as a function of Tom's unhappiness.

A streetcar named Desire has a much cleaner realistic structure in the sense that there is no frame around the world of the play. Blanche arrives in New Orleans with the ghosts of Belle Reve, Allan Gray, the Tarantula Arms, and an unnamed student, but all of those parts of her past are revealed in realistic dialogue. In fact, the only unrealistic aspects of the world come in the form of soundscapes, particularly the *Varsouviana*. The seven appearances of the song form their own sort of pattern that maps onto the overall structure of the play. It first appears at the end of Act I, Scene 1 during an exchange with Stanley:

> STANLEY. You were married once, weren't you?
> [*The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance.*]
> BLANCHE. Yes, when I was quite young.
> STANLEY. What happened?
> BLANCHE. The boy—the boy died. [*She sinks back down*] I'm afraid I'm—going to be sick.
> [*Her head falls on her arms*] (Williams, 1947, p. 28).

Thus, it is a direct question about Allan that first triggers Blanche to hear the music but not the shot. The tune's direct connection to Allan's existence and ephemera continues through its next appearance, at the end of Act II, Scene II, when Blanche is telling Mitch about Allan.

But this pattern is shattered by the next time the song is heard, this time in Act III, Scene II, after Stanley hands Blanche a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel, Mississippi as a *birthday present*. As she holds the ticket in her hand, "The Varsouviana music steals in softly and continues playing" (Williams, 1947, p. 136). Once the pattern of direct connect to Allan has been broken, it is never reestablished. Throughout the rest of the play—in the scene with Mitch mentioned earlier and in the final moments of Blanche's exit—the song comes to represent Blanche's feelings of dread, solitude, anxiety, and powerlessness associated with Allan's death, but does not require a mention of Allan himself. Interestingly, the shot only occurs a single time, in the scene with Mitch. This means that Blanche has either managed to find a coping mechanism or technique to stop the memory before the shot the previous times, or that the play's scenes have faded out before the cycle completes. That detail leaves a certain amount of Blanche's agency and power up to interpretation and provides hope in the play's end—she has not heard the shot yet, so

perhaps she can still change the pattern. This would be radically different if the audience could not hear the *Varsouviana*. The dramatic irony present in scenes where the audience knows what is happening inside of Blanche's head, while the other characters are not, makes the audience privy to details of her psychological journey that are not available to the other characters in the play. This is certainly to Blanche's benefit. One can only imagine how Stanley would react to knowing that Blanche has a soundtrack in her head because of the death of her gay husband.

Although it is tempting to look at *Streetcar* as the most realistic of these three plays, *Suddenly last summer*'s strict adherence to linear time gives it a temporal reality that *Menagerie* and *Streetcar* cannot approach. And yet, though the play happens in real time, its opening stage directions begin with a note that,

> The set may be as unrealistic as the décor of a dramatic ballet. […] The interior is blended with a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest, in the prehistoric age of giant fern-forests when living creatures had flippers turning to limps and scales to skin. The colors of this jungle-garden are violent, especially since it is steaming with heat after rain. There are massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body, torn out, still glistening with undried blood.; there are harsh cries and sibilant hissings and thrashing sounds in the garden as if it were inhabited by beasts, serpents and birds, all of savage nature…. (Williams, 1971a, p. 349).

A dream ballet world that also evokes untamed nature and the violence of body parts sets the scene for a play in which we are asked to believe that a gay white man was literally torn limb-from-limb and eaten by a group of brown children. The entire play leads us to believe that the words coming out of Catherine's mouth are emotionally true, and perhaps even objectively true, yet the world of the play is explicitly unrealistic [or, not true]. The juxtaposition between the scenic elements and the play's obsession with *truth* can be explained away as easily as it is in the previous two plays: symbolic truth is still seen as truth in the theatre, as it is in other art forms. We know that we are sitting in a theatre watching actors play their parts against a set that might be equally at home as a set for *Little shop of horrors*. This is not a criticism [of *Suddenly* or *Little shop*], but simply a rather fascinating look at what theatrical belief looks like.

The fact of the matter is that any Catherine on stage in front of us is, in a sense, *lying*. She has *not* seen Sebastian swallowed up by boys in Cabeza de Lobo. But the emotional truth of what Catherine has gone through rings true, regardless of the details. And an actor inhabiting that story is not lying, but rather representing a human experience

that cannot be rendered neatly into words. One aspect of traumatic memory is this inability to render into sense that which has been experienced. And so it does not matter if the set for the garden is painted cardboard with the word "plants" written in big letters across it—if the actor playing Catherine can manage to commit to her monologue and experience the increasingly large waves of emotion that crash down within it, the play will be largely successful. In a certain sense, the payoff of that monologue against the anti-realistic set and other characters in the play simply reveals what is important in representations of traumatic memory. *Suddenly last summer* stages a trauma survivor narrating her experience while others witness her, which is a key aspect of dealing with trauma. Not only that, but the play concludes with a medical professional siding with Catherine against her aunt who wants to silence her from telling her truth. In this way, the details of the world around Catherine do not matter, because she cannot see those things clearly due to her unprocessed trauma. She has been hidden, but not treated. Therefore, the nuns assisting her appear almost cartoon-like, and the house where her aunt lives now appears as physically (and botanically) dangerous as it feels emotionally to her. The audience accepts these aspects of Catherine's reality the same way we accept hearing the *Varsouviana* when Blanche hears it, or when the *oompa-oompa* sound transports Catherine back to the moment she watched her cousin die in Cabeza de Lobo.

"AND SO GOODBYE….":[6] FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Although it is tempting to look at *The glass menagerie, A streetcar named Desire*, and *Suddenly last summer* as three versions of Williams's never-ending mission to relieve the guilt he had for leaving Rose Williams to get a lobotomy, this strictly biographical reading misses some of the most interesting aspects of the ways traumatic memory appears in these plays. Tom, Blanche, and Catherine [and Mrs. Venable, to some extent] all represent different responses to trauma and the process of remembering, repeating, and working through that trauma. Not only do each of these characters have different causes of trauma, symptoms, and ways of representing their stories, but the dramatic styles and structures of their individual plays are intricately tied to their specific traumatic experiences. No two of these three plays are alike, and yet they share some common themes that match up with

[6] Williams (1971b, p. 237).

writings about the actual experiences of traumatic memory and its representations. My hope is that this closer look at the dramaturgical structures of these plays encourages productions to look beyond biographical explanations for why these plays tell these specific stories the way they do and that, in the process of taking these characters as something beyond avatars of the Williams family members, we can find new ways of telling these still resonant stories.

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