A Rose for Tennessee Williams[1]

Uma Rosa para Tennessee Williams

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Abstract

This essay analyzes different versions of a major plot and its characters created and rewritten by Tennessee Williams between the 1930 and 1970 decades, verifying in which ways formal and thematic adaptations and changes made in different historical moments correspond to social changes that took place in the US in each specific period. Three plays are here analyzed: *27 wagons full of cotton* (1946), *The unsatisfactory supper* or *The long stay cut short* (1946) and *Tiger Tail* (1976), as well as the screenplay *Baby Doll* (1955) and the short story "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton" (1936).

Keywords: Tennessee Williams (1911-1983); US theatre; Dramaturgy and history.

Resumo

Este ensaio busca retomar diferentes versões de personagens e de um enredo central criados e reescritos por Tennessee Williams entre as décadas de 1930 e 1970, verificando de que modo as adaptações e alterações temático-formais realizadas em diferentes momentos da história refletem modificações sociais ocorridas nesse mesmo período nos Estados Unidos. Para tanto, analisamos três peças teatrais: *27 wagons full of cotton* (1946), *The unsatisfactory supper* or *The long stay cut short* (1946) e *Tiger Tail* (1976), o roteiro cinematográfico *Baby Doll* (1955) e o conto "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton" (1936).

Palavras-chave: Tennessee Williams (1911-1983); Teatro EUA; Dramaturgia e história.

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This essay reexamines, after several years, a former research on the dramaturgy of Thomas Lanier (or Tennessee) Williams (1911-1983), accomplished at State University of Campinas, with notes and updates based on the rereading/reassessment of certain updated and significant issues. It readdresses a period of immersion in this dramatist´s work for a dissertation mentored by late and dearly remembered Professor Eric Mitchell Sabinson.

Before and around the year 2000, his courses at the Language Studies Institute were offered in the Translation Studies area. Professor Sabinson's subjects focusing on American theatre attracted a great number of students, who gathered for long discussions after the classes. A son of prominent press agent and former Broadway League executive director Harvey Sabinson (1924-2019), he would tell us students of his impressions and details of countless New York premieres he had had the opportunity to watch in his youth, including a few of Tennessee Williams´s last plays. In these classes and discussion circles, Williams´s characters would come up in the powerful reciting of lines remembered by heart, as we learned different meanings and translations of current slang and expressions, without which several subtle meanings would have passed unnoticed (such as typically southern jargons or very specific artistic or queer vocabulary, somewhat veiled at the time). The American history and ways of life at the time the plays were written and staged were always emphasized in his analyses, and he would frequently lend us generous volumes of his own books. That is how I ended up reading dozens of Tennessee Williams´s plays, following his precious suggestions and mentoring, up to the point we decided on the theme for my master´s dissertation research. Although we did partially disagree on the interpretation of certain aspects of American ideology, we ended up choosing five works (or their re-creations) by Williams, written in four different decades and moments of his career, as we shall further examine.

Tennessee Williams´s writings throughout his life amount to a vast work, and in his multiple dramatic work one finds almost ´another´ author, to a certain extent unknown to the general reader. In his research on Williams´s late plays, in *Neither mad nor repressed: the countercultural confrontation between women and mainstream culture in Tennessee Williams´s late plays*,[3] Luis Márcio Arnaut (2022, Apêndices) presents a precious and updated inventory of the author's cataloged plays, including his non-canonical or generally

[3] Original title in Portuguese: *Nem loucas, nem reprimidas, o confronto contracultural da mulher com o mainstream nas late plays de Tennessee Williams.*

unknown ones (by and large and also in Brazil); and emphasizes the importance of the study of the author´s vast material, which should include the plays that stand outside the narrow period of the author´s prolific writings that include only his most famous and commercial pieces, according to Thomas Keith (in Arnaut, 2022, flap).

The present comeback to Williams´s works, decades later, as well as a return to their most significant traits and characteristics, intends to reexamine the prevalence of certain formal and historic assumptions, considering as well the great amount of research on the author´s dramaturgy that was nimbly produced in the last years at University of São Paulo. Beyond the academic research on short plays by Williams, which till further notice we believe to have started in Brazil, in 2000, several other short and long plays by the author have been object of interest to multiple academic theses and dissertations in the Modern Languages/English department of our university, one more reason to return to the aforementioned work, in this volume specially dedicated to Tennessee Williams.

Acclaimed by critics as one of the three major twentieth-century American postwar playwrights, along with Eugene O'Neill e Arthur Miller, Tennessee Williams achieved major success for fifteen continued years. He left dozens of plays, some of which still unpublished, as well as novels, poems, short stories and screenplays – being movie screens an important medium for the wider dissemination of his dramaturgy. Williams´s is a theatre of emotions, of instinct and its violence, a theatre of sexuality, loneliness, marginality and loss, to a certain extent a confessional drama, surrounded by deep tensions and poetry. His characters come essentially from the American South, the author's childhood South, full of past reminiscences, simultaneously violent and poetic, puritan and full of prejudice, aristocratic and decadent. Dealing with the individual´s nonconformity to a certain way of life and certain socially normalized behaviors, Williams's drama focuses on man´s isolation in a corrupted society and his struggle to maintain individuality in a collective structure ruled by mass values; in that sense, his drama frequently unveiled the inaptitude of the most fragile ones to conform to the demands of a materialist, hypocritical and profit-oriented world, full of prejudice and indifferent to the grief of others. His drama frequently staged maladapted characters living on the sidelines of society´s merciless and selfish reality. If he was at times scorned as a lurid playwright seeking nothing else but to scandalize his audiences by means of morbid melodramas filled with violence, sex and frustrations, he was on the other hand

vastly acclaimed as a great playwright, one whose poetic intensity managed to reproduce on stage characters and situations of intense realism.

Tennessee Williams´s dramaturgy, consistently staged on Broadway, was translated to several languages and his plays were staged in various European countries,[4] as well as in Brazil, particularly in the 1950s and 1960s.[5] Our national cinema exhibited several screen adaptations of his dramaturgy, which intensified in the fifties. Beyond the significant national stage productions, Hollywood´s influence in the forties and fifties was very powerful, especially in the rising metropolises attuned to the ´American way´ and unaware of peripheral or Third World relations. Since World War I, when countries such as France, Germany and Britain had to forcibly halt film productions, Hollywood took over Latin America´s film market, amounting to 95 percent of all exhibited movies. Regardless of how one may judge imperialist or commercial aspects of such influence, the impact of its signs in the new and developing national ways of life, as well as in the new aesthetic expectations for Brazil´s cultural history was undeniable. American patterns spread in the mass media made up a cycle made of the film, its poster (which not only advertised the movie, but also generated great expectation and curiosity), general or specialized magazines and literature which boosted the phenomenon, the movie songs heard through the radio, photo albums and collections, ads bearing images of the movie stars, etc. (Meneguello, 1996, p. 12).

James Baldwin has once famously stated that every writer tells one single story.[6] In that sense, one can point out that Tennessee Williams´s writing is to a great extent self-referential, not only in the sense of summoning events namely inspired on his personal life (some of which, as a matter of fact, were 'psychologically interpreted' to exhaustion, including non-authorized biographies and gossips mixing what would be later known as 'cult celebrity' with more or less fantastic or analytical inspections of his daring, 'atypical' private life). Throughout his vast dramaturgy and multiple revised or rewritten works (including poems, short stories, screenplays and plays launched through decades),

[4] Among several others, at the Royal Court Theatre, the Comedy Theatre and the Arts Theatre in London. In Paris, at the Antoine, the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Grammont, and at Théâtre de l´Oeuvre.

[5] Upon this matter, we quote the 2021 dissertation of David Medeiros Neves (*Apresentação e recepção crítica das peças de Tennessee Williams na renovação do teatro paulistano (1948 to 1964)*, School of Communications and Arts) that reports in updated detail and analyses the critical reception of Williams´s plays in Brazil between 1948 and 1964.

[6] "Every writer has only one story to tell, and he has to find a way of telling it until the meaning becomes clearer and clearer, until the story becomes at once more narrow and larger, more and more precise, more and more reverberating."

recurring characters, themes and forms return from time to time, narrowing or enlarging meanings and interpretations, in notorious reverberations.

As is also common in Nelson Rodrigues´s dramaturgy, 'the same' characters somehow continually return along the playwright´s path, bearing either the same or different names along with their founding characteristics: hence return, in Williams´s plays, typically drifting or marginal characters, set in hopeless scenarios and decadent suburbs in the thirties, or else in the novel capitalist forms rapidly spreading in the rising and prosperous America of the late 1940s and 1950s, following World War II. Hence fragile, ambitious or delicate youngsters either surrendered to a prig, pedantic and hypocrite southern tradition or to a new world, brutally desirous of profit and contrary to any tradition, nostalgia or sensitivity; hence his unmistakable solitary, aging matrons and spinsters, referred to as "little birdlike women without any nest,"[7] who, plunged in seclusion, hatred, alienation, reminiscence, whether helpless or lost in appearances, or else anxious and eager for any control whatsoever, return in search of wealthy or illustrative male saviors. Hence his protagonists, way too human, whether maladjusted or enthusiasts of a vigorous 'new America,' either in the condition of material scarcity or at the height of the celebrated and much desired success of the 'American dream,' question, in different plays and decades, their individual position in an inhospitable and hostile world.

After the reading of Williams's plays, as aforementioned, the following works were selected for our research:

- Theatre plays: *27 wagons full of cotton* (1946), *The unsatisfactory supper* or *The long stay cut short* (1946) e *Tiger Tail* (1976);
- Screenplay: *Baby Doll (*1955);
- Short story: "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton" (1936).

These texts (a short story, three plays and the screenplay on which a film was based) bring diverse, consolidated or embryonic versions of the characters and themes that repeat or modify themselves throughout the writings of Tennessee Williams. Our

[7] In scene 2 of *The glass menagerie* there is a remarkable excerpt that is frequently quoted: in its scene, Amanda, a lady with no husband who is desperately eager to marry her daughter, defines the situation of the spinsters, who lack a providing male, as birds without any nest, doomed to humiliation and homelessness: "I know so well what becomes of unmarried women who aren't prepared to occupy a position. I've seen such pitiful cases in the South—barely tolerated spinsters living upon the grudging patronage of sister's husband or brother's wife!—stuck away in some little mousetrap of a room—encouraged by one in-law to visit another—little birdlike women without any nest—eating the crust of humility all their life! Is that the future that we've mapped out for ourselves?"

hypothesis was to reveal transformations in the author's plays, as associated with socio-historic transformations that simultaneously took place in the United States. By comparing the different works, we tried to figure by which means issues such as social marginalization, power, gender, wealth, prejudice in diverse stances, women´s social role within family and tradition, among similar others, changed in Williams's drama throughout the decades, artistically materialized in different versions of a same plot, across the 1930s-40s, 1950s and 1970s, in agreement with their respective (re)creations. In that sense, the short story "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton" and the play *27 wagons full of cotton* are set in the midst of the Great Depression; the *Baby Doll* movie is subsequent to the culmination of McCarthyism, screened in the moment of ascent of a new American middle class, and within a golden period of Hollywood productions; and *Tiger Tail* is written in the mid-seventies, later than the period of rebelliousness and questionings that were momentous in the 1960s decade.

Assuming that art and culture are expressions of social phenomena (Hauser, 1982, p. 7), or that what is transformed in men´s real and social life is what determines transformations both in philosophic and artistic representations, this study readdresses and verifies the ways through which Williams´s adaptations and changes on a same story, in various times in history, reflect social changes that took place in such periods. Starting from the initial works (or the so-called *early plays*, written between 1930 and 1945, roughly), going through the successful 'main' or *major plays* (written between 1945-1960) and arriving at the so-called *late plays*, ulterior to 1960), we try to verify what issues effectively remain (and do not) behind narratives of success and suggested formal-thematic achievements, beyond the mainstream criticism that usually privileges the plays from the times of greatest commercial success.

We start with the short story "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton" (1936) and with the one-act play *The unsatisfactory supper* or *The long stay cut short* (published in 1946),[8] that introduce both the characters´ initial features and key elements present in the play *27 wagons full of cotton*, also published in 1946. As others from his early plays, these works are situated in the mood of the 1930s and of the Great Depression, in its sense of desolation and in the lack of perspectives in the characters´ fates, especially the female ones. In the

[8] The quoted edition (Williams, 1990) is the play version *The unsatisfactory supper* or *The long stay cut short*, copyrighted in 1946, as informed on page 297. In this essay, it is from now on referred to as *The unsatisfactory supper*. In 1948, the play (possibly this same version) was also published in Williams´s *American blues* collection.

1946 long play, particularly, the characters' socio-economic situation and context loom on the horizon, in the economic dispute between the existing southern power and an Italian foreigner who tried to settle professionally in Roosevelt's New Deal times.

Baby Doll (1955), by its turn, is the screenplay based on the stage play *27 wagons*. Here one can observe to which extent the characters and their interrelationships changed, in little more than a decade. As suggested by the title, instead of the economic fight for the ginned cotton (as in *27 wagons full of cotton)*, what is at dispute now is Meighan's wife, Miss Baby Doll, designated in the title. The title change is not accidental. In a period when the movie industry introduced 'nymphet starlets' such as Marilyn Monroe and Brigitte Bardot, who merged extreme amounts of innocence and eroticism (Bardot starred at seventeen in the Cannes 1954 Festival; in 1955, Marilyn played a provincial, innocent and young curvy girl in *The seven year itch*), Meighan´s wife character – previously a fat, indolent and somewhat stupid lady in *27 wagons* – turns into a voluptuous nineteen-year-old virgin in the 1956 film. Childish and provocative, she now bargains her virginity between a rude and bankrupt older husband and a young, attractive and bold foreigner. In the movie industry of the 'accessible' or advertised American Dream of the affluent 1950s, the prejudice against foreigners gave way to desire, a somewhat exotic one, mixed with a subtle criticism of the objectified or socially discarded female characters, in a same patriarchal and decadent world, a white and broke one, in which new and aggressive exchange relations and new "capital" revolved.

The 1936 short story "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton," which ridiculed southern family relations using some black humor, originated, a decade later, an homonymous one-act-play centered on the exchange relations between a broke southerner and a foreigner bringing 'progress' to the local commercial exchanges. In its later version, in the movie *Baby Doll*, the female protagonist would turn into an asset in their commercial transaction and dispute, exciting and scandalizing audiences in a booming and optimistic 1950s America.

The one-act-play *The unsatisfactory supper* (or *The long-stay cut short*), by its turn, focuses not on the Meighan housewife (whether in the earlier grotesque version or in the new nymphet one), but on the character of aunt Rose, who becomes part of the cast both in the 1955 film and in the play *Tiger Tail* (1976), itself inspired in the film. Born in this one-act-plot from Williams's early plays, aunt Rose enrolls the gallery of typically

marginalized or humiliated characters from the one-act plays set in the Great Depression, among the playwright's initial plays. As Fulvio Torres Flores proposes (2013), in his fine research on *American blues* (a collection of short stories written in the 1930s and 1940s), the life conditions of the working class and of those excluded from work production, vital to understand Williams's work in this period, were a fundamental matter in his early plays. It is also in this direction that Iná Camargo Costa (2001, p. 129) interprets such plays, "marked with the stamp '*social issues and radicalism*'" (our highlight), and frequently relegated by critics to the group of 'surpassed' theatrical experiments of the thirties – since (as many typical early plays), did not belong in the 'successful' period of the 'greater' or 'major' plays. This collection, awarded by the Group Theatre in 1939, as well as the collection *27 wagons full of cotton and other plays* (1945), a collection of plays written in the 1930s-1940s, bear rudiments of the original material of epic nature of Williams's theatre, as spotted by Iná Costa; partially introducing reasons for the "difficulties, mental as well, of a type of southern mythomaniac that he knew so well" (Costa, 2001, p. 135), such characters peopled much of his work, although in his better known plays such difficulties may seem to be caused by essentially individual motivations.

Two decades later than the 'immoral' *Baby Doll*, the 1976 play *Tiger Tail* resumes the screenplay's plot, in a much more violent, sour and rude tone. Belonging to the group of the so called late plays, *Tiger Tail* deals in a different way with the original plot elements. Its title now refers to the location where the story takes place, instead of addressing the men's commercial transaction or the desirable female screen character.

This essay focuses mainly on the works published between 1936 and 1946, and on his female character to whom our title is dedicated: namely, aunt Rose.

Of men and roses: feminine roles in Tennessee Williams

The grotesque 1936 short story

The short story "Twenty-seven wagons full of cotton," that originated all the works examined in this essay, takes place in the state of Arkansas, bearing three characters: Jake Meighan, introduced early in the narrative, and Silva Vicarro and Mrs. Jake Meighan, who participate more actively in the plot. Vicarro is the manager of the

Syndicate Plantation, a small cotton gin recently set in the region. It is implicit from the beginning of the plot that Meighan sets the Syndicate Plantation's rival and better equipped cotton gin on fire. The plot is altogether bizarre, comic, sadistic and somewhat scandalous, considering the epoch's moral patterns. Nonetheless, the comic tone prevails, intertwined with extremely grotesque scenes. The mixture of comic and grotesque features is noticed in the very description of the contrasting characters: Mrs. Meighan is described as a big and terribly fat woman, with "mountains of sweating flesh" (Williams, 1994, p. 46), while the Syndicate Plantation manager is portrayed as a small and dark-skinned man, fascinated by the woman's enormity, that almost doubles his size. At the Meighans' porch, on the day following the arson, both interact while Jake gins the cotton brought by the rival. Vicarro, obsessed with the idea of having sexual relations with the enormous woman, whips her legs from time to time, presumably chasing off the flies. The woman, too lazy in the awfully hot day, sweats continuously after swallowing a whole box of cokes, half sleeping while hearing his advances, accumulating thick saliva in her half-open mouth. Vicarro, after a great effort, manages to push her into the house. He holds the whip while she, suddenly fearful, starts sobbing but ends up entering the place.

Described as lazy, stupid, excessively fat, clumsy and surrounded by flies (which she was too lazy to chase off, but whose crawling on the hairy legs pleased her), the original Mrs. Meighan was somewhat bizarre, incapable of generating any compassion. Her whimsical match with Vicarro, a foreign and proportionally minuscule man holding a whip by means of which trying to force a huge, flabby and almost animalesque woman into a weird adultery, fits Wolfgang Kayser's definition of grotesque: of an alienated universe, revealing simultaneously the estranged and the sinister (Kayser, 1986, p. 159), in a sort of grotesque game resulting from an absurd, strange, repugnant situation.

The 1946 collection: the one-act plays of the humiliated

The homonymous play *27 wagons full of cotton* was categorized by Williams as a "Mississippi Delta comedy." Resuming some of the short story's estranged and playful spirit, the play had a much more serious and pessimistic tone, and the grotesque tone was replaced by grief. As in other one-act plays of this period, his suffering characters resumed a sort of realism very typical of the 1930s. In fact, after the economic crash of 1929, the

country was filled with millions of jobless people, looking for food or livelihood, and many young writers became bitter or gloomy at the rise of fascism and before scenes of misery and injustice. Harold Clurman, one of the founders of the Group Theatre, stated that a good play should deal with challenges of its own time, addressing "the image or symbol of the living problems of our time. […] to all of them there must be some answer, an answer that should be considered operative for at least the humanity of our time and place" (Rabkin, 1964, p. 74). This was an important period for the formation of left-wing groups of workers such as the Prolet-Bühne or the Worker´s Laboratory Theatre (associated to the Workers International), that encouraged the working men to use theatre as support for their disputes (Carlson, 1997). According to John Gassner (1980), in the 1930s, the young writers seeking explanations for the widespread misfortunes accepted the Marxist explanation that capitalism was about to die. In search for some sign of hope, they readily believed in the prediction of a better society rising above the agonistic present:

> [they] dreamed of a world of collective effort undominated by the predatory and anarchic race for profits to which they attributed not only the sorry economic state of affairs but war, hatred, and the frustration of personality. Looking abroad, they saw a new nation arising in Russia, and despite the head-shaking and documentation of some disillusioned reporters the Soviets looked like the Promised Land to a number of the new and a few of the older playwrights. And out of these diagnoses and prognoses arose a new stimulus. The immediate battle between capital and labor, the coming struggle for power between the two classes, and the faith in the imminence of a new order made heady wine for the young men and women who organized new theatre units and wrote for them (Gassner, 1954, p. 761).

In *Tennessee Williams, master of US modern theatre*,[9] Luís Márcio Arnaut (2023, p. 97) also notices the presence of "social movements and political trends seeking social, racial and economic equality, concerning the great contrasts in American society." It is important to study Williams's early plays considering the more politicized theatrical context throughout this decade. His initial plays, bitter and gloomy, were centered on themes concerning the individual, focusing on characters isolated within a superstructure that was only indirectly criticized – for this reason, perhaps, his work in the period was interpreted as having "no social content."[10] Williams's early works, bearing decrepit,

[9] Original title in Portuguese: *Tennessee Williams, o mestre do teatro moderno nos EUA*.

[10] In "The past, the present and the perhaps," preface to *Orpheus descending*, Williams himself mentions that in the thirties, in Chicago, his work was not accepted by the W.P.A. Writers' Project since it allegedly had

ignorant or neglected characters, most of them devoid of perspectives or future, indirectly pointed to nonconformity towards a decadent, greedy and socially excluding society.[11]

Written in such context, the play *27 wagons full of cotton* is composed by an act divided in three scenes, and again bears the couple (Flora and Jake) Meighan and the foreigner Silva Vicarro, manager of the same Syndicate Plantation. The characters become more complex, though, while several of their actions are now more cynical or intelligible, and the sensation of alienation and bizarreness from the short story are diminished.

Jake Meighan, a cotton-gin owner in a small property near Blue Mountain, Mississippi, is a large and fat man, relatively old (sixty), "with arms like hams covered with a fuzz of fine blond hair" (Williams, 1990, p. 13). Silva Vicarro is a small guy, dark and sturdy, with Latin traits and personality. Born in New Orleans, of Italian descent, he is a recent newcomer and manager of the Syndicate Plantation that was ruining old locals such as Jake Meighan. Latin, small and 'dark,' the outsider who is locally settling and disputing work with the 'American' residents wears a Catholic medal on the neck, and bears a whip which he snaps on the floor from time to time.

Written at some point between 1936 and the copyright publication date (1946), it is clear that the action in the play *27 wagons full of cotton* takes place supposedly in 1933, when President Roosevelt took office and delivered the speech on the good-neighborhood policy mentioned in some of the play's lines. Amidst the economic crisis, when new policies were established with the New Deal, Williams focused on the disputes between a new cotton ginning enterprise – symbolized by a slim and dark Latin character who is sabotaged – and the preexistent local power in a southern town, personified by a white, large and dishonest old Meighan. Forced to stand the cynicism of Meighan, who cannot hide his excitement for getting hold of such amount of work in meager times, Vicarro finds out about the arson and Meighan's culpability – through his own wife, the somewhat stupid Mrs. Meighan, who had been strictly instructed not to say her husband had left the house on the day the Syndicate plantation burned down. Aware of the truth, Vicarro plots revenge using Meighan's fat and idiotic wife, whom he will whip and rape, as suggested

no 'social content' or 'protest.'

[11] Concerning Williams´s ideological stance, critic Charles S. Watson characterized him as: "A relentless satirist of capitalism, as shown later in the caricature of Lord Mulligan in Camino Real (1953), Williams ridicules the brashness of American business in *The Glass Menagerie*. Jim tells Laura how he will rise to the top, bragging "Knowledge - Zzzzp! Money – Zzzzp! Power!" Because Jim´s dream – like Willy Loman´s in *Death of a Salesman* – is business success, the anti-capitalist Agrarian Williams can only recoil with scorn (Watson, 1997, p. 178).

by her ravaged appearance in the following scene, in torn clothes and covered with bruises. After the husband's ambiguous suggestion of the wife entertaining the foreigner, quoting Roosevelt's good-neighborhood policy, the foreigner concludes that this world "is built on a principle of tit for tat" (Williams, 1990, p. 22), and takes advantage or the 'kindness exchanges'. An object of revenge from the foreigner and object of the husband's corruption, and of the scorn of both, the childish Flora Meighan passively pays the price of the masculine commercial trade, in times of scarcity and competition.

Baby Doll

While in the 1930s American theatre produced realist documentaries and plays of social protest by authors such as Clifford Odets, post-war audiences applauded productions aiming at different directions. The 1940s American theatre, tells us Martin Gottfried (1970, p. 336-337), was typically naturalistic in style and literary in form, based on plot and realism, and its plays were produced based on the playwright's text and the director's fidelity to it. Such were the initial stagings of Williams, Miller and Inge, as were the preceding ones based on the plays of the 1930s playwrights (Kingsley, Hellman, Rice, Anderson, Odets, Sherwood, Howard, etc.). However, once the Great Depression problems diminished after the advent of World War 2, the pre-war idealism became outdated, while the adjustment of the US economy to obvious social necessities put it to a halt. Still according to Gottfried, Arthur Miller's *Death of a salesman* was the last of the anti-capitalist plays, putting an end to an era; and all the while, he continues, it was more concerned with private tragedies of the American capitalism than with its economic problems.

It is usual for critics to attribute to the 'major works' of Williams the withdrawal from the semi-fantasy and romantic poetry of his early writings, as well as from left-wing ideals. His artistic originality had been accepted by the establishment, and according to Martin Gottfried (1970, p. 354-356), Williams adhered to the world of material success, lending it the grace of his writing, along with his vigorous style and technique.

Baby Doll's screenplay was written and its movie produced in this period recalled by Gottfried. In 1955, having a successful and well-established career both in theatre and in Hollywood, Williams merged the one-act plays *27 wagons full of cotton* and *The*

unsatisfactory supper into the screenplay of *Baby Doll* (translated in Brazil as *Boneca de carne,* something like 'Flesh doll'). At the time, described by *Time* magazine as "just possibly the dirtiest American-made motion picture that has ever been legally exhibited,"[12] it was directed by Elia Kazan, and enacted by Caroll Baker, Eli Wallach, Karl Malden and Mildred Dummock, among others.[13] Organized in 115 shots, it had fourteen characters now. Beyond the four major characters – aunt Rose (who had the name preserved), the foreigner Silva Vacarro and the couple Baby Doll and Archie Lee Meighan (whose names were altered or hybridized with names of the previous works) - *Baby Doll* introduced a pack of new and secondary characters, representing the background and local community of Tiger Tail.

Shot in 1956, *Baby Doll* was a screenplay written for commercial means, a response to the 'imperatives of time,' as well as several other productions of the time, as noted by Gottfried. The production combined visceral elements of Williams's theatre with film industry formulae meant to achieve an 'easy' popularity. On the other hand, one can find in it elements of social criticism that contribute in representing manifestations of racism and xenofobia: a group of impoverished white men (including Archie Lee), economically threatened by a small and just established foreign corporation, managed by a descendant of foreigners, wrathfully referred to as *the foreign wop*. Williams, himself an early victim of prejudice in the South, concerning his sexual orientation, frequently spoke against all forms of prejudice – in the very preface to *A streetcar named Desire*, he expressed his wish that the play would not be staged in states that advocated for racial discrimination.

In "The cultural imagination of Tennessee Williams," critic Charles S. Watson (1997) divides Williams's career in two stages; in the first of them, albeit criticizing it, he turned nostalgically to the old South; in the second one, he dedicated the plays to condemning racial injustice in his home land, censuring the South and his fellow countrymen with a much greater vehemence. This second stage was initiated with the plays written in the 1950s, in a period when the racial conflicts in the South were extremely violent and brutal:

> His [Tennessee Williams´s] view of the South became much harsher in the late 1950s because of his reaction to the racial violence that followed the

[12] Williams (1991), Introductory text in the back cover of the book.

[13] Though deemed immoral, the film *Baby Doll*, whose publicity occupied a whole Manhattan block, was a great hit, awarded by the British Academy Awards with the 'outstanding new actor' prize (Wallach), and with the Globe prize for best director (Kazan), besides the nominations for three other prizes by the British Academy, and four Oscar nominations, among them best adapted screenplay, which Williams lost for the authors of *Around the world in 80 days*, James Poe, John Farrow e S. J. Perelman.

> Supreme Court decision against segregated schools in 1954. Thereafter, in plays such as Orpheus Descending (1957), he presented a South riddled with racial prejudice. The political issue, southern resistance to social change, increasingly consumed Williams´s attention […] As part of the racial conflict that had erupted following the Supreme Court decision of 1954, massive resistance was organized in the Mississippi legislature, and White Citizen´s Councils were practicing intimidation. Several killings occurred in 1955, the most notorious of which was the murder of Emmett Till, a black youth from Chicago, who proposed a date to a store owner´s wife in Money, Mississippi. After his mutilated body was found in the Talahatchie River, an all-white jury in Summer, Mississippi, acquitted Roy Bryant, husband of the woman […] on September 23, 1955. Despite a storm of protest led by the NAACP, the U.S. Department of Justice refused to enter the case, but later worldwide furor led the attorney general to draft the legislation that became the Civil Rights Act of 1957. Baby Doll parallels details of the case, since the Italian´s 'wolf-whistle' at Baby Doll bears the same label as Emmett Till´s whistle (Watson, 1997, p. 183-184).

Condemning the lack of democracy by questioning the freedom of action of a small foreign corporation in a provincial town in the South, *Baby Doll* touches on the region's most obvious form of racism, the prejudice against African-Americans, but does not focus on it; he rather addresses the prejudice against Catholic foreigners, more specifically Italians, by this same community. The social role of oppression played by the whites in defense of their established 'rights' is evident in the following scene, when Archie Lee almost names explicitly the sordid and racist organization embedded in the South, Ku Klux Klan:

> ARCHIE: […] But there´s one teensy-eensy little – thing that you – overlooked! I! Got position! Yeah, yeah, I got position! Here in this county! Where I was bo´n an´ brought up! I hold a respected position, lifelong! – member of – Wait! Wait!- Baby Doll! […] On my side ´re friends, long standin´ bus´ness associates, an´ social! See what I mean? You ain´t got that advantage, have you, mister? Huh, mister? Ain´t you a dago, or something, excuse me, I mean Eyetalian or something, here in Tiger Tail County? […] ALL I GOT TO DO IS GIT ON THAT PHONE IN THE HALL! (Williams, 1991, p. 109).

Though Archie Lee does not call his Klan-like companion, they can be seen in other scenes of the screenplay. When, upon arriving, Vacarro gazes at the surrounding men, he notices their hostility: "Silva Vacarro passes by a knot of men. He is followed by Rock, holding the kerosene can. The camera stays with them. They smile"(Williams, 1991, p. 32).

Furthermore, when Vacarro defies the marshal, affirming that the initials of the arsonist were printed in the gallon found at the fire, the group manifests solidarity towards the crime – Rocky, Vacarro's employee holding the proof of the crime, is beaten in

the restroom, and the proof is confiscated. The police chooses not to interfere, sustaining the version of an accidental fire, and the marshal warns Vacarro to watch out – being a foreigner, he was not welcome:

> MARSHAL: You take the advice of an old man who knows this county like the back of his hand. It´s true you made a lot of enemies here. You happen to be a man with foreign blood. That´s a disadvantage in this county. A disadvantage at least to begin with (Williams, 1991, p. 35).

Vacarro is harassed and economically wronged by the local and racist community, though this is not the plot's main point. We thus observe that although Williams's 'move towards the right' in the most successful phase of his career, his social criticism is still there. If in *27 wagons full of cotton* the minuscule foreigner was impotent before Jake Meighan and took revenge by beating and raping his wife, in *Baby Doll* there is no intent on revenge. Vacarro, now turned into a good guy, seeks justice, and therefore scares Archie Lee Meighan's wife, to the point she speaks out and signs a paper testifying the husband's crime of arson. In possession of such document, the foreigner can officially claim justice towards Meighan, or at least hope for it. Beyond a greater possibility of democracy and legal action, some typical Manichaeism is also established. In 1950s Hollywood, the Italian character, previously just as brutal as Meighan, becomes a more humanized and just man, one who is gentle to the old aunt Rose. Moreover, a well-mannered gentleman, even if holding a whip. Archie Lee, by opposition, is still the ignorant and brute 'old man' of the 1930s play; he is a greasy sixty year old who is introduced to the audience trying to make a hole on the wall to spy on his maiden wife; crouched on the floor, unshaved, sweating on his pajamas, he starkly contrasts with the girl who sleeps innocently in a crib, and who was traded to him over a money debt. Too old for the spouse who is now nineteen, he has as rival a "handsome, cocky young Italian" (Williams, 1991, p. 137)[14] who, though 'dark' and small, was clean and tidy.

As Maggie from *Cat on a hot tin roof*, the young wife Baby Doll integrates a new gallery of Williams's female characters – no longer the pathetic, dazzled or neglected characters of the early plays, but 'strong' women searching their place in a competitive, capitalist world. According to Edgar Morin, Hollywood, menaced by television productions after 1948, for some years found salvation in the wide screen and in the

[14] Character's description in *Tiger Tail* (inspired on the screenplay of *Baby Doll*), that perfectly fits the screen character casted for *Baby Doll*.

launching of superstars such as Marilyn Monroe. Writing to Warner Brothers at this point, Williams set aside the old and mistreated Flora Meighan, making room for a starlet whose appeal was in conformity with the aesthetic ideals of the 1950s Hollywood movies: stupid and large Flora, the character who is spanked and raped in *27 wagons full of cotton*, gave way to a young and attractive nymphet named Baby Doll, a childish and virginal character played by young Carroll Baker. Such new synthesis between good and evil, as Morin pointed out (1989), now inscribed the star in a great and profane chain, led by an erotic energy now freed and spread on the screen, culminating on the screened images of the nymphets of mid-twentieth-century: "The new stars are entirely eroticized, while the previous virgins and avengers were as pure as the Virgin Mary or Lohengrin, and the vamp and evil ones carried the bestial and destructive appeals of sexuality. […] The redemption of eroticism plays a fundamental role: the rebirth of the star system is characterized by the 'mammary rebirth': the 'Bardotism' deepens the cleavages and reveals the stereoscopic charms of Gina, Sophia and Martine. The movies multiply the stars' strip-teases and baths, their dressing and undressing, and so on. A new wave of naughty innocence takes the nymphet to the first plan: Audrey Hepburn, Leslie Caron, Françoise Arnoul, Marina Vlady, Brigitte Bardot" (Morin, 1989, p. 16-17).

A rose, an indigestible supper

Aunt Rose, the old and fragile relative created in the one-act play *The unsatisfactory supper,* along with the neglected characters of the 1930s, reappears in the 1950s movie as Baby Doll's aunt. A minor character in the new plot, she has two main functions: to help in the protagonists' characterizations and to trigger laughter, in order to outweigh gloomier parts of the plot. Not relevant for the main actions, the adjuvant is kicked out by Meighan and welcomed by a righteous Silva Vacarro; somewhat ridiculous, she enacts on stage with a chicken and steals chocolate from the sickly at the hospital, triggering laughter on the young couple.

But we now return to the aunt Rose from *The unsatisfactory supper,* from Williams's initial phase. It is her we conclude this essay with. In this one-act play also set in the American South (Blue Mountain, Mississippi), one finds long stage directions, along descriptions of speechless actions. The sets are meaningful, and help shape the bleak tone

of the scenes that take place around the faded gray house, where skies announce storms and the wind whines like a cat. Next to the porch, there is a giant rose bush, whose beauty seems somehow sinister, and the sun is setting while a "Prokofiev-like" music is heard through the air (Williams, 1990, p. 299).

The plot is extremely simple: Archie Lee Bowman, a gross man who sucks at his finger, is mad at the supper cooked by his wife's aunt. The old lady had forgotten to light up the stove and the food ended up half-cooked. The wife, Baby Doll Bowman, a large and idle woman whose magnitude is not benign and "whose stupidity is not comfortable" (Williams, 1990, p. 299), agrees with her husband, complaining of the 'ownership' of the kitchen by the aunt, and of the fact he would not get her a Negro woman to do the cooking. They agree the best would be to get rid of the old lady, who had been already expelled by other relatives. Deteriorated human relations – this time, family relations – related to money are thus focused. No longer able to cook, the old maiden had no further utility in the house, so should be passed on as quickly as possible, before getting sick and costly. The dialogues are harsh, straight to the point:

> ARCHIE LEE: Some of them get these lingering types of diseases and have to be given morphine, and they tell me that morphine is just as high as a cat's back.
> BABY DOLL: Some of them hang on forever, taking morphine.
> ARCHIE LEE: And quantities of it!
> BABY DOLL: Yes, they take quantities of it!
> ARCHIE LEE: Suppose the old lady broke a hipbone or something, something that called for morphine!
> BABY DOLL: The rest of the folks would have to pitch in and help us.
> ARCHIE LEE: Try and extract a dime from your brother Jim! Or Susie or Tom or Bunny! They´re all tight as drums, they squeeze ev´ry nickel until the buffalo bleeds!
> BABY DOLL: They don´t have much and what they have they hold onto.
> ARCHIE LEE: Well, if she does, if she breaks down an´ dies on us here, I´m giving you fair warning – I´ll have her burned up and her ashes put in an old Coca-Cola bottle – unless your folks kick in with the price of a coffin! (Williams, 1990, p. 307-308).

For as long as one can remember, female inequality was intertwined in our social fabric, as part of a life process which defended itself from change. Political, economic and social institutions, especially in the portrayed period, were marked by acute divisions in sexual roles. The qualities necessary to succeed in the female world were directly opposite to those in the masculine world. In a society which assumed that men and women occupy different spheres and have different qualities, most women accepted the roles of wives

and mothers: more than 75% of the women who responded to the 1936 Gallup survey condemned female work. No major demonstration questioned the legal restrictions of women's rights in the 1930s due to the Great Depression. If enslaved, as said the feminists, it was a well-accepted slavery, reinforced by the whole social process.

In such a scenario of the 1930s feminine universe in the US, characters like aunt Rose (as well as Baby Doll and Flora Meighan) represent women who were economically dependent, dedicated to the domestic-family life. "Roses of the home," as then suggested a popular novel. Oppressed by the practical world led by money, they subjected themselves to all sorts of abuse. When questioning about the prostitution she is being subjected to, the housewife Flora is called lazy and useless by her husband; and the elderly aunt Rose is expelled when no longer fit to cook for the nephews (and no longer useful for saving the costs of a Negro woman), in exchange for food and a roof. By criticizing the hypocrisy of the family relations concerning women, Tennessee Williams, beyond portraying the oppressions these women were subjected to, questioned their sexual repression – figured, in *27 wagons*, in the long veiled dialogue between Flora and Jake Meighan about the sexual intercourse fully acknowledged by the complicit husband.

If Meighan's wife 'rebels' in the 1955 film (confronts her husband, flirts with the foreigner and has sexual interest, menaces to leave the husband), in contrast with Flora, who passively accepted abuse, she only does so to the point of seeking support from a new protecting male figure, attuned with the prospects of romance and a happy ending in the Hollywood fashion. As the typical *baby doll* or rising Hollywood nymphet of the times, she trades the old and broke husband by the young foreigner, holding onto the sexual assets of a new female role, in a world just as old and alienated, albeit perhaps more hopeful.

In such a world, the most interesting and consequent character of all aforementioned plots is certainly the aunt Rose from *The unsatisfactory supper*, the one created by Williams in the 1930s. Owning a poetic and tragic, pungent, lyricism, this frail character refuses the imposition of humiliation, neglect and resignation to which she is subjected, though having no choices due to her gender and economic and familial situation. Upon being informed by Meighan of her summary dumping on the next morning, she refuses to enter the house, as the tempest approaches:

> [The door slams shut. The whine of the angry cat turns into a distant roar and the roar approaches. But Aunt Rose remains in the yard, her face still somberly but quietly thoughtful. The loose gray calico of her dress begins to whip and tug at the skeleton lines of her figure. She looks wonderingly at the sky, then back at the house beginning to shrink into darkness, then back at the sky from which the darkness is coming, at each with the same unflinching but troubled expression. Nieces and nephews and cousins, like pages of an album, are rapidly turned to her mind, some of them loved as children but none of them really her children and all of them curiously unneedful of the devotion that she had offered so freely, as if she had always carried an armful of roses that no one had ever offered a vase to receive. The flimsy gray scarf is whipped away from her shoulders. She makes an awkward gesture and sinks to her knees. Her arms let go of the roses. She reaches vaguely after them. One or two she catches. The rest blow away. She struggles back to her feet. The blue dust deepens to purple and the purple to black and the roar comes on with the force of a locomotive as Aunt Rose´s figure is still pushed toward the rose bush.] DIM OUT (Williams, 1990, p. 313).

It has already been said that modern theatre often times waved the flag of disillusion, and that several art works from the first half of the twentieth century were but ruins of a wrecked society. According to John Gassner (1980), grief, related to social or psychological analysis, was often present on the modern stage. Nonetheless, a great part of this theatre presented a satirical protest against society's dehumanization in the industrial age of mass production, along with its relativist morality, absence of social reform and gender inequality, among many other concerns.

We may state that Tennessee Williams's great art remains by the poetry of this fragile lady, forever exposed to the turmoil of real life, that would drag her along in the end. Within the whining of the wind, the stage goes dark, and the roses are carried from her hands. Before a darkened and troubled sky, forever tossed towards the bush of roses, aunt Rose offers us the contradictions and the strange strength of her (im)permanence, in the pungent lyricism of the great playwright that was Tennessee Williams.

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