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Stairs and Jungles: Setting as an Existential Metaphor in Tennessee Williams's Drama

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams emphasizes the importance of setting as an integral part of drama under the concept of what he called "plastic theatre." Williams's use of settings and methods, such as the screen device, effectively establishes a sense of distance, which is also considered a crucial dramatic element by Brecht and Sartre. Williams's approach reflects a strong existentialist understanding, which is conveyed to the audience, particularly using settings that complement the dramatic text and dialogue. Based on Williams's notion of setting as a means that transcends the limited space of the stage, this article focuses on some of the most important stage elements in the playwright's settings and their significance in terms of symbolism, spatiality, and existentialism. These sets include images of jungles to depict the thematic notion of freedom (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958) and isolated spaces to illustrate anguish towards the facticity of current situations, but also towards the responsibility of decision-making and

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the uncertainty of the future (*The Two-Character Play,* 1979). As a response to these situations, the image of stairs pervades Williams's drama, especially in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Stairs to the Roof* (1947), and *Camino Real* (1953). This article concludes that, in line with existentialist philosophy, escape, and movement are shown as the only viable solutions for the self to assert its individuality through settings that vary from literal fire escapes to abstract and complex images.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, stairs, movement, plastic theatre, existentialism, human condition

Merdivenler ve Ormanlar: Tennessee Williams'ın Oyunlarında Varoluşsal Bir Metafor Olarak Mekân ve Dekor

Öz

Tennessee Williams, "plastik tiyatro" adını verdiği kavram altında, dramanın ayrılmaz bir parçası olarak mekanın ve dekorun önemini vurgular. Williams'ın mekân kullanımı ve "screen device" olarak adlandırılan belirli yöntemler, Brecht ve Sartre tarafından dramanın önemli bir unsuru olarak kabul edilen mesafenin etkili bir şekilde gerçekleşmesini sağlar. Williams'ın yaklaşımı güçlü bir varoluşçu anlayışı yansıtır. Mekân ve dekoru etkileyici bir şekilde kullanıp bu anlayışı izleyiciye aktarır, dolayısıyla dramatik metni ve diyaloğu tamamlar. Williams'ın mekanı sahnenin sınırlı alanını aşan bir araç olarak gördüğünü göze alarak, bu makalede yazarın mekan ve dekorlarındaki en önemli unsurlarından bazıları ile sembolizm, mekansallık ve varoluşçuluk açısından önemleri ele alınmaktadır. Devamında, bu mekan setlerinden bazı örnekler analiz edilmektedir: özgürlük temasını tasvir eden orman sembolleri (*Suddenly Last Summer*, 1958), hem mevcut durumlarına hem karar alma sorumluluğuna ve geleceğin belirsizliğine yönelik ıstırabı gösteren izole mekanlar (*The Two-Character Play*, 1979). Bu durumlara bir yanıt olarak, merdiven imgesi Williams'ın oyunlarında, özellikle *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Stairs to the Roof* (1947) ve *Camino Real* (1953) eserlerinde

yaygınlaşır. Bu metinlerde kaçış, aksiyon ve hareket, gerçek yangın merdivenlerinden başlayarak, soyut ve karmaşık imgelere kadar değişen mekanlar aracılığıyla, varoluşçu benliğin bireyselliğini ortaya koymasının tek uygulanabilir çözümü olarak gösterilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tennessee Williams, plastik tiyatro, varoluşçuluk, insanlık durumu, merdivenler, hareket

Introduction: Tennessee Williams's Theater

Tennessee Williams's inclination to write for the stage, despite his body of work spanning across several genres, is closely related to his aim to create an art that reflects the human condition, with all the modes of existence and anxieties that it entails. Williams was interested in creating "something more animate than written language could be," indicating that he intended to transcend the limitations of the written text and fuse it with action and presence (Gassner 389). Indeed, in his afterword to *Camino Real* (1953), Williams states that "a play in a book is only a shadow of a play and not even a clear shadow of it . . . The printed script of a play is hardly more than an architect's blueprint of a house not yet built or built and destroyed" (xxxiv). The statement echoes Sartre's idea that "a book can speak in a murmur; drama and comedy have to shout," emphasizing the significance and necessity of extra-verbal elements (*Sartre on Theater* 65).

Indeed, Williams envisioned drama as truth expressed through the "language of theatre," as something that is conveyed not only "in the language of naked words, but in a symbolic complex of gesture, music, sound, light, and color; of line, mass, volume, and texture" (Jackson 12). Therefore, in creating a dramatic text to express truth – a notion that for Williams would evolve simultaneously with that of theater – the playwright must necessarily take into consideration all the aspects of staging a play, including setting, an element that plays an essential role in Williams's vision.

This article firstly discusses Tennessee Williams's idea of theater, particularly his plastic theatre and the use of the screen device, to demonstrate an affinity with the notions of Bertolt Brecht's alienation

effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) and Sartre's theories on theater. One of the fundamental and most effective elements that constitute Williams's theater is the use of settings that function as visual complements to existential thematic concerns like anguish, the struggle for freedom, and the individual's quest for meaning and authentic self-realization. The focus of the article is henceforth directed towards some particular staging elements that appear in Williams's drama, starting with the image of the jungle in *Suddenly Last Summer* and the confined space in *The Two-Character Play*, as respective depictions of the existentialist notions of freedom and anguish. Moreover, greater attention is dedicated to the recurring image of stairs in Williams's drama, which varies from the illustration of individual and more particular existential concerns in *The Glass Menagerie* to more abstract and complex images of escape and movement in *Stairs to the Roof* and *Camino Real*. Finally, a conclusion is drawn in terms of correlating Williams's use of setting devices and set pieces with a philosophical interpretation analyzed from a Sartrean approach to existentialist themes.

Williams's concept of theater, where text is removed from its traditionally central role, is the result of several influences, including a strong relation to cinematic techniques. Indeed, Williams's short-lived employment in the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios of Hollywood left a considerable impact on his future writing. He was "deeply impressed with the wide-ranging, often poetic freedom of film itself, and this would influence his writing of *The Glass Menagerie* as well as other of his major plays" (Leverich 530). This impression is documented in greater detail in one of Williams's notebook entries dated back to September 1943, where he describes the effect left on him by Sergei Eisenstein's 1938 film *Alexander Nevsky*:

> In my dramatic writing prior to this I have always leaned too heavily on speech, nearly everything I have written for the stage has been overburdened by dialogue . . . I determined to think in more plastic or visual terms. To write sparingly but with complete lyricism and build the play in a series of dramatic pictures. No play written in such creative terms could be naturalistic . . . Written in verse, with a surrealist influence and a background of modern music, it would have to be independent of nearly all dramatic conventions. (Thornton and Williams 306)

This new kind of dramatically unconventional writing that integrates all the staging elements of a play into the written text points primarily to the role of the playwright, who does not merely provide directors and stage designers with a text ready for theatrical adaptation but is instead the first person that holistically envisions all the other non-textual elements of the theatrical performance.

Williams's novelty in the American stage would be presented in the form of what he called "plastic theatre," first defined in his production notes to *The Glass Menagerie*. According to him, this "new, plastic theater . . . must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions if the theatre is to resume vitality as part of our culture" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 7). More importantly, it aimed "to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression" by using and combining other art forms and unconventional techniques (7). This meant the creation of a "truly multi-dimensional theatre, integrating all the arts of the stage," with a particular emphasis on setting and space (Kramer). Williams's consideration of setting not merely as a decorative aspect of the dramatic text is also reflected in his novel *Moise and the World of Reason* (1975), in the words of the titular character – significantly a painter – as she states that plastic space "is alive, not empty and dead, not at all just a background" (136). Similarly, in Williams's plastic theatre, the setting becomes as substantial as the dramatic text.

This emphasis on the importance of setting was not exclusively limited to Williams. The tendency of a playwright to have complete control over his dramatic creation had already been prevalent in the tradition of modern American drama, where, most notably, Eugene O'Neill showcased a somewhat more obsessive approach. The stage directions of his play *Long Day's Journey into Night*, written in 1941 and first performed and published fifteen years later, suffice to give a clear indication of this fact. O'Neill's notes are extremely realistic to the extent that, apart from the detailed descriptions of the characters of the play, they include even the specific titles, authors, and physical state of an extensive list of books that should be placed in the small bookcase included in the set pieces.

Moreover, the American theater, starting from the 1920s, had already reflected disobedience to traditional settings and theatrical unities. The most indicative device was the so-called multiple set, a fragmented setting that does not change throughout the entire play but allows the action to happen in different parts of it. A set would include an entire apartment building, but the action of the play would flow through different rooms and sections without being interrupted by curtain falls and pauses between scenes, something that is best represented in Jo Mielziner's design for Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. However, while retaining this sense "of wholeness, of allness rather than singleness" (Brooks 32) that was pervading the American drama of the time, what distinguishes Williams's point of view is a preference progressively inclined towards unrealistic, expressionistic, and abstract settings that additionally reflect strong ties to an existentialist approach. This way, his settings complement the existentialist thematic concerns by adding a visual layer to the dramatic representation of the truth of the human condition.

Setting Devices as Means of Leading to Objective Truth

Williams veered away from the use of realistic settings throughout his entire career, from his early theatrical successes to later, less positively received plays. For example, *The Glass Menagerie,* being a memory play, uses a "nonrealistic" setting (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). The set of *Suddenly Last Summer* is "as unrealistic as the decor of a dramatic ballet" (Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer* 5). Similarly, in his production notes for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the playwright suggests a "far less realistic" set with walls that "dissolve mysteriously into air" (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 16). The multiple areas that comprise the setting of *Stairs to the Roof* include high buildings, offices, parks, and even a zoo, making it impossible to be accurately and realistically represented on stage. As he did with almost all his plays, Williams conveyed this lack of realism through the use of stage props, lights, background images, and other elements of his plastic theatre.

One of the most noteworthy devices that Williams utilized was the so-called screen device, a wall where images were projected throughout a performance. Although Williams had experimented with the screen device in earlier plays, it became particularly famous with *The Glass Menagerie*, where forty-three images and titles were to be projected on one of the walls of the set. Although this unconventional device was initially considered redundant and was not even featured in the original production of the play by Eddie Dowling in 1944, Williams insisted on its importance. He stated that the purpose of this device is to "accent certain values in each scene" and "strengthen the effect of what is merely allusion in the writing" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 8), thus removing the classically central position of the dramatic text in a play and creating instead a structural fusion of text and setting.

In addition to this structural effect, Williams's screen device falls in line with his intention of conveying truth, and more particularly with Tom's aim as the main character and narrator of *The Glass Menagerie* to deliver this truth "in the pleasant disguise of illusion" (22). Since the play is a memory play, truth becomes obfuscated, being delivered solely from Tom's subjective perspective. In this sense, as critic Geoffrey Borny states, the screen projections play the role of a distancing device, preventing the audience "from empathizing too readily" with Tom's version of the story (113). Instead, by establishing this distance, the screen device makes it possible for the audience to perceive "the symbolic truth of the action of the play" (108) and prevents it from reading the performance as a "soap opera" (112). This allows audiences to see beyond Tom's subjectivity and reach for an objective interpretation of the play. Hence, Williams's use of unconventional and alienating setting techniques in *Menagerie* contributes to the purpose of presenting audiences not just truth but, more importantly, an objective truth.

A crucial step that audiences should take in realizing this truth is founded first and foremost in their rational realization that the play is neither real nor realistic. Therefore, the playwright should, in some way, make it clear that the play is merely a representation of reality rather than reality itself. This sense of alienation from instinctively identifying and empathizing with the play's characters echoes Bertold Brecht's notion

of *Verfremdungseffekt*, usually translated as the distancing or alienation effect. In his essay "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," Brecht elaborates that the efforts of creating a nonclassical theater "were directed to playing in such a way that the audience was hindered from simply identifying itself with the characters in the play. Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious place, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious" (Brecht and Willet 91). To reach this effect, Brecht would use "songs, montage, lighting, role reversals, and alike," which would indicate the representational quality of the performance in order "to disrupt the impulse towards realism" (Durmišević 103). Similarly, Williams's theatrical devices and the unusual position of Tom in *Menagerie* as simultaneously character and narrator are effective in establishing the same sense of distancing and alienation.

In addition, this notion holds a significant similarity to Sartre's ideas on modern theater. Distance is to Sartre, "the real origin, the real meaning of theater" (*Sartre on Theater* 12). Elaborating on what he called "theater of situations," Sartre furthermore argues that modern theater should "explore all the situations that are most common to human experience" (36). However, what is crucial is to show these situations at a certain distance so that audiences do not empathize with the character as a person with emotional and psychological traits but focus instead on the manifestations of his freedom through the deliberate actions he undertakes and his reactions towards the situations that he is thrown onto. This way, the emphasis remains on action, choices, and decisions rather than the psycho-emotional makeup of the character.

According to Sartre, distance is essential in achieving this effect, to the degree that the playwright "should not try to reduce it but should exploit it and show it as it actually is, even manipulate it" (12). This manipulation of distance is exactly the effect of Williams's screen device. It amplifies distance, disrupts the attention of the audience, and presents them with multiple targets to focus on, where action, spoken dialogue, and visually displayed words or images occur simultaneously. This tension pulls the theatrical performance away from realistic or naturalistic representation, where even the decision of the audience member to selectively direct their attention towards

one of the aforementioned elements of the performance becomes a manifestation of the importance of deliberate choice, a fundamental tenet of existentialist thought. This way, the screen device not only establishes the required distance effect but also forces the audience to experience first-hand this deliberate decision-making and the moment of choice.

While an argument about the similarities of Williams's vision to the theories of Brecht and Sartre can be made, a direct influence of them on his work is difficult to trace. Williams superficially confirms his interest in Sartre, "whose existential philosophy appealed to [him] strongly" (*Memoirs* 149). Williams was also familiar with Sartre's creative and dramatic efforts, as the plays *No Exit* and *The Flies* stand out as part of his reading list in 1948 ("My Current Reading" 26). As for Brecht, Williams would consider his *Mother Courage* as "the greatest of modern plays" (*Where I Live* 111), a statement that should certainly be taken with a grain of salt considering Williams's tendency to exaggerate and frequently change his position. Yet, strong assumptions can be made about his exposure to Brecht's ideas. Critic Downing Cless argues that this exposure is "almost certain" due to Williams's playwrighting studies at the New School's Dramatic Workshop in 1941 (42). This "private course in Epic Theatre techniques" under the supervision of Erwin Piscator, a close collaborator of Brecht, may have played a role in the development of Williams's plastic theatre and its devices (Kramer).

Moreover, in an essay titled "Tennessee Williams Presents his POV," the playwright would mention another connection with Brecht, indicating an additional relation to his notions of objective truth. In the essay, Williams defends his depiction of ugly acts and unlikeable characters by calling it an honest way of writing about life, with all its unpleasantries, naming Brecht as one of his "fellow defendants" in this notion (*Where I Live* 110). As such, Williams's sense of objective truth on stage is twofold: on one hand, he uses nonconventional and unrealistic devices to indicate that the play is just a representation of reality, hence enabling the audience to go beyond the representational level of the play, beyond the aforementioned "pleasant disguise of illusion" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 22), and towards a rational

perception of truth; on the other hand, by arguing for an honest representation of reality, he opts for the depiction of the human condition with all its ambiguities, dilemmas and dark sides.

Nevertheless, the extent of objectivity in Williams's represented truth can be questioned. After all, the truth conveyed in *The Glass Menagerie* cannot be purely objective since it stems from Williams's perspective. He would state that he "couldn't create anything outside [his] own experience" (Spevack 223). Similarly, as a stand-in for Williams, Tom also presents his own experience, making it possible to read him as "the only character in the play" (Crandell 4). Indeed, the truth that Williams explores in his early works is focused on personal and individual concerns. The action of his early plays is focused on small-scale representations of the characters' struggle to establish their existence among the circumstances that surround them. Therefore, the central theme becomes that of the conflicting friction between isolation and the desire for freedom. Tom wants to relieve himself from family responsibilities to follow his ambitions; Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* creates her version of reality under Stanley's overbearing presence; Myra longs for a new life by saving herself from the domineering pressure of her much older husband in *Battle of Angels*. All these characters depict the individual drive to find new meaning in existence, rooted in the desire for freedom.

Settings of Isolation and Confinement

As in all of Williams's plays, setting is integral in depicting this aspect of the human condition, the struggle to acknowledge and assert one's freedom in the face of facticity, of circumstances that are out of one's control. A notable example that depicts this struggle is the setting of *Suddenly Last Summer*, which strikingly features "a fantastic garden which is more like a tropical jungle, or forest," with "violent" colors and "massive tree-flowers that suggest organs of a body" (Williams, *Suddenly Last Summer* 5). Other than foreshadowing the violent action described later in the play, the setting becomes a metaphorical representation of the wilderness of human nature. The garden/jungle participates significantly in the action throughout the entirety of the

play. When characters laugh, "jungle birds scream in the jungle" (22); when there is an overlapping of the characters' speech, "the jungle is loud with the sounds of its feathered and scaled inhabitants" (28).

More importantly, the jungle carries a twofold function concerning individual existence. On one hand, it represents Sebastian's wild nature. The Venus flytrap, the insectivorous plant in the garden to which he devotedly used to feed flies, as described by his mother in the first lines of the play, becomes a direct representation of his instinct to feed his homoerotic desires with very young boys. The garden in *Suddenly Last Summer* purposely does not have the typical appearance of a tamed space; on the contrary, it is presented in the appearance of a jungle: wild, unbridled, and consuming. Rather than carrying the classical connotations of gardens as safe, idyllic spaces, the garden/jungle of the play is not a *hortus conclusus* of peace and beauty but a place of horror and darkness instead. As such, while Sebastian – being already dead – never appears in the play, the garden/jungle becomes his stand-in as a ubiquitous presence and illustration of his character. In this sense, the setting does not simply integrate into the text of *Suddenly Last Summer* but becomes a character in itself.

On the other hand, the garden/jungle can also be read as a depiction of the circumstances around the individual, that is, the world that surrounds – and even confines – the character in his struggle for personal freedom. Sebastian's desires and mode of existence cannot be satisfied under the frame of a traditional world. The character finds himself "engaged in a world of values" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 38), but the problem arises from the fact that these are not Sebastian's values. They stifle the character's inclination to freedom because their "foundation can in no way be being" (38). The imposition of these externally established values and norms of what is considered normal for a young man clashes with Sebastian's desires. Therefore, just as the Venus flytrap consumes flies in the garden/jungle, Sebastian is eventually consumed by the world around him. He gets his first vision of the wilderness of reality in his journey to Encantadas, where carnivorous birds devour the newborn turtles that are trying to get to the sea. Similarly, Sebastian gets mutilated and devoured in Cabeza de Lobo by a band of naked and hungry young boys. Taken from this

perspective, the garden/jungle comes forth as the image of a world that isolates and consumes the individual without allowing him to freely express his existence. If freedom is not allowed to manifest itself, the individual will eventually and inevitably fall prey to the destruction of his selfhood.

This inner-outer conflict between the individual and the world is present throughout most of Williams's oeuvre. The freedom – or even wilderness – of human existence is countered by a strongly isolating world. Williams's use of space in his settings frequently depicts this notion. The house of *The Glass Menagerie* is positioned in one of the buildings of "hive-like conglomerations" in overcrowded cities (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). Stella and Stanley's house in *A Streetcar Named Desire* becomes a suffocating space for Blanche, where the only two rooms of the house do not allow for individual privacy. The entire action of *Small Craft Warnings* takes place in a small bar. The conflicts of *Vieux Carre* unravel inside the small, shabby rooms of a boarding house. *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* takes place largely in a mental asylum guarded by interns, doctors, and nurses. The use of such settings points toward two different aims: they illustrate the playwright's focus on small-scale individual concerns and simultaneously depict the isolating effect of a larger external environment as opposed to the confined individual's existential instinct for freedom. This situation creates a sense of anguish, which "arises from the negation of the appeals of the world," where the Self rejects the stifling norms and values systems of an external world, recognizing that they are built upon a basis that exists outside of self's being, and thus, realizes that it is personal freedom that becomes "the foundation of values" (Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 39).

The most extreme sense of isolation is depicted in the setting of Williams's *The Two-Character Play*, where the main characters, Felice and Clare, are trapped in a theater building. The play has the structure of a play-within-a-play, where the characters are two actors trying to finish their performance of a play written by Felice. In the play-within-the-play, the characters are likewise confined, this time in a house where tragedy has taken place, shutting them in with the fear of going outside to face the outer world, a fear that borders on

madness. Williams states in his stage directions that this setting, confusingly mixing Williams's play to that of Felice's play-within-the-play, must depict "the phantasmagoria of the nightmarish world that all of us live in at present, not just the subjective but the true world with all its dismaying shapes and shadows" (*The Two-Character Play* 1). Opposed to Clare's outburst to go "out, out, out" (56), the set of *The Two-Character Play* becomes a metaphor for the existential angst of the individual against confining circumstances.

The experience of the characters showcases several layers of anguish that are additionally represented through the setting of the play. Felice and Claire being locked in the theater building is a situation out of their control. Thus, it depicts a thrownness into a situation that the individuals are forcefully forced to face on their own. Nothing external permeates the space that is created through this event; therefore, Felice and Claire must express their freedom in facing, interpreting, and reacting to the current circumstances. In a sense, this shows an affinity to Sartre's notion of theater of situations. For the characters, the situation is indeed "an appeal: it surrounds [them], offering [them] solutions which it's up to [them] to choose" (*Sartre on Theater* 4). Thus, the isolated setting, although seemingly confining, provides the characters with the opportunity to make choices and decisions.

Yet, this reveals another layer of anguish. As stated above, the individual has to face the fact that they are the foundation of their values, that is, the self creates the only values that give meaning to true and free existence. In turn, this creates a new type of anguish, where the individual is faced with a sense of responsibility. If values are created by the self, then the self is the sole responsible for everything that happens to it. Choices will bring consequences for which the self can blame no other than itself. In this situation, the self can either acknowledge, accept, and act based on its freedom and responsibility or can turn its back in denial, following what Sartre calls "patterns of flight" (*Being and Nothingness* 40). In the case of Felice and Claire, this anguish manifests itself in the form of fear, particularly in the face of the possibilities of the future. Imprisoned by the events of their past, additionally represented through the fact that they keep performing a play much like their own life, Felice and Claire do not know how to

exist outside of this bubble. They want to be free; however, freedom is scary due to the responsibility it imposes.

This freedom is represented as a powerful and beautiful desire, illustrated through the sunflowers that appear behind the windows in the setting. Yet, the setting, through the density of these sunflowers in the background, also implies the difficulty of navigating this newfound freedom that scares the characters through its unfamiliarity as a terrain that has never been approached before. Moreover, it also represents the idea that this sense of freedom is seemingly not normal for the two characters, who have always lived in isolation. The very tall, two-headed sunflower in the setting is abnormal, something that would not – and should not – exist in a normal course of events. All these elements of the setting represent the isolation, not only of the current situation but, most importantly, the self-isolation of the individual, who, because of his fear of freedom and responsibility, makes the deliberate choice of continuing to stay in the isolated space.

Stairways to Personal Freedom

The suffocating environments and settings of the aforementioned plays are inseparably related to the expression of a general desire for freedom in the face of current situations. In William's drama, this desire is usually reflected in the form of escape and presented through what is perhaps the most recurring image in his settings: stairs. This image appears in numerous plays, including *The Glass Menagerie, Stairs to the Roof, Battle of Angels, Orpheus Descending,* and *Camino Real*. For Williams's characters in these plays, stairs become the means of movement away from their present condition, and they constitute a transitional space from confinement to freedom. The most significant image of stairs in Williams's early work is again depicted in *The Glass Menagerie.*

As explained in the stage directions of the play, the apartment found in between the enormous building compound can be entered through "a fire escape, a structure whose name is a touch of accidental poetic truth, for all these huge buildings are burning with the slow

and implacable fires of human desperation" (Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* 21). Being the representative of this state of desperation, Tom is the only character in the play who repeatedly visits the landing of the fire escape, "leaning against the grill, smoking" (68), as if he were perpetually attracted to this space, the only one where he feels free enough to express his thoughts. It is in this section of the stage where he holds a meaningful conversation with his friend Jim, confessing that he is "starting to boil inside," intending to abandon his home and workplace (80). While movies have become his coping mechanism against the pressures of his home and work life so far, he expresses for the first time the desire to escape altogether, stating that he is "tired of the *movies* and . . . about to *move*" (79).

In addition, the stairs of the fire escape are the only place where Tom can get a glimpse of the Paradise Dance Hall, an image of the outer world of freedom he longs for. In other scenes of *Menagerie*, Tom looks at even more distant and symbolic representations of this external world, such as the moon, to which he expresses a secret wish (58). It is this same moon that his mother curses him to go to after their final heated argument by the end of the play. As he addresses the audience for a closing monologue – again speaking from the fire-escape landing – he admits that he went to a "much further" place than the moon (114), implying that freedom and escape are not merely concepts of physical space and distance, but states of the human condition and existence instead. Thus, ironically, instead of playing their initial function of an entrance point as described in the stage directions, the stairs eventually become Tom's exit from the apartment and, consequently, his previous life.

The stairs of *Menagerie*, depicted as a fire escape, are not a particularly complex metaphor. As their name indicates, they foreshadow an eventual act of escape. As such, this image is closer to Williams's treatment of explicitly individual and small-scale concerns. It is merely a single individual acknowledging his freedom and making a deliberate choice to free himself from an isolating – yet small-scale and ordinary – space. After all, *The Glass Menagerie* is, first and foremost, a semi-autobiographical story of a young man and aspiring artist longing for personal freedom, subjectively narrated by that very

same young man. It is true that, from an existentialist perspective, the play depicts what Sartre considers "the most moving thing the theater can show," that is, "a character creating himself, the moment of choice, of the free decision" that eventually leads the character to "a whole way of life" (*Sartre on Theater* 4). Yet, being focused on a single individual and a very tangible concern of the time, the play, the act of escape, as well as the image of the stairways are quite literal and do not hold great complexity. Nevertheless, as Williams's idea of theater evolved, so did his depiction of stairs as a prevalent element in the setting of his plays.

From Personal to Universal: Stairways to the Unknown

Indeed, the "personal lyricism" of Williams's earlier work gradually transformed into a quest for "a level of objective interpretation," largely reflecting more universal psychological and philosophical concerns (Jackson 11). His later work showcases a distancing from his previous position that the artist can only write based on his own experience. Instead, he argues that "the playwright in the modern theater cannot afford to use his art simply for the description of his peculiar sorrow" and that his initial idea of theater "is not yet enough excuse for personal lyricism that has not yet mastered its necessary trick of rising above the singular to the plural concern, from personal to general import" (15). This indicates a new notion of truth on Williams's behalf: truth is not defined only by what a certain individual has experienced firsthand, but it is instead a concept that must encapsulate the human condition as a whole. This becomes his newfound "essence of art and theater: the portrayal of a common fund of inner experience" as something that binds all audience members together in recognition of the themes depicted on stage (Spevack 224). He becomes so intent on voicing this new position that he even intrudes on the action of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* to add a personal confession within the stage directions, where he argues that:

> … the bird I hope to catch in the net of this play is not the solution to one man's psychological problem. I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people that cloudy, flickering, evanescent – fiercely charged! – interplay

> of live human beings in the thundercloud of a common crisis. (Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* 116-117)

Nevertheless, the main representative of man in this common crisis remains similar to the protagonists of his earlier plays. Usually, he takes the form of the outsider, the fugitive, or the aspiring – yet unsuccessful – artist. However, apart from the individual perspective depicted in his early work, Williams's later drama employs an additional function to this "doomed soul," not only as an individual but as a "representative of man as a figure in a cosmic drama" (Spevack 229-230). The truth conveyed by his characters is not a small-scale concern anymore but evolves into a universal cause that concerns all humanity. Williams's imagery shifts in a parallel direction to this notion. The recurrent image of stairs in his work expands from merely a means for a young man to set himself free from the constraints of his household and eventually transforms into a transitional space between two worlds, importing more abstract and surreal nuances.

What makes Williams's use of stairs interesting is the fact that he does not abide to the typical notion of up and down in the traditional sense that up indicates an ascension to something better, whereas down implies a descent to a worse condition. On the contrary, the levels found in the extremities of Williams's stairs are often ambiguous. Sometimes, they even subvert this traditional understanding, positioning a far worse condition upstairs, as happens in *Orpheus Descending*, where upstairs becomes the place of the imminent "knock, knock, knock" (73) of death and its inescapable threat on human life.

The ambiguity of the metaphorical implication of stairs is evident in *Stairs to the Roof*, a play that premiered not more than four years after *The Glass Menagerie*. The similarities between both plays are instantly recognizable. Ben, the main character, is again a troubled young man who finds his job insufferable and longs to escape his present condition. However, the image of the titular stairs is significantly different and indicative of Williams's later focus. The stairs to the roof lead to the top of the sixteen-floor building where Ben works and initially becomes his place of temporary escape, where he smokes, feeds a flock of pigeons, and looks at the outer world, not much

differently from what Tom does in *Menagerie.* However, Ben's grasp on the constraints forced upon him transcends the realistic pressure of work. Differently from Tom, he does not simply long to set himself free from superficial and individual issues but voices a greater cause. He longs to get out of "the universal cage – The Cage of the Universe" (Williams, *Stairs to the Roof* 50) and become "the first and original HOMO EMANCIPATUS! Meaning – COMPLETELY FREE MAN!" (50). As such, Ben envisions freedom not merely as an escape from his current situation to a different one but instead as an absolute state of liberation from the constraints of the human condition.

Accordingly, Williams transforms the function of stairs into something beyond reality. He plays with his audience's perception, particularly in the last scene of *Stairs to the Roof*, further beclouding the image of the roof and describing that the stairs have instead led to "the transcendental," to "light, light, light," and the "last high reach of the spirit, matter's rejection" (90). Mr. E, the mysterious character who laughs offstage by the end of each scene, finally appears as Williams's stand-in for the creator of the universe, the omnipresent observer that follows the actions of humans on Earth. He offers to send Ben to a new star to populate a new version of the world, presenting Ben with the opportunity to create a new meaning for his – and consequently humanity's – existence, far from the deterministic factors of the present world. Therefore, the image of stairs – and the entirety of the play, for that matter – get employed with more complex existential themes that concern not only Ben but humanity. In addition, to further emphasize the universal relevance of the play, Williams exposes in the final monologue of Mr. E a different version of the hero, that of the "ordinary little white-collar worker" as the "tragic protagonist of a play called 'Human Courage'" (97), putting on him the garb of the ordinary man, an image that can be relevant and relatable to every viewer and reader of the play.

The idea of a new world, a new version of reality, and stairs leading to something beyond the real are present in *Camino Real* as well. In the foreword to this play, Williams is more vocal regarding his intentions and his theory of plastic theatre. He states that the purpose of the play is indeed universal, as it aims to construct "another world, a

separate existence . . . outside of time in a place of no specific locality" (Williams, *Camino Real* xxxi). The language he utilizes to achieve this purpose is that of metaphors, symbols, and allegories, rooted in the "great vocabulary of images" that we have in our minds, which Williams finds more efficient than the written text, for "it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted stage" (xxxiii). Among the plastic elements of this set, not surprisingly, stairs are featured prominently.

The setting of *Camino Real* is a small city square surrounded by an ancient wall, yet again reflecting Williams's affinity for confined spaces as illustrative of isolation and existential anxiety. The stage directions further mention "a great flight of stairs that mount the ancient wall to an archway that leads out into 'Terra Incognita,'" a desert positioned between the walls of the town and the mountains further away (5). Similarly to *Stairs to the Roof,* the stairs of *Camino Real* lead to an ambiguous destination, literally to "unknown land." Just as the audience is not offered any explanation of World Number Two in *Stairs to the Roof*, they do not know whether Terra Incognita is a better place or not. Thus, stairs become a means of connection and communication between two worlds, two levels of existence, without explicit indications of whether one is better than the other.

Nevertheless, stairs in *Camino Real* still provide a way out. Many characters express their intention to climb up the stairs – some of them even attempt to do so – during the entire play, however, without success. When Kilroy finds himself almost at the top of the stairs, he climbs back down because the desert he has to pass is "too unknown for [his] blood" (36). Jacques echoes the same concern, however, with romantic nuances. His terror of the unknown is depicted as the fear of crossing that unknown alone. Marguerite, his romantic interest, answers him with a long speech full of philosophical and existentialist remarks. She acknowledges his fear, stating that "the questions that torment [them]" cannot be asked to anybody (72) since no one in Camino Real knows where they are or what they are supposed to do. She describes the city as "a port of entry and departure" (73), where there is no way to know what happens if you get out of it. This perception echoes the

concern mentioned earlier, the anguish perceived by Felice and Claire in *The Two-Character Play* when they are faced with the possibility and, consequently, the unfamiliarity and uncertainty of the future.

The only character of the play who musters the courage to climb up the stairs leading to Terra Incognita is Lord Byron. Asked about the point of his decision, Byron proudly responds that he is doing it: "For *freedom!* You may laugh at it, but it still means something to *me*" (56). This answer points to a notion that pervades almost the entirety of Williams's oeuvre: that of a constant state of movement. Byron suggests that "there is a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go" (59), and his last words before crossing the archway at the top of the stairs are, "*Make voyages! – Attempt them!* – there's nothing else" (60). As happens for the other doomed souls of Williams's plays, here as well, "travel seems essential . . . [it] encompasses the *was*, the *is*, and the *to be*, . . . the whole 'history' of man" (Spevack 230). After all, "man is nothing else by that which he makes himself" (Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism* 22). Man, for Sartre, is first and foremost "something which projects itself into a future and is aware that it is doing so" (23). Therefore, despite the intensity of anguish towards the uncertainty of the future, movement and action are crucial. Instead of passivity, anguish should manifest itself in movement and the desire for action because, not only in life but also in theater, "*doing* reveals *being*" (Sartre, *What is Literature* 193). That means that characters are not limited to their deterministic past or their psycho-emotional background, but instead, they create themselves and their characteristics through their actions.

Conclusion

In Williams's drama, "everybody is a traveler," and this state of movement and departure is "the force that informs all his work" (Rogoff 88). Movement is Williams's response to the pervasive existential angst of the human condition, not only as a solution but also as an expression of freedom from a philosophical point of view. In existentialist terminology, freedom is "the first condition of action" and, more importantly, of action that is "on principle *intentional*"

(Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 433). As such, the deliberate decision of Williams's characters to climb up stairs as an act of freedom and as an indication of their own will to face the true nature of their existence is telling of the newfound focus of his later drama. Therefore, stairs become the most consistent metaphorical image in his plastic theatre. They are not merely a point of spatial movement but, most importantly, a symbol of the departure from ourselves to ourselves, that is, to a new recognition of self, depicting thus "*the furthest* departure a man could make" (Williams, *Camino Real* 56). It is a difficult departure, it causes suffering, but "suffering, in the drama of Williams, is consciousness;" it is the "enactment of man's movement toward a tragic knowledge of his human condition" (Rogoff 88). His heroes – or, more accurately, antiheroes – do not have the good and virtuous qualities of the classical hero. Instead, they are common people with many faults, without any deep knowledge of themselves and reality, and in a constant state of searching for truth and meaning in their existence.

In all, Williams's plastic theatre is an attempt at a new presence on stage. Like many American playwrights influenced by European theatrical experimentations that started in the 1940s in the form of existential theater and followed by the theater of the absurd, Williams, too, intended to present "a kind of theater that embodied an existential world-changing dramatic structures to mirror a new philosophical vision" (Prosser 15). By depicting man as "an actor on the great stage of the universe," Williams showcases his universal and philosophical concerns far wider than his previous personal lyricism (Jackson 17). His vision of theatrical presence, although initially originating from the playwright's personal experience, aims to create a discourse with the audience to reach a point of common understanding of objective truth as related to the general human condition. After all, to him, "it is only in the theater that modern man may discover true meaning in his experience" (10), and the recurring image of stairs is a metaphorical representation of the constant state of movement, of the existential drive and purpose to deliberately go forward. As such, *En avant*, the signature phrase that he used in his notes and correspondences to encourage the act of moving forward, becomes the motto that informs Williams's oeuvre and his understanding of theater.

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