



BODIES THAT DESIRE: THE MELODRAMATIC CONSTRUCTION OF THE FEMALE PROTAGONISTS OF *THE GLASS MENAGERIE* AND *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*, BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS*

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ABSTRACT: Melodrama came into being in Italy during the seventeenth century and evolved in eighteenth-century France. It is mainly characterized by focusing on family and love relationships through an emotive approach. Melodrama has influenced many authors such as Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo, and Tennessee Williams. Tennessee Williams is a North-American playwright most famous for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In his plays he explores emotionalism, love conflicts, economic decadence, and family problems. This paper presents an analysis of the melodramatic construction of the female protagonists Amanda and Laura Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*), and Blanche DuBois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*). It also discusses how melodrama helps to build the tragic end of these characters.

KEYWORDS: melodrama; Tennessee Williams; female characters.

RESUMO: O melodrama surgiu na Itália no século XVII e desenvolveu-se na França durante o século XVIII. Ele é majoritariamente caracterizado por abordar relações amorosas e familiares através de uma abordagem emotiva. O melodrama influenciou diversos autores como Charles Dickens, Victor Hugo e Tennessee Williams. Tennessee Williams é um dramaturgo norte-americano famoso pela peça *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Suas peças exploram o emocionalismo, os conflitos amorosos, a decadência econômica e os problemas familiares. Este trabalho apresenta uma análise da construção melodramática das protagonistas femininas Amanda e Laura Wingfield (*The Glass Menagerie*) e Blanche DuBois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*). Discute-se também como o melodrama auxilia a construir o desfecho trágico dessas personagens.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: melodrama; Tennessee Williams; personagens femininas.

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TENNESSEE WILLIAMS: THE WRITING OF DESIRE

The South of the United States is a region historically marked by rural activities and relative economic prosperity. Many Southern American writers – such as Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Alice Walker – had their literary works influenced by the Southern context. One of the most famous Southern writers is Tennessee Williams (1911-1983). Although he is more frequently remembered for his famous plays which were adapted for the cinema and for Broadway, Tennessee Williams also wrote short stories, novels, and poems. His career started in the 1930's with the play *Candles to the Sun* (1936) and he was acknowledged to be a great playwright with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944).

The Glass Menagerie is based on the short story "Portrait of a Girl in glass" (1948). This play has a narrator called Tom who, in the very beginning, announces that the story belongs to his memories about his family once it is the story of the downfall of his mother, Amanda Wingfield, and of his sister, Laura Wingfield. After being abandoned by Mr. Wingfield, the family faces economic difficulties. By trying to keep up appearances, Amanda becomes a very oppressive mother as she restricts Tom and Laura to a regulated life. Amanda also constantly refers to the past in a very nostalgic and emotive way as she tries to show that one day the family had lived in prosperity after they moved from the

South. As for Laura, she has physical disability in one leg and a very fragile psychological condition. Laura has a collection of small glass animals of which she takes care daily. After some happenings, Tom leaves his house, and his family falls into a tragic situation as he was their supporter. It is important to remark that the play emphasizes the feeling of suffering experienced by these characters by making use of emotive language, music, and images projected on a screen as the story develops.

The play that is considered to be Tennessee Williams' masterpiece is *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). This play was also adapted for the cinema, television, opera, and ballet. In the 1951 movie, Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh starred the main roles (Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois). The movie also won four Oscars while the play received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948.

A Streetcar Named Desire opens with Blanche DuBois arriving at her sister's home, in a poor street called Elysian Fields in New Orleans. Blanche is a southern middle-aged woman who saw her rich family lose all they had. She decides to move to her sister's house after Belle Reve (a typical southern plantation that belonged to the DuBois) was sold to pay debts and she was fired from the school for having an affair with a student of hers. Despite her financial problems, Blanche tries to be a glamorous woman. Blanche's exaggerated behavior and

her dubious stories about her past make her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalsky, fell suspicious about what really happened in her past life. In this sense, the play deals with Blanche's physical and psychological deterioration to the point that she becomes insane and is taken to a madhouse.

As we can perceive from this short presentation of the plot of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, both plays have a complex structure because of the combination of three different genres – melodrama, epic drama, and tragedy.

According to Jean-Marie Thomasseau¹, melodrama is a dramatic genre that came into being in Italy during the seventeenth century. At the time, the word “melodrama” (in Greek, *melos* means music and *drama* means action) was used to name plays involving singing. The genre developed in France at the turn of the eighteenth century into the nineteenth century, when it was used to teach moral principles to people of the lower classes mainly. Thomasseau argues that, in 1775, Rousseau stated that his text *Pygmalion scène lyrique* was an ‘intermediate melodrama’ placed between declamation and dramas which were fully sung. After his declaration, the word ‘melodrama’ started to be used to classify plays that used music to create dramatic effects. In the twentieth century, the genre influenced other artistic manifestations such as the cinema, TV, novels, and short stories,

but kept its main characteristic, namely, the emphasis on familiar and love themes that have a highly emotive approach.

Melodrama is a genre built by oppositions (good and evil, brutality and fragility, *etc*). Therefore, melodrama expresses a manicheist view. According to Daniel Link², melodrama will always deal with carnal/body passion/desire that cannot be lived or expressed. In order to better explain this idea, he presents the example of the lyrics of a *bolero*. In this kind of lyrics, there is a person exposing a feeling – love or passion – that cannot be lived. But in this kind of lyrics, there is no person saying “I’m a woman/man in love with somebody”. In this sense, the gender of the enunciator in the *bolero* does not matter for the understanding of the lyrics. As the focus is not on gender, what really matters in the *bolero* is the condition assumed by the enunciator. This condition entails suffering for love, being abandoned, and crying. For Roland Barthes³, the condition of being abandoned, of crying, waiting and mourning for a lost or a non-corresponded love is symbolically related to women. When a person lives this condition, she or he becomes feminized. In this condition the person is in disadvantage and is prone to fail in life. So, as Link argues, this condition which involves feminization and disadvantage in melodrama is called *castration*. For Link, the castrated person is characterized by being “o menos absoluto [...] o sujeito que descobre o vazio do desejo”.⁴ Castration is also related to the reader’s identification with the character,

1. cf. THOMASSEAU. *O melodrama*. 2004.

2. cf. LINK. O amor é um naufrágio (sobre o Melodrama). In: _____. *Como se lê*. 2000.

3. cf. BARTHES. *Fragmentos de um discurso amoroso*. 1984.

4. LINK. O amor é um naufrágio (sobre o Melodrama). In: _____. *Como se lê*, p. 121.

as Link argues: “Sendo castrado (e porque o é), o castrado castra: o milagre da identificação do bolero (do tango, do teleteatro, do romance sentimental, *etc*) repousa no processo pelo qual o que ouve (vê, lê) identifica-se com o lugar de enunciação do castrado: a carência, o menos definitivo”.⁵

In this sense, the symbolic field of melodrama is not concerned with gender difference, but with the condition of being castrated. In this genre, conflicts (love, passion, desire) are resolved through castration. So, melodrama is organized through the system of castrator/castrated. Consequently, it is the perspective of the castrated that is basically explored in melodrama.

From the three dramatic genres that form the structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*, tragedy is the oldest one. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines tragedy as “a serious play with a sad ending, especially one in which the main character dies”.⁶ However, this word has a long tradition in the literary field in which tragedy has a complex conceptualization. Tragedy came into being in ancient Greece during the fifth century B.C. As Aristotle argues in *Poetics*, tragedy dealt with the downfall of an eminent person who was neither the most noble nor the most vicious one. Tragedy had a fixed form (Prologue, Episode, Exodus, and Chorus) and a specific function, namely, the cathartic function which aimed at the purgation of emotions, especially

pity and fear. However, along the centuries, tragedy had its characteristics and conceptualization changed. In *A tragédia moderna*, Raymond Williams argues that the idea of tragedy has become a subjective concept as society changed along the years, especially in the twentieth century. He also discusses the changes in the tragic protagonist. The tragic protagonist started to change along the rise of the bourgeoisie during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This new social class started to reject the idea that only aristocracy could be represented in tragedy. The bourgeoisie believed that tragedy could occur to a common person and it could be as valid and real as the tragedy suffered by a prince. So, in the modern period, tragedy can be experienced by a character representing an ordinary person and the tragic effect is achieved as the audience members see in the protagonist a person who is similar to them. In other words, Raymond Williams shows that tragedy is still possible nowadays because of the identification of the audience member/reader with the tragic character.

The third genre perceived in both plays is epic drama. For Anatol Rosenfeld⁷, epic drama is a dramatic genre in which epic elements are present along the development of the action. In this genre, the characters, in certain moments, can assume the role of a narrator and tell about an event located in the past which is important for the action that is

5. LINK. O amor é um naufrágio (sobre o Melodrama). In: _____. *Como se lê*, p. 121.

6. OXFORD. *Oxford Dictionary*. Available on: <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/tragedy> Access on: 11/13/2014

7. cf. ROSENFELD. *O teatro épico*. 2008.

developed in the present. Therefore, past events are part of the dramatic action.

As we recall the brief presentation of the two plays by Tennessee Williams, we can perceive that these three different dramatic genres (epic drama, melodrama, and tragedy) are combined in order to compose the structure of the plays. This structure can be summarized as follows:

- *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie* deal with an event located in the past which is directly related to the action that is developed in the present;
- The female protagonists are related to this past event and they are built as melodramatic characters;
- Melodramatic elements lead the play to its tragic effect in the end.
- We can then understand that the combination of different dramatic genres is crucial for the development of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Menagerie*. In fact, we can perceive that melodramatic devices are used to build the female protagonists. These devices also contribute for the tragic effect that happens in the end of these characters as the melodramatic devices evidence the pitiful condition of the female protagonists. In this sense, this paper aims to analyze and discuss the use of melodramatic devices to build female protagonists and

the role of melodrama to build the tragic end. So, in *The Glass Menagerie*, I will analyze Laura and Amanda Wingfield, while in *A Streetcar Named Desire* my analysis will be focused on Blanche DuBois.

THE PORTRAIT OF A MOTHER AND A DAUGHTER IN GLASS

Before analyzing the construction of Laura and Amanda in the play, I will consider the sections “Production Notes” and “The Characters”, which were written by Tennessee Williams himself to be placed before the text of the play. Both sections present valid information for my discussion.

The section “The Characters” presents a brief explanation of the characters in the play: Amanda, Laura, Tom and Jim. Amanda is characterized as

A little woman of great but confused vitality clinging frantically to another time and place. [...] She is not paranoiac, but her life is paranoia. [...] Certainly she has endurance and a kind of heroism, and though her foolishness makes her unwittingly cruel at times, there is tenderness in her slight person.⁸

In this note, we can see that Amanda is held back by her past life which becomes a strong component of the present moment of the play. This is a procedure typical of “epic drama”. Also, the note informs that Amanda has a paranoiac life, which is related to the economic conditions of her

8. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 228.

family. As they face economic difficulties, Amanda becomes a very oppressive mother and is in constant conflict with her son, Tom, who will consequently leave home and lead Amanda and Laura to a tragic end.

Different from Amanda, the description of Laura is emotive. In fact, Laura is described in such a way as to make the reader perceive her fragility, as it is possible to observe in the excerpt below⁹:

Amanda, having failed to establish contact with reality, continues to live vitality in her illusions, but Laura's situation is even graver. [...] This defect needs to be more than suggested on the stage. Stemming from this, Laura's separation increases till she is like a piece of her own glass collection, too exquisitely fragile to move from the shelf.¹⁰

This fragility built by her physical and psychological condition would make the audience and the readers feel pity for Laura. The emphasis on Laura's condition is also built by other elements such as lighting and music, as we can read in the "Production Notes". These notes show that the music

'The Glass Menagerie' is primarily Laura's music and therefore comes out most clearly when the play focuses upon her and the lovely fragility of glass which is her image. [...] A single recurring tune, 'The glass menagerie', is used to give emotional

emphasis to suitable passages. This tune is like circus music, not when you are on the grounds or in the immediate vicinity of the parade, but when you are at the same distance and very likely thinking of something else¹¹.

The light used for Laura is also a different one. The production notes highlight that during the quarrel scene between Tom and Amanda, in which Laura has no active part, the clearest light should be on her figure. Moreover, "The light upon LAURA should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in religious portraits of female saints or madonnas".¹² In this sense, clear light on Laura is used to create a special emphasis on her and highlight her purity and different condition when compared to the other characters.

As for the development of the action in the play, in "Scene One" Amanda is shown to be a very oppressive mother as she always controls her children's attitudes. We can see an example of this situation in the passage in which she tells Laura: "Resume your seat, little sister – I want you to stay fresh and pretty – for gentleman callers!".¹³ In her words to Laura, Amanda hints that she is planning to marry her daughter. This plan is better exposed in "Scene Two":

AMANDA: So what are we going to do the rest of our lives? Stay home and watch the parades go by? Amuse ourselves with

11. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 229-230.

12. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named*

13. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 236.

9. I choose to use the word 'reader' because I am discussing the notes that come together with text of the play.

10. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 228.

the glass menagerie, darling? Eternally play those worn-out phonograph records your father left as a painful reminder of him? We don't have a business career [...]. What is there left but dependency all our lives? 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 – [...] eating the crust of humility all their life!

Is that the future we've mapped out for ourselves?
I swear it's the only alternative I can think of!
It isn't a very pleasant alternative, isn't it?
Of course – some girls *do marry*.¹⁴

Along this passage, the readers and the audience can understand why Amanda wishes to marry her daughter: she is worried because Laura has no job and will probably not be able to provide for herself in the future. Moreover, her preoccupation reinforces Amanda's characteristic paranoia. This idea is reinforced by Laura's speech: "Mother's afraid I'm going to be an old maid".¹⁵

As she plans to marry her daughter, Amanda asks Tom to introduce a friend to Laura. However, she cannot imagine that Tom will use this occasion to revenge himself over his mother's oppression towards him. Tom invites

Laura's teenage love, Jim O'Connor, to visit the Wingfields. However, as it will be soon revealed, Jim cannot even go out with Laura because he is engaged to another girl. In "Scene Five", the audience follows the preparations for this visit. As Tom announces to his mother that he will introduce a friend to Laura, Amanda starts to prepare the house for the visit of the "gentleman caller". By doing so, Tom shows a perverse attitude as he is consciously able to plot an event that will make his mother and sister suffer. In this scene Laura's singular condition is reinforced, as it is possible to perceive in this dialogue:

TOM: Laura is very different from other girls.

AMANDA: I think the difference is all to her advantage.

TOM: Not quite all – in the eyes of others – strangers – she's terribly shy and lives in a world of her own and those things make her seem a little peculiar to people outside the house.

AMANDA: Don't say peculiar.

TOM: Face the facts. She is.

[the dance hall music changes to a tango that has a minor and somewhat ominous tone]

AMANDA: In what sense is she peculiar – may I ask?

TOM [gently]: She lives in a world of her own – a world of little glass ornaments.¹⁶

14. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 245. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.).

15. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 240.

16. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 271-272.

As we can see, Tom highlights Laura's fragility. In fact, she lives in a world of her own, which shows her inability to live in society as she is shy and has a problem in her leg. By this characterization, Laura is placed in a disadvantageous position, which makes the audience feel pity for her. Along the dialogue above, the music changes to tango as the conversation exposes Laura's condition and the atmosphere becomes tenser. The use of music reinforces the melodramatic structure of the play. Specifically in this part, the use of tango reinforces the emotional content of the dialogue. As it refers to Laura, tango also helps the audience to perceive her fragile condition.

Scene Six is about Jim's arrival and the dinner with the Wingfields. A stage direction presents the preparations to receive him:

Amanda has worked like a Turk in preparation for the gentleman caller. The results are astonishing. The new floor lamp with its rose-silk shade is in place, a coloured paper lantern conceals the broken light fixture in the ceiling, new bellowing white curtains are at the windows, chintz covers are on chairs and sofa, a pair of new sofa pillows make their initial appearance.

Open boxes and tissue paper are scattered on the floor.

Laura stands in the middle with lifted arms while Amanda crouches before her, adjusting the hem of the new dress, devoted and ritualistic. The dress is coloured and designed by memory. The

*arrangement of Laura's hair is changed, it is softer and more becoming. A fragile unearthly prettiness has come out in Laura: she is like a piece of translucent glass touched by light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting.*¹⁷

We can notice that the decoration is old-fashioned and has a decadent kind of glamour: Amanda's efforts reveal her intention of creating a living condition that was possible in the past but not in the present anymore. Amanda tries to thrill the visitor with the new decoration. We can also perceive that Laura has her figure highlighted by her position in the scene. She is placed in the middle of the room and her fragile appearance makes her look like a piece of glass. Again, her peculiarity and fragility are reinforced as she is compared to a piece of glass. We can also observe that Amanda takes care of Laura just like Laura takes care of her glass collection: dedicatedly and devotionally. In this sense, Laura is presented as a figurine that belongs to Amanda and can be compared to the pieces of her glass collection given her fragility and her relation with her overprotective mother.

Amanda's exaggerated care of Laura is also present in the following dialogue:

LAURA: Mother, you made me so nervous!

AMANDA: How have I made you nervous?

17. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 274. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

18. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 275. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

LAURA: By all this fuss! You make it seem so important!

*Amanda produces two powder puffs which she wraps in handkerchief and stuffs in Laura's bosom*¹⁸.

All this preparation makes Laura feel nervous and shows how important the visitor is: it could be the salvation of Laura's condition. In fact, Jim is presented as a hope for Laura since the beginning of the previous scene which starts with the word "Annunciation" projected on the screen. The word alludes to the biblical passage in which an angel announces to Virgin Mary that she will be pregnant with the Savior. So, when Tom says to his mother that he will introduce a friend to Laura, Amanda sees in his friend the figure of a savior. In this sense, Jim is presented as the savior of Laura's life, which creates suspense and expectation. However, this event will lead the Wingfields to their tragic end.

The relation between Laura and her glass objects is better developed in the last scene (scene seven). As Jim comes closer and closer to Laura during a conversation about her glass menagerie, she becomes less and less shy. Their attention is focused on a specific glass animal, which is her favorite one, as we can notice in the passage below:

LAURA: I shouldn't be partial, but he is my favorite.

JIM: What kind of thing is this one supposed to be?

LAURA: Haven't you noticed the single horn on his forehead?

JIM: A unicorn, huh?

LAURA: Mmmmm-hmmm!

JIM: Unicorns, aren't they extinct in the modern world?

[...]

JIM: Poor little fellow he must feel sort of lonesome.

LAURA [smiling]: Well, if he does he doesn't complain about it. He stays on a shelf with some **horses that don't have horns and all of them seem to get along nicely together**.¹⁹

According to Jean Chevalier, unicorns represent strength and purity, which explains why they are commonly pictured as white animals. In addition, unicorns can only be touched by virgin women because of their purity. As Chevalier explains, "[o] mito do unicórnio é o da fascinação que a pureza continua a exercer sobre os corações mais corrompidos".²⁰ In the dialogue quoted above, Laura can be related to the glass unicorn as both of them are fragile, lonely, and different. For Laura, the unicorn is also a horse while the other horses are just horses without a horn. This statement can be understood as Laura's view of herself: she is not different from other people; she only has something peculiar that other people do not have.

19. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 301. (Emphasis in bold: mine.)

20. CHEVALIER. *Dicionário de símbolos*, p. 920.

However, the unicorn is accidentally broken by Jim while they are dancing:

JIM: Ha-ha-ha [*They suddenly bump into the table. JIM stops*]

What did we hit on?

LAURA: Table.

JIM: Did something fall of it? I think-

LAURA: Yes.

JIM: I hope it wasn't the little glass horse with the horn!

LAURA: Yes.

JIM: Aw, aw, aw. Is it broken?

LAURA: **Now he is just like the other horses.**

[...]

LAURA: Horn! It doesn't matter. Maybe it's a blessing in disguise.

JIM: You will never forgive me. I bet that that was your favorite piece of glass.

LAURA: I don't have favorites much. It's no tragedy [...] **Glass breaks so easily. No matter how careful you are.** The traffic jars the shelves and things fall of them.

JIM: Still I'm awful sorry that **I was the cause.**

LAURA [*smiling*]: I'll just imagine he had an operation. The horn was removed **to make him feel less – freakish!** [*they both laugh*]

Now he feels more at home with the other horses, the ones that don't have horns...

JIM: [...] I'm glad to see that you have a sense of humour. You know – you're – well very different! Surprisingly different from anyone else I know!²¹

It is possible to perceive that Laura considers the event from a positive angle as it makes this animal seem more normal: when the unicorn loses its horn, it becomes a “normal horse”; that is, it loses its peculiar characteristic. As Laura is connected to the unicorn, this event will affect her directly and mark the beginning of Laura and Amanda's fall. Before the breaking of the unicorn's horn, there is growing expectation that Jim would have a loving relationship with Laura. However, Jim reveals that he cannot date Laura because he is already engaged to another girl. As for Tom, he runs away from home leaving his family facing economic straits. When Jim informs her about his engagement, Laura breaks the unicorn and gives him the shattered glass saying it would be a souvenir. This attitude marks the climax of her fall: from now on, there is no hope for her anymore. She does not have any other savior. All hope of changing her

21. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named*

life and having love was deposited on Jim. By giving him the shattered glass as a souvenir, Laura symbolically gives Jim a memento of what he did to her.

After Jim leaves the Wingfields' house, Amanda has a strong argument with Tom. Tom states that he will go to the movies, but he runs away from his home instead and takes the money of the electricity bill with him. When he leaves the house the lights are turned off and Laura and Amanda are on the sofa. Laura has "dignity and tragic beauty" while Amanda's "gestures are slow and graceful, [...] as she comforts the daughter".²²

The play ends with a long soliloquy in which Tom states that all these events belong to a past time. "Now", he remembers his past because he sees small glass bottles of perfume on a window shop. In this sense, all memories of Laura, Amanda, and what he planned to his family become a collection for him. Glass objects, such as the perfume bottles, remind him of his family, because glass represents fragments of his memory that now hurts his consciousness.

BLANCHE DUBOIS: A DECADENT GLAMOROUS WOMAN

The first aspect to be considered regarding the female protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is her French name: "Blanche DuBois". "Blanche" means white and this color is associated with illumination, purity, superior beings (God

and angels for example), and innocence.²³ The word "du" is the nobility particle (*la particule*) and is used in a surname to signal the noble rank of a family. Finally, the word "Bois" means wood, a natural element that is related to the idea of concreteness, rusticity, and triviality.

One can notice that the signification of "blanche" contrasts with the signification of "bois"; that is, the semantic field of "blanche" is related to superior beings (such as God, angels, and high pagan priests) while the semantic field of "bois" is associated with triviality. In addition, the signification of the noble particle "du" also contrasts with the signification of the word "bois". In this sense, the reader/audience member can expect a character that is marked by a clash of characteristics. This clash is perceived in Blanche's attitude as she tries to be sophisticated and refined, as indicated in this stage direction from "Scene One":

[BLANCHE comes around the corner, carrying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building and again at the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. She is about five years older than STELLA.]

23. Cf. CHEVALIER. *Dicionário de símbolos*, p. 141-144.

22. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 312.

24. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 117. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.) (Emphasis in bold: mine.)

*Her delicate beauty must **avoid light**. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well her white clothes, that suggests **a moth**.*²⁴.

In “Scene One”, Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields, in New Orleans, the place where her sister, Stella, lives with her husband Stanley. Elysian Fields is described in a long stage direction as a poor place with several old buildings. Blanche contrasts with the scenery as she is inappropriately dressed for this kind of place. Her exaggerated refined clothes contrast with the poverty of the place around her.

In this passage, it is possible to perceive how Blanche is built through melodramatic devices. She is built through exaggeration, one of the main characteristics of the genre. Moreover, it is ironic how she is compared with a moth. Moth is an insect which feels attracted by light but if it touches a light bulb, it dies. Blanche has a similar complex relation with light. Her name is associated with light/illumination, which she constantly avoids as if she is trying to hide something because she knows that light can make truth appear and destroy her planned image.

One aspect that she tries to hide about herself is alcoholism, as we can read in this stage direction from “Scene One”:

[...] She [Blanche] catches her breath with a startled gesture. Suddenly she notices something in a half opened closet. She springs up

*and crosses to it, and removes a whisky bottle. She pours a half tumbler of whisky and tosses it down. She carefully replaces the bottle and washes out the tumbler at the sink. Then she resumes her seat in front of the table.*²⁵

In the sequence, she states to her sister: “Just water, baby, to chase it! Now don’t get worried, your sister hasn’t turned into a drunkard, she’s just all shaken up, and hot, and tired, and dirty! [...]”.²⁶ As we can perceive, Blanche’s attitude shows that she is aware of her problem as she acts as if she had never found a whisky bottle in Stella’s house. At the same time, her attitude symbolically builds her as a melodramatic character because it emphasizes her physical desires.

Blanche’s wish to be regarded as a glamorous and well-behaved person evokes her past life. Blanche and Stella come from a rich family that once owned a plantation called Belle Reve, located near Laurel, Mississippi. When the family starts to lose money with the property, Stella leaves home to live her own life, while Blanche stays at Belle Reve. As the members of the family die, Blanche takes over the plantation management, but she fails. The conditions under which Blanche loses Belle Reve are not clear. She presents her version of the story, but it does not seem to be true. Stanley then questions her about the veracity of her version and about her life in Laurel. Stanley becomes Blanche’s

25. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 119. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

26. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 121.

antagonist as he questions, investigates and brings out some facts about her life. This antagonism can be perceived in the following excerpt:

BLANCHE: Capricorn – the Goat!

STANLEY: What sign were *you* born under?

BLANCHE: [...] that's under Virgo.

STANLEY: What's Virgo?

BLANCHE: Virgo is the virgin.

STANLEY: [...] Hah! [...] Say, do you happen to know somebody named Shaw?

[Her face expresses a faint shock. She reaches for the cologne bottle and dampens her handkerchief as she answers carefully.]

BLANCHE: Why, everybody knows somebody named Shaw!

STANLEY: Well, this somebody named Shaw is under the impression he met you in Laurel, but I figure he must have got you mixed up with some other party because this other party is someone he met at a hotel called the Flamingo.

[...]

BLANCHE: I'm afraid he does have me mixed up with this 'other party'. The Hotel Flamingo is not sort of establishment I would dare to be seen in!²⁷

If we consider the symbolism of the goat and the virgin, it is possible to observe that Stanley and Blanche express different ideas. The goat is an animal considered to be impure and moved by its need of procreation;²⁸ it is also related to Satan's image and Satanist rituals. On the other hand, the virgin is associated with purity, innocence, and the figure of Holy Mary. Besides Stanley's antagonism to Blanche, this dialogue also shows how he questions her attitudes, especially about what she did in the past. By questioning her past, Stanley destabilizes the image of a refined and sophisticated woman that Blanche builds for herself.

As the play goes on, Blanche shows that there is something wrong with her past:

BLANCHE: I wasn't so good the last two years or so after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers.

[...]

BLANCHE: I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. [...] Have got to be seductive – put on soft colours, the colours of butterfly wings and glow – make a little – temporary magic just in order to pay for – one night's shelter! That's why I've been – not so awfully good lately. I've run for protection [...] You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I – I'm fading now!²⁹

28. cf. CHEVALIER. *Dicionário de símbolos*, p. 134.

27. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 167-168. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

29. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 171. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

This speech is part of a dialogue between Blanche and her sister, but it sounds more like a soliloquy as Stella does not pay attention to Blanche. As a consequence, this passage informs the audience member/reader that Blanche's behavior does not correspond to what society would expect from a woman of her position. Blanche is very subtle when she tells Stella that during the economic crisis in Belle Reve/Lauren she was forced to resort to an immoral means of living by becoming a prostitute. In short, she tries to hide her true self by deluding herself and the others with a type of behavior and lifestyle that do not correspond to her reality. That is the reason why Blanche's actions, movements, gestures, way of dressing/speaking sound exaggerated: she is enacting a "role" to cover up her decadence.

Blanche's relation with Mitch is also marked by these aspects. Mitch is a worker and Stanley's friend. She meets him in Stella's house ("Scene Three" – The Poker Night) and, from this point in the story, she shows some interest in him. The fact that Blanche considers Mitch a possible suitor, a hope for her future, is also a sign of her decadence as he is a poor man who cannot afford the lifestyle she dreams to have. When she talks with Stella about her relationship with Mitch she assumes a position of a 'well-behaved woman', as we can read in this excerpt from "Scene Five": "BLANCHE: [...] I want his respect. And men don't want anything they

get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over – thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to – the vulgar term is – 'put out'... [...]"³⁰.

However, in "Scene Six" she slyly suggests to go to bed with Mitch:

[...] to be very Bohemian. We are going to pretend that we are sitting in a little artists' café on the Left Bank in Paris! [*She lights a candle stub and puts it in a bottle.*] *Je suis La Dame aux Camélias! Vous êtes – Armand!* Understand French?

[...]

Blanche: *Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quel dommage!* – I mean it's a damned good thing... I've found some liquor! Just enough for two shots without any dividends honey...³¹

As we can see, Blanche compares herself to the protagonist of *The Lady of The Camélias*,³² a French novel written by Alexander Dumas, whose main character, Marguerite, is a prostitute; Armand is her lover. In the second speech, Blanches clearly invites Mitch to go to bed with her. It is interesting to notice that she does it in French as she knows that Mitch does not speak this language. Thus, it is possible to say that she is being ironic with him.

30. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 171.

31. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 177. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

32. Published in Brazil as *A dama das camélias* by Brasiliense in 1965.

All in all, we can see that Blanche is built through opposite characteristics (purity vs. sensuality, sophistication vs. poverty, innocence vs. guilt) that are enacted by her in different occasions. In addition, Blanche is marked by exaggerated gestures, clothes and attitudes.

From scene seven to eleven, the readers/audience will follow Blanche's downfall. In "Scene Seven", Stanley reveals Blanche's past to Stella by focusing on the period when she lived in the Flamingo hotel:

STANLEY: This is after the home-place had slipped through her lily-white fingers! She moved to the Flamingo! A second-class hotel which has the advantage of not interfering in the private social life of the personalities there! The Flamingo is used to all kind of goings-on. But even the management of the Flamingo was impressed by Dame Blanche that they request her to turn in her room-key for permanently! This happened a couple of weeks before she showed here.

[...]

STANLEY: Honey, I told you I thoroughly checked on these stories! Now, wait till I finish. The trouble with dame Blanche was that she couldn't put on her act more in Laurel! They got wised up after two or three days with her and then they quit, and she goes on to another, the same old lines, same old act, same old hooley! But the town was too small for this to go

on for ever! And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco – nuts.

[STELLA draws back.]

And for the last year or two she has been washed up like poison. That's why she's here this summer, visiting royalty, putting on all this act – because she's practically told by the mayor to get out of town! Yes, did you know there was an arm camp near Laurel and your sister's was one of the places called 'Out-of-Bounds'?³³

Although the passage above is a dialogue between Stanley and Stella, it is more like a soliloquy as Stella does not pay attention to Stanley. Once more, we have a passage that basically aims at informing the audience/readers about Blanche's past. In this scene, Stanley also affirms that he had told Mitch about Blanche's affair with a 16-year-old student; as a consequence, Mitch breaks up with her in the following scene.

As one can notice in the passage quoted above, Stanley presents a side of Blanche that contrasts with the image that she tries to build: a sophisticated woman with a type of behavior that corresponds to what society would expect from her. At this point, it is important to highlight that Blanche is conscious of this 'dark side' of her life. For instance, in "Scene Five" she states to Stella: "I wasn't so good the last two years [...]"³⁴ In this sense, Blanche is built as an ambivalent

33. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 186-187. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

34. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 171.

character, contrasting two different images: a sophisticated one, which is imaginary and false, and a real one, which reveals her social, economic, moral, physical degradation. In ‘Scene Nine’, a dialogue with Mitch reinforces how Blanche hides her real condition:

BLANCHE: I like it dark. The dark is comforting to me.

MITCH: I don’t think I ever seen you in the light. [...] That’s a fact!

[...]

BLANCHE: There is some obscure meaning in this but I fail to catch it.

[...]

MITCH: Let’s turn the light on here.

BLANCHE [*fearfully*]: Light? Which light? What for?

MITCH: This one with the paper thing on it. [*He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened gasp.*]

BLANCHE: What did you do that for?

MITCH: So I can take a look at you good and plain!

BLANCHE: Of course you don’t really mean to be insulting!

MITCH: No, just realistic.

BLANCHE: I don’t want realism.

MITCH: Naw, I guess not.

[...]

BLANCHE: I’ll tell you what I want. Magic! [...] I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell them the truth. I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And, if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! *Don’t turn the light on!*

[*MITCH crosses to the switch. He turns the light on and stares at her. She cries out and covers her face. He turns the light off again.*]³⁵

In the passage above, light reveals Blanche’s real condition and, consequently, damages the fake image she builds for herself. This passage can be related to the one in which Blanche is compared to a moth as she is hurt by light just like a moth is: “There is something about her uncertain manner, as well her white clothes, that suggests a moth”.³⁶ Moreover, in the dialogue above, Blanche demonstrates how she refuses reality and prefers magic; in her words, “I tell what *ought* to be the truth”. What “*ought* to be the truth” for Blanche is intrinsically related to her desires for a better life and a glamorous self-image. In fact, she desires the rich life she had in the past; she desires the youth she does not have anymore. Light in this context is an element that expresses both the passage of time and impossible desires for Blanche. In this sense, the scene is one of the most violent in the play as

35. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 203-204. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play’s text.)

36. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 117.

Blanche is forced to face a situation that hurts her psychologically in a very cruel way.

In the sequence, Blanche confesses her past to Mitch:

BLANCHE: Flamingo? No! Tarantula was the name of it! I stayed at a hotel called Tarantula arms!

[...]

BLANCHE: Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims. [...] Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with... [...]

[...]

BLANCHE [as if to herself]: Crumble and fade and – regrets – recriminations... 'If you'd done this, it wouldn't cost me that!'

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Corones para los muertos. Corones...*

BLANCHE: Legacies! Huh... And other things such as blood-stained pillow-sleeps – 'her linen needs changing' – 'yes, mother. But, couldn't we get a coloured girl to do it?' No, we couldn't of course. Everything gone but the –

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores.*

BLANCHE: Death – I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was close as you are... we didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it!

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Flores para los muertos, flores – flores...*

BLANCHE: The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? [...] Not far from Belle Reve, before we had lost Belle Reve, was a camp where they trained young soldiers. On Saturday nights they would go to town to get drunk –

MEXICAN WOMAN: *Corones...*

BLANCHE: – and on the back they would stagger on to my lawn and call – 'Blanche, Blanche' – The deaf old lady remaining suspected nothing. But sometimes, I slipped outside to answer their calls... Later the paddy-wagon would gather them up daises... the long way home...³⁷

By confessing her past to Mitch, Blanche destroys the image of a well-behaved woman. In this confession, she also mentions that to have intimacies with strangers was a means to satisfy her desire of filling her empty heart. In reality, this satisfaction would attend to her emotional and carnal desire. As she reveals her past life to Mitch, Blanche knows that she loses her last hope to marry and have a proper life. This passage marks the beginning of Blanche's definite fall as expressed by the Mexican woman's lines that sound like a warning to the audience/readers. As a matter of fact, in

37. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 204-206. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.)

this passage we can notice the presence of a structural aspect of the ancient Greek tragedy, as the woman's voice would correspond to the ancient choral, more specifically to Coryphaeus' voice.

In "Scene Ten", the readers/audience will follow the climax of the tension between Blanche and Stanley which will end with Blanche being raped by her brother-in-law. The scene happens in Stella's house while she is in hospital to give birth. Before going home, Stanley had been drinking and he presents a strange behavior as he had planned something for this moment. While they are talking about Stella, Stanley takes his shirt off in front of Blanche. She asks him to close the curtain before getting undressed and he answers: "STANLEY [*amiably*]: *This is all I'm going to **undress right now** [...]*".³⁸ As we can perceive, his speech hints at the fact that he has something in mind and already points to what will soon happen to Blanche. In fact, Stanley seems to be preparing the occasion for the brutal event: he puts on his 'special silk' pajamas of his wedding night. Blanche starts to talk about a 'millionaire' who is interested in going out with her. Apparently, Stanley seems to believe in Blanche until she states that Mitch implored her forgiveness. In this moment, Stanley acts as if he were tired of Blanche's stories and unmask her by affirming that Mitch had not asked for her forgiveness and that this millionaire does not exist

either. They start a strong argument and tension increases along the scene. As they argue, some unclear images appear on the wall around Blanche. Stanley moves to the bedroom where she is and closes the door. Jungle sounds are heard and shadows of trees are projected on the walls while they discuss in the bedroom. These images and sounds seem to announce that something animalistic and brutal will occur. Blanche tries to defend herself with a broken bottle while Stanley pushes her over a table as if she were a prey and he a kind of predator. We can then understand that she will be raped as she falls on her knees and Stanley carries her to bed at the end of the scene. This scene is marked by brutality and confrontation between two different characters: a brutal/savage man versus a delicate/fragile woman. This tension between them is built from a manicheist perspective, which is one of the most important melodramatic characteristics, as there is a clash of two extremes: brutality vs. fragility.

This manicheist view of the world reinforces the tragic effect as it shows that Blanche cannot escape from this terrible condition: her opponent is stronger than herself. Blanche's fragility is exposed in full. As a consequence, the tragic effect starts to be built in this part of the play and is reinforced along 'Scene Eleven' when Blanche is taken to a madhouse. In this scene, Blanche is destroyed both physically and psychologically as, on the one hand, she is unable to

38. WILLIAMS. *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, p. 210. (The emphasis in italics are originally in the play's text.) (Emphasis in bold: mine.)

tell what is real from what is unreal and, on the other hand, her destruction is witnessed by the other characters (Mitch, Stanley's friends, Eunice, and Stanley and Stella) who see her being taken away to the madhouse.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of the female protagonists Laura, Amanda, and Blanche shows that these characters are built through melodramatic devices. This melodramatic construction entails several desires – such as having a better life, recovering youth, and marrying –, which are not satisfied. As a consequence, the characters experience castration, which is the strongest melodramatic characteristic as Daniel Link explains in his paper “O amor é um naufrágio (sobre o Melodrama)” that had been already mentioned. As Amanda, Laura, and Blanche are castrated, they accentuate their pitiful condition, which builds their tragic end.

The melodramatic construction of these female characters also draws on their bodily expression. As a matter of fact, Blanche's and Amanda's exaggerated gestures and Blanche's and Laura's physical condition relate their construction directly to melodrama. Other melodramatic characteristics are also perceived in both plays, such as music and emotionalism. In short, the exaggerated bodily expression and condition as well as the unsatisfied desires are certainly more

explored than any of the other melodramatic devices; thus, they have more importance for the melodramatic construction of these characters.

As discussed in the analysis of the female protagonists of both plays, the melodramatic devices used to construct these characters reinforce their pitiful condition. As a matter of fact, as the action develops, the problematic condition of these characters becomes more and more acute and gradually builds the tragic end of the plays. In this sense, we can affirm that the melodramatic construction of the female protagonists plays a central role in the creation of the tragic effect of both plays. To sum up, the combination of genres in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is so well articulated that we cannot highlight one specific genre as being more important than the others. So, we can appreciate two very complex literary works in which the female characters play a central role in this tragic *melos drama*.

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