



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Vol. 9. Issue.4. 2022 (Oct-Dec)

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

THE DISPLACEMENT OF REALISM OF IN SELECT PLAYS OF TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

Lec. Fouad Abbas Ali

University of Wasit/ Faculty of physical Education and Sport Sciences/ Department of Theoretical
Sciences



Article information

Received:20/09/2022
Accepted: 07/11/2022
Published online:08/11/2022
doi: [10.33329/ijelr.9.4.73](https://doi.org/10.33329/ijelr.9.4.73)

ABSTRACT

This work, however, presents a bold reading of Williams' *late plays*: the works will be considered daring, innovative and even revolutionary. Critics considers them more honest than those deemed canons, as they bring the dramatization of paradoxes not only in the context, but in the form, which differentiates them from the set of works by Tennessee in Latin America. The term *late plays will* be used here beyond a mere definition of time or chronological description, extending the conceptual possibilities and escaping prejudice. Late will outline a more tolerant description of differences, the world and its stereotypes, safeguarding less realistic but more metaphysical and epistemological contradictions and modulations. Therefore, these pieces collated here are closer to the contemporary posture of investigation of new paths for an author who has always had his work subjugated by hegemonic readings, psychological realism and biographism.

Keywords: Realism, late plays, Tennessee Williams, Critical analysis, mainstream

INTRODUCTION

The plays written by the American playwright Tennessee Williams [1911-1983] between 1962 and 1983 are known in the United States as *late plays*. With that term, they would be considered those that appeared too late, after the author's most important and acclaimed period. Williams' celebration took place when his works were widely produced on the Broadway circuit and glamorized with their film adaptations in Hollywood, between 1945 and 1961. moved away from the commercial standards of texts that were written for the entertainment industry. *late plays*, therefore, sounds pejorative, as it is a term that gives the impression that they were written at an inappropriate time or that they emerged beyond the determined time as the most creative and successful. They would then be considered extemporaneous, inopportune, indolent, expressionless works.

This work, however, presents a bold reading of Williams' *late plays*: the works will be considered daring, innovative and even revolutionary. Prosser (2009, p. 268) considers them more honest than those deemed canons, as they bring the dramatization of paradoxes not only in the context, but in the form, which differentiates them from the set of works by Tennessee in the USA and Latin America. The term *late plays* will be used here beyond a mere definition of time or chronological description, extending the conceptual possibilities and escaping prejudice. *late* will therefore outline a more tolerant description of differences, the world and its stereotypes, safeguarding less realistic but more metaphysical and epistemological contradictions and modulations. Therefore, these pieces collated here are closer to the contemporary posture of investigation

of new paths for an author who has always had his work subjugated by hegemonic readings, psychological realism and biographic.

These are unpublished works in the International publishing market and still little appreciated on the country's stages. They are didactically framed in the third phase of his career, after the period of acclaim in the *mainstream*. For those who are familiar with his work, it may even be strange that they have not yet been a focus of interest for USA and Latin Americans, in terms of their study, translation, publication, and staging. Many claim, without knowing them, that all of the playwright's works had already been translated and published in the USA and Latin America, or at least those reputed to be the most important. The *late plays* are not considered when any follower, artist, researcher or admirer of the playwright refers to his work. Even because they are almost entirely unknown. Confirming the playwright's fame only for the most celebrated plays, USA and Latin Americans ratify the celebrity *status* he had in the 1940s to 1950s, arguing about his stylistics, themes and figuration conventionalized as a universal concept for the entire body of his work.

The 'Williams plays' model is built on the critical expectation that certain elements are, or should be, recognizable in a Tennessee Williams play. The most prominent defining elements are: its form is 'poetic realism'; makes a self-portrait of himself; occurs in the South [of the United States]; it is a moralistic drama that often pits sexual relations against a puritanical ethos; and that if the subjectivity of the 'fugitive type' [or the outsider] results in a disfigurement by death or madness, there will be some redemptive meaning, occasionally derived from mythic structures (Dorff, 1997, p.9, author's highlights).

Traditional reading, however, is on the surface of a sea of anachronism, which separates Williams' work from considerations of the contexts in which these plays were written — poems, short stories, novels, and screenplays. The *late plays* they have a much bolder experimental approach than any other by an American author of his time for the following reasons: the socio-political situation in which they were created was different from the entire context of the 1930s to 1950s; the aesthetics that contributed to the artistic-theatrical scene in the United States were in harmony with European innovations, then novelties across America from the 1960s onwards; and the biographical motivations, very different, too, from when he was a celebrity—Tennessee was no longer a young man at the beginning of his career, forced to deal with the dictates of the *mainstream* as opposed to his subjectivities.

The usual Tennessee Williams, with a style rooted in traditional drama, the same enshrined in *The Glass Menagerie* [1943-44,] (Williams, 2014) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* [1947] (Williams, 1988), practically does not exist in the works of this phase. From a contemporary perspective, they are as experimental as any other from that fruitful and courageous countercultural moment, resulting from disparate experiences in the sociological, anthropological and political contexts of theater historiography. They were unprecedented scenic and aesthetic innovations that signal the departure of American drama from its traditional veins.

Many of these pieces have links, perhaps even umbilicals, with the more famous ones. Some still refer to certain references to the South of the United States, but there are no longer the famous mothers of Tennessee Williams — maternal characters with villainous, persecuting and arrogant characteristics, such as Donald's mother in *Summer at the Lake*, 1937] (Williams, 2005). Some aspects of his famous aesthetic are strongly recognized, mainly lyricism. He never abandoned the influence of Anton Chekhov and the modernist poet Hart Crane. However, his pieces are no longer the same rhythms and tones from previous phases. The literary character of his writing had lost ground to the physicality typical of the theater.

There are also the *outsider characters*, as in all his work, an approach that the author never abandoned and which is intensified in this period. They are figurations of sensitive individuals, isolated and uprooted from the productive American system. Williams did not abandon the artist's insistent portrayal of society, excellence in the representation of the female soul and its contexts; as well as desire and cruelty. These last two devices are the ones most discussed by the dominant critics in his most famous plays. Now, they emerge with a much more critical potential, revealing Williams' perspective on the world's brutality, and a certain proximity to the *Grand Guignol*. This can be seen in the play *Ivan's Widow* [Ivan's Widow, 1982], which portrays the desperate widow committing suicide in front of her psychiatrist, and in *Sunburst* [The *Sunburst Diamond Ring*, 1980], when

a pair of gay men, while assaulting an old retired actress, wants to mutilate his finger for not being able to remove his diamond ring. Many of the *late plays* are also overtly comical, such as: *A Lovely Sunday for a Suffering Heart* [1979] and *The Mutilated* [1964]. Others are even grotesque, such as: *A Knight for Milady* [1976] and *The Gracious Woman* [1966] (Williams, 1970; 2008; 2016).

CONTEXTS AND CONJUNCTURES: THE DISPLACEMENT OF REALISM

By contextualizing the historical moment in relation to the theater, it can be said that Williams was politically engaged during the uprisings of the so-called counterculture. Thus, he gained space for dramaturgical formats that criticized capitalism; he personified at least one of the countercultural protesters' demands; and also incorporated forms, mainly epic, arising from the Brechtian universe: the breaking of the fourth wall, narrating characters, reflective distance and eminently parodic or ironic postures, in addition to observing the incorporation of music to enhance socio-political criticism. This process contributed to the flow of different dramaturgies, which reflected the emerging new society and an unprecedented shift in public discourse on radicalism and experimentalism in American culture.

In the 1960s and 1970s, there was no longer the repression and prohibitions that Williams suffered throughout his career, such as the Hayes Code, the Catholic Legion for Decency and McCarthyism (TOLEDO; FLORES, 2018). All were instruments of censorship, persecution, and justification for cuts in the film and theater industry, considered subversive, immoral or outside the sexual, social and political ideological standards of conservative, white, self-proclaimed Christian and heteronormative society.

Thinking on the political scale, there were interventions in Vietnam, Korea and Cambodia, corruption, growing massification and the defense of democracy with the arms industry. The United States was in difficult economic times, with tumultuous social revolutions: gay liberation, the women's freedom movement, Black Power and the Civil Rights Movement, as well as race riots in many cities across the country. The plays of this phase focused on national paranoia, perhaps confused with the playwright's personal paranoia.

These two decades saw the rise, rise and fall of politicized movements during and after the counterculture as a sexual and behavioral revolution. The so-called counterculture has instilled a political, social and artistic plurality that cannot fail to be linked to its members. Along with the revolution in customs and postures, there is an inherent aesthetic innovation as a result of these new behavioral dispositions and points of view.

During this period, Tennessee made no artistic concession to realism. This was one of the innovative features of this work and, perhaps, one of the reasons for the affectations of its audience and critics. This split made them less attractive to spectators, who were used to more accessible and commercially palatable texts, even taking into account that spectators on this circuit were not averse to innovation. The identity of the bourgeoisie with commercial products amalgamated the bases for the recognition of the playwright as a reliable writer to expose the morals of a society that is not so perfect, but is robust of characters with whom it identifies psychologically (THOMASSEAU, 2005).

Small Craft Warnings [Small warnings of cheating, 1971-72] (Williams, 1972), for example, was produced in 1972 and its staging presented an aesthetic distance from the hegemonic New York theatrical circuits, in which each character, throughout the play, referred to himself. to the audience in a confessional tone, a clear reference to the epic, revealing, therefore, critical elements of society. The playwright himself participated as an actor in this production (GRIFFIN, 1998), parodying himself. The proximity to epic devices caused strangeness and scared the public and critics, who preferred to classify it with the same key as previous prejudices. In addition, Tennessee featured a free, drunk, fat woman and, yet, three homosexuals in the same scenario as heterosexual characters. A great daring for the commercial theater of the time.

The usual consideration of realism in the work of Tennessee Williams is connected with the idea of an ideological representation of the real. Thus, what is sought in his work is a photograph of versions of the characters' social and psychological realities, even if they are incompatible with the truth, a mirror of an objective world and a fixed, immutable, generalized human nature. In this way, diversity is not considered.

Realism is more than an interpretation of this reality that passes for real; it is an aesthetic that produces a reality when the spectator tries to know and verify the truths through the greatest possible wealth of written and staging details.

Theater critics in the United States today [from the late 1990s]—particularly those who write for major newspapers and magazines—approach [phase three] plays with the assumption that all American drama is realistic, evaluating the play and actors by these standards and making moral judgments of them, which almost always reflect the superior values and prejudices of middle-class audiences. In its descriptive and argumentative style, the function of theater criticism is primarily to recommend that its readers buy a ticket to the play or refrain from doing so. As such, journalistic criticism serves this economic purpose. Therefore, for American theater critics, the most important assumptions underlying his approach to a 'Williams play' are the expectation that it will be primarily a realistic drama with a moralistic theme understandable to bourgeois audiences. When they do not come across these elements in one of these third-phase plays, they decide that this is not a 'Williams play' and exercise their economic power so that it does not succeed (DORFF, 1997, p.10).

The realistic piece seeks to naturalize the relationship between the stage and what is outside it, suggesting that what is represented is real, even with artifices and artificialities, making up to be believable. Williams was not interested in realism from the beginning of his career. He wanted his writing to be admissible and believable, so “his early successes are generally considered realistic in terms of the type of action that takes place, the way language is used, and how the visible and invisible environments are defined” (Saddik1999, p.47) .

The playwright was never comfortable with realism. For this reason, it is possible to identify, in his work, traces of: expressionism, as in *Not about Nightingales* [It will not be about nightingales, 1938] (Williams, 1998); symbolic language close to Surrealism, as in *Stairs to the Roof — a Prayer for the Wild of Heart That Are Kept in Cages* (Williams, 2000a) ; and epic-lyrical forms, as in *Something Unspoken* [1953-58] (Williams, 1966), making his work a true mixture of genres. Williams manipulated the realistic form to create a particular dramaturgy that included realistic contours expressed only in the well-constructed dialogues with his poetics - hence the extreme confusion when reading his plays. What existed was a *semblance of* realism. The playwright gave the devices to characterize the literal meaning of the social environment, impregnated with the purpose of truth, even if, for that, he had to use unrealistic devices to achieve this objective — hence the mix and the misalignments in the author's work.

Williams could be considered a realist, not a reproducer of reality, such as a camera or a mirror that captures the outside, because his drama deforms reality. With this, the playwright would propose distortions, transpositions, and transformations that take realism to a philosophical sense — a broken mirror reflecting disfigured images. And the greatest example of this is the distortions of reality, the planes between real and imaginary created by the famous character Blanche from *A Streetcar Named Desire* (Williams, 1988).

The pieces of the third phase therefore assume anti-realistic characteristics. However, this aspect did not emerge as a mystical epiphany or the hallucinogenic trips of an old *hippie* . Tennessee did not have this behavior back then, although it was involved in what he himself called the *Stoned Age*., its flat phase. These works are the result of aesthetic experiments that found fertile ground precisely because of the social, political and historical context that supported the so-called exaggerations. Critics insisted on negatively emphasizing the result, neglecting what Williams's own dramaturgy had already pointed out throughout his previous history, always with intrinsic experiments in his writing. The pieces of the third phase appeared not as an evolution in the author's work. They have an aesthetic that has already been worked in an embryonic way throughout his entire body of work since the 1930s.

In *late plays* , realism is therefore welded into other formal structures, such as the epic, the so-called theater of the absurd or metaphysical existentialism, *camp* and the theater of the ridiculous, the theater of cruelty, *black comedy* , the grotesque, *vaudeville*, cartoons , burlesque, slapstick, *Grand Guignol* , carnival celebrations (SADDIK, 2015, p.10). Even in the midst of this profusion, which at first glance seems confusing or

even the metaphorical idea of a *patchwork*, the playwright imposes the illusions of realism with non-realistic or anti-realist elements.

During the period of writing these works, Williams returned to the traditional form, closer to literary realism, only with the long plays *A Lovely Sunday for a Suffering Heart*. Both, like all other plays towards the end of his career, were critical and commercial failures, despite the author's constant revisions and their marked presence in the *mainstream*.

Today, with the critical distance from that historical moment, it can be said that Williams would be focused on the aesthetic trends of that countercultural conjuncture and, undoubtedly, on the social, political and artistic contexts, to give a new meaning to his career. It cost him, painfully, his reputation. His main lineups would certainly be with *The Living Theatre, Open Theater and The Wooster Group* (Hoopper, 2012, p. 1-7), in addition to *The Theater of Ridiculous*. These were groups with which Williams' new work dialogued closely and minimally, although their direct influence was not observed. Similarities are perceived in terms of the groups' experimental, daring and critical character, in addition to the scenic aesthetics they practiced. Traveling in the circuit where they performed, Williams got acquainted with these matrices, drawing on their principles.

Williams brought to the surface in the *late plays*, therefore, a context never before printed in his work and which was very close to what was already called Gay Theater in the United States in the 1960s — the figuration of open homosexuality. Although this Theater was looking for to show gays performing usual tasks, being common people, standing out and living happily, being what they are. Tennessee, in turn, wanted to show them as individuals displaced from the productive axis of capitalism and outside the American dream — as they were, in fact, treated by society. A scathing portrait of reality almost never shown.

Unrealistic setting

In both works (*The Glass Menagerie* and in *Orpheus Descends*) he emphasizes a derealization of the scene. We stop at a very important metatext of his, since his subjectivist worldview with expressionist roots clearly appears. Also, we continue with the comparative analysis of Orfeo descends. We refer to his "Author's Notes for the representation of *"The Glass Menagerie"*, included in the edition of Losada that we follow. Prior to the characterization of the scenic elements, the author makes a series of observations so that the director —and the readers of the edition— understand the non-mimetic character of his theater, where things are represented from the perspective of the soul. His interest in the internal universe of the characters already appears in the name of the piece "comedy of memories", where Tom tells the story of his family. Its evocative nature poses a fragmentary dramatic structure, to the point "that it can be represented with an unusual liberation from all conventionalism" (Williams, 2007, p. 9).

Later, he explains the features of his poetics:

Expressionism and all other unconventional theater techniques have only one valid goal: a closer approach to the truth. When a piece employs techniques it is not - or certainly should not be - trying to evade its responsibility to deal with reality or to interpret experience; intends or should at least intend to find a closer angle of approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are, or at least try (...) truth, life or reality is something organic that the poetic imagination it can only represent or suggest, in essence, through transformation, transmutation into forms other than those existing simply in its appearance (Williams, 2007, pp. 9-10).

Evidently in his Preface he attacks the theater of his time, which followed a canonical realism: "a conception of a new and plastic theater, which must replace the exhausted theater of realistic conventionalisms if dramatic art is to regain its vitality as an integral part of our culture" (2007, p. 10). For this reason, stage signs are fundamental, since they fulfill different dramatic functions within this non-naturalistic proposal, where many of its resources come from cinema and the visual arts: music, lighting, scenery and characterization signs of the characters.

This is what we see in *The Glass Menagerie* and in *Orpheus Descends* –pieces from different periods– where Tennessee Williams deals with the problems of the southern zone: loneliness, the situation of women, sexuality and puritanical hypocrisy, with a highly poetic perspective of the scene, where artistic languages reveal the subjectivity of frustrated modern man. We consider that his plastic theater, highly innovative, is in force in the theater of the 21st century. Precisely because, in the current scene, the fusion of the arts is crossed by the audio-visual story, where theatrical proposals appear that go beyond mimetic representation.

Conclusion

Williams expresses in *late plays* the anxieties of that unique moment not only in the constructions of the characters. They were not accepted, therefore, because, read with the key of psychological realism, they could never be fully understood. Understanding the contexts in which they were conceived is essential for their work to be interpreted potentially as another way of apprehending the world and the theater, contesting, in a countercultural way, the standards of American dramaturgy until then. It is clear that Tennessee no longer wanted to offer an industrial theater, whose dramaturgical components were already known gears, beaten Broadway recipes, formulas that only needed to follow the standardized processes of assembly and performance. The playwright did not want to offer entertainment, he was more concerned with the artistic quality to serve as a reflection, surprise, estrangement, to take away what was established. Create something new, shake up structures. He claims:

I've certainly become less naturalistic, in the 1960s, I'm a lot less, I believe I'm writing in a more direct way, where I connect people and society, both getting a little crazy, you know? I believe a new way of writing will appear if I continue working in theater. I will certainly never work on a full-length play for Broadway format again. I want to do something very different. I'm very interested in the staging where everything is very free and different, where you have complete freedom. I wouldn't even mind having a young collaborator, now, in a play or two (Devlin, 1986, p.218).

The counterculture is another important highlight, because it presents the great antagonistic shock, essential for examining the context of *late plays*. By featuring other aesthetic proposals for theater, including political and structural ones, he challenged society and its ability to impose its cultural and aesthetic values as correct. Tennessee was already a misdemeanor from his earliest works, even if that was never a major issue when read in biographical and realism contexts.

In addition, it is a movement that made possible other forms of interpretation, preparation of actors, as well as concrete matters about contemporaneity. These are plays in which physicality takes over and the Stanislavskian system, as it was known until the 1940s in the United States, of interpretation based on emotional or sensorial memory for the construction of characters, valuing the inner aspect of the individual — a process of the actor about himself — would no longer help, because the author was not focused on the psychology of the characters, but on the physicality. They were closer to the theatrical games of Viola Spolin, to the physical theater of Grotowski, to performance or to Stanislavski's method of active analysis, the latter little known in that country at the time. Therefore, these works go beyond the literary contribution.

When considering late plays, the disfigurements of form and content defy official criticism and reveal a virtually unexplored author. Agreeing with Linda Dorff (1997, p. ix), it is clear that he employed a theatrical poetry of disfigurement to pierce the mimetic conventions of a dramaturgy that is externalized in metadrama and to promote the split with the fictional contents and realistic forms of American theater.

Tennessee Williams is a playwright widely performed in USA and Latin America from the 1940s to the present day, always a major attraction for professional theater here. Exploring his work, still ignored in the country, will open doors and fill a large gap in a phase that was neglected for reasons strongly linked to the American cultural production system, which in USA and Latin America, in principle, there would be no reason to take them as a national reality.

As the *late plays* bring aesthetics that are in line with contemporary theater, it can be synergistically arranged with the languages that outline the country's stages. Thus, Williams would still have much to contribute

to the national theater, its audience formation and its experimentalism in form and content, because it brings the soul of a society strongly reproduced and reaffirmed in the current conjuncture as a capitalist model to be followed.

As has been happening in the United States, a new/another vision of the playwright may be established in the USA and Latin America. With these pieces he doesn't even seem like himself, considering the prejudices and canonicity with which his previous works are read. With the incursion into a period when Tennessee's work is underrated, admirers, researchers and artists in general may be surprised.

References

- Devlin, AJ (ed.). *Conversations with Tennessee Williams*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1986. 369 p.
- Dorff, L. *Disfigured Stages: The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams, 1958-1983*. Thesis (Doctor of Philosophy) - University of New York, New York, 1997. 401 p.
- Hooper, MSD *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012. p. 1-7
- Prosser, W. *The Late Plays of Tennessee Williams*. Maryland: The Scarecrow Press, 2009.
- Saddik, AJ *The Politics of Reputation: The Critical Reception of Tennessee Williams' Later Plays*. Cranbury: Associated University Presses, 1999.
- Toledo, LMA *The Unknown and Experimental Tennessee Williams of Six Plays in One Act from the 1960s to 1980s : Approach, Analysis, and Context of Female Characters*. 2019. Thesis (Doctorate in Theater Theory and Practice) - School of Communications and Arts, University of São Paulo, São Paulo, 2019.
- Williams, T, ; Windham, D. *You Touched Me! : A Romantic Comedy in Three Acts*. New York: Samuel French, 2010.
- Williams, T. *Mister Paradise and Other One-act Plays*. New York: New Directions, 2005.
- Williams, T. (1960). *Orpheus descends*. Buenos Aires: Editorial South.
- Williams, T. (1985). *Memories*. Bruguera. Barcelona.
- Williams, T. (2007). *The Crystal Menagerie*. Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada.
- Williams, T. *27 wagons full of cotton and other one-act plays by Tennessee Williams*. New York: New Directions, 1966.
- Williams, T. *A Streetcar Named Desire* . Translation of Brutus Quarry. São Paulo: Circle of the Book, 1988.
- Williams, T. *Candles to the sun: a play in ten scenes*. New York: New Directions, 2004.
- Williams, T. *Dragon Country* . New York: New Directions, 1970.
- Williams, T. *Not About Nightingales* . New York: New Directions, 1998b.
- Williams, T. *Now the Cats with Jeweled Claws & Other One-act Plays* . New York: New Directions, 2016.
- Williams, T. *Small Craft Warnings* . New York: New Directions, 1972.
- Williams, T. *Spring Storm* . New York: New Directions, 1999.
- Williams, T. *Stairs to the Roof: A Prayer for the Wilder of Heart That Are Kept in Cages*. New York: New Directions, 2000a.
- Williams, T. *Tennessee Williams : One-act Plays*. London: Methuen Drama, 2012.
- Williams, T. *The Fugitive Kind* . New York: New Directions, 2001.
- Williams, T. *The Glass Zoo/Suddenly Last Summer/Sweet Bird of Youth* . Translation by Clara Carvalho and Grupo Tapa. São Paulo: É Realizações, 2014.
- Williams, T. *The Traveling Companion and Other Plays* . New York: New Directions Books, 2008.
- Williams, T. *Tennessee Williams: Plays 1957-1980*. New York: The Library of America, 2000b. (Library of America Series; 120)