CONTRADICTIONS OF SOCIETY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' PLAYS

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Abstract: *The paper examines the picture of society in four of Williams' plays. Even though portrayals of four different periods of the 20th century America, the plays reflect a single, apocalyptic vision of society, whose main determinant is paradox, an intrinsic feature of southern mentality, Williams's personality, and contemporary events.*
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1. Introduction

The specific mentality of the South, the once predominantly agricultural area, is marked by paradox. If a Southerner was a hedonist, it was very likely that he was a Puritan, which, for W. J. Cash (1960:58) is a result of "the fundamental split in his psyche [...] a sort of social schizophrenia [...] naive capacity for unreality which was characteristic of him". Without any fear of being condemned, a Southerner could commit violence, support exploitation and propagate the concept of honor and fiery religiosity. "All men should live like brothers "was the slogan that was heard along with the condemnation of the strikers, because to respect the class structure meant to respect the will of God. In the same way, commiting violence meant the defense of honour. While propagating mercy, forgiveness and tolerance, the priests supported or tacitly approved of the Ku Klux Klan – "an anti-black, xenophobic, anti-red, anti-Catholic, anti-Jewish, anti-Darwinist, anti-modern, anti-liberal, fundamentalist and militant group that in itself summed up all the fears and hatred of America" (Cash 1960: 336). Alongside the fiction of the superiority of Southern women to all the women of the world, "the lily-pure maid of Astolat", "the pitiful mother of God" inhibited by puritanical education, we are confronted with a nymphomaniac white woman, a prostitute, a woman who can easily surrender to everyone, especially blacks, even for a drink. The process of strengthening the real paternalism in the South went along with the strengthening of the old individualism. The belief in the right of its leaders to order, command, and prescribe the public course of life coexisted with the faith in the full development and expression of individuality, just because every good Southerner identified his/her ego with the South and in each decision of their leaders recognized the strengthening of his/her personal ego, never suspecting that these decisions could be contrary to his/her personal goals and desires (Cash 1960: 113). The contradictory tendencies of the Southerners were even more apparent in recent times, in the moment of transition from the old to the new form of life. In the period of expansion of modern ideologies – biology, mechanistic philosophy and skepticism toward everything that was not firmly established – the most emancipated modern minds and champions of new ideas in the South longed for the old sentimentalism and Puritanism. Instead of class consciousness as a natural reaction to the exploitation of cheap labor, the new spirit brought about hatred, not

of the exploiters, as it was logical to expect, but of the labor unions who, just because they were fighting for basic human rights, were declared traitors to the South and to the southern postulates and therefore equated with the communists, atheists and fighters for social equality with the blacks. Due to the impossibility of adopting the idea of a new era, the Southerners held belief in an ideal past due to the aristocratic virtues that they stressed against the corruption of the new era.

Pretty aware of his own paradoxes on a personal and artistic level, Williams once declared: "I am contradictory, baby" (Savran 1992: 82). His father was a Cavalier and his mother a Puritan. Even though his Puritan heritage marked him for good, he fought against it all his life, calling himself a "rebellious Puritan" (Tischler 1962: 16-17). He spent enormous energy "on the climb to success" (Williams 2006: 92), but it was because of success that he fell into depression realizing one more paradox: that security brings luxury but takes away uncertainty, the need for struggle and conflict that gives you the meaning. In New Orleans, in his quest for satisfying his sensual nature, he was fascinated by "the kind of freedom that [he] had always needed", but "the shock of it against the Puritanism of [his] nature" was the source of his creativity (Tischler 1962: 61). He simultaneously revealed and concealed his homosexuality "configuring [it] in extremely conflicted ways, as a locus of desire and scandal, 'freedom' and 'crime' [making it] both natural and unnatural, allowing it [...] the dual distinction (and penalty) of simultaneously contravening both 'nature' and 'culture', fertility and the law" (Savran 1992: 82). He wanted approval from his audience, even though he despised its conventional taste. He claimed that his place in society was in Bohemia, but he admitted that he cared very much for conventions. In his early plays, he advocated social action, whereas the position of a Bohemian gave him the safety and the choice of being apolitical. Although Williams claimed that the thing he was fighting for was "revolution, personal and artistic" (2006: 238) and insisted that not only his plays, but also all art is essentially revolutionary, he stated with the same conviction that "a man's politics, if the man is an artist, [is not] of particular importance in his work; his degrees of talent and of humanity are what count" (2006: 142). He began his career as a political writer, but very quickly became not only apolitical, but anti-political, as the characters in his last plays fled from life into relationships with other people, or fled from their own causality. Eventually, the paradox that he tried to fight all his life was that of the relationship between life and art: he wanted to escape from life into art, only to find out that art was a confrontation with life, and, even though convinced of the redeeming power of imagination and creation, he tried to come to terms with the idea that "by freezing time, art mimics the death which it is designed to deny" (Bigsby1985: 47).

The apocalyptic vision in Williams' plays involves the paradoxes of a new era: democracy reduced to imperialism, militarism, fascism, totalitarianism, exploitation and inequality of races, sexes and different sexual orientations; the deconstruction of the American dream (promotion of equal chances of success that dooms most people to failure); progress that comes along with the disintegration of personality; the warmth of a madhouse versus the coldness of the human world; the comfort of prison life in contrast to the insecurity of life out of prison; sex presented as a commodity which excludes sexuality; tolerance of deviance in the private world and outrage over it in the public domain; fostering individualism along with the requirements for the inclusion in the inhumane social categories, etc.

2. The radicalism of early plays: *Not About Nightingales*

Similarly to Williams' direct expression of social protest in this play – in October 1938, he wrote: "I am at last being sincerely aroused in my social consciousness" (Hale 1999: 346) –, one of the main protagonists of the play, prisoner Jim, who felt the horrors of crimes in prison, demonstrates his commitment by writing a social message: he is tearing Keats' *Ode to a Nightingale* from the book, because it is "sissy stuff", wonders how immature writers do not know that there are more important things to write about and advises them "to spend a few years in stir before they select their subjects" (Williams 2000: 149).

At the beginning of the play, Williams confronts us with the paradoxical situation in which brutality in prison is presented as humanity: he shows the false picture of the prison which is presented to the public through the media. Instead of "the door to opportunity" (Williams 2000: 104) and "model institution" (Williams 2000: 100) based on the idea of social rehabilitation, we are faced with "a little suburb of hell" (Williams 2000: 106) where people are "tortured, twisted, driven mad" (Williams 2000: 153). This is the place run by people who think they are gods and who "like to crack heads, make sausage out of human flesh" (Williams 2000: 129), a place where the state sends criminals together with innocent people. Williams's protagonist is made to compromise his beliefs and to praise "the inspirational quality of prison life" (Williams 2000: 104) in order to reduce his sentence. Having lost his dignity, he is called "the canary bird", a bird that never goes out of the cage. Other prisoners are slowly killed by the rotten, monotonous food, because the real prison food is sold for personal profit. The prison priest, who dares to reveal that since he was there, there had been "too many suicides, several drownings, hangings, so-called accidents" (Williams 2000: 152), gets dismissed and replaced by a new employee, who is instructed to intimidate prisoners by emphasizing three key words: "food", "heat" and "Klondike".

The prison is a microcosm of American society - it is a cage in which people are kept until the end of their lives. American society becomes the place selected for the superior white people – fascist Protestants, who persecute other races, religions and sensibilities. In this play we hear the voices of the local Ku Klux Klan, who, in pursuit of one hundred percent Americanism, seek the persecution of Catholics, Jews, immigrants and African Americans. The guard Schultz kicks the Jew and says, "Shapiro, do I have to speak Yiddish to make you understand?" (Williams 2000: 162). And when the prisoners wonder where the black prisoner Oli is, the guard replies: "Who's responsible if some fool nigger takes a notion to butt his own brains out?" Prisoner Queen (Queen), a gay man who is sick with syphilis says: "Because I'm sensitive, I been persecuted all my life" (Williams 2000: 114).

The play contains a number of references to the totalitarian regimes of Japan, Italy and Germany. Jim says that his supervisor is crazy, like Benito Mussolini, Butch refers to Hitler as a "monkey wit' the trick mustache" (Williams 2000: 127), and the supervisor is compared to the fascists. "Klondike" is not just a dramatization of a true news story, but also a prophecy of the gas chambers of Auschwitz. Jewish Shapiro says: "I come of a people that are used to suffer. It is not a new thing. I have it in my blood to suffer persecution, misery, starvation, death" (Williams 2000: 174).

Hell in prison, paradoxical though it may sound, is a real blessing in comparison with the life outside. Despite the fact that she has a university degree,

three-year experience and excellent references, Eva Crane is absolutely delighted to start working as a secretary of the prison warden, because she knows that people outside the prison are literally dying of hunger. Because of hunger, people lose dignity and compromise their beliefs: Eva dares not testify about the prison conditions, as she is afraid of losing her job.

However, Williams' protagonists fight for basic human conditions in prison shouting:

> Git us decent livin' conditions! No more overcrowdin', no more bunkin' up with contajus diseasus; fresh air in the cell-blocks, fumigation, [....] some food that's fit to put in our bellies [....] place where guys are learnt how to make a livin' after they git outa stir [....] where they teach 'em trades an' improve their ejication! (2000:164)

Williams soon disillusions us by sending all the prisoners who are persistent in striking to "Klondike" – a gas chamber where the prisoners are baked alive – showing us that no reform is possible in such a society.

3. The clash of old and new: *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Williams' most famous play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was a personal and social work and completely the product of the time. (Londré 1997: 48). In this play, Williams expressed ambivalent attitude of the South both to the past and to the present.

Blanche, a representative of the Old South, is an embodiment of different types of contradictions: although her ideals are "beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart" (Williams 1995: 69) and although she is trying to present herself as the symbol of calmness and kindness, she reveals her snobby sarcasm and an inclination towards violence when she describes Stanley as the "survivor of the stone age", something "subhuman", "ape-like" and his friends as a group of monkeys "grunting [...] and swilling, and gnawing and hulking" (Williams 1995: 54). She shows strong individualism and a need for self-determining action, follows her instincts, flirts and seduces and simultaneously reproaches herself for the group pressure to conformism and the code of conduct by which "a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost" (Williams 1995: 69). Blanche's long-lasting debauchery runs parallel to her public contempt of physicality. Despite the fact that "piece by piece, [her] improvident grand-fathers and fathers and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications" (Williams 1995: 28-29), Blanche has never been able to accept her sexuality as part of her identity, because of the puritanical contempt for the body, which limits the soul in its higher purpose and her faith in the myth of civilization, spirituality, art and culture. Her commitment to romantic idealism is obvious, although she talks about the collapse of romance and admits the brutal truth that "men don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you" (Williams 1995: 60). She flatters Stanley, praising his simplicity, directness and honesty, admires the artist who paints "strong, bold [….] primary colors" and admits she does not like weak people (Williams 1995: 25). At the same time, she claims that she is one of the weak, that she has discovered love with Alan who owned "softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's" (Williams 1995: 75) and thanks God for having sent her one so gentle as Mitch, "a cleft in the rock of the world" (Williams 1995: 101) she can hide in. Blanche is trapped in the Southern beauty myth: she strongly believes that the value of a

woman is determined by her physical attractiveness and, on the other hand, denies the value of physical beauty, claiming that physical beauty is fleeting.

The culture of the New South embodied in Stanley is, in Williams' vision, composed of opposing elements. No matter how attractive Stanley is because of his sexuality, without immediate self-destructive puritan guilt, his healthy life, vitality, faith in himself and in prosperity, he is also an expression of the brutality and social banality reduced to positivist tendencies. In his world there is no place for sophistication, nice manners, and speech, for a tendency towards art and higher goals in life. His motto is "Be comfortable". He stirs the admiration of others and manages to function in life because he is the master of his own destiny and not its victim. Even though he believes in himself and shows endurance, Stanley is not capable of real growth or adjustment, because of his psychological traits and values which are too limiting. Stanley's tenderness and submission when he "falls to his knees on the steps and presses his face to [Stella's] belly" (Williams 1995: 44) is contradictory to the exaggerated masculinity Stanley usually adopts and shows (when he, for example, throws the radio out the window, opens a bottle with teeth, hits Stella or mocks). Philip C. Kolin (1997: 454) argues that the papers related to sending Blanche to a madhouse (complaints, testimonies, statements) are the most infamous documents whose main agent is Stanley in alliance with Stella; Blanche could not have been sent to a madhouse if they had not previously complained, testified, and sent for the doctor – the representative of the law. It is a paradox that Stanley uses the law to get rid of his guilt and responsibility for rape. He goes unpunished for the much more serious sin of rape and fraud thanks to the documents that testify to Blanche's madness. We become the witnesses of his fraud. The same law, which was initially so firmly adhered to (Stanley referred to the law of Louisiana, the Napoleon code, which guarantees equal division of property between husband and wife; he asked for the document to confirm Stella's, ie. his ownership of Belle Reve) now gets betrayed. In the end, Kolin (1997: 465) argues, it is paradoxical that Stanley is deconstructed by the same 'paper' tactics, which he initially directed against Blanche.

Ambivalence is also present in Williams' portrayal of New Orleans, a city that at the same time fascinated and disappointed Williams, attracted and irritated him. The place described as "a cosmopolitan city, where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (Williams 1995: 1), where you feel the "the warm breath of the brown river [...] redolences of bananas and coffee", hear the piano "played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers" and feel the spirit of the poor but vital community, is soon revealed as a confluence of distrustful and inhospitable strangers and enemies that will lead to Blanche's mental breakdown. After the rape, Blanche says about the bells of the cathedral: "They are the only pure thing in this neighborhood" (Williams 1995:117). It turns out that New Orleans is as dirty as the other cities where there is no consolation for the weak, and Blanche's departure to a mental institution, a place where she will eventually feel the "kindness of strangers" as opposed to the enemy world inhabited by her closest relatives, is one more paradox of her time.

4. The collapse of the American Dream: *Camino Real*

Camino Real is Williams' allegory of the fifties, the "conception of the time and world" that he lives in (Williams 1964: 419) and a sharp protest against the fascist demagoguery spread throughout the country in the voice of Joseph

McCarthy. Williams explains that the American paranoia of the time is the result of ignorance. In this play, Esmeralda, a gypsy, explains the confusing state of American politics, which does not distinguish between Marxist and linguistic dialectics. When she asks Kilroy, a former American boxing champion, how he feels about class struggle, and when he answers he doesn't take sides, she answers: "Neither do we because of the dialectics […] Languages with accents, I suppose" (Williams 1964: 552). Esmeralda mixes religious and political figures and repeats her mother's fear that the Pope might be brought to the White House(an allusion to the fear of the Americans that the Pope was plotting to seize the White House). When Kilroy confusingly asks who could do it, she replies: "Oh, the Bolsheviskies, those nasty old things with whiskers! *Whiskers scratch*! But little moustaches tickle" (Williams 1964: 553). The paradox of the situation is that Americans, brought up in the spirit of individualism, accept totalitarian ideologies, but in their ignorance give themselves the right to declare the totalitarian ideology of their own country a lesser evil than other totalitarian ideologies.

Williams said that this play was an expression of the dilemma of an individual caught in a fascist state and that it described the problems that romantic persons have in a dominantly cynical world. In this country there is not a shred of humanity, there are no ideals of truth, loyalty, honor, compassion, love and imagination. Instead, people are divided according to their material wealth, which must be defended with the "martial law" of a police state. Here prostitution is offered in the name of love. In the unforgiving world, people cannot survive without intimacy with their loved ones, but Williams shows us that this most sacred thing is most vulgarized: "For what is a brother to them but someone to get ahead of, to cheat, to lie to, to undersell in the market. Brother, you say to a man whose wife you sleep with" (Williams 1964: 452). Because of it, there is loneliness in the world of single-mindedness that turns every protest to death, to ridicule (Kilroy's initial protest against the tyranny of the politician Gutman was reduced to playing the clown nose), and festivities distract the masses from anarchy: "The Eternal Punchinella! That's exactly what's needed in a time of crisis!" (Williams 1964: 454). The only escape is to the Unknown Country. However, it is an elusive victory that testifies to yet another paradox: freedom, honour and beauty cannot be achieved *among* people in this society, but through dissociation, and withdrawal from the actual world into madness.

5. The elusive victory of racial hegemony: *Kingdom of Earth*

David Savran (1992: 135) highlights the fragmentation of the radical discourse, character, and plot as three basic features of Williams' plays in the sixties. As Savran argues, fragmentation and incoherence in his work is a sign of rebellion, allegorizing civil unrest and political violence. Despite the fact that Williams was not an active member of any movement of the New Left, nor of the movement for gay rights, he made a significant contribution to the new political culture, which was much closer to his aesthetic, social and sexual norms than the politics of the Cold War. And, just as an incomplete sentence breaks the established syntactic hierarchy, the shift of the eccentrics in the focus of drama breaks the hierarchy of conventional society.

The main themes of the 60s in America – racial inequality and the horrors of colonization – were the focus of an extremely social drama, *Kingdom of Earth.* Here Williams clearly expresses the disdain for racism, which he equates with

disease, sterility, and death. It is Williams' only work where a representative of another race plays a major role. At the very beginning of the play, Williams revelas the subordinate position of the blacks in the white repressive culture of rural Mississippi. Fleeing the flood, Chicken's neighbors, the whites, say to him: "Sorry we don't have room for you in our car" (Williams 1976: 125). Chicken's half-brother Lot wants to take his right to property, despite the fact that Chicken is, by birth, the legitimate son of the Ravenstock and had worked hard to deserve that. After many years of exploitation, Lot's mother expels Chicken from the farm, saying to him directly and shamelessly: "Chicken, I don't want my son to be known as half-brother to a nigra" (Williams 1976: 565). The blacks are not allowed to buy alcohol or to have sex with a white woman. Even the local prostitute rejects him with the words: "Nigger, stay in your place" (Williams 1976: 206), and chooses instead to be humiliated by the white man she lives with. From Lot's point of view, the blacks are an inferior race that is not able to understand the meaning of culture and elegance, as valuable things "can only be safely cared for by people that know and love them" (Williams 1976: 206). Chicken is described as an animal: a highly sensual figure, a rough macho man who calls his half-brother a sissy, barbaric and violent. He is aware of the negative impact he leaves as a black man. He submissively talks about injustice: "I work out in the field and Lot just lays in bed" (Williams 1976: 140) and concludes that he lives the "life of a dawg that nobody owns and owns nothing" (Williams 1976: 205).

Williams juxtaposes the picture of the degradation of the blacks with a picture of the squalor of the whites, embodied in Lot and Mrs. Lotti, and soon confronts us with the paradox of the situation: those that were degrading become the degraded ones. Williams demonstrates that hatred and intolerance of another race is much more devastating than Chicken's healthy, emphasized sexuality. Lot is as much eaten up by racial hatred as he is by physical illness. He explicitly says: "I hate and despise him with such a passion that if this place or anything on this place became his property [...] Neither mother or me could rest in peace". (Williams 1976: 178). Ironically, he would rather hand over the property to Myrtle, a failed show star he calls a "whore", than leave the house to a black man. For this goal, he is even ready to kill: he convinces Myrtle to get Chicken drunk, and in case she fails, to "knock him out with a hammer" (Williams 1976: 180). Chicken's physical description defies racial stereotypes. Unlike his feeble, impotent, eccentric half-brother, Chicken is "remarkably good looking with his very light eyes in darker-than-olive skin, and the power and male grace of his body" (Williams 1976: 126). In the end, in the story of the fall of man, it is the blacks who survive before the coming flood: Lot dies wearing his mother's clothes and Chicken stays alive waiting for "a child from an all-white woman" (Williams 1976: 214). As Philip C. Kolin (1993: 144) points out, by initially highlighting all the stereotypes on which the blacks were degraded in the colonial economy, Williams manages to invert each of these individual devastating mythologies or ridicule their values through irony and assault on conventional exclusively white wisdom.

6. Conclusion

Despite the specificities characteristic of four distinct periods of American history, Williams' plays impose a unique, apocalyptic picture of society. In his early social plays, the image of society was coherent, with clearly defined good and evil forces, reflecting the author's faith in the reformation of society. After the war,

Williams' vision becomes darker. Portraying the collapse of the South, Williams portrays the collapse of civilization and culture, disintegration, decadence, lack of purpose, entropy, cataclysm and hysteria. The new, pragmatic world, the crude rationalism of today and brutal directness are seen as not being sympathetic to emotionality, imagination, ambiguity and sophistication of the response. Williams' work evokes images of war, political treason, Nazism, fascism, totalitarianism, colonization and nuclear age. As cohesion is destroyed in the individual, in the family, in the American nation and the world, Williams' work abounds with images of decay. Alienation becomes the only reality and acting the only sign of human existence. The new God of society is the God of the Apocalypse – violent, vindictive and inhumane. Williams' vision thus becomes Spengler's vision.

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