

# Front Porch Women in Tennessee Williams' Spring Storm

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## Luis Marcio Arnaut de Toledo

Universidade de São Paulo  
São Paulo, SP, Brasil  
sp.vi@hotmail.com  
orcid.org/0000-0002-9301-2339

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## Vanessa de Paula Hey (tradução)

Universidade Federal do Paraná, PR,  
Brazil  
vani\_de\_paula@hotmail.com  
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/4290290530278287>

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**Abstract** | Form and content of Tennessee Williams' Spring Storm are analyzed, identifying Expressionism from the grotesque, which deforms the traditional elements of the female figuration and role. There is a thorough examination of ellipses applied to the construction of characters that are spinsters, slaves to social prototypes of delicacy and submission. The work also presents the play's structure, composition, history, characters, and reception.

**KEYWORDS:** Dramaturgy.  
Expressionism. Tennessee Williams.

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**Resumo** | São analisados forma e conteúdo da peça Spring Storm, de Tennessee Williams, identificando o Expressionismo a partir do grotesco, que deforma os elementos tradicionais da figuração e do papel feminino. É traçado um exame minucioso sobre as elipses aplicadas na tecitura das mulheres solteiras, escravas dos protótipos sociais de delicadeza e submissão. O trabalho, também, apresenta a estrutura da peça, sua composição, histórico, personagens e recepção.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Dramaturgia.  
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## Las mujeres del balcón en Spring Storm, de Tennessee Williams

**Resumen** | Son analizados forma y contenido de la obra Spring Storm, de Tennessee Williams, identificando el Expressionismo a partir del grotesco, que deforma los elementos tradicionales de la figuración y del rol femenino. Es trazado un examen minucioso sobre las elipses aplicadas en la actitud de las mujeres solteras, esclavas y de los prototipos sociales de delicadeza y sumisión. El trabajo, también, presenta la estructura de la pieza, su composición, contexto histórico, personajes y recepción.

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### **Single women in Tennessee Williams' work**

Single women are emblematic characters in the dramaturgy of Tennessee Williams [1911-1983]. His allusion has even become legendary, a tradition almost always typified by figures that are authoritarian and arrogant, crazy, full of repressed sexual drives, comic relief and peculiar physical characteristics. A representation that has become recurrent, famous and, moreover, stereotyped. However, this reading neglects some aspects that help deepen the social and historical understanding of women, bringing to the fore an inflexible appreciation of Tennessee's work, biased, exclusively, with aspects from the individual scope.

The sovereign reading of the author's works has a restricted view of women as a figuration of elements of autobiography, it associates them with the rigid mother, Edwina Dakin Williams, and the fragile schizophrenic sister, Rose Williams, who underwent lobotomy in 1943. There are still the rumors of a contiguous approach due to the fact that Williams was homosexual and had a very close relationship with women, making them his friends.

Even today, the main approach to criticism, said to be specialized in his work, corroborates the conservative perspective of Professor Nancy M. Tischler (1961, p. 15, 275-304), from the University of Washington. For her, the playwright is exclusively biographical, especially and excessively concerned with the psychology of his characters, which would bring the main content of his work closer to the concepts of psychoanalysis and realistic aesthetics. The author also calls Tennessee a puritan, since she identifies in his dramaturgy only material that favors sexual drives, saturated with moral lessons. In view of the countless research, dramaturgical analysis, contemporary staging and reviews of his works throughout the world, Tischler is still a historical reference to support an always repetitive reading. Therefore, the researcher has a legacy that marked the historiography of American theater, reminiscent until today.

The dialectical contextualization of Williams' writing, thus left out, was also done in Brazil, which can be verified among other researchers: since the psychologizing view of Professor Dra. Daisy Sada Massad (1977) about the whole American theater, especially regarding the playwright Williams; until the most recent clippings about memory as the only expedient of interest in contemporary theater, highlighted by professor Dr. Paulo Henrique de Alcântara (2013, p. 78-82). These readings are not pointed out as mistaken and, certainly, can offer an overview of Williams' work. They are only possible readings that leave aside the historical-cultural and sociological moment in which the works were created.

It is, in fact, a perception that seems to find an echo in part of the playwright's own critical fortune, mainly because it is strongly associated with the evaluation, also widely disseminated, that the material par excellence of this dramaturgy comes from the projection of elements concerning the author's autobiographical memory (BETTI, 2011, p. 21, own translation).

With these hegemonic approaches, there is an evident displacement of women from their social, historical and political realities: the institutions with which they are bonded do not have a deliberative value about their destinies and existence, everything happens because of their drives; nothing is directly connected to the social roles they need to exercise and to the domination of man in all existential spheres. It does not present or reveal a socio-political examination of the women's figuration in this type of individual-centered reading. They are women who do not seem to live in a society, not being part of a historical context, although they are victims of the system.

In order to dislocate the focus of this traditional reading, it is proposed here an extension of the investigation in the direction of a sociological view on the single woman in Williams' work, however, without denying or belittling the other approaches. It is an appreciation that, in addition to complementing, opens up new aesthetic possibilities for the playwright's artistic scope in Brazil, distending the understanding dimensions of the *corpus* of his writing.

The work *Spring Storm* [1937-38] (WILLIAMS, 1999) is here investigated, a play rarely visited by researchers, artists and followers of the dramatist in Brazil. It is a composition that profiles a list of female characters, identified as old maids, so there is no biographical proximity to the author, instead it offers possibilities for understanding these women in the context of American society in the 1930s and its consequent reverberations today. Starting from the social, political and historical contextualization, it is possible to reach an understanding that deepens the perception of Williams' point of view on the South of his country and on the women inserted in this sexist, conservative and traditional conjuncture. With this kind of reading, an author with greater power is reached, angle of analysis that has little comprehension in Brazil, which reaffirms his importance in modern theater, the presentation of an unprecedented work in the country, in addition to the possibility of reassessing the reading of those most celebrated.

Because *Spring Storm* is an unknown play, the objective of this work is extended to a detailed presentation, not only with historical and technical reports on its narrative, but especially exposing its trajectory, reception, characteristics and curiosities. However, the intention is, for the most part, to expose it as a work with evident critical reverberations of its content and formal expedients.

### ***Spring Storm*: an unknown play of a neglected phase of Williams' career**

In the United States, the works of the first phase of Tennessee Williams' career are called *early plays* [initial plays, in literal translation, covering the period from 1930 to 1944]. It can be said that there is a general lack of knowledge in Brazil of this phase, very different from the canon in which he was erected with his most celebrated plays, written between 1945 and 1961. This happened, certainly, due to the lack of translation and enthusiasm regarding these works, which did not have the same commercial recognition.

*Spring Storm* was written and rewritten between 1937 and 1938, having its first publication only in 1999 – 16 years after the death of the playwright and five years after the death of the copyright tutor, Maria St. Just. She was named by Williams still in life, since his sister was unable to manage it. Therefore, it is part of the first phase of the author's career.

Still a student at the time of his writing, the playwright sought to improve his stylistic, deepening himself in the reading and study of great literary masters, revealing, also in later works, remarkable influences, among which we can mention Eugene O'Neill, Federico Garcia Lorca and August Strindberg. From this time, it is worth highlighting the surrealist expedients in *Stairs to the Roof – A Prayer for the Wild of Heart That Are Kept in Cages* [1941] and the adaptation *You Touched Me!* [1942] from two short stories by the English novelist and poet D. H. Lawrence, an express statement of his fertile scholarly and poetic inspiration (WILLIAMS, 2000b; 2010).

In *Spring Storm*, there are several references that also show this literary research and the dramatist's artistic and cultural proficiency, highlighting his outstanding lyrical vein. The references are: the Reverend Hooker's quote from Romeo's speech, from the play *Romeo and Juliet* [1591-92, by Shakespeare], certainly for mentioning the word "April", a spring month in the Northern Hemisphere; *Saturday's Children* [1927], a play written by the dramatist egress from political theater, Maxwell Anderson. It is a work in which the characters live a marriage in which the husband does not want his wife to get pregnant, but they discover that there is much more between them than financial concern; the poem *I Shall Not Care* [published in 1915], by Sara Teasdale, a poet from St. Louis who deeply shaken young Tom Williams by the time she committed suicide, in 1933. The poem also mentions the month of April; the *Notable Families* collection, by Zella Armstrong, published between 1915 and 1933, in which the genealogy of so-called illustrious southern families was presented; Hertha's quote from excerpts of the poem *The Ballad of Harp-Weaver* by Edna St. Vincent Millay, 1923. There are three possible reasons: Tennessee admired the poet, the phrases seem to have been made for describe exactly the character who mentions them and there are several other poems by the author that speak of spring and April, being Millay a declared admirer of that season; Hertha also says that she loved Greta Garbo's latest film, which may have been *Camille* [directed by George Cukor, 1936]. It could also be the film *Conquest* [directed by Clarence Brown, 1937], both referring to great affairs that Hertha's character will never experience; and, finally, Arthur quotes the first sentence of the English poem *Song* [17th-18th centuries] by the Jacobite and metaphysical poet John Donne, in a moment of tenderness with Heavenly (WILLIAMS, 1999, p. 115-116).

*Spring Storm's* first title was *April Is the Cruellest Month*, the opening sentence of T.S. Eliot's 434-line poem *The Waste Land*, published in 1922 in

England and considered his most famous poem. One more reference to a literary work. Another previous draft title is *Time of Roses*, a possible reference to spring.

Tennessee carried out many revisions to his originals. His manuscripts are full of scribbles and notes that are difficult to interpret. From the 1990s, many researchers were invited by the publishing house *New Directions* to perform the task of reconstructing the texts with the pressing aim of their publication. *Spring Storm* had unfinished sections and many gaps. Researcher Dan Issac was responsible for its rescue. The professor and playwright also transcribed his Herculean work of recomposition in the notes at the end of the book (WILLIAMS, 1999, p. 115-131) and, thus, it is clear that he played an important role in the recovery of this work.

Taken to the public in a dramatic reading coordinated by Issac in 1996 in Berkeley, California, *Spring Storm's* career continued with a montage produced by the *Willoughby Fine Arts Association* in 2001 in Ohio, an English one in 2009-2010 and also an Australian montage in 2018.

The trajectory of this work is quite curious. In 1936, Tennessee met director and theater critic Willard Holland, director of the amateur group *The Mummies*, that staged agitprop plays. They were socially engaged works, verging on protest against American standards of dramaturgy and theater. The two got along very well. Holland for admiring the dialogues and the ability of his quick rewriting, Williams for longing for a kind of mentor for his work. But *Spring Storm* was widely criticized, considered by Holland to be very disordered, which discouraged Williams from taking it forward. It is important to remember that the guidelines on women in society are absolutely current. In the 1930s, there were no open questions and anxieties about the female issue, such as those that will be presented in this work. This justifies Holland's negative reception of the play, although a politically active artist. In this way, Williams discarded it. He also introduced this play to dramaturgy seminars while attending the University of Iowa in 1938, having been advised by professors and colleagues to leave it behind, situation that disappointed him. According to Issac (1999, p. 10), even homophobic and virulent attitudes by one of the professors in relation to the play writer may have discouraged him from developing the play. However, he still sent a film script version to MGM Studios in 1943, when he was developing some works for them, so that the character Heavenly could be played by Teresa Wright, in order to enjoy her success after two consecutive nominations for the Oscar for best actress, having won one of them. However, she ended up in the *Shadow of a Doubt* [directed by Alfred Hitchcock, 1943]. The script was never accepted by the studios.

### **The *Spring Storm* narrative**

*Spring Storm's* action takes place in Port Tyler, a small town on the banks of the important Mississippi River. The year is 1937 and it is spring, a period of historic devastating floods, an expedient also used as fictional material in the play *Kingdom of Earth* [WILLIAMS, 2000a, p. 623-706]. The title mentions spring storms, monsoons that plague the region and cause floods.

It is a long play, with 23 characters and three acts, the first has just one scene while the last two have three scenes each. So, the Aristotelian structure is not observed. In each act or scene there is different time, space and actions. Tennessee had, at that time, a different conformation if compared to the traditional drama, with different scenarios in each act and fragmented temporal sequence. A staging, therefore, would have a logistics that would depend on a dynamic scenographic exchange. These sudden variations in time and space strongly refer to the cuts in the formal structure of a film script, an evident clue that the author thought of the original text more like a cinema one than a theater one.

The central axis is led by four young people with their unrequited loves: Dick, Heavenly, Arthur and Hertha. The main character is Heavenly Critchfield, since the actions are centered on her. She is in the attention spotlight of Dick Miles and Arthur Shannon. Her mother wants her daughter's marriage to save their family from the financial devastation caused by Economic Depression. At first glance, the play refers to an outdated melodrama, however it reveals itself with an unprecedented sociological awareness of the author about the "old maids" (reference to the "spinsters") in the American society of the 1930s.

Williams treats this woman's condition in Port Tyler's patriarchal society as an oppressed one. In order to express the terror and fear of becoming a spinster, the dramatist put the female outburst in Heavenly's mouth. A revelation observed at the beginning of the play, when she identifies herself as a woman who may become like the other single women in her city, who stand on a balcony, with a chair to sit and wait for her man who will never come. She recognizes herself as an inhabitant of the *Country of the delay*, of the illusions shattered in relation to the American dream, a concept associated with the illusion of success and fulfillment under the protocols of a capitalist society, which expects her to be a servile reproducer. The American dream fabricates a parallel world of happiness and achievement through hard work, economic growth and victory. As a laconic expedient, Williams exposes a character, therefore, distant from this dream, unmasking the illusory mechanisms of establishment. What would be left is the long wait for Dick.

HEAVENLY: [...] I'd rather die than be an old maid! [Pause for emphasis.]

ARTHUR: Surely that's not a possibility!

HEAVENLY [intensely]: Oh, yes it is. All the boys go No'th or East to make a livin' unless they've got plantations. And that leaves a lot of girls sitting out on the front porch waitin' fo' the afte'noon mail. Sometimes it stops comin'. And they're still sitting out there on the swing in their best white dresses, smilin' so hard it's a wonder they don't crack their faces—so people across the street won't know what's happened! (WILLIAMS, *SPRING STORM*, KINDLE EDITION, p. 1122)

In a time devastated by the Depression and in a region damaged by constant floods, men were forced to seek better working conditions in more lavish regions. Class issues are revealed here in relation to these men, since only those who have their own property can remain. Those from the lower classes, on the other hand, need to go and those from the upper classes stay. The city had, therefore, a vast number of single women, who persevered on the balconies for their entire lives, in their best dresses, watching the horizon, expecting the fulfillment of their dreams. The expression used by Williams to define them is "Front Porch Girl" (p. 1590). The deeply lyrical metaphor is, at the same time, tragic.

### **Female celibacy and social stigma**

When considering female celibacy, we are investigating, mainly, its visceral connection to the project of a bourgeois modernity, in which civil marriage legally establishes the family. It identifies the concern of politics, religious institutions and science itself in supplying their ideologies and fostering power. It would be a kind of root of the State, establishing protocols, forms of control and discipline to serve it. Furthermore, it is in this family institution that the social idealization of men and women is constituted, instituting gender by genital sex and their traditional outlined social roles. Therefore, the monogamous and heterosexual family became the basis for organizing the social model of women and their servile roles in the home, breeding and maintaining disciplined labor for the system.

Single women would be a destabilizing model of this system because, under this view, they would be openly denying the roles of servant mother and wife, essential to support this sort of system. They establish themselves as individuals who would be obliged to assume different ways of living, being prevented from being part of society and, thus, identified as outsiders – marginalized, lacking in virtues and humanly inferior. Potentially, they can even become a new model in society and, therefore, identified as a threat. For this reason, they are considered unwanted, being classified as untrue or incomplete women; they do not collaborate with the status quo, which would cause a possible shock in their own nature.

The spinster thus became a stereotyped figure, being, then, a term used to designate social disrepute. Historically, it refers to women that are over 25 years of age. According to researcher Cláudia Maia (2007, p. 46), the spread of the expression occurred "as an effect of capitalist development, that brought the decline of domestic work, classifying the women, then, as useless dependents" (own translation)<sup>1</sup>. The term appeared in England in the 17th century and, in the following, in the United States with the same meaning, from the development of capitalism. Thus, it is one of the conceptual by-products of the Industrial Revolution that, traditionally, should demarcate the position and image of women in society: "[...] the 'spinster' discourse is nothing more than a hygienic-moral discourse" (MAIA, 2007, p.

<sup>1</sup> Cláudia Maia (2007, p.46): "como efeito do desenvolvimento capitalista que fez emergir a decadência do trabalho doméstico, classificando-as em dependentes inúteis".

43, highlighted by the author).<sup>2</sup>

Celibacy has been considered a curse on women, who, in order to survive in these conditions, had to be subordinated to seclusion and the charity of relatives, to humiliation for being different, unable to contribute to the solid constitution of society as subservient wives and caring mothers. In addition, in many cases, they become dependent on the “kindness of strangers” (WILLIAMS, 1988, p. 216, own translation). This phrase refers to the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* [1946-47], which in Brazil became famous in the 1950s, with French actress Henriette Morineau playing for the first time the lonely most famous character of American dramaturgy, the widow Blanche Dubois. In this character's sentence, therefore, there is a deep historical and political awareness of the social role of the single woman and her status as an outcast. It is not an alienated, purely aesthetic element, but a critical view of the female social position.

Historically, women had only one role in the family tradition in the southern United States: getting married between 17 and 21 years old, when still young, beautiful and coquettish. Always with a rich man, so that her family could make a good deal. The institution of marriage was, thereby, a combination of material interests, that aimed at profit, enrichment and maintenance of conservative mores. For this, the woman should be servile and subservient in order to obey such protocols, as already observed.

The concept of spinster had an unprecedented derogatory implication throughout the West since the 19th century. Literary discourse was the main agent that built and disseminated the representations of the single woman with her concerns and subjectivities, in addition, of course, to its negative view. The novel *La femme de trente ans* [written between 1829 and 1842] by Honoré de Balzac is famous for making an apology to these women who are considered old for marriage. For the French author, they are emotionally mature and capable of loving with greater fullness. This, however, makes a counterpoint to the traditional and predominant figure of romantic girls who, in the literature of that century, were no more than 20 years old. The novel stigmatized the spinster, her sexual drives, and popularized the term “Balzaquiana” all over the world. As a result, it was not long before numerous caricatures appeared, portraying them as despicable, although in grotesque aesthetics. At the beginning of the following century, they were seen as loners who worked hard to ensure their maintenance, frightening a large part of the female population, who were educated to be fragile and without opinion. Not to mention the humiliating satirical stereotypes that despair many women even today, despite the great advances of feminism.

The misfortune of these characters in *Spring Storm* is the endless waiting of the man who does not return, resulting in the woman's psychological deformation as a catastrophe, according to the social precepts of the time: arrogance, intelligence, freedom, harshness, rudeness, sexual drives. The absence of man as her master and determinant of her destiny would transform the young women into balzaquianas,

<sup>2</sup> “[...] o discurso da ‘solteirona’ não é outra coisa que um discurso higiênico-moral” (MAIA, 2007, p. 43, destaque da autora).”



unpleasant and dangerous women to the customs of the time. Thus, they start losing their characteristics of traditional femininity, of servile and silenced, to become deformed women, extrapolating the social expectations of their roles.

Williams used the existential impasse of women, many of them spinsters, in several works. For him, the shock caused by oppression was a source of conflict in his dramaturgy. But it is hegemonically read, even in an exclusive way, only as a typical playwright theme and identified merely as a distinctive expression of female sexuality, as proposed by Susan E. Nornhold (1985, p. 53), a professor at *Eastern Lebanon County School District*. According to the researcher, Tennessee Williams was the playwright who best represented the nation in his time, exclusively romanticizing sexual passions in his plays and, although shocking the public with the brutality of the male characters, it made possible a delight in inflicting sexual humiliation on his heroines. For Nornhold, the playwright had no political awareness of the role of women, he was only concerned with Freudian aspects, in order to give psychological depth to the character. The same happens in the reading of the researcher George Hovis (2011, p. 187-188), who highlights the female subjectivities displaced from their sociological context, when citing the *Southern Belle* myth not as a figure created by the macho context of the conservative society of the American South in the 19th century, but as an aesthetic and psychological allegory to characterize female characters insistently.

### **The spinster archetypes: the Tennesian dialectic on the *outsider* woman**

There are other extrapolations to be highlighted for the *Spring Storm* review, both aesthetic and contextual. *Waiting* is a way of seeking the dignity of women. And being on the front porch would be a great metaphor to reinforce the expressionist character, bringing up a symbolism that removes their humanity and turns them into grotesque elements, distorting the feminine role in society. In addition, "[...] The images of the grotesque body are precisely those degraded by the physical canons of classical aesthetics" (RUSSO, 2000, p. 21, own translation). Social tradition seeks a young, beautiful woman with a sculptural body. When figuring characters out of these physical archetypes, the grotesque embodies, causing aesthetic strangeness, showing distortions. Thus, there is a meticulous [mis] characterization of these women for bordering on the bizarre in the eyes of society. What is seen, then, is the single woman who is not able to remain congruent with the established protocols. However, always with another characteristic to give it more expressionist emphasis in the narrative, such as those misunderstood already mentioned character deviation or, still, with physical extrapolations that make it a source of scorn and contempt.

Port Tyler is not portrayed as a city of progress, it does not make the American dream come true. Equal opportunities, where everyone will be free and happy from hard work and economic growth, here seems an ideological bankruptcy, but an expressionist device that disfigures women. The dysfunctional city produces people equally dysphoric for bourgeois society: men who leave and single women. The main character is not a female social model who exposes tradition, Heavenly has sex with her boyfriend for a year and does not get pregnant. There is a

controversy about sex that the society of the 1930s does not accept: a woman who dares to go out of standards and overflows in freedom, like the Mississippi river. However, she ends up just like the other spinsters, waiting on the front porch, sitting on its chair. The figuration is so unique that it goes out towards the tragedy, allowing the complex expressiveness of social criticism go along with the author's lyricism.

Williams' laconic view of the American dream is ostentatious when Heavenly is forced by her mother to vow in front of a full-size portrait of a Civil War hero, who was seen as a patron saint by the family, her great-grandfather Colonel Wayne. In front of him, she should promise not to have sex with her boyfriend Dick anymore, the poor boy, to keep herself pure and marry Arthur, the rich boy. The illusion seems to be a motivation for women in Tennessee, just as the establishment itself motivates the American dream.

There is a gallery of spinsters ahead of these historical-critical issues in *Spring Storm*, each with its own intrinsic character. The following can be highlighted: Aunt Lila, the friendliest sister of Heavenly's father; Birdie Schlagman, the chief librarian; Hertha, the storyteller; Agnes Peabody, a vivid caricature of the society's unfocused woman; Miss Kramer and Mabel, the oldest and most experienced [or conformed]; and, inevitably, Heavenly herself, that finds out being one when Dick leaves her at the end of the play. "Within Williams' entire canon, this archetypal Front Porch Girl will never again be seen in such great profusion and sharp focus" (ISSAC, 1999, p. 16, own translation).

The author presents the various layers of the single woman in *Spring Storm*: from Heavenly, the girl who tirelessly seeks not to be single, to the older ones, with the strange impression of a restless conformism, eccentric women, that grotesquely differ from the younger ones. Without a doubt, it is possible to conclude that *Spring Storm* is a critical play about the single woman, the feminine social role and the institution of marriage. All fictional material revolves around the relentless search for marriage and the consequences on family and society for being single. Williams shows the breakdown of social institutions and the existential problems that this causes in individuals.

### **The profusion of spinsters**

The character of a spinster initially appears in the figure of Agnes. She is described as conventional and affable, flirt, overflowing with animation. She has enthusiastic lines, however without notoriety. Tennessee presents her as a chatty woman, a satirical portrait that distorts the standard behavior of women, according to the social prototypes of the 1930s. Her speech, however, is ignored by the other characters. What is evident, with this subtle metaphor, it is that the spinster has no relevance in society, she is not heard and what she says makes no difference in dialogical relationships.

A character very alike to Agnes is portrayed by Williams in the play *Adam and Eve on a Ferry* [1939]: “After a few moments a spinsterish looking woman of thirty-five steals diffidently across the threshold bearing a little potted geranium” (WILLIAMS, 2005, p. 169). She even has the name beginning with the same letter A and the same last name, Ariadne Peabody. In a meeting with the writer D. H. Lawrence, character of the play, he makes it evident that he acknowledges the immense desire of this woman to get married and about her old stories of failure, her deep frustration as a woman. He gives a lecture about sex and female seduction, saying that the character's evil is puritanism, shame, sterile intellectualism and denial of the body. After the conversation with the writer, the spinster hurries to meet the man she let slip in the past.

DR. HOOKER: Your laurels are still green, my lad, your laurels are still green—glorious sunset, Heavenly, glorious.  
 AGNES: Dr. Hooker, look at those clouds!  
 DR. HOOKER: And how does it happen your mother isn't with us this afternoon? AGNES: Those clouds, Dr. Hooker.  
 HEAVENLY: Mother was very skeptical about the weather.  
 DR. HOOKER: Yes, storm clouds— “Swear not by the inconstant—April! Her moods are various—”  
 AGNES: Yes, but, Dr. Hooker—  
 HEAVENLY: I hope the picnic's a financial success.  
 AGNES: Yes but—  
 DR. HOOKER: Oh, indeed, yes. Richard, we're going to have the cake sale.  
 AGNES: Yes, but from the purely esthetic point of—  
 DICK [indifferently]: Yeah? (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 382-388)

Tennessee used the same resource of this reference in *Not about Nightingales* [1938] in some scenes featuring the characters Lady Bristol and Queen, a woman who seeks her son in a penitentiary and an open homosexual, respectively. Both are figures that society does not want to hear. The material worked by the playwright is, therefore, the criticism about oppression and silencing: human rights for prisoners is a bold topic in a society like the American, which promotes meritocracy; and homosexuality would be unthinkable in the dramaturgy of that time if not explicit by a prisoner, an individual punished for his actions.

A dialogue between Heavenly and Dick reveals how the woman's body is seen in that society, its usefulness is perceived as purely aesthetic, to decorate patriarchal life. There is an exaltation of the female body to please the man, regardless of the female identity and its subjectivity. The man reveals what he thinks, making a play on words, holding the woman responsible. A rhetoric that Tennessee operates as a criticism of chauvinism.

[She starts off. He grabs her arm.]  
 DICK: No, you're a woman. Women never go anywhere unless a man makes 'em. Don't you know what's the real diff'rence between the sexes?  
 HEAVENLY: Yes, I mean, no. I don't want to hear any dirty jokes.  
 DICK: This isn't dirty, this is scientific. Set down an' I'll tell you. The real diff'rence is that a man knows that legs're made to move on but a

woman thinks they're just for wearin' silk stockin's.  
 HEAVENLY: You're crazy. I haven't got any stockings on mine.  
 DICK: Naw. But as Agnes would say they're "purely exthetic!"  
 Ornamental—ain't that what she means?  
 HEAVENLY: Why shouldn't they be? (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 400-412)

The character Susan, an obese girl, is constantly reminded of her body, different from the social standards imposed for the perfect ornament of patriarchal servitude. She is treated as an ideal candidate to become a spinster when she is older, simply because her body is not considered pleasant and healthy to constitute the traditional family and present herself socially. Tennessee has never been more incisive in relation to the female body and the obesity. "LILA: She just wants Heavenly to come looking peculiar so that fat Susan of hers won't show up so bad in comparison" (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 761). Aesthetically, what emerges is the grotesque resource of physical deformation.

The *peculiar* physical characteristics of the character Hertha are thinness, dark skin, and be 28 years old, besides she has an unusual ability to create stories. Her presentation in the rubric identifies Hertha as an unusual woman because she has imagination, artistic gifts and particularities that go beyond the social demands of subservience, silence and obedience. Hertha tells fairy tales that she creates. A different woman in comparison to those who only obey, without creative capacity, a traditional relationship always made, until then, almost exclusively, to men. The thinness characteristic, such as Susan's obesity, in addition to dark skin, is an attribute to differentiate her from other women, making her physically extravagant and misshapen – specifics clearly attributed to the grotesque, apart from revealing traces of racism.

Interested only in the rich man, Arthur is her only expectation. Although in a social environment with several interrelations, Hertha focuses her dialogue only on him. All other characters are ignored by her, as an obsession. The exaggerated behavior shows a parodic representation of Tennessee in composing this character based on the unsettle behavior of the woman, since she does not have a usual conduct. She even mentions that being a spinster can make you schizophrenic [or bear *dementia praecox*, as schizophrenia was called at that time]. Mental illness would therefore be the only way to relate to the world, an existential revolt to express what she lives and what she is, in fact. When exposing this type of psychic maladjustment, Williams expresses a concern with the social order in relation to these women, since health is the vector of personal, family and group balance in which they are inserted. With this, the author raises the possibility of social destabilization, as if society were a predator of these women who are disfigured before the required traditional image. Williams makes it clear that "diseases have always been used as metaphors to reinforce accusations that a society was unjust or corrupt" (SONTAG, 2002, p. 91, own translation). Hertha refers to schizophrenia as a possible answer to her frustration, however, much more as a laconic accusation by the author about the society that can make her sick.

MISS SCHLAGMANN: Hertha, I'm afraid you're getting run down again this spring. You'd better take a week off.  
 HERTHA: I'm all right. It's just nervousness. [She turns and sits down rigidly at the desk.] —Maybe I'm losing my mind.  
 MISS SCHLAGMANN: Don't be absurd!  
 HERTHA: Lots of girls do at my age. Twenty-eight. Lots of them get dementia praecox at about that age, especially when they're not married. I've read about it. They get morbid and everything excites them and they think they're being persecuted by people. I'm getting like that.  
 MISS SCHLAGMANN: You are not! [She speaks gently.] I know what's wrong with you, Hertha. It's that Shannon boy— Isn't it now?  
 HERTHA [with effort]: —Yes.  
 MISS SCHLAGMANN: I knew that was it [...] (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 1736-1742)

As for the character of Aunt Lila, when in the rocking chair, which creaks when moved, it causes an audible nuisance, associated with old age, the passage of time, which indicates it needs repairs or it is outdated. This metaphor is, thus, associated with the elderly spinster, as if she were the squeak of the chair herself, a very evident expressionist resource. Since the author does not use dialogues to show the characteristics of this woman but reflects her essence in the noise. This expedient has a profound impact on the public, acting as an informant for the secrets of the soul, an element that dialogism does not take into account, which is the core of expressionism.

### **Tennessee Williams' social critique**

Another relevant subject brought up in the first act is class prejudice against Dick. Marriage is undeniably important, but it must take place with wealthy men who will be able to help the girl's family to save themselves financially, an issue that extends throughout the play. Even though he is a possibility to remove any woman from social limbo, he is not welcomed by any other person, except Heavenly, and this prejudice was intensified in the second act with the girl's mother. The matron makes it clear that he does not serve to play the role of husband and, in the third act, it is reinforced with Arthur's discreet sexual dubiousness in challenging him. "MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Imagine! A delivery boy. HEAVENLY: He's not a delivery boy. He's assistant pharmacist. MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Soda jerker." (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 875).

Mrs. Critchfield, Heavenly's mother, is a liar, hysterical and overly dramatic, concerned only with taking advantage of her daughter's marriage, using all kinds of pretenses, without shame or morals. She figures the capitalist society itself, featuring another important expressionist character in the play. At no time is she concerned with her daughter's subjectivities. In this tradition, the girl would be just a bargaining chip for her decaying family. For her, marriage is a chance for social rise.

With her, there is a curious reference to another play, *Why do you smoke so much, Lily?* [1935, own translation] (WILLIAMS, 2011, p. 117-127), when Mrs. Critchfield criticizes her daughter for smoking too much. Tennessee makes the same complaint that Lily's mother does, Mrs. York, distorting the objective reality by figuring the two

matrons as if they were the normative society. Lily's mother says that the cigarette deforms her, turning her into a grotesque woman, who loses the essential beauty to capture a husband with her charm and beauty, worsening her situation through her masculinization (ARNAUT, 2017, p. 54-55).

VOICE: [...] I made you know the right people. All the good parties in the city. We live beyond our means. We are in debt. Just to give you a proper education, Lily! The best opportunities. But it cannot last forever. You know that you are no longer young (WILLIAMS, 2011, p. 127, own translation).

Like Mrs. York's desperation to marry her androgynous-looking single daughter, Mrs. Critchfield represses her daughter Heavenly, imposing on her the traditional condition of obedience, delicacy, conformism and social object, to exercise the role of a dedicated mother and wife. She invested too much so that her daughter would have opportunities to meet men of wealth. So, Williams characterizes the failed southern aristocratic family with only capitalist interests, the same way he does to Heavenly's mother.

MRS. CRITCHFIELD: Listen, Heavenly—  
 HEAVENLY: What?  
 MRS. CRITCHFIELD: If you let a chance like this slip through your fingers—  
 HEAVENLY: What chance are you talking about?  
 MRS. CRITCHEFIELD: Arthur Shannon. (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, P.882-888)

In a post-Depression era, when the absence of a man to run business was a family catastrophe, Lily's mother was forced by circumstances to revive the Southern Belle myth, imposing on her daughter the family's salvation: marrying a rich man. Mrs. Critchfield has a sick and drunk husband, with a very quiet voice in the play, showing the same condition of *Why do you smoke ...*, with a strong ambiguity: the devaluation of the figure of the husband and the endless search for one, denoting the exclusive and critical importance of the woman in the play.

Tennessee presents Heavenly as a brave woman and ahead of her time – she even puts alcohol in the punch, a mark of rebellious behavior. However, she is immersed in her existential doubts: she confesses to her mother that she is no longer a virgin and in the end she sees herself unflinchingly as a spinster typical of her city, a candidate to be called the Country of waiting. Although she fights for a marriage, what is identified are ambiguities: she defies social norms but, at the same time, she wants to get married in order not to be like the others.

The gossip about the possible loss of Heavenly's virginity and how it might be treated by society and the possible interested in marrying her, Arthur, seems to sound anachronistic to the present day. The issue of virginity is a thematic experience that makes clear the physical constitution of the woman desired by that society of the 1930s. And gossip works as a comic element, so it is very close to the grotesque figuration, which points to greater distortions of these women regarding their social identity. "LILA: [...] The point I'm making is simply that Heavenly's been going with Richard Miles too long to switch to another" (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 796).

Virginity is also an expedient worked in the narrative of the play *Virgo* [probably written in the 1950s], where the deflowered daughter is used by her mother to not only clean up the family's honor, but to acquire a rich marriage – perhaps one of the most outstanding works of Williams on this issue, since he dedicates this work only to this discussion. Unfortunately, a play that has not been published yet.

Arthur's party shows the entire Port Tyler community in a hilarious yet grotesque moment, with a lot of gossip. These comments do not help the progression of the scenes, Tennessee uses them only to characterize single women and to show the bourgeois family with a critical expressionist figuration in dialogism.

The grotesque is configured by the stripped-down humor, with puerile and excessive dialogues, commenting mainly on the love relationships of women, while deforming them from the traditional figure. In the dialogical exchange, it is evident that single women will not be available for servile marriage, as their behavior is displaced from the social position accepted by that time. What draws attention is that the scene is portrayed as a parody of the social status of this disqualified woman, outlining a Tennessee trial on this issue.

MRS. ADAMS: Heavenly and the Miles boy were seen coming out of a tourist cabin—  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: Tourist cabin!  
 MRS. ADAMS: Yes, at about two o'clock this morning!  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: Why didn't you tell me before? Oh, my Lord!  
 MRS. DOWD: I think it's unfair to repeat that kind of gossip.  
 MRS. ADAMS: It's been substantiated. And of course I've thought right along—  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: Oh, I did, too. But after this!  
 MRS. ADAMS: I think some definite measures should be taken to express our feelings. After all she's associating with our sons and daughters.  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: Oh, my goodness, yes! Susan has very little to do with her but still—  
 MRS. ADAMS: I've warned Henry.  
 MRS. BUFORD: Annabelle and John Dudley dropped her in high school. They say she's so uppity and independent that—  
 MRS. DOWD: Mrs. Lamphrey!  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: Yes?  
 MRS. DOWD: Such delicious punch!  
 MRS. ADAMS: Oh, yes, isn't it though? Are those rain clouds?  
 MRS. LAMPHREY: If it does rain, we'll simply move the party indoors.  
 (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 1352-1365)

After arguing with Dick at that party, Heavenly threatens to marry Arthur, even without the same feeling and with the suspicions, although not as conscious or unexplored by the author, about the possible sexual ambiguity of the rich boy. The institution of marriage has become a weapon of war in the relationship of these young people, evidence that getting married can only be a social mask. Dick is unable to be touched by his girlfriend's complaints, fascinated by adventure and the savage need to follow unpaved paths, a stereotyped characterization of the man who needs to leave his homeland. As an outsider, he doesn't want traditional jobs, he wants freedom. The river fascinates him. He calls his girlfriend to accompany him

without getting married with her, both would be free, but she does not accept this type of bond with a man. She wants the socially established union, and then, once again, the complex paradoxical construction of Heavenly emerges

Miss Kramer is described as the oldest, well dressed, giving Hertha lessons on how to be and act like a spinster. Miss Schlagman and Mabel approach them, inviting Hertha to join, since both are single, the activities that are typical of women like them. A perfect aesthetic composition of the characters in line with the formation of a tragic chorus: similar behavior, common goals.

In the final scene, at the meeting of Aunt Lila and Heavenly, it is made clear that being a spinster in a protocol society is a path of no return that leads to unhappiness. She reluctantly accepts her condition. Tennessee thus presents an outcome that resembles tragedy. Heavenly proves to be the heroine of the play from the beginning because she has a personality that stands out from the others. The scenes are built from her, leading the audience to follow her plot, just like in a film. However, even though highlighted, she cannot fight her destiny, she is driven to perdition against her own will, by her vices. Neither is she coerced, nor is she perverse. Tennessee exposes a game of contradictory forces in which she is subjected, because all the culture of her time and society do not give her another way out to be different. An outcome is revealed, therefore, that does not encounter the melodrama, with resolution of the conflict. Heavenly's tragedy appears as a playwright's proposal to question the woman's condition, the oppression in which she is inserted and its limits. This tragic vein would later become a stylistic brand that Williams would insist on reaffirming during his most celebrated phase in his famous plays. Recognition and comparison that earned him prizes, as he was, according to his critics, paired with the most acclaimed playwright in the country until the 1940s, Eugene O'Neill.

LILA: Are you going to Richard?

HEAVENLY: No, he doesn't want me either. He's got what he wanted. But maybe someday he'll want me again. Or maybe Arthur will. I don't know. I'll have to wait and see.

[She moves slowly toward the hall.]

LILA: Where are you going?

[Heavenly turns in the doorway and stares vacantly into space.]

HEAVENLY: I'm going out and sit on the front porch till one of them comes back. (WILLIAMS, KINDLE EDITION, p. 2173-2179)

The spinsters are women in contrast to the affable girls who will serve as wives, customarily figured in American dramaturgy, exposing a work of extremes through the ambiguity and ambivalence of the characters. The typification of spinsters as authoritarian figures, full of repressed sexual drives or comic relief, allegorizes metaphors and exposes expressionist expedients. Her disqualification, based on male overvaluation, is critical evidence in the society in which Williams was inserted, but which has reverberations in contemporary times as they are still difficult to discuss. There is no formulation of delinquent or rebellious female characters, not even feminists who oppose submissive and subjugated fate. The figuration of the woman



is, therefore, mimetic, bringing to light a social and political critical awareness of the playwright in relation to her.

### **The figuration of inconvenient characters to the status quo**

The essence of representing single women as a metaphorical stereotype, possibly, is in the society that makes them austere, like a shield to protect themselves from the world, or simply wants them to be recognized like that, different from the beautiful, delicate and silenced ones. The counterpoint is important for her expressiveness to stand out.

There is also the approach of class behavior in this play, since it is observed the search for transcendence of class barriers from the fixation by social ascension and marriage to solve poverty: single women who seek exclusively rich men. Also visible in the prejudice against Dick, the boy who is not suitable for single women because he is from a lower social class and, therefore, considered unable to manage a traditional family nucleus along the lines that the American dream advocates: capitalist and meritocratic. There is a trace of the influence of The Mummers' social work in this important, though unknown, work by the author.

There is evidence of expressionism when one observes the grotesque deforming the elements considered as traditional of the feminine figure and role, which disarticulate this work from the figuration of psychological realism, as hegemonically the author's work is framed. Also, when it is observed that the Port Tyler family is a representation of tradition, a device that disfigures objective reality. Scenically, its citizens appear in a nucleus almost choreographed by the stereotyped performance when assuming the accusatory stance on single women, acting like a tragic chorus. The play thus brings a judgment about the patriarchal society of the Mississippi Delta in the very structure of these female characters, in the figure of the gossip ones, metaphors that distort the usual representation of women.

The playwright's literary concern is expressed in the dialogues, with rhetorical expressions that strengthen the figuration of women and their social criticism. They are verbose, extensive and lyrical compositions that channel scenic solutions, a characteristic that would mark his work during his most celebrated phase in the two decades following the publication of *Spring Storm*. Tennessee, however, went beyond what was seen in the United States dramaturgy in the 1930s.

The narrative proximity of *Spring Storm* to August Stringer's work, *The Dreams* [Ett drömspel] (STRINDBERG, 1978), based on the theme: expectation of unmarried women, cannot be denied. In this Swedish play, there is a dreamlike portrait of a playwright waiting in a theater corridor for love that never comes. *The Country of delay*, in which Williams allocates his spinsters, seems, therefore, to be bordering with the same playful expedient of the Swedish playwright.

Another relevant approach can be established with the spinster Ema Crosby, character from *Diff'rent – A Play in Two Acts* [1921], by Eugene O'Neill (O'NEILL, 1988, p. 1-54), who has Cartesian reasons for staying out of wedlock. Spinster Ema has tragedy in her suicide, Heavenly has it in the helplessness and abandonment of the boys she could have married. Her great scourge is

becoming another spinster in the city.

One of Williams' favorite playwrights, Federico Garcia Lorca, may also have motivated him to indulge in the critical story about single women. Lorca's work that richly addresses these substrates is *Doña Rosita la soltera o la language de las flores* [Dona Rosita, the maiden, or the language of flowers, 1935] (LORCA, 1959; 2019). Lorca portrays a woman who spends her life waiting for her fiancé. Already old, her tragedy is to discover that her long-awaited love of youth built his life in America, without worrying about the promises he has made when they were young.

Thereby, it is possible to observe in *Spring Storm* a Tennessee from an early stage that already started developing his own stylistic traits, from several literary sources that may have been used, not directly or even intentionally, but certainly poetic, literary.

Williams' work cannot be read exclusively as a call for attention to mad, lunatic women, identical to what has been done since the 1940s, as predicts the predominant reading of female characters. Much less can his writing be exclusively associated with biographical and psychological material. There is a social context that shapes these women or wants them to be exposed that way. It is clear that in the play, Williams' stance is to figure characters that are inconvenient to the status quo, using comic and grotesque resources. Perhaps, that is why a society that is loath to be questioned prefers to read his plays with romantic, realistic and even melodramatic features, obscuring other important analytical contours, such as the author's deep understanding and awareness of the society of his time. However, with the approaches presented here, it is possible to visualize his critical stance in relation to the single women and the social role that tradition advocates, which disarticulate the hegemonic reading of his work in the country.

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