




**ELYSIAN FIELDS: BETWEEN DESIRE AND DESPAIR**

**ELYSIAN FIELDS: ENTRE O DESEJO E O DESESPERO**

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**ABSTRACT**

Literature is a door that opens to various discussions. When reading “*Um bonde chamado desejo*” (A streetcar named desire) (1947) by Tennessee Williams, the reader may wonder what led Blanche to her catatonic state or analyze the relationship of the Kolyskis, this is the charm of literature, to make the reader question, to travel, to be enchanted and indignant. In this perspective, this work will seek to analyze the relationship of the Kolwaski couple and what led Blanche to a catatonia, for this will be presented Tennessee, the writer who gives life and color to this work, how his writing process takes place and, finally, how this work is a portrait of his memories. For this, Costa (2020), Rodrigues (2011) and Silva (2005) are theoretically based and the methodology used was a systematic review of the literature.

**RESUMO**

A literatura é uma porta que se abre para discussões diversas. Ao ler “*Um bonde chamado desejo*” (1947) de Tennessee Williams, o leitor pode se perguntar o que levou Blanche ao seu estado catatônico ou ficar analisando a relação do casal Kolwaski, esse é o encanto da literatura, fazer o leitor questionar, viajar, se encantar e se indignar. Nessa perspectiva, este trabalho buscará analisar a relação do casal Kolwaski e o que levou Blanche a uma catatonia, para isso será apresentado o Tennessee, o escritor que dá vida e cor a essa obra, como se dá seu processo de escrita e, por fim, como essa obra é um retrato de suas memórias. Para isso, se tem como embasamento teórico Costa (2020), Rodrigues (2011) e Silva (2005) e a metodologia utilizada foi de uma revisão sistemática de ordem bibliográfica.

**INFORMAÇÕES DO ARTIGO**

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## **Introduction**

When studying a literary work it is necessary to understand that it can describe memories and worldviews of the one who writes it, the work is intrinsically linked to its writer, it sometimes brings a portrait of the society and the time in which the writer lived. It is important to be aware that even these works, even written decades or even centuries ago, can portray a present reality, because the issues present in them can be current.

*Um bonde chamado desejo* (A streetcar named desire) (1947), by writer Tennessee Williams is one of these works, it portrays the society in which Williams lived, but is current in issues of gender, domestic violence, psychological problems, etc. Based on Costa (2020), Rodrigues (2011) and Silva (2005), this work seeks to analyze these issues in the work, observing the relationship of the Kolwaski couple and some factors in the life of the character Blanche.

The methodology used for this work was a systematic review of the bibliographic order, divided into data surveys on author and work, reading and analysis of the work and discussion of the data obtained and analysis of the work.

Finally, Williams' work is rich in details, even receiving several criticisms, it becomes awarded and globally acclaimed, because as Calvino (1993, p. 12) presents, the “classic is a work that incessantly provokes a cloud of critical discourses about itself, but continuously repels them away”. Even though it provoked the critical discourses, Tennessee's work made a big one and caused more noise than those of the critics.

## **TENNESSEE WILLIAMS**

Thomas Lanier Williams is one of the greatest playwrights in the world, born in 1911, in the city of Columbus, in the state of Mississippi, in the south of the United States of America. Grandson of a minister of the Southern Episcopal Church and son of a former American military man, Cornelius Coffin Williams, he has a difficult childhood, especially when he moves with his family to St. Louis in Missouri, the arrival in the big city caused the family's social status to change, and a social downgrade happened, “the move from a small provincial town to a big city was quite difficult for Williams' mother” (Costa, 2020, p. 11). Young Thomas had a difficult childhood, being bedridden for about a year due to diphtheria, but during all this time his mother was kind, caring for and protecting her son, the indomitable Mrs. Edwina has always dedicated herself to her son.

Thomas's older sister, Rose Isabel Williams (born in 1909), had an influence on him,

Rose had psychological disorders, spending almost her entire life in sanatoriums, in one of her first outbursts, 1934, she reportedly asked Thomas to die together. In addition to Rose, Thomas had another brother, Walter Dakin Williams, who was born in 1919.

Mr. Cornelius in St. Louis drowns himself in gambling and drinking, becoming a violent man with his family, he “was a shoe salesman, an alcoholic, and an emotionally absent father. Their father became more and more abusive as his children grew older” (Costa, 2020, p. 11).

In 1929, he entered the University of Missouri, where he began studying journalism. However, in 1931, due to the family's financial problems, he left his studies aside and started working in a factory, in this factory he met a Stanley Kowalski, who would serve as the basis for the creation of the homonymous character of “A Streetcar Named Desire” (*Um bonde chamado desejo*). “He despised his job, yet he worked every day and wrote at night. The pressure was enormous, and in 1935 Williams had a nervous breakdown” (Costa, 2020, p. 12).

In 1936, he returned to his studies, and that same year he wrote his first play, “Cairo, Shangay and Bombay!”, staged the following year in Memphis. In 1938 he graduated from the University of Iowa, moving to New Orleans, a city that would be the setting for several of his works. It was in New Orleans that he began to sign as Tennessee Williams and won his first prize in dramaturgy with *American Blues*, a collection of several plays in a single act. “He struggled to come out about his sexual orientation during his youth, but finally took on a new life as a gay man, with a new name and a promising new career” (Costa, 2020, p. 12).

In New Orleans he met Frank Merlo, with whom he built a relationship that helped him cope with bouts of depression, with Frank he moved to New York and had his most intense phase in writing, writing several successful plays such as “A streetcar named desire” (*Um bonde chamado desejo*) (1947) and “Cat on a hot tin roof” (*Gata em teto de zinco quente*) (1955). With Merlo's death, he drowns in depression and alcoholism. In 1983, he died in New York at the age of 71. He choked on a plastic cap of the kind used on nasal spray bottles.

### **Tennessee Writing**

Writing for Tennessee was like an escape from reality, he used the gift of writing to get out of the world, to enter and create his own world, by making writing this escape from the world he presented in his work a portrait of what he witnessed and lived with Candido (2006, p. 147):

Every work is personal, unique and irreplaceable, insofar as it springs from a confidence, an effort of thought, a breath of intuition, becoming an “expression”. Literature, however, is collective at the moment when it requires a certain communion of expressive means (the word, the image), and mobilizes

deep affinities that bring together the men of a place and a moment, in order to arrive at a “communication”.

In characters such as Blanche DuBois, Amanda Wingfield, Laura Wingfield, etc., it can be noted that the author describes his own family, Laura and Blanche would be personifications of Rose, Blanche being also a portrait of the author himself, for some scholars, and Amanda a representation of his mother, Edwina. This is one of the hallmarks of this great playwright, he personifies, brings to his works, through his writing process, several milestones of his experience, making the works portraits of his real and imaginary world.

Known for being one of the great American playwrights, Tennessee not only wrote theatrical works, like Silva presents (2005, p. 2):

The set of works by T. Williams encompasses poetry, short story, and novel, but the author is best known as a playwright. Although he ventured into all literary genres, T. Williams managed to maintain a style that is common in theater, prose, and poetry. In almost all of his works, it is possible to recognize a preoccupation with poetry - especially imagery and symbolic poetry - that describes the microcosm of his characters in prose and theater, as well as a critique of American society that goes almost unnoticed by critics. It is not surprising that Tennessee Williams belongs to an American tradition of a theater based on family drama (p. 2).

Thus showing the greatness and multifacets of the writer, who even encompassing several literary genres in all of them presents his writing model, a unique and striking style.

### **A streetcar named desire (*Um bonde chamado desejo*)**

The Tennessee-written play was created in 1947 and first staged the same year at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre on Broadway, New York, winning the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. The play was directed by Elia Kazan and featured Marlon Brando's professional theater debut.

The film is set in New Orleans, the city where Williams came out as gay and where he adopts the name Tennessee. The setting is a two-story corner building at 632 Elysian Fields, a street in New Orleans, a “[...] poor but, unlike corresponding regions in other American cities, it has a certain charm that emanates from its own condition as an ill-famed place” (Williams, 2004, p. 35).

The play chronicles the relationship of Blanche DuBois, her sister, Stella, and her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. The story “begins” when Blanche arrives at number 632 in

the Elysian Fields. The montage presents the conflicts present in American society, especially Southern, in the 1940s, such as gender issues, alcoholism, mental illness, etc.

The Streetcar, from Tennessee, is a timeless work, with several issues discussed, as presented, however, the focus of this work will be to analyze the relationship of the Kolwaski couple and the factors that led Miss DuBois to her catatonic state.

### **KOLWASKI COUPLE**

Stella and Stanley are two opposites, while Stella is sweet, delicate and untrustworthy, the husband is rustic, brutish and very confident. In this opposite there is an abusive relationship, but Stella accepts all psychological and physical abuse from her husband, as part of her attraction; their love and relationship are based on animalistic power and sexual chemistry.

#### **STELLA**

Drunk, drunk... You piece of an animal! (Rushes to the poker table) All of you... Please leave! If there's a shred of decency in you...

#### **BLANCHE (sharply)**

Stella, watch out, he's... (Stanley seems about to attack Stella).

#### **THE MEN (timidly)**

Take it easy, Stanley. Calm down, boy... Let's go!

#### **STELLA**

Put your hands on me and I...

(Back to the side, out of sight. He moves forward and also disappears. There's the sound of a slap. Stella cries. Blanche screams and runs to the kitchen. Men charge, and there's the sound of hand-to-hand fighting and name-calling. Something is knocked over and breaks noisily).

#### **BLANCHE**

My sister is going to have a baby.

#### **MITCH**

What a terrible thing!

#### **BLANCHE**

Lunatics. They're lunatics! (Williams, 2004, p. 102-103).

In this excerpt, it is possible to notice the issue of domestic violence, Stanley's exaltation of spirits and aggression towards his wife show the sexist behavior, which often triggers the thought "I am the owner of the house, I am the one in charge here, obey me and you will be beaten".

**STELLA**

Yes, it is, Blanche. I know what it must have looked like to you and I'm very sorry it happened, but it wasn't as serious as you imagine. First of all, when men drink and play poker, anything can happen. Stanley always breaks things. On the night of our wedding, as soon as we got here, he grabbed one of my slippers and ran around the house breaking the lamps.

**BLANCHE**

He did... What?

**STELLA**

Broke all the light bulbs with the heel of my slippers.

**BLANCHE**

And you... Did you leave? Didn't you run, didn't you scream?

**STELLA**

I was kind of turned on by it. (Wait a moment) Did you and Eunice have coffee?

[...]

**BLANCHE**

You take it like it's normal, Stella.

**STELLA**

What else could it be? (Williams, 2004, p. 111-112).

Animalistic love is something remarkable in the couple's relationship, Stella feels pleasure in seeing her partner's attitudes, to the point of telling her sister that she was a little excited by her husband's rustic attitude, to Rodrigues (2011, p. 85).

The author seems to want to expose, to denounce this sexist behavior, often understood as natural, genuine, reinforcing - logic of - He attacks me, but attracts me, embraces me and protects me; I need him and man that's just the way it is. In this way, this is reinforced, attending to the interests of power in human relations, which would certainly be weakened if it were exchanged for the power of human relations.

In this way, by presenting Stella as a fragile woman dependent on her husband, Williams wants to denounce the sexist behavior of some men of the time, even a denunciation of the relational behavior of her parents, Edwina and Cornelius.

## Blanche

The traumatic events in Blanche's life cause her to “give herself to several men to rescue her self-love and lost vanity” (Silva, 2005, p. 6), she seeks in sex to recover a lost love, to hide the pain of loss, by creating such a complex character, Williams shocks the critics of the time.

According to Phillip C. Kolin, when T. Williams' play was staged in the late 1940s, the reaction of some critics was negative toward Blanche's past. The nymphomania of the character in her adventures with the recruits shocked the audience of the time, as well as the Catholic Mary McCarthy, as it seemed improbable and implausible that an aristocratic Southerner could be so ambiguous in her construction, showing two distinct images of her feminine facet: candor and promiscuity (Silva, 2005, p. 17).

In the 1940s it was almost unthinkable that a girl born into a wealthy family and who liked to appear to be a good girl, a pure woman, could be a nymphomaniac and seek to have relations with so many men, like the character from Tennessee, the shock was increased by her having a relationship with an underage boy, his student, the reason that leads to his dismissal from school and consequently his move to Stella's house.

However, it is necessary to understand what the author presents to us about this behavior of Blanche, what causes it, similar to Williams' sister Rose, the character demonstrates to have psychological disorders, which may have been caused by the suicide of Miss DuBois' husband. When she discovers her partner's homosexuality, she does not accept it and says that she disgusts him, which makes him commit suicide.

“Come back, come back. You don't want to see it, do you?” See? See what? Then I heard voices saying, Allan, Allan, Allan! Oh! Allan! He had put the revolver in his mouth and fired and the back of his head had flown through the air! (She shakes her head and covers her face) All because, my God, during the dance, unable to contain myself, I had said to him: “I saw, Allan, I know everything. You disgust me”. Since then, the light that had been illuminating my life has suddenly gone out. And there has never been another light in my life that was stronger than this poor candlelight... (Williams, 2004, p. 159-160).

This guilt corrupts Blanche's entire being, causing her to seek relief in relationships, a remedy for wounds caused by the loss of her sweet and beloved Allan. Just when she thinks she's found it, her brother-in-law unravels, destroys every possible relationship she could have with Mitch, causing her to lose her sanity entirely.

Thus, widowed, without Belle Rêve, without a job, known in Laurel as a harlot, she seeks help to fight against her traumas at her sister's house, but in the search for magic, for her escape from reality, for a new beginning, she is raped in one of the last scenes, by her brother-in-law, on the day of her nephew's birth, and ends up being admitted to a psychiatric hospital.

## **Conclusion**

The streetcar taken to get to Elysian Fields is called desire, but it could easily be called despair, because the various dilemmas presented in the course of the plot lead to the despair of a bankrupt society, with outdated customs, a society that is not only Blanche's, but Thomas's own, who has become the giant Tennessee, but cannot forget and remove from memory everything he witnessed and lived.

Blanche, thus, would be a portrait of Tennessee's memories, given that Williams was gay and his sister, whom he loved immensely and who would inspire Blanche, was schizophrenic and had been committed several times to mental hospitals. She ended up undergoing a lobotomy, with her parents' permission, which incapacitated her for the rest of her life. Williams would never forgive his parents for this. As the author writes in the book, "I don't want realism. I want magic. Yes, yes, magic. That's what I try to give to people. I don't tell the truth, I say what should be true. And if this is sin, may I be cursed forever. Don't turn on the light!" (Williams, 2004, p. 191). He doesn't want pure realism, he wants magic, he wants to "shock" society by showing the naked truth, to the point of asking not to turn on the light, so as not to see his deformities.

He is not afraid to present and denounce the abusive relationships of many couples of the time and the submission of women to such attitudes of husbands, he presents serious issues such as rape, how psychological problems were treated, the issue of homosexuality, among other issues.

Tennessee, writes a timeless work, if it can be said that he wrote a classic, because as Calvino (1993) presents "a classic is a book that never finished saying what it had to say" (p. 11), the classic is always current, this work is current, it is present in twentieth-century discussions, even with the passage of time, it becomes linear.

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