

**Poeticization of the South, Politicization of the Theater: Deconstructing the Phallogocentric Nationalist Historiography in Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending***

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**Abstract**

American Southern Gothic is considered an ideological apparatus used by the nation to create the myth of homogeneity. However, by drawing on Kristeva's theories of abjection and revolution, this article argues that in *Orpheus Descending*, Tennessee Williams appropriates the very same apparatus to deconstruct the phallogocentric historiography of the nation. By casting the social abject into the mainstream drama, Williams means to disturb the symbolic realm in order to recalibrate the criterion of Americanness. It is also discussed that Williams's allegorical rendering of the abject sublimates what resists incorporation within the hegemony of the symbolic and dismantles its essentialist categorizations of the subject. Moreover, Williams equips the abject with a semiotically charged counter-discourse that is substantiated in his poetic dialogues as well as his obscene desire and sensuality. This recourse to the pre-symbolic drives is meant to enable the abject to reclaim his place in national literature and history.

**Keywords:** Tennessee Williams, *Orpheus Descending*, Julia Kristeva, The semiotic and the symbolic, abject.

**Introduction**

Southern Gothic is an Americanized form of Gothic that stems from the nascent nation's machinations to create a native myth. This measure aims to establish a collective American identity and prevent the potential political turmoil. This requires demarcating the national borders and developing an inevitably xenophobic discourse that would guarantee American exceptionalism. Constructing such a common narrative and identity out of a melting pot is tantamount to violence against those who fail to meet the requirements of Americanness. Of all the American regions, the South, with its long history of slavery and strict puritanical codes, has proved to be the most loyal to these repressive policies. As a result, it is the South that "carries the burden of racism and slavery for the whole nation and presents this burden in gothic form" (Ford 2020, 24). As the primary setting for American Gothic, the South reflects the anxieties surrounding the nation's racial Other hidden beneath the myth of national homogeneity. The geographical otherness of the South has prompted the nation to evaluate its progressivism by portraying the region as

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stagnant and mired in the past. Addressing this political façade, Ford asserts that since the South as the nation's "safety valve" is [merely] a construction", some Southern scholars have recently started to challenge "the idea of a coherent and identifiable South" (2020, 24-25) that overlooks the region's dynamism and mobility.

In the introduction to their collection of essays on the American Southern Gothic, Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow, call for a new definition for the Southern Gothic that rises above its myopic orientation based on the customary discriminative polarities and provides a more comprehensive account of the region's social mobility and cultural complexity. This twist in the topos of the Southern literature can problematize the "traditional Southern stereotypes" (Street and Crow 2016, 2-3) and the oversimplified historiography of the region. The traditional reductive approach to the history of the region has been commanded by the nation's obsession with integrity as well as the region's conservative ambiance and its strict codes of membership. As Ayers Points out, "the South has suffered from generalizations" that fail to provide an authentic picture of the region as well as its people in their "fullness" (1996, 64). As a result, it is blind to the "subterranean pressures" or "latent meanings ...that may not be visible at any given moment but that can quickly come to the surface as events change" (1996, 5). However, the innovative path refuses to consider any essence for the South (as simply a space for the nation's black Other). Such a novel approach to narrating the region deconstructs the myth of Southern homogeneity in the Southern identity and brings to light the otherwise muted voices to fill the historical gaps. By taking into account the heterogeneity of the region's demographics, it represents the South as a liminal space and rewrites the region's history accordingly. This new approach positions the South in a reflective relation with the nation as a whole. Consequently, the Southern Gothic can turn into an aesthetic critical discourse that exposes the rich tapestry of the American culture and thus allows for a laxer policy of inclusion. This discourse becomes more politically effective, not least when it takes on the form of a drama that is meant for the commercial stage where it can reach a wider audience.

This article attempts to argue that Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending*, when studied in light of Kristeva's theories of abjection and revolution in poetic language, corresponds to the qualities of the liberal discourse in question. It is argued that Williams's abject figure in this play is imbued with an exceptional revolutionary power. Thus, his appearance in the play subverts the aesthetic and moral principles governing the Southern gothic drama and challenges the phallogocentric historiography of the state since the former is an ideological apparatus of the latter. Since Kristeva has "linked the production of the abject to *the weakness of that prohibition*, which ... necessarily constitutes each social order" (Kristeva 1982, 64), it is contended that by casting the social abject into the mainstream drama, Williams intends to disturb the symbolic realm in order to recalibrate the criterion of belonging and American identity. As contextualizing the play reveals, this measure was meant to pave the way for the legislative inclusion of that which the Post-World War II American nation refused to incorporate in an arbitrary and dictatorial fashion. It is further argued that Williams's exploitation of allegory as the primary trope in his representation of abjection performs two functions. First, it is meant by Williams to sublimate what resists incorporation within the hegemony of the symbolic which (in this case) is the restrictive code governing the Post-World

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War II American commercial stage. Second, allegory's inherent capacity for suggestion and ambiguity enables the playwright to dramatize the resistance of the body of the abject to the essentialist categorizations of the symbolic order. This tropic field, thus, has provided Williams with a public platform to mount criticism against the essentialist accounts of the body, thereby triggering a revolution in the discriminatory and arbitrary norms concerning national identity and the inclusion of minorities.

In addition, by drawing on Kristeva's concept of the semiotic that is the rhythmic, poetic, and libidinal axis of language, it is argued that Williams also imparts his abject figure or the Other of the American stage and state, so to speak, a counter-discourse. This oppositional discourse of the abject is fully charged with the semiotic power which is substantiated in the poetic and rhythmic quality of his dialogues and his obscene desire and sensuality. This recourse to the pre-symbolic drives is meant to enable the abject figure to strive for recognition in the history and literature of the nation by filling the lacuna of nationalist historiography.

### **Review of Literature**

There have always been controversies among Tennessee Williams's scholars, about the neutral or sometimes antagonistic position the playwright has taken regarding those who live on the fringe of the society, including the ethnic groups, homosexuals, and women who fail to comply with norms of public decency. The disenfranchised are often horrifically removed from the plot. Some of them merely appear in the background. Yet, some others are physically absent from the stage and are featured merely through exposition. These are deemed to be indicative of the downright apathy of a playwright for whom art needs to stay away from any form of social commitment. What most critics emphasize when they make (if any) references to Williams's political attitude is the representation of desire as a universal yet destructive force that brings about the downfall of characters. However, they have overlooked the fact that the familiar plot pattern of individuals' inevitable victimization by their inherent natural traits makes Williams's plays naturalistic rather than political and avant-garde. So these critics' assignment of the term "political" to Williams's plays is overly loose.

In her contemporary semi-biography, *Tennessee Williams: Rebellious Puritan* (1961), Nancy M. Tischler, delves into Tennessee Williams's personal life and gives the account of his development as a rebellious artist. Torn between his Puritan heritage on one hand and his tendency for bohemianism on the other, Williams has expanded the thematic boundaries of theater to include the Puritan taboos in his plays and thus, inadvertently, has paved the way for the other Avant-guard dramatists. According to Tischler, Williams believes that no area of human experience must be inaccessible to the modern artist; thus he doesn't shun discussing sexual themes in his plays. According to Tischler, Williams is neither a social dramatist nor a religious one. He believes in no absolute system of belief. For him, only sympathy with the individuals matters.

In *Modern Tragedy* (1966), Raymond Williams has devoted a whole chapter, under the subtitle "Private Tragedy: Strindberg, O'Neill, Tennessee Williams", to the analysis of Tennessee Williams and the two other title playwrights. He considers Tennessee Williams's drama as an example of bourgeois art, albeit

in its most solipsistic form, which is the quintessence of what he calls private tragedy, i.e., a drama peopled by “isolated beings who desire and eat and fight alone” (Williams 1966, 119). Raymond Williams ignores the political implications and resonances of Williams's plays and instead of ascribing the source of the tragic plight of the characters to the external forces such as the capitalist society, seeks it inside each individual character. He points out that this form of tragedy, including that of Tennessee Williams characters, is inherent in every modern individual and that society is an “arbitrary institution, to prevent this horde of creatures destroying each other”(106).

In *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992), David Savran historicizes the works of Miller and Williams in the ideologically limiting and rigid post-war epoch in the United States to provide an innovative account of the stances these two writers have taken against the dominant ideologies. Although he refutes altogether the assertion that Williams is a political activist, he confirms that the playwright is committed to some forms of social change. Savran argues that Williams takes a more revolutionary and radical step than Miller by redefining the discursive masculinity and gender roles through textuality, i.e., the play of signs, images, and metaphors. Savran has assigned Williams's revolutionary stance to his adoption of surrealism. This lax dramatic style, according to Savran, has enabled the playwright to subvert the linear progression of time so dominant in the plays of his contemporary playwrights. In other words, the inherent capacity of surrealism for challenging causality and temporality has provided Williams with a style through which he attempts to recast the bourgeois subjectivity and what traditionally was assumed to be straight sexuality and gender roles.

In *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest* (2012) which is an insightful analysis of Williams's oeuvre, Michael S. D. Hooper contends with the attribution by critics, including the above-mentioned David Savran, of the titles of revolutionary and political to Williams. According to Hooper, Williams deals with homosexuality, racial tensions, and women's issues in his works. However, these are simply backdrops for advancing the personal drama rather than incentives for public political action to make any social changes. What is of prime importance in Williams's depiction of the dispossessed is the revelation of their sexuality or sexual potency. In other words, the representation of the plight of these outcasts is primarily meant to make way for the erotic. Quite unaware of the social forces that have deprived them of their rights, they are merely shown in relation to their sexual desires. According to the writer, Williams's most important contribution to the discourse of revolt is simply the revolt of individuals provoked by their desire which can be set over against the puritanical background of both the writer and his audience.

Williams's refusal to deal centrally with any particular social issues in *Orpheus Descending* has yielded very few critical works analyzing the political implications of this play. This play features no overtly homosexual character. Ethnic minorities have been assigned minor roles in the background. In addition, the play doesn't centrally deal with misogyny and sexism. However, as it will be discussed, Williams's refusal to deal primarily and centrally with the disenfranchised in *Orpheus Descending*, doesn't stem from the dramatist's lack of political interest in the life and rights of the marginalized groups and social outcasts,

himself (as a homosexual) included. Rather, by deploying allegory as the primary trope for his play, Williams has conflated all the subordinated figures of the play into one central revolutionary ego. However, the close resemblance of this central revolutionary figure to all the social outcasts (based on the Southern/national criteria) is of the potential to evoke empathy of the audiences and trigger a similar revolution against the symbolic realm or the state. Furthermore, despite the notable overlap between Williams's poetic language in his drama and Kristeva's theory of revolution in poetic language, the political and revolutionary implications of Williams's poetic language have received scant critical attention. Hence, this article attempts to establish a complementary relationship between the social abject, revolution, and the poetic language in *Orpheus Descending* and expose the different ways Williams's drama disturbs the symbolic. As a result, Julia Kristeva's interdependent theories of abjection and revolution in poetic language provide the framework through which Williams's revolutionary stance in this play is examined.

### **Theoretical Framework**

"Revolution" is a key concept that first appears in Kristeva's seminal book *Revolution in Poetic Language*. However, despite its connotation, Kristevan "revolution" is not militant at all. Rather, it is a form of revolt at the level of micropolitics that is necessary to overcome the symbolic order which is the realm of language, patriarchal meaning-making, and cultural laws. This means that through a linguistic and a psychic revolt, the individuals are reconciled with those semiotic energies that the symbolic order attempts to repress. These semiotic forces encompass a wide range of corporeal and extra-linguistic experiences including libidinal drives, poetic and rhythmic qualities, and nonverbal sensory features. The revolutionary force of the semiotic lies in its elusion from incorporation within the symbolic (phallogocentric) realm and all that it encompasses. That's why Kristeva describes it as "indifferent to language, enigmatic and feminine" as well as "musical and anterior to [patriarchal] judgment" (1984, 29). As a result, every attempt to articulate the semiotic leads to the activation "of the unconscious, of sexual fantasies, of Oedipal aggression, of incest, of matricide" (Gana 2004, 196). What these various ramifications of the semiotic have in common is that they are all the residue of the chora, the pre-symbolic realm of oneness with the maternal body. Thus, their discharge into the symbolic realm questions the rules and taboos of the patriarchal system.

Closely aligned with this revolutionary axis of language is the concept of abject. Kristeva propounds this concept in her *Powers of Horror*. The abject is that which the subject assumes as the Other and thus expels. In fact, it is perceived as a menace to the subject's sense of selfhood for it is "the jettisoned object" that, according to Kristeva, "is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 2). However, even after the repulsion, the abject constantly threatens to assault the subjectivity. Since the abject is a variation of semiotic it can't be signified in the symbolic. As a result, it occupies neither the position of the Subject nor that of an Object. Such a liminal position evokes, on one hand, the vulnerability of the borders of selfhood and on the other hand, the nostalgia for the symbiotic relation of the child with the mother prior to the mirror stage. This concept has social implications and can also be interpreted as operating within a "collective mentality" (Arya 2014, 43) because the abject can be

considered a menace to society as well. It can disturb the social order because it evokes what society considers taboo and tries to keep at bay to preserve its integrity.

What sets Kristeva apart from the other feminist critics is that, for Kristeva, femininity is not necessarily ascribable to any feminine body which is in constant attempt to gain the phallus and become man. Rather, it is a quality associated with the pre-symbolic energies and drives that have the power to disturb the symbolic order and challenge (rather than replace) it. Kristeva sees the semiotic as potentially undermining phallogocentrism- a Derridan neologism meaning the exclusive power of the phallus over logos, language, and meaning. The phallogocentric system privileges the phallus in constructing the truth in every field and assumes such a truth to be coherent and stable. In this system, non-phallic epistemologies are marginalized by the dominant phallogocentric institutions.

Although Kristeva believes in the revolutionary power of the semiotic, she nonetheless acknowledges the necessity of the symbolic in creating a revolutionary discourse. In a revolutionary discourse, the semiotic functions to challenge the symbolic (and the set of rules governing it) rather than completely exclude it. The dialectical synthesis of the semiotic and the symbolic and the consequent weakening of the symbolic by the semiotic forces can lead to the transgression of the rules imposed by the symbolic and induce jouissance. The revolutionary power of jouissance can offer a space for alternative identities and rules beyond those dictated by the phallogocentric system.

Since abjection is a ramification of the semiotic, it cannot be comprehended within the symbolic order which is governed by the law of the father and dominates language, society, and its institutions. Thus, narrating this phenomenon beyond ken requires a trope that enables the circumvention of the strict codes of the symbolic. Since Kristeva purports that “the abject is already a wellspring of sign for a non-object” (1982, 11), then allegory with its “semantic impoverishment” and “its refusal of transparency ... impel[s] American gothic's narrativization of Otherness toward its insubstantial shadows” (Savoy 1998, 6).

In the particular field of drama, the allegorical rendering of the abject must be of an ocular and acoustic nature in order for it to have a performative capacity. Hence, in this play, Williams turns toward prosopopoeia-the act of personifying, of *giving face* to an abstract, disembodied Other” as “the master trope of gothic's allegorical turn” (Savoy 1998, 10). In addition, he gives an alternative and revolutionary poetic language to the prosopopoeic abject in *Orpheus Descending*, equipping him with a discourse to subvert the symbolic and reclaim the voice and place of the disenfranchised in the historiography of the nation.

## **Discussion and Analysis**

*Orpheus Descending* dramatizes the abrupt arrival of a male figure in a small Southern town marked by patriarchy; i.e., the townsmen hold decision-making positions, while the women have no say in law enforcement. The newcomer doesn't seem to be patently recalcitrant upon his arrival. However, with the reversal of plot, he turns out to correspond to Kristeva's definition of the abject as one who “disturbs ... system, order” and “does not respect borders, positions, [and] rules” (1982, 4). As a result of this infringement, he incurs the wrath of the townsmen, who, in an attempt to eliminate him, inflict violence upon him. But what distinguishes Williams's representation of the abject in this play is his deployment of

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the allegory as the primary gothic trope to represent the abject as the site of ideological differences. In other words, Val, the main character, is by no means the only abject figure within the play. Nevertheless, he carries the marks of all the other figures who are considered as others in that community and is thus subject to the very same punitive measures as they. Since, as Kristeva states, the abject is “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982, 4), it has provided Williams with a congenial site to let the audience see through the myth of the regional homogeneity and thus hear the pent-up narratives that are the inherent part of the history of America. As Watson Points out, “Williams's interest in the culture of the Old South demonstrates a comprehensive view, for he looks at the total culture and responds imaginatively in an original way” (2009, 157). Consequently, Williams's abject figure, though individual per se, is the allegorical Everyman who represents the cacophony of the regional voices single-handedly and substantiates what Watson believes to be “the divided nature of the Southern culture” (2009, 175).

Val is a musician and a bohemian free spirit who arrives in Two River County with his guitar and a snakeskin jacket as his most precious possessions. In the expository scene, when Lady and Val are getting to know one another, Val's suggestive way of describing himself is the quintessence of Williamsian masterful allegorization of the abject that renders it “ambiguous” and “composite” (Kristeva 1982, 4). While trying to categorize people, Val identifies a kind he thinks he belongs to:

Val: You might think there's many and many kinds of people in this world but, Lady, there's just two kinds of people, the ones that are bought and the buyers! No! – there's one other kind...

Lady: What kind's that?

Val: The kind that's never been branded.

Lady: You will be, man.

Val: They got to catch me first. (Williams 1968, 161)

This unmarked figure is neither black like the conjure man who recurrently shows up in the dry goods store and scares the townswomen, nor a “wop” like Lady's father who was burnt to his death. He is also not an overt “exhibitionist” like Carol who has been ostracized by her community due to what they assumed was her “lewd vagrancy.” In fact, Val is Kristeva's latent abject since “he who [obviously] denies morality is not abject.... Abjection, on the other hand,...is shady: a terror that *dissembles*” (Kristeva 1982, 4, emphasis added). Val further describes himself as a bird with wings that are “transparent, the color of sky” that their “camouflage” do not let anyone “tell those birds from the sky and that's why the hawks don't catch them” (Williams 1968, 161). Val's description of himself as elusive, unbranded, and invisible implies how Williams's gothic rises above the essentialist national narratives of the body. In fact, by allegorizing a nomadic subject that is both grounded in and able to “transcend the very variables—class, race, sex, gender, age, disability”, he shows that the body “is the complex interplay of the highly constructed social and symbolic forces” (Braidotti 1994, 25).

Val, the unmarked protagonist of *Orpheus Descending* that defies any particular categorization is “the composite” which means that he bears resemblance to and thus represents all the other abject figures within the play. He even undergoes the very same discriminatory behaviors as they do. Jackson asserts Williams's

composite characterization but assigns it to the cinematic quality of Williams's plays. He refers to Williams's deployment of "montage" in his characterization in which characters "are made up, after the manner of cinematic techniques, by the superimposition of figures one upon the other" (Jackson 1966, 37). Yet discussing the depiction of the abject in Gothic, Hogle states that "an 'abject' Gothic image that crosses between and blurs these distinctions...[is] (always a combination of discordant ingredients), the creature [that] both obscures and manifests heterogeneity" (Hogle 2019, 108-109). Hogle further contends that because through abjection societies repel and thus keep at bay the "desires of different groups competing for cultural power", the abject Gothic figure hints at social frictions and "intermingled yet clashing ideologies" that threaten society's longing for homogeneity (2019, 112). In the same vein, Val allegorically represents the ideological discordances of different marginalized groups for each of which Williams has appointed a representative within the play, albeit in the background. In other words, Val is "the composite" through whom the stories of all the outcasts are narrated all at once.

In this play, Williams's primary policy for creating social outcasts is to underscore their distinctions via their eccentricity and odd looks. In scene one, Carol Cutrere is described as having "an odd, fugitive beauty which is stressed, almost to the point of fantasy, by a style of makeup" that draws everybody's attention to her. Her "face and lips powdered white and the eyes outlined and exaggerated with black pencil and lids tinted blue" (Williams 1968, 136). Carol's arrival is followed by that of "A Negro CONJURE MAN" whose odd appearance, like that of Carol, shocks and scares all the women inside the store. His tattered garments are fantastically bedizened with many talismans and good-luck charms of shell and bone and feather. His "blue-black skin is daubed with cryptic signs in white paint" (Williams 1968, 139). The next figure who enters the store is Val whose looks bear a close resemblance to those of these two unwanted figures in the dry goods store. His "wild beauty" suggests the "odd fugitive beauty" of Carol and his "pair of dark serge pants, glazed from long wear" calls to mind the "tattered garments" of the conjure man. In addition, Val's "snakeskin jacket, mottled white, black, and gray" (1968, 140) suggests the exaggerated and colorful makeup of Carol and the "cryptic signs in white paint" on conjure man's "blue-black skin" (1968, 139). Though Val is particularly neither of them, he embodies both of them at once because he partially carries the marks of both as if he is the reincarnation of the two.

Val is also carrying "a guitar which is covered with inscriptions" (1968, 140) just like the body of the black conjure man which is "daubed with cryptic signs" (139). The inscriptions on the guitar look so enigmatic that Lady asks Val to decrypt them for her. Val then explains that they are the "autographs of musicians I ran into here and there" (157). As Clum states, "Val's guitar connects him to the blues, and through them to the racial other, the Black. On his guitar are inscribed the names of great Black musicians: Leadbelly, Bessie Smith, King Oliver, and Fats Waller" (Clum 1997, 136). Besides that, Val's guitar also ties him to the Wops as well. As it is exposed during the gossip of the two neighboring women, when the long-deceased father of Lady who was a foreigner or "a Wop from the old country" (132) first arrived in the town, he possessed "a mandolin". As a newcomer, he started to earn a living by playing his mandolin and picking up "dimes and quarters in the saloons" (132) before establishing his orchard. In a quite similar vein, Val is dramatized as an itinerant singer whose main job is to sing and play his guitar in the bars. Yet

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upon arrival, he is employed by Lady to help her with running the confectionery she has designed in the style of her father's orchard.

Moreover, Val, as a polyvalent selfhood who is shown to be a conflation of all the unwelcomed figures in the town, is treated in much the same manner as they are. He is shown to be subject to the very same xenophobic and discriminative policies that are aimed at restricting the blacks and the Wop in the town. He is treated as if he were a black when he is warned to leave the town before sunrise. Threatening him, Sheriff Talbott says, "There is a certain county I know of which has a big sign at the county line that says, 'nigger, don't let the sun go down on you in this county.' .... I want you to just imagine that you seen a sign that said to you: 'Boy, don't let the sun rise on you in this county'" (1968, 207). Carol is also victimized by the very same sundown town policy because, as she reveals to Val, she is not "allowed to stay overnight in this county" (149). In an act of protest to the indifference of the government toward her radical anti-racist speeches and "letters of protest about the gradual massacre of coloured majority in the county", she has once walked "barefoot in this burlap sack to deliver a personal protest to the governor of the State" (150). Consequently, she has been given the label of a "lewd vagrant" by the townspeople and has been ostracized ever since. Val also shares a common fate with Lady's father, "a Wop bootlegger who was [once] burned to death in his orchard" (157). The stage direction describes Val's death scene as follows:

*He [Val] turns and runs through the dim radiance of the confectionary, out of our sight... A jet of blue flames stabs the dark... The men cry out together in hoarse passion crouching towards the fierce blue jet of fire, their faces lit by it like the faces of demons. (223)*

Just like Lady's father, Val is burned to death by the townsmen in the confectionary that simulated the Orchard Lady's father owned.

It is through Val that Williams has created a nexus of relationship between all the abject figures that jeopardize the patriarchy and the power structures in this Southern town. This allegorical dramatization of the outcast and the discriminative regional policies on the commercial stage extrapolates the xenophobic and exclusive policies of post-World War II on a national scale. King implies this allegorical function of the setting and characters in Williams's plays and considers it a unique quality that sets him apart from the other Southern dramatists. As King asserts, Williams does not simply set about inscribing the South; rather, he writes about those qualities of the South that he has identified in the "real people" (1995, 644). However, he gives his plays a regional atmosphere to avoid abstraction and moralization.

In addition to the aforementioned qualities that link this allegorical figure to several other outcasts within the play, Val's ambiguous sexuality associates him with the playwright himself and thus gives him an autobiographical significance. Yet Williams's homosexuality which he had to hide from the public for the fear of marring his reputation, is constructed only to be deconstructed through the character of Val. What Paul De Man notes regarding the genre of autobiography can be employed to characterize this autobiographic figure. According to De Man prosopopoeia which is the dominant trope of the autobiographical writings "confers upon it [the voiceless entity] the power of speech" but it then "deals with the giving and taking away of faces, with the face and deface, figuration and disfiguration" (De Man

1984, 76). This same deconstructive ambiguity can be traced in Williams's portrayal of Val. Torn between his unorthodox sexual orientation and the prevalent homophobic atmosphere of American society prior to the Stonewall uprising, Williams only hints at Val's possible homosexuality and then deconstructs it by granting Val the ability to impregnate Lady. Then, it is through Val that the homosexual is out of the closet, into the stage, and then into the closet once again. Though irresistibly attractive to the women in the town, he constantly rejects Carol and the other women's sexual advances. When asked about his capabilities, he says he can "burn down a woman" and when he is admonished by Lady to be cautious about his relationships with the town's women, he adds, "I'm saying I could. I'm not saying I would" because "I'm disgusted" of women (Williams 1968, 160). Later he accepts Lady's offering of a room to stay for the mere purpose of saving his money. Clum attributes Val's abstinence and passivity to his ambivalent sexuality and the women's harassing him to the subverted gender system (Clum 1997, 140). Yet, at the end of the play, Lady reveals to Val that she is pregnant with his child. Highlighting Williams's anti-essentialist characterization in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Savran notes that, "throughout Williams's work, gender and sexualities are not set in opposition but are dispersed and plural, constantly in circulation" (1992, 108). Savran's comment on Williams's experimental characterization in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* can be similarly applied to *Orpheus Descending*. Val is also shown to "cut diagonally across the culturally produced antitheses between subject and object, ...homosexuality and heterosexuality, or more exactly, expose the arbitrary and provisional nature of these binarisms" (Savran 1992, 108).

Although the ambivalence in representation of Val's sexuality has crossed him out from Williams's oft-quoted list of overt homosexuals, Williams has slyly turned the tables on this heteronormativity by what Edelman believes to be the "queer oppositional politics" (Edelman 2013, 291). According to Edelman, the political discourse which is shaped in the realm of the symbolic, fetishizes the figure of the child to propagate heteronormativity and defer *jouissance*. This discursive formation and its focalization of the child as the *telos* is merely an attempt to underscore the coherence of the symbolic order and avoid the traumatic moment of confrontation with the "drives that carry the destabilizing force of what insists outside or beyond" it (2013, 289). The queer subject, Edelman proposes, is then the quintessence of the death drive with the potential to disturb the symbolic order and halt the teleological move toward productivity by choosing "not to choose the child" (2013, 297).

In the same vein, Williams turns his Gothic drama into a counter-discourse that circumvents the policy of sexual containment on the commercial stage by combating its most significant agenda, "the cult of the child" (Edelman 2013, 293). This is opaquely projected in the way the child is omitted from this play twice; Lady's first child is aborted and her second child is killed prenatally. In the scene where Lady confronts her former lover David, long after he had left her to sever his "connexion with a Dago bootlegger's daughter," she reveals to David, "I carried your child in my body the summer you quit me but I had it cut out of my body" (Williams 1968, 178). Williams's inclusion of the abortion of the child in his drama is a gesture toward halting the rhetoric of productivity and survival that lies at the heart of American pro-natalist policy.

Williams's removal of the child from this play, which is aligned with his oppositional policy, disturbs the coherence of the symbolic order. Although Val is given the power to impregnate Lady, the child Lady

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carries is killed when in an act of defense, she shields Val's body in the climatic final scene. In the final scene, when Jabe becomes informed by the nurse that Lady is pregnant with Val's child, points his revolver at Val to shoot him. However, Lady who "rushes to cover Val's motionless figure with hers" (III, iii, 222) is shot dead instead. Appearing as a death drive or a disruptive force to the town's patriarchal system, Val brings death to his own unwanted child. In other words, in this play, the child is symbolically sacrificed to shield and give life to Val whose abstinence from women is the telltale sign of his homosexuality. Looking at the play in its cultural context reveals that the conception of this child was merely orchestrated by Williams to ensure that the play met the requirements of the heteronormative policies that dominated the commercial stage around the time the play was premiered.

In addition to this cunning representation of what has once been beyond the pale for the American commercial stage, Williams has skillfully tailored a revolutionary language to contain his innovative scheme and convey his revolutionary message. His masterful experimentation with the linguistic style, in conjunction with his thematic innovations, has created a revolutionary organic whole out of this gothic play. In this play, Val, as the abject or rebellious figure who endangers the integrity of the Southern town, is an artist whose romantic and feminine discourse appears to be diametrically opposed to that of the obdurate patriarchy that makes up the reality of the Southern town. Referring to this incongruent discourse, Matterson points out that "Substituting actual reality for imagined possibility is essentially a Romantic gesture, and Williams himself is at heart a Romantic. So too are many of his protagonists: they are people who dream" (2016, 383). This notion of "imagined possibility" highlights the visionary power of Val's semiotically charged romantic discourse and its potential to foment revolution on a national scale.

In her seminal work, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, Kristeva identifies the semiotic and the symbolic as the feminine and the masculine aspects of language, respectively. Reading *Orpheus Descending* in light of this theory pinpoints the revolutionary undertones of the play in which the eruption of the semiotic within the symbolic has added a poetic quality to the otherwise quotidian realistic dialogues. Adler identifies an androgynous form dominant in Williams's drama by means of which the playwright aims at "delineating and probing character psychology" (Adler 1996, 173). Durham also takes a phenomenological approach to Williams's "poetic drama". He notes that the synthesis of prose and poetry is congenial to the audience who desires to experience, quoting from Eliot, a "'peculiar range of sensibility'" and yet "demands to see life as it is" and thus finds mere verse in drama rather "artificial" (Durham 1971, 3).

However, both Adler and Durham have failed to notice the revolutionary implications of this concoction of prose and poetry and its contribution to augmenting the revolutionary undertone of the play. Val, the quintessence of the Williamsian poet rebels, brings poetry, music, and romantic perspectives to this gothic play and thus undermines the realistic language of the historiography of the nation. As Savoy points out, "the gothic might be broadly conceptualized as a cultural ritual of inscribing the loss of coherent ego formation, the negation of national [or regional] imaginary, and the *fragmentation of linguistic accountability*" (Savoy 1998, 11, emphasis added). In *Orpheus Descending*, Val's language is a tropical field fraught with metaphoric descriptions through which he tries to communicate the reality of his life as it is and as he romantically yearns it to be. In addition, he is shown to be a musician and a singer through

whom Williams brings musicality and poetic quality into the language of his drama “for a singer is a kind of poet, too, just as a poet is a kind of singer” (Tischler 1997, 149). The romantic and figurative discourse of this poet figure is then dramatized to be at odds with that of the townsmen. In other words, Williams has masterfully brought up the poetic and emotionally charged language of the poet figure against the deadening and lifeless language of the Southern patriarchs. By weaving the realistic prose and poetry together and creating a dialectic of the two he has come up with a unique theatrical language that has enabled the social abject to reclaim his place in the (hi)story of the nation. The disturbance of the patriarchal system by the abject is aligned with punctuating the prosaic discourse of Southern authoritarianism by the semiotic or poetic discourse of the artist. As Williams himself has purported, for creating this poetic and feminine axis of language, he has been inspired by “the natural rhythm and melody of Southern speech”, the ones he says he has heard “especially in the voices of [the Southern] women” (Griffin 1995, 13-14).

On several occasions in the play, Val intersperses the realistic dialogue of the play with poetic language and poetry to communicate his ontological differences with the town's people. He employs literary devices such as metaphor to describe himself as “a kind of bird that don't have legs so it can't light on nothing but has to stay all its life on its wings in the sky” (Williams 1968, 161). It is because of this emotionally laden and impressive language that the “character reference” Val has got from his last employer describes him as “a peculiar talker” (158). In addition, since he is a singer, he abruptly bursts into singing *Heavenly Grass* in the middle of a prosaic dialogue at various points in the play. Such an abrupt transition from prose to poetry creates a language that is simultaneously functioning at two levels; the semiotic and the symbolic. Therefore, the language of this play is figuratively and rhythmically poetic, yet straightforwardly prosaic and mimetic.

*Heavenly Grass* which is a poem by Williams himself, serves as a revolutionary mantra for Val. It is through this poem that Val communicates his revolutionary potential. Here is the text of this poem:

My feet took a walk in heavenly grass  
All day while the sky shone clear as glass  
My feet took a walk in heavenly grass,  
All night while the lonesome stars rolled past.  
Then my feet come down to walk on earth  
And my mother cried when she gave me birth  
Now my feet walk far and my feet walk fast,  
But they still got an itch for heavenly grass. (Roessel and Moschovakis 2002, 63)

In the first half of the poem, the speaker describes the pre-symbolic experience of oneness with the mother before the birth. The quality of this idyllic chora-like space, characterized by abundance, is communicated through “heavenly” and “grass”, the celestial and fertility imagery, respectively. Associating the chora with heaven emphasizes the divine feminine power of creativity which is finally embodied in the way Val's presence and his semiotically charged discourse inspire Vee, the sheriff's wife, to create his long-awaited masterpiece. Then in lines five and six, the focus shifts to the transitory and disturbing moment of birth and separation from the mother which can be translated into Kristeva's moment of abjection

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and entrance into the symbolic order. Yet, it is the last line that renders the revolutionary quality of the play. Ventriloquizing the speaker of the poem, Val admits that, although he has been separated from his mother and has entered the symbolic realm, he still “got an itch for heavenly grass”. This can be translated to Kristeva's semiotic reverberations, the feminine, rhythmic, and sensual aspect of Val's discourse and existence that is activated through his link to the woman he “has locked up in the dungeon of his own psyche” (Adler 1996, 177). This woman is not ascribable to any specific female body. Rather, it is the revolutionary aspect that jars with the realistic language of the play and the patriarchal codes governing its production. Moreover, Val's presence in the town and the semiotic energy of his discourse, which is a result of the connection he still has maintained with the feminine chora, finally inspires Vee to create her long-awaited masterpiece because the feminine power is intertwined with creativity and intuition.

It is the feminine quality inherent in the revolutionary power of the semiotic that has brought poeticism into the realistic language of this play. In fact, disturbing the symbolic order and the realistic language of the play through a feminine and rhythmic discourse is an attempt by this allegorical figure to gain recognition for those who have been omitted from the regional and nationalist historiography. In other words, by interrupting the straightforward and realistic dialogues of this play and a shift of emphasis to poetry, Williams has come up with a counter-discourse that has enabled the abject to disturb the authority of the symbolic and reclaim his place in the literature and history of the nation.

In addition, Williams's overt intertextual adoption of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice enhances the revolutionary quality of the play. In *Desire in Language* Kristeva suggests an allegorical approach toward the revolutionary orientation in the poetry of the Russian futurist poets. She identifies an intertextual application of pagan mythology in the poetry of the revolutionary Russian poets, where an allegorical revolt takes place against the sun, the symbol of patriarchy. Such a revolt is “supported by a feminine figure, all-powerful mother or forbidden virgin, gathering into one representation and thus substantifying all that which ...[is] hammered in sonorous thrusts within and against the system of language—that is, rhythm” (Kristeva 1980, 30). When read in dialogue with Kristeva's allegorical interpretation, the characters in *Orpheus Descending* become the prosopopoeic embodiments of Kristeva's revolutionary axes. Val's descent into this underworld is followed by a revolt against the symbolic order or the strict patriarchal system of the town in which women or the semiotic forces are simply disregarded. In a society where the semiotic forces are neglected, fertility and creativity are stifled, as evidenced by Lady's barrenness and Vee's artistic block before Val's arrival. However, Val, the revolutionary artist, disturbs the order of this system in company with the women in the town. His mere presence in the town is not considered as a menace. It is his complicity with the women (the semiotic) that endangers the patriarchal system (the symbolic order) of the town and leads to his final homicide by the townsmen.

Referring to the revolutionary potential of the intertextual incorporation of the mythical narratives, Kristeva further states that “pagan mythology is probably nothing more than rhythm become substantive: this *other* of the linguistic and/or social contract, this ultimate and primordial leash holding the body close to the mother before it can become a social speaking subject” (1980, 30). In the same vein, the intertextual juxtaposition of the modern story of Val with its archaic Other (myth of Orpheus) has provided Williams

with a revolutionary ground to challenge the social and cultural norms of his time. Apart from the fact that Orpheus is the archaic other for Val, his revolt against the symbolic and all its rules and taboos through the semiotic powers enhances the political undertone of Val's story.

Yet, the power of the semiotic is not solely limited to the rhythmic and poetic quality of the discourse; rather, the libidinal and sensual potency also falls under the category of the semiotic modality. Through the content of this play, Williams has smuggled libidinal drives to the strictly policed stage of the post-World War II America. These libidinal drives pertain to the contents the symbolic would rather keep "hidden on the stage: racial and sexual otherness; artistic creativity as insanity and madness; narcissism and neuroticism; incest and homosexuality" (Adler 1996, 177). It is through Val that Williams brings the pre-symbolic libidinal drives and sensuality into the play. Val's revolt against Jabe who epitomizes the symbolic or the realm of the father is an oedipal revolt. In this oedipal triangle of love between Val, Lady, and Jabe, Val is represented as the oedipal son, Lady as the mother, and Jabe as the father due to the fact that he is much older than Val and is married to Lady. Jabe's recurrent "knocks on floor", by means of which he summons Lady, interrupts the flirtatious conversations between Val and Lady on several occasions and is thus the constant reminder of non du père who stands between the son and the mother. Val's desire is the materialized form of the semiotic or bodily drives that disrupt the symbolic arena and its rules governing the stage. This fully explains why the premiere of the first version of the play (with almost the same plot as *Orpheus Descending*, but under the title of *Battle of Angels*) "became to the Watch and Ward Society indecent exposure of a hillbilly Lothario" and consequently they ordered that "the production be closed until Bowdlerized to meet Boston Standards"(Tischler 1961, 83).

In the final scene, after erroneously shooting Lady, Jabe intends, for the second time, to shoot Val with a phallic-like revolver but finds that "*the revolver is empty; it clicks impotently*" (Williams 1968, 222). This scene then dramatizes the impotency of Jabe, the reification of the symbolic, in suppressing Val whose presence has brought the semiotic into the play. In other words, it allegorizes the emasculation of the symbolic or the rules governing the American stage/state by the revolutionary power of the semiotic in Williams's drama.

Yet, the tragic ending of Val's life, when he is finally lynched by a group of townsmen, might be interpreted as a thwarted revolutionary project where the symbolic finally contains and suppresses the semiotic. However, attention must be paid to the fact that *Orpheus Descending* was written during the Cold War era when plays were strictly policed, lest they contain any morally or politically objectionable content. The prevalent theatrical standards of that time necessitated poetic justice for every defiance of society's moral codes. Williams needed to observe the rules governing the theatrical productions to be able to bring a counter-discourse to the stage and subvert those very same rules. Kristeva refers to this co-dependence of the semiotic and the symbolic in every signifying practice when she states that "no signifying system he [the subject] produces can be either "exclusively" semiotic or "exclusively" symbolic" (Kristeva 1984, 24). An exclusively semiotic production from which the language and the governing rules of the symbolic are barred is not interpellated at all. In *Visual Cultures and Critical Theory*, Patrick and Kelli Fuery, refer to

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the revolutionary force of the semiotic and its ironic dependence on the symbolic or what it intends to disturb. According to them, the semiotic works:

[T]o establish and maintain certain visual cultures that were culturally deemed as transgressive, yet ironically, in order to maintain their transgressive nature... has to work alongside the regulation of the symbolic to allow these images and cultures to appear non-transgressive. (2003, 69)

Based on what was discussed, it can be said that Williams's revolutionary power lies in the fact that he has appropriated the nationalist discourse, i.e., the Southern Gothic drama to deconstruct the phallogocentric historiography of the nation. In other words, he has cunningly turned the apparatus of the state against itself.

### **Conclusion**

In *Orpheus Descending*, Tennessee Williams capitalizes on the topos of otherness in the genre of the Southern Gothic but gives it a new slant in order to saturate his play with political meanings. He develops Kristevan “personal archeology” into a collective archeology (Hogle 2019, 111) by showing the South in a state of flux or becoming. This representation of the South in a temporal state problematizes the classical topology of the region which is unaffected by the social and cultural flow and mobility of the place. To deconstruct the myth of regional seamlessness, Williams reverses the narrative of the regional ego and lets the abject, take the region “back to its source on the abominable, limits from which, in order to be, the [collective] ego has broken away” (Kristeva 1982, 15). This deconstruction of the myth of homogeneity via rewinding the history of the South to its incipience, when the region stands vis a vis the Other, allows for reading of the region as chora. Such a chora-like model of narrating the region gives impetus to political reforms since “[p]laces, as well as their defenders, can become renewed suddenly, and with drama, when being hit by perceived-as-threatening signals from beyond the familiar order. Resistance and repression produce the contingent dynamics of spatial change, or becoming” (Kymäläinen and Lehtinen 2010, 257).

The challenge to the integrity of the collective ego in this play is in tandem with the equal break in the consistency of the language that narrates it since “the epistemology underlying the [traditional] linguistics and the ensuing cognitive processes ... seem helplessly anachronistic when faced with the contemporary mutations of the subject and society” (Kristeva 1980, 24). Thus, the disturbance of the coherence of the symbolic can be traced in Williams's linguistic style and his lyrical and rhythmic dialogues as well. Williams infuses the dialogues with lyricism and creates an idiosyncratic discourse that is predicated upon the poetic and erotic language of the chora. This poetic language more than anything establishes the political dimension of Williams's play since it challenges the phallogocentrism of the nationalist historiography.

In order to smuggle revolutionary contents into the American stage, Williams has taken advantage of the inherent capacity of allegory for suggestion. The allegorical dramatization of the persona non grata in this play has renders comprehensible what culturally and linguistically resists incorporation and problematizes the essentialist markers of identity.

The microcosmic choral and liminal representation of the South in this play, then, is considered a step toward advocating for the dynamics of cultural and social changes in the South. Due to the fact that any positive shift in regional politics can enable social changes at a broader scale, it can be concluded that Tennessee Williams's *Orpheus Descending* has politicized the American stage without appearing too narrowly political.

شعرية الجنوب وتسييس المسرح : تفكيك التاريخ القومي لسيطرة الذكر في مسرحية (هبوط أورفيوس)

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### الملخص

يعدّ الجنوب القوطي في أمريكا أجهزة أيديولوجية لإنشاء أسطورة التجانس. ومن خلال تبني نظريات كريستيفا حول الدناءة والثورة تذهب هذه الدراسة إلى أن تنسي ويليامز في (هبوط أورفيوس) قام باستخدام نفس الأداة لتفكيك التاريخ الذكوري للأمة. وذلك من خلال إدخال الدنيء الاجتماعي في الدراما السائدة. علاوة على ذلك، كان ويليامز يهدف إلى التشويش على النظام الرمزي من أجل إعادة ضبط معيار المواطنة الأمريكية. كما تم مناقشة تقديم وليامز الرمزي الدنيء قد صقل ما قاوم الاندماج داخل هيمنة المجال الرمزي وفكك تصنيفاته الجوهرية للموضوع، علاوة على أن وليامز أعطى الدنيء خطاباً مضاداً ومشحوناً سيميائياً يتمثل في حواراته الشعرية وكذلك في رغبته الفاحشة وشهوانيته. كان المقصود في هذا اللجوء إلى الدوافع ما قبل الرمزية إلى تمكين الدنيء من استعادة مكانه في الأدب والتاريخ القومي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تنسي ويليامز، هبوط أورفيوس، جوليا كريستيفا، السيميائية والرمزية، الدنيء.

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