
Orpheus Descending by Tennessee Williams: Using myth and tragedy in a non-realistic way to illustrate the failure of human life

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Abstract

In *Orpheus Descending* the archetypal myth serves as a key structural element which allows to create a personal reworking of the myth without devaluing its essence. However, a careful reading of the play ought to analyze not just the tradition of the myth itself, but also the secular tradition of Greek tragedy given that Williams populates his drama with many of its essential features as described in Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Keywords: *Orpheus Descending*; Tennessee Williams; classical tradition; classical mythology; Greek tragedy

Resum. *Orpheus Descending de Tennessee Williams: mite i tragèdia per il·lustrar, no pas realistament, el fracàs de la vida humana*

A *Orpheus Descending*, el mite arquetípic esdevé un element estructural clau que permet una recreació molt personal del mite sense devaluar-ne l'essència. Tanmateix, una lectura acurada del drama hauria d'analitzar no només la tradició del mite, sinó també la tradició secular de la tragèdia grega, atès que el dramaturg omple el seu drama amb molts dels seus trets essencials tal com Aristòtil els descriu a la *Poètica*.

Paraules clau: *Orpheus Descending*; Tennessee Williams; tradició clàssica; mitologia clàssica; tragèdia grega

To M. T. Clavo, eminent mythologist, with admiration.

In his *Memories*, Williams regrets the failure of *Orpheus Descending*¹ after a previous fiasco: *Battle of Angels*. This does not seem an ideal letter of introduction to an analytic study that highlights its doubtless merits from the perspective of the "Classical Tradition". In effect, researchers working within this tradition, can sympathize with the playwright's reasoning: "A play is never an old one until you

1. WILLIAMS (1976a: ch. 9).

quit working on it and I have never quit working on this one. I believe that I have now finally managed to say in it what I wanted to say”². What does he want to tell us, then? The reference in the title to the “failure of human life” invokes Williams’s tragic view of existence³, the one with which a series of marginal misfits⁴ often repay their rebellion against their fanatical communities⁵. In any case, he wants to recount it by means of a myth⁶, and to this end GÓMEZ GARCÍA⁷, leaves us perfectly oriented: Williams uses the archetypal myths, well installed in the collective consciousness⁸, in seeking their dramatic effect, thus integrating them into a personal symbolic world, relying on their timeless and symbolic nature⁹ and becoming the backbone of his dramas. He rejected the “critical realism” ascribed to him¹⁰, because his characters suggest and transcend the specific reality of the performed work¹¹. *Mythos* is recognized to be neither logical *stricto sensu* nor univocal, but rather ambiguous and mentally stimulating. Thus, as Williams’s characters are doomed to collide with the laws of an inflexible society¹², any language such as myth, which excels in suggesting rather than in rationalizing, was bound to attract his acceptance, not to mention the role Williams himself played in creating the modern myth of the American Old South¹³.

The lack of realism in this drama becomes evident not only because of the literary equation Val=Orpheus, Lady=Eurydice¹⁴, that is, the customary habit of equating dramatic characters to mythical figures while idealizing the former, but also because Williams extends this device to the whole play: “Scene. The set represents in non-realistic fashion a general dry-goods Store”. And, referring to two of the choral characters: “This monologue should set the non-realistic key for

2. “The Past, The Present and the Perhaps”, Tennessee Williams’s introduction to *Orpheus Descending* in GUSSOW and HOLDITCH (2000: 7). All the citations correspond to this edition.
3. SCHVEY (2011: 74); HAUPTMAN (1984); GASSNER (1948, 1960).
4. SADDIK (2015).
5. Regarding the social and political contextualization of Williams’s plays, see BIGSBY’s (1984).
6. “It would be characteristic of Williams to construct his plays on a frame of Greek mythology... reading ... in his grandfather’s classical library” (HALE, 1997: 22, 24). Regarding myth in *Orpheus Descending* and in his plays in general, see MARCET (2008); THOMPSON (2002); TRAUBITH (1976); BELLI (1969); PORTER (1969); LEE (1961).
7. GÓMEZ GARCÍA (1988: ch. 7): “Orfeo y Eurídice: *Battle of Angels y Orpheus Descending*”.
8. Regarding Williams and the Greek culture, see CORONIS (1994).
9. “In a play, time is arrested... The audience can... watch a world flooded with light... in which emotion and action have a dimension and dignity that they would likewise have in real existence, if only the shattering intrusion of time could be locked out” (WILLIAMS, 1976b: 13).
10. JENNINGS (1973: 80).
11. FUNKE and BOOTH (1962: 17).
12. Regarding Williams’s dramatic conception, see MURPHY (2014); BAK (2013); THORNTON (2006); COLACCHIA (2005); GROSS (2002); TISCHLER (2000); KOLIN (1998); ROUDANÉ (1997); MARTIN (1997); FLECHE (1997); CRANDELL (1996); GRIFFIN (1995); WALLACE (1984); ASIBONG (1978). On his biography: LAHR (2014). On the topics found in his plays: KOLIN (2004). On the bibliography: CRANDELL (1995).
13. DEVLIN (1997: 102); HOLDITCH and LEAVITT (2002: 103).
14. I shall focus on the explicit equations after the rewriting of *Battle of Angels*, i.e., to those in *Orpheus Descending*. “Myth lends themselves more readily to the kind of ‘poetic’, non realistic theatre he desires” (DICKINSON, 1969: 280).

the whole production". Readers and audience, then, must confront the non-realist visions of the sheriff's wife, Vee, who, intending to liken Jabe to Jesus, has brought him a painting of the Church of Resurrection with its steeple in red because "I paint a thing how I feel... nothing is what it looks like... You got to have – *vision – to see!*". Val, in turn, understands her, so that she can confess to him that, until she started to paint this way, "existence didn't make sense". As the sheriff's wife, she has lived terrible experiences such as the news of fugitive convicts torn to pieces by dogs, almost as if they were crazy maenads fighting fiercely against the hapless Orpheuses of the real world. Val even believes that God touches her fingers, thus making "some beauty out of this dark country". Painting leaves her "drained inside", although "sometimes you feel-*elevated!*... This is the Holy Ghost ascending... The head was a blaze of light". And, on the eve of the Easter Sunday, Vee saw "the TWO HUGE BLAZING EYES OF JESUS CHRIST RISEN and His hand! – *Invisible!*... *touched* me – here!" – i.e., her bosom¹⁵. Human beings, they both conclude, "live in light and shadow" and "*it's – confusing*".

Fulfilling the expectations of a myth of rescue, Williams has placed us in that human hell or Hades which we should hope to abandon. Being in a dark cavern that turns our life into complete non-sense, we ought to metaphysically ascend in a syncretically Orphic, Platonic and Christian way¹⁶, thus clarifying our confusion and, by draining us completely, raising like holy spirits above appearances until we could contemplate the beauty of a redemptive glow and feel the sharp blazing light of the risen Jesus.

In fact, the four main protagonists are "the fugitive kind"¹⁷ escaping from a world that does not deserve them. In addition to Vee, Carol lives in exile, punished for having faced up to the "gradual massacre of the coloured majority in the county". Lady, Jabe's wife, waits for an Orpheus who would free her from her particular Hades after having slept with "a son of a bitch who bought me at a fire sale". And Val is well aware that his life was "corrupted" until he learned that "he had something to sell besides snakeskins and other wild things". However, Orpheus's myth also demands characters initiated into the mystery of purity, above all in Val's case, so that, in Val's relationship with Carol, "there's a kind of purity", in addition to being himself an expert in ethical typologies: "there's just two kinds of people, the ones that are bought and the buyers!", although "there's one other kind... that's never been branded". There is even a role model: "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... never light on this earth but one time when they die".

Lady does not believe this but "I'd like to be one of those birds... I sure would give this mercantile store". It does not matter, Williams presents Val playing guitar throughout the drama while singing lyrics from the author's poem *Heavenly Grass*,

15. ADLER (1977a: 138-48).

16. UŽDAVINYS (2011); JOURDAN (2010-2011); HERRERO (2007); VIEILLEFON (2003); EGAN (1993). Needless to say, we should recall now the Platonic image of the cave.

17. The term appears at the end of the drama (Carol: "Wild things leave skins behind them... and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind"). Regarding this topic, see COSTELLO (1977: 107-22); WEALES (1962: 18-36).

in which, as if he were one of those wingless and fallen souls of the palinode in Plato's *Phaedrus*, he nostalgically recalls how long ago he walked through a sort of heavenly Arcadia: "My feet took a walk in heavenly grass", until, having become wingless and a prisoner in a material body, after his mother "cried when she give me birth", he now walks on the tangible plane, although his feet, brimming with nostalgia, "still got an itch for heavenly grass"¹⁸. Williams, then, "sympathises with" and "belongs to" that fugitive kind, since Val's reflections make him a good interpreter of the author's poem: "Nobody ever gets to know *no body!* We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our own skins... for as long as we live on this earth!"¹⁹.

Indeed, we are not only prisoners in a cavern or lower world, but also prisoners within the still darker dungeon of our body, sealed in by our skin. And, unlike snakes, we cannot change our skin and leave it behind, but we carry it adhered to our flesh and it has so little porosity that we must renounce any real communication: the sort that should exist among us, and between us and whoever, despite holding the answer to the enigmatic why of everything, guards it jealously sharing it with no one, and "day comes after day... and you're still waiting for someone to answer the question and going right on as if the question was answered".

The urgency of a rescue, then, is unquestionable and who knows whether under the name "Eurydice" hides the whole of mankind. In any case, being free as a bird without the legs of the blind loyalty that would chain him to the archetype, Williams will transmute the mythology as much as he needs to the despair of fundamentalist critics.

Lady, for example, has not arrived at her particular Hades wounded by the bite of a snake; however, she will no longer feel the cold of her husband's mercantile store, and the cold of her senseless life, when Val covers her with his snakeskin jacket: "It's warm from my body... My temperature's always a couple degrees above normal". Lady feels another sort of bite, a redemptive one that paradoxically will poison her little by little until she wants Val to love her and inseminate her.

According to a woman of the village, Lady lives in a prison, "A county jail", but she is between thirty five and forty-five, she is alive – even though she wanted to die when she aborted the child of the man who despised her – while her husband "has th'death sweat on him!". Lady, then, has fallen in love with Val and, amidst an isolated episode of mutual distrust, he tells her that he is going to leave although her life depends on his presence: "NO... DON'T GO... I NEED YOU!!! TO LIVE... TO GO ON LIVING!!!". Being a musician as Orpheus, he plays the guitar and his enchanting singing brings Lady to enter his room – the one she had prepared for him – so that now they will become initiated in a mystery they already had known but had misunderstood: "he begins to whisper the words of a song so tenderly that she is emboldened to draw the curtain open and enter the alcove". Lady is not dead, but Jabe's hopeless death, makes its claim on her. The sheriff has threatened Val and, knowing now that Lady is expecting his child, he finally declares: "I feel a

18. ROESSEL and MOSCHOVAKIS (2002).

19. On loneliness in Williams's plays, see DOMENECH (1990).

true love for you... I'll wait for you out of this county". For once, Williams will be almost faithful to the mythic model: "I know! Death's knocking for me!... I guess my heart knew that somebody must be coming to take me out of this hell! You did... I'm alive once more!". Lady is alive because her Orpheus has inseminated her and she no longer needs to be rescued from a hell or Hades that seems to have disappeared; on the contrary, it is precisely she who, now contradicting the myth, can exchange Eurydice's role for that of Orpheus and rescue him for life: "Take your pay... cross the river into some other county. You've done what you came here to do... I have life in my body... I've won... Mr. Death, I'm going to bear!".

In spite of its tragic ending, the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is undoubtedly a hymn to life, thanks to which Williams speaks of characters, whose vital energy irrepressibly overflows. Nevertheless, the paradox lies in the fact that this drama does not portray an Orpheus in a lone struggle to attain restitution to life; instead, it is other characters who eventually overwhelm his efforts. In this Williams's Old South, the role of Hades-death is often played by wild lands in search of a brave man who has the will to civilize and embellish them²⁰. This was the case of Lady's father, first sufficiently industrious to turn a little piece of land into his personal Arcadia: "He picked up a piece of land... He planted an orchard on it" and, afterwards, generous enough to offer it to the people of the village after having adorned it with grapevines and fruit trees and having built "little arbors... with tables and benches to drink in". This Arcadia that metaphorically descended to Hades because of the igneous bite of a local Mystic Crew as deadly as that of the most poisonous snake, is what Lady resuscitates within the confectionary inside her husband's mercantile store, thus exchanging death for life, without the help of a magical lyre but with the strength of her thirst for revenge: "it's something's got to be done to square things away... I won't be defeated, not again, in my life!".

Nevertheless, the reverse, Val's and Lady's final defeat, will be the case. So far, we have reviewed the Apollonian features of this contemporary Orpheus perceiving the features of the mythical Orpheus as also pointed out by researchers in the field of Orphism²¹. Val is thirty years old but "He's mighty good-looking. Do women give him much trouble?", asks Jabe, and the sheriff even relates these two features to social menace: "A good-looking boy like you is always wanted". His voice is "soft, intimate, tender", and so are the chords of the guitar that "He holds... with a specially tender concentration". As he is also pure, he rejects Carol's sexual demands but he never shows a brutal attitude. And, finally, we should also mention the "artistic bloom" – so to speak – that Val's loving inseminating act has caused in Lady. Williams uses in this case the good fortune of a traditionally accursed tree:

20. Regarding what has been described by some aestheticians as 'Southern agrarianism', see JACKSON (1966: 46). Let us remember that Brick's father in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* turned a wild delta into a rich plantation (WILLIAMS, 1976c). On the significance of the South in Williams's plays, see KIM (2012); GOLDTHWAITE (2006); LEAL (2004); ADLER (1977b); GAINES (1962).

21. For a global and comprehensive vision of the many aspects of the myth of Orpheus and Orphism, along with a comprehensive bibliography, see BERNABÉ and CASADESÚS (2008). On the myth and its tradition, see WROE (2012); TAMPLIN (2011); LUCIFORA (2011); FABBRI and ANDRISANO (2009); WARDEN (1985); GIL (1974); GUTHRIE (1952).

the fig tree, the one standing between the house and her father's orchard that never gave fruit. One day a miracle occurs and Lady hastens to open the box containing the Christmas ornaments and decorates it "with glass bells... birds... silver icicles and stars, because it won the battle and it would bear!". Now that Val's seed has germinated in Lady, Williams also depicts Lady's human and non-realistic reaction: "Unpack the box... with the Christmas ornaments... put them on me!" – let us bear in mind that the myth of Orpheus has also been interpreted as a symbol of Art's failure in the face of death²².

But researchers on Orphism also mention the similarities between Orpheus and Dionysus. The former would not be a Dionysian figure *stricto sensu* for, if he preached Dionysus's religion, it was in order to reform it. However, all the scholars highlight the parallelism of their death: Orpheus torn to pieces by maenads or by Thracian women, and Dionysus torn to pieces by the Titans or by his followers in the course of bacchanalian orgies²³. Williams is not a mythologist, but he takes advantage of the dramatic benefits that, after Nietzsche, we might call the Dionysian features of the myth of Orpheus. He has designed a Val who now wants not to be bought again, but he is aware that his power of seduction is quite similar to that of women: "They say that a woman can burn a man down. But I can burn down a woman". He will even remind Lady that he no longer takes women to his rooms but "I would like to feel free to". Within him, then, there are opposite drives. After having been the active subject of the most intense of these, the denouement of the drama will condemn him to being attacked not by the crazy women of a little village in the South but by their husbands, who incarnate the least naïve sort of wildness. Williams was not always right rejecting the "critic realism" mentioned above. The exposition of the drama that we shall contemplate from this point on is credible in so far as it represents a part of the wicked history of a Mystic Crew that we can easily identify: "Papa Romano... sold liquor to niggers. The Mystic Crew... set that place on fire... He took a blanket and run into the orchard to fight the fire singlehanded – and burned alive".

Williams opts for a double theatrical performance of horror. The audience will contemplate the theatrical performance of a tragic event, but the very text invites the audience to reproduce mentally the drama which so many immigrants have previously enacted in real life. Lady explains how her people reached America "on a banana boat from Palermo... with a grind-organ and a monkey my papa had bought". They sought their sustenance playing the grind-organ and making the monkey dance in the sun *O Sole Mio*, but "One day, the monkey danced too much in the sun... and it dropped dead... My Papa... turned to the people... and... said: 'The show is over, the monkey is dead'". The struggle for survival went on and Lady neither thought then nor thinks now to interrupt the theatrical performance of her life: "For me the show is not over, the monkey is not dead yet!". She has calculated all the dangers lying in wait for her and Val. However, in this Hades in which the Mystic Crew promotes racial-hatred and practices Negro-hunting, those

22. SEGAL (1989).

23. GUTHRIE (1952: 42-43).

who place social peace at risk, like that good-looking man, a focus of women's attention and desire, face only exile. Indeed, the men of this little village, unlike the mythical Charon, have never been enchanted by the music of an Orpheus nor opened their door to welcome him. Therefore, the sheriff takes action: "They's 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'". Needless to say, the sheriff wants Val to feel really threatened: "I want you to just imagine that you have seen a sign that said to you: 'Boy, don't let the sun rise on you in this county'". He won't flee but Williams emphasizes above all his heroine's courage and we see her protecting with her body her lover's life and receiving the impact of the shots fired by her husband. And it is now that the audience should realize that the actress playing Lady ends her performance repeating in the affirmative sense those sentences they had heard before: "The show is over. The monkey is dead", thus being expected to associate the performance on stage with real dramas that unfold in their world, ironically unworthy of being contemplated (*theáomai*, "contemplate" > theatre) because they do not reach their audience by means of the noble and millenary theatrical art.

Lady dies and finally becomes the dead Eurydice of the myth, but now her definitive Hades appears to be a true flaming hell welcoming Orpheus with true demons insensitive to the sweet Christian mercy: "They got him...git rope... I got something better... A BLOWTORCH! *A jet of blue flame stabs the dark... The men cry out together in hoarse passion... their faces lit by it like the faces of demons*". The failure of human life has been eventually accomplished and we do not glimpse on the horizon any white saving light.

This tragic ending would amply provide the *páthos* that any tragedy requires, but the myth speaks of a body torn to pieces and Williams also wants to take advantage of the pathetic intensity of Orpheus's death. Throughout his drama we will feel the frightening presence of the sheriff's dogs pursuing fugitive convicts. Lady explains to Val their mission: "The chain-gang dogs are chasing some runaway convict". Val's solidarity awakes immediately: "Run boy... If they catch you, you never will run again" but "the dogs've got him... They tearing him to pieces!".

In this Hades in the Southern States, the natural wildness that is inherent to human *phýsis* has been outlawed. However, Williams allows a residual dose of it to creep in by means of the Conjure Man, who arouses fear and rejection. Only Carol likes listening to his wild cry, and only she is aware that "This country used to be wild, the men and women were wild and there was a wild sort of sweetness in their hearts". It is not surprising, then, that they both receive the token that Val passes to future generations. In the myth, it is the surviving talking head of Orpheus that continues to draw attention. Williams makes use of a natural phenomenon, the way snakes shed their skin turning it into a metaphor for life beyond death. Val's snakeskin jacket is rescued unburned from the ashes, and this may have occurred precisely in order to illuminate the way for the "fugitive kind": "Wild things leave skins behind them... are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind".

As suggested before, it is quite logical to expect the well-known myth to become the backbone of a drama entitled *Orpheus Descending* and, in my opin-

ion, the foregoing analysis has amply demonstrated this. Nevertheless, the title of this article includes the term “tragedy” with the implied adjective: “Greek”: “This Southern aesthetic has provided for the drama of Williams a kind of basic linguistic structure comparable to that which appeared in elementary stages of Greek tragedy”. JACKSON (1966: 46) is referring here to the intricate symbolic language that Williams’s plays share with Greek tragedy seen as a political, social and religious phenomenon, occurring in the context of a primitive society as is the Old South. We have already considered the symbolic language in *Orpheus Descending* while contemplating the author’s adaptation of the myth. Now I would like to argue for the real possibility of reading this contemporary drama as a Greek tragedy, thus recognizing in it several of its essential elements, as expounded in Aristotle’s *Poetics*. “Williams was conscious of working within a tradition of classical tragedy”, comments SCHVEY (2011: 75)²⁴, and this assertion is confirmed by “the playwright’s own awareness of his classical antecedents, his obsession of sacrifice and martyrdom in his work”. In his *Memoirs* (1976a: 212), Williams considers that *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* “adheres to the valuable edict of Aristotle that a tragedy must have unity of time and place and magnitude of theme”. And, in order to deal with reasonable doubts regarding the unity of time, he adds (1976a: 213): “The set in *Cat* never changes and its running time is exactly the time of its action, meaning that one act, timewise, follows directly upon the other”. This is in fact a unique feature of his dramas since: “I know no other modern American play in which this is accomplished”²⁵. He refers to *Cat* because it is his favorite drama, but we could say the same about *Orpheus Descending*, leaving aside what we might think about his reading of the Aristotelian edicts concerning the unity of time in Greek tragedies.

What are the other essential elements I alluded to? The role played by Vee, Carol, Lady and Val has already been discussed but not the one played by another important protagonist: the chorus, intended here to create a tension so great that it must inevitably turn to a tragedy²⁶. Whether we consider the women of the village or their husbands, all of them, along with their great leader, Sheriff Talbott, are highly involved in the action (*dràma*) because they are the wicked world, which has always crushed those who live innocently and permanently installed in their hopes and dreams. They are in this drama the origin of another essential element: the suffering (*páthos*) of the rebels because, as seen before, they do not renounce the flames of the hell. A *páthos* that the playwright wants to see also reach the audience, or “contemplators”, who are intended to feel in their own flesh the tension and fear created on the stage.

On the other hand, tragic heroes and heroines are often cursed by a sort of tragic family flaw. Williams might have thought of this dramatic resource regarding

24. Or also: “His writings certainly suggest an artist self-consciously exploring and testing the parameters of tragedy in modern age” (SCHVEY, 2011: 76).

25. “Furthermore, in the essay *The Timeless World of a Play*, Williams notes his admiration for the unfettered scope of Greek tragedy, in contrast to the (presumably realistic) plays of many of his contemporaries” (SCHVEY, 2011: 75).

26. Williams himself speaks about a “tragic tradition which offers us a view of certain values in violent juxtaposition” (WILLIAMS, 1978: 53).

Lady, since, as an immigrant neither welcomed nor loved, is always well aware of her inherited stigma: “I’m the daughter of a Wop bootlegger burned to death in his orchard”, and her tragic end would confirm that the family debt had not yet been paid.

Thus, the circumstances that tragic characters face are always adverse and dangerous, and this propensity explains the customary presence in tragedies of premonitions and forebodings. Williams’s Orpheus experiences these feelings but, in accordance with the myth, he neutralizes them: “Lately I’ve woke up with a fast heart... and had to pick up my guitar to calm myself down”. Carol had already warned him: “You’re in danger here, Snakeskin”. But the playwright wants him to stay by Lady’s side in spite of his premonition of danger when Jabe confesses that he was in that murderous Mystic Crew: “Val is... standing... in the tense, frozen attitude of a wild animal listening to something that warns it of danger”.

We are also well aware of a few moments of tragic irony in *Orpheus Descending*, when two women of the chorus promptly reveal to us that Jabe was the leader of the squad responsible for the death of old Papa Romano. Beulah raises a rhetorical question: “I wonder... if Lady has any suspicion that her husband... was the leader of the Mystic Crew?”, and Dolly responds by appealing to logic: “How could she live in marriage twenty years with a man if she knew he’d burned her father?”. Consequently, as soon as the spectators have received this piece of crucial information, and precisely because of this, they are aware of the irony of seeing Lady still concerned about her husband despite the many grievances she has had to bear. And it is still more ironic that Lady asks the nurse to curtail her husband’s sufferings with a fatal dose of morphine, bearing in mind that, unlike Lady, we – the spectators – already know he led the Mystic Crew.

Nevertheless, the moment of greatest tension in Greek tragedies ensues when the discovery or *anagnórisis* takes place: the tragic change from ignorance to knowledge accompanied by a *peripéteia* or change from one state of affairs in the play to its opposite. It is Jabe and the nurse who eventually raise (*aná*) the veil that kept Lady and Val from knowing (*gno*) what they should have always known (Jabe: “We burned him out... and... was burned up trying to fight the fire”. Lady: “Did you say ‘WE’?”. Jabe: “Yes, I said ‘We’ did it”). From this very moment, Lady’s formal respect towards her husband is overturned and transformed into desire for revenge, particularly felt when the nurse confirmed that she was bearing a new life, representing the antithesis of her husband’s imminent death: “The moment I looked at you... I knew that you were pregnant”. Lady: “Thank you for telling me what I hoped for is true”. And it is also now that Val’s *anagnórisis* takes place because the nurse has added: “I also knew the moment I looked at your husband it wasn’t by him”. The hero and heroine fail to either punish Jabe or join their lives for evermore; they are welcomed by the darkness of death, and we perceive a well planned grand design of tragic irony: one that arises from the conflict between the protagonists’ efforts and desires and their ultimate failure.

If we have proposed the possibility of reading this drama in the light of the cannons of a Greek tragedy, we should not shrink from holding up its denouement to the light of Aristotle’s statements in his *Poetics* regarding the aim of a tragic

performance: “Tragedy is, then, a representation of an action... it represents men in action... and through pity and fear it effects relief (*kátharsin*) to these and similar emotions”²⁷.

The pity and fear Williams aims to arouse in *Orpheus Descending* are clearly those of an audience that may associate their own conduct with the demented behavior of the inhabitants of this small southern town. They fear finding themselves in need of a *kátharsis*²⁸ or purification, thus revealing self-pity. However, doubt arises when we wonder whether or not Williams really believes this. Aristotle states that seeing good people passing from good luck to misfortune neither arouses fear nor pity but rather repugnance²⁹. Williams exalts the four protagonists to varying degrees because of their different merits, but two of them truly fail, and the visionary Vee is too unique a character to win the empathy of the audience. In any case, if Carol should gain their empathy, if they are also going to pick up that valuable token, they will feel relief from the passions that have been represented. Nevertheless, their conversion or complete change of mind (*metánoia*) would in this case have to be as it is broad ranging; if not, it is quite evident that, in this little village in the South, any character like Carol bringing the news of Val’s gospel would always live under the close scrutiny of those who would never permit her to preach such a message.

Regardless of whether we agree or disagree with Williams’s tragic vision of existence, we might perhaps admit that *Orpheus Descending* exemplifies very ably the power of seduction of the Classical Tradition, particularly over audience and readers convinced that its enormous weight will never asphyxiate them if they are genuinely prepared to engage in an audacious and uninhibited dialogue with it.

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27. *Po* 6, 2-3, 1449b (FYFE, 1973).

28. “If there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on stage, then it may be that my cycle of violent plays have had a moral justification after all” (WILLIAMS, 1978: 109-10).

29. Ch. 13, 2-3, 1457b (FYFE, 1973).

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