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Orpheus et les autres: Repression, Racism, Alienation and Superstition in *Orpheus Descending* and *La Putain Respectueuse*

In 1975, in the pages of his memoir, Tennessee Williams acknowledges the strong influence that the existentialism in Jean Paul Sartre's theater had in his activity as a playwright (*Memoirs* 149). Still, as a critic once pointed out: "[Williams's] work has never been read within the context of Sartre's philosophy" (Colanzi 451). The evident differences between their ways of playwriting might have been the reason why critics often limited themselves to acknowledge such influences and did not include Tennessee Williams's activity in the framework of Sartrean thinking.

At first glance, indeed, it may seem difficult to find contact points between two apparently distant authors such as Tennessee Williams and Jean-Paul Sartre, but after an accurate analysis, it is possible to find some sort of link between these two great personalities of the XX century.

Besides the aforementioned influences of Sartrean theatre on Williams's work, in the latter's autobiography it is possible to read about the only occasion on which they met:

Once when she and I were at the Hotel Nacional... we saw Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir sitting in another cabana and I said, "Marion, I think we ought to meet them." She didn't object so I went to introduce myself to Mr. Sartre. He was quite pleasant and I said, "Won't you come and have a drink with us, sir." He and Miss de Beauvoir came over and joined us. Miss de Beauvoir was rather an icy lady, but Jean-Paul Sartre was very warm and charming. We had quite a long conversation; I mentioned that Marion wrote poetry. She had showed me some particularly lovely poems the evening before. He said, "Oh, I would love to see them!"... Mr. Sartre said, "Oh, just go up and

get them.” So I went up and fetched them down. Well. Sartre was very, very impressed. (*Memoirs* 68-69)

Unlike Tennessee Williams, however, Sartre has never acknowledged some kind of admiration toward the American author, let alone a possible exchange of influences, thus relegating any possible affinity to the mere environment of intertextuality.

Furthermore, among the pages of *Memoirs*, Williams narrates how he tried more than once to meet Sartre, after the above-quoted episode, without success.

At one point in Paris, I had expected Sartre to come to a party of mine, but he hadn't and that's why it surprised me so that he was cordial on this later occasion. (69)

I decided to give a big party in my room at the Hotel de l'Université. It was attended by most of my celebrated new friends in Paris. But I kept waiting for Jean-Paul Sartre, whom I had invited by wire. Off and on during the evening, I received bulletins concerning him. He was just around the corner in the bar of the Hotel Rond-Point and people kept assuring that he would show up. He never did.

I suppose he regarded me as too bourgeois or American or God knows what, but he did not appear at my party. (149)

The tone of the author while recounting such anecdotes is entirely light-hearted. In order to entirely understand the actual weight that the research of a contact with Sartre had for Williams, it is necessary to take into account Gore Vidal's words, who says that “[Sartre] refuses to come, Williams was highly pissed off, “commenting such refusal with the statement, “The French gods kept their distance from all of us” (qtd. in Kaplan 281).

Despite Sartre was obviously distancing himself from Williams, the two authors seem to share many points of convergence.

The first one is that both seem to aim to a criticism of the middle-class

environment: Sartre by launching an attack of political mold, and Williams by recounting the mania and the irreversible tendency to unhappiness of the bourgeoisie.

Also the theme of desire seems to be one of the aforementioned links: the bodies of Williams's masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* may be related to the desire that Sartre in his *Being and Nothingness* places within the birth of thought as a request of self-assertiveness.

Therefore, desire, in both authors, is a triggering force that causes action. These are two visions which are only apparently unable to coexist, and which, however, merge unintentionally and indirectly in one of the most controversial philosophical essay of the twentieth century, Deleuze's and Guattari's *Anti-Oedipus*, through assertiveness:

D.H. Lawrence had the impression – that psychoanalysis was shutting sexuality up in a bizarre sort of box painted with bourgeois motifs, in a kind of rather repugnant artificial triangle, thereby stifling the whole of sexuality as a production of desire so as to recast it along entirely different lines, making of it a 'dirty little secret', a dirty little family secret, a private theatre rather than the fantastic factory of nature and production. (Deleuze and Guattari 53)

The cosmopolitan approach to art can be considered an umpteenth thing that the two authors have in common. They were, indeed, two curious travelers constantly exploring the world. It is common knowledge that Williams deeply loved the Europe, where he lived several years of his life. Sartre, on the other hand, often visited the United States and one of these journeys was the source for the writing of the Two Act Tragedy *La Putain Respectueuse*. This work, originally accused of having a deep anarchical spirit and an Anti-American position, is instead a powerful criticism of racism widespread in the United States and can be considered an example of the Sartrean *engagement*.

Speaking of which, in the preface that Sartre wrote for the American translation of his work, it is possible to read: "They accused me to be an Anti-American. I'm not. I don't even know what that word means. I'm an Anti-Racist, though, and that's because I do know what racism really means." (qtd. in Contat 243)

According to Sartre, political commitment must dominate each man's life, while for the American playwright, who identifies himself less with the role of a militant and more with that of "quite revolutionary," commitment coincides with a criticism of the petty bourgeois world, coming from the inside with a more subtle, and less evident approach.

Being formally a middle-class writer might have been what Sartre imputed to Williams. Actually, even if, as we just said, criticism coming from Williams is more hidden and less explicit, it can undoubtedly be considered the essence of his poetry.

It is necessary to underline, though, that there is a significant difference between the very concept of engagement adopted by these two authors. The purpose of Jean Paul Sartre's *engagement* which turns the stage into the "place of the engagement," was to rouse the masses about social and political issues, thus underlining the collective dimension and the public utility of theater. Tennessee Williams's work, which has its roots in the very concept of the memory play, is diametrically opposite. A personal and often autobiographical dimension contrasts with the aforementioned collective dimension. Williams's theater is therefore enhanced by a different kind of catharsis; an intimate one, whose aim is the redemption from a past impossible to accept.

Despite such significant differences, there are many points of convergence where their plays meet in terms of intention and style. The interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the light of the existentialist concept of Bad Faith, offered by an above mentioned study can be considered an example of it. Nevertheless, the purpose of this essay is to throw light on the fundamental similarities between two specific works of these authors: *Orpheus Descending* and *La Putain Respectueuse*.

In a comparative approach of the two plays, what immediately stands out is the symmetry between the environment where the works take place: a deeply racist South, marked by an attitude of righteousness that leads its citizens toward an inevitable intellectual and sexual repression. The state of mental and physical constraint that the protagonists of the two plays have to endure is represented by the claustrophobic space where the plays are set: a small apartment and the ground floor of a small town shop.

In both these suffocating backdrops, four characters interact, opposing

to another key character, common both to *Orpheus* and to *Putain*: the others.

While Sartre is more explicit when he underlines how the presence of the “people” around the protagonists has a key role in the development of the play, and inserts a cryptic “*plusieurs hommes*” in the characters list, Williams as well assigns an essential role to the Southern people always ready to point their finger at his protagonists. The conviction of self-righteous people is what will lead the potential heroes of these plays to the catastrophe.

It seems to reflect something belonging to Sartre’s *Huis Clos* (known in English as *No Exit*), in which the author asserts “l’enfer c’est les autres” and in which he considers the constraint of living with other people the real tragedy of humankind.

Similarly, *les autres* represent the external influence on the decisions of the characters in *Orpheus Descending* and *La Putain Respectueuse*. Their opinion, as Sartre would say, prevents them from choosing and limits their freedom. The courage which is necessary to turn a man into a hero is thus suppressed, and in case of a possible resistance, harshly punished.

In both cases the Choice is only theoretically possible. Lizzie, Sartre’s prostitute, can choose not to bear false witness and save the Negro from the death warrant, but the senator’s deceiving and apparently fatherly attitude convinces her to lie.

A critic, when talking about *La Putain*, maintains that “Sure, Lizzie could refuse, lying, to relinquish her personal dignity and thus avoid to recognize herself in her social role. But it is an abstract and theoretical possibility, because what emerges in the context is the overwhelming, yet somehow unconscious, power of the influence which guides her choice” (Rubino 84).

On the other hand, Lady and Val, from Williams’s *Orpheus* decide to challenge the morality of the conformists and surrender to an adulterous passion. But once again, the overwhelming power that Rubino mentioned, has the upper hand. The protagonists’ act of rebellion will lead them toward an atrocious death, whose instigators are the very “others,” indignant about their subversive attitude.

What the characters of these plays are asked to accept is the immobility

inside a suffocating and infernal dimension; death is the only way out of such condition.

Furthermore, it is necessary to highlight the presence in both plays of strong references to mysticism and Christian morality. In the first version of *Orpheus*, whose original title was *Battle of Angels*, the pagan myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is replaced by several religious metaphors, speaking of which a critic states: “Eventually Val and Mrs. Torrance (named Myra in *Battle of Angels* and Lady in *Orpheus Descending*; both, as variants of Mary and “Our Lady,” are Virgin Mary surrogates) become lovers.... The profusion of symbolic or allegorical figures and the blending of pagan and Christian stories, which bewildered and enraged Bostonians who first saw *Battle of Angels*, were all highly personal emblems of Williams” (King 137).

The decision to incorporate both the Virgin Mary and Eurydice from Roman paganism in the character of Mrs. Torrance is further highlighted by Williams at the end of the play. Val and Lady, indeed, die on the Sunday of the Resurrection, in a fire that reminds of Orpheus’s Hades.

On top of all this, Val is the protagonist of another example of mysticism and superstition. His snakeskin jacket has a fundamental role in the play and transforms itself into a real amulet that can take the soul of a dead hero into the body of a young and degenerate woman. At the end of the play, when Carol indeed finds herself wearing that jacket, it is clear that Lady and Val did not die in vain and that their act of dramatic protest gave hope and direction to a character who apparently lacked both of them.

The last line pronounced by Carol refers to this, to the overlapping of material and spiritual dimension in the inheritance that Val left to her: “—Wild things leave skins behind them, they leave clean skins and teeth and white bones behind them, and these are tokens passed from one to another, so that the fugitive kind can always follow their kind...” (OD 97).

Similarly, also in *La Putain* it is possible to find a little amulet; a snake-shaped bracelet which is, according to Lizzie, the cause of all her misfortune. Just like in *Orpheus Descending*, the bracelet is given a supernatural power and thus becomes cause and scapegoat of the destiny.

However, Val’s jacket is an exotic symbol of courage and freedom, an emblem of a possible escape from the demonic immobility that the

characters of the play are condemned to, whereas the bracelet of *La Putain* represents the chain that prevents this character from escaping and at the same time prevents from any movement toward a positive evolution. Lizzie herself acknowledges the power of this object and the dramatic bond that ties her to it.

LIZZIE: Yes, sure. I attract trouble; some people are like that. You see this snake? [She shows him her bracelet.] It brings bad luck.

FRED: Why do you wear it?

LIZZIE: As long as I have it, I have to keep it. It's supposed to be pretty awful—a snake's revenge. (RP 144)

...

LIZZIE: So there we are! Here's me in it up to my neck—just for a change. [To her bracelet] God damn you, can't you pick on anyone else? [She throws the bracelet on the floor.] (RP 146)

...

LIZZIE [in a low voice]: The cops. I knew it had to happen. [She exhibits the bracelet.] It's this thing's fault. [She kisses it and puts it back on her arm.] I guess I'd better keep it on me. Hide. (RP 147)

...

THE NEGRO: How many?

LIZZIE: Five or six. The others are waiting outside. [She turns toward him again.] Don't shake so. Good God, don't shake so! [A pause. To her bracelet] It's all your fault! You pig of a snake! [She tears it from her arm, throws it on the floor, and tramples on it.] Trash! (RP 153)

In both plays, the snake is the link between the common and the uncanny, the connection between earthly and mystic dimensions, the bond between the ordinary and the exotic. The choice of such an animal is closely related to the concept of Myth: the snake in a mythological context reminds, indeed, of timeless images.

Therefore, Val's jacket and Lizzie's bracelet stand for the temptation in the garden of Eden, the snake who tempted Lilith, the Hebrew demon that symbolize adultery, and Python; son of Gaea created with the mud of the Deluge.

It is impossible to analyze such plays without considering the utmost importance of their mythic dimension.

Mythology has a clear central role in Williams's *Orpheus*, which represents the author's chance to allegorically speak about the role of the artist, while using once more metaphors to introduce autobiographical elements in his work.

Whereas for Sartre it is necessary to overstep the boundaries of *La Putain* in order to realize how the revision of mythological stories has often had a key role in his activity as a playwright (two examples can be considered *Les Mouches*, rework of Aeschylus's *Coefore* and *Les Troyennes*, inspired by Euripides's *The Trojan Women*).

Also in Sartre's work it is possible to find allegorical elements which are a literary escamotage that allows the author to indirectly talk about the contemporary political situation. The lack of psychologism in Sartrean plays is one of the many differences between his work and Williams's.

On the one hand, Williams's playwriting can be considered as a sort of *Teatro dei caratteri* ruled by a deep psychological characterization; on the other hand, Sartre's drama is pragmatic and anti-psychological. In both cases, however, the development of the events is regulated by a dramatic determinism, thus imposing itself on the characters' will.

As it has already been analyzed above, the decisive factor for the final defeat, in both plays, is not the psychological predisposition of the protagonists to fight or to surrender. Val and Lady, just as Lizzie and the Negro lose because the over-mentioned determinism, to which Sartre refers to as "The Situation," wants them to fail right from the very beginning. Their destiny is predetermined; a relentless rush towards an already established destination. The inclination to include characters in borderline situations, thus allowing the irreversibility of the events to guide them, is described by Sartre himself as one of the main features of a new theatre: the so-called "*de Situations*," which he depicts as follows:

But if it is true that man is free in a given situation and that his choices are taken inside of it and depending on it, then must show simple and human situations, as well as the liberties taken in that context.... The most touching thing can show is a character taking shape; the moment of the choice, of the

free choice which affects your whole moral values and your whole life.... it is necessary to bring borderline situations on stage. That is to say, situations in which death is one of the possible conclusions. (qtd. in Contat 20)

This holds true also for *Orpheus Descending*. Lady is a character *en train de se faire*, who discloses her change in the very act of choosing. At the same time, it seems that Carol's personality can only be forged by the fire that will bring the two lovers to death. Lady's change, filled with promises and expectations, will be suppressed by the *Situation*, whereas Carol's will develop itself only after the curtain has fallen.

Similarly, Lizzie's personal uprising is repressed by the context, and Fred's change (yet slighter) is only revealed at the end of the last scene, when he declares his passion for the prostitute and convinces her to quit her profession and dedicate herself only to his sexual fantasies. This request, thus, confirms the social submission she is condemned to.

The umpteenth analogy between the two plays is represented by the internal/external dichotomy, present in both works.

Since the backdrop where they are set is, as it has already been mentioned above, stifling and oppressive, hope for change seems to always come from outside. The idea of "outside" therefore represents the desire for salvation.

Both Lizzie and Val are outsiders. It is quite relevant that the two characters, who more than anyone represent a possible escape from that suffocating social and behavioral pattern, come from an external place. In both cases the concept of escape becomes a synonym of freedom. The enclosed space of the representation turns into an existential prison or a hell from which someone can only dream breaking out. About that, a critic study dedicated to Williams's *Orpheus* underlined:

Such an escape denotes the predicament of the main characters of *Orpheus Descending*. It is the release of their emotions into their own world of memories or fantasies which is in contrast to reality. These fugitives metaphorically convey the theme of bondage and liberation. Their idealised imagination finds an escape into disillusionment which is illusory liberation because it certainly relieves them of their repressive emotions unconsciously yet it tempts them into another desire i.e. bondage of the senses, and they find relief in a different world of their own. (Singh and Srivastava 102, 103)

At the beginning of *La Putain*, Lizzie MacKay says she is from New York, and at the end of the play she is convinced by Fred to leave her apartment in order to aim to what has only the appearance of a lifeline. He proposes her to become his sexual slave, and she accepts, confirming her resignation to a destiny as a social outcast.

The Negro constantly seeks shelter in Lizzie's apartment, and once there he is driven out and threatened to death. Once he has escaped out in the street, the audience will wonder whether he is still alive or not, but will not find any answer.

Meanwhile, in *Orpheus*, the inside/outside dialogue happens on several layers. In the first place there is Val who arrives at the Torrance Mercantile Store by chance, looking for a job. Everything in him seems to remind of the stereotype of the wanderer, the *fugitive kind*. The distant and mysterious places recalled by his character are a clear metaphor of passion and freedom.

At the end of the play, while trying to save Eurydice/Lady from her thrall, he proposes her to escape with him, but their attempt will lead them to death.

Carol, on the contrary, arranges her escape right from the beginning of the play. She belongs to that suffocating context and wants to leave it behind her. Her fleeing impetus, before becoming something physical/practical, is strictly mental: her life is wild and profligate, aimed at creating a violent opposition with the extremely narrow-minded people she has to live with.

That feeling of dramatic repression marks once again another affinity between Williams's *Orpheus* and Sartre's *Prostitute*. In both plays, indeed, the characters are driven to the borders of the society because they do not conform to the moral and behavioral rules that govern the microcosm in which they live.

Lizzie is a prostitute and the erotic desire she arouses in men legitimates Fred to compare her to Satan. Surrendering to passion, in the universe of *La Putain*, is a source of shame and embarrassment. Therefore, Lizzie's fault is leading righteous men toward perdition. This is expressed clearly in the second scene of the play, where Fred holds a violent grudge against Lizzie, the prostitute he spent the night with:

FRED [pointing toward the bed]: Cover that, while you're at it.

LIZZIE: What?

FRED: The bed. I said you should cover the bed. It smells of sin.

LIZZIE: Sin? How come you talk like that? Are you a preacher?

FRED: No. Why?

LIZZIE: You sound like the Bible.

...

LIZZIE:... Well, well, I won't insist. Think it over. My, my! You're as pretty as a picture. Kiss me, good-looking; kiss me just for the hell of it. What's the matter? Don't you want to kiss me? [He kisses her suddenly and brutally, then pushes her away.] Oof!

FRED: You're the Devil.

LIZZIE: What?

FRED: You're the Devil.

LIZZIE: The Bible again! What's the matter with you? (RP 142)

In *Orpheus Descending* sexual repression is otherwise represented by Lady's condition, forced to live a loveless marriage standing by her dying husband. Val's descending arouses in her a passion and a feeling which are considered unacceptable by the society, and that will cause their death.

The character who embodies, more than anyone else, the feeling of sexual repression in Williams's work is Carol. She considers her promiscuity as an identity-giving surge; an escamotage to overstep the behavioral rules imposed by the world surrounding her. She is the one who explains the reason why of her attitude when stating:

CAROL: I don't like playing it cool! What are they saying about me? That I'm corrupt?

VAL: If you don't want to be talked about, why do you make up like that? Why do you –

CAROL: To show off!

VAL: What?

CAROL: I'm an exhibitionist! I want to be noticed, seen, heard, felt! I want them to know I'm alive! Don't you want them to know you're alive? (OD 27)

...

CAROL: I used to be what they call a Christ-bitten reformer. You know what that is? – A kind of benign exhibitionist... I walked barefoot in this burlap sack to deliver a personal protest to the governor of the state. Oh, I suppose it was partly exhibitionism on my part, but it wasn't completely exhibitionism; there was something else in it, too. You know how far I got? Six miles out of town – hooted, jeered at, even spit on! – every step of the way – and then arrested!... All right. I've told you my story, the story of an exhibitionist. Now I want you to do something for me. (*OD 28*)

In both cases, the repression has a double force; the unconscious desire for integration and an insurgent one for dissociation. Carol wants “them” to know that she is alive, but she also wants to abandon them. Similarly, Lizzie hates conformists, but their hint of promise of moral acknowledgment is enough to convince her to betray all her values and bear false witness.

Lizzie and Carol share a desire for revenge, mitigated by the painful awareness that their role has already been assigned, and that they cannot change it. Nevertheless, they both show an obsessive need for their identity to be recognized and somehow accepted.

Carol expresses such need in the scene of Val's arrival in the drugstore. That is not the first time they have met, and she tries to make him confess that he remembers her:

CAROL: Why are you pretending not to remember me?

VAL: It's hard to remember someone you never met.

CAROL: Then why'd you look so startled when you saw me?

VAL: Did I?

CAROL: I thought for a moment you'd run back out the door.... Are you afraid I'll snitch?

VAL: Do what?

CAROL: Snitch? I wouldn't; I'm not a snitch. But I can prove that I know you if I have to. It was New Year's Eve in New Orleans.... You had on that jacket and a snake ring with a ruby eye.

VAL: I never had a snake ring with a ruby eye. (*OD 23*)

...

CAROL: [smiling gently] Then maybe it was a dragon ring with an emerald eye or a diamond or a ruby eye. You told us that it was a gift from a lady osteopath that you'd met somewhere in your travels and that any time you were broke you'd wire this lady osteopath collect, and no matter how far you were or how long it was since you'd seen her, she'd send you a money order for twenty-five dollars with the same sweet message each time. "I love you. When will you come back?" And to prove the story, not that it was difficult to believe it, you took the latest of these sweet messages from your wallet for us to see ... [She throws back her head with soft laughter. He looks away still further and busies himself with the belt buckle] – We followed you through five places before we made contact with you and I was the one that made contact. I went up to the bar where you were standing and touched your jacket and said, "What stuff is this made of?" and when you said it was snakeskin, I said, "I wish you'd told me before I touched it." And you said something not nice. You said, "Maybe that will learn you to hold back your hands." I was drunk by that time, which was after midnight. Do you remember what I said to you? I said, "What on earth can you do on this earth but catch at whatever comes near you, with both your fingers, until your fingers are broken?" I'd never said that before, or even consciously thought it, but afterwards it seemed like the truest thing that my lips had ever spoken, what on earth can you do but catch at whatever comes near you with both your hands until your fingers are broken ... You gave me a quick, sober look. I think you nodded slightly, and then you picked up your guitar and began to sing. After singing you passed the kitty. Whenever paper money was dropped in the kitty you blew a whistle. My cousin Bertie and I dropped in five dollars, you blew the whistle five times and then sat down at our table for a drink, Schenley's with Seven Up. You showed us all those signatures on your guitar ... Any correction so far?

VAL: Why are you so anxious to prove I know you? (OD 23, 24)

A similar scene is described in *La Putain Respectueuse* when Lizzie tries to make Fred say that his decision to spend the night together was not caused by his drunkenness, but by a firm act of will:

LIZZIE: You held me tight, so tight. And then you whispered that you loved me.

FRED: You were drunk.

LIZZIE: No, I was not drunk.

FRED: Yes, you were drunk.

LIZZIE: I tell you I wasn't.

FRED: In any case, I was. I don't remember anything.

LIZZIE: That's a pity. I got undressed in the bathroom, and when I came back to you, you got all red and flustered, don't you remember? I even said to you: "There's my little lobster." Don't you remember how you wanted to put out the light and how you loved me in the dark? I thought that was nice and respectful. Don't you remember?

FRED: No.

LIZZIE: And when we pretended we were two babies in the same crib? Don't you remember that?

FRED: I tell you to shut up. What's done at night belongs to the night. In the daytime you don't talk about it.

LIZZIE: And if it gives me a kick to talk about it? I had a good time, you know.

FRED: Sure, you had a good time! [He approaches her, gently kisses her shoulders, then takes her by the throat.] You always enjoy yourself when you've got a man wrapped up. [A pause.] I've forgotten all about it, your wonderful night. Completely forgotten it. I remember the dance hall, that's all. If there was anything else, you're the only one who remembers it. [He presses his hands to her throat.]

LIZZIE: What are you doing?

FRED: Just holding your throat in my hands.

LIZZIE: You're hurting me.

FRED: You are the only one who remembers. If I were to squeeze a tiny bit harder, there would be no one in the world to remember last night. [He releases her.] How much do you want? (RP 142)

Finally, the most evident analogy between these works is that both of them tell stories that develop themselves around an important social issue; a sort of *deus ex machina* of the events in the *Orpheus* and in *La Putain*. The racism topic is indeed the leitmotif between these plays. Since from the opening acts, the authors depict the profile of an extremely bigoted America, which is committed to the adoption of the racial policy that will mark one of the darkest periods of the twentieth century.

In Sartre's work, that matter is always in the foreground. All the events

arise, develop and finish around the Negro character, unfairly charged with rape and sentenced instead of a white man.

The play opens with the wanted man, who knocks at Lizzie's door, seeking shelter. On that occasion he clearly reveals his position: inferior to white people, guilty whether or not and unworthy of compassion. Toward the end of the play, the Negro even refuses to point a gun to his persecutors, justifying himself by saying "I can't shoot white folks" just because "they're white folks" (RP 154).

The social submission introduced by Sartre is so deeply rooted that its victims are the very first to give up to their role with melancholic powerlessness.

Fred, who fully embodies the kind of despicable society where *La Putain's* characters live, often compares the Negro to Satan and expresses his loutish superstition by saying that: "It's always bad luck when you see a nigger. Niggers are the Devil" (RP 141).

Once again, Fred is the one who is given the task of introducing to the audience the public opinion about the Afro-American question.

The senator as well, who is another key character, has a fundamental role for the correct identification of the social and ideological context where the play is set. His hypocrite attempt to convince Lizzie to bear false witness ends up in a summation which reveal all of his racist beliefs.

THE SENATOR: Then Uncle Sam would have many things to tell you. He would say: "Lizzie, you have reached a point where you must choose between two of my boys. One of them must go. What can you do in a case like this? Well, you keep the better man. Well, then, let us try to see which is the better one. Will you?"

LIZZIE [carried away]: Yes, I want to. Oh, I am sorry, I thought it was saying all that.

THE SENATOR: I was speaking in his name. [He goes on, as before.] "Lizzie, this Negro whom you are protecting, what good is he? Somehow or other he was born, God knows where. I nourished and raised him, and how does he pay me back? What does he do for me? Nothing at all; he dawdles, he chisels, he sings, he buys pink and green suits. He is my son, and I love him as much as I do my other boys. But I ask you: does he live like a man? I would not even notice if he died."

LIZZIE: My, how fine you talk.

THE SENATOR [in the same vein]: “The other one, this Thomas, has killed a Negro, and that’s very bad. But I need him. He is a hundred-per-cent American, comes from one of our oldest families, has studied at Harvard, is an officer – I need officers – he employs two thousand workers in his factory – two thousand unemployed if he happened to die. He’s a leader, a firm bulwark against the Communists, labor unions, and the Jews. His duty is to live, and yours is to preserve his life. That’s all. Now, choose.” (RP 150)

In Williams’s work as well, the racist topic has a central role. The idle gossip of some women of the town opens the first scene of the play. They are talking about Mrs. Torrance, who is unaware of her being married to the man who killed her father.

In the same scene, it is possible to find out that Mr. Torrence was a notable member of the Mystic Crew, a sort of Ku Klux Klan which had decided to punish Lady’s father for having sold liquor to a black man.

The hostile attitude toward black people is highlighted once again in the second scene of the first act, when a black witchdoctor (The Conjure Man) enters the Torrance Mercantile Store and the women who opened the play show their disapproval, while watching Carol interacting with him:

(Her sentence is interrupted by a panicky scream from EVA immediately repeated by SISTER. The TEMPLE SISTERS scramble upstairs to the landing. DOLLY also cries out and turns, covering her face. A Negro CONJURE MAN has entered 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.)

DOLLY: Git him out, git him out, he’s going to mark my baby!

BEULAH: Oh, shoot, Dolly – (DOLLY has now fled after the TEMPLE SISTERS, to the landing of the stairs. The CONJURE MAN advances with a soft, rapid, toothless mumble of words that sound like wind in dry grass. He is holding out something in his shaking hand.) It’s just that old crazy conjure man from Blue Mountain. He can’t mark your baby.

(Phrase of primitive music or percussion as NEGRO moves into light. BEULAH follows DOLLY to landing.)

CAROL: (Very high and clear voice) Come here, Uncle, and let me see what

you've got there. Oh, it's a bone of some kind.... Hey, Uncle Pleasant, give us the Choctaw cry. (NEGRO stops in confectionery.) He's part Choctaw, he knows the Choctaw cry.

SISTER TEMPLE: Don't let him holler in here!

CAROL: Come on, Uncle Pleasant, you know it!... (Looking at the young man) Thanks, Uncle –

BEULAH: Hey, old man, you! Choctaw! Conjure man! Nigguh! Will you go out-a this sto'? So we can come back down stairs? (OD 18)

The Conjure man embodies two of the main topics of Williams's work: racism and the mystic dimension. But in this case the latter is seen as the umpteenth dissociative element toward an ignorant and cruel world. It is not by chance that the only character who talks to the black witchdoctor is Carol, who from the very beginning declares a profound desire for escaping.

With *Orpheus Descending* and *La Putain Respecteuse* the distant universes of Williams and Sartre give birth to two parallel stories meant to intersect more than once along their way. When facing the matter analyzed in this essay, these two authors seem to create a new communicative system, which is able to put into contact different worlds, such as the Sartre's existentialist theater and Williams's psychologism, thus discovering a no man's land where they can communicate. Their meeting point is the criticism to a world that praises the safeguard of essential values, using them in order to prevent men from reaching their most important achievement, their freedom.

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