

Political Discourses in Tennessee William's "Something About Him"

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Abstract

This article aims to gather three different dialogues that mutually cooperate in terms of time and ideology. It is therefore my intention to analyse Tennessee William's "Something About Him" and its consequent intertext – Emerson's "Self-Reliance"—under the umbrella of Raymond Williams' political estimations. This comparative analysis will try to shed as much light as possible on the struggle between monolithic vs emergent discourses while delving into subjects such as: narration, gender, power dynamics or 'communitarism,' among others.

Keywords: Emerson, Marxism, Political Discourse, Raymond Williams, Tennessee Williams

Título: Discurso Político en "Something About Him" de Tennessee Williams.

Resumen

Este artículo busca reconciliar tres diálogos que engranan mutuamente en términos temporales y culturales. Es por lo tanto mi intención analizar Something About Him de Tennessee Williams y su consiguiente intertexto, "Autoconfianza" de Emerson. Todo esto bajo la sombra de las ideologías políticas del académico Raymond Williams. Este análisis comparativo tratará de arrojar luz sobre la guerrilla entre discursos residuales y emergentes. Para ello, se entrará a analizar aspectos como: narración, género, dinámicas de poder o 'comunitarismo', entre otros.

Palabras clave: Emerson, Discurso Político, Marxismo, Raymond Williams, Tennessee Williams.

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This paper attempts to briefly interconnect Tennessee Williams' short story "Something About Him" and Raymond Williams' *Culture and Materialism*, with special interest on his well claimed essay "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory," while delving into these literary artefacts that have contributed to the creation of this multidisciplinary composition that is both, artistically and politically biased. The following study offers some insights into R. William's approach to Marxism and its consequent analysis considering the story at hand, as I do personally believe that they do not only commune together in terms of time but political initiatives. In the pages that follow, it will be thus conveniently and slightly discussed different subject such as: setting, narration, counter-/discourses or gender... among other epigraphs.

The author of "Something about Him" was born in Mississippi in 1911, son of a broken family and particularly marked by his disturbing parental relationship as well as the places behind his narrative. Raymond Williams, on the contrary, was born in Wales, 1921. The British communist has focused his academic career on political discourses and, especially, cultural materialism.

The first section of this paper will initially examine how this quasiautobiographical provincialism has helped shape T. Williams characters' identity. Regions are, according to the German geographer Walter Christaller (1933), defined in terms of organisational principles and social relations. Regionalism has indeed a pivotal role on the evolution of this story; the location offered is not only rather limited but claustrophobic, events therefore turn into gossips and they are definitely known by all the villagers. This organic communitarian links are nevertheless very much based on –predominantly– preconceptions and discriminating impressions: "And Lucinda was right in the family tradition." (213) This pastoral organism does not only share puritan dogmas but conservative standards that paradoxically echoes Tönnies' conception of *Gemeinschaft* (1887).⁴⁷²

⁴⁷² In English "community." In terms of communitarian theory, Tönnies (1887) describes *Gemeinschaft* as a living old-fashioned organism, a pastoral community based on kinship and blood links.

This dissertation will, in the following lines, try to shed some light on Raymond William's sociological distinction between dominant and emergent ideologies. Narration conforms in this story a fundamental ideological apparatus as the narrator becomes an active agent who teases and leads, at will, the reader towards the story. As the plot goes on, the narrator ingeniously makes us sympathise more with these outcasted emergent figures than those in power. Haskell, for example, is defined as "except for these eccentric manners of his he might have been called *good looking*" (214. Italics are mine) The little girl, who happens to be one of the empowered character's daughter, is on the contrary "very plump and buck-toothed" (213), not to mention Miss Jamison and "her gassy stomach" (214). T. Williams uses satire everywhere as a mechanism to undermine authorities and thus give voice to supposedly misfit characters.

On the one hand, the hegemonic group in this story is, as stated by Torres (2011), clearly represented by the villagers, "it is most obvious to notice the absence of any title to position him within the social system, whereas everyone else in the story is Mr., Mrs., or Miss – he is just Haskell." (217). In relation with R. William's essay, they are the dominant faction in key positions (bosses, owners, landlords...), the hegemonic majority and, as previously stated, they do commune and promote these obsolete ideologies such as keeping these Victorian-like titles for the commission of residualist confabulations. The protagonist, on the other, constitutes this new contemporary emergent agent of society who either consciously or unconsciously set himself in a position that is contrary or alternative to the predominant one. Rose nonetheless becomes a vehicle who leads the social interaction between both worlds, and eventually matures by embracing social change.

It is also my intention to explore –in further detail– the relation between Rose and Haskell as, in Marxist terms, emergent figures. Considering the aforementioned role of the narrator as a guiding voice throughout the story, both characters' background is, compared to the rest of the village, clearly marginal. They are abused employees, subjugated by their respective bosses' demands. Haskell is, on the one hand, neither unaware nor worried about his neighbours' gossips: "Haskell didn't know this and so he decided [...]." (213) Rose is, on the other, never influenced by hegemonic discourses, she rather prefers acting on her own criteria: "Oh, I wouldn't hold that against him" (214). Rose is nevertheless so intoxicated with these puritan standards that she is unable to escape from it. Not just physically, but morally. She actually concludes the story as an empty automaton who, far from feeling incapable of crossing the social monolithic barrier and running away with the protagonist, stays and prostrates before her monotonous hopeless life:

At one forty-five Miss Rose put on her tweed jacket, which she now wore every day, and walked to the corner drugstore for a milk and a sandwich. In windows she caught her image, angular, tall, her wrists too long for the sleeves of the brown jacket, the hem of her skirt – yes! – uneven.

"Oh, God," she whispered.

"Milk and cream cheese sandwich." (220)

Returning briefly to Rose, T. Williams recreates a patriarchal society in which daughters, women employees or wives are purposely silenced and subjugated over male figures who are indeed pictured as chauvinist and dictatorial. Rose herself feels powerless without Haskell: "She was lifted up and blown forward, a thin tissue kite that was suddenly caught in a rising wind." (217). Haskell is nevertheless more interesting for the coming analysis. Although he is a man, his voice is equally silenced as we only get to know about him by someone else's opinions and judgments. He is feminised and 'queernised' by the villagers: "His voice assumed almost an almost girlish falsetto" (216), or "delicate in their precision as the fingers of a young woman" (218). This inflicted, as stated by Butler (2013), androgynisation breaks with the expected heteronormative standards and it of course secludes him from the hegemonic group: "A man who reads effeminate may well be consistently heterosexual, and another one might be gay." (n.p)

Haskell went home at once and packed his valise. On his way to the station he dropped in at the library to return a volume of Emerson *Essays* that Miss Rose had taken out for him the night before. (219) [sic]

In the last section of this paper I will scrutinise the role of this preceding quote as Haskell's redemption. It alludes to one of Emerson's works and, considering the story at hand, it may be easily interpreted as to be the transcendentalist essay 'Self Reliance' (1841). This essay understands individuality as a tool to fight conformity and false consistency. Emerson affirms that, as our protagonist, your personal idiosyncrasy is to be given priority over external conjectures.

What I must do is all that concerns me, not what the people think. This rule, equally arduous in actual and in intellectual life, may serve for the whole distinction between greatness and meanness.

It is the harder, because you will always find those who think they know what is your duty better than you know it. It is easy in the world to live after the world's opinion; it is easy in solitude to live after our own; but the great man is he who in the midst of the crowd keeps with perfect sweetness the independence of solitude. (Emerson, 1841: n.p)

In 'Self-Reliance', the author argues that this believed 'childish' rebellious individualism contrasts with adult opinions, reputation or rumours since these make humans indecisive. At the end of the essay, Emerson contemplates the benefits of a society based on individualism instead of following the established rules and, by doing so you, you collaterally progress by becoming a 'risk-taker.' Haskell, connecting now these previous arguments with the story itself, leaves this organic community for he can mature as an individual. He finally observes that this society is so idiotically rooted in puritan standards that it is impossible to get anything beneficial from it. Before he leaves he decides to leave the essay to Rose thus stimulating her individuality as he sees in her a potential emergent character.

All in all, the open ending of this story may be interpreted as one pleases. R. Williams' approach to Marxist and political theories have definitively proved useful mechanisms for the understanding of this power dynamic between both spheres. As far as I am concerned, and knowing T. Williams' combative politics, the hegemonic group has won this ideological battle as Rose will remain trapped forever in this almost ridiculous routine of morals and gossips, thus transforming Haskell's figure into *some-thing* (reference to the title), dehumanising the protagonist until he was nothing but a mere occasional and transitory *some (ordinary) thing* (fortuitous). The story may nevertheless be interpreted more positively if we understand Emerson's essay as a passing baton to the [pseudo] emergent protagonist. It is up to the reader to decide whether she will stay in town forever, both as a figure of potential changing or as a representative of its residual culture, or she will become the emergent voice Haskell thinks she is.

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