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**APPROPRIATION OF SYMBOL AS DISCLOSURE
 OF THE WORLD OF THE PLAY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S
 THE GLASS MENAGERIE**

*This paper examines the symbol as a key to understanding the world of Tennessee Williams's play *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) within the frame of hermeneutics offered by Paul Ricoeur. Various conceptions of the symbol are presented, and the impact of religion upon the playwright's drama is discussed. The interest of the authors is particularly directed towards the role of Christian symbols and their power to present, in a distinctive and irreplaceable way, the interplay of sacred and profane contexts. The Christian images inspire and shape the narrative structure of the drama. The analysis of particular symbols reveals that the playwright artistically uses Christian iconographic and liturgical implications as the symbolic pattern of the play. The spiritual meanings are evoked by the symbol of the rose, which is traditionally regarded as an emblem of the Virgin Mary, while the symbolic representation of the unicorn is associated with the Annunciation.*

KEY WORDS: symbol, hermeneutics, appropriation, world of the text, religion, myth.

In representing one thing by means of another, and being chiefly applied in the religious sphere, a symbol, as Hans-Georg Gadamer maintains, is obviously something which has value not only because of its content, but also because it can be “produced.” Consequently, no matter “whether it is a religious symbol or appears in secular context, in every case the meaning of a symbolon depends on its physical presence and acquires a representational function only by being shown or spoken” (Gadamer 2004: 63). As mediators between the natural and the transcendental worlds, symbols represent what Eric Voegelin calls “the In-Between character of human exist-

ence” (Voegelin 2004: 38), and provide the key to understanding human experience. Although symbols display a richness that is analogous to abstract ideas, they are nevertheless bound by human experience. They mirror human potential and creativity in that they are, as Ricoeur implies, both “bound and free” (Ricoeur 1970: 16). Symbols sustain their efficacy only if they are continually revisited by the interpreter. Since all interpreters bring with them specific concerns vital to the historico-cultural period they live in, the symbolic world of the text remains in a state of flux and keeps challenging questers anew. While ideas, theories and concepts are not excluded from

this sort of updating, the inherent ambiguity of symbols makes this sort of renewal easier (Voegelin 2004: 39).

Tennessee Williams (1911–1983) entered the stage of the American theatre of the mid-1940s as a dramatic innovator engaged in experimenting with the established canons of stagecraft, as well as in psychologizing and mythicizing the real world through the multi-dimensional language of symbols. Symbols are Tennessee Williams's stock in trade, but to understand what affected and influenced his dramatic compositions, some reference should be made to the theatre of which he was such a significant part. According to Richard Freeman Leavitt, Tennessee Williams's two major plays—*The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)—in-disputably “changed the course of American drama” and established his reputation and theatrical voice (Leavitt 2011: 34).

Due to the impact of such eminent European playwrights as August Strindberg, Bertold Brecht and especially Anton Chekhov, Williams came to abhor the realistic theatre of the time. His concerns revolved around a different use of language, the dramatic mode, and enterprising attempts to create new shades of meaning and perception. Similarly to the Absurdist movement that was just beginning in Europe, the playwright was working out a novel theatrical aesthetic based on a controlling metaphor from which he developed a non-realistic drama with its own aesthetic and stage logic (Murphy, in Krasner 2008: 182–183). As the playwright himself confesses in his *Memoirs*: “My thing is what it always was: to express my world and my experience of it in whatever form seems suitable to the material” (Williams 2006: xvii).

The production notes which Tennessee Williams added to his early screenplay, *The Glass Menagerie*, reveal his ambitious vision of a “new, plastic theatre, which must take the place of the exhausted theatre of realistic conventions” (Williams 1996: xvii). Williams's concept of the “plastic theatre” seems likely to have been inspired by the German-born American abstract expressionist painter Hans Hoffmann's “plastic space” (Hoffmann *et al.* 1967: 72). The playwright believed that just as the viewer of a plastic painting has a three-dimensional experience from a two-dimensional work of art, the audience of a plastic theatre should have a theatrical experience beyond the mere image of actual life. As such, Williams's “plastic theatre” incorporates “the use of lights, music, sets, and any other forms of nonverbal expression that would complement the textual version of the play” (Roundané 2003: 3). It is worth noting that, stylistically, *The Glass Menagerie* contains a number of elements which are more characteristic of the cinema than the theatre. Its author replaces the conventional three-act structure with a disjointed sequence of scenes, introduces a narrator who is simultaneously a character in the play, and very strictly defines music and lighting in order to create what his German contemporary Bertold Brecht referred to as a *Verfremdungseffekt* (“alienation effect”) (Brecht 1964: 91). For Brecht, it served to prevent his audience from comfortably escaping into illusion, and reminded them that what they saw on stage constituted the real world. Meanwhile, Williams took this Brechtian concept a step further and turned alienation into the backbone of his play. He perceives the denial of reality as “symptomatic to the largest and fundamentally enslaved section of American society,” predestined to “ex-

ist and function as one interfused mass of automatism” (Williams 1996: 2).

The experimental techniques and devices employed by Williams in his plastic theatre are likely meant to make the familiar strange. At the beginning of *The Glass Menagerie*, this is exemplified by the character of Tom Wingfield, who is the prototype of the playwright himself: “TOM: Yes, I have tricks in my pocket, I have things up my sleeve. But I am the opposite of a stage magician. He gives you illusion that has an appearance of truth. I give you truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (ibid.: 2).

Contrary to Brecht, Williams precludes his characters’ “conquest of a world of reality that [they] were somehow set apart from” (Williams, in Devlin 1986: 47). None of his characters is able to cope with the challenges of everydayness and, hence, they all seek refuge in their own worlds of dreams, to such an extent that “illusion itself becomes subjective reality” (Smith-Howard and Heintzelman 2005: 89). However, as Lillian R. Furst points out, in *The Glass Menagerie* Williams “destroy[s] the illusion at will by calling attention to it as an illusion” (Furst 1979: 27).

Due to the playwright’s particular consideration for symbols, which he regarded as “the natural language of drama” (Williams 1978: 66), his “plastic theatre” is not bound to merely visual structures. As Esther M. Jackson observes, its “sensuous symbols also embrace sound patterns: words, music, and aural effects” (Jackson 1965: 99). Although Williams found himself “more and more pleasurably involved in this new form, undisguised self-revelation” (Williams 2006: xviii), it should be stressed that for him, “expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a

closer approach to truth” (Williams 1996: xvii). The author was deeply convinced that “art is made out of symbols the way your body is made out of vital tissue” (Williams 1978: 45). Further, with reference to the subject, he explicates: “Some critics resent my symbols, but let me ask, what would I do without them? Without my symbols I might still be employed by the International Shoe Co. in St. Louis. Let me go further and say that unless the events of a life are translated into significant meanings, then life holds no more revelation than death, and possibly even less” (ibid.: 142). Actually, an important reason why *The Glass Menagerie* has not received much critical attention in terms of symbolism is related to its plot, which closely mirrors the actual events of the playwright’s life (Leverich 1995: 129).

However, the comprehension of the meaning of the symbolic world of Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie*, “built into the structure of existence” (Bigsby 2000: 38) and presenting “truth in the pleasant disguise of illusion” (Williams 1996: 2), is not an easy task to pursue and therefore poses a hermeneutic problem. In this respect, as Ricoeur maintains, to interpret is “to penetrate the disguise and thereby to render it useless” (Ricoeur 1967: 16). The current paper is an endeavour to explore symbols as a key to understanding the world of *The Glass Menagerie* within the frame of hermeneutics offered by Paul Ricoeur.

Ricoeur’s hermeneutic ideas are, on the one hand, close to the philosophy of culture (*History and Truth*, 1955); on the other hand, they concern the interpretation of discursive texts and analysis of narrative poetics (*Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, 1976); the

three-volume *Time and Narrative*, 1983–85). He proposed a model of interpretation, which, reconnecting with the original Greek meaning of the term, emphasized the discovery of hidden meanings in the symbols of ordinary language. For Ricoeur, the “meditation on symbols starts right out with language and with the meaning that is always there already” (Ricoeur 1960: 196). The philosopher regards symbols as “the manifestation in the sensible—in imagination, gestures and feelings—of a further reality, the expression of the depth that both shows and hides itself” (Ricoeur 2008: 7). As such, symbols possess the power to rejuvenate the language and animate the entire hermeneutic quest. Ricoeur holds the view that “we must think not *behind* the symbols, but starting from symbols, *according* to symbols, that their substance is indestructible, that they constitute the *revealing* substrate of speech which lives among men” (Ricoeur 2004: 259). Thus, the hermeneutic task is to disclose the multiple significance of the symbol as a “structure of meaning in which a direct, primary, literal sense designates in addition another sense which is indirect, secondary, and figurative and which can be apprehended only through the first” (Ricoeur 2004: xiv). Here it is important to consider the difference between the philosopher’s initial definition of hermeneutics as limited to an interpretation of the hidden meaning of symbols, and the later one which “extends the work of interpretation to all phenomena of a textual order and which focuses less on the notion of hidden meaning than on that of indirect reference” (Ricoeur 1994: 33).

In his study *Symbolism of Evil* (1960), which marks the turn of his Husserlian phenomenology towards the hermeneutics of symbols, Ricoeur elaborates on a general

theory of symbols worked out in the early years of his philosophical career. Consider: “The world of symbols is not a tranquil and reconciled world; every symbol is iconoclastic in comparison with some other symbol, just as every symbol left to itself tends to thicken, to become solidified in an idolatry. It is necessary, then, to participate in the struggle, in the dynamics, in which the symbolism itself becomes prey to a spontaneous hermeneutics that seeks to transcend it. It is only by participating in this dynamics that comprehension can reach the strictly critical dimension of exegesis and become a hermeneutic; but then one must abandon the position—or rather, the exile—of the remote and disinterested spectator, in order to appropriate in each case a particular symbolism” (Ricoeur 1967: 354).

Though deeply convinced that there is “nowhere a symbolic language without hermeneutics” (ibid.: 350), the philosopher claims that the interpretation of symbols is “worthy to be called hermeneutics only insofar as it is a part of self-understanding and of the understanding of being, outside this effort of appropriating meaning, it is nothing” (Ricoeur 2008: 30).

The Ricoeurian concept of “appropriation” denotes a process by which the reader “makes his own” what was, because of the distance between the writer and the reader, initially alien. Ultimately, what an interpreter appropriates is “the proposed world which is *not behind the text*, as a hidden intention would be, but *in front of* it, as that which the work unfolds, discovers, reveals” (Ricoeur 1991: 87). Thus, to appropriate the meaning of a text is to actualize, in the present, the possible world it proposes. The philosopher holds that, “What must be interpreted in a text is a proposed world which I could inhabit,” and that namely

this capacity of world-disclosure yielded by texts is the most significant feature of hermeneutics (Ricoeur 1991: 490). Above all, a hermeneutic quest is “animated by one’s willingness to listen, and is characterised by a respect for the symbol as a revelation of the sacred” (Ricoeur 1994: 6). Hence, in the process of interpretation, the symbol “unfolds as a horizon of possibilities” (Ricoeur 1967: 351).

In agreement with Ricoeur, the historian of religion Mircea Eliade provides valuable ideas on the interpretation of religious symbols.

Religious symbols are capable of revealing a modality of the real or a structure of the World that is not evident on the level of immediate experience.... An essential characteristic of religious symbolism is its multivalence, its capacity to express simultaneously a number of meanings whose continuity is not evident on the plane of immediate experience.... This capacity of religious symbolism to reveal a multitude of structurally coherent meanings has an important consequence. The symbol is thus able to reveal a perspective in which heterogeneous realities are susceptible of articulation into a whole or even into a “system” (Eliade 2012: 84–87).

Such studies as Eliade’s had an immediate relevance to literary criticism, and provided Northrop Frye with a solid basis for claiming that without proper apprehension of symbols, it is impossible to deal adequately with contemporary literature (Frye 2006: 291). The critic argues that “the poet does not equate a word with a meaning; he establishes the functions or powers of words,” since “the understanding of their meaning begins in a complete surrender of the mind and senses to the impact of the work as a whole, and proceeds through the effort to unite the symbols

toward a simultaneous perception of the unity of the structure” (Frye 1990: 75).

Tennessee Williams distilled symbols out of his own experience, transferred them into his works, and used them as signifiers for what pulled his heartstrings the most. Since symbolic expression is a process that required a great deal of consideration and selectivity, the playwright muses upon it in one of his essays: “Symbols and their meanings must be arrived at through a period of time which is often a long one, requiring much patience, but if you wait out this period of time, if you permit it to clear as naturally as a sky after a storm, it will reward you, finally, with a puzzle which is still puzzling but which whether you fathom it or not, still has the beautifully disturbing sense of truth, as much of that ambiguous quality as we are permitted to know in all our seasons and travels and places of short stay on this risky planet” (Williams 2009: 146).

This is where the Christian symbols come into play with regard to Williams’s life and works, helping him to explore the spiritual terrain. The spiritual yearning which the playwright conveys in his plays with the help of symbols can be traced back to his childhood. According to John Lahr, Williams “grew up in an environment of fluency, in which Biblical imperative, Puritan platitude, classical allusion, patrician punctilio, and Negro homily were tumbled together in a rich linguistic brew” (Lahr, in Williams 2009: xi). The religious upbringing made an impact on all the family members, but Tom (Tennessee) was especially susceptible and, therefore, seemed to absorb most of it. As he maintains, “it may seem ingenuous to have religious feeling to a lot of people but to me it seems necessary” (Williams, in Devlin 1986: 127).

Indeed, throughout his life the playwright confronted many spiritual tests which caused him much suffering and pain. Thus, Williams created dramatic characters to depict his own passage from spiritual innocence to carnal self-awareness. This transition was taken heavily, but he managed to stay truthful to his religious background, confessing that he did, in fact, go “from puritanical shackles to, well, complete profligacy” (ibid.: 369). Despite the fact that the author ultimately abandoned his religious practices, it is clear that throughout his career he yearned for the purity he felt he had forsaken. In his search for God and the paradise lost, religion became a kind of language that defined the combination of the most substantial elements in his work, including isolation, desire, and atonement (ibid.: 375).

The strongest childhood influence which sheds light on the interaction between Tennessee Williams’s artistry and his life is that of his family. In *The Glass Menagerie*, which is an autobiographical “memory play,” he transmutes the torments of his personal experience into a sensuous work of art. Elia Kazan, one of the most honoured and influential theater directors, commented that “everything in [Williams’s] life is in his plays, and everything in his plays is in his life” (Kazan, in Spoto 1997: 171). As the playwright admits, it was the impact of Marcel Proust that enabled him to transform his autobiography into an artistic metaphor: “Within the limits of each, the writers of our times can use the method of Proust, that of transposing the contents of his own life into a creative synthesis of it. Only in this way can a writer justify his life and work and I think all serious writers know this and their serious audience has a sense of it, too” (Williams 1978: 126).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, memory “takes a lot of poetic licence. It omits some details: others are exaggerated, according to the emotional value of the articles it touches, for memory is seated predominantly in the heart” (Williams 1996: 1). Indeed, the world of this play focuses on the past, as narrated by the protagonist and reflected by the specific music from the time remembered and the slides that reveal certain emotions, regrets, fears and other recollections of the characters. Williams was particularly interested in details which had a specific emotional value, both personal and universal. In this respect, *The Glass Menagerie* confirms this idea of Ricoeur: “Affectivity is still a mode of thought in its widest sense. To feel is still to think, though feeling no longer represents objectivity, but rather reveals existence. Affectivity uncovers [man’s] bodily existence as the other pole of all the dense and heavy existence of the world” (Ricoeur 2007: 86).

The musical interludes recurring between each episode of *The Glass Menagerie* add to the atmosphere of nostalgia, which its author considered to be “the first condition of the play” (Williams 1996: xvii). In the play, the past is actively reinvestigated as an episodic structure that is based on flashbacks and gives an impression of recall. The plot also reveals the power of memory over human life and consciousness. Consequently, as the French philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch insightfully notices, “the mysterious and profoundly obscure fact of having been” is a human being’s “viaticum for all eternity” (Jankélévitch 1974: 275).

To use Ricoeur’s wording, the memories of the Wingfields “operate in the wake of imagination” (Ricoeur 2004: 5) and are continuously revived by a “larger-than-life-size photograph” of “gallantly smil-

ing” Mr. Wingfield, “a telephone man who fell in love with long distances” (Williams 1996: 2). Tom Wingfield, both a character in and the narrator of the play, is not the only person haunted by memories. His sister Laura’s attachment to the old records left to her by her father as “a reminder of him” (ibid.: 7) and her beloved collection of glass animals turn into a crippling force that prevents her from searching for a real life in the present or the future. Amanda’s self-centered entrapment in the memories of her bygone youth and her nostalgia for the idealised Southern past leaves her incapable of adjusting to reality and the present situation of her family.

In order to understand the meaning of the symbols employed in *The Glass Menagerie*, the reader/interpreter should not assume a remote or disinterested position, but place himself/herself in “the circle of hermeneutics which can be stated bluntly: you must understand in order to believe, but you must believe in order to understand” (Ricoeur 2004: 294). This circle is alive, and stimulates the reader during the process of interpretation. Although, on the surface, *The Glass Menagerie* appears to be a plain, short episode from a life story, the reader/spectator should not stop at this surface-level position, but rather seriously consider the symbols used in the drama. In the course of the play, a number of images acquire a symbolic, Christian resonance. It is noteworthy to mention here that each character deciphers each symbol in a different way. The symbols provide the reader/spectator with insights into the interior worlds of the characters. Alongside the characters’ symbols, there is an overall symbolism in *The Glass Menagerie*. Symbols undoubtedly play a crucial role in illuminating the drama’s theme and conveying its message.

The glass menagerie, which is the controlling symbol of the play and is also reflected in the title, traces back to the playwright’s memories of a collection of glass ornaments possessed by his sister Rose when the family lived in St. Louis:

On the shelves around [Rose’s] room she collected a large assortment of little glass articles, of which she was particularly fond. Eventually, the room took on a light and delicate appearance in spite of the lack of outside illumination, and it became the only room in the house that I found pleasant to enter. When I left home a number of years later, it was this room that I recalled most vividly and poignantly when looking back on our home life in St. Louis. Particularly the little glass ornaments on the shelves. They were mostly little glass animals. By poetic association they came to represent, in my memory, all the softest emotions that belong to recollection of things past. They stood for all the small and tender things that relieve the austere pattern of life and make it endurable to the sensitive (Williams 2009: 68).

It is therefore not by accident that in the play, the glass menagerie symbolises the unique and enticing, yet fragile and illusory world of Laura, whose prototype is Williams’s sister Rose. According to him, Laura is “like a piece of translucent glass touched by light” (Williams 2006: 30). Glass is transparent, but, when the source of light is directed on it properly, it glows in a full rainbow of colors. Though “old-fashioned” and “terribly shy” (ibid.: 45, 28) with strangers, Laura becomes a source of inexplicable enchantment to those who choose to approach her peculiar glass-like world more closely. Consider Jim, another character in the drama:

You know—you’re—well—very different! Surprisingly different from anyone else I know! ...Has anyone told you that you were

pretty? ...Well, you are! In a very different way from anyone else. And all the nicer because of the differences, too (ibid.: 56).

Although in his production notes Williams insists that “the stage should be kept dim throughout the play to create the atmosphere of memory,” he nevertheless specifies that the most distinct stream of light should be directed on the figure of Laura:

The light upon LAURA should be distinct from the others, having a peculiar pristine clarity such as light used in early religious portraits of female saints or madonnas. A certain correspondence to light in religious paintings, such as El Greco’s, where the figures are radiant in atmosphere that is relatively dusky, could be effectively used throughout the play (Williams 2006: xix).

Throughout his life and especially during his trips abroad, Williams demonstrated his interest in Christian art and later on referred to his plays as being “full of Christian symbols. Deeply, deeply Christian” (Williams, in Devlin 1986: 334). Not surprisingly, the use of this particular lighting for Laura reflects his knowledge of Christian iconography and art. As Nancy M. Tischler admits, it is “impossible to understand the full meaning of [Williams’s] plays without reference to Christian symbolism which permeates them” (Tischler 2000: 74). By surrounding Laura with light of a quality that is traditionally reserved for saints in religious art, the dramatist attempts to idealise the prototype of his beloved sister Rose. It is due to the innocence of her inner world that Laura stands out as “radiant” in the “relatively dusky” atmosphere of the play (Williams 2006: xix). Such an intention becomes obvious when light is centered on her figure, sometimes even in contradiction to the apparent center of the act.

In *The Glass Menagerie*, the two symbolic plants, the rose and the jonquil, are emblems of the female characters. The nuances of the symbolic language of flowers are evoked as a means of communication, in which the rose is used to emphasise the theme or character type. According to William Stewart, “more than forty diverse sentiments can be unveiled by selecting particular colours and types of roses” (Stewart 1998: 336).

The symbolic meaning of the rose varies in relation to its colour and the context. For instance, in Freemasonry, roses symbolise a guiding principle; the three Freemason roses indicate abiding love, life and light (ibid.). Though all three of these qualities are evoked in *The Glass Menagerie*, the most important of them is love, since the rose is not only the name of a flower, but also the name of Williams’s beloved sister, on whom the character of Laura is based.

A closer inspection of the name “Blue Roses” provides a key to understanding Laura’s inner world. In the play, “Blue Roses” is a high-school nickname given to Laura by Jim. Consider the following dialogue:

LAURA: He used to call me—Blue Roses.

Image: Blue roses.

AMANDA: Why did he call you such a name as that?

LAURA: When I had that attack of pleurosis—he asked me what was the matter when I came back. I said pleurosis—he thought that I said Blue Roses! So that’s what he always called me after that. Whenever he saw me, he’d holler, “Hello, Blue Roses” (ibid.: 13).

By changing the poetic cliché of describing a rose as red or white, Williams constructs an original image of a blue rose, thus emphasising Laura’s distinctiveness

and glamour. Blue is the colour “of heaven, of purity, of truth, of the ideal,” and in Christian symbolism, blue is related to the Virgin Mary (Ferber 2001: 31). Since Laura is “radiant” with some mystery (Williams 1996: xix), the rose attributed to her implicitly appeals to the Medieval tradition, which represented the Virgin Mary as the Mystic Rose (Ferber 2001: 174). This association is partly derived from the “Rose of Sharon,” which appears in *The Song of Songs* 3:1. Another implication may be found through the Christian image of the “rose without thorns” (ibid.: 176) applied to the Virgin Mary, which allows Laura to be characterised as an innocent, tender, and obedient girl.

Blue roses do not exist in reality, which is stressed by Laura herself (“Blue is wrong for roses”; Williams 1996: 27). Understanding this, Jim explains that he gave her this nickname because he finds her beautiful “in a very different way from anyone else” (ibid.: 56). She is not “common” like the crowds (“one hundred times one thousand”), but unique—a blue rose among “weeds” (Williams 1996: 56); yet unreal, impractical, and unable to meet the challenges of real life. The significance of Jim’s words is emphasised by the slide with blue roses on it, which is a clear expression of Williams’s double theatrical language—verbal and plastic (scenic). On the other hand, the reader/spectator discovers a very inventive movement structured by an original spoonerism (pleurosis—Blue Roses), which offers an important interpretative suggestion: the movement from the context of disease to the context of beauty, idealism, and rebirth.

Laura’s acceptance of the nickname, which sounds very poetic and resembles a pseudonym, means that through her attrac-

tion to Jim as a representative of the real, natural world, she finds the courage to step out of the comfortable space of illusion. As Bert Cardullo observes, Laura’s nickname symbolises “her yearning for both ideal and mystical beauty and spiritual or romantic love” (Cardullo 2007: 66). It is noteworthy to mention here that before Williams, the image of a blue flower was used by the early German Romanticist Novalis in his novel *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* (1802) as a symbol of longing for complete emotional and artistic fulfillment. In this respect, it also echoes Maurice Maeterlinck’s fairy play *The Blue Bird* (1908), in which a beautiful blue bird leads children through a garden of bliss.

According to Derek Clifford, in late Medieval European literature and visual arts, the enclosed garden or *hortus conclusus* became a specific emblematic attribute associated with Our Lady, who was often depicted in or near a walled garden—thus illustrating the doctrine of her perpetual virginity and her Immaculate Conception (Clifford 1963: 17). Tennessee Williams seems to invoke this motif intentionally in order to create a spiritual basis for Laura’s character, who prefers spending time in the company of exotic flowers to participating in typing classes at Rubicam’s business college: “Lately I’ve been spending most of my afternoons in the Jewel-Box, the big glass-house where they raise the tropical flowers” (Williams 1996: 11). Due to the “fragile unearthly prettiness” (ibid.: 39) of her enclosed world, Laura can also be symbolically referred to as a *hortus conclusus*. Like the tropical flowers which can only grow in an artificial environment, Laura clings to the artificial security of her illusory world, represented by the symbol of the glass menagerie.

Due to its spiritual signification, the rose is a recurrent symbol in Williams's other works. His poem *Of Roses* reveals the same symbolic meaning that was attributed to Laura's character in *The Glass Menagerie*. Consider:

In the confine of gardens or grown wild
they [all roses] are the crystal vision of a
child,
unstained by craft, undisciplined by grief,
sweet as child's laughter, and as wild and
brief.

(Williams 2002: 217)

In his other poem, *A Liturgy of Roses*, the author gives a poetic meditation on the tragic fate of his sister Rose in relation to the liturgical feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin:

While moving through rooms of dual pur-
poses
and concealed appurtenances
to the heart of abundance from which flow
eternally roses,

Roses, all roses, the immense impartiality
of all God
and all roses,
orifice emptying, never emptied of roses.

Because you are tolerant only of those who
have roses,
Your eyes including the roses of others in
bouquets of your own....

(Williams 2002: 116–117)

The parallels between Williams's characters in *The Glass Menagerie* and the Biblical figures are quite overt. By artistically tinkering with the religious image discussed above, Williams succeeds in highlighting an ironically emphasised contrast between Laura and her mother Amanda, who, when disappointed, "gets that awful suffering look on the face, like the picture of Jesus's mother in the museum!" (Williams 1996:

11). Amanda's rigidly expressed, traditional religious attitudes arise from her sentimentality and egocentricity rather than living faith. This can be traced in Scene Four, where the mother totally misunderstands her son's romanticised notion of instinct:

TOM: Man is by instinct a lover, a hunter,
a fighter....

AMANDA: Man is by instinct! Don't
quote instinct to me! Instinct is something
that people have got away from! It belongs to
animals! Christian adults don't want it!

TOM: What do Christian adults want,
then, Mother?

AMANDA: Superior things! Things of
the mind and the spirit! (Williams 1996: 26)

By sincerely wishing the best for her family and simultaneously insisting on the terms they are supposed to appropriate, she not only finds herself "bewildered by life" (ibid.: 7) but also, to put it in Ricoeur's wording, "corrupts the experience of value, which is no longer an impetus but a stagnation" (Ricoeur 2007: 83) for her adult children. Consider Amanda: "My devotion has made me a witch and so I make myself hateful to my children" (Williams 1996: 17).

However, this duality of Amanda's character cannot be reconciled. She strives to meet the spiritual standards she was raised with, but also proclaims her merciless drive to survive at all costs. Her corporeal nature is revealed through the reminiscences of her young days, spent at her parents' home in Blue Mountain, where gentlemen callers kept knocking on her door: "Invitations poured in—parties all over the Delta! Evening dances!—Afternoons, long long rides! Picnics—lovely!" (ibid.: 41). The jonquil is interwoven into the memories of a very special spring for Amanda—the spring when she was being wooed: "So lovely, that

country in May.—All lacy with dogwood, literally flooded with jonquils. That was the spring I had the craze for jonquils. Jonquils became an absolute obsession” (ibid.). According to Kate Greenaway, the jonquil may symbolically be linked to Amanda’s “desire for return of affection” (Greenaway 2012: 24). This is vividly expressed by the “girlish frock of yellowed voile” she used to wear for her gentlemen callers, and which she intentionally chooses to wear again to welcome Jim (Williams 2006: 41). The “bunch of jonquils” enhances the effect of the yellow colour of Amanda’s dress, which now ironically reveals the impossibility of bringing back the past. Through the image of the jonquil, the playwright discloses the irreconcilable duality of the carnal and the spiritual in the character of Amanda. She is in love with herself and not reconciled to her aging and her past, which cannot grow into the present of her children. Moreover, to her son Tom, the glorious past embodied in the “girlish” garment of the aging figure of Amanda looks like a caricature, and he is “distinctly shocked at her appearance” (ibid.: 38).

Like the symbol of the blue roses, the unicorn also reveals Laura’s uniqueness. The reader/spectator may see a parallel between the unicorns who, as Jim reasons, are “extinct in the modern world” and “sort of lonesome” (Williams 2006: 64), and Laura, who is different, lonely, and unable to adapt to the real world. On the other hand, the unicorn is also Laura’s dream of an ideal husband. By showing the glass unicorn to Jim, she symbolically opens up the door into her enclosed life and invites him into wooing. Yet she does not forget to admonish: “Oh, be careful—if you breathe, it breaks!” (ibid.: 53). Jim’s kiss may be seen as a breath of new life for Laura. She is,

however, afraid of leaving her comfortable prison of illusion and discovering a new reality. As the play proceeds, the destiny of the glass unicorn becomes symbolic of Laura’s own fate when, in Scene Seven, during her dance with Jim, the unicorn’s horn breaks off and it becomes “just like all the other horses” (ibid.: 55). Although the “novelty of her emotions” (ibid.: 56) dissolves Laura’s shyness, it also causes a quake to her glass world:

She bites her lip which was trembling and then bravely smiles. She opens her hand again on the broken glass ornament. Then she gently takes [Jim’s] hand and raises it level with her own. She carefully places the unicorn in the palm of his hand, then pushes his fingers closed upon it (ibid.: 59).

This accident may be viewed as Laura’s symbolic liberation from the illusion she had about herself and the world. Here the unicorn transforms into a symbol of illusion, which easily and painfully breaks when confronted with harsh reality. The breaking of the unicorn’s horn is symbolic of Laura’s vanished ideals about Jim: he is not exceptional, but similar to other men, and belongs to the modern world. It may also be seen as emblematic of their separation. Now, without its horn, the unicorn is more appropriate for Jim than for Laura, therefore she gives him the broken glass ornament as a “souvenir” (ibid.), symbolic of all that has been taken from her and broken in her.

The presence of the unicorn symbol in the play is particularly significant, as it allows Williams to approach myth as a “secondary symbol,” thus initiating hermenutic reflection (Ricoeur 1994: 87). In *Physiologus*, a didactic collection of tales about animals, birds, and fantastic creatures, written by an anonymous author around the second century AD, the description of each

animal is followed by a story from which the moral and symbolic qualities of the animal are derived (Scott 1998: 431). Here the unicorn is characterised as “a small animal, like a kid, but surprisingly fierce for his size, with one very sharp horn on his head, and no hunter is able to catch him by force. Yet there is a trick by which he is taken. Men lead a virgin to the place where he most resorts and leave her there alone. As soon as he sees this virgin he runs and lays his head in her lap. She fondles him and he falls asleep. The hunters then approach and capture him and lead him to the palace of the king” (Shepard 2012).

In *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams combines his experience of mythical consciousness with Christian allusions. He artistically recreates the myth of the unicorn as a plastic symbol which is able to engage parallel or underlying resemblances, revealing both the symbolic meaning and the playwright’s response to it. Moreover, as the symbol embodies many aspects of meaning, it also has the capacity to evoke various associations and interpretations in the reader/spectator.

It is interesting to note that descriptions of unicorns are varied, thus opening new horizons for interpretation. Since unicorns were mostly portrayed as white animals, they soon assumed the symbolic qualities of that colour and were seen as a symbol of innocence and purity, and, in some interpretations, the unicorn became the emblem of Christ:

[The] horn [of the unicorn] is said to signify the unity of Christ and the Father; its fierceness and defiance of the hunter are to remind us that neither Principalities nor Powers nor Thrones were able to control the Messiah against His will; its small stature is a symbol of Christ’s humility and its likeness to a kid of His association with sinful men. The virgin is held to represent the Virgin

Mary and the huntsman is the Holy Spirit acting through the Angel Gabriel. Taken as a whole, then, the story of the unicorn’s capture typifies the Incarnation of Christ (ibid.).

In his study *Unicorns and Other Magical Creatures* (2005), John Hamilton enlarges upon the literary treatment of the unicorn, underscoring a peculiar moment, i.e., that of the Annunciation: “In the primary version of the hunt, the virgin came to represent Mary, the only one holy enough to induce the white unicorn, Christ, to dwell with men, obviously evocative of the Incarnation generally. As time progressed, it came to represent a specific point in the Incarnation: its inception, the Annunciation” (Hamilton 2005: 85). This particular point which Hamilton observes is a recurrent motif in *The Glass Menagerie*. First, in Scene Five, according to Williams’s commentary, the legend on screen displays in bold letters “ANNUNCIATION” and, secondly, after Tom reveals that he has invited a gentleman caller to dinner, the caption “THE ANNUNCIATION IS CELEBRATED WITH MUSIC” appears (Williams 1996: 29–31). The musical accompaniment ironically implies the supposed sacrality of the moment. Like James Joyce, who used the religious term “epiphany” as a symbol of a particular spiritual state in a secular context, Williams employs the Christian liturgical terms in the profane context of *The Glass Menagerie*.

At the beginning of the play, Tom treats Jim as an emissary and adds: “Since I have a poet’s weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for” (ibid.: 2). Thus, Jim is seen as the symbolic saviour of Laura and of the Wingfield family in general. Scene Three includes a comment about the Wingfields

waiting for Jim that insinuates this analogy: “An evening at home rarely passed without some allusion to this image, this spectre, this hope. Even when he wasn’t mentioned, his presence hung...” (ibid.: 14). Before his arrival, the interior of the apartment is lit in a “delicate lemony light,” and new white curtains are hung as a ritualistic preparation for the greeting of a special guest who, in Tom’s words, “seemed to move in a continual spotlight” (ibid.: 38).

The significance of Laura’s meeting with Jim is intensified by particular scenic lighting effects. After a devout change of clothing, Laura, now in a light-colored dress, acquires a saint-like look: “A fragile, unearthly prettiness has come out in LAURA: she is like a piece of translucent light, given a momentary radiance, not actual, not lasting” (ibid.: 39). In an attempt to ritualize the moment, Williams employs the images of altar candles and the candelabrum, thereby alluding to Christian liturgy. Jim appears like a beam of light in her life, lighting her “inwardly with altar candles” (ibid.: 61); in fact, he states that “candlelight is my favourite kind of light” (ibid.: 53). After the electricity disappears, Jim is handed the “old candelabrum that used to be on the altar at the church” (ibid.) to keep Laura company and dissipate her loneliness. The symbolic function of candles and the candelabrum, which are suggestive of spiritual light and salvation (Cirlot 2002: 37–38), is significant in that the playwright operates through the symbolic codes in the hypothetical plane of Christian tradition. Yet, within the context of the play, the candle is also symbolic of the temporality of human life.

It is important to emphasize that the symbolism of the play becomes especially complex towards its end, when the previously introduced symbols are either elabo-

rated anew or transformed. Moreover, the consideration of myth itself is versatile: “When the modern mind attempts to understand medieval Christian metaphors like these, and indeed when we struggle to isolate one meaning from several that have been combined in a single symbol to express multiple images of thoughts simultaneously, we are obliged to abandon our natural inclination to search for simple logic and even, occasionally, to suspend disbelief” (Cavallo 1998: 24).

To conclude, through its themes and imagery the Bible undoubtedly influences literature and urges the readers to take into consideration how dense and powerful symbolic meanings can be. Literature interposes various conceptual implications on the profane and sacred aspects of life. The same could be said of *The Glass Menagerie*, where Williams employs reflections of religious thought and transforms Christian symbols in order to create a correlation between the spiritual and his artistic vision of human endeavour. The symbols employed set the tone of the play, as they are thematically tuned to the overall narrative of the drama. Moreover, Williams’s artistic attempt to employ Christian symbols and liturgical terms in the profane plane allows for a better understanding of his characters, arriving at a new conception of the manner in which the religious and artistic dimensions closely intertwine through the profoundness of the symbolic implications.

Above all, Tennessee Williams’s *The Glass Menagerie* reveals that, for the playwright, the life on stage was a symbol of the human condition, rather than a mere range of individual experiences. The appropriation of the symbolic world of the play discloses a universal truth—that human life is rooted

in mystery, and therefore cannot be reduced to mere case histories. In following the hermeneutic route proposed by Ricoeur, the interpreter is incited to reconsider whether his/her own life is not being nourished by illusion, which provides a human being with pseudo-security and simultaneously

prevents him/her from encountering the truth about himself/herself and the world. The play is a powerful manifestation of the fact that liberation from the bonds of illusion is never painless—and yet, it is the only way towards “an enlarged self” (Ricoeur 1994: 143).

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SIMBOLIO APROPRIACIJA KAIP PJSĖS PASAULIO ATVĖRIMAS TENNESSEE'IO WILLIAMSO *STIKLINIAME ŽVĖRYNE*

Santrauka

Straipsnyje, remiantis Paulio Ricoeuro hermeneutikos principais, analizuojamas simbolis kaip tam tikras raktas, atveriantis Tennessee'io Williamso pjesės *Stiklinis žvėrynas* (1945) pasaulį. Apžvelgiamos įvairios simbolio koncepcijos, svarstoma religijos įtaka rašytojo gyvenimui ir kūrybai. Daugiausia dėmesio skiriama krikščioniškųjų simbolių analizei, kuri leidžia atskleisti savitą sakralių bei

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PRZYWŁASZCZENIE SYMBOLU JAKO KLUCZ DO ŚWIATA UTWORU DRAMATYCZNEGO W *SZKLANEJ MENAŻERII* TENNESSEE WILLIAMSA

Streszczenie

Artykuł zawiera analizę symbolu jako klucza do zrozumienia świata sztuki Tennessee Williamsa *Szklana menażeria* (1945) w hermeneutycznym ujęciu Paula Ricoeura. Przedstawiono różne koncepcje symbolu, omówiono wpływ religii na życie i twórczość pisarza. Najwięcej uwagi poświęcono analizie symboli religijnych, pozwalającej ukazać

profaniškų kontekstą sąveiką. Išanalizavus kūrinį, darytina išvada, kad autorius, pasitelkdamas krikščioniškus simbolius, remiasi Šventuoju Raštu kaip žanrine atmintimi ir stilizuoja biblinį pasaulėvaizdį. Varijuodamas skirtingus religinius motyvus, jis kuria religinę ir meninę personažų viziją. Bibliniai vaizdiniai motyvuoja ir formuluoja pjesės naratyvo struktūrą. Biblinės prasmės akcentai atsiskleidžia rožės simboliu, kurį galima interpretuoti kaip Mergelės Marijos simbolį, o vienaragis sietinas su liturgine Apreiškimo švente.

REIKŠMINIAI ŽODŽIAI: simbolis, hermeneutika, apropriacija, teksto pasaulis, religija, mitas.

związki między religią i literaturą. Analiza utworu pozwala na sformułowanie wniosku, że autor, wykorzystując symbole religijne, opiera się na Piśmie Świętym jako źródle pamięci archetypowej. Wykorzystując różne motywy religijne, konstruuje światopogląd biblijny, tworzy religijną i artystyczną wizję postaci. Obrazy biblijne są inspiracją w kreowaniu struktury narracyjnej sztuki. Znaczenie biblijne niesie w sobie symbol róży, który można interpretować jako symbol Najświętszej Marii Panny, zaś jednorożec symbolizuje Jezusa Chrystusa i jest wiązany z Jego inkarnacją.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: symbol, hermeneutyka, przywłaszczenie, świat tekstu, religia, mit.

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