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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to offer a Modernist-based perspective on teaching Eugene O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949). Beginning with a brief theoretical excursus, the paper first outlines the most important features of Modernist discourse and Modernist drama. The second section of the paper discusses how Modernist themes and motifs (the sense of fragmentation, the burden of the past, moral ambiguity, social integration, painting the familiar, and the tragicomedy of cynicism) can be applied to teaching the afore-mentioned plays. The paper concludes by considering, in the light of possible objections, some consequences of our argument: it shows that Miller's, Williams', and O'Neil's plays do stand on their own as works of art but they also operate as catalysts to offer both students and teachers new interpretative and analytical opportunities.

**Introduction**

We write as a teacher and a student who have found that the Modernist approach to American drama can function heuristically to complicate and enrich students' readings of Eugene O'Neil's *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1941), Tennessee Williams’ *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1949) and to encourage students to take a more reflexive approach to these plays. We believe that reading and discussing the plays from this perspective can help students question the commonly accepted interpretations they might be tempted to reach for and understand the complexities that lie beneath their surface. This approach can also help students develop new insights on the intricacies of human condition.

*Long Day's Journey into Night, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Death of a Salesman* are plays, relatively popular with students, that can appear deceptively easy to read, analyze, and interpret, perhaps because they depict what they depict in an easily understandable and realistic way. Students who engage with the plays only on the superficial level tend to identify, for example, Blanche DuBois as the "bad sister and easy woman," Jamie and Edmund Tyrone as the "hopeless alcoholics," and Willy Loman as the "bad husband, father, and salesman," taking their cues from the plot or the tone of the plays. When students are asked to discuss the plays through the Modernist lens, they are able to move away from formalist reading strategies to engage critically with the
plays and to explore other interpretative possibilities. A related problem concerns the plays' resolution, in which, for example, Blanche DuBois is punished for her meddling into Stella and Stanley's marriage by being sent to an asylum. Students tend to draw a simplistic moral lesson from the fact that Stella and Stanley, standing united through their love, sexual attraction, and a new born baby, win over intrusive and corrupt Blanche rather than to interrogate the play's development and elements critically and carefully to engage in a more nuanced reading, which can be achieved if the play is approached through Modernist analytical categories. This nuanced reading can thus begin with a brief theoretical excursus on what Modernism is and how the salient features of the Modernist discourse can be used in teaching the afore-mentioned plays.

**About Modernism: A Very Short Intro**

As a literary trend, Modernism stands for the break with tradition, the new outlook on the world in general, the redefinition of accepted value and moral systems, the consideration of the "here and now" the authors find themselves in as opposed to the grandiose narratives of the past time periods. This new outlook on the world is perhaps best exemplified by Ezra Pound's "imperative: 'Make it new'" (qtd. in Lathbury 5). Despite change being usually a desired occurrence and at least proverbially strived for, Modernist literature displays a not-always rational fear of change and an unyielding reluctance to let go of the crumbling past which used to define us but is now a burden holding back an individual psychologically, emotionally, and socially. People who were raised to believe in a set of particular doctrines, philosophies and traditions found themselves in a world they could not comprehend anymore and, even more frustratingly, their rationales, which were based on those doctrines and traditions, could not be applied to understanding why this change had occurred. Consequently, this incomprehensibility made itself apparent in their works: "As the nineteenth-century synthesis shattered, as the tradition collapsed and the underlying value systems that had shaped centuries of art were challenged or dissolved, the whole basis of artistic enterprise had, it seemed, to be re-created" (Ruland and Bradbury 240).

The reasons for change and re-creation are manifold, penetrating every layer of human existence, and as such cannot not be approached from a single perspective, field of research, or point of authority, but have to be considered as a cumulative result of historical, political, economic, social, philosophical, and other factors. As the theoretical
disciplines in all these fields had to change in order to grasp reality, so did the arts as well, if they were to approach the scattered truth and piece it together. As George Parker Anderson puts it:

Writers who sought to find ways to explore this evolving sensibility pioneered the experimental literary approaches associated with literary Modernism—ambiguity and multiple interpretations of events; the use of myth as a structural device; the sophisticated probing of the unconscious and subconscious of the individual psyche; the incorporation of dreamlike or surreal sequences; experimentation with forms, styles, voices, and the use of language; and techniques such as interior monologues, stream of consciousness, fragmentation, flashbacks, and other manipulations of time. (64)

Another point to draw students’ attention to is the fact that not only is Modernism hard to define in the sense of its features; it is also ambiguous in terms of the time period it dominates. For some, the turn of the 20th century represents the point where it all started, or rather ended according to the modernist sentiment; for most, however, the beginning of World War I signifies this historical turn. The Great War redefined America's place and role in the world on the political, social, ideological, and economic planes, changing it from the comfortable indifference of isolationism of the pre-war years to the uncertainty of being just one cog in the global machine. This change naturally necessitated the shift of the American collective frame of mind as well, but since these new circumstances proved to be in a complete opposition to the established moral value systems, the ensuing clash of ideals gave birth to the collective sentiment of being lost in the modern world. The same uncertainty can be claimed for the perceived end date of Modernism. In George Parker Anderson’s words:

Modernism . . . as a literary movement defies a consensus definition, particularly when it comes to its beginning and ending. ( . . . ) While some critics have used the end of World War II as a line to divide Modernism from Postmodernism, for others the spirit that prompted Modernism did not
end with the war and indeed continues to shape the literature of the present. (64)

Since Modernist outlooks are primarily evident from the sentiment displayed in the works of art of the period and cannot be fully defined by the dates of historical turning points, such rigid periodization does not do it justice. Therefore, literary works of the post-World War II years, even those written well after the war in the 1950s, can be described as Modernist.

American drama of the period had also become fraught with the sense of fragmentation, the burden of the past, moral ambiguity, uncertainty, frustration, the need to integrate into the society a modern man despises, the familiar, and cynicism. Its greatest achievements, like other signature texts of American Modernism, like T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, expressed these issues through a "mix of allusions to myth and contemporary imagery" (Anderson 8). Accordingly, American drama's respect for the legacy of previous periods as a point of reference as well as its experimental drive, which was at the core of all Modernist literature, bear the same cultural weight as any other literary form, and represent a mirror for the mood of the period. For students, looking at the plays through the lens of Modernism and its defining features, help them transcend the formalist sphere of analysis and interpretation to experience the reality of other approaches to literature. Discussing the ways in which the sense of fragmentation, the burden of the past, moral ambiguity, social integration, the familiar, and cynicism are important in the plays allow students to move closer to the possibility of seeing the plays from the point of view of a Modernist.

*The Modernist Analytical Category #1: The Sense of Fragmentation and the Burden of the Past*

Focusing on the sense of fragmentation and the burden of the past as Modernist analytical categories can help students see how, ever since T. S. Eliot gave his depiction of the modern world as *the waste land*, the past became more of a mythologized ideal than a memory of factual occurrences, and as such could not provide logical explanations for the state of the world in the 20th century. The relentless passage of time and the problem of how to cope with the changes it brings, the sense of being lost and confused by the new circumstances are present in the plays not only through the
dialogues but also through the utilization of Expressionistic techniques that playwrights of the era had pioneered. Sights and sounds from the stage, thus, become more than merely a feature of the world actors inhabit on the stage; they become subconscious triggers for students as well.

For instance, the sound of the flute in *Death of a Salesman*, which signifies the moments when Willy Loman gets disconnected from reality, can represent for students the moment when they become aware of a greater world that exists behind the scenes, with all its historical weight behind it. Also, Willy's reliving of the past concerning his teenage sons and his brother Ben, who at the same time represents Willy's unfulfilled past and the promise of a better future which is now unattainable for him, depicts the fragmented state of his character in its non-linear approach to the narrative. Moreover, on a subconscious level, it serves as a remainder of the discrepancy between Willy's aspirations and his failure to understand that his misconceived ethical code, which he imprints on his sons, is what prevents him from achieving greatness. The cyclical nature of the plot of *Long Day's Journey into Night* is also reflective of this fragmentation, where the same mistakes, whose origins lie in the characters' inability to accept reality, repeat themselves on a daily basis. The same can be said for the symbolic cyclical journey of the streetcar in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which carries its passengers in a closed loop where the only escapes are desire, i.e. a form of madness or a neurosis in a Freudian sense, and cemeteries, i.e. death.

Another way in which the analytical category of the sense of fragmentation and the burden of the past can help students see more complexity in the plays is to pay attention to "fragmented" characters searching for something to cling to, which they usually find in the idealized past. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "Blanche's dilemma, and Williams', is that of a southerner, who has lost a culture and a way of life and who is caught between two worlds, one gone with the wind, the other barely worth having" (Porter 176). The loss of the way of life, or failure to understand life, is not a problem inherent only to the South. In *Death of a Salesman*, this problem can be seen in the notable discrepancy between Willy Loman's belief that the reputation of being "well liked" plays a key role in obtaining material wealth; especially if students keep in mind the morally dubious methods through which his brother Ben gained his. The preoccupation with time is also of the essence here, seen how Ben is always in a hurry, glancing at his watch, constantly reminding Willy that he had missed his opportunity.
O'Neill's James Tyrone, who has obtained the land he had strived for his whole life, does not understand that his appearance and the way he runs his household are the reasons why he cannot integrate into that society. A fact that his wife Mary, due to her upbringing, understands: "He thinks money spent on a home is money wasted. He's lived too much in hotels. (. . . ) He doesn't understand a home. He doesn't feel at home in it. And yet, he wants a home" (O'Neill 61).

One of the Expressionistic techniques that can help students perceive these issues is the foghorn heard throughout Long Day's Journey into Night. It implies the existence of a fog that surrounds the Tyrone summer home and serves as a constant remainder of the feeling of being lost that the characters are trying to deal with as well as their inability to see a way out of their suffering. This can also be said for the "blue piano" music heard in A Streetcar Named Desire, evoking the melancholy sentiment of the loss of the mythologized grandeur of the Old South; as well as for the color symbolism where Blanche's name and her white apparel stand for the illusion of her upholding of the Old South moral values. Similarly, in Death of a Salesman, the apartment houses that box Willy Loman's skeletal home with "bricks and windows, windows and bricks" (Miller 17), stand for the suffocating feeling of the modern world crushing the individual and the disintegration of the intimacy and comfort of the "little house on the prairie" that every hard-working American is axiomatically entitled to. Applied to the plays, these Expressionistic techniques not only help students understand the characters' frame of mind but serving as subconscious triggers in a way also pull them into the plot, making them the part of the same narrative thread.

Furthermore, students can be informed that the roots of the themes of O'Neill's, Williams', and Miller's plays originate in the general sentiment of the 1920s as the ideas and worldviews depicted in their plays correspond to those of the authors of the so-called Lost Generation. For instance, clinging to non-existent ideals and philosophies that did not stand the test of time, James Tyrone is appalled by his son Edmund's nihilism. For Edmund, "God is dead: of his pity for man hath God died" (O'Neill 78). This nihilism that Edmund has accepted reminds Tyrone of his failure in spite of what he considers his best efforts to succeed in life, making him resent his son. Similarly, James Tyrone mythicizes the past and his Irish ancestry, taking for granted the completely arbitrary rules that one's genealogy plays a part in his or her chances to succeed or fail in life:
TYRONE: And keep your dirty tongue off Ireland! You're a fine one to sneer, with the map of it on your face!
JAMIE: Not after I wash my face. (O'Neill 80)

Jamie has, too, become disillusioned by life and accepts the break with tradition that enables him to see the broader picture of life, which his father is missing because of his stubbornness. For him, the past is dirt, which needs to be washed away and not clung to in order to be able to move forward in the modern world.

The same attitude toward the passage of time and the relationship with the past can be found in Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams' plays. According to Christopher Bigsby,

Blanche, too, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, resists the pull of time, terrified of the first signs of age, aware that something has ended and that it can only be recovered at the level of story, only through the roles that she so desperately performs and which finally offer her no immunity. (32)

The loss of Belle Reve in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, therefore, stands for the loss of the mythicized Old South, which now exists only as an idea in the hands of those who cannot truly understand what it means to be a Southerner, as they do not share the same legacy:

BLANCHE: Here all of them are, all papers! I hereby endow you with them! Take them, peruse them – commit them to memory even! I think it's wonderfully fitting that Belle Reve should finally be this bunch of old papers in your big, capable hands! (Williams 44)

On the other hand, Willy Loman does not only mythicize the past, he invents it, and turning a blind eye toward the truth, while being aware of it at the same time, results in his increasingly disturbing split personality disorder and mood swings. By not accepting the need for a change in his attitude, he dooms his sons to a life of similar delusions: "How the hell did I ever get the idea I was a salesman there? I even believed myself that I'd been a salesman for him! And then he gave me one look and – I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been" (Miller 104). Similarly, the image of Willy's brother
Ben – an image he strives to imitate, an original rags-to-riches story and the promise of the American Dream, which Willy did not have the courage to grasp but cannot let go of, is fleeting in the modern world: "But I've only a few minutes" (Miller 48). The dream of success, therefore, if it was ever achievable, has passed, and the only thing left to Willy is to reflect on his missed opportunities.

The Modernist Analytical Category #2: Moral Ambiguity

Moral ambiguity is a second lens through which a productive class reading of Long Day's Journey into Night, Death of a Salesman, and A Streetcar Named Desire can proceed. The questions of morality, its arbitrariness, and its ambiguity in the modern world stand at the core of all Modernist plays. However, the supposed lack of moral values is not the real problem that Modernist plays point out; the problem occurs when these false values are applied to life situations just by virtue of being traditionally accepted and impede progress due to the lack of any logical connection between what is considered to be the right thing to do and what ought to be done. Students can be told that O'Neill exemplifies this issue in Long Day's Journey into Night by having Tyrone exclaim: "Your dirty Zola! And your Dante Gabriel Rossetti who was a dope fiend" (135). Tyrone’s system of moral values prevents him to accept the realities of life that Zola describes and, ironically, that he himself had experienced working in a machine shop as a child. More importantly, had he accepted his wife's morphine addiction, which he also hypocritically criticizes in others, instead of indulging her out of guilt and shame, he might have been able to save both her and the rest of his family from disintegrating.

Furthermore, seeking escape in death, Mary Tyrone hopes to overdose herself but the moral values she cannot let go of, despite not really upholding them for decades, keep her living in denial instead of seeking help: "I hope, sometime, without meaning it, I would take an overdose. I never could do it deliberately. The Blessed Virgin would never forgive me then" (O'Neill 121). On the other hand, Jamie Tyrone, flawed as he may be, is able to put these traditional moral notions aside and find humanity that his parents cannot find despite all their heritage and the social status they covet. In an ironic twist, he shows more humanity in helping out a down-on-her-luck prostitute by sleeping with her and describing it as an act of mercy: "Fat Violet's a good kid. Glad I stayed with her. Christian act. Cured her blues" (O'Neill 161). Rather than preaching morality he does not
believe in, he acts according to his own moral code, which is uninhibited by preconceived arbitrary rules.

The class discussion can continue by pointing out that Tennessee Williams addresses the issues of morality mainly through his female characters and their misconceptions of their position in society. Blanche is still mentally a sixteen-year-old Southern belle, and tries to keep that appearance by wearing white and lying about her age, although nobody is fooled by her antics. The moral values she has been taught to uphold stand in the direct opposition to her promiscuous behavior, but since she does not know any other mode of social existence, she feels she has to hide her troubles and desires from others. Her harsh reaction to Stella spilling coke on her white dress, therefore, comes from her realization that she is living a life that is the direct opposite of the life she is pretending to live: "Right on my pretty white skirt" (Williams 94). Consequently, on a symbolic level, the long baths she takes stand for her attempts to wash away what she considers to be sin and immorality.

Additionally, her snide attitude toward Stanley, whom she describes as ape-like but at the same time desires and flirts with, also depicts the clash of her moral values and that which she desires the most: "What such a man has to offer is animal force and he gave a wonderful exhibition of that! But the only way to live with such a man is to – go to bed with him" (Williams 79). When confronted with this notion by Stella, she denies that her life has been defined by her sexuality because the acceptance that she is not the image of the "Southern lady," she tries so hard to present herself as, would mean that the state she finds herself in is her own fault and the result of her own actions; and she cannot bring herself to accept that:

BLANCHE: What you are talking about is brute desire – just – Desire! – the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another…

STELLA: Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar?

BLANCHE: It brought me here. – Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be… (Williams 81)

Here, her delusions are revealed beyond a doubt, because this "streetcar" she is talking about is not the one that has brought her to Stella and Stanley's home but the one that
has brought her to this point in her life, where she is "not clean enough" for a gentleman "to bring in the house with his mother" (Williams150).

The moral implications of Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, on the other hand, are those of the importance of moral values for developing work ethics and whether the American Dream is achievable through such ethics of hard work. Teaching his sons wrong work ethics, or rather no ethics at all, although he himself is a hard-working man, Willy Loman instilled no sense of morality in them as well. This is not only evident from his son Biff's attitude toward work, but also from the kleptomania he had developed as a way of getting even with those who had, in his mind, unjustly wronged him. Similarly, his other son Happy's objectifying attitude toward women is a direct result of the lack of moral values that his father had not instilled in him during childhood:

> BIFF: Naa. I'd like to find a girl – steady, somebody with substance.
> HAPPY: That's what I long for.
> BIFF: Go on! You'd never come home.
> HAPPY: That girl Charlotte I was with tonight is engaged to be married in five weeks. (Miller 25)

Happy considers his promiscuous behavior to be the result of the lack of women eligible for a stable relationship when, in fact, he is the one treating them as purely sexual objects. Like his sons, Willy does not understand the competitive nature of business and, while he glorifies his brother Ben's accomplishments, he does not see the moral implications of the manner in which Ben had achieved his wealth: "The man knew what he wanted and went out and got it! Walked into a jungle, and comes out, the age of twenty-one, and he's rich! The world is an oyster, but you don't crack it open on a mattress" (Miller 41). Willy's notions of being "well liked" as the prerequisite for success appear quite absurd considering that Ben, as interesting a man as he might seem, is not a likeable character at all. He takes what he wants and is not interested in being fair to anyone; he is a success story which has more in common with Al Capone than Benjamin Franklin: "Never fight fair with a stranger, boy. You'll never get out of the jungle that way" (Miller 49).

Furthermore, Willy and his sons are already too late to go into the wild and start from nothing; the world has been conquered and Biff has to seek out his old employer to
ask for a loan to start a business. Ben is the embodiment of the American Dream myth because he had the courage to venture into the darkness of the jungle, the equivalent of the classical hero venturing into the underworld, both as physical place and the metaphysical representation of his subconscious mind, to rediscover and reinvent himself. If we were to view Ben as the representation of the early American pioneer and Willy as his 20th century successor, Death of a Salesman becomes a commentary on how the American Dream had been achievable for those who were ready to risk it all for the chance of success, and since Willy is not ready to do that, it becomes unattainable for him. Knowing Ben for what he really is, reveals the futility of Willy's efforts and gives the answer to why the modern world, built by people like Ben, is crushing the individual and why a "well liked" traveling salesman cannot find an open door anywhere: "He drives seven hundred miles, and when he gets there no one knows him anymore, no one welcomes him" (Miller 57).

The Modernist Analytical Category #3: Social Integration

Reading the plays from the perspective of a person's in/ability to integrate into society can help students focus on and better understand the characters' inability to cope with the world they do not understand leaving them desperate to integrate into the society which they despise, often quite overtly at that. Students learn, for example, that James Tyrone's compulsive purchase of land is reflective of his need to belong somewhere after a life spent on the road, as much as it is a result of his aspiration to be perceived as a member of high society, which is due to his very humble origins. For the Tyrones, owning land represents the only way they could be perceived as equal to the people they want to socialize with. As Mary concedes: "Still, the Chatfields and people like them stand for something. I mean, they have decent, presentable homes they don't have to be ashamed of. They have friends who entertain them and whom they entertain" (O'Neill 44). Ironically, as seen from the way he runs his household and appears in public, the house he managed to provide for himself and his family never becomes their home. The constant reminders of the Tyrones' Irish origins are also symptomatic of their need to belong. As the only time they could identify with any social group is the mythologized past, the Tyrones, especially James, imbue Ireland with almost supernatural powers, as the land to which they owe everything they are.
Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the old stereotypes about various national minorities, which comprise America today, are only thinly veiled by the uniform American identity that the characters claim to be the only one important to them. The old prejudices about their countries of origin still loom large in the characters’ minds, and are easily brought to the surface as in the poker night scene, where the players comment on Mitch’s parsimony as reflective of his Scottish origin: "Sure he’s got ants now. Seven five-dollar bills in his pants pocket folded up tight as spitballs" (Williams 56). Similarly, the reason for Stanley’s lashing out at Blanche also lies in this fact, as she constantly reminds him that he does not belong in the South, making him aware of his own inferiority complex: "I’m not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don’t ever call me a Polack" (Williams 134).

In the "Foreword to *Death of a Salesman*," Arthur Miller shows students why the question of social integration plays such an important role in human lives, and why he addresses this issue in his play:

> The confusion of some critics viewing *Death of a Salesman* in this regard is that they do not see that Willy Loman has broken a law without whose protection life is insupportable if not incomprehensible to him and to many others: it is the law that says that a failure in society and in business has no right to live. Unlike the law against incest, the law of success is not administered by statute or church, but it is very nearly as powerful in his grip upon men. (144)

Miller’s Willy Loman becomes the victim of this unwritten law of social success. As his social standards originate from the afore-mentioned moral values and do not have a rational justification in reality, he does not understand the errors in judgment he is making, but only sees what he perceives to be a proper social conduct.

Because the salesman has to sell himself before he can sell his wares, Willy believes that the reason for his troubles of late is that people do not take to him as they used to, when in fact it is because the capitalist society thrives on easily available consumable goods, making the traveling salesman a relic of the past, with no place in the social hierarchy of the modern world. Also, Willy’s awareness of his delusions about
being liked is apparent from his mood swings, but he cannot bring himself to acknowledge it:

WILLY: America is full of beautiful towns and fine, upstanding people. And they know me, boys, they know me up and down New England. The finest people. And when I bring you fellas up, there'll be open sesame for all of us, 'cause one thing, boys: I have friends. I can park my car in any street in New England, and the cops protect it like their own. (Miller 31)

By teaching his sons that being "well liked" is everything they need in order to be accepted, Willy is condemning them to the same fate of ending up as social outcasts. People living in the modern world, which has been built and is run not by people akin to Willy but those similar to his brother Ben, do not have the time or interest in socializing with someone like him. There are no more open doors or welcoming patrons, only disillusioned people suspicious of the trickster that had rung their doorbell trying to push on them goods they either do not need or can obtain more conveniently at the supermarket.

The Modernist Analytical Category #4: Painting the Familiar

Another Modernist analytical category that students can apply while discussing Long Day's Journey into Night, Death of a Salesman, and A Streetcar Named Desire is "painting the familiar." Toward this end, a short passage from Walter J. Meserve's An Outline History of American Drama can be usefully placed in dialogue with the plays. Meserve points out that "perhaps the most significant aspect of American drama between the world wars is the concern of the dramatists for ideas of a spiritual and universal import" (325). These ideas of "universal import," however, are not depicted from the outside with thorough understanding, which would imply that the playwright knows the way of transcending them, but from a limited perspective of a person who finds himself in the middle of a struggle. Just like his characters, the playwright is also struggling with the questions that bother the Everyman – an archetype of sorts of the modern man, who gives these problems their "universality," since he could stand for any one of us. This is what Jean Gould emphasizes when discussing Williams' use of the
social milieu as a background for his characters' struggles, which in turn constitutes one of the most iconic recurring themes in his plays:

Here the must-be playwright met up with the "shadow people," creatures without roots, who lived in utter loneliness. Like Eugene O'Neill, he felt a certain kinship with them, for he realized that the grim emotions he had been suffering were shared by a whole segment of human life. (236)

The "painting of the familiar," therefore, does not only stand for the theme of the South in a geographical sense, but for every other aspect of the playwright's life – the people he socialized with, the worldviews he shared with them, the existential questions which bothered them all, which were consequently reflected in his plays.

Similarly, O'Neill's familiarity with the world of theater, issues of mental illness, New England settings, where he found analogies to human struggles that went back to ancient Greek times etc., also became a form of "the familiar" in his plays, as these matters represented the world he was most acquainted with. Combined with the issues of social acceptance, identity, and problems of finding a place in the world that he had experienced during his travels outside the USA, his work had also gained an expatriate dimension. In much the same way, the disconnectedness of the French Quarter of New Orleans, where the plot of *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place, from the mid-20th century mainstream American culture, also gives the impression of an outsider's look into the social dynamics of America as the expatriate works do; although ironically, here the Southerners are the ones feeling as outsiders in their own land, unable to grasp the realities of the New South which they do not feel any connection with:

STELLA: They're a mixed lot, Blanche.
BLANCHE: Heterogeneous – types? (Williams 17)

Thomas E. Porter explains this issue of the specific being a gateway toward the universal on the example of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams:

Both playwrights are concerned with a specific cultural milieu and both concentrate on an interpretation of that milieu for the audience. (...) The death of Willy Loman represents the passing of an American dream; the
confinement of Blanche DuBois is a legend about the passing of the Old South. (153)

Miller and Williams deal with intrinsically American myths, namely the success myth and the plantation myth, but what is important to draw students' attention to is the fact that, while both myths represent a distinctly American perspective on life philosophies, they belong to two quite opposite social milieus which hold them to be true and steer their lives according to them.

Porter, too, teaches students that a Southerner is a person who "had a sense of identification with a given segment of the earth, of belonging on the ancestral estate that the transient Northerner can only admire" (157). The success myth, on the other hand, assumes quite the opposite subject, one of humble origins, whose aspiration is to achieve wealth and social recognition through hard work. When these two notions intersect, a conflict ensues. Students can see this occurring in A Streetcar Named Desire when Blanche condescendingly treats Stanley and his friends, neither of whom is a Southerner: "Oh, I guess he's just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume, but maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve" (Williams 45). She even puts herself in the role of a cultural anthropologist, studying the society of the "ape-like" brutes that her sister had married into:

STEVE: That rutting hunk!
BLANCHE: I must jot that down in my notebook. Ha-ha! I'm compiling a notebook of quaint little words and phrases I've picked up here. (Williams 88)

As distinctly American phenomena, the success myth and the plantation myth represent two modes of America: each of them relying on a set of distinct cultural symbols, which ultimately lead to the same desired outcome. The first states that a common man may achieve wealth and greatness through hard work and abiding by the ethical principles set forth by Benjamin Franklin, and the other claims that social status and wealth is one's right by virtue of being born in an upper-class Southern society. Although they appear contrary, their ultimate goal is the same, with the difference being the methods of approaching each myth and their symbolic representations. These sets
of symbols and their influence on the individual can be found in the particularities of Blanche DuBois' mental breakdown, and Stanley Kowalski’s attitude to his Polish heritage and American nationality; in James Tyrone’s acquiring of land and the pride he takes from his Irish heritage, and Mary Tyrone’s hypocritical moral standards; in Willy Loman's obsession with success and material wealth, and his brother Ben's methods of achieving those. By describing the world they are most familiar with, the playwrights contribute to painting a broader picture of the modern world as a whole, where nobody has the insight into the whole picture, only the bits and pieces of it which surround them.

The Modernist Analytical Category #5: The Tragicomedy of Cynicism

After applying the afore-mentioned Modernist analytical categories to the discussion of the plays of concern here, it might appear to students that there is no place for humor in a world in which one’s identity is fragmented, the past is an idealized myth, and a better future is all but unachievable. This is, however, not true because humor in the form of tragicomedy or cynical irony constitutes one of Modernist drama perpetual themes. Modernist playwrights do not make a student laugh, but rather sneer in contempt and disbelief at the incredulity of what s/he has read. The humorous effect, therefore, comes across almost as a reflex, an involuntary reaction which should not have been allowed to occur by any rule of common sense, "decent behavior," or "good taste," and which is made all the more shocking by the uneasy feeling of truth hiding behind a protagonist's actions. For example, Mitch from A Streetcar Named Desire, the only one of Stanley's friends who nurtures romantic ideals of masculinity and femininity, breaks into a banter about his physical appearance in an ironic attempt to portray himself as the opposite of a mama's boy that his friends consider him to be: "I weigh two hundred and seven pounds and I'm six feet one and one half inches tall in my bare feet – without shoes on. And that is what I weigh stripped" (Williams 107). As opposed to the South being invaded by the Northern culture that is foreign to it, Blanche's descent on the Kowalskis is described as "the Old South" "invad[ing] the lower-middle-class American society" (Porter 168). In this way, "the tragic and the comic function symbiotically, the comic modifies, and by subverting, also protects what is tragic from becoming either melodramatic or laughable and, indeed, renders the tragic more bitter" (Foster 111). This symbiotic nature of humor and tragedy is, too, visible in Blanche's tragic end: "she is tragic in her attempt to expiate her guilt over her young
husband's death and to find consolation in 'intimacies with strangers' (118), and in her self-destructive sexual game-playing with Stanley that leads him finally to rape her' (Foster 112-3). This cruel sense of irony is a cynic's form of humor, and Williams here treads the fine line of flirting with the notion that, while Stanley might be the ape-like brute as Blanche had characterized him from the first, it was Blanche that brought this situation upon herself.

Students can find another example of the symbiotic relationship between humor and tragedy in Long Day's Journey into Night. After learning about her coquettish nature as a young woman from her husband, Mary Tyrone's lamentations about her aspirations to become a nun seem comically absurd, without diminishing the tragic nature of her ordeal. The gags and the drunken slur of Jamie Tyrone's moment of honesty with his brother Edmund, too, add a bittersweet undertone to a genuinely positive moment of brothers bonding. Combined with all the ironies about the Tyrones' social aspirations while being a disintegrating family and their blaming of external factors for their cycle of mistakes, makes cynical humor as a foundation for tragedy one of the main features of Long Day's Journey into Night.

In Death of a Salesman, the tragicomic effect is achieved by the two Willy Lomans: one who is a dreamer, and the other a realist, the two of whom are constantly fighting each other. One claims that "There's one thing about Biff – he's not lazy" (Miller 16), but the other rebukes him that "Biff is a lazy bum" (Miller 16). One exults with the notion that "Chevrolet is the greatest car ever built" (Miller 34), and the other sneers at "that Goddamn Chevrolet," and concludes that "they ought to prohibit the manufacture of that car" (Miller 36). The most tragic aspect of this type of humor, however, is that Willy himself is aware of his dichotomies: "Well, I figure, what the hell, life is short, a couple of jokes. To himself: I joke too much" (Miller 37). Finally, by not heeding his own advice, Willy is the only one left to blame for the greatest tragicomic irony of Death of a Salesman – by doing everything in his power to be "well liked," Willy ends up being not liked at all, neither by his customers, nor by the audience witnessing his tribulation.

Conclusion

An alternative to the class discussion of Modernist analytical approaches to Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Long Day's Journey into Night
might be a group discussion. When students are divided into small groups and asked to use the sense of fragmentation and the burden of the past, moral ambiguity, social integration, the familiar, and the tragicomedy of cynicism as analytical categories in their consideration of *Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Long Day’s Journey into Night*, with each group sharing their opinions with the class as a whole before moving on to talk about the next, they experience both enlightenment and frustration. While the close focus on each discrete analytical category can generate a variety of insights, this method, too, shows students how difficult it is to discuss how moral ambiguity functions in the plays, for example, without also considering the sense of fragmentation, the burden of the past, social integration, the familiar, or the tragicomedy of cynicism. This alternative method is valuable because it once again demonstrates how powerful the categories of the sense of fragmentation, the burden of the past, moral ambiguity, social integration, the familiar, and the tragicomedy of cynicism can be when used as heuristics; it is also useful in showing students how these terms are imbricated.

We believe that *Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Long Day’s Journey into Night* are the ideal plays with which to demonstrate the power of using Modernist analytical categories to approach a work of drama in the undergraduate literature classroom. In reading *Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Long Day’s Journey into Night* students can experience Modernist techniques and thereby become more open to other possible readings of these plays. Thus, the plays are valuable not only as well-crafted literary works but as a means of rereading the existing interpretations that many students bring to university. If students are open to *Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, and Long Day’s Journey into Night* and their complexities, a shift in critical consciousness may occur. Miller’s, Williams’, and O’Neill’s plays do stand on its own as works of art but they also operate as catalysts to offer both students and teachers new interpretative and analytical opportunities. These new readings can start with a close examination of Modernist themes and motifs in Miller’s, Williams’, and O’Neill’s plays.
Works Cited


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