

Heat and Ice in Tennessee Williams's "Three players in a summer game"

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Calor e gelo em "Three players in a summer game", de Tennessee Williams

Resumo: Conto que dá origem a *Cat on a hot tin roof*, "Three players in a summer game", de Tennessee Williams, é um texto de grande potencial semiótico e explora o 'calor' e o 'gelo' como metáforas extensivas. Este artigo visa a observar o universo conotativo do conto e a relação entre este universo e os três personagens que compõem o título da narrativa. O artigo aborda questões de gênero em dois sentidos. Por um lado, discute padrões de comportamento masculino e feminino estereotípico; por outro lado, a assimetria de direitos entre o homem e a mulher.

Palavras-chave: gênero, simbolismo, convenções sociais

Abstract: Inspiring Tennessee Williams to write *Cat on a hot tin roof*, "Three players in a summer game" figures as a potentially interesting text to semiotic studies by pointing out 'heat' and 'ice' as extensive metaphors. Owing to this, this essay aims at observing the connotative universe of the short-story and the relation between such universe and the three characters foreshadowed in the title. The article approaches gender questions in two different manners. On the one hand, it problematizes stereotypical male and female behaviors; on the other hand, the asymmetry between man and woman's rights.

Keywords: gender, symbolism, social conventions

Polemic and thought-provoking, *Cat on a hot tin roof* stands as one of Tennessee Williams's most striking and worldwide famous masterpieces, prompting ambivalent questions about the human nature, mendacity, the western politics of sexuality, familial greed and especially survival strategies. Even so, little is said about the play's making-of, let alone that Brick and Margaret Pollitt were birthed in one of Williams's short-stories, written shortly before he thrived into the play's draft.

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Indeed, “Three players in a summer game” is the very narrative which sets one forth into Williams’s backstage upbuilding of Brick and Margaret before their ultimate upgrade in *Cat on a hot tin roof*. His ongoing remolding of both characters evidences the playwright’s perfectionism and his self-critical spirit on art. Deeming heat and ice in the short-story as potential extended metaphors for Williams’s symbolical critique upon the southern society, I dare say these two opposite words appear as emblematic tokens, iconographically projected in topics like alcoholism, sexual misconduct, and prejudice to fallen women’s children. The text certainly tackles on gender differences, woman’s empowerment and social rejection, among other issues.

Throughout the plot, one learns that heat particularly tortures three social misfit characters over a singeing summer. As a palliative, cooling can function as a momentary amenity for Brick Pollitt, Isabel Grey and Louise Grey’s troubles. In this, Williams’s ‘I as witness’ story-teller foreshadows that frosty water is not effective enough to solve their problems. Only does it lessen their uneasiness from summer for a while.

In Brick’s case, heat is associated with marital betrayal and his becoming an emasculated husband. Married to Margaret, a domineering woman, Brick feels psychologically weakened for not ruling his family as expected. So, to make up for his low-esteemed manlihood, he starts a love affair with Isabel Grey. Their sudden happiness, however, does not linger as her husband, Doctor Grey, commits suicide soon after learning of her connection with the richest farmer in the neighborhood. For all these reasons, Mary Louise, the Greys’ daughter, is eschewed and forbidden to draw near any child in Meridian at all because of her mother’s immorality.

In depth, high temperature may represent their inner conflicts. More precisely, heat points to the consequences the three of them have individually born since Brick and Isabel’s rupturing with moralist social standards. Confirming this reading of heat, the lexicologist Collins Cobuild (1991) defines the term as displeasure, “something used to mean a state of strong emotional feeling, especially anger and anxiety” (COBUILD, 1991, p. 675). Considering this, heat not only characterizes high temperature but also represents Brick’s, Isabel’s and Mary Louise’s discontent. Owing to this, ice-cubes can polysemically refer to physical refreshment and relief from social reproach. As a form

of sublimation, ice appears to alleviate social oppression connotatively speaking. But as it melts, heat and the characters' traumas remain.

According to the psychoanalyst Kelly Oliver (2004), "oppression affects the rebels within a particular social situation" (p. 24). Owing to this, "sublimation and idealization are necessary not only for psychic life but also for transformative and restorative resistance to oppression" (Idem). If so, in the short-story, escaping from heat can mean a badly accomplished self-protection strategy; one which only numbs a problem but never eradicates it once and for all. Reading sublimation as an unsuccessful compensation for a particular issue, their attempt to refresh themselves is hopeless and inefficient. If so, no matter what they do to make up for their personal dilemmas, the three characters cannot release themselves or each other from social pressure. All Brick and Isabel can do, nevertheless, is to procrastinate their decision-making, avoiding, therefore, plans for the future. On the other hand, the poor child is left aside. Still, she obeys her disoriented mother, bearing the continuous mosquitoes' stings.

In a broad sense, one might say that their standing at a critical point can symbolize political resistance, as the three of them do not leave town in spite of all odds. Even so, inertia, rather than an attitude, is what best translates their situation into words. Despite their transgressive condition, the two adults stay in Meridian out of conveniences. Brick depends on Margaret's budget, Isabel expects to find support in her lover and Mary Louise consequently pays a price for wrongs she has not made. Provided they play different roles in society, the signification of heat obviously varies to each of them. After all, a man is supposed to rule his household the same way a woman is meant to be chaste, loyal and set good examples to a child. This aspect of the text unfolds the symbolic association between heat and their different psychological stuffiness. In this, one learns that each character goes through idiosyncratic problems and needs to carry on their burdens alone.

As a prototype to *Cat on a hot tin roof*, "Three players of a summer game" is a story which contains important structural elements of Greek drama. The literary theorist Junito Brandão (1978) explains that the classic hero would be punished by gods if he surpassed one's measure of mortality (*metron*). This transgression (*hybris*) awakens divine jealousy (*némesis*), making the hero atone himself through tragic events (p. 10-11). In Brandão's words, "the actor's trespassing the metron is a *démeseure*, a *hybris*,

that is, the hero's violence against himself and immortal gods, provoking *némesis*, divine jealousy. The *áner*, the actor, or the hero becomes the god's primal interest. Punishment is immediate" (p. 11) [My translation].

Undeniably, Williams's short-story and play do make us think of Brick and Isabel's suffering as a way to punish them for their misconduct; but, in this case, the power which coerces the characters is not divine but consists of social conventions. Even so, both texts, up to a certain extent, seem to rupture with the Greek tradition as long as the closure is concerned. After all, both in this short-story and in the first version of the play, there is no purification for the transgressors. Just like Isabel and Brick cannot be unburdened in "Three players of a summer game", Maggie and Brick are not supposed to be whitewashed at the end of *Cat on a hot tin roof's* first version. In Williams's works, tension is meant to remain because his characters, similarly to people, are not to repent or be unblemished. Because of that, Brick and Isabel are deprived of a definitive relief, potentializing heat's symbolism in the short-story in vogue.

Right on the opening lines, Brick, Isabel and Mary Louise are leaving their Victorian summerhouse, completely airless and stuffy. The narrator, while observing the players' anxiety to play croquet, associates heat with suffocation and points their coming outdoors as a kind of refreshment. In this context, withdrawing the building is something metaphorical and which signals to their public romance. So much so, the narrator says they seem to be uncloseted players in a heterosexual game:

I associate the summer game with players coming out of the house [...] released from a suffocating enclosure, as if they had spent the fierce day in a closet, where breathing freely at last in fresh atmosphere and able to move without hindrance. [...] They are three players – a woman, a man and a child¹.

Though they are now exposed to sunlight, heat does not affect them equally. Owing to the laws of physics, the solar irradiation on each of them varies considerably because of their peculiar body types and distinct positions on the lawn. Being so, let us analyze each character and their exposure to the sun step by step, starting with Brick. As the man, he is, for instance, the most exposed to the heat. Supposed to be the family leader, Brick is the tallest in this croquet game. As he

plays, the temperature rises so intensely that the sunlight is even personified. In his daydreams, he pictures sun flames dashing down from the sky in a raging and frenetically speedy movement. Always burning whatever they confront, the sparks are particularly eager to penetrate into Brick's skin and reach the inner parts of his body:

He is a head taller than the tall woman player of the game. He is such a tall man that even in those sections dimmed under violet shadow, his head continues to catch fiery rays of descending sun, the way heavenward pointing index finger of that huge gilded hand atop a Protestant steeple in Meridian goes on drawing the sun's flame for a good while after the lower surfaces the town have sunk into lingering dusk (*TPSG*, p. 305).

According to Eliane Berutti (1990), Brick's restlessness is not a simple response to the hot weather and denotes anguish and distress. As he moves, sweat rolls down his temples and leaves him soaked with perspiration. Although he tries to amuse himself in Meridian, all he longs for is a fresher place to feel better, somewhere he might play away from the neighbors' surveillance:

Brick's search for coolness is not only related to the summer heat. The narrator describes the summer game on the lawn as a "running together out of something unbearably hot and bright and into something obscure and cool. [...] Since Brick has identified summer with the unpleasant realities of his life, these have become also unbearably hot for him" (BERUTTI, 1990, p. 102).

As mentioned before, Brick has problems in his marriage and finds a way to evade from his disillusion in alcohol. He confesses to be no longer the man he used to be because of family matters. Hypothetically, Brick's behavioral modification is a consequence of his addiction to alcohol. Since Margaret has taken over their family business, his drinking habits have become more recurrent. In this, it is unclear if the wife starts running the farm because of his negligence or if he thrives into drinking since her interference in his financial affairs. What is odd, either way, is that after her assimilation of supposedly male societal roles, she grows manly and Brick, emasculated. As far as one is concerned, this inversion of familial parts demoralizes him and causes him to drink even harder.

Although the neighbors take for granted Mrs. Pollitt runs Brick's plantation because of her husband's alcoholism, Brick's drinking habit is a way to escape from Margaret's controlling behavior. After all, the narrator describes her as a kind of vampire who absorbs his livelihood and masculinity out of bleeding: "It was as though she had her lips fastened to some invisible wound in his body through which blood drained out of him and flowed into her the assurance and vitality that he had in marriage" (*TPSG*, p. 306).

Confirming this idea, the narrator still remarks: "[S]he became vivid as Brick disappeared behind the veil of his liquor" (*TPGS*, p. 306). Owing to this, in a way, Brick becomes sexually impotent as if his depowerment brought him somatic problems. By then, the narrator even describes Margaret as a masculine figure, driving her husband both literally and figuratively:

Margaret Pollitt handled the car with a wonderful male assurance, her bare arms brown and muscular as a Negro field hand's, and the car's canvas top had been lowered the better to expose on its back seat the sheepishly grinning and nodding figure of Brick Pollitt. [...] The manner in which she treated him was exactly the way some ancient conqueror, such as Caesar or Alexandre the Great or Hannibal, might have led in chains through a capital city the prince of as state newly conquered (*TPSG*, p. 324-5).

After losing his driver's license, Brick is judged as a bad leader both in his car and at home. After all, a real man is not supposed to have his wife take hold of the family business, tame him as if he were now a domestic beast, let alone drive him to and fro in town. Actually, even Brick thinks like everybody else in the surroundings. This is why he makes a point not to sit ladilike in the front seat right by her side. Yet, looking superior, he wishes she resembled a chauffeur:

Brick's driver's license had been revoked again for some misadventure on the highway due to insufficient control of the wheel, and it was his legal wife, Margaret who sat in the driver's seat of the Pierce Arrow touring car. Brick did not sit beside her. He was at the back seat of the car, pitching this way and that way with the car's joltining motion, like a loosely wrapped package being delivered somewhere (*TPSG*, p. 325).

Therefore, Brick yields to alcoholism, being not only a player of croquet game itself but somebody who likes the croquet-drinking game better than anything in the world for losing self-esteem and credibility in his birthplace. Surrendering to drunkenness, he forgets his oblivion and surrogate position in his own family. Unable to break free from a metaphorical bondage, he continues legally linked to a woman who both supplies his financial needs and annihilates his masculinity in Meridian.

On the other hand, as a fallen woman, Isabel's social condition differs considerably from Margaret's. In fact, Mrs. Grey's heat is related to misogyny and sexism, and, as expected, the Meridian society lays a heavier burden on women as far as social demeanor is concerned. Being a conservative community, their principles of morality privilege men, not giving equal rights to male and female bodies. According to Elaine Showalter (1989), social conventions are always stricter to women: "We find sexual asymmetry, inequality and male dominance in every known society" (p. 3).

In this realm, gender unbalance is a key concept for one's understanding why social demand weighs heavier on Isabel than on Brick. In Christian communities, woman is expected to repress her desire and to be a model of honesty, moderation and balance. She is the one to manage the family masterly, to aid her husband and nurse her children. Woman is not supposed to be oversexed; and if so, she becomes outrageous and indecorous. Instead, she is to be an altruist, always finding satisfaction in her family's welfare. Because of this, the transgressive woman is to blame. So much so, Isabel is given no mercy. Coming from the Mid-Atlantic Region, she is not to be trusted or pitied, especially for being an outsider and a yankee, as people in town say. To worsen things, she is also guilty of her husband's suicide, which gives her total social inacceptance.

Looking from this prism, Brick's situation is fairly lighter than his lover's. Even in adultery, he is excused for lechery because he is a man. So, keeping a mistress does not really ruin his social reputation because men with problems in marriage are supposed to have sex with another woman. Margaret herself is comprehensive and lenient about his conduct. Even not siding with or approving of

his inadequate behavior, she thinks his bigamy and alcoholism are temporary. From her point-of-view, his commonsense will bring him back home safe and sound. Whenever asked about Brick, Margaret replies: “‘He’ll come out of it, she said. ‘Brick is passing through something that he’ll come out of’” (*TPSG*, p. 306).

If, on the one hand, Brick receives tolerance from his local community, on the other hand, Mrs. Grey is severely despised and rebuked for setting bad examples for girls. Criticized by her immoral condition, she is seen as a promiscuous woman for many reasons. After all, she did not only cause her husband’s death but she is now inappropriately living with a married man. Peering from this angle, the heat Isabel bears has much to do with utmost prejudice and social rejection because, even not being the tallest on the grass, she is centered in the field, being more exposed to the sun. Due to this fact, Isabel is described as the uneasiest croquet player:

This woman player, even more than her male opponent in the game, has the greatful quickness of motion of someone let out of a suffocation enclosure; her motion has the quickness of breath released just after a moment of terror, of fingers unclenched when panic is suddenly past or of a cry that subsides into laughter. She [...] moves in convulsive rushes, whipping her skirts with long strides that quicken to running. [...] The neighbors think she’s gone mad but they feel no pity for her, and that, of course, is because of the male opponet in the game (*TPSG*, 304). [...] [S]he had not been long in town; the doctor had married her while he was in intern in Baltimore. Nobody had formed a definite opinion of her before the doctor died, so it was no effort, now, to simply condemn her, without any qualification, as a strumpet, common in everything but her ‘affections’ (*TPSG*, p. 310).

Mrs. Grey’s defamation is so strong it affects her daughter. Mary Louise, being the shortest of the three, is not exposed to the sun as are the other two; but she is not allowed to play with the other children in town. Even hot having done anything wrong, she suffers for being the offspring of a supposedly obscene woman: “The little girl was made unpopular among other children of the neighborhood” (*TPSG*, p. 305). Despite being less exposed to the sun, Mary Louise is tormented by mosquitoes’ stings, which justifies her need of ice in the story. In her case, ice is used to soothe the pain from the bites and to stop the itching and skin throbbing. Her mother always advises her to do so to avoid marks or future face scars: “[W]hen you have a mosquito bite [,] [...] get a small piece of ice and wrap it in a handkerchief and rub it gently with it until the sting is removed” (*TPSG*, p. 320).

All over the narrative, ice appears as a means of relief to the three characters. If, on the one hand, Brick uses ice for his liquor, Isabel needs it to lessen her constant headaches. By the way, Mrs. Grey's consumption of ice is so intense in the story, her daughter forced to complain: "You put so much [ice] in the ice bag for your headache" (*TPSG*, p. 320). According to Mary Louise, Brick is also eager for ice. As she confesses, "[h]e needs it for his drinks" (*TPSG*, p. 321). Object of desire, ice becomes so seductive that Mary Louise licks and sucks the melting cones from Mr. Pollitt's glass as a way to quench her thirst. Unaware of the risks she is running, the girl finds in ice and sugar a balsam for the hot weather. As her mother states, "Honey, you mustn't eat the ice in the bottom of Mr. Pollitt's glass!" (*TPSG*, p. 321).

When the iceman appears later, Isabel confesses Brick and she consume all the ice they are provided with and that extra cubes are made necessary for her daughter. "Oh, iceman, [...] don't forget to leave extra pieces for little Mary Louise to rub her mosquito bites with!" (*TPSG*, p. 315). From this fragment, one may observe that the characters' alleviation can only be possible with ice. Taking it all into account, ice functions as a palliative, a painkiller and as refreshment. Concerning Brick, it appears as a catalyst for alcoholism or escapism from reality. At the moment ice makes liquor tasty for Brick, he feels stimulated to drink more and more. As Tom Reck (1971) explains, "Brick freezes consciousness of reality into a numbness just as he freezes the sting" (p. 141).

Although ice may represent comfort, it is ephemeral and instantaneous, effective to their uneasiness only until it melts. Besides, ice does not stand as a cure. Rather, it symbolizes the stagnation of a dynamic process if one considers that Brick and Isabel do not do a thing to fight against social affronts. In other words, the ice imagery freezes the connection between the formal (the croquet game, the Victorian house) and the informal (reality, the present). In addition, explains that ice cannot be as purifying as water in its fluid state because it cannot remove one's dirt.

Regarding it all, one may realize that ice does not constitute a definitive solution for the three characters' heat. Functioning as an anesthetic, it only diminishes their pain but does not heal their inner wounds. If Brick drinks iced liquor to cool himself from his oddly hot relationship with Margaret, he does not overcome his problems through evasion. Although Isabel has always an ice bag at hand, she is

constantly surrounded by prejudice in a way her headaches never cease. And, if the mosquitoes' bites do not stop bothering Mary Louise, that is because the neighbors' rumors do not end. In short, heat is superior to these characters' struggle to find relief. Even though they do their best to get refreshed, their tentative is completely useless and ineffective. Heat will last as long as the summer lasts.

Undoubtedly, three croquet players try to find amusement in the game of life. Annoyed with the scorching weather, they are in search of freedom and respect, no matter they feel like outcasts in Meridian. Even evading from reality, they expose themselves to the heat of social prejudice. What matters, anyway, is that they try hard to react against their inner conflicts and the social interference around them. So, if they are playing the match, that is because they stand in the sun; and, if so, they will go on suffering from outer judgement. In short, whenever there is ice to replenish their glasses, they will have something to soothe their souls. Discouraged and identitarily fragmented, the three characters are likely to remain far away from a cooler refuge, from rest and tranquility to amenize their annoyance and discomfort.

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¹ WILLIAMS, Tennessee. Three players of a summer game. In: ---. *Collected stories*. New York: New Directions, 1985. p. 303-25. Every quotation from this narrative belongs to the same edition and, henceforth, will be indicated by the initials *TPSG*, followed by page number.