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THE SOUND OF ANGER! Desire and destruction in the diegetic music of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract: This article traces how Tennessee Williams transforms music into a living presence that haunts, wounds, and endures beyond language, carrying tragedy's rhythm in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Analyzing the Blue Piano, the Varsouviana, and saccharine popular songs, it shows how these recurring motifs echo memory, trauma, and desire, collapsing time into a spiral where past and present converge. The article argues that Williams employs sound as both confession and antagonist, orchestrating Blanche DuBois's unraveling and shaping the play's descent towards destruction. By analyzing how music intrudes upon or withdraws from dramatic action, it demonstrates how diegetic music enfolds the atmosphere and presses against the character's psychological limits. In doing so, Williams has integrated music as a mechanism through which the play's motifs extend beyond individual characters, shaping audience engagement and sustaining the drama's tragic impact.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams; A Streetcar Named Desire; diegetic music.

Resumo: *Este artigo traça como Tennessee Williams transfigura a música em uma presença viva, que assombra, fere e persiste para além da linguagem, conduzindo o ritmo da tragicidade em* Um Bonde Chamado Desejo*. Ao analisar o Blue Piano, a Varsoviana e as canções populares, mostra como esses temas recorrentes ecoam memória, trauma e desejo, dissolvendo o tempo em uma espiral na qual passado e presente se entrelaçam. O artigo argumenta que Williams emprega som como confidente e antagonista, orquestrando a ruína de Blanche DuBois e moldando o percurso da peça rumo à destruição. Ao examinar como a música se infiltra ou se retira da ação dramática, demonstra que a música diegética estrutura a atmosfera e pressiona os limites psicológicos dos personagens. Dessa forma, Williams integra a música como um mecanismo que permite aos temas da peça se projetarem além dos personagens, moldando o engajamento da audiência e sustentando o impacto trágico do drama.*

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Palavras-chave: *Tennessee Williams;* A Streetcar Named Desire*; música diegética.*

1. Introduction

1.1. Prelude of (desire and) destruction

This article aims to explore the presence and treatment of music as a crucial aspect of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, using a scene-by-scene analysis to show how sound functions as a structural and interpretive key to the play. Music often operates diegetically, emerging from the world of the characters themselves, highlighting and scrutinizing their hopes and fears, and becoming an almost psychological echo of their states of mind. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Blanche DuBois, the displaced Southern belle who is scored, interrupted, and ultimately undone by the sounds that haunt her.

Diegetic music is sound or music that comes from within the story world (the diegesis) and, according to Berndt (2011), "[its] source is part of the scene's interior. [...] Hence, it can exert an influence on the plot and acting and is frequently even an inherent part of the scenic action." (p. 60). Because of this, it can be tied to the actors' actions and influence the overall mood of the performance, as it is audible to characters within the scene, whether it is someone playing a piano, a radio in the background, a character singing, or the sharp crack of a gunshot in the street. The diegetic use of music can be traced back to theater and opera traditions "as early as the 18th century, for instance in the ball music of the finale of W. A. Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, which premiered in 1787". (Berndt, 2011, p. 61).

By examining moments where the music of *A Streetcar Named Desire* intrudes upon or withdraws from dramatic action (*i.e.* rising and then fading, increasing and then resuming, starting and then dying away), this article argues that Williams employs sound as an active agent of meaning-making, with diegetic music functioning as a tool for shaping atmosphere. In particular, it externalizes Blanche's inner turmoil, heightens moments of conflict, and blur the boundary between reality and illusion, thereby reinforcing the play's central tension between the motifs of desire, destruction, and memory. To understand the power of diegetic music in Williams's dramaturgic piece, it is first necessary to consider the broader cultural and philosophical weight that music has carried across history.

1.2. Sound as being

Music permeates every aspect of life: the rustling of leaves, the blooming of flowers, and the rhythms of animals and humans alike all contribute to a world constantly shaped by sound. From the whisper of a breeze to the beating of a heart, music becomes a metaphor for existence itself. This deep connection between sound and *being* has long been recognized, and *auteur* Tennessee Williams, like many writers before and after him, draws on music not merely as a background but as a vital force, one that animates the inner lives of the characters and the very soul of the world they inhabit[5]. Music is both an in-depth reflection of our collective sorrows and passions, and of the things that stir in us disgust and delight. It descends, according to Erlmann (2010), from an age-old desire to understand the materiality of sound — What is air? What is sound itself? What is *music* made of? — with earlier reflections traced back to "[an ancient Greek] theory of musical magic in which sound was said to stem from the movement of a force that is at once spiritual and material." (Erlmann, 2010, p. 32).

The American play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), set in the city of New Orleans, tells the story of Blanche DuBois, who visits her sister Stella, now married to Polish man Stanley Kowalski. Blanche is very welcome by her sister, however, she is met with extreme suspicion by Stanley, who questions her mysterious past. The peculiar reasons which guided Blanche to the Kowalski's residence are revealed gradually and smoothly, unifying the rhythm of life with the rhythm of music. In this play, music is a character of sorts. It heals, hides, invades, twists, lulls, softens, and explores the narrative with insurmountable strength, adding context and meaning to what the actual characters leave unsaid. Throughout the play, as a way of dramatizing Blanche's psychological landscape, Tennessee Williams incorporates diegetic music: that which exists within the world of the narrative and can be heard by the characters. These sonic elements accompany pivotal moments of tension and vulnerability,

[5] Music is everywhere: in nature, in language, in accents, in the cries of infants and the clamor of construction sites. It permeates theater, television, and cinema. It pulses in the heartbeat of hummingbirds, in the ocean's tide, and even in the infrasounds and silences beyond human perception. It echoes in memory and grief. Music, in this sense, becomes the reverberation of existence, an ever-present rhythm in eternal recurrence.

while at times anticipating emotional breakdowns or amplifying latent conflicts. In this sense, music functions, again, not as a background, but as a form of inner narration, revealing desires and traumas that verbal language fails to contain:

> A corresponding air [to that of the warm breath of the brown river] is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. *This "Blue Piano" expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.* (Williams, 1960, p.1, emphasis added).

There is a certain peacefulness, or rather, a quiet complacency *in the spirit of the life which goes on* at 632 Elysian Fields Avenue, New Orleans. The Kowalskis's residence, unremarkable, offers little in the way of visual distinction. The Kowalskis themselves, too, do not command much attention. But Miss Blanche DuBois, unmistakably, with theatrical precision, does. From the moment of her arrival, she is paradoxically defined by both her extravagance and her silence. She embodies a volatile combination of pomposity and restraint, as if an overwrought sense of control threatens at every moment to unravel. These defining (and conflicting) traits position her, from the very beginning, in a perpetual state of tension with the seemingly stable, emotionally muted dynamic between Stanley and Stella. Yet the true magnitude of the Kowalskis's underlying, "hidden" power struggle — and the unsettling normalcy with which it is treated — warps (and wraps) itself around Blanche almost immediately, distorting her perception and amplifying her sense of alienation.

Blanche's newborn dilemma (Stanley, the brother-in-law) is introduced the moment Stella, her younger sister, first exits the scene. What begins as a faint undercurrent is quickly eclipsed (both for Blanche and for the spectator/reader) by the reappearance of unresolved phantoms from her past. Stanley's behavior, however, is set ablaze. His every gesture enacts masculinity as though it were a role, a ritual, or even a fantasy: to stage himself as *the* man. Notwithstanding, Blanche enters this dynamic not simply as an outsider, she is a disruptive force which threatens the stability of Stanley's gendered performance, even as she grapples with fantasies of her own.

In this warping space between inward fantasy and outward reality, we catch the first subtle, suspicious echo of a connection[6] between the polka music and Blanche's widowhood in "*There is a silence.* [Stanley] I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type. Stella's spoke of you a good deal. You married once, weren't you? *The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance.* [Blanche] Yes. When I was quite young. The boy—the boy died." (Williams, 1960, p. 24). These sonically psychological threads form a tapestry of fragments, one that becomes fully legible only later in the play, as Blanche's initial response to the music (and to her first encounter with Stanley) is darkened by the heavy materiality of her confession.

Here, the polka works as a dialogic element within the scene, responding to the spoken words as well as to the silences, hesitations, and the emotional subtexts that escape direct articulation. Blanche's line "The boy—the boy died" is fractured, interrupted, nearly unspeakable, and it is around this moment of linguistic breakdown that the music rises, filling the void with a nonverbal utterance that participates in the scene's meaning. While the present conversation unfolds, the music ushers in a past that never fully recedes. This coexistence of voices (spoken, remembered, sonic) produces a polyphonic/many-voiced structure in which multiple emotional and narrative dimensions are held in tension, each refracting the others.

Tennessee Williams orchestrates this convergence of voices so that diegetic music assumes the status of an interlocutor. The recurring polka, in particular, functions as a voice that refracts Blanche's inner life while maintaining a figurative "autonomy", shaping meaning as if independently of spoken dialogue. This layering evokes Mikhail Bakhtin's theorization of polyphony, defined as a structure in which multiple independent and unmerged voices coexist, each recognized as fully valid within the narrative (Bakhtin, 1984). Just as Bakhtin emphasizes the autonomy of each voice, resisting subsumption under an authorial monologue, Williams's music resists reduction to language, sustaining its own expressive

[6] This was considered the "first subtle, suspicious echo of a connection" because we actually see the music intertwine with Blanche's discourse earlier, on page 18, but in a much simpler tone. It happens when she reveals to Stella that she has lost their childhood home, Belle Reve: "*They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. Blanche slowly nods her head and Stella looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table. The music of the "Blue Piano" grows louder.*" (Williams, 1960, p. 18). It works as a quiet signal of the deeper, more severe emotional entanglements that will unfold.

register. The polka thus complicates the scene's emotional texture: it coexists with memory and speech, amplifying tensions while remaining intertwined with the narrative, producing a genuinely many-voiced dramatic moment.

2. Analytical section

2.1. Music as the flesh of the text

With her all-encompassing persona, Blanche collects a set of both wholehearted and heartbreaking eventualities during her stay at the Kowalskis's residence. She is buzzing, all the time, inside and outside. Following this trail, the use of diegetic music as a continually startling (re-)connection to her past, when allied with the ongoing negotiation of paradoxicalities she experiences — such as truth versus illusion and past versus present — incorporates an excruciating layer of meaning into something that would usually serve merely as a little grace, a decorative flourish in the background of the play. Here, the music has a life of its own, giving flesh to the text as it moves through the scenes like a living actor in the middle of a life-altering spectacle. Alongside metaphors, repetitions and parallelisms, which seem to play an omniscient role, it brings the intangible into presence and gives memory the force of immediacy. For Blanche, each reappearance is more than just a return; it acts as a re-wounding, a quiet spiritual laceration she bears with the delicate composure of someone who interprets their pain as penance.

Crucial to tracing the emotional logic and gradual collapse of the narrative, one of the earliest and most persistent clues Tennessee Williams offers is the undulation of the music: how it walks, sways, and drifts through the scenes like a ghost of what is to come. This chiffon-like movement, particularly the "palpable" entrances of the music in select scenes, can be traced across several sections of the play, initially led by Stanley in "*Stanley enters the kitchen from outside, leaving the door open on the perpetual "Blue Piano" around the corner*" (Williams, 1960, p. 25) and later in "*Stanley appears around the corner of the building. As he rounds the corner the honky-tonk music is heard. It continues softly throughout the scene*" (Williams, 1960, p. 131). This motif culminates powerfully, close to the end of the play, with one of Blanche's last entrances: "*Blanche appears in the amber tight of the door. She has a tragic radiance in her red satin robe following the sculptural lines of her body. The*

"Varsouviana" rises audibly as Blanche enters the bedroom" (Williams, 1960, p. 145). Moments like these transform the music into an explicit auditory symbol of the characters' inner turmoil and emotional states, making their psychological fracture, longing, tenderness, and vulnerability almost tangible. It characterizes and gives weight to their feelings, helping to universalize private suffering and emotional disarray into something collectively legible.

The totality of the music examined thus far corresponds to what would traditionally be understood as the *score* of the play. Yet throughout the play, there are movements — or as previously stated, undulations — in which Tennessee Williams deliberately employs music to support and echo the intensification of the characters' emotional states, at times doing so through vocalized song rather than instrumental score alone. From this perspective, the author selects three songs that, at first glance, may appear divergent in tone and theme, yet all subtly mirror the emotional landscape of the world Williams creates. *Wien, Wien, nur du allein*[7], *Paper Doll*[8] and *It's Only a Paper Moon*[9], remarkable tunes from the early to mid-1900s, ranging from Austrian nostalgia to American swing-era charm, are united by their delicate treatment of longing, illusion, and loss. Each song carries a private ache, a sentimentality that is both tender and deceiving. Beneath their lilting melodies lies a quiet desperation (born from the loss of stability, of trust, and of meaning), a refusal to accept the real, a yearning for what was, or what might have been.

This emotional resonance is especially evident in the character of Blanche DuBois, whose fragile psyche embodies the very tensions these songs evoke. Blanche's clinging to past illusions, her retreat into fantasy, and her desperate search for meaning amidst chaos find their reflection in these melodies. The nostalgia of Sieczyński's *Wien, Wien, nur du allein* parallels her mourning for a lost world; the bittersweet irony of The Mills Brothers's *Paper Doll* mirrors her fear of genuine intimacy and betrayal; while Fitzgerald's *It's Only a Paper Moon* encapsulates her tenuous grasp on reality[10], sustained by a willful belief in illusion. Through

[7] Released by Austrian composer Rudolf Sieczyński in 1912, as part of the Viennese Romanticism.

[8] Released by American quartet The Mills Brothers in 1942, as part of the Jazz Golden Age.

[9] Released by American singer Ella Fitzgerald in 1945, as part of the Jazz Golden Age.

[10] Specifically, the use of Ella Fitzgerald's *It's Only a Paper Moon* further demonstrates how Tennessee Williams envisioned music as an active (foreground) player in the story, as seen in his stage direction describing the moment: "*Blanche is singing in the bathroom a saccharine popular ballad which is used contrapuntally with*

these songs, Tennessee Williams externalizes Blanche's internal struggles more viscerally, word for word, a way of making her turmoil both heard and felt by the audience.

Destruction begins subtly, threading its way through the fabric of the characters' lives like an unseen but inevitable current. What starts as small fractures and misunderstandings gradually escalates, unraveling the fragile bonds that hold their worlds together. When the first major confrontation between Blanche and Stanley erupts, it shatters whatever illusion of domestic harmony remained, cracking open the emotional architecture of the play, and the music follows suit.

Blanche and Stanley become clear opponents in an emotional and territorial war, with the diegetic music responding almost as if it were a sentient presence within the drama itself. It screams and bleeds with them. Williams personifies sound to underscore the volatility of the moment, as in: "*An indistinguishable shrill voice is heard. Stanley hurls phone to floor. Dissonant brass and piano sounds as the rooms dim out to darkness and the outer walls appear in the night light. The "Blue Piano" plays for a brief interval.* [...] [Stanley] STELLLAHHHHH! *The low-tone clarinet moans.*" (Williams, 1960, p. 59). In this passage, the instrumentation externalizes Stanley's outburst. The dissonant brass and moaning clarinet both accompany his violence and give it acoustic form, rendering the chaos he unleashes as something spatial and inescapable. The sound becomes architecture: it fills the rooms, leaks through the walls, and forces the audience to inhabit such emotional wreckage alongside the characters.

Right after this first fight, Stella and Stanley go opposite ways, a gesture prompted solely by Blanche's protests, but what seems like a considerate landmark of division quickly reveals itself as an illusion. The rupture is temporary, for Stella is soon drawn back to Stanley with a force that defies logic or safety. Their separation lasts for about fifteen pages of the script, which for them must have felt like living through a Proustian novel from beginning to end. But for Blanche, there was scarcely time to take a single breath. This moment marks the first real glimpse into the cyclical, almost gravitational nature of the Kowalski's relationship, something sustained purely by its own volatility. The violence, far from ending things, has become part of their emotional language. Flesh to the bone (and to the text), when their

Stanley's speech. [...] *The water goes on loud; little breathless cries and peals of laughter are heard as if a child were frolicking in the tub.*" (Williams, 1960, p. 106). Stanley nicknames her "Canary-bird" because of it.

encounter happens in "*Stella has embraced him — with both arms, fiercely, and full in the view of Blanche. He laughs and clasps [Stella's] head to him. Over her head he grins through the curtains at Blanche.* [...] *With a lingering brightness on their embrace, the music of the "Blue Piano" and trumpet and drums is heard.*" (Williams, 1960, p. 75), what is destroyed is not the couple, but the illusion that their love can be negotiated or redirected by reason.

2.2. Tonal ambiguity

Faintly go the story and the sonnets. When they rise, at times, it is to signal that danger is near. They represent Blanche's repression of her real feelings in real time. The music rises as she continues living a life she deems barely worthy — "the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this—kitchen-candle…" and it faintly lingers and then fades away again as she forgets, briefly, losing herself in the dream of happiness — "[but] sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" (Williams, 1960, p. 102). A new set of ascending and descending, clanking and thundering sounds sours halfway through the narrative, adding a somber tenor to Blanche's grief-stricken recollection of her past regrets:

> *Polka music sounds. In a minor key faint with distance.* [Blanche] We danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later—a shot! *The polka stops abruptly. Blanche rises stiffly. Then, the polka resumes in a major key.* [Blanche] I ran out—all did!—all ran and gathered about the terrible thing at the edge of the lake! I couldn't get near for the crowding. Then somebody caught my arm. "Don't go any closer! Come back! You don't want to see!" See? See what! Then I heard voices say—Allan! Allan! The Grey boy! He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired—so that the back of his head had been—blown away! (Williams, 1960, p. 102).

Blanche's memory is unstable and elusive, much like the polka music that sways unevenly around her recollection. The music's wavering rhythm and tonal shifts mimic the fragmented, haunting nature of her traumatic past: sometimes distant and faint, sometimes sudden and jarring. It reflects how memory itself ebbs and flows, refusing to settle into a clear, coherent narrative. In a single monologue, Blanche reflects upon her youthful discovery of love at sixteen, describing it as a sudden, blinding illumination in an otherwise shadowed

world. She recalls marrying a boy, Allan Grey, who was tender and nervous, "unlike a typical man", and how he silently sought help she was unable to provide. Blanche painfully reveals the moment she discovered Allan's secret relationship with an older man, and that despite this, they pretended all was well. The Varsouviana was playing, years in the past, and also now. The music sways with her memories: the boy breaking away in the middle of the dance, a sudden gunshot stopping the tune, and the tragic revelation of his suicide. She corners this preterit description by confessing her guilt, remembering how she harshly told him, "You disgust me," (Williams, 1960, p. 102) moments before he killed himself. Throughout this confession, Mitch (her would-be companionship and Stanley's narrative foil) listens quietly, his presence a crucial counterpoint between Blanche's fragile grasp on the past and the looming reality of her present.

Mitch molds himself into Blanche as he enters the scene with silent grandeur. He adds a scent of desire to where there had been nothing but destruction. It is in Scene Six that we first notice how the polka surrounds and embraces Blanche's every single move, that is when the diegetic use of music in *A Streetcar Named Desire* becomes an inescapable living presence. And right then and there, Mitch makes it stop for the first time: "*Mitch gets up awkwardly and moves toward her a little. The polka music increases. Mitch stands beside her.* [Mitch] You need somebody. And I need somebody too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche? *He kisses her forehead and her eyes and finally her lips. The polka tune fades out.*" (Williams, 1960, p. 102). The initial overload of minutiae in this courtship, which later adds to the star-crossed, broken element of it, is the ultimate (re-)signifier of Blanche's constant transition from brokenness to wholeness to breaking again. Her cyclical fantasy of happiness. A vicious, twisted symphony, with sounds that have Blanche trapped inside of herself — as if the omniscient drum were her heart. As if anything and everything were one and the same, leaving her unable to separate one from the other: the wheat from the chaff, love from hate, joy from sorrow.

Alan, as the Grey boy, could also be seen as a figure of constant liminality: neither fully present nor entirely gone, existing in the in-between spaces of Blanche's memory and guilt. Analyzing the color symbolism further reinforces this interpretation: Blanche enters the play dressed entirely in *white*, comes from "*a great big place with* white *columns*" (Williams, 1960, p. 07, grifo nosso), claims her name evokes the color *white*, "*like an orchard in spring!*"

(Williams, 1960, p. 54) and even imagines her own death as a romantic fantasy of purity, *"sewn up in a clean* white *sack and dropped overboard—at noon—in the blaze of summer—into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes!"* (Williams, 1960, p. 148). This is further reinforced by the numerous references (nineteen at total) throughout the play to white objects and clothing associated with her. Alan *Grey* introduces a tonal ambiguity that complicates this whiteness. He becomes a spectral emblem of contradiction and blurred boundaries (between light and dark, purity and desire, truth and illusion), mirroring the fragmented, performative nature of Blanche herself. In this sense, his presence/his haunting absence shapes the very instability of identity and memory that defines Blanche's tragic unraveling.

2.3. Blanche's musicalized severance

As heaven falls, Blanche's state of mind begins to "sever" when Stanley threatens, with blazing hostility, to send her back to Laurel, Mississippi. Even when this predicament was still just whispered between Stanley and Stella, Blanche's emotional unraveling was already evident when she exclaimed, "[Blanche] Something has happened!—What is it? [...] You're lying! Something has!" (Williams, 1960, p. 114), staring fearfully at Stella as a distant piano goes into a hectic breakdown. When the revelation is thrown at her in "[Blanche] Why, why—Why, it's a— [Stanley] A ticket! Back to Laurel! On the Greyhound! Tuesday! *The Varsouviana music steals in softly and continues playing. Stella rises abruptly and turns her back*" (Williams, 1960, p. 119), Blanche tries to smile, to laugh, but there is nothing left for her to draw strength from. Never clean, never satisfied, never pure again, always on the run, Blanche dissipates, becoming a ghost of herself, drifting through memory and fantasy as if reality had closed its doors on her. Her breakdown is orchestrated in fragments: a trembling voice, a misplaced laugh, a piano that plays only in her mind. When the light touches her face, she recoils; when the truth knocks, she spins another fantasy. And in this slow, almost operatic descent, the audience witnesses a person unraveling, each fragile defense she ever constructed violently stripped away, leaving her utterly exposed to the world.

Even the remote possibility of returning to *Belle Reve*, to her old life, her old mistakes, her old regrets sends Blanche into a spiral. And the music follows this downward, whispering and screaming to her. "*The rapid, feverish polka tune, the 'Varsouviana,' is heard.*

The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her, and she seems to whisper the words of the song." (Williams, 1960, p. 122). The polka emerges here as an auditory embodiment of Blanche's guilt and unresolved trauma, particularly tied to her young husband's suicide. The music's presence is entirely diegetic in the psychological sense: it is not heard by the other characters but exists in Blanche's "auditory" hallucinations, a cruel accompaniment to her private descent. The polka, instead of simply representing memory, re-enacts its torment, repeating like a broken record at every moment Blanche's composure falters. Now, her drinking becomes a form of self-medication, an attempt to drown out both the literal music and the emotional weight it carries within her. This auditory torment is momentarily interrupted when Mitch arrives again:

> Mitch climbs the steps to the door and rings. Blanche is startled. [Blanche] Who is it, please? [Mitch] Me. Mitch. The polka tune stops. She offers him her lips. He ignores it and pushes past her into the flat. She looks fearfully after him as he stalks into the bedroom. [Blanche] My, my, what a cold shoulder! [...] The unforgivable insult to a lady! But I forgive you. I forgive you because it's such a relief to see you. You've stopped that polka tune that I had caught in my head. Have you ever had anything caught in your head? No, of course you haven't, you dumb angel-puss, you'd never get anything awful caught in your head! (Williams, 1960, p. 122)

The sudden cessation of the polka upon Mitch's entrance marks a pivotal moment. Blanche now sees in Mitch a kind of salvation, someone who might anchor her to reality and rescue her from her own mind, functioning as a temporary reprieve from madness, a living substitute for peace. Blanche's flustered blend of flirtation, sarcasm, and fragile confession, like calling him a "dumb angel-puss" who could never understand such mental torment, exposes how alone she truly is in her suffering. She is not the only one to feel it, but she is the only one to be psychologically affected by it. The polka is silenced but its return is inevitable, just as the emotional collapse it signifies can not be halted by mere human presence. The music, therefore, becomes a diagnostic tool within the diegesis: its presence or absence reflects Blanche's internal weather, and her attempt to use Mitch as a cushion between herself and the unbearable echo of memory ultimately foreshadows the collapse of both her illusions and her mental coherence.

The brief silence Blanche experiences with Mitch is quickly undone as the Varsouviana resurfaces, signaling the return of her inner torment. Its recurrence is no longer

private, erupting into the dialogue and collapsing the boundary between Blanche's hallucinations and the audience's perception of reality. "[Blanche] I'll just—*She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again.*—pretend I don't notice anything different about you! That—music again... [Mitch] What music? [Blanche] The polka tune they were playing when Allan—Wait!" (Williams, 1960, p. 123). In this moment, the music becomes fully anchored to the trauma of her young husband Allan Grey's death. The Varsouviana no longer acts as a generalized symbol of regret; knowing that Blanche's cruel words precipitated his suicide, the sound is now inseparable from the night of that singular event. Her vagueness, her gesture to her forehead, and the fragmented syntax of her speech suggest both profound distress and a mind straining under the weight of memory. Mitch's confused response — "What music?" — reinforces his inability to access her interior world, widening the emotional gap between them.

This pivotal hallucination culminates with a final sonic rupture: "*A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.* [Blanche] There now, the shot! It always stops after that. *The polka music dies out again.* [Blanche] Yes, now it's stopped. [Mitch] Are you boxed out of your mind?" (Williams, 1960, p. 123). The gunshot is not a real sound. It is the remembered echo of Allan's suicide; the moment Blanche relives again and again in her mind. Her relief is haunting as she has come to expect this sequence of sounds, as though she is trapped in a looped score that only concludes with death. The Varsouviana's diegetic presence, and its dependence on the imagined revolver shot to stop, reveals the rigid pattern of Blanche's breakdown. Mitch's final question — "Are you boxed out of your mind?" — exposes again his complete misapprehension of her suffering. For Blanche, the music and the memory are terrifyingly real; for Mitch, they are absurd, inexplicable symptoms. Through this musical motif, Tennessee Williams transforms Blanche's trauma into something sonically tangible, mapping the contours of her madness while also dramatizing her isolation. The audience hears what Mitch cannot, and in that dissonance, the tragic dimension of Blanche's inner life painfully widens.

2.4. The song of the songless

With Mitch becoming her only possibility at having something that at least resembles a grounding force, Blanche begins to release fragments of her oneiric yet realistic

stream of consciousness. She is a multitude, a shifting constellation of personas and performances and Mitch, knowingly or not, accepts at least a portion of this fractured self. He both challenges and (sort of) embraces it, even when death's chant is all Blanche can hear. As an unreliable character, Blanche's metaphorical descriptions of her past life seem shadowed by the enormity of grief, guilt, and psychological distortion, emotions so overwhelming that they reshape memory into myth, and reality into selective illusion. It casts a spectral haze over her narratives with the truth being obscured, and memory becoming a stage for performance rather than confession.

But, choosing to believe that it happened, I see a correlation between the constant death and rebirth of the polka music and the scene of Alan's death replaying in Blanche's mind non-stop. Blanche's recollections exist in a state of continuous happening and unhappening (as in the idea of *time as a spiral*), where the boundaries between past and present blur under the strain of trauma. Blanche is undergoing a suicidal crusade, every day. In the book *Performances do Tempo Espiralar: Poéticas do Corpo-Tela* (2021), Leda Maria Martins discusses the general view of the passage of time and how it is perceived by scholars who study it:

> "In the images that represent time, the most common—graphically—is that of the *arrow* pointing toward the inexorability of the end and the origin. Even when it points in two directions, it still outlines a way of designating and perceiving time. Likewise, there is the image of the *river*, whose contemplation and access could never be repeated, since the river would always flow in the same sequential direction, without the possibility of turning back—because the river would not be the same, just as the person would no longer be the same, in that instant already being dragged into the future, in a continuous, accelerated, non-cumulative, and irreversible flow. In this conception, *becoming* is always elsewhere, and the present is an *illusion*". (Martins, 2021, p. 15, grifo nosso).

This conception of time as irreversible and linear stands in stark contrast to Blanche's experience, in which the traumatic instant of Allan's death endlessly replays, refusing to be relegated to the past. The Varsouviana functions as the sonic embodiment of this spiral temporality (*i.e.* non-linearity), collapsing the distance between the moment of loss and the present moment, so that Blanche is never free to inhabit the "now" without reliving the "then". In this configuration, Bosi (1990) points out that "each moment that arrives is the death certificate of what once was", leaving only "the immediacy of the body struggling for its

survival". Just like Blanche herself mentioned, "Funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths—not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, "Don't let me go!" Even the old, sometimes, say, "Don't let me go." *As if you were able to stop them!*" (Williams, 1960, p. 19, grifo nosso). Bosi's reflection and Blanche's own morbid observation expose the impossibility of halting time's passage and the inevitability of loss, yet in Blanche's fractured temporality, as described by Martins (2021), the past refuses to "die" in the linear sense. Instead, it resurfaces insistently, animated by the Varsouviana's cyclical return, as if each repetition were both a death and a rebirth of the same moment. This temporal spiral is not confined to memory alone; it reaches outward, reflected in the small, uncanny reminders she encounters along the way.

Blanche's encounter with a Mexican flower vendor, who was offering gaudy tin funeral flowers and wreaths, arrests her in a breathless instant between life and death, a living *memento mori* whose lurid, metallic blooms echo the inevitability she can not escape. Each artificial blossom pulses with a beauty doomed to corrosion, each gesture a reminder that all is already slipping. The Varsouviana coils in her ears, a musical accusation: the past refuses to recede, every loss repeating itself like a wound (re)opening. The polka tune fades in again. Mitch, undone by her "uncleanliness" in his eyes, starts to fade from her world. Blanche watches everything fall apart and she chants, as if to herself: "Crumble and fade and—regrets—recriminations... 'If you'd done this, it wouldn't've cost me that!' [...] Death—I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are.... We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it!" (Williams, 1960, p. 129). She can not inhabit the present, even in the fleeting presence of another human. Time itself fractures, scattering memory and desire across a spiral that circles back to Allan, to decay, to the ache of recognition that nothing — nothing — dies cleanly. In this collision of music, memory and mortality, Blanche stands suspended; life persists only as echo, as shadow, as unending remembrance.

For a transient instant, death seems to withdraw from its metaphorical orbit, leaving a tense vacuum in which menace can strike with the precision of a predator. Blanche (fledgeling, songless, clipped-winged), still suspended in the echoing spiral of the past, senses a new, immediate threat coiling in the space around her. The lurking danger, embodied by Stanley (serpentine, deliberate, cold-blooded), intrudes like a snake, measuring the interval

between thought and action. Her body, attuned to memory and music, feels the approaching violence before it manifests. The drums of the unseen *Blue Piano*, distant yet insistent, prefigure the roar of impact, a sonic herald of the collision between fragile perception and raw, corporeal force. In this anticipatory moment, the terror is both imminent and inevitable. That once internal spiral of trauma now collides with the external world, and Blanche's fragile agency teeters on the knife-edge of survival:

> Stanley stares at her for a count of ten. The barely audible "Blue Piano" begins to drum up louder. The sound of it turns into the roar of an approaching locomotive. [Stanley] You think I'll interfere with you? Ha-ha! The "Blue Piano" goes softly. She turns confusedly and makes a faint gesture. The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step toward her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips. [Stanley] Come to think of it—maybe you wouldn't be bad to—interfere with… He takes another step. She smashes a bottle on the table and faces him, clutching the broken top. [Stanley] Oh! So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house! He springs toward her, overturning the table. She cries out and strikes at him with the bottle top but he catches her wrist. [Stanley] Tiger—tiger! Drop the bottle top! Drop it! We've had this date with each other from the beginning! She moans. The bottle top falls. She sinks to her knees. He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly. (Williams, 1960, p. 139).

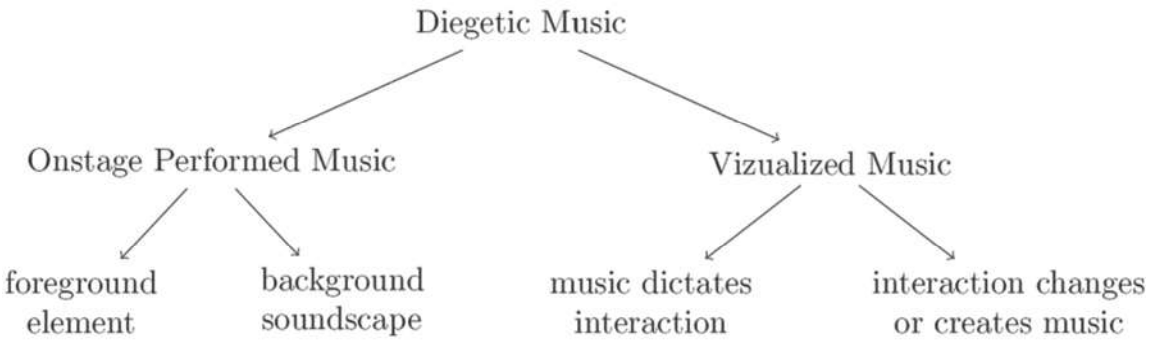
As the story spirals towards its climax, the symphonic chaos inside Blanche's head swells to a fevered pitch. Stanley has just returned from the hospital where his child was born, yet he is no herald of life. He is predator incarnate. Cold, deliberate, unstoppable. The fragile boundary between Blanche's illusions and reality shatters. The music begins softly, a distant pulse, and then drums pound, rising, building, until it roars like a locomotive hurtling towards her. Jungle cries pierce through, inhuman, relentless. Blanche flails, struggles and sinks. Reality folds over her, primal, irredeemable, consuming. Every note, every scream, every motion tightens the coil of terror she cannot escape. That *once internal spiral of trauma* now lashes outward: tangible, inescapable, unrelenting. Unclean.

2.5. The motifs and the trumpet that herald the end

Before diving further, it is worth pausing to consider the broader framework in which these sonic eruptions operate. The interplay between music and drama in *A Streetcar*

Named Desire works as a deliberate ornamentation within the systematic diegetic structure that Tennessee Williams exploits to both fracture and intensify our notions of time, emotion and reality. To visualize this more clearly, the following figure maps out the principal forms of diegetic music as theorized by Berndt (2011):

Figure 1 - A systematic overview of all forms of diegetic music.



Source: Berndt (2011).

Among these categories, *A Streetcar Named Desire* gravitates most ardently towards the usage of onstage performed music as a foreground element, a feature that "[very consciously] replaces speech" (Berndt, 2011, p. 61). Williams elevates music beyond background texture, thrusting it into the dramatic spotlight and giving sound an agency that rivals dialogue and body language. The Varsouviana, the jungle cries, and finally the hot trumpet all erupt as sonic intrusions that fracture the scene and invade Blanche's (un)consciousness. Sound, in effect, becomes the play's truest antagonist, a relentless force that anticipates and puppeteers with Blanche's undoing, preparing the ground for the trumpet's final, devastating call. Blurring the line between reality and imagination, it ends up prompting questions about the existence of figures such as Alan Grey and the veracity of her narratives, thereby reinforcing music's role as the architect of Blanche's psychological collapse.

These sonic intrusions again mark Blanche's unraveling. The hot trumpet signals Blanche's demise. In reading this play with a class of twenty students specializing in literary criticism, literature teaching, and creative writing, many questioned whether Alan had ever truly existed. Many wondered whether anything Blanche had ever said was true. Her engagement with her own story can definitely be read as a coping mechanism, a way to weave lies about her life, her affairs and her necessities. Yet I hold in the belief that Blanche is not someone who would ever lie about death. Her intimacy and experience with it renders her a

mirror, silently echoing every clamorous sound she has ever known. It all passes through her. It all passes through Stella too.

In one of the last conversations exchanged by the DuBois sisters, Blanche momentarily slips into a register tinged with religious reverberation. After Stella mistakes the color of Blanche's jacket, she reframes Stella's description, insisting, "It's Della Robbia blue[11]. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures" (Williams, 1960, p. 147). It is one of those rare moments she abandons her habitual color white motif, trading the purity she has long performed/seeked for for a borrowed mantle of sacredness. Soon after, the cathedral bells chime. Blanche clings to them: "Those cathedral bells—they're the only clean thing in the Quarter. Well, I'm going now. I'm ready to go. I can smell the sea air. The rest of my time I'm going to spend on the sea. And when I die, I'm going to die on the sea" (Williams, 1960, p. 148). The chimes mark her apparent, superficial readiness for departure, a ritual summoned into another life, or perhaps only into madness. For a moment, she imagines transcendence, but the sound is already funereal, a prelude to the asylum where she will be sent. Her Virgin Mary-blue robe and the cathedral bells fold together into an ironic liturgy: not salvation, but *crucifixion*.

From now on, Stanley commands, Stella submits, the neighbors obey, and Blanch cannot locate herself within their orchestration. The stage directions render her disorientation tangible: "*Drums sound very softly.* [Stella] Everything packed? [Blanche] My silver toilet articles are still out. [Stella] Ah! [Eunice] They're waiting in front of the house. [Blanche] They! Who's "they"? (Williams, 1960, p. 149). Blanche is physically stuck and psychologically lost. The music, a polka soft, distant, and insistent, folds over her thoughts, whispering her past into the present. Moments of silence stretch taut, broken only by "Stanley steadily shuffling the cards", each sound a measure of control that she can not resist. She hangs suspended, judged and condemned by forces beyond her. The music inhabits the space between her consciousness and her perception; it presses her memories, fears, and illusions into both

[11] The Della Robbia shade of blue refers to the cobalt-pigmented tin glaze refined and popularized by Luca della Robbia and his family in their terracotta sculptures of the Italian Renaissance. It became closely associated with Virgin Mary's robe in devotional art, carrying connotations of purity and sanctity. (Kupiec, 2020).

unbearable clarity and obscurity. The architecture here becomes the executioner, structuring the scene and dictating the rhythm of her every breath.

> [Stanley] Did you forget something? [Blanche, shrilly] Yes! Yes, I forgot something! She rushes past him into the bedroom. Lurid reflections appear on the walls in odd, sinuous shapes. The "Varsouviana" is filtered into a weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle. Blanche seizes the back of a chair as if to defend herself. The Matron advances on one side, Stanley on the other. Divested of all the softer properties of womanhood, the Matron is a peculiarly sinister figure in her severe dress. Her voice is bold and toneless as a firebell. [Matron] Hello, Blanche. The greeting is echoed and re-echoed by other mysterious voices behind the walls, as if reverberated through a canyon of rock. [Stanley] She says that she forgot something. The echo sounds in threatening whispers. [Stanley] What did you forget, Blanche? [Blanche] I—I— [Blanche, retreating in panic] I don't know you—I don't know you. I want to be—left alone—please! [Matron] Now, Blanche! [Echoes, rising and falling] Now, Blanche—now, Blanche—now, Blanche!

In the climactic moments of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, music assumes a new distorted layer. The familiar Varsouviana, once soft and distant, twists and recoils against itself, filtered through a lens of striking paranoia. It merges with the jungle cries and other diegetic noises, creating a soundscape both intimate and invasive. The audience is now totally drawn into Blanche's perspective, hearing what she hears, experiencing what she experiences: a hallucinated symphony of dread where every note signals a threat and every echo magnifies her vulnerability.

As she seizes the back of a chair, trying to defend herself, and as the Matron advances, the filtered polka and reverberating echoes transform the stage into a space where reality and hallucination collide panoramically. The repeated voices, Stanley's echoing prompts, and the rising and falling cries create an uneven rhythm that heightens suspense and drives the relentless pace of Blanche's capture. The audience is caught in her panic, sensing the off-kilter cadence that shapes how she perceives threat. Music becomes the ultimate vehicle for paranoia, bending the space around her, emphasizing her isolation, and marking the inevitability of what is to come.

Blanche is taken, escorted past the shadows of her fading illusions. Her resistance falters, her voice trembles, and the world closes in with unyielding insistence. She is suspended between memory, fear, and the judgement of others, each sound a reminder (a never-ending reminder) of her helplessness. In this final, orchestrated surrender, the music

traces the ultimate collapse of her world, stripping away her autonomy and the quiet complicity of those around her. As she is led away, the last line pierces through the cacophony, fragile and unadorned, almost songless and clipped-winged: "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams, 1960, p. 153).

As she goes away, Stella experiences death in a "luxurious, inhuman way, surrendering completely". Blanche is still breathing but her body is gone; she screams to be taken seriously, for them to not let her go. But she *goes* either way. At the same time, Stanley's presence is staged as voluptuous excess: "Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now, love. Now, now, love. Now, love…", he whispers, kneeling beside Stella and shielding her, unfastening her blouse as the *Blue Piano* swells for one last time (Williams, 1960, p. 154). What Tennessee Williams describes as "luxurious sobbing and sensual murmur" overwhelms the audience, drowning Blanche's plea beneath sexual reconciliation. The play collapses the register of desire and destruction, showing how Stella chooses survival through submission, while Blanche, crucified and institutionalized, now depends on the very structures that destroy her, because no other choice remains. With the trumpet, drums, brass, clarinet and piano now dead, silence reigns; the motifs are thereby revamped.

3. Conclusion

As richly described by Martins (2021), "like the word, *death* is an event, a necessary act in the dynamic of transformation and renewal of all that exists, allowing the continuous movement of the cosmos and its permanent renewal and revitalization." (grifo nosso). In the play, this idea of death as transformation is ironically inverted as Blanche's institutionalization signals rupture instead of renewal. This collapse is a personal and familial cataclysm that blocks the movement of continuity she dreamed about and longed for.

Martins continues: "While, on the family level, death means the loss of the individual, on the collective level it represents enrichment. Thus, the importance of funeral rites, which act as forces that restore the balance momentarily suffered and broken: a way to exert control over death, the gaps, and the voids". Finally, Martins observes: "[Such] balance is restored through the performances of funeral ceremonies, which, while in part can be considered rites of passage, also constitute rites of permanence, for from them ancestors are born". Blanche's departure is a *mauvais rêve*, a counterpoint to everything the DuBois knew

from childhood, from *Belle Reve* to their version of the present. The play closes with the failure of this ritual, a distorted, songless, ritual-less "funeral" in which no balance whatsoever is restored. The game ends in destruction, even though Stanley is still there, for the desire, for the life he fantasized about, for the wish of owning everything once again.

And the *Blue Piano* expressed it as it "expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here" (Williams, 1960, p. 1). As diegetic music that regulates motion and acting, it "represents the state of the environment. [It heals, hides, invades, twists, lulls, softens, and explores the narrative with insurmountable strength], abruptly changing the background atmosphere, signaling and indicating that something happened, that something has fundamentally changed" (Berndt, 2011, p. 63). And something did happen, but did anything really, actually change? The *Blue Piano* will play again, mournful yet insistent, echoing through the rooms and hearts of the living and the lost, carrying on as life itself does: beyond individuals, beyond destruction, beyond desire. It *will* play again, reminding us that the world endures, unceasing, perpetual, boundless.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams demonstrates that the emotional force of a play arises from the intricate architecture of its narrative and sonic elements. The diegetic music and recurring songs allied to the motifs of desire, destruction, memory, and anger function as structural and affective instruments, guiding the audience's engagement with the drama. In this respect, the play exemplifies Aristotle's insight: "Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece. [...] For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place." (Aristotle, 1922, p. 58). By embodying affective power in both the diegesis and the interplay of musical and thematic motifs, Williams ensures that the audience experiences the tragic and the passionate at a structural level, where the resonance of desire and destruction persists beyond the visual and the immediate, leaving an indelible impression long after the curtain falls.

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