CAMINO REAL BETWEEN EXPRESSIONISM AND MAGIC REALISM

Miruna Ciocoi-Pop
Assist. Prof., PhD, „Lucian Blaga" University of Sibiu

Abstract: Having Tennesse Williams' Camino Real as a focal point, the present paper tries to underline the influence of both Expressionism and Magic Realism on the play. The presence of expressionist elements in Camino Real has been made clear by many critics. The present paper reiterates them, trying to add a new dimension to the analysis by focusing on the similarities of certain aspects of the play with Magic Realism.

Keywords: Expressionism, magic realism, humanity, theatre, dramatic dimensions

The talent of Tennessee Williams is evident not only in his plays, but also through the fact that he was the author of numerous film scripts, novels, short stories and poems; in other words, what some would call a complete artist. "The 'novelty' of his dramatic work was evidenced by his traditional technique, the use of the Southern idiom, his stunningly vivid dialogue, and the 'shocking' themes (at least for the time when his plays were first performed)."[1] His dramatic works are particularly striking for "compassionately exploring the failures, frustrations and tensions entailed by human relationships and interactions."[2] *Camino Real* (1953) is a very illustrative example of the essence of Williams' work: it depicts with great empathy and compassion the most human frustrations that come with the senescence of once great, heroic figures: Don Quixote, Casanova, Marguerite Gautier, Lady Mulligan, and Kilroy – the former boxing champion with a heart of gold whose tremendous asset proved to be the reason of his leap. Albeit in perfect post-modern fashion the author and the text must be considered separately, more often than not, certain events in the author's life have great impact on his or her writing. Williams himself has had his share of hardship growing up in the suburbs of St. Louis, mocked for his Southern accent, dealing with the loss of his mentally ill sister[3]. Having dealt with suffering himself, his inclination towards a compassionate analysis of human relationships seems natural.

Camino Real, like many other theatre plays of the early twentieth century, falls under the umbrella of Expressionism, an "artistic style in which the artist seeks to depict not objective reality but rather the subjective emotions and responses that objects and events arouse within a person. The artist accomplishes this aim through distortion, exaggeration, primitivism, and fantasy and through the vivid, jarring, violent, or dynamic application of formal elements."[4] Although emblematic for many artists of the late 19th and early 20th century, Williams seems to have manifested his expressionist literary brilliance in drama. It comes as no surprise that Expressionism and theatre form a powerful mechanism, since the former is characterized by self-expression, subjectivity, the arousal of the senses triggered within the artist, all of which were, at times, achieved through "distortion, exaggeration,

[1] Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop, *Notes on Modern American Literature* (Sibiu: "Lucian Blaga" University Press), 170.
[2] *Ibid*.
[3] *Ibid*.
[4] *Expressionism, Britannica*, March 22, 2021. *https://www.britannica.com/art/Expressionism*

primitivism, and fantasy"[5]. Theatre is by definition a raw and unswerving form of subjective, individual expression of human nature. The fact that, according to the Britannica Encyclopedia quoted before, Expressionism paints a canvas of personal human emotions through the use of fantasy, makes it somewhat similar, in certain respects, to another highly appreciated and long-serving literary genre: Magic Realism, so masterfully enriched by such authors as Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, or Haruki Murakami. Much like Expressionism, Magic Realism adds magic elements, that is, fantasy, to the picture of the realistic modern world. It is characterized by a "matter-of-fact inclusion of fantastic or mythical elements into seemingly realistic fiction."[6]

In his foreword to *Camino Real*, Tennessee Williams discloses details about his laborious work behind the play, as well as the response of both audience and theatre critics. It is in the beginning of this foreword that the author draws a parallel between his play and the creation of a world that would create great confusion to some readers and viewers:

> More than any other work that I have done, this play has seemed to me like the construction of another world, a separate existence. Of course, it is nothing more nor less than my conception of the time and world that I live in, and its people are mostly archetypes of certain basic attitudes and qualities with those mutations that would occur if they had continued along the road to this hypothetical terminal point in it. [7]

The construction of a confusing world, inhabited by relatable characters that represent prototypes, is, at the same time, a trait of Expressionism through the play's ability to articulate subjective human views and feelings, "the stylized presentation of the subjective inner world"[8], but, holds a great deal of, what I would call, reversed Magic Realism, since it depicts realistic characters living in a hypothetical, constructed, imaginary world. Williams was known for the creation of vivid dialogues about subjects that were shocking at the time, which explains why in the same foreword he states that "there have been plenty of indications already that this play will exasperate and confuse a certain number of people which we hope is not so large as the number it is likely to please."[9] The rawness of drama and on-stage performances resides in the vulnerability of writers, directors, and actors who are direct witnesses of the public's reactions. The staged *Camino Real*, an expressionistic and outer-worldly experience, was, as the author himself exemplifies, not easy to digest: "At each performance a number of people have stamped out of the auditorium, with little regard for those whom they have had to crawl over, almost as if the building had caught on fire, and there have been sibilant noises on the way out and demands for money back (…)."[10]

Williams himself stated many a time, whether in interviews or in his own book of Memoirs, that his time was the age of anxiety, where most people were afraid of life and deeply troubled. He himself lead a troublesome life of addiction, nevertheless, his personal compassion is very much reflected in *Camino Real*, as is his aim to create a certain type of character: "I have always been more interested in creating a character that contains something crippled. I think nearly all of us have some kind of defect, anyway, and I suppose I found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life,

---

[5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Magic realism, Britannica*, March 22,2021. https://www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism
[7] Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), 119, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up.
[8] Jonathan L. Chambers, "*Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theathre: Bodies, Voices, Words"*, *Research Gate*, March 22, 2021, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236812281_Expressionism_and_Modernism_in_the_American_Theatre_Bodies_Voices_Words_review
[9] *Ibid*., 120.
[10] *Ibid*, 120.

who were desperate to reach out to another person."[11] A look at Kilroy, the epitome of the American Sports superstar, Jacques Casanova, the greatest seducer of all time, Don Quixote – the conqueror, or Marguerite Gautier, the courtesan aux camélias, all outlined by Williams bereft of their legendary aura, will prove just that: Williams (re)built characters who are desperate to reach out to another human being, and who, in absence of their past youth and juvenescent flamboyance, become troubled inhabitants of the Camino Real – a realm of physical and moral perdition, a place far away from the Terra Incognita - desperate to escape and equally unable to accept the belittling that they are subjected to by their inevitable downfall and human ruination.

Camino Real is a God-forsaken setting, inhabited by loan sharks, alcoholics, perverted psychics, gipsies, in other words, a realm of lost souls. The only persona who seems dissimilar is Kilroy, the archetypal American with a positive outlook on human existence, whose role seems to be to direct everyone on the Camino Real back on the right track. Not surprisingly he ends up wearing the Patsy outfit, ridiculed and, literally, discarded by the omnipresent Streetcleaners, whom he hears and fights constantly: "I want to be on my feet when the Streetcleaners come for me."[12] As a matter of fact, the Streetcleaners are omnipresent, almost a Leitmotiv of the play. They are a symbol and a constant reminder of the ephemeral existence of Camino Real's inhabitants, an abhorrent presence throughout the entire play, lurking around every street corner, waiting to discard any fatalities on the Camino Real. Even though all major characters in the play are equally significant in their symbolism, Kilroy, the only character who cannot be traced back into well-known literary history, takes on, or at least tries to, the role of the saviour. He is the visionary American free spirit, a pleasant, friendly presence, who wishes to enlighten and help out the other inhabitants of the Camino Real. In his ardent desire to save the others, it is only towards the end of the play that he realizes the magnitude of his own tragedy, which is no less great than any of the others'. Empowered by the glory of his past boxing career and the picture of his wife, the truth that he is just as struck by his own humanity as the ones whom he feels sorry for is only revealed to him at the very end.

In keeping with the core values of Expressionism, Williams' masterful portrayal of humanity, as well as its inherent drama and trials, highlight that humanity, in all its misery, degradation, splendour and opulent insignificance is what makes us human after all. The entire play is a celebration of all that is human, as reflected in Esmeralda's ending monologue, which encapsulates the essence of the play's characters:

> God bless all con men and hustlers and pitch-men who hawk their hearts on the street, all two-time losers who're likely to lose once more, the courtesan who made the mistake of love, the greatest of lovers crowned with the longest horns, the poet who wandered far from his heart's green country (…), look down with a smile tonight on the last cavaliers (…), and visit with understanding and something that's almost tender those fading legends that come and go in this plaza (…).[13]

Speaking of the characters, their selection is indeed luscious, reminding of Expressionism as they are portrayed in all their misery and glory, as well as somewhat reminiscent of Magic Realism, since the entire realm of the Camino Real, the real path, seems to be imaginary and populated by a magical revival of former glorious personas. What might seem to be a clash between Expressionism and Magic Realism is rather a blissful union: legendary figures who stayed forever young in the collective memory,

[11]. James Miller, "*Heritage of American Literature"*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991), p.299, apud. Dumitru Ciocoi-Pop, "*Notes on Modern American Literature"*, p.170

[12] Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), 220, 22 March 2021, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up

[13] *Ibid*., 229.

are now painfully similar to the everyday human being: an elderly Casanova, still curelessly romantic, Marguerite Gaultier, la dame aux camélias, is now in such a state where she has to pay men for their company, Lord Byron, the lost wanderer in the desert, Don Quixote, the dreamer and idealist, the cavalier who cannot exist unless he fights in search of a possibly inexistent cause. On the Camino Real all these idealistic figures seem to slowly fade away, crushed by the immorality and the nothingness of a decaying modern world. But it is only apparently so, since the play ends, as stated before, with a celebration of the human being, of existence, despite its inevitable decay. Esmeralda's monologue towards the end of the play is an encouragement to celebrate human existence in all its splendour, to celebrate existence for existence's sake.

Tennesee Williams, as mentioned in the beginning, found that characters suffering from anxiety, frustration or emotional insecurity were the perfect outlet for his creativity. Thus, it comes to no surprise that a parallel can easily be drawn between the style of his plays and Expressionism, given that many artists, especially in Germany, where the genre came to be, expressed frustration, fear or repugnance in their art, particularly in painting, according to the Britannica Encyclopedia[14]. The characters in *Camino Real* also seem to mirror the author's attitude towards the ugliness of the world. Expressionist drama in particular focused on the internal state of the individual, on his mental and emotional condition, rather than on the outer world: "Emphasis was laid not on the outer world, but on the internal, on an individual's state of mind."[15] The outer world was just the trigger of intrinsic emotions which stood at the centre of Expressionist theatre. A smouldering revolt against the discomfort of old age, a natural clinging to the beauty of youth is to be observed in all leading characters of Williams' play, especially pointing out the lack of solutions in the inescapable tableaux of the Camino Real.

Oxymoronic as it may seem, the Camino Real, the real path, reminds the reader or viewer of an imaginary realm where some of the most iconic figures of world literature are brought together. Nevertheless, Magic Realism, although containing fantastic elements, which "are considered normal in this world"[16], sets itself apart from fantasy, since its setting is the real, modern world with its everyday, ordinary people and society. Williams' characters fit into this slot perfectly, as does the setting, the Camino Real itself. Its denomination is far from being a coincidence, it is strikingly similar to modern society, which discards of their elderly and often fails to comprehend how ridiculed a human being may feel at the end of his or her career or youth. *Camino Real* is a most lurid description of present-day society enriched with the magic presence of the most unexpected characters. In *Camino Real*, on the other hand, one can notice the absence of the supernatural, which is another trait of this genre. However, the symbiosis between the reality of the New World, American society, and the preposterous presence of the aforementioned characters, fortune-tellers, the dry fountain of youth that is, ironically enough, the source of death, all are very much reminiscent of Magic Realism. Together they create a harmonious absurdity.

One cannot leave the human(itarian) nature of the play go unobserved, since the play describes in a most accurate way a world of humiliation and cruelty where man hopes for an honourable escape. John Whiting writes in his appreciation of the play: "The Camino Real is at the frontiers of experience. The sudden movement, the

[14] *Expressionism in Literature, Britannica*, March 22, 2021 https://www.britannica.com/art/Expressionism
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] *What is Magical Realism? Definition and Examples of Magical Realism in Literature plus & Magical Realism Novels You Should Read*, *Masterclass*, March 22, 2021, https://www.masterclass.com/articles/what-is-magical-realism#what-is-magical-realism

mysterious and savage violence, and the silence cannot at once be comprehended but must be accepted. As in life the moments of beauty, when we are frightened and lonely, are not moments of reality."[17] It is in the same appreciation where he states that the play is one of the middle years, where the characters are forced to be realistic, while at the same time holding on to their romantic idealism. "But absolute realism leads to disgust."[18], he says, and the undeniable truth that mankind is rubbish. I find this last remark absolutely true, which is why I sense that the hint of fantasy or reversed magic realism in the play is indispensable, since it counteracts the disgust of reality by adding a hint to dreaminess to an otherwise cruel and unjust world.

"An over-all atmosphere of hysteria, which from time to time erupts without warning in an almost uncontrollable frenzy, permeates the whole work. Every possibility of electronic control in light and sound is employed to its maximum."[19] These words remind me of the masterful staging of Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real* at the "Radu Stanca" National Theatre in Sibiu, in early 2020, directed by Cosmin Chivu. The director kept the staging very true to the original text, concomitantly adding his personal touch and vision to the overall play, as well as on the stage setting. Music and lyrics by Andrei C. Şerban offered a poignant, touching, rounding musical veil to the play. Cosmin Chivu's artistic approach to Williams' play, which is far from being an easily digestible one, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, brought out its very essence, namely that it is almost dehumanizing to accept the insignificance of one's own life without falling into the arms of a vice of some sort: alcoholism, perversion, madness.

Aside from his artistic vision, the director casted a handful of brilliant actors who slipped perfectly into the skin of their characters: a Kilroy pictured as a boxing saviour, Jacques Casanova in a wheelchair, desperate to cling to true love discovered too late, Marguerite whose passion and fury are sensed beyond any limits and their relationship which might be a forewarning to lovers in general, a Sisyphean Don Quixote, or a lost Byron who is wandering in a desert – an image in perfect contrast to his historical death in water.

The play is, beyond the shadow of a doubt, worth seeing, if not for the sheer pleasure of viewing a theatre play, at least as a reminder of what mankind truly is. The most recent staging of the *Camino Real* at the national theatre in Sibiu is equally eye-opening to both sceptics and dreamers, to the hopeless and the hopeful alike, since, in its essence, it conveys perfectly the message of Williams' play: the spectacle of being human with all the frustration, fear, blissfulness and certain uncertainties that come with it. What is more, this interpretation of Williams' play goes against the general reaction that it provoked on Broadway, where it was not appreciated at its true value. It goes without saying that *Camino Real* was ahead of its time, as Williams felt "imaginatively freer in creating it than theatrical circumstances usually permitted."[20]

Even though the overall atmosphere of the play is decrepit and disenchanted, one scene in particular translates the beauty of devotion and passion in its most emotional form: after the departure of the much-awaited and unannounced Fugitivo (the escapee), the only ticket out of the Camino Real – a moment of absolute crudeness where the

[17] John Whiting in the foreword to Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up, 117

[18] *Ibid*., 117.

[19] Hana, Khaleif Ghani, "*Expressionism in Tennessee Williams's Camino Real*", March 22, 2021, t https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/24390b57503682f4, las1

[20] Brian, Parker, "Documentary Sources for Camino Real*", Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, 1998, no. 5

desperate inhabitants of the Camino Real literally push and fight for their impossible escape, Jacques Casanova expresses his love for Marguerite, despite her intention to leave without him: "Because you the part of love which is tender. I never knew it before. (…) but never loved until now with the part of love that's tender…".[21] Other critical views, however find that: "In Camino Real one has to be realistic and practical. Dreams and romantic love have no place in it." [22]

The seamless shift from one mental state to another is done in such a skilful manner that only a great playwright such as Tennessee Williams would be capable of, and it is this very transformation of a state into another that perfectly encapsulates human nature. When the Fugitivo arrives, people lose their humanity; Lord Mulligan dies before having any chance to board the plane: "Prudence and Olympe rush out of the hotel half dressed, dragging their furs. Meanwhile Kilroy is trying to make a fast buck or two as a Redcap. The scene gathers wild momentum. (…) Baggage is tossed about, ripped open, smuggled goods seized, arrests made, all amid the wildest importunities, protests, threats, bribes, entreaties."[23]

Camino Real, a play about the misery and degradation of human life, still offers the readers/viewers a glimpse of hope, suggested by the renewal of Casanova and Marguerite's relation: "The violets in the mountains have broken the rocks!"[24]. Reading and watching Tennessee Williams' *Camino Real* means experiencing a magic reality on stage, where logic is often hard to comprehend, and where well-known literary characters come together by expressing their inmost humanity. It is a challenging play to take in, but universally appealing and beautiful through the truths that it puts out so bluntly. Williams is outstanding in his ability to express human loss, downfall, slaughter of identity, resorting to what might seem the most irrational techniques on stage. It is through his creative and technical dramatic emancipation that he managed to create a play about the constraints and sovereignty of human existence, merging Expressionism and, what I see as, Magic Realism, ultimately revealing the universality of human existence.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chambers, Jonathan, L. "*Expressionism and Modernism in the American Theathre: Bodies, Voices,Words"*,Research Gate, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/236812281_Expressionism_and_Modernism_in_the_American_Theatre_Bodies_Voices_Words_review

Ciocoi-Pop, Dumitru. "*Notes on Modern American Literature"*. Sibiu: "Lucian Blaga" University Press, 2001.

Expressionism in Literature. *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/Expressionism.

Magic Realism. *Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/art/magic-realism.

Khaleif Ghani, Hana "*Expressionism in Tennessee Williams's Camino Real*", https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/24390b57503682f4

[21] Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), 191, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up

[22] Hana, Khaleif Ghani, "*Expressionism in Tennessee Williams's Camino Real*", March 22, 2021, https://www.iasj.net/iasj/download/24390b57503682f4, p.12

[23] Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), 191, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up, p.184

[24] Tennessee Williams, "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.) (Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), 233, https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up

Miller, James. "*Heritage of American Literature"*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1991

Parker, Brian. "*Documentary Sources for Camino Real"*, *Tennessee Williams Annual Review*, no. 5 (1998).

Williams, Tennessee. "*The Rose Tattoo. Camino Real",* E. Martin Browne (ed.). Great Britain Hunt: Penguin Books), https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.170966/page/n3/mode/2up