

## Revitalizing Identity in Language: A Kristevan Psychoanalysis of *Suddenly Last Summer*

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### ABSTRACT

Tennessee Williams's plays have frequently been criticized for overt use of poetic language and his constant focus on poetic devices such as alliteration and metaphor, as well as tropes like violence and feminine madness. A psychoanalytic study of his famous drama *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) will enable us to explore the qualities of unresolved psychological complexes in the characters and also in the author himself, as the play is believed to draw strongly upon the playwright's own biography. Towards this end, an intertextual interpretation serves to reflect upon the semiotic disposition of author and characters, which figures out a paradigm of the "transcendental ego" (Moi, 1986, p. 28). This analysis therefore aims at projecting the unconscious of the characters and the author through language, while examining how language can represent characters' identities and their hidden complexes through fragmentation of their identities. Through the analysis it will be shown how the interpretation of poetic language uncovers the unconscious via the effects and affects of devices such as metaphor, metonymy, replacement and condensation. Using a Kristevan interpretation of poetic language and its revelation of the semiotic, this paper therefore attempts to show that violence presented in the text is rooted in the fragmented identities of the characters and their creator and ultimately, it suggests the potential to recover one's identity through poetic language. It may thus offer some clues to puzzling issues that have been misunderstood with regard to the recurrent poetic language and images in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

**Keywords:** psychoanalysis; semiotic; identity; intertextuality; abjection

### INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams's poetics has contributed towards his critical acclaim, and simultaneously, has been the subject of much debate among critics. He has received accolades for the wide range of rhythm, images and symbols he brought to American literature (Adler, 2006) yet at the same time, he has also been criticized for the abundant use of poetic devices and symbols in his works. Ruby Cohn, for instance, describes Tennessee Williams's language as being replete with "gratuitous violence and irrelevant symbols" (Cohn, 1997). One of the main reasons for such critical attacks is that besides adopting

revolutionary language in his drama, he also attempted to deconstruct old Southern social codes by injecting transgressive concepts such as homosexuality, cannibalism, madness, prostitution and violence through his excessive use of poetic language which created a sense of violation to the conventions of dramatic writing codes. Unlike his contemporaries such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller or Edward Albee whose works were highly affected by post war social upheaval, an interpretation of Tennessee Williams's use of violence, madness and deviance from social norms that characterises his mood of malcontent to the period of depression after the war would not suffice, as "the art of today's world has far surpassed in violence and deviance" (O'Connor, 1997). In addition, Williams's plays are seldom noted for their historical value even though they paradoxically changed the history of American drama to give his audience a wonderful understanding of "human nature, human suffering, ... human foibles" (Vitale, 2011), and "enunciate[s] the inhibited conflicts of individuals" (Maleki & Jaihouni, 2014). Therefore, it is probable that he perhaps desired to share something deeper than the mere violation of norms and boundaries, and he desired to convey something which was for him, universal; something that due to the limitations of dramatic form and performance<sup>1</sup>, had been hitherto difficult to depict.

Durham (1971, p. 8) views Tennessee Williams as a major practitioner of poetic drama who combined verbal and nonverbal elements of the theatre to express "a peculiar range of sensibility" which other dramatists failed to express. It would not be a stretch of the imagination to suggest that this "peculiar sensibility" originated from Williams's personal experiences. Philip C. Kolin in *A Guide to Research and Performance* notes that Williams once confessed, *Suddenly Last Summer* was the first work that reflected his emotional trauma (Kolin, 1998, p. 126). Bigsby and Wilmeth Don (2000) concur that "Williams renews his familiar motifs of individual loneliness, sexuality, bigotry, and his collective pains in his dramas, emphatically, in *Suddenly Last Summer*". Considering the uncanny resemblances between Williams's life events and his dramas, as well as the 'abnormal' characters he created who invariably end up either confined to the asylum or demonstrate symptoms of psychosis, it was inevitable that critics would relate Williams's traumatic experience to his subjectivity and his plays, as they are well-known for staging conflicts among impulses, social custom and familial pathology. Jacqueline O'Connor indicates the assertion in her book *Dramatizing Dementia* where she states that like other Williams' plays *Suddenly Last Summer* is based on violence, and while a handful of the best plays focus on madness, she perceives the madness in Williams's works as representing "a collective madness of the modern world" (Bloom, 2007, p. 14). She does not see it as an individual madness that can be attributed to a particular person, hence proposes that the madness Williams presents is the projection of modern women – distorted, frightened, fragmented, highly sensitive, and somewhat neurotic dreamers who, like their creator, are unable to adjust to harsh realities (p. 30). Unlike O'Connor who views madness from a socio-cultural perspective that takes into consideration the overall mood of depression after the World War, Saddik (1998) adopts a more psychological approach to the dramas and believes that the fragmentation of social and psychological identity experienced by characters in Williams's plays is the outcome of a transformation of "unrestricted desire into literal physical fragmentation" (p. 348). This blurring of borders between the physical and the psychical can sometimes be well represented through language. Sofer (1995) for example, comments: "*Suddenly Last Summer* weaves its subject into a glittering skein of language, until we can no longer say for certain where the body ends and discourse begins". Sofer's remark invokes the function of language in constituting the self, and prefigures O'Connor's view that in *Suddenly Last Summer* "language has connections to the unmentionable speaks of prohibited acts of sex and violence" (Bloom, 2009, p. 17). The link between language and identity is a phenomenon that cuts

across geographical boundaries and nationalities - Lee (2003) for instance, points to “a distinctively inseparable relationship between language... and identity.”

Williams’s critics above detected symptoms of psychosis such as madness, narcissism, and violence in his plays, yet they failed to justify the excessive use of poetic language and symbols and their connection with the fragmentation of identity in characters and to Williams’s own psyche. However, poetic language unveils abjection which has a great contribution in identity constitution. Abjection as it is defined by Julia Kristeva is what disturbs “identity, system and order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 4). It is a mode of in-between’s that does not follow any moral consistency. Accordingly, no fixed position or identity is defined for the so-called subject. An intertextual analysis of *Suddenly Last Summer* will detect the sources of such identity fragmentations, violence, madness and lack of consistency in Williams and his characters, and its inevitable reflection in language. Moreover, not only will the analysis work on how language discovers these distorted identities, but it will also show how it reconstructs the identity.

A genotext analysis can project the shattered identities of both characters and the author and their reconfiguration through the text. By definition, genotext refers to “release and articulation of drives<sup>1</sup> as constrained by social codes” (Moi, 1986, p. 28). This is what Julia Kristeva calls the semiotic disposition. Accordingly, “any deviation from grammatical rules” that is perceptible and acceptable (and enjoyable) in the symbolic order can be regarded as genotext. Poetic language, then, aptly fits into genotextual assimilation, and consequently, intertextual analysis.

Adopting Kristeva’s notions of poetic language and semiotic regarding avant-garde writers can justify the noted violence in Williams’s writing. According to Kristeva, poetic devices signify the violence from grammatical rules of language as they signify affects and effects that shatter meaning. In *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) Kristeva analyzes avant-garde writers and points out that the language they use contains elements that shatter the conventions that usually make a text meaningful to readers. She emphasizes that in the case of the avant-garde text, words do not always signify the real meaning since they are loaded with affects that only poetic language can release. This means that Williams’s avant-garde texts that are overloaded with poetic language and affects, and vibrate with violence, psychosis, and psychological fragmentations lend themselves well to a Kristevan intertextual analysis because seen in this light, his poetic language with its various figures of speech such as metaphor and metonymy can then be analyzed using a psychoanalytic approach to disclose condensation and replacement. In this manner, the trans-symbolic<sup>2</sup> sphere which is the sphere between unconscious and conscious is open to a semiotic interpretation which reads the effects of poetic devices in the text such as “rhythm, repetition, and alliteration, and sometimes nonsensical articulations” (Kristeva, 1989, p. 42) as being linked to the bodily drives and charges, conveyed through the symbolic order. Williams’s devices such as alliteration, metonymy, condensation and replacement will be examined to expose the violence, fragmentation and personal traumatic experience of the dramatist through the affects he projects onto the text. In other words, a discussion of the poetic language used in *Suddenly Last Summer* will reveal the mal-subjectivity of the author in its violent and fragmented state, and suggest how the author’s subjectivity is reconstructed through the text. Analyzing language in an attempt to deconstruct a writer’s subjectivity is an accepted practice in language studies: Hassanpour and Hashim (2012) for example analyze linguistic

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<sup>1</sup> This is naturally violent, maddening and melancholic.

<sup>2</sup> Trans-symbolic here refers to the hybrid sphere that contains both symbolic and pre-symbolic features; poetic language resonates with such qualities.

elements in the poetry of Forough Farrokhzad, specifically the micro-elements of her words to determine her stance towards the position of women in Iranian society. In a similar vein, this paper analyzes poetic language; however it will read beyond the word units in an attempt to detect the sources of the violence (both in terms of writing and with regard to social norms) in the fragmented psyche of the author. The assumption here is that Williams' psyche is fragmented because he is an object, hence the language he produces through his drama can be viewed as an attempt to reconstruct his identity.

#### ALLITERATION

As a literary device, alliteration refers to the "repetition of a sound in a sequence of nearby words" (Abrams, 2005) that show the poetic quality of language and consequently, its semiotic disposition. According to Cohn (1997) "William's expressive dialogue embraces rhythm, alliteration, repetition, overlap...and incompleteness" (p. 242), and may puzzle readers. This is one of the criticisms made against Tennessee Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer* where there is a lot of repetition, sometimes of nonsensical sounds that can be labelled as empty words. Close textual analysis, however, reveals an intentional attempt to connote the themes underlying the seemingly nonsensical sounds. The first instance of this effect can be detected from the title: *Suddenly Last Summer* where the "s" sound is repeated in every word of the title. The repetition of "s" not only indicates hesitation but also reflects silence that thematically pronounces one of the major themes of the play. First and foremost, the "s" sound is also the initial letter for the name Sebastian, the main protagonist whose identity is discovered in silence after his death by his silent<sup>3</sup> cousin Catherine. Sebastian, the main character of the play who is devoured by the "famished" boys in Cabeza de Lobo, is represented in the play through his silence and absence. While his obsessive mother tries to conceal his homosexual traits and impose fake truths about him, the babbling Catherine whose brain is being targeted for lobotomy reveals what has been sealed in silence for a long time. In scene four, it is stated that Catherine has been silent for years until she was raped by a man at the Mardi Grass; right after the incident she attempts to break the silence by continuously writing her diary, yet addressing herself in the third person. In this context, the "s" sound maintains the silence of the characters both in their absence, like the dead Sebastian, and in their presence like Catherine with the secrets that she reveals during the course of the play which are finally confirmed by Dr. Sugar at the end. Connoting concepts of silence, death, and truth, the alliterated "s" are all encompassed in the title.

Another instance of repetition can be found in the following text where Mrs Venable talks about the sand beach during her last trip with Sebastian:

Mrs Venable:

To escape the flesh-eating birds that made the sky almost as black as the beach!  
And the sand all alive, all alive... while the birds hovered and swooped to attack  
and hovered and – swooped to attack! (Williams, 1958, p. 20)

Birds symbolize masculinity (Taylor, 2006, p. 69) and as such the text reveals itself as masculine too. According to Kristeva (1982) identity is formed by language and also reveals itself in language; as such, its advent in repetition affirms the masculinity of Mrs Venable as the character who utters these words. The two letters "a" and "l" in the third line above are alliterated and since alliteration focuses on the repetitions of the consonants rather than vowels then the linguistic analysis will be on the "l" sound. "L" pronounces a very strong sound "high-frequency pure tone" (Ryuichiro & Sakai, 2004, p. 312) with least release which

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine is 'silent' as she babbles, and her utterances seem meaningless to others.

is combined with “a” (ɔ) “an emphasized low vowel” (Erickson, 2002, p. 144). The combination of the strong consonant of “l” with its emphasis on a high frequent vowel “a” pronounces power which emphasizes the masculinity, and consequently ruling power of Mrs Venable as she is the one uttering the words. On the other hand, repetitions, pauses, silences, or grammatical malfunctions could be interpreted as other keys to identity through poetic language and consequently, violence and semiotic in writing (in Kristevan terms) because of the interruption they bring to the signifying process and subsequent deconstruction of meaning as a result of the interruption. The repetition of the words in the last line, “birds hovered and swooped to attack and hovered and –swooped to attack”, breaks the symbolical structure and reveals the semiotic release within the text.

Apart from phonological analysis, a linguistic perspective on alliteration affirms that, by nature and structure, alliteration is a system that does not refer to anything outside its signifying system and this recursive quality highlights the self-reflexivity which is repeating itself within the open system (Erickson, 2002, p. 33). As the repetition of sounds within an open system does not signify any meaning, such an effect pronounces a deviation from the process of signification. However, as repetition has its effect on the reader and produces the meaning connotatively and thematically, it represents the charges and energy drives that in turn represent the semiotic. The above violence from language rules is not only acceptable, but also enjoyable and desirable in the symbolic order, as it creates a sense of the aesthetic in literature.

#### METONYMY AND DISPLACEMENT

Catherine’s account of Sebastian’s horrifying death discovers an overflow of metonymy, condensation and displacement carried out through poetic language to retain the semiotic release. Metonymy is a figure of speech in which one object or idea is substituted for another related object or idea in order to produce an aesthetic or literary effect (Wolfreys, Robbins, & Womak, 2006). Catherine recalls that the tragedy of Sebastian took place in a place called Cabeza de Lobo, which in Spanish means “wolf’s head”; the colloquial meaning however refers to “something that attracts attention”. In the play, Sebastian used his mother and Catherine as bait to attract the attention of other men thus ultimately enabling Sebastian to quench his gay desire: Mrs Venable confesses that she and Catherine were decoys and Sebastian used them as bait, and they procured for him (Williams, 1958, p. 77). Therefore, Mrs Venable and Catherine were the objects of desire for the men. However, during the last trip Mrs Venable did not accompany her son and instead, Catherine took over the role. Accordingly, Cabeza de Lobo uncovers the metonymy of object of desire in the person of Catherine. Cabeza de Lobo (head of wolf) is further represented in Sebastian’s room where he keeps a host of disembodied heads such as the totem pole carving, a drawing, a skull, busts, and assorted objects of art displayed on the table and walls. Sebastian’s artworks – the masks or empty shells all have lifeless holes in place of eyes; this accentuates the castrating image of Cabeza de Lobo. Once again, the “head of the wolf” is not only a place for Sebastian to find God<sup>4</sup> but as Brian Parker (1998) states, they are symbols of castration which help the metonymic shift of Cabeza de Lobo as the place that attracts desire – inferring Catherine as the object of desire.

From another perspective metonymy has been projected on to Catherine. Catherine presents madness (Ohi, 1999, p. 41) and this is confirmed in the text by her confinement to the asylum and her babbling language and how she took over the function as object of desire: for madness and chaos are features of the mother who according to psychoanalytic theory is

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<sup>4</sup> According to Mrs Venable, Sebastian was on the beach at Cabeza de Lobo searching for God.

the object of desire for the mal-abjected child. However, surprisingly, although madness is attributed to Catherine, it is even more attributable to Mrs Venable. Hers is a feminine madness as the object of desire<sup>5</sup> (as death) who acted as bait to fulfil her son's homosexual desire. Mrs Venable, the obsessive mother, connotes a motherly feminine madness that leads the son to her realm which promises violence of both social norms and psychological development. This is why Thompson (2002) asserts that "Sebastian's homosexuality results from a mutually exploitative and symbiotic relationship that he shares with his mother". Catherine on the other hand evoked the heterosexual desire in Sebastian and they started a heterosexual connection, a connection that rendered Sebastian unable to write any poems in his last summer. Sebastian's separation from his mother in his last journey and the substitution of mother for Catherine is another indication of a metaphorical death of the maddening, feminine, mothering desire. The transition from mother to Catherine that connotes the love from one's self<sup>6</sup> to another allows Sebastian to move on from the narcissistic stage that is marked by his homosexual desire and loving of self to the symbolic stage, that is manifested by heterosexual desire and love for Catherine. For narcissism, as Lacan puts it, is self-love: "It's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on the imaginary level" (Lacan, 1988, p. 142). Kristeva (1982) further develops the concept by suggesting that the narcissist is "delightfully and dramatically condemned to find the other in the same sex only" and accedes to homosexuality. Accordingly, love of self is libido and preserving the pre-symbolic, whereas love towards another facilitates the move to the symbolic. In other words, if abjection is akin to "spitting" out the self to move on to the symbolic, then narcissism on the extreme contrary would represent merging and drowning within the self.

Another reflection of metonymy in Williams's language in *Suddenly Last Summer* is the displacement of the father figure with the God image that has a great impact in constituting/ destroying identity. Most of Tennessee Williams's works resonate powerfully with the theme of God or the God image – both as the God of love and God of Wrath (Siegel, 2005, p. 538). A quick survey of Williams's dramas and their projections of God and the God image infers a cruel image of God, implying psychological complexes and struggles in early childhood. Sebastian whose evocation, strangely, "demanded" the company of his mother on long journeys to create poems enters a place full of flesh eating birds and great sea turtles, which crawl to the shore for their annual egg laying. When Dr Cukrowicz questions Mrs Venable on the reason for their trip to Cabeza de Lobo in scene one, she explains:

My son was looking for...[Stops short: continues evasively--]... all right, I started to say that my son was looking for God and stopped myself because I was afraid that if I said he was looking for God, you'd say to yourself, 'Oh, a pretentious young crack-pot!' All poets look for God, all good poets do..... I mean for a clear image of Him. (Williams, 1958, p.21)

Here the God image is strongly associated with the pre-historic father experienced in early childhood. Adler affirms that the image of God in psychoanalysis resonates with an unresolved identity formation that is hidden in the word of God (1977, p. 138). In the play the image of God is a metaphor for "The-Law-of-the-Father" as in Lacan's prehistoric father, before the mirror stage. Lacan believed that authoritative images like God act as an "incarnation or delight of [the] symbolic" (Grosz, 2005, p. 68) that function to install the child within the scene of subjectivity and discipline him/her: the image "accelerates the identification of the subject to the symbolic realm" (Fritscher, 1961, p. 27). The symbolic act

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<sup>5</sup>Death and madness, and heterosexual desire are the two extremes of objects of desire. One could gravitate either way, according to the misidentification or well-established identification in identity development.

<sup>6</sup>The child's identity is merged with the mother's before the child starts to deject the mother and loves the other.

of searching for God connotes Sebastian seeking a great ruling and governing power to fill the Name of the Father as an identifier. Mrs Venable explains that Sebastian “was looking for a clearer image of God because he hasn’t yet been identified with a God-like father (rather than a God-like mother) to establish his subjectivity. He is still in the realm of the ruling mother who connotes death and madness, the one who babbles and describes herself and her son as a couple. The symbolic elements of the play lend further support to this idea when in his search for such an image, Sebastian goes to the beach and observes flesh eating birds. The sea is a symbol of nature and nature symbolises the mother, but what attracts his attention on the beach is not the sea but the sky full of flesh eating birds and turtles, “which are the symbols of masculinity” (Taylor, 2006). Surprisingly, the birds are birds with no legs which connote the defection and depletion of the whole picture of masculinity in Sebastian’s mind.

Adler (1977) considers the God image in Williams’s plays as both the God of Wrath and the God of Love, with more inclination towards love. However, the God image in *Suddenly Last Summer* receives angry, thundering effects that impart a strong gothic and grotesque touch to the play. For instance, the God in *Suddenly Last Summer* is presented in the form of huge black birds that devoured defenceless turtles on the beach, and as the God of famished, savage boys who finally devoured Sebastian. Guar (2012) by contrast, suggests that Williams’ religious message is invariably man-centred, with God as a threatening background figure: “His [God’s] laws are perceived as arbitrary restrictions, not particularly helpful as guidelines for the good life” (p.21). This description shows a strong resemblance to what Williams described of his own father. Referring to Williams’s memoirs, Fritscher (1961) recounts Williams’s father’s violent nature as follows:

On those occasional week-ends when my father visited the house the spell of perfect peace was broken. A loud voice was heard and heavy footsteps. Doors were slammed. Furniture was kicked and banged... Often the voice of my father was harsh, and sometimes it sounded like thunder. He was a big man. (quoted in Fritscher, 1961, p. 203)

The God that Williams invokes in *Suddenly Last Summer* and its compatibility with the description of his father can be seen as proof of a Freudian regression before developing “I”. According to Freud, regression occurs when the “functioning desires encounter powerful external obstacles, which hold the desires back”, and the subject sometimes regresses to the pre-symbolic phase in normal psychosexual development (Dugdale, 2012). The regression, then, leads to a malfunction in the process of identification since the image that the infant perceives from the father is rough enough to cause the fear of the castration. The pictures and images of his father that Williams presents resemble the monstrous, horrifying, revengeful figure of God that are reflected in his plays. It was the abhorring father that disabled the young Williams from separating successfully from his mother in order to attain his own subjectivity. This shortcoming is reflected aptly in the absence of the father figure in most of Williams’s dramas including *Suddenly Last Summer* in which the mal-identification is reinforced by the strong presence of the mother.

#### CONDENSATION

Another poetic description from Williams that highly restructures his play as a psychological play is in the theme of baiting<sup>7</sup> that constitutes a lurid condensation in *Suddenly Last Summer*. Condensation as defined in the *Dictionary of Literary Terms* is “a Freudian term referring to the psychic process whereby phantasmatic images assumed to have a common affect are

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<sup>7</sup>Sebastian used his mother and Catherine to attract men.

condensed in single image” (Wolfreys et al., 2006, p. 23). In the play, Cabeza de Lobo is the place where turtles are devoured by birds, signifying masculinity, and where after laying eggs on the beach, the turtles return to the sea. The depositing of the eggs in the sand pits and the devouring of their undersides by the birds resembles the sex act. Ohi (1999) believes that sodomy and cannibalism are forms of what Mrs Venable calls a “devouring creation”; turtles spawning in the sand pits stand for sodomitical penetration that reflects self-reflexive acts and self-involution that is metaphorically expressed by Mrs Venable: “we are all of us trapped by this devouring creation” (p.44). Similarly, cannibalism is a symbol of gay male sex, presented as an exhausting, difficult, and tragic motherhood, and “bring[s] to mind less any specific sexual act than the category of sodomy, with all of its moralistic, legalistic, and religious overtones” (Ohi, 1999, p. 39).

Condensing Sebastian’s homosexuality and his attraction to masculinity, into symbols like birds, turtles and the tragic death by way of being devoured by famished boys elicits the theme that associates homosexuality with death. As turtles are devoured by the sea birds, so is Sebastian devoured by the famished boys. As turtles return to the sea (which in archetypal interpretation signifies nature and eventually motherhood and the feminine) so too Sebastian meets a metaphoric death which signifies motherhood in the pre-symbolic order. His death remains one of the ambiguous mysteries of the play as the truth about his death is never revealed and his dead body is never discovered. The only ‘evidence’ is a “babbling Catherine”.

Finally, fragmentation is evident in Williams’s writing style which is marked by hesitation, pauses and blankness. As O’Connor (2007) indicates, in none of Williams’s other plays do we notice such a large dependence on hyphens, blanks and pauses as can be observed in the following example:

CATHERINE: Completing! ---a sort of! ---*image*! ---he had of himself as a sort of! ---*sacrifice* to a ! ---*terrible* sort of a --- (p. 62).

In another part of the text Catherine says “*He! accepted!---all!---* as – --*how!---* things !--- are-and...”. The excessive use of hyphens and dashes as well as pauses all over the play signify the lack of coherence and unity in self, which in turn resembles the fragmentation and inconsistency in the author’s psyche. Nelson (1961) affirms that during the summer of 1957 Williams was seeking relief for claustrophobia and the constant pressure of fear he experienced as his psychotic distress increased. Then he found psychoanalysis as an escape to “dissolve, at least temporarily, annihilate[e] fears that were threatening to paralyze him” (p. 244).

These sorts of inconsistencies once again, recall the presence of babbling language by Williams, vocalized by Catherine. Babbling is the stage of speaking just before the infant begins to learn words or grammar; s/he articulates sounds without specific signification or meaning. This is the stage when castration or abjection (according to post-structuralist thought) functions to bridge the pre-symbolic to the symbolic, the chaos to rule, the violence to obedience and finally the babbling to meaningful words with significations. In literary writing, adults’ babbling is closely linked to insanity and madness; however from a psychoanalytic point of view, babbling is a symptom of melancholy. John Lechte confirms that “laughter, babbling, word play-prosody are all revelations of semiotic disposition and pre-symbolic charges, for they are energy charges of drives, and although they are not part of language, are in the signifying process” (Letche, 1990, p. 129).

Julia Kristeva defines this connection as the subject failing to find the signification for the signifying process. She mentions in *Black Sun* that:

The depressed persons do not forget how to use signs. They keep them, but the signs seem absurd, delayed, ready to be extinguished, because of the splitting



that affects them. For instead of bonding the affect caused by loss, the depressed sign disowns the affect as well as the signifier, thus admitting that the depressed subject has remained prisoner of the non lost object (the *Thing*) (1989, p. 47).

She continues that the depressed person constantly wanders between disconsolate and all aphasic, alone with the unnamed *Thing*, and the only way to escape it is the “primary identification” with “the father in individual prehistory”. Nevertheless, with such an instability in affects, for a melancholic, the primary identification provides no fixed boundaries of identification.

A tight bilateral connection between babbling and melancholy maintains a major motif in *Suddenly Last Summer*; Catherine as a girl whose mind and brain is locked with the trauma of her cousin Sebastian’s death, babbles and although she has been interrogated by her aunt (Sebastian’s mother) to unearth the truth about Sebastian’s death, she still babbles and is eventually threatened with lobotomy:

Mrs Venable:

I mean keep her *still* here. She *babbles!* They couldn’t shut her up in Cabaza de Lobo or at the clinic in Paris-she babbled, babbled! - smash in my son’s reputation.-on the Berengaria bringing her back to the States she broke out of the stateroom and babbled, babbled, even at the airport when she was flown down here, she babbled a bit of her story before they could whisk her in to an ambulance to St. Mary’s. (Williams, 1958)

As discussed above, babbling reflects a melancholic depression and consequently its connection with the *Thing* in Kristevan terms or in Freudian and Lacanian terms, death and the death drive or the object of desire. Although Mrs Venable complains about Catherine’s babbling, Catherine actually hardly babbled during her conversation with Dr. Cukrowicz. Instead a close textual analysis affirms that the one who appears to be babbling in most of her conversations is Mrs Venable, and this is obvious even from the very beginning of the drama when she is trying to enunciate the doctor’s name: “Mrs Venable: ...I think I can lean on your shoulder, Doctor-Cu-Cu?”. In another conversation she repeats: “I won’t collapse! She will collapse! I mean her lies will collapse-not my truth- not the truth...” (Williams, 1958, p. 16). As can be seen, her incoherent, disjointed exclamations here are very akin to a baby’s babbling.

More of this sort of confused ramblings can be found in almost every dialogue related to Mrs Venable. This reveals even more of her desperation to establish her function as the object of desire, the one through whom Sebastian fulfils his desire of pleasure and whose constant company he needs to create his poems. The foregoing discussion affirms that, Mrs Venable as the mother who connotes madness psychoanalytically stands as the semiotic disposition supplier (of drives and charges) and accompanies her son<sup>8</sup> to create his poems every nine months. Nevertheless Catherine, Sebastian’s cousin, with her babbling language, psychologically, connotes the mirror stage for the homosexual Sebastian by establishing a heterosexual love with him. Catherine’s role as the mirror stage and “other” has been realized when she accompanies Sebastian on his last trip – but he couldn’t deliver any poem on that journey; instead with his figurative death at the end of the drama he transformed into the unified “I” when he saw himself in Catherine’s love. His figurative death connotes the end of the old homosexual, ego-centered, narcissist Sebastian. He was devoured and consumed by the famished boys. He failed to deliver a poem this time because he could not access the

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<sup>8</sup>As they are always attached to each other.

semiotic supplier or the affect provider; that is to say, he could not use the mother as the object of desire, and finally he was separated from the mother (in both the literal and psychological sense). An analysis of the exchanges below demonstrates this interpretation and confirms that Catherine took the part of the object of desire in the symbolic, since she acted as the object of love or Other to enable Sebastian's passage to the symbolic.

Catharine: I loved him, sister! Why wouldn't he let me save him? I tried to hold on to his hand but he ran, ran, ran in the wrong direction, sister!

Doctor: In what way did you love him?

Catherine: The only way he'd accept! - a sort of motherly way. I tried to save him Doctor. (Williams, 1958, p. 39)

Later Catherine agrees that she couldn't function as the mother love for she confesses:

Catherine: But then I made a mistake of responding too much to his kindness, of taking hold of his hand before he'd take hold of mine, of holding onto his arm and leaning on his shoulder , ...and, last summer, he began to be restless and-oh!.(Williams, 1958)

She continues: "I failed him; I wasn't able to keep the web from – breaking" (Williams, 1958, p. 73). The conversation above accentuates a heterosexual relationship rather than the homosexual connection, which obviously Mrs Venable assisted him to achieve by acting as bait. In this respect Sebastian's death is a metaphorical death; his consumption by famished boys metaphorically highlights his ending with his mother as the primal object of desire projected on the boys' features: chaotic, uncontrollable, mad, hungry, uncivilized and consuming. One of the supportive argumentations for the on-going claim is the underlying ambiguity which is hidden in Sebastian's death that is portrayed as a metaphorical death. According to Sebastian's mother, no one has found Sebastian's dead body; instead, he is present all over the play in almost all the characters; in George's outfit which was meant to be Sebastian's suit– Mrs Venable gave it to him after Sebastian disappeared. Another representation of Sebastian on the stage is in the scene with Dr. Sugar's blonde hair and bright shining face and white suit which is said to be the colour of the suit Sebastian was last seen wearing.

Catherine: The Doctor's still at the window but he's too blonde to hide behind window curtains, he catches the light, he shines through them.... We were going to blondes, blondes were next on the menu... cousin Sebastian said he was famished for blondes, he was fed up with the dark ones and famished for blondes. (Williams, 1958, p. 40)

Finally Sebastian's character seems to be projected onto Dr. Sugar as he is the one who declares that what Catherine speaks is the truth. The combination of phantasmatic images of Dr. Sugar, George and Catherine in Sebastian's character that by itself condensed themes of death, truth and God in his ambiguous death justifies the implication of each of the images, themes, and symbols in the play.

## CONCLUSION

Applying different figures of speech and poetic language in *Suddenly Last Summer* projects Williams's battle with symbolic collapse as embodied in the characters of Sebastian, Catherine and Mrs Venable. The playwright's excessive use of rhetorical devices can be evidently linked to the sense of violence projected in cannibalism, homosexuality, and

devouring creatures. A psychoanalytic study of language and its possibilities to convey meaning and affects provides the opportunity to uncover how alliteration and metonymy depicts condensations and displacement represented in the God image (especially as the God of Wrath). In addition, this representation shows a compatibility with Williams's personal life which ends with Williams (or Sebastian) an abject. The abject, the dark side of narcissism, as defined by Kristeva is what "disturbs identity, system and order", the one who "does not respect the borders". The abject, in other words, swings between the semiotic and symbolic, between chaos and order, between death and life. With his wandering between death and life, and the lack of consistency, unity and, identity Sebastian Venable (like his creator) is represented as an abject who desires to gain his identity by declaiming poems, searching for love and finally, God.

On the other hand the expressive qualities that literature<sup>9</sup> shows in effect and affect can unveil the abject, and by bridging the semiotic to the symbolic, is capable of recovering the abject as well. Accordingly, like his creator, Sebastian faces the situation of being in limbo: suspended between the maternal or semiotic and the paternal or symbolic. Williams's sexual life affirms this ambivalence; although he never hid his homosexuality, he never admitted to it completely. Hence he unconsciously maintained a dual sexual orientation which accentuated his unfixed position and his pending situation. Catherine's presence as the catalyst of heterosexual love made it possible to constitute an identity for him in the symbolic by moving Sebastian from the dark sea with black birds to a light blazing toward the sky. As for Williams, his literary creation and drama as a part of art which "facilitates the trans-symbolic" and identification (Letche, 1990), was enough to cross over from the semiotic to symbolic and revitalize his identity.

The paradigm above aptly reflects Williams's own trauma where Catherine resembles his first heterosexual love, Hazel Kramer, where their love ended in a fatal separation due to his father's obsessive surveillance of the romance. His father called the romance a kind of 'sissiness' in Williams and he was determined to stop it at any cost. The domineering Mrs Venable and her bitterness at Catherine that resulted in Sebastian's destruction reinforce the foregoing psychological reading. If Williams had the chance to carry on with his heterosexual relationship he might have not reverted to homosexuality, something with which he was not happy. It was possibly for this reason that he attempted to resolve his conflict through artistic creation in *Suddenly Last Summer*.

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<sup>9</sup>Love, literature, and religion are the three means by which the subject can access the semiotic and create a symbolic representation. In this respect literature with its potential to deconstruct the rules of language through its rhetorical devices can reach the semiotic and create a symbolic resemblance of the semiotic that is acceptable in the symbolic order.

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