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THE IMAGERY OF DECADENCE IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *VIEUX CARRÉ*

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine the imagery of decadence in Tennessee Williams' *Vieux Carré*. Through the exponential approach, we shall try to show how decay is apparent in the setting, characters and action of the play, conveyed by the images and symbols employed by the dramatist.

In the Introduction, after naming the reasons for choosing the subject and stating our aim, we start with a review of the recurrent themes in Tennessee Williams' work. Certain literary terms employed throughout the analysis are presented, as well as a brief mention of the structure and plot of the play.

In Part I we concentrate on the setting: a cheap boarding house whose decadence is revealed in its furniture, objects, lack of light, and stress on the color black, as well as in the clothing and physical appearances of the characters. The time of year and day is also discussed. The house is further compared to a madhouse, a jailhouse and a graveyard, making this microcosm potentially symbolic of a macrocosm.

The second section of the study analyzes the characters as predominantly decayed people who, despite having their positive sides revealed, are further contaminated by the

decadence irradiated from the setting. Hence the link they have with the house, which, in addition, would appear to be an extension of the characters themselves.

Part III focuses on the action in *Vieux Carrē*, involving a series of conflicts between the inhabitants of the rooming house which once more project the characters' decayed features, both physical and mental. However these clashes also lead some of the characters to achieve self-realization and, moreover, to transcend, either physically and/or spiritually, the premises of the boarding house.

In the Conclusion we confirm the manner in which the setting, characters and action are brought together through the extensive use of the imagery of decadence, which, in turn, controls the entire play, and illustrate how this guiding principle may well provide us with a deeper and therefore richer appreciation of *Vieux Carrē*.

Resumo

Este trabalho pretende examinar as imagens de decadência encontradas na obra teatral *Vieux Carrê* de Tennessee Williams. Através de uma abordagem exponencial, tentaremos demonstrar como a decadência está presente no cenário, personagens e ação da peça, projetada pelas imagens e símbolos utilizados pelo dramaturgo.

Na Introdução, depois de justificar a escolha do tema e estabelecer nosso objetivo, iniciamos com um exame dos temas recorrentes na obra de Tennessee Williams. São apresentados certos termos literários empregados na análise, bem como é feita uma breve referência à estrutura e trama da peça.

Na Parte I, concentramo-nos no cenário: uma pensão barata cuja decadência se revela na mobília, objetos, falta de luz e ênfase na cor negra, bem como nas roupas e aparência física das personagens. A época do ano e dia também são discutidas. A casa é, além disso, comparada a um hospício, uma prisão e um cemitério, tornando, portanto, este microcosmo potencialmente simbólico de um macrocosmo.

A segunda parte analisa as personagens como pessoas decadentes que, embora tenham seus aspectos positivos também revelados, são contaminadas ainda mais pela decadência irra-

diada pelo cenário. Daí provém sua ligação com a casa que, por sua vez, parece ser uma extensão das personagens.

A Parte III concentra-se na ação da peça, composta por uma série de conflitos entre os habitantes da pensão, projetando as características decadentes, tanto físicas quanto mentais, das personagens. Entretanto, estas desavenças também levam algumas das personagens a alcançar auto-realização e, ainda mais, a transcender, espiritual e/ou fisicamente, os limites da pensão.

Na Conclusão, confirmamos a maneira pela qual o cenário, personagens e ação são aproximados através do uso extensivo de imagens de decadência que, por sua vez, controlam toda a peça, e ilustramos como esssa linha-mestra pode levar-nos a uma compreensão mais profunda e mais rica de *Vieux Carré*.

INTRODUCTION

The choice of Tennessee Williams, one of the most honored American playwrights, as the subject of this dissertation is the result of my lasting admiration for his works. Ever since I was first introduced to them, not only their themes appealed to me, but the author's use of symbolic devices as well. His employment of visual and acoustic signs attracted my attention which was then further increased when studying Tennessee Williams' own ideas about play-making more deeply. His theory of dramatic writing has been expressed in this way:

> Expressionism and all other unconventional techniques in drama have only one valid aim, and that is a closer approach to truth. When a play employs unconventional techniques, it is not, or certainly shouldn't be, trying to escape its responsibility of dealing with reality, or interpreting experience, but is actually, or should be, attempting to find a closer approach, a more penetrating and vivid expression of things as they are.[1]

Thus is made explicit Williams' attempt to show in his works the world as it really is, no matter how oppressive reality may be, preferably by shocking the readers. Hence my arriving at a better understanding and appreciation of Williams' value as a dramatist.

My reasons for choosing him are further corroborated by some criticism of his work:

> Tennessee Williams not only gives the impression of being a "poet" of theatre, but, in some ways can justifiably lay claim to being the most consciously poetic of his generation of American playwrights. All his plays give a strong impression of meaning more than is conveyed by their surface appearances; all of them, to a degree, have what E.Martin Browne has referred to as a "luminous" quality as if the characters were, so to say, on loan only to this clay-ey earth and brought with them, for their temporary stay, a colouring of some other-where. In their different ways, his characters are "all citizens of a country whose nature we can only guess at. What we experience of them is what is revealed when they are planted in the explicit naturalistic situations of the play".[2]

Garith Loyd Evans and E. Martin Browne thus talk about Williams' combining expressionist, impressionist, surrealist, symbolist, and naturalistic elements. In a specific American way his characters are external symbols of an inward reality mirrored in his drama. Thus it is not surprising that Stanley Kauffman calls Williams' dramatic gift "one of the finest of the age", while Allan Lewis claims that "no playwright of our times has created greater magic in the theatre"[3], for he is able to project his characters' inner psychological realities through the manipulation of external elements.

Vieux Carrē, published in 1979 and thus belonging to the last phase of the author's work, was chosen after a close reading when the different manifestations of decadence in the

setting, characters and action in the play became apparent. At the same time I realized that not one book or article (other than review articles) has yet focused exclusively on *Vieux Carré*, despite the great variety of criticism, evaluations and reevaluation of Tennessee Williams' literary output. There are, in addition, four very recent pieces of criticism of the work which, like much of the criticism about his other plays, might well be considered controversial. T.E. KALEM commented:

> In his later, lesser plays, among which *Vieux Carré* belongs, the sleeve has grown emptier, the illusion scantier, the truth more repetitive. As he had less to say, Williams has adopted an assertive, confessional way of saying it, as if the strength of his own voice would re-establish the dramatic authority that once resided in his compelling characters and arresting situations.[4]

In the same vein, H. HOBSON asserted that

> more kindly one could say that *Vieux Carré* is a feeble echo of old glories (....). *Vieux Carré*, alas, is Mr. Williams desecrating the grave in which his once fine talent is buried.[5]

These negative views of the work made me wonder whether Tennessee Williams was not able to construct a different story around his formulas any longer. But Sally AIRE had a more positive opinion about the play:

> In Tennessee Williams' latest play there is a sense of the writer reaching a new period of maturity, and a feeling of newly-found personal liberation. It is a very fine piece

> indeed. (....) It is a play of great richness, and contains many of the elements we have come to recognise as Williams' hallmarks.[6]

In Aire's opinion, the repetition of Williams' themes and devices was not seen as diminishing the value of the play since they were being shown in a new context.

E. SHORTER presented a different opinion still, when he affirmed that

> this was a new play that seemed to cristallise many of his old studies of emotional, sexual and economic desperation. But the familiarity of the downtrodden people and their problems (....) did not for once seem at all re-hashed, though it was hard to believe that in writing of New Orleans forty years' ago Mr. Williams wasn't re-hashing something. Why shouldn't he if it works theatrically? Once again his wide and compelling sympathy, his humour, his refusal to take up moral attitudes, and above all the actability of his assorted characters (....) reminded us that in the presence of an accomplished dramatist the shape of a theatre does not matter because the shape of the writing transcends any stage.[7]

One can only agree with Sally Aire as *Vieux Carré* reflects, on a broader scale, Tennessee Williams' other plays. A consensus view has developed that the whole of his work is unified by certain recurring themes and devices. Some critics consider his work repetitious as it is immediately recognizable from its setting, themes and dialogue. Even certain character types are repeated in his plays, especially people trapped by society.

The most frequent charge against Tennessee Williams has always been his lack of development because of these repetitions. His works prior to *Vieux Carrè* have often been criticized for repeating his negative view of life, for his reliance on decadence, sexual aberrations, violence and its terrifying effects. As Signi L. FALK has stressed, the playwright's most employed theme is that of the lonely individual who finds himself out of place in a vulgar materialistic society; but "his urge to reach a large audience has forced him to obscure this basic theme by over-emphasizing other and sometimes rather dubious subjects (....)". He adds that however this repetitiousness may be interpreted, the truth is that Williams has always concerned himself with variations on the theme above, to include decadence of Southern aristocracy, man in search of truth, people who flee away from reality through alcohol, narcotics, homosexuality, sexuality and dreams. He repeatedly contrasts the average man with the poet, who demands for himself a type of freedom incompatible with modern urban society. These are characters, torn between natural instincts and ideals imposed by a Puritan culture, who have always been of special interest to the playwright. Frequently he also touches on religious themes, although he does not seem to have any religious convictions; by associating Puritanism with chastity and opposing it to a fully realized sexual experience. It would also seem worth pointing out that Falk has, in addition, stressed the fact that the favorite recurrent idea in Williams' work is sex as

the symbol of freedom, and thus becoming a synonym for life and a valid manifestation of religion and love.[8]

As far as the frequent charge against Williams regarding his alleged lack of development based on the repetition of themes in his work, FALK has also expressed the view that Williams was more concerned about shocking his audiences with dramatic scenes than with the organic development of drama. He further says that

> his [Williams'] rejection of the realistic mode has apparently freed him from responsibility of making logical relationships between disparate themes in one play. Unable, apparently, to develop fully one theme, he scatters his energy among several.[9]

Bamber GASCOIGNE confirms this idea for sometimes Williams' themes appear to be very similar with "none of them fully dealt with or fully integrated with the others"[10]. To contrast with Gasgoigne's opinion, LEWIS has observed that

> an American playwright is never forgiven his failures ... [Williams] dissipated a rare talent, but much of the criticism leveled at him is overanalytical. Only a one-play playwright is exempt from the charge of repeating his themes and characters.[11]

Williams himself once stated that he was never able to say what the theme of his plays was, and he claimed he had never written consciously with a theme in mind. What he probably means is that he does not set out to deliver a unique message in his plays, but for Gerald WEALES "we must recognize that his choice of character and situation provides him with

recurrent themes that turn up in his work from the earliest one-acters (....)"[12]. Another clue to all that Williams has written might be given by an artistic theory he initially expressed after his first two successful plays:

> Every artist has a basic premise pervading his whole life, and that premise can provide the impulse to everything he creates. For me the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstances.[13]

However, as previously mentioned, Williams has been concerned on concentrating on several variations upon this basic theme, all of which have justified the attention of his dramatic talent.

In *Vieux Carrē* many elements from his other plays were repeated, although this time they have been subordinated to decay, for the playwright's recurrent themes are here linked by the imagery of decadence which pervades the whole play. For, beginning with the title, which already gives the work its central symbol and tone, the understanding of space/character/action relationship in *Vieux Carrē* reveals the linking image of decay which in turn becomes the recurring image in the play. The re-emergence of these repeated elements has meant that many critical references made about his previous plays are also applicable to *Vieux Carrē*.

In order to examine the imagery of decadence, which will be the topic of this dissertation, let us first define certain literary terms which will be employed throughout the

analysis. As imagery is one of the most common and ambiguous terms used in modern criticism, two complementary definitions were chosen.

For Edgar V. ROBERTS,

> imagery is a broad term referring to the verbal comparison of one or many objects, ideas, or emotional states with something else. The use of imagery is a means by which an author relates something he wishes to express to something you yourself have experienced or can easily imagine as your own experience.[14]

He further adds that imagery may refer to all the images within a passage, an entire work, a group of works or an entire body of works.[15] Here I shall, of course, deal with the imagery presented in *Vieux Carrē*.

In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a more specific definition was found:

> Imagery (that is, 'images' taken collectively) is used to signify all the objects and qualities of sense perception referred to in a poem or other work of literature, whether by literal description, by allusion, or in the analogues (the vehicles) used in its similes and metaphors. (....) Also, imagery includes auditory, tactile (touch), olfactory (smell), gustatory (taste), or kinesthetic (sensations of movement), as well as visual qualities.[16]

As we shall see, in *Vieux Carrē* the imagery of decadence occurs beginning with the title itself, as mentioned, and continues to act as a "controlling image" over the ideas of the entire play. By "controlling image" we mean an image "developed so thoroughly throughout a work or which is so

vital and pervasive that one may interpret the work in the light of the image"[17].

The controlling image is closely connected with symbol, a device used by Tennessee Williams throughout his career as a playwright. He has given us his personal opinion regarding the efficiency of symbolism:

> I can't deny that I use a lot of those things called symbols but, being a self-defensive creature, I say that symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama. We all have in our conscious and unconscious minds a great vocabulary of images, and I think all human communication is based on these images as are our dreams; and a symbol in a play has only one legitimate purpose which is to say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words.[18]

Bamber GASCOIGNE even says that Williams' approach to the audience has become almost Pavlovian i.e. to establish a symbol and to present it whenever salivation is required, and FALK has stated that Williams employs all kinds of symbols and that even a number of his characters are symbolic, flat characterizations rather than people. Williams' great success, according to Falk, is usually attributed to his ability in projecting a poetic idea in terms of sounds and colors which turn out to be symbols of what he wants to express.[19]

For our purposes, we will consider that

> symbol is applied only to a word or set of words that signifies an object or event which itself signifies something else; that is, the words refer to something which suggests a range of reference beyond itself.[20]

ABRAMS states that some symbols are called conventional but there are also personal symbols which the writers develop themselves. Nancy TISCHLER adds that Williams

> is at his best when he is creating symbols out of situations rather than superimposing them or hauling in irrelevant or traditional ones. (....) The most exciting Williams' symbols are those fashioned from his own experience.[21]

In *Vieux Carrē* we may also point to the fact that Williams has employed a great many images and symbols which are related with decadence. Decadence may be defined as "the act or process of falling into an inferior condition or state; deterioration; moral or mental decay; loss of strenght, health, intellect, etc"[22]. Decadence is thus seen as a progressive decline. In this analysis both terms, decadence and decay, will be used interchangeably.

The methodology to be employed in the analysis of the play will be that of the "exponential approach"[23], since our concern will be with the themes of the work and the ways to follow them, that is, the tracing of thematic imagery. As W. GUERIN et alii explain, in *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*,

> such thematic statements are frequently less explicit than implicit, if only because they are often made by the communicative and evocative power of symbols and images.[24]

In adopting this approach, it is intended to identify the images and symbols and consider not only the artistic weaving

of the play's images and symbols into patterns, but also their exponents, that is, those people, objects, words that represent the patterns. As GUERIN et alii further state, the "exponential approach" might also be called the "symbolic" approach, "especially when we speak of those images that are charged with meaning beyond their usual denotations"[25]. Ad de Vries' *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery* will be used as a guiding point for the explanation of the images and symbols employed in *Vieux Carrē*. An attempt will then be made to see how far the imagery of decadence can be charged with meaning and symbolic force, leading us to a deeper appreciation of *Vieux Carrē*, and in this way, making us live the author's original experience.

Vieux Carrē is a play of remembrances, or a "memory flashback"[26] of a cheap boarding house in the old quarter of New Orleans in the 30's. Memories often consist of fragments which are so loosely connected that they seem chaotic, and therefore one might think of the play as loosely related episodes. However, it maintains unity of place and goes steadily toward a foregone conclusion. In other words, although it is not built with scene following scene, chronologically speaking, the scenes should be considered as part of the Writer's memory at a crucial time in his life — that is, they are selected to show a slice of life that Williams once lived through. Thus the play is structured on the principle of the presentation of a series of episodes which accumulate to comment about a specific time of Williams' life, as is also true in *The Glass Menagerie*.

Vieux Carrē is divided into twelve scenes; scenes 1 to 7 make up Part I, and Part II goes from scene 8 up to scene 12. These scenes are tied together into a unified whole by several devices including the setting, the repeated themes, the metalingual references to the art of writing, the visual and acoustic signs as well as the symbols employed by the dramatist which are all related to decadence. As well as these elements the first scene begins with a prologue and the last scene concludes with an epilogue which is related to the prologue. In this prologue the Writer addresses the audience to comment on the house that was "once alive"[27], and is still alive in his recollection, although it is inhabited by "shadowy occupants like ghosts" (p.5). In the epilogue, the Writer will comment on this same house and its inhabitants, telling the audience that they are disappearing behind him. He also says that people go when you go: "the earth seems to swallow them up, the walls absorb them like moisture, remain with you only as ghosts; their voices are echoes, fading but remembered" (p.116). Thus the end of the play leads us back to its prologue, which frames the action together with the epilogue, making the play achieve an effect of unity. Therefore, because of its type of structure — a memory play —, two dramatic conventions must be accepted in *Vieux Carrē*: the setting, which is the rooming house and, at the same time, the Writer's memory; as well as the Writer, who is both the narrator and a character in the play and through whom the past is conveyed.

The plot of *Vieux Carrē* takes place in Mrs. Wire's boarding house. In the hall, sleeping on a cot to keep an eye on everything which goes on in her house at night is the landlady herself, and her constant helper, Nursie. Deeper into the house we gradually meet the other inhabitants: Jane, a middle-class young New Yorker who has ended up in New Orleans sharing her room with Tye, a good-looking young man although a delinquent, whose talents seem to be confined to bed. Then there is the character known only as the Writer, trying to become a good writer, who is also the narrator of the play, as we have said above. In a cubicle adjoining the Writer's lives Nightingale, an aging tuberculous homosexual painter who inducts the Writer into homosexuality. Somewhere deep inside the house live Mary and Miss Carrie, two crones who used to be genteel ladies but have now fallen on hard times.

One night, Mrs. Wire feels the need to take a moral stand against the sexual orgies of a Photographer, T. Hamilton Biggs, who has hired the basement beneath her kitchen. She pours boiling water through a hole in the floor on the naked guests below. A case is brought, Mrs. Wire is found guilty, fined and bound over. From this point, the story of most of the house's occupants changes. Nightingale will be taken to a charity ward to die; Jane finds out that her leukemia is weakening her again, although she had enjoyed a temporary remission after meeting Tye. He is told about her disease, but he is too selfish to acknowledge Jane's need for spiritual support.

Mrs. Wire has another of her periodic breakdowns, when she becomes quite convinced that the Writer is her son, taken away from her by her divorced husband. However this time she recognizes it is all part of her past, and accepts that now she is an old woman.

It is also after the incident between Mrs. Wire and the Photographer that Sky appears, a young jazz clarinettist and fugitive from legal wedlock. Until now, since the first scene, he had been simply a name on a knapsack left for several months in Mrs. Wire's boarding house. He offers the Writer freedom in the shape of a trip to the West Coast. That night the Writer packs and leaves, although to a conflicting future. The opening of the door into the street is for him a "desperate undertaking" (p.116) for it is in that house that he has discovered himself, as writer and man. In this way, the plot allows Tennessee Williams, through his spokesman "the Writer", as he explicitly mentions in the first stage directions, to reveal the truth he had been searching for during his life before he found it in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans.

Having briefly mentioned the structure and plot of *Vieux Carré*, let us now turn to the analysis of the play, which will have the following sequence:

Part I will be centered on the setting: a rooming house, its furniture, its inhabitants' clothing, and physical

appearance, and other details, as well as time. I will demonstrate how this decadent setting influences and further contaminates the characters and is, at the same time, a kind of projection of the characters' decaying features.

In the second part, the focus will shift to the characters, when an attempt will be made to display their two opposing sides which are discernible but sometimes difficult to reconcile. The characters' physical and mental decay will be shown as well as their possibility, or not, of redemption.

A third section will concentrate on the action of the play, showing how the conflicts between the characters, partially caused but increased by their confinement to the house, reveal to themselves the truth of their physical and spiritual degradation.

In the conclusion, the relationship between setting, characters and action will be evaluated together with an explanation and clarification as to how the imagery of decadence is the guiding principle of *Vieux Carrē*. In this way, we hope that the proposal to study *Vieux Carrē* through the imagery of decadence will provide a new approach to the understanding of Williams' play.

NOTES

[1] LACHER, J. & EVORY, A., ed. *Contemporary Authors*. Rev.ed. Detroit, Gale, 1969. v.5-8, p.1257.

[2] EVANS, G.L. *The Language of Modern Drama*. London, Dent, 1977. p.190.

[3] LACHER & EVORY, p.1254.

[4] KALEM, T.E. Down and Out in N.O. *Time*, May 23, 1977. p.45.

[5] H.HOBSON, quoted from *Drama*, *129*:68-9, Summer 1978.

[6] AIRE, S. Vieux Carré. *Plays & Players*, *25*:20, July 1978.

[7] SHORTER, E. Plays in Performance. *Drama*, *129*:68-9, Summer 1978.

[8] FALK, S.L. *Tennessee Williams*. New York, Twayne, 1962. p.163-8.

[9] FALK, p.175.

[10] GASCOIGNE, B. *Twentieth-Century Drama*. London, Hutchinson, 1967. p.170.

[11] LACHER & EVORY, p.1257.

[12] WEALES, G. *Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1965. p.15-6.

[13] Quoted from FALK, p.163.

[14] ROBERTS, E.V. *Writing Themes about Literature*. 3.ed. Englewood-Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973. p.135.

[15] ROBERTS, p.136-7.

[16] ABRAMS, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 3.ed. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. p.76.

[17] ROBERTS, p.140.

[18] WILLIAMS, T. Foreword to Camino Real (1953). In: COLE, T., ed. *Playwrights on Playwriting*. New York, Hill and Wang, 1961. Williams even adds that "sometimes it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted stage". (p.279).

[19] GASCOIGNE, p.170. FALK, p.179.

[20] ABRAMS, p.168-9.

[21] TISCHLER, N. *Tennessee Williams*; rebellious puritan. New York, Citadel, 1961. p.294.

[22] Quoted from THE RANDOM House Dictionary of the English Language. College ed. New York, 1968. p.343.

[23] GUERIN, W. et alii. *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature*. New York, Harper and Row, 1966. p.151.

[24] GUERIN et alii, p.151.

[25] GUERIN et alii, p.152. They further say that "whether we call this approach the exponential or the symbolic (....) we are recognizing patterns of images and symbols that lead us to a constantly deepening appreciation of the literature. Image leads to image, idea to idea, until ultimately we are led to experience the 'meaning' of the work".

[26] KALEM, p.45.

[27] WILLIAMS, T. *Vieux Carré*. New York, New Directions, 1979. p.5. Subsequent quotations refer to this edition and will be followed by page numbers.

PART I:

"WHY, 722 TOULOUSE STREET IS ONE OF THE OLDEST BUILDINGS IN THE VIEUX CARRÉ ..."

(MRS. WIRE TO THE WRITER)

It appears very likely that Tennessee Williams was taken up by the idea that environment has a vital influence on human character, for he emphasizes the deleterious effect of dirty, cold, drab rooms in *Vieux Carrē*. In other words, deterioration is portrayed clearly everywhere in the boarding house which bespeaks the character of those people who inhabit it. This means that all the attention in the play is focused on the house and its lodgers and that we must understand the characters in relation to their restricted and unfavorable setting — a decayed rooming house which, in one sense, controls the characters and through them the action of *Vieux Carrē*. Thus, an attempt will be made to try to prove in this chapter that this decadent house is the controlling image of the play since this setting pervades and illuminates all the action and the characters.

In order to do so, let us first define setting and all its implications. According to Edgar V. ROBERTS,

> setting refers to the natural and artificial scenery or environment in which characters in literature move, live, and have their being. Setting also includes what in the theater would be called props or properties — the implements and manufactured goods employed by the characters in various activities.[1]

He complements his idea by saying that it refers to all the physical and temporal objects of the play as well, including such things as clothing and descriptions of the characters' physical appearance besides their spatial relationship. Even the flora and fauna, the smells and the weather are part of the setting. The time of day at which an event occurs and the consequent amount of light also belong to the setting. Thus all the acoustic and visual signs of the play will be discussed in this chapter. As Tadeus KOWZAN also affirms, the main task of the setting it to represent the place (geographical, social or both) where the action occurs. Furthermore, the setting or one of its elements may also stand for the time (historical time, season, time of day) when the action takes place. He adds that besides its semiological function of fixing action in place and time, the setting may contain signs related to a variety of different circumstances.[2] In addition, according to Jindrich HONZL, "the space can be designated by an acoustic sign or by means of a light sign"[3], in this way revealing the mobility of the sign in the theater.

In *Vieux Carrē*, the setting is actually represented by a "spatial sign"[4], i.e. a decaying boarding house in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans which functions as an "enclosing" setting, for it serves as the place of the entire action and is constant and prominent throughout the story.[5] This "realistic setting (indication of the locale)"[6] will serve

at the same time as a symbol which helps give the play its meaning for the symbolic qualities of the setting chosen by Tennessee Williams are clear since the beginning, mainly because the playwright is explicit in his detailed stage directions about it, showing how it contributes in a high degree to the theme of the play. As the first stage directions read,

> The stage seems bare. Various playing areas may be distinguished by sketchy partitions and doorframes. In the barrenness there should be a poetic evocation of all the cheap rooming houses of the world. This one is in the Vieux Carrē of New Orleans, where it remains standing, at 722 Toulouse Street, now converted to an art gallery, (p.4)

The adjective "cheap" already hints at the condition of the house. But Williams gives us even more details about the place:

> I will describe the building as it was when I rented an attic room in the late thirties, not as it will be designed, or realized for the stage.
>
> It is a three-story building. There are a pair of alcoves, facing Toulouse Street. These alcove cubicles are separated by plywood, which provides a minimal separation (spatially) between the writer (myself those many years ago) and an older painter, (....).
>
> A curved staircase ascends from the rear of a dark narrow passageway from the street entrance to the kitchen area. From there it ascends to the third floor, or gabled attic with its mansard roof.
>
> A narrow hall separates the gabled cubicles from the studio (with skylight) which is occupied by Jane and Tye.
>
> Obviously the elevations of these acting areas can be only suggested by a few shallow steps: a realistic setting is impossible, and the solution lies mainly in very skilful lighting and minimal furnishings. (p.4)[7]

These details give a clear image of the decaying condition of the house. Here Tennessee Williams uses the word "realistic" in a different manner from the way in which the word is used by BARNET, meaning that the house has to be fragmented "to allow fluidity without scene change"[8].

As G.B. TENNYSON has said, "stage directions, extensive or slight, explain themselves. In modern plays, they offer us background, character study, and sometimes minutiae of the appearance of a room or place", as is the case in *Vieux Carrē*. He adds that since the aim of the realistic theater has been to make actual places and circumstances visible and to emphasize their importance symbolically, the reader needs the stage directions to perceive the atmosphere and mood the playwright is trying to create.[9] In the play, the visualization of the house as real is fundamental because it is used as a physical representation of its inhabitants' decadence. It therefore becomes a recurring image which establishes a relationship in the reader's mind, leading to the perception of the house as a physical symbol of decay.

The sense of reality involving the house is mainly based on precise factual information. Besides the initial stage directions, there are countless references throughout the play which make the house credible due to certain elements connected with real life. One of these elements is, for example, the reference to the rooming house as a historical old building in New Orleans (p.72).

As has already been mentioned it is important to keep a clear image of the house in mind as a real and tangible

place. However there is a parallel aspect one can observe about the house: the real and the fantastic. The external part of the house, besides reminding us that the setting of the play is real and visible, is even on the "tourist list of attractions" (p.72) of the city. Tourists pay admission to visit the courtyard during the Azalea Festival (p.75) and sometimes pick "the azaleas off the bushes" (p.77). People usually admire the outside of the house:

> VOICES OFFSTAGE: Edwina, Edwina, come see this dream of a little courtyard. Oh, my, yaiss, like a dream. (p.85)

The word "dream" already foreshadows the fantastic (in the sense of different and odd) world one finds inside the house. In the same way, the "spoiled garbage pail " (p.14) and the "ole banana tree" (p.5), with a permanent colony of bats, that shadows the house from the outside already lead one to think of the decadence which will be shown inside the building. On approaching and entering the house we are able to visualize the change from the real world to a nightmarish place where the action will take place.

As we have seen, the setting of the play is a cheap rooming house in the French Quarter of New Orleans — although the adjective "New" seems ironic since it is "an old town" (p.80), actually "eight feet below sea level" (p.38):

> JANE: (....) For me the climate here is debilitating. Perhaps because of the dampness and the, and the — very low altitude, really there's no altitude at all, it's slightly under sea level. (p.31)

In this way Williams has already established New Orleans as the perfect place for the crumbling rooming house of *Vieux Carré*. The fact that it is under sea level reminds us of the underworld, "where the spirits of the dead were originally supposed to wander in eternal darkness, doing nothing"[10], according to Ad de VRIES' *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*.

The Vieux Carré or French Quarter is further a disreputable quarter in New Orleans, "built on corruption and evil" (p.57), and was chosen to be the title of the play since it already symbolizes decadence: "Old Square". The square is one of the shapes most frequently employed in the language of the symbols.[11] In addition, it is also considered the antithesis of the transcendental as well as conveying the idea of stagnation. In the astrological tradition, the square has always been related to obstacles, difficulties, divergences and to the idea of tension, conflict and incompatibility.[12] This comes to corroborate what will happen in the play, for the characters will be seen as imprisoned in the boarding house which stands in the Vieux Carré, without apparently transcending the material things towards spiritualization. They are like pieces in a chess-board, which have to move and fight against each other. The square is also a geometrical figure with *four* sides, which might stand for the four forms of punishment, war, pestilence, death, and hell.[13] As will be seen further on in the action, these four forms could be represented by the clashes between the characters, by their physical decay, by

the imminent death of two characters at the end of the play and by the house itself.

The rooming house, "one of the oldest buildings in the Vieux Carré" (p.72), is on Toulouse Street, which is referred to again, as "the most historical street in the Vieux Carré" (p.88). For Mrs. Wire, the landlady, her place is "the only respectable rooming house in the Quarter" (p.6), but this comment reveals itself to be ironic because of the state of decay in which the house is. Thus the tenants' opinions about it are not the same as Mrs. Wire's:

> MARY MAUDE: (....) Our room gets no sun, and the walls are so damp, so - dark ... (p.13)
>
> NIGHTINGALE: (....) You're not managing right. Need advice and ... company in this sad ole house. (....) (p.21)
>
> WRITER: How would you know anything outside this moldy, old - (house). (p.72)

It is thus made explicit that the boarders are aware of the decaying condition of the place they live in. The first stage directions also say that the house is at number 722 of Toulouse Street; if we read the number as it is usually done in the English language, we have number 7 and number 22. This is very significant for number seven can be related to inverted holiness or evil, since in the Bible it is the number of things which are an abomination to the Lord, as well as related to the underworld. The number twenty-two is said to be generally unfavorable, "a superfluity with regard to the lucky number 21"[14]. Thus the decadent tone of

the setting is established from the title and the first stage directions.

The upstairs cubicles of the house, the tenants' rooms, do not allow the tenants' "privacy of body and thought"[15] , because they are separated by "plywood" (p.4), an unexpensive type of wood which provides a minimal separation between them. Thus their bedrooms become small and dark, and are described by the characters as cages (p.90). For this reason they look like small cells of a prison, making the rooming house comparable to a jailhouse. The house in the play is therefore more than a shelter for the tenants, symbolic of Mrs. Wire's "maternal body"[16], but also a place of confinement from where they cannot easily escape. The landlady, naturally, plays the role of a keeper:

> NURSIE: Lawd, that woman, she got the idea that 722 Toulouse Street is the address of a jailhouse. And she's the keeper-... (p.10-1)

This comparison of the house to a prison emphasizes the change from the real to the unreal world that exists inside the building. Mrs. Wire has even decided to sleep in the entrance hall to "keep watch on the comings and goings at night of tenants in my [her] house" (p.11). No wonder that the tenants feel like prisoners in the rooming house. She controls even the people they want to bring into the house, just like a policeman controls visitors to prisoners:

> NIGHTINGALE: Oh, yes, I know your aversion to visitors at night, but this is my first cousin. (....) (p.11)

And the boarders are aware of their situation in the rooming house:

> WRITER: The tourists don't hear you shoutin' orders and insults to your, your - prisoners here! (p.72)

Because of its characteristics, the boarding house also resembles a graveyard, with the characters' cots representing their impoverished tombs. The very first scene of *Vieux Carrè* presents an image that reminds us of a cemetery:

> NURSIE: Why, Mizz Wire, I swear it was a bull bat up there in the kitchen. You tell me no bats, why, they's a pack of bats that hang upside down from that ole banana tree in the courtyard from dark till daybreak, when they all scream at once and fly up like a - explosion of - damned souls out of a graveyard. (p.5)

Thus the characters might be seen as these "damned souls" or ghosts, an idea which is emphasized through the symbolism of the bat, an animal related, in fact, to ghosts, evil spirits, death, madness and darkness. It is a night animal, "visible at the critical period of the day between light and dark and spending the light of day in darkness"[17]. This is exactly what the characters do: go out at night and spend the day in the darkness of the rooming house.

This darkness makes the rooming house also comparable to a madhouse, for darkroom confinement was a "recognized treatment for madmen"[18], as several references confirm:

> MARY MAUDE: We did understand that this was a guesthouse, not a ... refuge for delinquents. (p.39)

> PHOTOGRAPHER: Not only she [Mrs. Wire] but her tenants; why, the place is a psychoward. (p.60)
>
> PATROLMAN I: Christ! Is this a fuckin' madhouse? (p.62)

It seems that the people who inhabit the rooming house are as unbalanced, odd characters, who live in a dark place where nothing is clearly seen because of darkness. As the text continues, this characteristic, associated with the color black, becomes related to the imagery of decadence and death apparent in the house. The darkness and the color black are also reflected in some of the minor characters like Nursie, the colored maid, and even in the pianist who plays the background music in the play, who is described as "a Negro singer-pianist at a nearby bar" (p.86) or as "the black singer-pianist" (p.96). It cannot be forgotten that the story takes place in New Orleans, a city full of black people, a color which somehow reinforces the idea that everything is dark and gloomy in the play. Tennessee Williams is so concerned about it that even the lupos, the dogs that attacked the Champagne Girl who worked in the same place as Tye (as will be seen later), are "big black dawgs used for attack" (p.98). And in scene eleven, when Tye seems to notice that Jane has got shadows under her eyes, she replies that "blackbirds kissed me [her] last night. Isn't that what they say about shadows under the eyes, (....)". The use of "blackbirds" reinforces the idea of darkness, besides their symbolic relationship with the devil, underworld deity and bad luck, evil, temptation.[19]

When the Writer looks at Jane's chessboard in scene three, he realizes that "black is in check" (p.29), thus stressing again the emphatic use of this color. This can also be said to be true of the last scene when Jane invites the Writer to play with her:

> WRITER: Want to play white or black?
>
> JANE: You choose.
>
> (The piano fades in. Jane looks about in a confused way.)
>
> WRITER: Black. In honor of the musician around the corner. (p.113)

His choice is symbolic, for Jane has just been left alone by Tye and this color is again related to death, mourning, penitence, punishment besides standing for the darkness of the underworld.[20]

Even the similes and images used by Tennessee Williams remind us of darkness, death and vice:

> MRS. WIRE: (....) And I got that TB case spitting contagion wherever he goes, leaves a track of blood behind him like a chicken that's had it's head chopped off. (p.72)

> TYE: (....) mouths wide open on their dagger teeth and their black eyes rollin' like dice in a nigger crapshooter's hands. (p.98)

As one can see, the imagery of decadence, through the emphatic use of the color black, is always clearly emphasized throughout the play.

Actually, the lack of light that pervades the play is another aspect that corroborates the decline of the rooming house, and brings it closer to the graveyard and jailhouse imagery, since these two places are dark. There is a "dark narrow passageway" (p.4, 115) from the outside to the inside of the building which again emphasizes the idea of a change from the real to the nightmarish world one finds inside the house. Mrs. Wire, the landlady, sleeps on a cot in this hall, and she seems to like darkness, as one surmises from Nursie's words:

> I said shoot ... faw shit. You'd see they're on the cot if you had a light bulb in this hall. (....) What you got against light? First thing God said on the first day of creation was, "Let there be light". (p.6)

And the characters are not even certain whether it is day or night inside the house because all the bulbs in their cubicles are out of use and have not been replaced:

> NIGHTINGALE: (....) Mind if I switch on your light?
>
> WRITER: The bulb's burned out.
>
> NIGHTINGALE (chuckles and coughs): She hasn't replaced a burnt-out light bulb in this attic since I moved here last spring. (....) p.17)

Their rooms resemble tombs and cages where the sun never comes in:

> MARY MAUDE: (....) our light bulbs have burned out, so we can't distinguish night from day anymore. Only shadows come in. (p.37)

> WRITER: I don't think there's a room in this building where you could be certain it was night or day, (....) (p.70)

One gets the impression in this way that nothing is clearly seen in the play. Even the stairs are dark, with the lower steps to the attic being dimly visible (p.41):

> TYE: Yeh, yeh, you, I dropped one of these packages on th' steps, so goddam dark I dropped it. (....) (p.41)

> MRS. WIRE's VOICE (from off stage, curiously altered): Why are those stairs so dark? (p.106)

Every time the Writer's grandmother, in the form of an angel, appears to him, it is dark or getting dark:

> WRITER: When I was alone in the room, the visitor having retreated beyond the plywood partition between his cubicle and mine, which was chalk white that turned ash-gray at night, not just he but everything visible was gone except for the lighter gray of the alcove with its window over Toulouse Street. An apparition came to me with the hypnotic effect of the painter's sandman special. (....) (p.26)

Another time, the angel enters from a dark passage and sits on an alcove bench, just faintly visible (p.93). And for a third time the angel of the alcove appears at dusk (p.107).

If there is a candle to be lit, the characters are against it:

> WRITER: Please don't light that candle. (p.49)

> MRS. WIRE: Things between grownups in love and marriage can't be told to a child. (....) (She is staring into space. He moves to the cubicle entrance; the candle is turned over and snuffed out.) (p.106)

At the end of the play, the lack of light is very strongly presented through the image of the sky turning dark:

> JANE: It isn't blue any more, it's suddenly turned quite dark.
>
> WRITER: It was dark as the question in her eyes.
>
> (The blues piano fades in.)
>
> JANE: It's black as the piano man playing around the corner. (p.112)

If the sky has changed from blue to dark, nothing more natural than to get dark inside the house; but this fact is highly emphasized by the playwright as the word "dark" is repeated in quick succession:

> WRITER (standing in the open doorway): It was getting dim in the room.
>
> TYE: It's almost getting dark.
>
> WRITER: They didn't talk. He smoked his reefer. He looked at her steady in the room getting dark and said ... (p.102)

Of the twelve scenes that make up *Vieux Carrē*, seven happen at night, the period of the day which is strongly related to darkness, death, winter and evil.[21] Thus the time of day helps to emphasize the play's atmosphere of decay, for "morning (....) is a time of beginning, and perhaps of optimism, whereas twilight is close to evenning and hence a less optimistic time"[22].

Since the very first scene of the play, night is portrayed, as one can deduce from the characters' comments:

> MRS: WIRE (switching off the light): Git upstairs, boy. We'll talk in the mawnin' about your future plans. (p.8)

> MRS. WIRE: Miss Sparks, what're you doin' out so late on the streets of the Quarter? (p.9)

Scene two also takes place at night, as shown in the stage directions ("The Writer has undressed and is in bed. (....) Then across the makeshift partition in the Writer's cubicle, unlighted except by a faint glow in its alcove window (....)" (p.16)) and corroborated by the Writer's comment "I ... don't feel well ... tonight" (p.17). The next scene, in contrast, happens on a Monday morning but scene four returns to the darkness that again makes the whole play dim, as the stage directions indicate: "A lighted area represents Mrs. Wire's kitchen, in which she is preparing a big pot of gumbo despite the hour, which is midnight" (p.35).

Darkness is also present in scene five, for the Writer asks Nightingale not to light the candle and to get out because he wants to be alone (p.49-50). In scene six the light of the day is seen — but it is daylight "tinged with rain" (p.52), for the sun is never shown in the play. The next scene brings us again back to the night as Mrs. Wire reprehends the Writer for his "sneakin' in at two A.M. like a thief" (p.55). In contrast, the dialogue between the characters in the eighth scene leads us to believe it takes place on a Sunday morning, as Mrs. Wire tells the Writer to

stop writing because "the streets are swarming this Sunday with the Azalea Festival trade" (p.71) and she wants him to go out to deliver the business cards where she offers lunch at a low price. Scenes nine and ten happen on this same Sunday afternoon, as Jane's (p.79) and the Writer's comments (p.90, 95) show while the next scene shows us that same Sunday, now getting dark, as the stage directions read (p.96). The play ends in darkness again, for the twelfth and last scene of *Vieux Carrē* elapses on that same Sunday night, as Tye says: "Gotta go now, it's late, after dark and I'm dressed" (p.109).

Thus most of the scenes in *Vieux Carrē* convey an imagery of night and, by association, of decline. There the lack of light is a continual reminder of the decaying condition of the setting and of the characters, for darkness may also be associated with the characters' misfortune and spiritual needs[23] since they are confined in that dark boarding house while the night affects their mood by suggesting gloom, reminding us once more of the square symbolism.

Besides the lack of light mentioned above, the objects in the house, as part of the setting, also reveal the oldness and decaying state of the house. According to O. Zich, all the objects that are signs in the theater have

> two functions: the first and most characteristic one is to give graphic

> depiction of the characters and the place of action; and the second function is to take part in the dramatic action.[24]

Thus, as Karel BRUSAK says, "a specific piece of furniture may be, in relation to its owner, a sign of his social standing taste, upbringing, state of health, habits, and so forth". He further adds that these articles may also function as "elementary signs, symbols standing for referents composing the scene"[25], as is the case in *Vieux Carrè*.

To start with, the Writer uses a "dilapidated typewriter" (p.69), a "secondhand Underwood portable" typewriter (p.21) for typing his works and sits at a "worn, wobbly table" (p.69) in his cubicle. When he decides to leave for the West Coast with Sky, the only things he takes with him are his "cardboard laundry box and the typewriter case" (p.115); thus his luggage also brings to mind a poor condition. The fact that he will go away with Sky, a vagrant musician, in a "beat-up old'32 Ford" (p.78) is significant too.

Nightingale, the occupant of another cubicle, who complains about burnt-out light bulbs that are never replaced (p.17), as mentioned above, has his room full of bedbugs which bleed him like leeches (p.20), and whose blood spots on the bed make his mattress "filthy" (p.75), although the blood actually comes from his lungs.

We can say that decay is also apparent in the studio Jane shares with Tye mainly because of its smell, since it is said to reek of marijuana (p.105). Besides, this room

has a window without a screen through which cockroaches fly (p.9-10). The cockroach is also a night animal, like the bats, called ominously "black beetle", and related to filth and decay.[26]

Therefore the window without a screen becomes symbolic of the declining condition of the house. The spoiled milk that Jane has to throw away on a Monday morning because "ice is not delivered on Sundays" (p.28) also plays this role, as well as the lid that has come off the mailbox (p.52), making the letters get soaked. Even the saucepan Mary Maude has is "rusty and old" (p.36), and she and Miss Carrie carry "greasy paper bags" (p.13) with spoiled food they take from a garbage pail. Nursie has "a bunch of musty keys" (p.74) that open every room in the house and which are also related to decadence, for the adjective "musty" conveys something tasting or smelling of damp or decay.

The fashion sketches Jane makes are also a reflection of her physical decay, for "they're no good" as she is no good anymore (p.84). Mary Maude and Miss Carrie are so hungry that they are even able to eat the gumbo Mrs. Wire makes, although she tells them she always spits into the pot of gumbo "to give it special flavor" (p.39). This partaking of food ties them even more to the house since it creates a bond,[27] thus making them more dependent of Mrs. Wire.

Contradicting the imagery of decadence, Jane's cat, Beret, is "white and fluffy as a piece of cloud" (p.115) and remains with Jane when Tye leaves her, maybe suggesting a new spiritual life for her. Jane also has a beautiful

chessboard in her room which could be symbolic of her love for Tye, since chess is "the entertainment where the two sexes could meet on equal terms".[28] But it is useless because Tye does not know how to play chess. Thus it stands there as a symbol of Jane and Tye's differences and, at the same time, of the decayed sexual interest that brings them together.

Another positive object which is part of the setting is Sky's knapsack, which is a visual sign of liberty contrasting with the tenants'feeling of confinement. It seems to stand there as a symbol of release since it is related to the pilgrim. The fact that this object is "colorfully decorated" (p.8) corroborates this idea for it contrasts with the darkness inside the rooming house.

Finally, the entrance door of the rooming house has a double aspect: it is not only a way of entering and leaving the decayed house, but also symbolic of a passage from an old life to a new one, as will be seen in the action.

In *Vieux Carrē*, Williams also makes extensive use of acoustic signs to stress certain identical situations throughout the play, as Gerald WEALES confirms in relation to Williams' other plays:

> In *Menagerie*, he calls for a musical theme which can be identified with Laura, and in *Streetcar*, the "Varsouviana", the polka that was playing when Allan shot himself, is used both to indicate and intensify Blanche's desperation. Street cries ("Red

> hots!"; "Flores para los muertos") in that play are obviously more than local color. Uncle Pleasant's Choctaw call is used twice in *Orpheus* as entrance cues for Val, and bird cries are used antiphonally in several of his plays - most notably, *Suddenly Last Summer*.[29]

The frequent use of the sound of rain in the play has the function of suggesting states of mind or heightening the mood of loneliness and sadness of the characters.

The sound of piano blues is also heard during the play underscoring its atmosphere of sexuality or sometimes emphasizing departures, separations or losses, for "by definition the blues are another example of what W.E.B. Du Bois has called the spirituals — 'sorrow songs'"[30].

Besides, there are actually twenty-one references in the whole play about the sound of Nightingale's coughing, mainly expressed by the stage directions, which make us aware of the fact he is very ill. He has a "fiendish, racking cough" (p.16) and is described, for example, "hacking and spitting up bloody phlegm" (p.16).

Another sound heard in is the call of Sky's clarinet at the end of the play, which becomes more and more urgent until the Writer finally leaves. As he does so, we can hear "a cacophony of sounds: the waiting storm of his future - mechanical racking cries of pain and pleasure, snatches of song" (p.116) which indicates the ambiguous nature of his future.

This analysis confirms EVANS' words that Tennesee Williams is "outstanding among American dramatists for the

contrapuntal effects he is able to achieve by a putting together of 'heard' and 'seen' material"[31]. His theatrical effects can be seen throughout *Vieux Carrē*, demonstrating its wealth regarding the use of actual noises as well as visual signs.

The decay in the house is further corroborated by the clothing and the physical appearance of the characters.

Tadeusz KOWZAN says that the costumes may suggest socio-economic, psychological and even moral features of a character, besides determining his sex, age, job, position, religion and nationality. Keir ELAM confirms this idea by saying that "costume may denote the mode of dress worn by the dramatic figure but, at the same time, may stand for his social position or profession".[32] The kind of clothes (odd or tattered robes and nightgowns) the characters wear for most of the play also project their decadence and vice, for "through tattered clothes small vices do appear"[33].

The Writer is first described as being "young and sensual" (p.49), with a "nice smooth skin" (p.22) but although he is only twenty-eight years old (p.19), he has had "a little eye trouble lately" (p.36):

> NIGHTINGALE: Isn't the pupil of the left one a little bit lighter?
>
> WRITER: ... I'm afraid I'm ... developing a - cataract in that eye. (p.19)

> MRS. WIRE: Why're you shifty-eyed? I never seen a more shifty-eyed boy. (p.36)

> MRS. WIRE: You're gettin'a a cataract on your left eye, boy, face it! - Cataracts don't usually hit at your age. (p.36)

His physical defect can be a reflection of his declining state (to be discussed later), in the same way as his "riding boots and britches, a faded red flannel shirt" (p.35), the cheap clothes he is described in are related to decadence: Mrs. Wire says he looks like "a jockey in a donkey race" (p.35) for she knows that his good clothes are not at the cleaners, as he claims, but at the pawnshop (p.35).

Nightingale, already described in the stage directions as being "an old painter, a terribly wasted man, dying of tuberculosis" (p.4), is also symbolic of decay. Because of his sickness, he chuckles and coughs all the time. The descriptions in the play which show him in "a tattered silk robe" (p.50), a piece of clothing which corroborates his physical decay, are also significant. It becomes even more symbolic of his condition when we are told that the color of his robe is purple (p.46) — a color related to death and mourning.[34] The passage of hospital interns with Nightingale's dying body on a stretcher (p.102) at the end of the play also evokes an image of sickness and death.

Another character in *Vieux Carré* associated with illness is Jane; she is apparently "bonita, muy muy bonita" (p.88), as the gentleman from Brazil says, but in fact she feels "close to exhaustion" (p.80):

> TYE: (....) Honey, you got shadows under your eyes. (p.96)
>
> TYE: Jane. You've gotten sort of skinny. How much weight you lost?
>
> JANE: I ... don't know ...
>
> TYE: Sometimes you walk a block and can't go no further. (p.106)

She knows she is ill but she does not tell Tye exactly what her illness is; she just says it is "some - blood thing - progressing rather fast at my age" (p.104). Near the end of the play, she comes to find out that her blood count has changed for the worse and is close to collapse (p.104). The image of her bleeding hand after cutting herself shattering a pane of glass after Tye has left her reminds us of her closeness to death. So does her wristwatch, which is working well in the beginning of the play:

> JANE: Mrs. Wire, according to the luminous dial on my watch, it is only ten after twelve. (p.9)

but is found to be broken at the very end of *Vieux Carrē*:

> WRITER: I'll take it off. To wind it. (He puts the watch to his ear.) I'm afraid it's broken. (p.112)

According to A. de VRIES, "a clock stops when the owner (or, giver) dies"[35]. Thus one can see how the image is pertinent again, for the clock becomes a symbol for Jane of the life which she cannot have.

Tye, who shares the studio with Jane, is described as "attractive" (p.49), having "a skin like a child" (p.82), with "faintly innocent boy's eyes" (p.34) and being a "physically appealing young man" (p.49). But a needle mark on his arm (p.82) represents his deterioration. As a drug-addict he is seen more than once "rolling a joint" (p.9, 96). He usually wears fancy sports shirts, one of them described as presenting "girls in grass skirts printed on it" (p.108). In colloquial language, "grass" is a synonym for marijuana: thus even his clothes bring about the idea that Tye is disheveled and drugged although with a vulnerably boyish appearance.

Nursie, the maid, is a black woman with a "big black mouth" (p.6) who is called, by the tourists who visit the courtyard of the house, "an impudent ole nigger" (p.77). Although having "eyes large and ominously dark as the continent of her race" (p.7), her eyesight, like the Writer's, has already given signs of failure:

> NURSIE: I can't please you no more. You keep callin' Nursie, Nursie, do this, do that, with all these stairs in the house and my failin' eyesight. No Ma'am, it's time for me to retire. (p.7)

To corroborate this image of darkness and physical decay, the only reference to Nursie's clothing in the whole play shows her in "an old dirty nightgown" (p.59), the two adjectives hinting at her condition.

Mary Maude and Miss Carrie are physically described as "emaciated crones" (p.62), "demented old horrors" (p.62), "old ladies" (p.62) and "old women" who are starving and dying of malnutrition (p.36). In fact, Miss Carrie is asthmatic and has a breathless laugh which clearly reveal her decaying physical condition. Besides, they carry greasy bags with spoiled food with "wild, wild eyes" (p.13), indicating madness. As to their clothing, the only reference in *Vieux Carrē* is to their "outrageous negligees" (p.57), increasing the feeling of decay.

Sky's physical appearance is that of a "lean, gangling young man" (p.69), which also suggests he is not a very healthy person. The same can be said of the Photographer, who is described as "a very effete man" (p.55), meaning that he is physically decayed for he is weak, exhausted and cannot have children.

Mrs. Wire's clothes are also representative of the rotting setting for they are also decaying; once she is seen in a "flannel robe" (p.63), another time she is described in "a yellowed silk robe with torn lace" (p.106), which is a "reliquary garment" (p.106) that might well explain why her husband took her son away from her, for yellow is the color of prostitutes.[36] During the play she also wears "Mr. Wire's old ragged bathrobe" (p.64) which could be symbolic of poverty and despair, since it is ragged,[37] poverty because she, in fact, does not have much money and despair because of her loneliness after Mr. Wire

takes Timmy away from her. In addition, the fact that she wears her husband's clothes could also refer to transvestism, for "the wearing of clothes appropriate to the other sex has always been a characteristic of witchcraft"[38]. Actually, she is called "witch" several times during the play and is clearly described as one in the fourth scene, when she is preparing gumbo at midnight in "vaguely modern, but definitely not new costume" (p.35) resembling a witch from *Macbeth* (p.35). She is like "an old witch" (p.87), with "dried up old dugs" (p.73) which convey her having passed the age of fertility. To emphasize her physical appearance of an old, ugly woman, near the end of the play, the stage directions describe her as "her hair is loose, her steps unsteady, her eyes hallucinated" (p.106), details which corroborate her decaying state as the house owner.

The physical decay of the characters leads us back to the symbolism of the square, which relates this kind of suffering to a form of punishment.

It is also relevant to point out that most of the references to the characters' clothing in *Vieux Carrē* show them in robes or nightgowns (except for the Writer, Sky and the Photographer) which one commonly wears at night, even when the scenes take place during the day. So, again, the imagery of darkness is reinforced through this device. Besides, their common outfits remind us of the uniforms prisoners wear when they are imprisoned — and that is how the tenants feel in the rooming house, as mentioned above. We can therefore claim that, in *Vieux Carrē*, the clothing is

symbolic of the decadence of the characters and, at the same time, a projection of the decay of the setting through them.

Having discussed the elements of the place where the action occurs, let us now move to the other element that makes up the setting, namely time.

After the Writer's introductory speech, the temporal structure of *Vieux Carrē* follows a chronological order up to the end of the play, when it is again framed by the Writer's final orders. But this chronological order is not clearly marked by Tennessee Williams since this is a memory play — everything happens in the mind of the playwright; the episodes are a recollection of the experiences he observed and/or went through those years ago, in the period between winter 1938 and spring 1939 (p.4), which will also become symbolic.

Because we have shifting scenes of memory, the chronological time is not stressed in the play; however, we have observed that the scenes follow an order through careful observation of the characters' speech. Let us now examine how chronological time is defined in *Vieux Carrē* and why it corroborates the idea of decay that pervades the whole play, as has been done in relation to night (time of day).

At the beginning of the play, the stage directions have already revealed that it is winter when the curtain rises. This season of the year is related to old age, involutive death, darkness and misery,[39] that is, winter is

chosen symbolically to represent in *time* what the boarding house does in *place*: the decadence of the setting.

Apart from the mention of winter, we have reached the conclusion that it is December because, in the first scene of the play, Mrs. Wire observes that "some crazy young man (....) dropped the sack on the floor and said he'd pick it up tomorrow, (....)" (p.6). In Part II, scene eight, Sky appears to obtain it and tells the Writer:

> That was Christmas week. I asked permission to leave my knapsack here with the landlady, overnight. She said, "For fifty cents". Extortionary, but I accepted the deal. However was unavoidably detained like they say. (....) (p.71)

The word "Christmas" has a double function here: the first one is symbolic, revealing that the action of *Vieux Carrē* begins in December, a month that represents "gloom and coldness"[40]; thus it seems obvious that time corroborates place again concerning the decaying condition of the setting. Its second function is ironic, for Mrs. Wire does not seem to be concerned that Christmas is a time of good will among men, and still demands a lot of money to keep Sky's knapsack, as seen above.

From scene eight onwards, Tennessee Williams emphasizes that four months have passed since the beginning of the play when Mrs. Wire mentions specifically to Sky that he had not been in a hospital four months but in the House of Detention "for resistin' arrest and assaultin' an officer of the law" (p.71). In the tenth scene, the Writer and

Nightingale discuss the first's change and the painter again mentions: "You used to be kind - gentle. In less than four months you've turned your back on that side of your nature, turned rock-hard as the world" (p.92). These references to the passing of time are further corroborated by dialogues which stress that now spring — with its suggestions of growth and rebirth — has come:

> MRS. WIRE: Knock it off this minute! Why, the streets are swarming this Sunday with the Azalea Festival trade. (p.71)
>
> NURSIE: Mizz Wire, those tourist ladies, I can't control them, they're pickin' the azaleas off the bushes, and - (....) (p.77)
>
> TYE: It's the Festival, Babe, It ain't always Festival ... (....) (p.83)

The mention of the flowers here acquires great significance, firstly because the azalea is considered "the herald of spring"[41], thus proving that this season of the year has actually arrived and that changes may happen. Secondly, the flowers also emphasize the contrast between the darkness and decay inside the house and its flowered courtyard. In addition, *Vieux Carrē* also ends in spring and significantly in April (four months after December), which once more leads us to the idea of beginning, once "for a long time April was the first month"[42].

Besides being spring and April, the fact that all the scenes in Part II (scenes 8 to 12) happen on a Sunday, as discussed before in relation to the lack of light, is very significant. Indeed, on this day crucial changes occur in

the characters' lives. Having lived for a short or long time in that decadent rooming house, they can only await a "resurrection" or "rebirth". This Sunday in April, although not specified in the play, could even be Easter Sunday, a day which is related to the "renewal of man" and to "the beginning (Spring) of fertility and life'[43]. To corroborate it, the word Sun-day is itself in contrast with the word darkness, thus foreshadowing some hope for some of the characters. This aspect reminds us of *Sweet Bird of Youth* where "the action takes place on Easter Sunday and all the main characters hope for resurrection, wish for a rebirth in their own way - Chance Wayne, Heavenly, The Princess (....) and Boss Finley"[44]. In *Vieux Carrê* this Sunday is also a very important day for some characters: the Writer leaves for the West Coast with Sky; Nightingale goes to a charity hospital almost dying; Jane and Tye break up after she tells him she is definitely sick; and Mrs. Wire recognizes she is an old woman who has been hiding from reality in a world of fantasy. Therefore, they are given a chance of escaping from the deterioration they are surrounded by or have inside themselves: either through death, in the case of Jane and Nightingale, or through leaving, getting away from decay, as the Writer does; or even through self-realization, as is Mrs. Wire's case.

Summing up, we hope to have shown how in this analysis of the setting, place and time become symbolic of all the decay that pervades *Vieux Carrē*, for decadence is revealed in the rooming house and its objects, as well as in the lack of light, time of year and day, and the color black, which are stressed throughout the play. As Williams himself once remarked, "the meaning of a play resides in those abstract beauties of form and color and line, to which I would add light and motion"[45]. Besides the employed visual and acoustic signs as evocative of decadence, through the countless images and symbols used by the playwright, the decay of the setting is also expressed through such devices as the characters' clothing and physical appearance, projecting their exhaustion, physical and mental illness, poverty and perversion, all of them seeming to indicate that Williams' cosmovision is pessimistic, for the rooming house can be compared to a jailhouse, to a graveyard and to a madhouse, and thus can be viewed as a microcosm somehow removed from the world at large, although potentially symbolic of a macrocosm.

Even so, there remains a suggestion of rebirth inside this pessimistic cosmovision, through the coming of a springtime Sunday at the end of the play in relation to time, and through the appearance of Beret, the cat, in relation to place, thus pointing to a setting which, in spite of being confined to decay, allows for some hope of change and renewal.

In this way, the symbolic power of the setting in *Vieux Carrē* confirms what Nancy TISCHLER says about Tennessee Williams' poetic theater, for it is also applicable to *Vieux Carrē*:

> Williams has a poet's weakness for symbols, and this modern technique frees his hand for scattering them about the stage. Their use to reflect, emphasize, and contrast with the meanings of the actions and the words has become a trademark of the Williams play.[46]

NOTES

[1] ROBERTS, E.V. *Writing Themes about Literature*. 3.ed. Englewood Cliffs, Prentice-Hall, 1973. p.69.

[2] KOWZAN, T. O Signo no Teatro. In: INGARDEN, R. et alii. *O Signo Teatral*. Porto Alegre, Globo, 1977. p.73.

[3] HONZL, J. Dynamics of the Sign in the Theater. In: MATAJKA, L. & TITUNIK, I.R. *Semiotics of Art*; Prague School Contributions. Cambridge, MIT Press, 1976. p.76. It is interesting to observe that in Tchecov's *The Cherry Orchard*, "the cherry orchard is on the stage, but in such a way that we cannot see it. It is not represented spatially, but acoustically, as the blows of axes cutting down the orchard are heard in the last act" (p.76).

[4] HONZL, p.82.

[5] ROBERTS, p.69.

[6] BARNET, S. *A Short Guide to Writing about Literature*. 2.ed. Boston, Little, Brown, 1971. p.102.

[7] Throughout this paper, certain key words within quotations have been underlined. This underlining is not found in the original quotations; this device has been used to highlight those words or phrases which are considered of the outmost importance within the discussion of the play.

[8] BROCKETT, O.G. *The Theatre*; an introduction. 3.ed. New York, Holt, Rinehardt and Winston, 1974. p.375. At this point we can remark that A.Curtis, in *Drama*, v.130, p.53, Autumn 1978, said he liked very much the way Voytek arranged the setting in the Piccadilly Theatre production of *Vieux Carrē*: "each of the main rooms set out like slices of a cake on a revolve and can be swivelled into position as required".

[9] TENNYSON, G.B. *An Introduction to Drama.* New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966. p.32.

[10] VRIES, A. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery.* 2.ed. Amsterdam, North-Holland, 1976. p.481.

[11] CHEVALIER, J. & GHEERBRANT, A. *Dictionnaire des Symboles.* Paris, Seghers, 1973. p.263-74.

[12] CHEVALIER & GHEERBRANT, p.263-74.

[13] CHEVALIER & BHEERBRANT, p.263-74.

[14] VRIES, p.416, 479.

[15] VRIES, p.390. The room may also be a symbol of loneliness and this theme will recur in the play.

[16] VRIES, p.264.

[17] VRIES, p.36.

[18] VRIES, p.129.

[19] VRIES, p.51.

[20] VRIES, p.50.

[21] VRIES, p.340. It is interesting to note that night may also be associated with passivity and involution, for the character analysis will show how the characters have difficulties in making decisons.

[22] ROBERTS, p.67-8.

[23] VRIES, p.129.

[24] Quoted by BOGATYREV, P. Semiotics in the Folk Theater. In: MATAJKA & TITUNIK, p.35.

[25] BRUSAK, K. Signs in the Chinese Theater. In: MATAJKA & TITUNIK, p.62.

[26] VRIES, p.106.

[27] VRIES, p.196.

[28] VRIES, p.95.

[29] WEALES, G. *Tennessee Williams.* Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1965. p.41-2.

[30] BROOKS, C. et alii. *American Literature*; the makers and the making. New York, St.Martin's Press, 1973. v.2, p.2759. It is worth pointing out that "the spirituals express the sorrow of the singer's earthly condition, but point to the 'freedom' in the next world — or even in this. The blues can scarcely be said to point to any form of redemption". (p.2759).

[31] EVANS, G.L. *The Language of Modern Drama.* London, Dent, 1977. p.192.

[32] KOWZAN, p.71. ELAM, K. *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama.* London, Methuen, 1979. p.25.

[33] VRIES, p.102.

[34] VRIES, p.375.

[35] VRIES, p.102.

[36] VRIES, p.107.

[37] VRIES, p.379. The rag is also said to promote fertility, thus Mrs. Wire might use it in an attempt to hide reality and go back in time.

[38] VRIES, p.102.

[39] VRIES, p.504.

[40] VRIES, p.132.

[41] VRIES, p.31

[42] VRIES, p.19.

[43] VRIES, p.156.

[44] FALK, S.L. *Tennessee Williams*. New York, Twayne, 1962. p.160.

[45] Quoted by GASCOIGNE, B. *Twentieth-Century Drama*. London, Hutchinson, 1967. p.166.

[46] TISCHLER, N. *Tennessee Williams*; rebellious puritan. New York, Citadel, 1961. p.102.

PART II:

"... DAMNED SOULS OUT OF A GRAVEYARD."

(NURSIE TO MRS. WIRE)

For G.B. TENNYSON, character is "'the sum of qualities or features, by which a person or thing is distinguished from others', especially those mental and moral qualities that constitute the most essential elements of a human being". He further adds that since we see these people only in selected moments of their existence and doing certain actions, we pressupose that we are seeing the significant things about their natures.[1] All plays provide some character revelation, which is specifically shown by what the characters do and by what they say, although they may not be speaking of themselves — and *Vieux Carrē* is no exception to this rule. The nature of an individual character may also be formed by what other individuals in the work say of each other, by what the author (as narrator or through the stage directions, in *Vieux Carrē*) says about them, and even by the setting in which they move which includes the characters' physical appearance, previously discussed. All of these points provide the material from which we can infer the characters' qualities.

According to M.H. ABRAMS, a character may remain unchanged in his outlook and dispositions from beginning to end of a work, or he may undergo a radical change either

through a gradual development or as the result of a crisis.[2] This means that he may be a "static (flat, unchanging) or a developing (changing, dynamic) character"[3]. In *Vieux Carrē*, both types will be found. Somehow or other, a character must have consistency, that is, he must be invested with certain distinguishable attributes in a convincing way; "by this is meant whether a figure created by the author behaves in a fashion consistent with his character or, conversely, whether his character is consistent with his actions", says TENNYSON.[4] While accepting the validity of this statement it is also true to say that occasionally an element of inconsistency, or an unexpected action from a character may be the most revealing trait in him or may mark a turning point in his life. This will be clearly seen in *Vieux Carrē* in the analysis of the Writer's character.

This examination of the characters' mental and moral qualities as well as both their good and bad facets, delineating the characters' development within the play, will be the main theoretical basis for the ensuing character analyses. We shall try to prove that in *Vieux Carrē* all of the devices of characterization employed by the dramatist point to the characters' mental and physical decay. This we shall call their negative features, although their positive aspects will also be shown, since the essential ambiguity of man is an aspect not to be forgotten in all of Williams' work, even if supplanted by the characters' extremely decayed condition in *Vieux Carrē*. This character analysis should then prove to be close to the analysis of the setting:

both dovetailing towards the decadence which the play conveys. However, it is, of course, also true that some of the characters are able to achieve redemption at the end of the play i.e. a transcendence of self (either physical and/or spiritual) beyond the limits of the decaying boarding house, although with great difficulty.

• *The Writer*.

As already mentioned, the Writer is both a character and narrator in *Vieux Carrē*, besides having a strong auto-biographical relationship with Tennessee Williams. He is both the person remembering the scenes and also a witness to all of them. There can be no objection to this device once he partakes even certain scenes as a spy or listener, thus being able to reproduce the other characters' dialogues, as for instance, Jane and Tye's. Such a device is very useful because, first of all, the Writer can speak for Tennessee Williams, as a commentator, and in this way he is able to analyze himself and the others around him. In the same way, the Writer as narrator can see reality as it really has been, for the play is placed in the past and, consequently, removed from our reality. Thus he is integrated in the play, stepping in and out of it.

In common with the other characters in the play, the Writer presents both decaying and positive aspects of his personality. Among those which might be considered positive, there is evidence that he is well-mannered, for he offers to carry Mary Maude and Miss Carrie's greasy paper bags up the

stairs for them (p.43). On another occasion, he offers to hold some sacks of groceries for Jane (p.28); even the fact that he knows how to play chess corroborates his "civilized behavior, good manners" (p.32). In addition, he is, according to Jane, "a serious person" (p.33) that one can easily talk to. Mrs. Wire confirms that when she first saw him at her door she had recognized "a young gentleman" in him, although "shy" (p.43).

One night, when Tye gets home in a doped-up condition, the Writer helps him get upstairs and, although sexually attracted by Tye, he does not take "any advantage of that kind" (p.42).

Later on, he brings Jane her letters which were getting soaked in the rain, showing that he is not only worried about himself. As she seems upset after reading the letter, he reveals his concern for her by asking if the news has left her worried (p.53-4). On this same occasion, he has received some manuscripts back, which means rejection for his literary writings; but this time instead of a printed slip, the Writer reveals with "shy pride" (p.53) that there is a personal signed note which reads: "This one doesn't quite make it but try us again" (p.53), making him feel encouraged to go on writing, a positive feature of his. But, although he struggles to become a good writer, he has "to retype the manuscripts soaked in the rain" (p.53) which again convey an image of decay.

Positive as well is the fact that he tries to dissuade Mrs. Wire from pouring boiling water through a hole

in the kitchen floor, for he knows that the Photographer will probably call the police, but it is in vain (p.55-6). In fact, the police are called and the Writer has to give testimony about the incident. He tries not to answer directly in order to help Mrs. Wire, but it is his answer that finally incriminates her. After this shocking experience, he tries to make the landlady feel better, for she seems to have discovered she is alone in the world (p.65). He tells her he is not a stranger to her although she replies that he just endures her company because he is employed there.

He also reveals himself to be a sensitive person, for when Mrs. Wire is telling Nightingale that she is going to send him away to a charity ward, he pleads with her to be "easy on him" (p.73). Later on, he goes to Nightingale's cubicle and asks him to allow him to "call a private doctor" (p.90) who will not let the painter be removed in that condition. He even takes his pillow to Nightingale and places it gently at his back so that the two pillows help the painter breathe better (p.91). Thus he shows compassion for a suffering creature, something which underlines his basic humanity.

In the last scene of the play, when Jane is left alone, he tries to help her not only by lifting her from the floor where she had fallen (p.111) but also by inviting her to play chess (p.113) so that she feels she is not completely alone. Since he thinks Sky is not coming to fetch him anymore, both the Writer and Jane feel "abandoned to the

other" (p.113). But Sky finnaly appears and leaves Jane without the partner she would have "for once" (p.113), although the Writer's attempt to help her can still be considered of value.

Having discussed the positive aspects of the Writer, let us now move to the negative features of his personality. The Writer's essential character is shown in his first speech: "I have no plans for the future" (p.8). He thus conveys the image of the "irresponsible vagrant who walks alone in search of experience and high-pitched emotion"[5], living in and for the present without thinking about the future. As we have seen in the previous chapter, his physical deterioration is conveyed through a cataract in his left eye which makes his vision cloudy thus preventing him from seeing things well, both in the literal and figurative meaning. That is why he says to have no plans for the future, for he sees no future for himself. However, the Writer is, in fact, "a boy with literary pretensions" (p.50) who feels frustrated in his writing; his manuscripts are usually sent back, and he has applied for work on the WPA for writers without having been accepted (p.35). Meanwhile he has to survive by hocking his typewriter (p.21) and taking his clothes to the pawnshop (p.35), as he does not have a job.

Moreover, the Writer's physical decay is heightened by his mental decaying condition also through his homosexual instinct which — as will be true of some of the other tenants too — spreads an aura of corruption that can be

said to pervade the play. At first, he is not sure about his true sexual nature. He has had only one homosexual experience with a paratrooper in New Orleans, for he is from St. Louis (p.22). However, he is aware of the special significance this encounter had for him, as he tells Nightingale: "I told him [the paratrooper] that I ... loved ... him" (p.25). After his conversation and sexual intercourse with the painter, his homosexual nature is completely brought out (p.26). This realization makes the Writer see the apparition of his dead grandmother and wonder about her attitude towards such perversion. However, as he drifts toward sleep, he feels "she neither blamed nor approved the encounter" (p.27), as though understanding that the great natural instincts, particularly the sexual, which stem from the subconscious of man, should be accepted.[6] Somehow or other, decadence is felt when the Writer feels sexual attraction, as mentioned, towards Tye, the delinquent drug-addict that shares the studio with Jane. The Writer's loneliness is yet another cause for his having sex with the painter and allowing his homosexuality to come out. In fact, the painter first visits the Writer because he hears him crying across the partition in their cubicles: "a sound of dry and desperate sobbing" (p.16). As the Writer tells Mrs. Wire, at night he "takes solitary walks" (p.43). Thus he accepts the painter's first visit, which ends up with the revelation of his latent homosexuality.*

Because he is a frustrated young writer trapped in an unpleasant setting and without a job, the Writer comes to

accept Mrs. Wire's offer to work for her by passing out printed cards advertising "Meals for a quarter in the quarter" (p.45). Thus he comes under the landlady's domination in exchange for food and board. He submits to her whims and keeps his artistic, freedom-loving spirit deep inside his soul.

Therefore the Writer has been placed within an atmosphere of complete decay, besides coming to depend financially on Mrs. Wire. He concedes to confinement when he starts working for her, which represents spiritual decay. But he begins to feel caged in and desires to leave, for an artist, by nature, cannot cope with confinement. He does not even like what he is writing, as when he says: "Even the typewriter objected to those goddamn lines. The ribbon stuck, won't reverse" (p.69). He has to stop writing the last paragraph of a story in order to go deliver the business cards (p.71). He really feels that he did not "escape from one mother to look for another" (p.77); he perceives a primary moral conflict within himself, that of freedom versus confinement, caused by his submission to Mrs. Wire's "protection". Therefore he rejects the possessive love of Mrs. Wire as he had already rejected his family by leaving them and coming down to New Orleans. The Writer comes then to realize he wants neither love (Mrs. Wire's) and lust (Nightingale's) nor soul (Jane's offer at the end); he actually wants to keep his freedom. His cataract is later symbolically removed (p.70), making him see his own reality as it really is. After meeting Sky, who represents the

romance of escape and adventure for him, his search for freedom and identity in the universe increases his desire to evade the need for protection. He is willing to shed the bonds of Mrs. Wire's protectionism to face the truth about himself alone. The Writer's change of attitude in scene eight is the first definitive evidence of his actually taking a step toward escaping from his present situation, after perceiving the similarities between his own nature and that of Sky. Thus he solves the conflict of freedom versus confinement within himself with his decision to leave.

As a conclusion, we can assert that the Writer has both positive and negative aspects in his personality, although those which represent decay are more heavily stressed since they lead him to a moral dilemma related to freedom and imprisonment. However, at the end of the play, this conflict is solved by his learning about himself, in which he finally faces the truth. He does not protect himself from reality but breaks out, achieving redemption through self-realization about his homosexual nature as well as the process of writing, with all the difficulties that becoming a good writer implies. He is able to transcend the decadence around him but it is only a physical transcendence for he says in the epilogue that the decadent people he had met in the Vieux Carré will always be remembered (p.116). Besides, his departure is ambivalent since it can be considered either a positive feature in the sense that he goes away from a decaying atmosphere, or a negative one, for he reaffirms the idea of the irresponsible vagrant in search of experience.

In relation to the autobiographical aspects of the play, if we check Tennessee Williams' biography, we will realize that the playwright was actually living in New Orleans in 1938 and 1939, holding a number of jobs and collecting experiences for his writing. Therefore we can affirm that *Vieux Carrē* is, in a sense, a reproduction of one of the dramatist's own experiences when young, as stated in the first stage directions of the play (p.4). This is corroborated by the fact that one of the major characters in the play is named only the "Writer". Thus *Vieux Carrē* seems to be an emotional play recollected with all the pain and compassion he felt at the time. Thus, in this work he again reveals the strong autobiographical impulse which had in fact motivated him since the beginning of his career. It is worth noting that the family picture shown in *The Glass Menagerie* is similar to the one of his own family.[7] Moreover, *Vieux Carrē* reveals a number of a striking parallels between Williams' life and that of the Writer. In the play, the Writer has come from St. Louis to New Orleans, has applied for the W.P.A. Writer's Project but has not been accepted because he could not prove his father was destitute (p.35). Williams' biography says that "in New Orleans Williams made another attempt to join the Writer's Project or the Theatre Project, and was again unsuccessful"[8], "again" because in St. Louis he had already made this attempt and had not succeeded because he could not prove his family was destitute.[9] In *Vieux Carrē*, he is then offered a job by Mrs. Wire, to deliver business cards advertising lunch in

the boarding house at a reasonable price, as we have discussed. TISCHLER observes that

> Williams was obliged to work for little more than room and board in a twenty-five-cent-a-meal restaurant run by his landlady. Robert Rice thus describes his days: 'Mornings he handed out flyers containing a slogan of his own composition: Meals for a Quarter in the Quarter. Afternoons and evenings he waited on tables. Nights he wrote or walked the streets and marveled'.[10]

NELSON also reveals that when living in New Orleans' Vieux Carrē, Williams felt a relationship with the strange characters who had previously only appeared "on the fringe of his consciousness"; it was like a sense of kinship with the lonely, rootless and outcast.[11] Actually, in the play the Writer remarks at the end that he will never forget the rooming house, its inhabitants and all he has learned with them (p.116). Mrs. Wire even says that the Writer has changed after living in the French Quarter and, more specifically, in her house (p.43). The dramatist's biography is incredibly identical, for it reveals that

> when Williams arrived in New Orleans he was a proper young man in a neat, conservative suit, polished shoes, dress shirt, and tie. When he left, he was headed for California with an ex-teacher-turned-clarinet-player in a decrepit Chevy (....).[12]

In fact, the Writer leaves with Sky, a young jazz clarinettist, for the West Coast. Thus the similarities cannot escape one's mind and prove *Vieux Carrē* to be an autobiographical play. It is remembered as a decaying period he went through; his memories are recreated in an

aesthetically appealing form trying to convey all the decay he experienced and saw around him in order to make us re-experience his living in that rooming house in the Vieux Carré. Williams said some years after living there:

> With these people I found a kind of freedom I had always needed. And the shock of it against the Puritanism of my nature has given me a subject, a theme, which I have never ceased exploiting. (....) If I can be said to have a home (....) it is in New Orleans where I've lived off and on since 1938 and which has provided me with more material than any other part of the country. (....) [13]

- *Mrs. Wire.*

As we found in the case of the Writer, we can clearly perceive a dichotomy in Mrs. Wire's personality in the display of positive and negative character traits although there is no doubt that the latter predominate. Mrs. Hortense Wire is the owner of the boarding house and also the sleazy landlady who runs the place. One of her positive aspects is that she feels a kind of maternal concern for the Writer, thus trying to help him whenever she can. She gives him some advice from the very first scene of the play, when she tells him that if he has no plans for the future he should start thinking about them. Further on, she even arranges a way for him to pay for his room and board in the rooming house, as we have seen:

> At twelve noon ev'ry day except Sundays
> you can hit the streets with these little
> bus'ness cards announcin' that lunch is bein'

> served for twenty-five cents, a cheaper lunch than you could git in a greasy spoon on Chartres ... (p.44)

She then opens this lunchroom and the Writer works for her in order to continue living there.

On another occasion, Mrs. Wire advises Nightingale to leave the Writer alone otherwise she would "get the goods" (p.51) on him. She tries to defend the Writer from people she presumes can bring him possible suffering and moral slackness.

When she learns that the Writer is leaving for the West Coast with Sky, she tries to prevent him from going in order to protect him: "I've sort of adopted you like the son took away from me by the late Mr. Wire and a - and a crooked lawyer (....)" (p.77). She even tries to intimidate him by saying she will inform his "folks of the vicious ways and companions you [he] been slipping into" (p.77). She makes him aware of the difference in him between when he arrived at the boarding house and now, "mockin' me [her] with that grin an'that shifty-eyed indifference" (p.77) which indicates for her that he is going to set out on a future life of corruption. She really seems to like the Writer, for after his forcing her to lose the case in court although not trying to answer directly, she allows him to stay on living there, to his surprise (p.64).

Her concern for him is further revealed when he is packing his belongings and Nursie appears in his bedroom: "Mizz Wire knows you're packin' to leave an' she tole me to bring you up this hot coffee and cold biscuits" (p.94). In

the last scene, as the Writer is about to depart, she does not forget to give him a last piece of advice about being careful of the future.

In this way it is clear that Mrs. Wire is really fond of the Writer, not only because she confuses him with her son Timmy (as we shall see below) but also because he is a companion to her in her lonely existence.

Another aspect that might be considered positive in Mrs. Wire is her "fight against the corruption and evil that this Quarter is built on!" (p.57). She is, in fact, obsessed by the ideas of order and morality, thus trying to "clean" the world and combat the evil she feels around her. However, these attitudes might well be seen as restrictive, authoritarian, a hangover of a limited, Puritan view of life, or, on the other hand, might be evidence of her neurotisms, heightened by her mental instability. As Mrs. Wire ironically comments to Jane about her sharing her bedroom with Tye:

> Hold on a minute, young lady. When you took your room here, you gave your name as Miss Sparks. Now is that young fellow that's living up there with you Mr. Sparks, and if so why did you register as Miss instead of Mrs.? (p.10)

Since the landlady knows they are not married, it is just one of her attempts to combat immorality. Besides, while Mrs. Wire hears Jane's cries as the latter is being raped by Tye, she becomes indignant and claims to have never seen such a "disgustin' exhibition!" (p.87). To defend the

respectability of her house, she does not permit Nightingale to bring visitors to her house at night although he tries to deceive her by saying they are his cousins. She also condemns the "filthy, morphodite" (p.61) photographer who has hired the basement of the building, because of his continual orgies. She cries out that "the Vieux Carré is the new Babylon destroyed by evil in Scriptures!!" (p.59). Although she never reads the scriptures (p.6) she probably knows of this biblical episode through Nursie's quotations. In fact, the Chapter 18 of the Revelation Book of the Bible reads that

> She is fallen, fallen, Babylon the great! She has become a resort for demons; a haunt for every unclean spirit; a refuge for every filthy and detested bird. For all the nations have drunk of the wine of her passionate immorality, and the kings of earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth have grown rich on her abundance of wantonness. (....) therefore on a single day her plagues will be upon her, pestilence, mourning, and famine, and with fire she shall be burned up.[14]

Thus Mrs. Wire seems to play the role of Lord God, the almighty, for after judging the Photographer's behavior, she has decided to destroy corruption and evil. But this does not prevent her from being judged, found guilty and imposed "a fine of fifty dollars plus damages and released in the custody of her nephew, Jim Flynn, a police lieutenant" (p.63).

Therefore we might assert that Mrs. Wire's positive aspects are in some way contaminated, as they cannot be

considered completely upright; her ideas of morality seem also to be a reminiscence of Puritan principles, thus adding an ironic touch for she does not behave as a religious person.

As we have already mentioned, the landlady's physical appearance is that of an old witch. This decay of the body is then corroborated by her deteriorating mental condition, which is also conveyed by her constant breakdowns when she becomes convinced that the Writer is her son. As Nursie adverts him: "Mizz Wire is gettin' you confused with her son Timmy. Her mind is slippin' again. Been through that before. Can't do it again" (p.94). Her periodic confusions had already been hinted at in the beginning of the play, when Nursie tells the Writer: "I think her mind is goin' on her again. Lately she calls out, 'Timmy, Timmy', or she carries on conversations with her dead husband Horace ..." (p.8). She regularly calls the Writer "son" during the play and, in the last scene, she really goes back in time and talks to him as if he were her son:

> Now, Timmy, Timmy, you mustn't cry every time Daddy gets home from the road and naturally wants to be in bed just with Mommy. It's Daddy's privilege, Mommy's - obligation. You'll understand when you're older - you see, Daddy finds Mommy attractive. (p.106)

Here she has, in fact, retreated to another world made up of illusions and dreams; she goes on telling the Writer that "things between grownups in love and marriage can't be told to a child" (p.106). Then she orders him "to lie down and

Mommy will sing you [him] a little sleepy-time song" (p.106) while she snuffs the candle out probably in order not to face reality, and starts singing a lullaby. As the landlady was considered mentally incompetent to bring her son up (p.77), she is therefore forced to find a means of escape from this unpleasant reality. Her surname, Wire, for instance, already gives us a clue to it, as it can be associated with thread which could be interpreted as related to an escape[15] from her own world. In the past, she was not allowed to remain with her son as she was considered insane. This is why she has acquired a sense of unreality; she dreams of Timothy, mistaking the Writer for him. Thus she has a moral conflict which involves reality versus illusion. Her means of escaping from this unpleasant reality, through her past, like Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, is an important aspect of her isolation, for it is a form of protection from other truths she does not want to face, namely her oldness and loneliness. She even drinks to forget about it, as she herself says: "I only touch this bottle (....) when forced to by such a shocking experience as I had tonight, the discovery that I was completely alone in the world, a solitary ole woman cared for by no one" (p.65).

Therefore, Mrs. Wire goes periodically back to the world of her youth in order to escape and forget the brutalities of today's world and the crude reality around her. She now has neither a husband to make love to, nor a son to educate, nor anyone to talk to. That is why she looks for support in Nursie, who seems to understand her: "She gets these spells, goes back in time. (....)" (p.107).

But Mrs. Wire does not manage to forget her reality, for she is constantly reminded of it by Nightingale, Sky and Tye, who do not respect her and usually refer to her as a "crazy witch" (e.g. p.12, 71, 87). Ironically, although the landlady does not want to accept her reality, she delights in showing the others' own sad reality. She calls Tye a "bum" (p.43), tells Nightingale that he is really dying of consumption (p.72) besides referring to Sky as a "jailbird" (p.76) and "piece of trash" (p.77).

We can also assert that Mrs. Wire is wicked to all the tenants and even to Nursie, from whom she needs support. In this way she plays the role of antagonist in relation to all the other characters in the play, as we will see in the action. As CURTIS comments when talking about the Writer, the landlady has a darting malice so that "he soon comes under the domination of the blowsy proprietress of the establishment (....) who bullies him and the remainder of her extraordinary galère of guests as ruthlessly as she does her black servant Nursie"[16]. She can be then considered an insensitive person for she even wants to accuse first Nightingale of being guilty of having poured boiling water through a hole in the kitchen floor and then, when she sees there is no way out for her, she tells the policemen that Mary Maude and Miss Carrie were responsible for pouring the water down the Photographer's studio in the basement (p.62).

Sometimes she seems to want to play the role of a mother toward the characters, but, it must be added, an

aggressive and dominating one. Once, when the Writer is typing the last paragraph of a story, she orders him "Knock it off this minute! Why, the streets are swarming this Sunday with the Azalea Festival trade" (p.71). Like a person who enjoys giving orders, she attempts by all means possible to prevent him from leaving, either by giving him gumbo, which creates a bond to the house, as discussed in the setting, or by threatening him with her contacting his relatives (p.77).

Nevertheless, at the end of the play Mrs. Wire achieves self-recognition, for although her house is full of people, they are "less than strangers" (p.65) to her: this is her discovery of loneliness. She realizes that "there's so much loneliness in this house that you can hear it. Sit still and you can hear it: a sort of awful - soft - groaning in all the walls" (p.65). She becomes aware that, especially at her age, "people die of loneliness" (p.65). She also discovers that she is an old person who goes back to the past in order to regain some happiness: "It all seemed so real. -I even remember lovemaking ..." (p.107), she says after one of her breakdowns. At the end she gives a cry which stands for her self-realization about her decadence of the body and spirit: her physical appearance shows her as an ugly old woman while her mental confusions convey her spiritual declining condition.

To conclude, we can say that Mrs. Wire's decaying aspects are stronger than the positive ones, for her deteriorating physical and mental conditions are much more

stressed throughout the play. Mrs. Wire, as the owner and landlady of the boarding house, is therefore an extension of the place where she lives in, in the same way as her establishment reflects her decadence. Nevertheless, at the end of the play she might well transcend this decadent world when she achieves self-recognition.

- *Jane.*

Another major character in *Vieux Carrē* is Jane Sparks, a fashion designer who lives with Tye in Mrs. Wire's rooming house. As we have seen in the first chapter, from the beginning of the play Jane can be seen as a physically decaying character. She enters the building "exhaustedly" (p.9) and starts up the stairs "weakly" (p.10). The other tenants do not know that she is ill, not even Tye, who later on remarks that she has gotten sort of "skinny" and that sometimes she walks a block and cannot go any further (p.103).

In fact, she had come down from New York and ended up in New Orleans after finding out that she was very sick. Then she met Tye by chance when a torrential rain backed her into a doorway on Royal Street. He had put his hand on her hip but, when she turned to tell him to stop, she looked at him and was attracted by his "innocent boy's eyes" (p.34). She thought she had "nothing to lose" (p.34) because she was aware of the imminence of her death, besides having been alone so long. She was again stimulated to live, especially sexually, by Tye. Their relationship began as almost exclusively based upon sex, mainly from Tye's part, and

symbolized by the chessboard which stood in their bedroom as a reminder of their differences and of what had brought them together: "sexual routine without essential contact"[17], the same meaning given to this type of relationship, skin-deep, dry, self-destructive, by T.S. Eliot in "The Waste Land". We could say that what led Jane to promiscuity i.e. sharing her studio with Tye, a delinquent drug-addict, was her sickness and her loneliness, which had induced her to make a last grab at pleasure. She also seems to be aware of her spiritual decay, for she tells Mrs. Wire that if her sharing her room with a man whose name is not Mr. Sparks offends her moral scruples, "sometimes it offends mine [hers] too" (p.10). But because of her closeness to death, she affirms to "have stopped thinking. Just let things happen to me [her]" (p.10). On another occasion, she tells Nursie that "pride's an easy thing to go past sometimes" (p.14).

It is thus clear that what has led Jane to forget her genteel upbringing (as we shall see later on) and to enjoy a living together with Tye was her illness and solitude — physical and mental decay — in her character.

Jane's deteriorating condition is reflected even in her way of speaking and sometimes she sees herself saying things she would not commonly say, as when she replies to Tye: "Which I'd return with a kick in the balls! (She gasps.) My Lord, did I say that?" (p.15). Her consciousness about undergoing a process of physical and mental decay is so strong that it makes her ironically comment about herself to the Writer when he asks her who is critically ill at Oschner's clinic:

> WRITER: Someone close to you?
>
> JANE: Yes. Quite close, although lately I hardly recognize the lady at all anymore. (p.54)

Thus Jane is aware that what brings Tye and her together is a decayed love, for there are many differences between them that lie in the very diversity of their backgrounds as well as in a different conception of love. The climax of her spiritual decadence comes for her when she is mistaken for a whore in the Blue Lantern — a hundred-dollar girl but still a whore. She does not accept that because deep in her heart she thinks not to be so: "I'm not a whore! I'm the Northern equivalent of a lady, fallen, yes, but a lady, not a whore" (p.96). But this is not what people think of her — and this is clearly stated when she opens the shutters to breath clean air after hearing Tye's account about the Champagne Girl and a tourist shouts: "There's a whore at the gallery window! Practically naked!" (p.99). These and the fact that Tye rapes her[18] when she tries to finish the "bed bit" (p.85) between them represent Jane's decaying condition, which is one of the soul and the body.

Jane has, nonetheless, positive aspects in her personality. She is cultured and intelligent for she has had a good education in New Rochelle, New York, where she used to live with her parents before going to college (p.9). Her awareness of that is revealed when she says to Tye: "How did a girl well educated and reasonably well brought up get involved in this ... (...)" (p.84), for she knows of Tye's lack of education.[19]

Another key to Jane's character is shown in the very first scene by her offering to help Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, where there is clear evidence of her compassion and thoughtfulness towards others: "I have an icebox in which I'd be glad to keep it [their food] for you ladies" (p.13). After finding out that the crones keep spoiled food because they have nothing else to eat, she offers to buy something for them and even asks Nursie "if they'd be offended" (p.14) with her gesture.

Most of the time Jane speaks softly, on a high level, searching for values and thus reflecting education in her manner of speaking, as we can perceive through this dialogue:

> WRITER: Let me hold the sacks for you.
>
> JANE: Oh, thanks; now, then, come in, put the sacks on one of those chairs. Over the weekend we run out of everything. (....) Oh, don't go out. Have you had a coffe?
>
> WRITER (looking at Tye): I was about to but ...
>
> JANE: Stay and have some with me. Sorry it's instant, can you stand instant coffee? (p.28)

This reveals her ambiguity and also how far the decaying environment and relationship with people have taken her and contaminated her, for she can even speak rough language inadvertently as discussed before.

The stage directions also read that Jane "has an elegance about her and a vulnerability" (p.9), thus revealing that she is sensitive and delicate. In fact, it is hard for her to accept the outside world so she becomes terrified with the Champagne Girl's story Tye tells her,

remarking that "it isn't real, it couldn't be -" (p.99) and stressing that it is "like a dream" (p.100). Her sensitiveness makes her understand that the world outside the house is also a world of illusions, even more deceptive and destructive than those held by herself.

Jane and Tye's relationship was initially based on sex, but she came to love him in the broader sense of the word, not only as a way of satisfying physical desire. This can be considered another positive aspect in Jane, since she began to care and worry about Tye although her concern for him is not warranted in his attitude to her. During the incident between Mrs. Wire and Biggs, Jane is worried only about Tye, asking the Writer if Tye was involved in it (p. 58). On another occasion, when Tye comes home after having shot a drug through his veins, her concern about him is evident for she tries desperately to rouse him from an unnatural deep sleep (p.79). Jane is even jealous of Tye, as revealed when they are talking about the Champagne Girl:

> TYE: You was jealous of her ... (Jane looks away.) I never touched the Champagne Girl. She was strictly the property of the Man. Nobody else dared t' touch her. (p.97)

This concern about Tye can be considered positive for it is a consequence of her sensitiveness and conception of love in a high level. It is exactly Jane's sensitivity and awareness of the decayed love between her and Tye that leads her to a moral conflict centered around sex. Tye pleases Jane sexually, but not spiritually. Although she likes the

physical part of love ("Silk on silk is - lovely ... regardless of the danger" (p.34)), she would also like to have spiritual support for her sickness and loneliness. As her surname, Sparks, confirms — for fire suggests spiritual enlightenment — Jane is in search of the spiritualization that would comfort and protect her against the rough edges of her decadent surroundings, her sickness (physical decay) and loneliness (spiritual decay). After realizing that Tye needs love only to satisfy his animal desires, she understands how different their approach to love is and comes to recognize she also has a spiritual need which Tye cannot satisfy if he does not change.

Thus she tries to make him change for the better, since she feels in need of someone not only to fulfill her basic physical wishes but to protect her emotionally as well. She attempts to improve Tye's manners in order to see if his concept of love gets closer to hers:

> JANE: Tye, behave yourself. (She turns to the Writer.) I've cherished the hope that by introducing Tye to certain little improvements in wearing apparel and language, I may gradually, despite his resistance - (p.31)

In her illusion, Jane even wants him to "seek out some higher level of employment" (p.31) and gives him a "shantung silk robe" (p.30) for his birthday, which he never wears. Since silk is a type of cloth related to the upper classes,[20] the robe might well stand for the change Jane would like to take place in Tye's personality for, as KALEM comments, Jane

"is a genteel New Yorker" while Tye is "a Neanderthal stud who works in a strip joint"[21].

But her attempt proves not to be worth it, and everything is in vain: he seems not to want her changes and, consequently, does not manage to give her the spiritual support she needs in order to transcend physical decay. As Jane observes, she had counted on Tye to grow up, but he refused to; she had taken him for "someone gentle caught in violence and degradation that he'd escape from ..." (p.101).

We can therefore see Jane as a person disrupted internally by the opposing forces of the soul and the body. Because she feels sex without love is decaying, she seeks security and protection from it in Tye. Actually, she had even felt much better physiçally after meeting Tye, as she tells him:

> I think I had a remission when I met you. A definite remission ... here ... like the world stopped and turned backward, or like it entered another universe - months! (p.104)

But it was like a sex therapy before she regained her moral strenght, or wish to transcend decadence. Since Tye does not provide her with the spiritual part of love, Jane falls back ill:

> JANE: No, no, that unnatural tiredness started again. I went to Oschners. (....) It informed that my blood count had changed for the worse. It was close to ... collapse ... (....) (p.104)

Her sickness might well be said to have come back as a kind of punishment for her having rejected life, or more specifi-

cally, to have rejected sexuality, even if a decayed one, as GANZ confirms about Williams' other plays:

> In Williams's moral system the rejection of life is the greatest crime, and those guilty of it are visited by the kind of punishment that falls upon Blanche Dubois in *Streetcar* and Sebastian Venable in *Suddenly Last Summer*.[22]

Tye, for some time, defeats the forces of her physical decay and rouses Jane to a new life, for sex can be a symbol of freedom for Williams, as seen in the introduction. But then the conflict soul (spiritual and physical love) versus body (only physical love = decay) makes her reject basic sexuality in order to transcend what she thinks to be decadent, although being punished with extinction.

Jane's only hope for spiritual satisfaction, after her knowing there is no way out for her physical decay, would be Tye's support and understanding when she tells him she will die. But he cannot stomach the real truth about her, as the stage directions read:

> (She stares at him; he averts his face. She moves around him to look at his face; he averts it again. She claps it between her hands and compels him to look at her. He looks down. (....) (p.104)

Tye, so completely selfish and self-assured of his machismo, is now unable to help her at the moment she needs him most. With her confession, he departs and leaves her to wait for her death. Her hope is snuffed out and her loneliness then intensified. Jane realizes that Tye is not the man to give

her the support she needs, mainly now that she is "about to become an encumbrance. An invalid, of no use, financial or sexual" (p.110). She tells Tye that "sickness is repelent (....) demands more and more care and gives less and less in return" (p.110).

At the end, Jane is left alone but Tennessee Williams suggests how people, as well as animals, resort to protection whenever fear comes upon them, as Jane says: "I'm not alone. I've got Beret. An animal is a comforting presence sometimes" (p.109). To emphasize Jane's need for protection against her loneliness, or spiritual decay, Williams uses an animal image — the cat, which becomes a chief symbol of this protection:

> JANE: That's Beret, let her in. Isn't it nice how cats go away and come back and - you don't have to worry about them. So unlike human beings. (p.104)

Thus Jane is a character who possesses tragic traits and makes a tragic, dignified realization about love and loneliness: one can love and even live with someone and yet be lonesome.

As a conclusion, we can say that Jane's moral struggle soul versus body is aroused by one of her positive aspects — her sensitiveness, and makes her face the truth about herself: she has sex but she does not have love, meaning that she goes through a process of self-realization in the Vieux Carré. Nevertheless, it seems to be implied here that in order for sensitive people to exist happily

they must be successful in physical love as well as spiritual love. Thus Jane has both negative and positive aspects although at the end she achieves redemption through self-realization and transcendence of self from spiritual decadence.

- *Tye.*

Jane's male partner, who shares her studio in Mrs. Wire's rooming house, is Tye McCool. He shows several shocking aspects in his personality, beginning with the fact that he is a drug-addict. He comes home drugged practically every night (p.41) and is described many times "rolling a joint" (e.g. p.96) or smoking marijuana (p.102, 103, 105). That is the reason why he is "half conscious all the time" (p.104) and has, according to Jane, even gone "all legal - analgesics" (p.82). Besides marijuana, he uses stronger types of drugs which leave needle marks on his arm (p.79, 82, 111). Thus he is considered by Jane "an addicted - delinquent, - a barker at a - stripshow joint" (p.14) and, moreover, a young bum who uses their bedroom as a depository for the "hot merchandise" he brings home (p.81). He even lies to Jane: he had promised her he would quit the show in a week when they started living together but he never did (p.79), for she would like him to "find something less publicly embarrassing, like a - filling station attendant" (p.80), as discussed.

Another decaying aspect in his personality is that he is a pervert, for he will sleep with women or men providing

he gets paid for it. Tye seems to regard money as a key to happiness since it buys anything. For him, money is a power that can buy the basic wants or pleasures of life. Therefore, sex and money are his main preoccupations: "I said to this guy, 'Okay, if you wanto blow me, you can pay me one hunnerd dollars - before, not after'" (p.42). Further on, when Nightingale tries to make love to him because he is drunk, he asserts that "no goddam faggot messes with me, never! For less'n a hundred dollars! A hunnerd dollars, yes, maybe, but not a dime less" (p.45-6).

Although he is presently living with Jane, there is evidence that he also sleeps with other women, for he is described by the Writer and Nightingale, respectively, as attractive and physically appealing (p.49). As a consequence, he arouses feelings of jealousy in Jane, who refuses to go to bed with him because his face is "smeared with lipstick; also other parts of you [him]. I didn't know lip rouge ever covered so much - territory" (p.81).

Stressing the fact that he is a drug-addict delinquent, Tye shows throughout the play to have no schooling, for as he himself affirms, he is "a dude with five grades of school and no skill training from the Mississippi sticks" (p.79). So he speaks loudly and brutally using rough and crude language: "Bullshit, you picked up a kid on the street?" (p.28); "Any chick who shacks with me's my chick" (p.80); "I honestly don't remember a fuckin' thing after midnight" (p.81). By violating the verbal and established norms of behavior, he also shows himself to be a common and vulgar man; even the

things he talks about are inappropriate, as when Jane invites the Writer to go to their bedroom to have coffee and Tye replies:

> I didn't invite him in, and I want you to git something straight: I live here. And if I live in a place I got equal rights in this place, and it just so happens I don't entertain no stranger to look at me undressed. (p.30)

Thus he is impolite and uncouth to the point of demonstrating he is a man of brutal physical action, as when he doubles his fist (p.14) in a threatening way in the first scene when Jane complains about his coming home in such a bad condition. His gesture makes Jane breaks into tears as he is like a hold back from the Stone Age.

Tye's main drive in life is sexual; sex means everything for him so he is constantly bragging about his sexual powers. He needs to know that his best talent is confined to bed, as this dialogue with Jane puts forward:

> TYE: 'Sthat all I do? Just That? I never pleasure you, babe?
>
> JANE: Yes, you - pleasure me, Tye.
>
> TYE: I try to do my best to, Babe. (....) p.33)

He needs love to satisfy his animal desires because love is for him nothing more than the physical act of love. Thus Tye lives his life sleeping nearly all day, working as a strip-joint barker at night, drinking, taking drugs and having sex. He has tried to make Jane adapt to his way of living, and believes she will continue this way. So when she tries

to finish their affair, he forces her to have sex with him, since he has basically only one means of power — his sexuality. When the rape is over, he does not understand why Jane is crying, for in his conception he had given her "one helluva Sunday afternoon ball, and you're cryin' about it like your mother died" (p.96). In his unsensitiveness, he does not realize that love means more than just the physical act of love for Jane, since he sums everything up in terms of sexuality.

We gradually come to see Tye as a selfish person who does not think twice about whether he is going to hurt Jane. His very surname, McCool, is revealing for it is naturally associated with the word cold which may stand for lovelessness.[23] Besides this meaning, the word "cool" is also a southern American, negro word, meaning "hip", "with it", existentialist, jazz type — the kind of person who is concerned only about his freedom. Tye is clearly narcisistic and egocentric and thinks only of himself, as clearly shown when he is dressing after having been told that Jane is very ill. He stands at the mirror, absorbed in his own image and in combing his hair, while Jane realizes that nothing exists for him but his image in the mirror (p.110). In fact, Tye's selfishness does not allow him to give Jane the support she needs. On the contrary, it is he who looks for support, even if purely sexual, in Jane:

> TYE: Come to - bed ...
> JANE: Don't lean on me. (p.15)

Yet, there is a hint in the play which might explain Tye's negative facets of personality. He tells Jane the Champagne Girl Story, a girl who was eaten by dogs because she quit sleeping with the Man, owner of the stripshow joint where he works:

> TYE: (....) And night before last, Jesus! he let'em into the Champagne Girl's apartment, and they - well, they ate her. Gnawed her tits off her ribs, gnawed her sweet little ass off. (....) (p.98)

Here the world is pictured as completely cannibalistic, in the sense that everything gets decayed and is eaten up by something else; this is the only truth and evil which exists.[24] It is revealed in this part of the play that the difference between the human and the natural creatures (like carniverous plants) lies in the fact that humans do not perform this act for sustenance; it is for revenge. Tye feels he is a possible victim of savagery, thus he becomes a savage as a way of self-protection, for he can do nothing to combat the evil he sees around him. When man causes death and destruction, protection against such forces is necessary. Tye gains protection through alcohol, drugs, physical sex, and his actions, becoming a decayed man. This would be a kind of excuse for him to be what he is: insensitive, vulgar, irresponsible and weak.

As a counterpoint to this wide range of decadent aspects which are apparent in Tye's personality, he is described as a "nice-looking young man" (p.41) with a "vulnerably boyish appearance" (p.14), although contaminated

by his use of drugs. His relationship with Jane is based on sex, but he does not consider Jane a whore, as he clearly says: "Whatever you took me for, I took you for honest, for decent, for ..." (p.101). He thinks they have love between themselves ("Jane, we got love between us! Don't ya know that?" (p.109)), since love for him is related to the body; it is all a question of his concept of love being related to its physical act. Love is as essential for him as it is for Jane, but since he lives and works in a basic, fundamental world which allows for no subtleties and refinements, he cannot understand a relationship between man and woman except a sexual one where the man's role is to give and take pleasure from this relationship.

What can also be considered redeeming in his character is revealed at the time that he thinks Jane is pregnant, because she is trying to tell him she is sick and says she is not feeling well lately. He tells her to have the baby. Because of his way of behaving this comes as a surprise. He even adds that he is against abortion (p.83) and that a baby would be a living thing between them, and that he would pull himself together for it. His selfishness is somewhat mitigated when he thinks that Jane will have a baby of their own but, since this is not true, his possible redemption never takes place.

Thus we see Tye as a physically and mentally decayed person who remains just like he was in the beginning of the play: a purposeless, drug-addicted, vagrant. The baby symbolizes the possibility of a change for the better in

Tye's life but it stands as a dream that will never come true at the end of *Vieux Carré*. And, although Tye seems to embody one of Tennessee Williams' "radiant male whose primitive vitality excuses his crudeness and brutality"[25], his physical and spiritual decay is so stressed throughout the play that it rather makes him a pale shadow of what Williams' former male characters used to be, for he is a prototype of the decadent environment he is surrounded by.

- *Nightingale.*

In contrast with Tye, who is a strongly masculine figure, there is Nightingale, an old homosexual painter who is terribly wasted for he is dying of tuberculosis in Mrs. Wire's rooming house. His physical decay has already been pointed out, as a preliminary to his character traits.

The character's name, Nightingale, already carries a symbolic even if ironic meaning in relation to his personality, for the nightingale is a night love-bird, or the bird of dawn, thus related to wakefulness,[26] while, in fact, Nightingale complains that he cannot sleep at night except when he takes his "sandman special" (p.26), that is, his pills for sleep, thus stressing a negative feature:

> NIGHTINGALE: Restlessness. Insomnia.
> I can't imagine a worse affliction, and I've suffered from it nearly all my life.
> I consulted a doctor about it once, and he said, "You don't sleep because it reminds you of death". A ludicrous assumption - the only true regret I'd have over leaving this world is that I'd leave so much of my serious work unfinished. (p.48)

The painter, then, seems to be suffering not only from consumption but also from moribund fears, for he refuses to accept the certainty of his imminent death. Besides, the robin and the nightingale are said not to live long in a cage[27] and, since the rooming house looks like a cage, for everybody is controlled by the jailkeeper Mrs. Wire, it is little wonder that the painter dies in the end. Furthermore, when a nightingale is about to die, it starts singing at dawn and keeps on singing, until it dies in the ninth hour.[28] As can be seen in the first long stage directions for the second scene, the painter is also described singing "hoarsely and softly a pop song of the era such as 'If I Didn't Care' or 'Paper Doll'" (p.16) and will die nine scenes later. Thus we are led to believe that the choice of his name was not at all made at random by Tennessee Williams, but, like so many other names he has given his characters in his previous plays,[29] it has been deliberately chosen.

Awareness of extinction is very painful, and Nightingale resists the idea of being physically sick, he does not want to see reality as it actually is. When the Writer refuses to drink from the same bottle from where Nightingale drinks, the consumptive painter himself finds an excuse: "Oh yes, flu is contagious, how stupid of me, I'm sorry" (p.23). He also claims that the big blood spots on his pillow are the "remains of a squashed bedbug" (p.48) and tells the Writer that Mrs. Wire had even "intimated that I coughed up the blood, as if I had ... (coughs) consumption" (p.48). Close to the end of the play, he affirms that the

landlady wants to commit him to a charnal house "on false charges" (p.90) since he looks pale only from "confinement with asthma" (p.91). This disease and not TB is why he claims to have been given "a leave of absence" (p.76) until he can recover and why he "wasn't fired" (p.76).

In the same way as Nightingale does not face the truth about his physical decay, he also refuses to accept the truth about himself. The painter dreams of eating in good restaurants but, actually, he eats at the Two Parrots, where "the menu sometimes includes cockroaches" (p.17). He is proud of having done "good painting, serious work" (p.22) in the past, but now he has to survive and, since "you can't live on good painting until you're dead, or nearly" (p.22), he is at present a quick sketch artist who requires much freedom for his soul. Decadence is apparent even in the people he paints: "old bitches" (p.22). Thus he works at the Two Parrots which are, in fact, "two very noisy macaws" (p.17) — reality is not clearly seen even here — painting tourists, thinking that what he does now, "temporarily", is a travesty of his talent, or "a prostitution of it" (p.17). He says that if he died he would be sorry that the world had not seen his good painting, but it seems to be one more of his fantasies, and we come to doubt him as well as the Writer does, in demanding: "Do show me your serious work" (p.48).

As well as these several negative aspects in Nightingale's personality, he is also representative of a faded Southern aristocracy. He claims to be a "Rossignol, of the Baton Rouge Rossignols, as any dog could tell you"

(p.76). As PORTER confirms, "for the Southerner, the past represents a glory and a heritage; its vitality in the imagination makes adjustement to the variegated society of the present difficulty"[30]. Nightingale protests against being removed from the house, for "a Rossignol will not be hauled away to a charity hospital" (p.90). But we know that he will be, in fact, sent to a charity ward and, according to the landlady, "on his way to a pauper's grave" (p.73).

His attachment to the past even makes the painter preserve some articles left him by his mother very carefully:

> NIGHTINGALE: (....) Her tortoise-shell comb with a mother-of-pearl handle and her silver framed mirror. Precious heirlooms, been in the Rossignol family three generations. (....) (p.91)

The speech above leads us to deduce that his homosexuality, a feature that involves mental and physical decay at the same time could be a result of the painter, when a boy, identifying himself too much with his mother.[31] Anyway, now the painter can be considered a pervert, for he brings pickups to the rooming house late at night pretending that they are his cousins since he knows Mrs. Wire's "aversion to visitors at night" (p.11). He can be considered degraded as well by the fact that he induces the Writer to make love to him. In the same sense, this declining facet of his personality is recognized when he also tries to seduce Tye, as the latter says: "S' that how you visit a friend, unzippin' his pants an' pullin' out his dick?"(p.45). This trait of Nightingale's character becomes apparent through

his dialogue with Mrs. Wire, who represents in *Vieux Carré* the society which does not accept the painter's decaying behavior:

> MRS. WIRE's VOICE: I heard you [Writer] from the kitchen, boy! Was he [Nightingale] molesting you in here? I heard him. Was he molesting you in here? Speak up! You-[Nightingale] watch out, I'll get the goods on you yet!
>
> NIGHTINGALE: The persecution continues. (p.51)

The landlady even wants Nightingale to take the guilt for her pouring boiling water through a hole in the floor as a way for the painter to pay for his behavior:

> MRS. WIRE: May you inquire, yeah, you may inquire. Look. Here's the story! You're in a doped-up condition. Drunk and doped-up you staggered against the stove and accidentally knocked a kettle of boiling water off it. Now that's the story you'll tell in payment of back rent and your habits! ... disgracing my house! (p.57)

Nevertheless, Nightingale's homosexualism might also have as one of its causes his loneliness, as he observes: "A single man needs visitors at night. Necessary as bread, as blood in the body. Why, there's a saying, 'Better to live with your worst enemy than to live alone'" (p.20). Then homosexuality would be an antidote for his loneliness, or a means to salvation; he makes love in order to interrupt his lack of companionship.

But besides sex, the painter also gains protection from the truth about himself through alcohol and narcotics, which point out another decaying character trait:

> NIGHTINGALE: (....) The witch has removed the glass, we'll have to drink from the bottle. I'll wash my pill down now, the rest is yours. (He pops a capsule into his mouth and gulps from the bottle, immediately coughing and gagging. He extends the bottle to the Writer.) (p.22-3)

Thus Nightingale does not dare accept the truth about himself, despite the Writer's attempts, as when he tells the painter to "stop calling it asthma - the flu, a bad cold. Face the facts, deal with them" (p.93). Nightingale even provokes the Writer by telling him what he thinks is truth about the Writer himself ("boy with literary pretensions" (p.50)), which makes the latter reply:

> WRITER (in a voice quick and hard as a knife): I think there has been some deterioration in your condition and you ought to face it! A man has got to face everything sometime and call it by its true name, not to try to escape it by - cowardly! - evasion - go have your lungs x-rayed and don't receive the doctor's bill when it's sent! But go there quick, have the disease stated clearly! Don't, don't call it a cold anymore or a touch of the flu! (p.51)

As the painter does not want to face reality, he staggers out of the light while he says "you've gone mad, you've gone out of your mind here, you little one-eyed bitch!" (p.51). Mrs. Wire, at the end of the play, reveals the truth completely about himself, thus exposing him to the others. He is accused of "spitting contagion wherever he goes" (p.72) while he replies she is telling lies. It is also revealed that he had been actually fired from the Two Parrots because he would hawk and spit by the customers' tables (p.73) until

"pity and patience was exhausted, it run out there and it's run out here!" (p.73). Mrs. Wire then calls the hospital to send an ambulance to fetch him although the Writer pleads her to be easy on him since he is dying. But, as the painter had always called the landlady "a fuckin' ole witch" (e.g. p.73) in an attempt to make her accept reality, as will be seen in the action, and had also defamed her house as infested with bedbugs to try to explain the blood he coughed on his pillow, she is irreductible and tells the Writer to recognize that "there's no defense against the truth" (p.74).

Nightingale does not want to accept that he is decaying, but admits to see decay around him and the others' decay, for he tells the Writer that the rooming house is a "madhouse" (p.20) where he is living only because of his bad financial condition; otherwise, he would be far away from it. So he sees part of the truth about himself and the others' realities, even revealing it to them, but, as mentioned, he does not want to face the complete truth about himself, paralleling Mrs. Wire.

Paradoxically, positive aspects can also be found in Nightingale's personality. One of them is that he makes the "old bitches" he paints "ten pounds lighter and ten years younger and with some touches of - decent humanity in their eyes that God forgot to put there, or they've decided to dispense with, not always easy" (p.22). Besides, when he hears the Writer crying in scene two, he goes into the Writer's cubicle in order to help him, as seen before. He

tries to carry on a conversation with the Writer who, at first, feels reluctant. But the painter insists for he sees the other as another solitary person like himself out of place in a materialistic society ("You need some company first. I know the sound of loneliness; heard it through the partition" (p.18)). Nightingale seems to be aware of the lack of communication between people and how people need other people to survive in this world. ("Need advice and ... company in this sad ole house. I'm happy to give both if accepted" (p.21)). Since both of them are lonesome, the painter wants the Writer to fill a type of vacancy for each other for he knows people are caged inside themselves and rarely get to know each other. Nightingale seems to believe that people can reach each other even if it is for a night only ("Love can happen like that. For one night only" (p.25)); communication between them is possible if they get outside their metaphorical cubicles, so that is why he leaves his literal cubicle and goes to the Writer's: to have a little understanding between them, and exchanged want to help each other. This positive feature in Nightingale might well be considered contaminated by his desire to have sex with the Writer but emphasizes, anyway, the individual's search for love as well as the contrast between the artist and the common man.[32] Since the artist has an intense sensitivity, he rebels against the conventions to get what he wants, therefore demanding for himself a freedom which is incompatible with modern society. In Nightingale's case, the freedom to sleep with other men, and this is why the Writer

becomes, so to speak, a kind of cure for the painter's loneliness. Nightingale even makes us feel pity for himself when he pleads to the Writer to hold him while he throws off his tattered silk robe (p.50). The painter admits that

> lack of appreciation is something I've come to expect and almost to accept as if God - the alleged - had stamped on me a sign at birth - "This man will offer himself and not be accepted, not by anyone ever!" (p.49).

What is implied here is that everyone in the world is basically alike. In a world of healthy people, sickness of the body and spirit exists. Men seem to be unsympathetic beings who stare at their equals when a deficiency is present, thereby isolating that individual. When this happens, another human being should be willing to accept the burden, to help that decadent person be successful, if possible. Ignoring the situation will not help; compromising will not help; only human compassion and understanding can be beneficial to the other person. But hardly anyone possesses these traits, as is apparent here. Nevertheless, by the end of the play, Nightingale's refusal to accept his truth is understood by the Writer, who tries to help him. This increases the painter's "faith in Christ" (p.90), for experiencing another human being's love in time of need is one of the only proofs man can find of God's love. Nightingale believes in God, "not in doctors" (p.90), which seems to imply that God might be the answer for the problems of human suffering, or physical and spiritual decay.

Nightingale becomes, so to speak, a symbol of the lonely, rejected exile — the homosexual who is, simultaneously, an object of sympathy and revulsion, for he is much more remembered as a physically and mentally decayed person. When he dies at the end of the play he finds relief through death because he transcends his physical and spiritual decay and the decadent environment which surrounds him.

- *Mary Maude and Miss Carrie.*

Other characters who also try to escape from their reality are Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, two old women that live in Mrs. Wire's rooming house. As we have already seen, their physical appearance is one of terrible decay. They are wild-eyed crones who have to get rotten food from the garbage can outside the building to have something to eat. They live in a room that gets no sun, with damp, dark walls, giving Miss Carrie "an awful asthma" (p.13) and "a breathless laugh" (p.13).

Furthermore, there are several examples in the play that prove the two crones to be also mentally decayed people. The stage directions describe them as having a "queer, high-pitched laughter or some bizarre relation to laughter" (p.36). In the seventh scene, during the pounding and shouting of the Photographer and Mrs. Wire, they cling together with "their hysteria erupting in shrill screams" (p.62). The emaciated old ladies even sink to the officers' knees "as if at the feet of an implacable deity" (p.62), wearing their

"outrageous negligees" (p.57) which make this picture of decay even more shocking.

Their mental problems might have been caused by the fact that they once belonged, just like Nightingale, to a Southern aristocracy which is now disappearing. They live in a decadent boarding house where they lock themselves in their room compiling "a Creole cookbook, recipes we remember from our childhood" (p.37), which they hope to have published. As Creole is a descendant of early French or Spanish settlers of the U.S. Gulf states preserving their speech and culture, it serves as a proof that they are representatives of a decaying social class. This is even more emphasized by their speech,[33] when Miss Carrie says to have turned down an invitation to dinner with her cousin Mathilde Devereau Pathet in the Garden District (the place where wealthy people live in New Orleans) because "very rich people are so inconsiderate sometimes. With four limousines at their constant disposal, they wouldn't send one to fetch me" (p.37). Miss Carrie is also proud of her family vault which is above the water level where niggers are buried (p.38). Their conversation comes close to the bizarre, since there is such a contrast between what they talk about and what they really are. But they do not see reality and still act as if they were members of an aristocracy. When they are told the police are coming to investigate the incident between Mrs. Wire and the Photographer, Mary Maude starts screaming but Miss Carrie stops her for neither of them have been directly involved, although complaining:

> MISS CARRIE: Mary Maude and I can't afford the notoriety of a thing like this.
>
> MARY MAUDE: Mrs. Wire, Miss Carrie and I have - positions to maintain! (p.59)

Thus they prove to be real old Southerners, whose characteristic is the tendency toward unreality because of the Southern experience.[34] We realize the old women live in a world of dreams and do not accept the reality around them; they cannot balance their dreams with the real world in which they are. So they live partially in another world to escape the brutalities of the present. Instead of accepting the truth about their eating rotten food, they say to have ordered "a little more dinner this evening than we [they] could eat, so we [they] had the waiter put the remains of the, the -", "steak 'Diane' and the chicken 'bonne femme'" (p.13) in their bags. Mary Maude also dreams besides of having "the most devoted son a mother could hope for" (p.39), but in fact he does not send his army paycheck to her, only postcards that cannot be cashed. She has even been deceived by her husband, who had not kept up his insurance payments, as well as having given his money and real estate to "that little redheaded doxy he'd kept in Bay St. Louie" (p.40).

So we can see that Mary Maude and Miss Carrie need protection from the truth. They escape through their abstract fantasies like reliving the past and dreaming of a better future, which would come in the form of the publication of their book or even through death, for Miss Carrie would then be buried on top of her "great-great-uncle, Jean Pierre Devereau, the third" (p.38). But they cannot escape from

their decaying reality and dream in peace, for Mrs. Wire, who considers them "two worthless dependents on me [her]", a "pair of scavenger crones that creep about after dark" (p.72), will not let them, constantly attempting to force the women to recognise their reality by her ironic asides. Because of their mental decay, the old ladies are even accused of being guilty of involvement in the incident ("Officers, remove these demented, old horrors. Why, you know what they done? Poured water on the floor of my kitchen, boiling water!" (p.62)) and humiliated by the landlady, who does not show any concern for the women.

Their decadence draws them to Mrs. Wire's gumbo whenever the latter prepares it, although she pretends to spit in the pot "like a bootblack spits on a shoe" (p.39) to enhance its flavor. But the crones are in such a state of decay that they eat it anyway; they try to divert Mrs. Wire's attention while Miss Carrie ladles out gumbo, swallowing a scalding mouthful and making the landlady suggest that she "cuts" her scorched throat (p.40). Thus we can say that Mary Maude and Miss Carrie's redeeming quality resides in their not resenting Mrs. Wire's observations and even thanking her for "being so concerned always about our [their] - circumstances here" (p.40). Besides, the other tenants of the rooming house understand the crones and feel pity for them because they are never unpleasant to the others. Jane offers to keep their spoiled food in her icebox (p.13) and asks the landlady not to involve them in the incident with the Photographer (p.60). Nightingale defends them

against Mrs. Wire's accusation of their being guilty of throwing boiling water down a hole in the floor (p.62). Even the Photographer understands that "these old women should be hospitalized, naturally" (p.62) but confirms that it was the landlady's fault. The Writer asks Mrs. Wire to be kind to them for the old ladies are "starving, dying of malnutrition" (p.36). Nursie also realizes that "they gone as far past pride as they gone mistaking a buzzard for a bluebird" (p.14). Their redeeming feature lies in the fact that they have never harmed anyone, having retired to their own world and having lived without bothering the others with their naiveness.

In this way, Mary Maude's and Miss Carrie's physical and mental decay corroborate and strenghten the decadence of the setting in the sense that they are a projection of this setting and vice-versa, i.e. the decaying rooming house to which they are confined also reflects their deteriorating physical and mental condition brought up in the play.

- *Nursie.*

Another decaying yet harmless character in *Vieux Carrē* is Nursie, the black woman who works in Mrs. Wire's boarding house as a maid. As we have already seen in setting, her physical appearance shows a state of deterioration, for she has a failing eyesight, she is feeling tired and can hardly get herself up the stairs anymore.

Among her negative features is the fact that she is described as an ignorant and naive person, for she is afraid of going into Nightingale's bedroom because of his sickness;

she probably thinks she will get TB only by breathing the same air he does: "Aw, no, not me! I told you I would never go in that room!" (p.74). She is even afraid of touching the painter's personal belongings as if she would be contaminated by them ("Wouldn't touch that mattress with a pole ..." (p.75)). Nursie's religious fanaticism also foreshadows a state of mental decline, for she insists on quoting the "book" for Mrs. Wire whenever possible:

> NURSIE: You never read the scriptures.
>
> MRS. WIRE: Why should I bother to read'em with you quotin' 'em to me like a female preacher. Book say this, say that, makes me sick of the book. (....) (p.6)

This decadent religious aspect of her personality is clearly highlighted when everybody is excited because of Mrs. Wire's pouring boiling water through a hole in the floor and Nursie enters the kitchen singing a church himn softly, "he walks with me and he talks with me" (p.59) and stays "calm as if unaware" (p.59). It seems that Tennessee Williams wanted to convey to us that Nursie, like Mrs. Wire, also had some confusions in her mind caused by her fanatical clinging to religion, especially in the tenth scene. Nursie and the Writer are talking about Mrs. Wire's confusions when he comments: "We all have our confusions ..." (p.94). Immediately afterwards Nursie crosses the stage out of the light, singing softly a religious gospel, showing she escapes her unpleasant reality through excessive religious zeal.

In spite of her physical and mental decay, we can find positive aspects in Nursie's personality. Although she

is a simple person, she wants to be respected like everyone else. She gets very angry when she is called "a impudent ole nigger" (p.77) by a tourist lady who is visiting the courtyard of the house, for she is aware of her humble position.

She also likes light, which contrasts with the darkness inside the house related to the physical and mental decay of the tenants:

> NURSIE: (....) What you got against light? First thing God said on the first day of creation was, "Let there be light". (p.6)

In addition Nursie helps the guests in the sense that she offers them coffee whenever she meets them. She helps Mrs. Wire in the rooming house for she is the one who has to ask the tourists for donations to "keep the cou'tyard up" (p.83). However, besides serving the landlady in this way, she is also a kind of "nurse" (as her name already reminds us), a word which is intimately related to hospital, suggesting that the boarding house is full of sick people whom she has to take care of. In fact, all the people there are physically and mentally sick, which means she acts as a real nurse, as the stage directions convey:

> (He (Writer) drops the knapsack at the edge of the kitchen light and wanders musingly back to the table. Nursie automatically pours him a cup of chicory.) (p.9)

Mrs. Wire is largely dependent on her: Nursie is required to give the landlady the spiritual support she needs as well,

for she above all is aware of the landlady's confused mind. Thus Mrs. Wire is seen leaning on Nursie and accepting Nursie's support (p.107), confirming the idea that the maid means protection for Mrs. Wire against the outside world.

In the last scene of *Vieux Carré*, the Writer calls Nursie to calm Mrs. Wire down because he knows that Nursie is the only one who can help her. Therefore we have a clear indication of the role Nursie plays in relation to the landlady, although Nursie is also dependent on Mrs. Wire for she has nowhere to go if she leaves the rooming house. So, when Nursie thinks of retiring, the landlady tries by all means to persuade her to stay by telling her she has no place to go, but not admitting she needs Nursie's spiritual support:

> NURSIE: Mizz Wire, I think I oughta inform you I'm thinkin' of retirin'.
>
> MRS. WIRE: Retirin' to what, Nursie? The banana tree in the courtyard with the bats you got in your head? (p.7)

As we can see, Nursie even suffers cruelty in Mrs. Wire's hands, who kicks the maid during the play (p.89), although the landlady needs her. That is what is ironic in Nursie: she plays the part of a nurse, taking care of the others, helping Mrs. Wire physically and spiritually, but she herself is an old woman who is also in need of care, since she is physically and mentally decayed because of her old age and religious fanaticism. Thus she also embodies the dilapidated condition of the house, which is then projected through her.

- *Sky.*

As Nursie is a support for Mrs. Wire, Sky is a support for the Writer: he exerts a strong influence on him and helps him take a very important decision in his life, as we have already discussed. Sky is a young jazz clarinettist who is cited as having left a knapsack in Mrs. Wire's rooming house in the first scene of *Vieux Carrê*. He appears in flesh and blood in the eight scene, where the stage directions describe him as a young man "whose charming but irresponsible nature is apparent in his genial grin" (p.69), already revealing the double aspect of his personality. But as with the other characters, his negative features predominate over the positive.

In the quotation above, the word "irresponsible" reminds us of the way he is first described by Mrs. Wire: "a crazy young man" (p.6) who had come there in search of a room. However, as there were no vacancies he had left a heavy knapsack on the floor saying he would pick it up later. The two adjectives the landlady uses already give us a hint of his personality. Sky himself confirms this flaw when he says he is "a fugitive from legal wedlock in Tampa, Florida, with the prettiest little bitsy piece of it" (p.69). After that, he had been in the House of Detention for the four months he had left his knapsack in the boarding house. This underlines a negative aspect in his personality, similar to that of the other tenants, although he does not live in the place. It is important to remember that the rooming house is also like a prison, as discussed in setting. In addition,

his benavior is commented on by Mrs. Wire as "trashy" (p.71), for she sees him urinating out of the window, which reveals a kind of contempt for the other people who are not as free from conventions as he feels to be.

Another negative aspect of his personality, related to decay, is that he is a drug-addict, like Tye, as it is meant he can "roll a cigarette with obvious practice" (p.78).

As far as his positive features are concerned, his nickname, "Sky", printed on his knapsack, is said to "shine in the dark" (p.6) in the first scene, thus already contrasting with the darkness inside the house. As the sky gives a suggestion of vastness and infinity[35] and, by association, of freedom, we could perfectly apply Schuyler's nickname, Sky, as a counterpoint to the decaying rooming house related to imprisonment.

Sky can also be said to be a pilgrim, that is, "someone who personifies the human soul"[36], always in search of something in life, since the knapsack is in itself a physical symbol of this type of person. It can also symbolically mean "release, or the decisive step in life one has to take without the help of others"[37]. In fact, Sky had not married because he had decided he was not yet ready to settle down.

When the Writer collides with the knapsack in the first scene, he already foreshadows that Sky will play a decisive role in his life, for he says that the name of the owner "shines like a prediction" (p.8). Actually, upon Sky's arrival, he looks at the Writer's typewriter and

immediately sees that the ribbon had slipped out of the slots, something that the Writer had not perceived. Thus we can say that he not only helps the Writer see something in the literal meaning but in the figurative meaning as well, providing the Writer with a chance to leave for the West Coast (p.76), far away from Mrs. Wire's domination.

Sky is overjoyed when the Writer accepts his offer because he would not have liked to travel that long distance by himself (p.78). They get very excited about the trip because they have no fixed plans, which means liberty, symbolized by the "plenty of wide open spaces between here and the Coast" (p.78). This implies that the Writer, thanks to Sky, will release himself from the decaying environment in which he had been living lately. Sky becomes, then, for the Writer, a symbol of hope — a bird not caged, for he is also an artist like the Writer, although his decadent character traits such as a naughty behavior and irresponsibility are given so much relevance in the play.

- *The Photographer.*

Similar to Sky in terms of decaying features is T.Hamilton Biggs, the photographer who has hired the basement of Mrs. Wire's rooming house to make it into a studio. As his surname — Biggs — already suggests, he "belongs to the Chateau family, one of the finest and most important families in the Garden District" (p.59). Nightingale says that Biggs is "New Orleans's most prominent society photographer" (p.59). As the Writer, as narrator,

confirms, he is "a fashionable youngish photographer (....) who has a perfect Oxford accent although being from Baton Rouge, Louisiana" (p.55) and who has made "a good living in New Orleans out of artfully lighted photos of debutantes and society matrons in the Garden District" (p.55). Mrs. Wire is aware that Biggs has "got big money" (p.56). But there is a contrast between his life in the Garden District and his life in his studio in the Vieux Carré: he uses the basement of the building to photograph, "more realistically", some of the many young drifters to be found along the streets of the Vieux Carré (p.55), only for his personal amusement. Thus the mental decay in him is visible when he is in the rooming house. The fact that he has rented Mrs. Wire's basement is very symbolic, for the basement represents "the baser desires"[38] of man and it is there that he gives his special parties:

> MRS. Wire (overlapping): You broken the terms of your lease, and it's now broke. I rented you that downstair space for legitimate business, you turned it into a continual awgy! (p.61)

The place was then rented to be a studio but Biggs had turned it into a place for orgies. Thus he is considered by Mrs. Wire "the city's most notorious pervert" (p.59) who is occupying space in her building, as well as a "filthy - morphodite" (p.61). When the landlady pours boiling water through a hole in the kitchen floor, which is directly over Biggs' studio, several of his guests get burned (p.61). This incident reminds us of the flood in the Bible, where

the Genesis, chapter 6, verse 5-7 reads that the Lord saw men only thinking of evil and regretted having created them. He then decided to exterminate men and everything upon earth by making it rain during forty days. In the same way, the Photographer's immoral behavior arouses Mrs. Wire's indignation and makes her punish him.

T. Hamilton Biggs calls the rooming house "a psycho-ward" (p.60) and considers not only the landlady but all of her guests insane (p.60). Although in this way he places himself in a different position from the other tenants as if he were not decayed, he is not completely sane, as we can see by the way he behaves or the immoral things he does and because he shares part of the decadent boarding house.

Although Bigg's function might be his usefulness as a way of showing Mrs. Wire's fight against the corruption and evil of the Vieux Carré, as well as conveying the freedom an artist requires, the Photographer is a minor character whose physical and spiritual decay also stresses the decadence of the setting for he serves as an example, just like Mary Maude and Miss Carrie and Nightingale, of Southern decayed tradition and, even more, of decayed high society involved in perversion.

Summing up, we can say that in *Vieux Carré* all of the characters are distinguished by their two opposing sides, negative or decaying on the one hand and positive on the other, while the decadence irradiated from the prison-like

setting further contaminates them and stresses the characters' already deteriorating physical and mental condition. Thus Williams reveals the ambiguity of man but gives more emphasis to the characters' negative features, consequently displaying a more pessimistic outlook of life, as already confirmed in relation to the setting. In fact, EVANS remarks that

> Williams's plays are full of dispossessed people who we feel were once gentle but who the jungle has caught up with their gracious clearings and spaces and the animals with their civilized pursuits. We hear in it, too, a kind of self-defeat, self-delusion, a weakness, so that we wonder what lies behind the gentleness, the civil behaviour.[39]

And *Vieux Carrê* again confirms the quotation above, for all of the characters are strongly decaying. We can even assert that the characters are at least partly what they are i.e. physically and mentally decadent because the setting is what it is: a rotten boarding house whose function regarding its inhabitants in either to increase their declining aspects or to taint them with its atmosphere of confinement, lonesomeness, gloom and darkness. In its turn, the house can also be said to stand as a projection of the characters' deterioration, as if it were an inert character possessing equally compelling dramatic power.

Mary Maude and Miss Carrie are sterile relics of an older tradition. In the same way Nightingale, the homosexual painter and the Photographer, a pervert, are also members of a decadent Southern aristocracy. Mrs. Wire is a symbolic

figure of evil and, as the owner of the house, embodies its decay through her periodic breakdowns and her physical appearance of a witch. Nursie, her maid, mentally escapes from her impoverished surroundings through her religious fanaticism, again a negative feature. For the Writer and Sky, the sacrifice of their freedom is similar to entering the outer gate of hell, or the house itself. They dream of liberty in the great open spaces for their free spirits — both are artists — have been badly restricted in the rooming house. Tye suffers from sex in the brain while Jane is a lonely misfit trapped in a world of decadence. Thus the characters are infected and driven to live debased existences by the constrictions, brutalities, and decay to which they are confined. What brings all of the characters together is their decayed loneliness, so great that one of Williams' characters, Val Xavier, from *Orpheus Descending*, might speak for them all when he says: "Nobody ever gets to know nobody! We're all of us sentenced to solitary confinement inside our skins, for life!"[40].

Nevertheless, if in a first moment of the play there is in the characters a tendency to avoid the question of self-examination which would reveal their deteriorating physical and mental condition, as the play comes to the end there is a possibility of change for some characters who achieve self-realization by transcending, either physically and/or spiritually, the premises of the boarding house, as will be seen in the action.

NOTES

[1] TENNYSON, G.B. *An Introduction to Drama*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966. p.45.

[2] ABRAMS, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 3.ed. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. p.21.

[3] TENNYSON, p.48.

[4] TENNYSON, p.48.

[5] FALK, S.L. *Tennessee Williams*. New York, Twayne, 1962. p.127. It is worth pointing out that the Writer reminds us of Kilroy from *Camino Real*: "a lonely traveller, immersed in self-pity and sentiments of the 'sweet-used-to-be', who faces a rough and sordid initiation on the so-called royal way of life". (p.119)

[6] Arthur GANZ writes that "from a very early point in his career (....) Williams saw Lawrence as the great writer who 'celebrates the body' and apparently saw himself as the writer's disciple. Like many disciples, however, Williams introduced his own variations on the master's doctrine. Williams betrayed Lawrence primarily by extending the approval of Lawrentian doctrine to areas of sexual experience beyond the normal". The Desperate Morality of the Plays of Tennessee Williams. In: DOWNER, A.S. *American Drama and Its Critics*; a collection of critical essays. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1967. p.204.

*It might be worth mentioning that all of Tennessee Williams' works of art contain certain elements of latent homosexuality.

[7] Quoted from *O Estado de S.Paulo. Cultura*, São Paulo, 3(147):6, 3 abr.1983.

[8] NELSON, B. *Tennessee Williams*; the man and his work. New York, I.Obolensky, 1961. p.38.

[9] NELSON, p.37.

[10] TISCHLER, N. *Tennessee Williams*; rebellious puritan. New York, Citadel, 1961. p.60.

[11] NELSON, p.38-9. He further adds that, in New Orleans, Williams was, for the first time, able "to give vent to his passions and desires and frustrations. If he could never be the man his father wanted, he would be, here in New Orleans, what he wanted". (p.39)

[12] TISCHLER, p.62.

[13] TISCHLER, p.61-2.

[14] BÍBLIA, Revelation Book 18:2-8.

[15] VRIES, A. *Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*. 2.ed. Amsterdam, North Holland, 1976. p.463.

[16] Quoted from A.Curtis. *Drama*, *150*:52, Autumn 1978.

[17] VRIES, p.95.

[18] This scene reminds us of the raping scene between Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when he also forces sex between them.

[19] S.AIRE observes that "Jane herself in her didactic relationship with Tye, is a direct descendant of Blanche in *Streetcar*". (*Plays & Players*, *25*:21, July 1978.)

[20] VRIES, p.424.

[21] T.E.KALEM also comments that Jane and Tye are pale shades of Blanche Dubois and Stanley Kowalski. (*Time*, May 23, 1977. p.45.)

[22] GANZ, p.206.

[23] VRIES, p.107.

[24] John Gassner, talking about *The Night of the Iguana*, remarked that "the defeated characters with whom the playwright sympathizes are entrapped by life like the iguana of the title - the lizard captured and tormented by the natives of Acapulco and kept overnight for eating the next day. 'Eating' has preyed on the author's mind, as may be seen also in the cannibalism theme of *Suddenly Last Summer*". GASSNER, J. *Best American Plays*; fifth series 1957-1963. New York, Crown, 1973. p.56. AIRE says that Tye's account is "More horrible in its imagery than the 'turtles' speech of *Suddenly Last Summer*" (p.21).

[25] Quoted from FALK, p.171.

[26] VRIES, p.341.

[27] VRIES, p.341.

[28] VRIES, p.341.

[29] POPKIN talks about the simpler symbolism of the trait names in *Sweet Bird of Youth*, "as for instance, Chance Wayne: chances waning". Quoted from FALK, p.160.

[30] PORTER, T.E. *Myth and Modern American Drama*. Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 1969. p.158.

[31] VRIES, p.255.

[32] G.WEALES considers the artist one of the five categories into which Williams' characters can be placed: a person "whose special sensibility keeps him from seeing the world through its own eyes". *Tennessee Williams*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1965. p.18-9.

[33] In relation to Tennessee Williams' characters, G.L.EVANS affirms that the playwright "seems to have a compulsion to compress 'messages' into set-piece speeches (....). In these speeches Williams (....) gives us the core of a character's personality or attitude; it is a kind of important summing-up and almost invariably is communicated in a way which draws more and more attention to itself as the message unfolds". *The Language of Modern Drama*. London, Dent, 1977. p.193.

[34] PORTER, p.158. He further asserts that Williams' dilemma is that of the Southerner, "who has lost a culture and a way of life and who is caught between two worlds, one gone with the wind, the other barely worth having", as is the case of Mary Maude and Miss Carrie. (p.176).

[35] VRIES, p.428.

[36] VRIES, p.366.

[37] VRIES, p.366.

[38] VRIES, p.89.

[39] EVANS, p.194.

[40] FALK, p.133.

PART III:

"YOU GOT A LOT TO LEARN ABOUT LIFE IN THE QUARTER."

(TYE TO JANE)

M.H. ABRAMS states that "the plot in a dramatic or narrative work is the structure of its actions", further adding that

> the actions (including verbal as well as physical actions) are performed by particular characters in a work, and are the means by which they exhibit their moral and dispositional qualities.[1]

As it has already become apparent, in our analysis of the characters in *Vieux Carrē*, where in dealing with characterization we are bound to refer to action to some extent, plot and character are interdependent critical concepts since plot deals primarily with conflicts between or within people. ABRAMS further observes that

> in addition to the conflict between individuals, there may be the conflict of a protagonist against fate, or against the circumstances that stand between him and a goal he has set himself; (....)[2]

Anyhow, what leads the characters to act is motivation, a specific aspect of the characters' credibility. For TENNYSON, "we must believe that a character has adequate reasons in his nature to do what he does"[3]. Thus the larger actions which characters complete in the course of a play must have one or

more motives behind them. As characters are complex human personalities with many facets, these motives are more patterns of motivation rather than a single motive.

The action in *Vieux Carrē* consists basically of conflicts between the characters, mainly between the landlady and her tenants. These clashes remind us not only of the characters as pieces in a chessboard, moving and fighting against each other, but also take us back to the symbolism of the four sides of the square, conveying war, pestilence, death and hell, as the revelation of the truth about the characters will confirm. These struggles between the characters can be said to be of two types: the ones in which both adversaries reveal truth to each other, as in

		the Writer
		Nightingale
Mrs. Wire	x	Tye
		Sky
		the Photographer

and the conflicts in which only the landlady reveals their degrading reality to others, as in

		Jane
Mrs. Wire	x	Nursie
		Mary Maude and Miss Carrie.

Thus instead of being simply a landlady, Mrs. Wire is an opponent to all of the other characters from the very beginning of the play. This becomes evident as *Vieux Carrē* opens upon a scene of highly charged bickering between Mrs.

Wire and the rest of the characters who are to continue, with mounting intensity, the same kind of combat throughout the play. Since the landlady is an ironic person, as seen in the character analysis, the revelation of the characters' truth is often made through ironical remarks about them.

Apart from the conflicts between Mrs. Wire and her boarders, there are also clashes between the characters themselves: Jane x Tye and the Writer x Nightingale, which are also important as a source of revelation of the truth about the characters' decayed features, further stressed by the decadence of the boarding house. Thus, since all the characters' actions grow inevitably out of their personalities, they are all related to decay because of the characters' decayed traits, and also because the actions take place in a decayed environment.

- *Mrs. Wire x the Writer.*

The clash between Mrs. Wire and the Writer is ambivalent, for she is at the same time helper and opponent to him. The landlady is a helper because it cannot be denied that she feels a kind of maternal concern for the Writer, no matter if it is originated by her mental confusions of her real son Timmy with the Writer. Her concern in relation to the Writer's life is evident throughout the play: the landlady is worried about his future plans (p.8) when he claims to have none. She also

offers him a job — to deliver printed business cards announcing that lunch is being served for twenty-five cents in her rooming house — in exchange for room and board there, for as we have already seen he was in considerable financial difficulty.[4]

When the Writer gets involved with Sky, the young vagrant musician, Mrs. Wire is against the Writer's idea of leaving New Orleans with him because she thinks the latter is not suitable company for the Writer. Her reaction to his departure with Sky has a double aspect; one refers to her maternal concern towards him. The other is related to the possession she feels in relation to the Writer, which makes her even threaten him by saying she will inform his family of the "vicious ways and companions" (p.77) he has slipped into.[5]

The landlady also feels the need to protect the Writer from Nightingale's homosexual assaults. Her concern can also be seen near the end of the play, for when the Writer is packing to leave, she sends Nursie upstairs with some hot coffee and biscuits for him. Again, in the last scene of the play, Mrs. Wire's concern is summarized in this piece of advice to the Writer:

> MRS. WIRE: Now watch out, boy. Be careful of the future. It's a long ways for the young. Some makes it and others git lost. (p.116)

The landlady here seems to embody the house which, besides being a jailhouse, a graveyard and a madhouse, could also be

a symbol of the maternal body a child has to leave to be born to the world. And since this is not an easy step to be taken, the Writer stands uncertainly by the door before he decides to open it and leave. As analyzed in the setting, this door can convey the dubious future which is awaiting the Writer, as the cries of pain and pleasure suggest (p.116).

At the same time that Mrs. Wire wants to play the role of a mother to the Writer, she sometimes behaves as his adversary, something clearly recognisable in scene four, when she tells him his room has been forfeited because he has not paid the rent.

During the incident with the Photographer, once again we see Mrs. Wire and the Writer placed in different positions; she is irreductible in her attitude against what she calls the corruption, evil and vice of the Photographer, and she wants the Writer to help her pour boiling water down through her kitchen floor or she will dismiss him. She does not listen to the Writer's piece of advice that she had better not do it or Biggs would call the police. His not helping her makes her angry with the Writer, and she calls him "you shifty-eyed little" (p.56), "one-eye" (p.57), "you one-eye jack" (p.61), an allusion to his physical defect, as seen in the setting. Everybody is taken to the night court, and the Writer kindly tries to defend the landlady by trying not to answer the judge's question directly. Although she accuses him of betraying her in court, she lets him stay because this whole incident leads her to realize how lonesome she is since her tenants are

"less than strangers" (p.65) to her. Thus she comes to realize one of the truths about herself — her loneliness, and wants the Writer to provide her with companionship.

On some occasions, Mrs. Wire also behaves as an irreconcilable boss who gives orders to the Writer, as when she tells him to stop writing to go deliver business cards on the streets. He replies that he has devoted more time to "meals for a Quarter in the Quarter" (p.71) than expected to, and this is the first evidence that he has undergone a process of change, for he shows the courage to argue against her. The landlady thinks that decent work can keep him away from the "bad company" (p.72) he has been drifting into. But the Writer again rebels against her, claiming that she treats her tenants like prisoners in the rooming house, as seen before.[6]

Therefore, the landlady realizes that a change has taken place within the Writer, firstly shy and gentlemanly, but now mocking her with a "grin and shifty-eyed indifference, evidence you're [he's] setting out on a future life of corruption" (p.77).[7] On telling the landlady that he did not escape from one mother to look for another, the Writer foreshadows his final decision to leave what is oppressing him. As he says in the last scene of the play, when Mrs. Wire has completely confused him with her real son Timmy:

> Mrs. Wire, I'm not your child. I am nobody's child. Was maybe, but not now. I've grown into a man, about to take his first step out of this waiting station into the world. (p.107)

The Writer takes the decision which will release him from the confinement represented by the boarding house and the landlady, thus choosing freedom although aware of the consequences that come with it.

Therefore, the conflict between the Writer and Mrs. Wire is vital because both characters help each other to discover the truth about themselves, for Mrs. Wire realizes she is an ugly, old and solitary woman while the Writer recognizes and accepts his homosexuality, as well as the fact that he is confined in and oppressed by a decaying boarding house and its landlady. But Mrs. Wire will stay where she is while the Writer's realization of truth has something positive in the sense that he is courageous enough to leave everything behind and start anew.

- *Mrs. Wire x Nightingale.*

Nightingale's homosexuality clearly defies Mrs. Wire's moral standards throughout *Vieux Carré*. In this sense, the first scene of the play is already revealing — the painter arrives home late at night with a pickup whom he claims to be his cousin. As the landlady is against visitors at night and is not easily deceived ("If you had half the cousins you claim to have, you'd belong to the biggest family since Adam's" (p.12)), he has no choice but to dismiss the man. This is the start of the differences between them which will continue during the whole play. Nightingale constantly utters imprecations to Mrs. Wire (e.g. "Fuck off, you old witch!" (p.12)), words which remind her of her decayed

reality of being an ugly and old woman. At the same time, she will not let the painter forget that he is actually very ill and does not have only a common bad cold. In this way, both reveal their symptoms of physical decay to each other.

According to the landlady, Nightingale's disgusting behavior and his not paying his rent regularly are reasons for his backing up a false story for her thus preventing her from going into night court because of the incident with the Photographer. But circumstances exempt him from assuming responsibility for something he has not done — when the policemen break into the house, she decides to accuse Mary Maude and Miss Carrie of the deed. But Nightingale defends the old women and therefore Mrs. Wire is taken to court and found guilty. Thus the painter also contributes to the landlady's recognition of her sad solitary state in the world.

In the eighth scene, Mrs. Wire and Nightingale exchange mutual accusations because she has run out of pity and patience and is mad about the things he has said to her. This is followed by her decision to reveal all she knows about him, that he has consumption and has been discharged from his job. However, the painter refuses to accept his degrading reality and keeps on believing he has only an advanced case of asthma, although he is removed almost dead on a stretcher by hospital interns. He would appear to represent those people who choose to live in an illusionary world instead of facing their sad reality. Mrs. Wire, although claiming to have "sympathy for the dying or the

hopelessly inflicted" (p.89), seems to embody those people who show indifference to other men's feelings because of society:

> Valuable paying tenants, distinguished society ladies, will quit my premises this day, I swear they will, if this Nightingale remains. Why, the State Board of Health will clap a suit on me unless ... (p.89)

She even transforms her tenants in good payers and aristocratic women so that she can ease her conscience after what she has done to the painter. Even though he is actually seriously ill and without appropriate medical treatment, it is the way things are told him that make Mrs. Wire a cruel person, unsensitive to his suffering. Thus the conflict between them is irresolvable because not only Nightingale does not accept the truth of his decay but also Mrs. Wire does not feel the need to be understanding towards someone who is dying.

- *Mrs. Wire x Tye.*

The constant revelation of their depraved features to each other makes the conflict between Mrs. Wire and Tye inevitable. The landlady shouts at him whenever he comes home drunk, telling him to "sleep it off in the gutter" (p.41). She does not hesitate to tell everyone that Tye is a bum and a delinquent, for she has an idea of the content of the boxes he keeps in his room. But it is in scene nine that their conflict becomes clearly known; as Tye grasps Jane and draws her to bed, forcing her into sexual inter-

course, she utters a wild cry which makes the landlady order them to quit heir "loud fornication" (p.86) in there. Tye, already angry with Jane, shouts an imprecation back to the landlady which provokes her to burst into their room to see "a disgustin' exhibition!" (p.87).[8] As the rent is paid in full, Tye thinks she has no right to interfere. When Mrs. Wire sees both naked, she exhibits an "air of shocked propriety" (p.87) and orders Tye to dress at once, for she assumes to have witnessed enough obscenities to want Tye away from her boarding house. This is in accordance with her characterization, for she considers herself to be "responsible" and "reputable" (p.88), and Tye's behavior clashes with her reminiscent Puritan principles. These strict moral principles are responsible for her harsh judgement on him, corroborated by the insults she has been obliged to hear from him in her own house.

Therefore the differences between Mrs. Wire and Tye stem from Tye's decadent immoral behavior, which she condemns, as well as from the landlady's obsession and mental instability of thinking she is some sort of God who can judge people and condemn them, as mentioned in an earlier point of our discussion.[9]

- *Mrs. Wire x Sky.*

The conflict between Mrs. Wire and Sky is felt through the conversation he and the Writer have in scene eight. Sky, for the first time appears in the flesh, and tells the Writer he had asked the landlady permission to

leave his knapsack in the rooming house, a deal which she had accepted for an extortionary fifty cents. However, now that he has come back for his things four months later, she refuses to surrender his knapsack to him without a further payment of twenty-five dollars, thereby revealing how intransigent she is. Thus Sky gets mad at her and refers to her as a "crazy witch", just like Nightingale does.[10] This imprecation, together with what she actually sees in the Writer's room — Sky urinating out of the window — makes her mad. She immediately gives her reply in the form of telling the Writer that she knows why Sky had been away for four months: he was a jailbird who had been in the House of Detention for resisting arrest and assaulting an officer of the law. Therefore, both adversaries reveal their decayed realities to each other, truths they would like not to hear.

Later on in this same scene, Sky tells her not to worry about him because he is leaving with the Writer for the West Coast. Mrs. Wire is stunned by the news, and tries to prevent the Writer from leaving with whom she considers to be a piece of trash. However, as we have seen, her efforts are in vain for Sky goes away with the Writer thus taking an adopted son from her side.

If the Writer is the main reason for Mrs. Wire and Sky's conflict, for the Writer means company for both of them against loneliness, not to mention Sky's immoral behavior, then their disagreement ends with the Writer's irrevocable decision of not staying in the boarding house any longer. As soon as Sky realizes that Mrs. Wire does not

accept his behavior and is trying to impose her will on him, as she had been doing to the Writer, he decides to invite the Writer to leave with him. Thus the clash between Mrs. Wire and Sky also helps the Writer to take an important and positive decision in his life which leads, on the other hand, to Mrs. Wire's loneliness.

- *Mrs. Wire x the Photographer.*

Mrs. Wire's antagonism towards the Photographer's immoral behavior is clearly seen in the seventh scene of *Vieux Carrē*, when she decides to pour boiling water down a hole in the kitchen floor directly over his studio. She decides to do that as an effort to fight against the corruption and evil which the French Quarter is built on, according to her. Thus she accuses the Photographer of being a notorious pervert and a filthy morphodite,[11] although aware of his belonging to an important and wealthy family. In his turn, the Photographer alludes to the landlady as an insane person who screamed with delight when his guests ran naked into the street after getting burned. Their fight ends with Mrs. Wire's being charged guilty in court and imposed a fine, besides being released only in the custody of her nephew. However, this is just a partial solution for their clash since the landlady will never change her mind about the Photographer's immorality. Most significant, nevertheless, is that this conflict leads Mrs. Wire to realize again she is completely alone in the world. The boarding house, itself, underscores her clearly felt

awareness that the fear of loneliness exists within every human being, for she feels she can hear the sound of loneliness in her rooming house, as her tenants are less than strangers to her. She understands then why she has heard some doctor say on the radio that people die of loneliness — she realizes how true it is.

One can therefore see that with both adversaries telling the truth to each other, the landlady is led to undergo a process of self-recognition about her personality and life. It is left unclear whether the Photographer changes or not since there is no further mention of him in the play. It is, however, most likely that he leaves the house and remains the same pervert he is.

- *Mrs. Wire x Jane.*

Jane is another tenant who, from the very first scene, has to put up with Mrs. Wire's ironical comments about her relationship with Tye. Although Mrs. Wire is aware of Jane's marital status, she ironically asks Jane: "Now is that young fellow that's living up there with you Mr. Sparks, and if so why did you register as Miss instead of Mrs.?" (p.10).[12] On another occasion, the landlady tries to force Jane to act according to her moral precepts, by telling her that "a single girl should be in at midnight" (p.9). Actually, Mrs. Wire wants Jane not to forget the promiscuity she has gotten herself involved in and, in this way, she helps to provoke a moral dilemma within Jane, that of the soul and the body, as discussed above.[13] The only time

during the play when Jane agrees with Mrs. Wire, as seen before, is after being raped by Tye: "Mrs. Wire, for once I do agree with you! Can you get him out, please, please get him out!" (p.87), when she is led to achieve self-realization about her moral decay.

Thus the conflict between the landlady and Jane is based on the revelation of truth by Mrs. Wire to Jane concerning her relationship with Tye. At the end of the play, this disagreement will probably be solved since Tye leaves the house and is not likely to come back. Therefore, if he were the reason for the landlady and Jane's clash, when he is gone the two women might come closer. Somehow or other, their antagonism has decadence as a starting point once it is aroused by Mrs. Wire's position against the promiscuous relationship of Jane and Tye, both themselves physically and morally decayed.

- *Mrs. Wire x Nursie.*

The struggle between Mrs. Wire and Nursie is first deflagrated when Mrs. Wire asks Nursie to carry Sky's knapsack upstairs, showing no consideration for Nursie's deteriorating state of health. Nursie informs Mrs. Wire she is thinking of retiring but the landlady dissuades the maid from this idea by showing her she is so poor that she would have nowhere to go if she left the boarding house. Later on during the play, Nursie decides to quit again because she has been insulted by a lady tourist. Once more Mrs. Wire runs after her to make her stay by reminding the maid of her

dependence on the landlady. So Nursie feels obliged to stay and obey the landlady's orders even when being badly treated by her. This can be seen when Mrs. Wire is calling an ambulance to remove Nightingale while she kicks at Nursie — conveying, in fact, even physical antagonism between them.

Apparently irrelevant issues like bats are also a reason for their arguing, since the landlady does not want Nursie to talk about the animals in order not to ruin the reputation of her house. Actually, as seen,[14] the bats could represent the characters of the play, those "damned souls" (p.5).

On another occasion, Nursie also complains about the darkness of the hall and remarks that God had said "Let there be light" on the first day of creation. This Biblical quotation adds a further dimension to the play, giving the house overtones of limbo, chaos and a madhouse. Besides, this is another reason for them to quarrel, for the landlady complains that Nursie is always quoting the scriptures for her, making her feel "sick of the book" (p.6).[15]

Nevertheless, the relationship between Mrs. Wire and Nursie is one of interdependence for both women need each other for different reasons. As previously discussed, Nursie has no place to go if she leaves Mrs. Wire. On the other hand, Mrs. Wire's spiritual dependence on Nursie is revealed from the beginning of *Vieux Carrē*, through the fact that she does not want the maid to leave — even if the landlady does not recognize this dependence. This will happen only after

achieving self-recognition at the end of the play. Then, when she realizes her decadent physical and mental condition, Mrs. Wire feels happy to accept the maid's support:

> NURSIE: Get up, Mizz Wire, come down with Nursie.
>
> MRS. WIRE (accepting Nursie's support): Now I'm - old. (p.107)

Thus, Mrs. Wire comes to understand that she depends not only on Nursie's helping her with the guests but also on the maid's spiritual support. Although the landlady is a domineering woman who delights in giving orders, on the other hand, she depends on someone who understands her.

Therefore, the conflict between Mrs. Wire and Nursie is aroused mainly because of apparently unimportant issues such as the lack of light in the house, the bats in the kitchen, but which are, nevertheless, related to the physical decay of the house. Moreover, Nursie's declining health condition as well as her loneliness in a hostile world also provoke clashes between her and Mrs. Wire but are, at the same time, the reasons for her not leaving the landlady, therefore pointing to an irresolvable solution for both remain in the house.

- *Mrs. Wire x Mary Maude and Miss Carrie.*

Another sub-plot of conflict which adds to the action in *Vieux Carrê* is the one between the inn-keeper and Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, the two Southern crones proud of their past. Since Mrs. Wire knows they depend on her even

to survive, she takes advantage of the situation and treats them badly, the same way she does with Nursie. The landlady does not allow them to keep their food in her refrigerator because it is spoiled and, consequently, does not smell good. When Mrs. Wire prepares her gumbo, she is certain that its smell will draw the two starving old women to the kitchen, while she ironically observes "Why, Mizz Wayne an' Miss Carrie, you girls still up at this hour!" (p.36). The women say they have come down to see if they could be of some assistance. But Mrs. Wire knows the true reason and her wickedness does not allow her to keep quiet, so she clearly states that they came to the kitchen with a "rusty ole saucepan" (p.36), to get some gumbo for themselves. They are offered just two spoonfuls of it. Thus they try to divert Mrs. Wire's attention in order to get more, even after the landlady has pretended to spit in the pot to give the gumbo "a better flavor"; this is what she tells them so that they do not eat the food. But they eat it and Miss Carrie has her throat scorched; once more, Mrs. Wire's cruel irony is felt as she suggests Miss Carrie to "cut it" (p.40) if there is no cure for it. Their clash with Mrs. Wire because of food makes them even comparable to animals which fight one another to get some food in order to survive.

The women usually keep themselves occupied in their locked room compiling a cookbook — this is another opportunity for Mrs. Wire to provoke them, for she remarks that recipes are "a poor substitute for food" (p.37). Later on, Miss Carrie lies to the landlady to have turned down an

invitation to dinner at her cousin's house in the Garden District to pretend she is not starving; again Mrs. Wire, aware of their decayed situation, asks her if she had "objected to the menu" (p.37).

In this same conversation, Miss Carrie says that her cousin's husband is a mortician who "buries all the best families in the parish" (p.38). Mrs. Wire does not miss the chance of making the crone realize how far from her reality she is, thus commenting to Miss Carrie that maybe Mr. Pathet wants her to pick out a casket for her because he has probably noticed Miss Carrie's "asthma from damp walls in the Quarter" (p.39). Therefore, we can perceive that they talk about decaying subjects related to starvation, disease and death.

Besides all that, Mrs. Wire also provokes Mary Maude by telling her the real truth about the latter's son who, instead of army paychecks, sends Mary postcards that cannot be cashed and are, therefore, useless, again an ironical observation.

It is worth pointing out that although the two women are treated in such a bad way, they still thank Mrs. Wire for "her being so concerned always about our [their] - circumstances here" (p.40);[16] this seems to be a real mixture of pathos and humor, for we know the crones' deteriorating physical and mental condition, and we are also aware of the fact that the landlady does not care about them and, even more, accuses the old women of pouring boiling water down into the Photographer's studio (p.62).

Thus the antagonism between Mrs. Wire and Mary Maude and Miss Carrie is generated only by one of the adversaries, the landlady, who makes cruel and ironical observations about the old women's present degrading situation concerning their starvation, ancestry, physical decay and moral pain. Nevertheless, the constant revelation of the crones' decadent truths is useless, because they are already lost in a world of past illusions.

Besides the conflicts between Mrs. Wire and her tenants, which make up most of the action in *Vieux Carrê*, there are also relevant clashes between the tenants themselves, as has been previously mentioned, including: Jane x Tye and the Writer x Nightingale, which also lead to the revelation of truth about each other.

- *Jane x Tye.*

Because of their conflicting views of the world, there are a series of confrontations between Jane and Tye throughout the play. This confrontation increases in severity until one of the two must be destroyed.

From the very first scene of the play, Jane is shown to be aware of her sharing her room with an addicted and delinquent capable even of physical action against her, a trait already discussed in his characterization:

> JANE: The less you say out loud about the hot merchandise you've been accumulating here ...
>
> TYE: Babe, you're asking for a - (He doubles his fist). (p.14)

Here we hint at the most obvious difference between the worlds of Jane and Tye — the diversity of their backgrounds, for she is a well-educated girl from New York while he does not have schooling and is from the Mississippi sticks.

Their next encounter, in scene three, clearly shows Tye violating the usual verbal code by employing four-letter words: "Bullshit, you picked up a kid on the street?" (p.28). He says this imprecation because Jane has invited the Writer to have coffee with her, since she thinks that he is someone she can talk to. Tye, in turn, resents Jane's superior attitude thus trying to convince her that the Writer is just "a little queer" (p.32), meaning that Jane has "a lot to learn about life in the Quarter" (p.33). He wants her to realize that the Writer feels sexual attraction towards him. Anyway, Jane still believes the Writer is a serious person she can talk to in order to drive her loneliness away. Tye is aware of his and Jane's differences and summarizes them in just one sentence: "You can't talk to me huh?" (p.33). In fact, as seen in the character analysis, what brings Tye and Jane together is sex, that is, the physical act of love. Love is essential to both of them but, while Tye thinks love to be nothing more than sex, Jane understands it to have a higher level, related to the soul. Thus, although they end most of their fights going to bed together, the conflict

between them is irreconcilable because it originates in the very essence of their personalities.

Once again, in scene nine, the difference between Jane's sensitivity and delicacy and Tye's crudeness and uncouthness can be seen. He had come home with a needle mark on his arm the night before and, although being close to exhaustion because of her illness, Jane had put him to bed and taken care of him. She is jealous of Tye and, moreover, had found out that his face was smeared with lipstick; besides, she had remembered his false promise of quitting his present job in a week when they started living together. All these, plus Jane's realization that Tye will never supply the spiritual support she needs, lead her to finish the "bed bit" (p.85) between them by telling him she is expecting a businessman from Brazil whom she had met at the Blue Lantern. Tye does not accept the breaking up and rapes Jane, in a last effort to subdue her through sex, the only way he knows of doing it.

In the eleventh scene, Tye tries to explain to Jane why he had needed a needle to get him through the night before and, consequently, had raped her. He tells her not to be jealous of the headliner at the strip show, the Champagne Girl, because she is dead. The girl was offered a deal on the West Coast but her boss, the Man, had said "No". She insisted and the Man had her brutally killed, by letting big black dogs into her apartment to devour her, as seen before. Jane cannot stand the story for she realizes that the world outside the house is as perverted as it is inside.

Nevertheless, she pleads to Tye to move out; she claims she had stayed with him although realizing his defects because he had touched her "like nobody else in my [her] life had ever before or ever could again" (p.101). But Tye refuses to grow up and escape from the violence and degradation he has been caught up in. So Jane ends up by telling him she is very ill and that her blood count is close to collapse. Tye cannot accept Jane's deteriorating health condition, for soon her body will not be ready to accept the love (sex) he wants to give. Now Jane understands she cannot expect Tye to return home after work although she even humiliates herself by pleading him to give her another lasting remission — she had had one when she first met him. On the contrary, she is left alone with Beret, the cat, a comforting presence, and, at the same time, a memento that life goes on.

At the end of the play, Jane is absorbed in her solitary chess game, for nobody had cured and could ever cure her loneliness, a feeling that had a place in her heart even during the time when Tye was living with her. Now that she needs him most because of her disease and imminent death, his indifference to her feelings and his egotism make her a completely solitary human being. Thus their relationship starts in decay and ends the same way: Tye does not change for the better and leaves Jane alone after having taken whatever he wanted from her.

- *The Writer x Nightingale*

Another important relationship in *Vieux Carrē* is the one between the Writer and Nightingale, the homosexual painter. They first meet in the second scene, when the quick sketch artist hears a sound of dry and desperate sobbing: the Writer crying because of loneliness. Nightingale goes to the Writer's room to comfort him for he recognizes in the Writer another lonely human soul like himself. As they are talking, the Writer tells the painter he has a cataract in his left eye which he cannot cure since he cannot afford to see an oculist. Nightingale then suggests him to go to a doctor and not pay the bill, for one should not be "so honest in this dishonest world" (p.19). Their mutual poverty is a point that links the Writer to Nightingale. Only some time later does the Writer accept Nightingale's suggestion and has his cataract removed, although we do not know if he pays the doctor or not. The most important point here is that this removal means that he not only sees well now in the literal meaning but that he symbolically sees things well too, which leads to his going away with Sky to find freedom.

It is also to Nightingale that the Writer reveals his wish to write about the people he has been meeting in the Vieux Carrē of New Orleans, for "there's - a lot of human material - in the Quarter for a writer ..." (p.20). This is actually a metalingual reference to the play itself, which deals exactly with the people of the Vieux Carrē.

During their conversation in this same scene, the Writer tells the painter about his first homosexual experience, which had suggestively happened on a New Year's Eve, a day when we commonly make our decisions for the year which is coming. After this report, Nightingale feels more at ease to induce the Writer to have sex with him. The painter argues that their loneliness is a strong reason for their becoming intimate friends. This first encounter leaves the Writer wondering what his grandmother's attitude toward such perversions might have been, either of forgiveness and understanding or of disapproval. What seems to be implied here is that the grandmother represents the Writer's own conscience which will allow the Writer's deeply hidden homosexual nature to emerge at last.

When the Writer and Nightingale next meet, in scene five, the first seems to be annoyed with the painter because of his attentions offered to Tye. Actually, the Writer admits he finds Tye attractive, so Nightingale's attempt to make love to Tye has bothered him. Nightingale tries to calm the Writer down by trying to have sex with him once more, but is rejected. The Writer, accused of having grown into "a selfish, callous man" (p.50), decides to reveal the truth to Nightingale: "I'm afraid I'm tired, I need to sleep and ... I don't want to catch your cold" (p.50). The painter, who does not accept his decayed health condition, demeans the Writer as nothing more than "a boy with literary pretensions" (p.50). This revelation releases a rage in the Writer which makes him accuse the painter of cowardly not facing up to the truth about his disease.

In this scene we can see that both of them try to escape from their sad realities, unwilling to see their own flaws. The Writer does not want to realize that he will have to develop his literary ability if he is to succeed in the literary field. Nightingale, in his turn, does not accept that he is seriously ill and tries to go on living as if nothing were amiss with his health.

Nevertheless, the Writer feels pity for the painter; when Mrs. Wire is having an altercation with Nightingale because he refuses to leave the house on an ambulance, the Writer asks her to "be easy on him, he's dying" (p.74). Later on, in scene ten, the Writer and Nightingale have their last talk, when for the first time the Writer returns the painter's visits. He is worried about Nightingale, and wants to call even a private doctor. He also shows his concern by bringing the painter his own pillow to be put in the back of his head so that he can breathe better. When Nightingale says that God has the moral obligation to give him time for serious work, the change that has occurred within the Writer is apparent as he replies: "I think that morals are a human invention that He ignores as successfully as we do" (p.91). If, in the beginning of the play, he was reluctant about accepting his homosexual nature, now he does not show to have second thoughts about it. Besides, the quotation also illustrates a seminal aspect of the playwright and the play itself, which is its avoidance of taking sides or condemning the characters' actions.

Nightingale wants to wear some make-up to go out on the street, but the Writer dissuades him from this idea by reminding him he is delirious with fever and that he should face and deal with the fact that he is very ill. The Writer even suggests that the painter should take more than one sleeping pill this time, an idea which is promptly rejected by Nightingale, who claims to be a Catholic believer, while the Writer is again said to be "a boy with soft skin and stone heart ..." (p.93). This reveals again the whole process of change the Writer has undergone while living in Mrs. Wire's boarding house. If he was a shy and panicky gentleman in the beginning, he has now been converted by the decaying environment, the decayed people, and the degrading scenes he has observed and seen. This conversion is ambivalent, for it is negative in the sense that the Writer allows his homosexual nature to completely emerge, becoming then involved with other perverts; but it is also positive because he then gathers the courage to rebel against Mrs. Wire's oppression to the point of choosing freedom and leaving the rooming house. Nightingale also leaves the house, not because he achieves self-realization, but through death, which can as well be considered a form of liberation from his decay.

Thus the action in *Vieux Carrē* is made up of conflicts between the characters, most of them between Mrs. Wire and each one of her tenants. She plays the role of antagonist

in relation to all of them, not only hurting them with what she says but provoking them physically as well as mentally.

The conflicts between the landlady and the Writer, Nightingale, Tye, Sky and the Photographer, bring out the revelation of the characters' decayed features.

Mrs. Wire and the Writer come to realize the decadent truths about themselves, which leads the latter to leave the boarding house in order to find the freedom required by his artist's soul, while the landlady only accomplishes a spiritual escape from the decay she feels within herself. In the clash between the landlady and Nightingale, neither of them accept each other's truths: Mrs. Wire acts as an unsensitive person as to his sickness and behavior, while he does not realize how ill he actually is. Tye's immoral behavior is also condemned by the landlady who, in her turn, acts as a God who can judge people for what they do. She also condemns Sky and the Photographer for their perverted behavior, anxious as she is to fight the corruption and vice she sees around her. Nevertheless, while at the beginning she does not realize she is also part of the decaying environment where they all live, and that she also has decayed character traits, she becomes aware of them through the conflicts with her tenants.

In the antagonism between Mrs. Wire and Jane, Nursie, and Mary Maude and Miss Carrie, the depressing truths about the characters are revealed only by the landlady, for the others do not dare to refer to her deteriorated aspects

either because of breeding, or because of their material dependence on her. As seen, Mrs. Wire accuses Jane of sharing her room with Tye, in an effort to combat immorality in the French Quarter. As to Nursie, even though they have a relationship of interdependence, the landlady enjoys giving orders, humiliating the maid as well as having all her wishes obeyed, although she realizes she needs Nursie's support at the end of the play. Finally, as Mary Maude and Miss Carrie depend on the landlady even to survive, they are obliged to accept all the ironies and humiliations from her in exchange for the little food she gives them.

Besides these struggles, we also have important clashes between Jane and Tye, and between the Writer and Nightingale, in which they are adversaries and partners at the same time.

Jane and Tye have confrontations mainly because of their contrasting views of the world which not even going to bed together can solve. As to the Writer and Nightingale, they start as friends and end as friends as well, although the change which the first undergoes during the play makes him avoid sexual contact with the painter, thus becoming distanced from him.

In this way the truths revealed in the clashes between the characters are related to decadence, for they stress the characters' perverted, degrading, or decayed aspects, either physical and/or spiritual, further emphasized

by the decaying boarding house in which they live. The setting once more confirms it is the ideal place for the conflicts, in the sense that it reflects all the decayed truths about which Mrs. Wire and her tenants quarrel, while at the same time it leads all of them to these fights because of their confinement in the rooming house.

NOTES

[1] ABRAMS, M.H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 3.ed. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1971. p.127.

[2] ABRAMS, p.128.

[3] TENNYSON, G.B. *An Introduction to Drama*. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966. p.49.

[4] See p.62 and 67.

[5] See also p.67.

[6] See also p.28.

[7] See also p.67.

[8] See also p.68.

[9] See p.69.

[10] See p.72.

[11] See also p.69.

[12] See also p.68.

[13] See p.78.

[14] See p.28.

[15] See also p.103.

[16] See also p.101.

Conclusion

It was stated in the introductory chapter of this work that I proposed to examine the setting-character-action relationship in Tennessee Williams' *Vieux Carrē* as linked and dominated by the imagery of decadence. I have sought to show that this connection exists in terms of a correspondence between the three parts through the communicative and evocative power of the images and symbols of decay employed by the playwright. This analysis has attempted to show, by means of the exponential approach, how significant the setting is to the overall meaning in *Vieux Carrē*, since the decayed characteristics of the house seem appropriate for the conflicts between the characters which will reveal their physical and mental decayed features. The imagery of decadence in the boarding house is universally embracing to the extent that the setting adds metaphoric energy to its purely theatrical functions. Therefore this setting plays a fundamental and essential role in this play, for place evokes decadence and leads us to the function of the house as a major symbol of the decay that pervades *Vieux Carrē*. In addition, Tennessee Williams seems to have established that Mrs. Wire's rooming house is similar to the world at large, so that his observations about the decayed condition of life

inside the house could well be applied to that of life in general. In other words, the dilapidated and dark rooming house and its decaying inhabitants are comparable to a jailhouse, to a madhouse and to a graveyard, full of prisoners, insane people, or ghost-like souls lost in a kind of limbo existence. As a microcosm of our own world, this underworld of decay would go beyond being a mere depiction of the setting to encompass and expose a broader environment of corruption, vice, disease and degradation.

However, although the setting in *Vieux Carrē* conveys all this decadence through the use of imagery and symbols, it leaves some hope for the world in the form of the Writer's self-release, by escaping from the house on a springtime Sunday, while a white and fluffy cat remains with Jane after she is left alone by Tye as a reminder that life goes on.

As Williams is a consciously poetic dramatist, the characters' inner psychological realities are projected through the manipulation of external elements related to decay. The characters are brought together by the very fact of their being decayed, lonely people, isolated from society, and trapped in a deteriorating house. They reflect an awareness of a crucial difference between illusion (escape from their decaying truth) and reality (acceptance of their decadence). In one of the first moments of the play, there is in all of the characters a tendency to escape from reality through alcohol, narcotics, sexual relationships and dreams. However this conflict becomes unendurable for some

of them when, at a later stage in the play, they become aware of their decadent characteristics and with their awareness finally embrace such transcendent values as truth and freedom. Their adherence to such values is what makes redemption possible and real for some of them. Thus, the confrontation of reality as a means of achieving self-recognition of their own decayed traits can be considered a positive outcome in the play.

Thus, although the decaying features of all the characters in *Vieux Carrê* are highlighted more than their positive ones, their partial redemption is corroborated by CURTIS who has observed that Williams "sees all these people with the charitable indulgence of hind-sight. Unlike some writers, whose inspiration has been stultified by success, he has never lost his love of failure and the failed"[1]. This means that he was able to find a kind of heroism among these decadent people, the worst and useless part of humanity, who are rotting in a deteriorating boarding house. They are misfits, failures and dispossessed people but the dramatist seems to describe them with sympathy and mainly with honesty, revealing his concern for the need for understanding between human beings trapped by circumstances, as seen in the introduction. Moreover, by emphasizing the characters' hidden contradictions through the revelation of their double personality, positive and negative, Williams tends to universalize them.

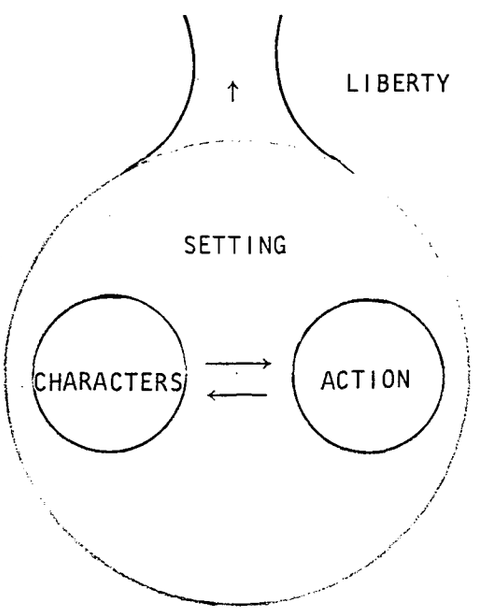
As to the conflicts which make up the action in the play, we hope to have shown how they are also related to

decadence since they display the characters' decayed truths, physical and mental, corroborated by the influence that the decaying boarding house exerts over them. Neither Mary Maude nor Miss Carrie are able to move out of the house as a consequence of their conflict with Mrs. Wire and they stay in this kind of limbo which the rooming house is. Nightingale, Tye and the Photographer do not submit themselves to self-examination either but, nevertheless, they leave the house: the painter is removed almost dead, Tye's unsensitivity and egotism makes him leave Jane, and the Photographer's immoral behavior arouses Mrs. Wire's indignation so that he probably moves out. Mrs. Wire and Jane, on the contrary, undergo a process of self-realization as a consequence of the conflicts, a process which allows them to accomplish some spiritual escape from the decay they feel within and around themselves. The Writer and Sky play the most important roles here, for the first achieves self-recognition and, moreover, is induced by Sky to leave with him for the West Coast, in an attempt to find the freedom required by his artist's soul. In this way, they manage to physically escape from what is oppressing them by moving away from the decaying confinement of Mrs. Wire's boarding house, and show how a possibility of redemption and liberty is projected into the play.

It is hoped that from this analysis it has become clear that the imagery of decadence acts as a controlling image over the entire play, as a thread that sews ideas and

relates them to one another, and thus helping us deepen our experience of the work.

We can summarize the analyzed aspects of *Vieux Carrē* in the following diagram:



Displayed in this way, the decayed setting dominates characters and action, although there is a small passage left open so that it is possible to move out of and away from this deplorable condition.

Bamber GASCOIGNE affirms that

> the word most apt for Tennessee Williams' theatre is 'evocative'. He is a painterly dramatist who builds up a play with a variety of delicate brush-strokes. These may be symbols, linked images, sound-effects off-stage, the sudden eruption of laughter, the sigh of a snatch of music, the interruption of a scene by some mysteriously poetic character, or even the play of electric lights.[2]

And in *Vieux Carrē*, the use of some of these theatrical devices explored in the setting, characterization and action, have led us to experience decadence as the main theme of the work, thus projecting Williams' interpretation of our own world in which things are as they are, and not as they ought to be.

NOTES

[1] CURTIS, A. *Drama*, *150*:53, Autumn 1978.

[2] GASCOIGNE, B. *Twentieth Century Drama*. London, Hutchinson, 1967. p.166.

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