

“THE MISERABLE, LAUGHABLE THING IT IS”: THE DEMISE OF THE TRADITIONAL MASCULINE ROLE IN ROBERT ANDERSON’S PLAYS

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Regarded as a minor playwright, Robert W. Anderson (1917-2009) posed and gave response to many of the political questions of post-war America. Tea and Sympathy (1953) addresses the McCarthyite witch hunt (the central message of Miller’s The Crucible, also of the same year), and clearly anticipates the denouement of Williams’s Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955). My contention is that violence in his work is the direct result of the erosion of the dominant image of masculinity (whose order and command, and sexual orientation are now contested) and the decline of the nuclear family (mostly in All Summer Long and in I Never Sang for my Father). By applying Girard’s scapegoating mechanisms to the analysis of Tea and Sympathy I attempt to demonstrate that Tom Lee incarnates the pharmakos of a repressed society. I also contend that in portraying Bill Reynolds as the instigator of prejudice Anderson uses the variables of the F-scale devised by Theodor W. Adorno. Needless to say, his melodramas do not provide a univocal solution to these cultural issues. Far from it they show an ambivalent attitude, both supportive of the demise of the authoritarian, hardboiled masculinity, and nostalgic of the loss of the traditional family model.

After watching Vincent Minnelli’s movie *Tea and Sympathy*, Argentinian writer Manuel Puig became so deeply impressed that he saw two versions of the original play, “one performed by Ingrid Bergman in Paris in 1957, where he sat in the third row” (Levine 2001:99). Decades later, Manuel Puig will reach a conclusion about homosexuality clearly inspired by Anderson’s audacious text:

Homosexuality does not exist. It is a projection of a reactionary mind. [...] Homosexuals do not exist. There are people who have sex with individuals of their own sex, but this fact does not serve to define them because it does not have any meaning.¹ (1986:86) [my translation]

1. “La homosexualidad no existe. Es una proyección de la mente reaccionaria. Lamentablemente, creo que en materia de sexo somos casi todos bastante reaccionarios: para nosotros la

Since the aim of this paper is to analyze how the dominant *status quo* of the gender roles is the result of the violent exclusion of all those alternative, peripheral attempts to invalidate its hegemony, I would like to define first which notion of gender-based violence I am going to be dealing with before discussing Anderson's production during the fifties, the "bad decade" (Gore Vidal, qtd. in Kaiser 2007:65), or "one of the worst decades in the history of man" (in Norman Mailer's words, qtd. in Miller and Novak 1977:12), the age of the totalitarian McCarthyism but also the decade of the explosion of sexualities (D'Emilio and Freedman 1997). My definition of violence owes much to Walter Benjamin and Raymond Williams, and ultimately to Jacques Derrida and René Girard. I start from the premise that violence is a tool of the ruling class to impose conformism to the hegemonic values so that any subversive value or oppositional idea at clash with the establishment culture can be oppressed and silenced (Williams 1973). Violence is therefore a socially conservative political instrument to preserve the allegedly cohesive, seamless structure of the social order. Derrida argues that the determination of the subject's identity (the mapping of the ethnic, sexual, and cultural frontiers of any social group) involves the exclusion of alternative ways of being and interpreting, so that the fabrication of any particular identity implies a unity which can only be achieved through a violent positioning and exclusion. The subject therefore ignores the existence of the Other (the present, living one) and also wipes out the memory of the dead ones out of fear and panic, and this is the inevitable, originary violence which the constitution of any identity entails (Fritsch 2001). Plurality, diversity, multivocal formations disappear as they seep back into a deceitfully tension-free, homogenous monolith. In Girard's theory the constitution of any society and the maintenance of any *status quo* are based upon the religious transformation of mimetic violence (all against all) into the collective sacrifice of a scapegoat. Girard points out some recurring features that define the scapegoat mechanism: (a) any kind of social crisis that affects the whole community; (b) crimes or acts that challenge certain social differences; (c) a set of features that mark the victim as different, unusual, or weak; (d) the act of physical violence (sacrifice), or simply the punishment of expulsion (Burkert 1979).

In order to understand Anderson's dramatic production in connection with gender-based violence and the so-called scapegoating mechanisms we must clarify the ideological conflicts of the fifties, a decade which has been defined as one characterized by a bipolar tension, a tug of war between a centrifugal flight from the norms and a centripetal effort towards homogenization and conformism. The classical study of David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd*, classifies

homosexualidad existe, ¡y cómo! Pero nos hacemos ilusiones, igual que los que creían en la tierra plana. Me explico: estoy convencido de que el sexo carece absolutamente de significado moral, trascendente. Aún más, el sexo es la inocencia misma; es un juego inventado por la Creación para darle alegría a la gente. Pero solamente eso: un juego, una actividad de la vida vegetativa como dormir o comer, tan importante como esas funciones, pero igualmente carente de peso moral. Los homosexuales no existen. Existen personas que practican actos sexuales con sujetos de su mismo sexo, pero este hecho no debería definirlos porque carece de significado".

Americans as “other-directed”, i.e. too frightened about the disapproval of others, subservient to public opinion and eager to conform. Yet the sociologist also speaks about the maladjusted, the anomics, those who do not fit into the socially acceptable patterns (Riesman 1950:240). The “anomic terror” of the American society of the fifties reveals the precariousness of the foundations of the hegemonic values, and thus it is hardly surprising that the fifties is a decade teeming with contradictory images. The metaphor of the “Closed Room” with which Paul Goodman defined America at that time is not so much characterized by competition but by the fear of “being outcast” (qtd. in Miller and Novak 1977:6), the fright of not belonging. Max Lerner in his monumental *America as a Civilization* (1957) also sees American society as divided by a major conflict: half of it is impelled by the dissolution of constraints (sexual freedom, unlimited individual options, the need to flaunt the moral codes...); the other is eager to impose morality through legislation, or through the vigilantist tradition of the local busybodies. In other words, the American is “caught between the morality breakers and the moralizers” (Lerner 1957:671). “The American society that Kinsey studied” is “half Babylonian and half Puritan” since it is characterized by both “an explosiveness of release of the older taboos” and a “reversion to a new form of the Puritan codes” (1957:686). Not surprisingly, the fifties constantly multiply the bipolar tension by adding terms to this overwhelming dialectical opposition. Norman Mailer (1966:313) sees Americans as either trapped in the totalitarian tissue of American society (the so-called squares) or pushed to become deviants (the so-called Hips). There is no intermediate position. Tennessee Williams (and also Carson McCullers) speaks about the lonely freaks silenced by squares, the violets in the mountains which will end up breaking the rocks, as the famous last line of *Camino Real* reads (Williams 2008:114). Theodor W. Adorno and the Stanford School build up the core of their study of political prejudice around the famous dichotomy authoritarian vs. democratic personality (Mack is the intolerant bigot; Larry, the unprejudiced liberal type), thereby anticipating the logic of the Cold War (Watten 2006). Finally, in a thought-provoking article Kyle A. Cuordileone (2000) speaks about the schizophrenic culture of the Cold War characterized by the opposition between two world views. The traditionally dominant gender role ceases to provide a unified image and is also split up into two opposing models: on the one hand, the hard masculinity (the label containing the normative ideal: athletic, vigorous, the frontier hero prototype); on the other, the emergent, soft masculinity (domesticated, emotional, sensitive) more in tune with the new demands of the post-industrialized, suburban America.

Anderson's plays of the fifties cannot be alien to the pervasive influence of these ideological shifts and tensions. My contention is that violence in his work is the direct outcome of: (a) the gender dislocations, particularly the complete erosion of the dominant construction of masculinity which the Post-War period is going to consolidate; and (b) the parallel dissolution of the “Happy Home Corporation”, i.e. the decline of the nuclear family as a stable, solid institution despite the efforts to preserve its foundations intact. In Anderson's *I Never Sang for my Father* the stage is symbolically divided into two overlapping spaces: the

Home area, the domain of a “hard and rough, selfish and prejudiced” father, Tom Garrison, a promoter of a “a phony set of values” who believes in Teddy Roosevelt’s ideals, is addicted to television westerns (Anderson 1968:53-54), and banishes his daughter after getting married to a Jew; and the Graveyard area where the mother’s body rests in the casket. Far from providing a coherent response, Anderson’s plays show ambivalence: they admittedly support the demise of the authoritarian, hardboiled masculinity but, simultaneously, evoke nostalgia for the loss of the traditional family model, disrupted by the sweeping social changes. The encounter of the traditional masculine model (brutal, primitive, animalistic) and the emergent emasculated man (emotional, cultivated, civilized) can only result in a violent collision, for the authority of the former can only be demonstrated through primal aggression and sanction. Gene Garrison is, in Alice’s words, looking for something impossible: “a mother’s love in a father” (1968:54). No matter how hard he tries to discover the emotional side of his father, Tom is only “a selfish bastard who has lived on the edge of exasperation” (1968:42), someone mean and unloving who wants “his son’s balls” and who sees his children not as flesh-and-blood people but “dividends” (1968:57), objects that can be instrumental to his needs.

Obviously, Anderson does not hesitate to stress the moral superiority of his soft characters (Gene Garrison, Tom Lee and Willie) by converting the hard masculine models (Tom Garrison, Bill Reynolds and Dad) not only into the antagonistic forces of his plays but also into ineffectual, powerless, pathetic figures whose order and command (Dad), and even sexual orientation (Bill Reynolds) are disputable. In *Tea and Sympathy* Anderson uses the structure of romance melodrama, particularly the triangle situation, to revalidate his conviction that the right candidate is no longer the hard masculine type but the soft type. Melodrama is, as we know, a drama of deceptive signs preoccupied with the presentation of a moral order which remains occluded, i.e. unrecognizable for the spectator whose goal is to disentangle the web of misleading information to rescue the truth (Gunning 1994:51-54). The allusions to G. B. Shaw’s *Candida* in *Tea and Sympathy* anticipate the moral conflict: there is a choice to be made, and Bill and Tom arise as the two opposing masculine roles on which Laura has to take a final decision. Before advancing these ideas it will be advisable though to dwell upon the plays under consideration.

Anderson’s contribution to Broadway during the fifties begins with *Tea and Sympathy*, presented on September 30th of 1953, directed by Elia Kazan and reaching an unprecedented success: the play ran 712 performances, a number that shows the interest of American audiences in homosexuality at a time when “the entire nation [was, or seemed on the verge of] going queer” (Lait and Mortimer 1952:44). Executive Order 10450, passed on April 27, 1953, i.e. five months before the opening night of the play, aimed to maintain the security of the nation by firing from government agencies or departments all those employees who were not “reliable” or “trustworthy” and who could easily subvert the stability of the country. The conflation of the Red Scare and the

Lavender menace explains why the new subversive citizen is not only the Communist but also the homosexual. John M. Clum argues that the play “challenges the normative equation of sexual orientation and gender” (1992:142) by invalidating the equation macho-man and heterosexuality and therefore the identification of effeminacy and homosexuality. Tom Lee is the “very sensitive boy”, the “lonely” “offhorse” (Anderson 1953:33,26) with long hair who prefers to listen to music, play the guitar — he wants to be a folksinger — and talk with the headmaster’s wife rather than bully around with the rest of the dorm students; the guy who keeps his room neat and tidy, with Indian print curtains matching the bedspread; and whose body movements and gestures are far from being manly: he is told that he should correct the way he walks. Even the way he plays tennis, despite being the school champion, without “any hard drive or cannon ball serve”, is criticized as dubious (1953:31). Yet he is not a homosexual: the gender signs, the bodily hexis (in Pierre Bordieau’s sense) and his refusal to sleep with the prostitute (the litmustest of masculinity for the dorm boys) are misleading signs which do not reveal anything about his sexual orientation. However, the he-man, Billy, the athletic headmaster who loves organizing mountain climbing outings with the boys, proves to be the latent (a word much in vogue after the Kinsey report) homosexual who persecutes in Tom “the thing [he] fear[s] in [him]self” (1953:84).

Anderson’s ultimate goal is to knock down at the bottom of the he-man mystique in order to cancel the regulatory regime of the gender traits ascribed to masculinity. His redefinition of masculinity is one which includes, in Laura’s words, “tenderness, gentleness, consideration”. Manliness is not “all swagger and swearing and mountain climbing”. Tom is finally “more of a man than you are”, the neglected wife lashes out at Bill (1953:83). The traditional man’s man image — the tough guy, the Western hero of the frontier past — proves to be a masquerade that has to be removed in the Post War America, despite the revival of the Westerns during the fifties and the failing attempts to reinscribe traditional models of masculinity. Now domesticity, cooperation, dialogue, creativity, sensitiveness (everything that Tom incarnates) become obligatory signs of identity of the new standardized model of masculinity, more in tune with feminine needs and demands, but not homosexual.

Not in vain, the setting of the play and the choice of costumes reinforce this dichotomy of the past and present models of gender construction. The scene is “a small colonial house” in New England, i.e. a Puritan order where differences and disconformity are much unwelcome. To a stage designer like Jo Mielziner, interested in creating symbolic spaces which acted like the vehicles of the characters’ conflicts, working on Anderson’s setting must have seemed a very rewarding experience. The rule in the boys’ school is to be a regular guy, this is at least Tom’s father’s concern, and Bill repeats the label “regular” on several occasions. The disruptive element is Tom’s Indian colorful print curtains and bedspread, a setting prop which stands out in a difference-leveling, monochrome cosmos. Bill’s clothes (grey flannel trousers, tweed jacket and a blue button-down shirt, not very different from Sloan Wilson’s popular protagonist, Tom Rath, the *exposé* of conformity to expectations in the bestselling novel) bespeak

of the urgency to fit into the prescribed uniformity and stodginess. Laura's choice of yellow as the color of her dress for the Saturday dance proves to be also meaningful for it is not only a symbol of decadent aestheticism but also of sexual subversion (Golden 2004:115), and contributes to adding more confusion in a play dealing with hidden truths. McConachie (2003:172-173) argues that the American theater during the Cold War became "emblematic", an arena with allegorizing tendencies whereby stylized spaces and interiors — Mielziner's typical gauze and toothpick décor — became the visible signs of characters' tensions and emotional responses. Mielziner's selective realism (the elimination of the non-essentials became his motto) naturally evolved into a minimalist conception of the stage: "I got to feel that even realistic plays didn't need realistic settings necessarily" (qtd. in Barranger 2006:258). Like his contemporary Mordecai Gorelik, Mielziner believed that the true function of the stage design was to provide a visual metaphor of the fabric of the play, and he usually accomplished his goal by strategically placing different settings simultaneously on different levels so as to indicate their symbolic value. In the premiere performance of *Tea and Sympathy* Mielziner's stage design, unlike the original play script, comprised only three spaces: Laura's sitting room on stage right (the feminine space); the boys' bedroom, lifted a few feet higher upstage and seen as a series of identical cells, and a narrow anteroom — the headmaster's studio — placed downstage, which stands for Bill's oppressive, monitoring presence, and suggests "the forced intimacy" of the students and the headmaster (Henderson 2001:198). The anteroom is Bill's domain, the system of surveillance, "the eye of power" (Foucault 1980) which controls that hard masculine values are reaffirmed; the setting where Ralph and Steve, the bullies, spread the rumors, invent the names and choose their next victim.

Yet Anderson goes farther in his negative portrayal of the hard masculinity prototype when he chooses Bill, "large and strong with a tendency to be gruff" (1953:23), as the instigator of prejudice and violent aggression. He does not only consent to the bullying and violence in the dorm: Tom is called Grace, is ostracized, ridiculed and abandoned by his room mate, Al, and finally expelled from school. Bill is also obsessed about demonstrating Tom's homosexuality right from the very beginning so that the very notion of being queer becomes "the antagonistic kernel of [his] ideological fantasies" (Žižek 1989:176-177). My contention here is that Anderson uses Adorno's F-scale to build up Billy so that the character itself incarnates most the features of the authoritarian personality. In doing so he converts the hard masculinity ideal he embodies into something pitiable, almost despicable, a superannuated model of imitation which has no place in present-day society.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into a detailed discussion of the scale devised by Adorno and the Stanford school (R. Nevitt Sanford, Else Frenkel-Brunswik and Daniel J. Levinson) to gauge the potential for fascism in America. The F-scale includes nine variables which are regarded as central trends in the person: (a) conventionalism, (b) authoritarian submission, (c) anti-intraception, (d) superstition and stereotypy, (e) power and "toughness", (f)

destructiveness and cynicism, (g) projectivity, and (i) sex (Adorno *et al.* 1950:228). Billy reproduces most of them very clearly. He is rigidly attached to conventional, middle-class values. Tradition, the reputation of the school where he went “and my father before me, and one day I hope our children will come” (Anderson 1953:26), is more important than people. He is too eager to punish those who violate conventional values. When he hears that Harris, the teacher, and Tom have been found naked together in the dunes by the beach he is too eager to have both of them booted. Later on, when he is apprised of Tom’s incident with Ellie, the prostitute — his refusal to have sex with her and his attempt at suicide — he is not only happy to be able to expel Tom from the dorm but also satisfied to see his suspicions about the boy’s sexual orientation reconfirmed. He is extremely concerned with homosexuality as an abominable crime, a rotten form of delinquency which did not exist in the past: “Was there anyone around like that in our day...?” (1953:31); and persecutes Tom for being a fairy: “You can’t escape from what you are”, he says (1953:81). Character determines one’s fate, and he looks with “malicious pleasure” (74) when he finds out that Tom was unable to do anything with Ellie. He is reluctant to express any kind of emotional response: “I wish you’d look at the facts and not be so emotional about this”, he advises Laura (81). He confesses having stopped crying his eyes out long ago when he was Tom’s age (28), and very rarely shows any sentimental feeling that may reveal his weaknesses or fears. In fact, he despises any sign of weakness and admires strength as the natural trait of manliness. Losing Al, the team captain, in the dorm is a disgrace, whereas getting rid of Tom, the weakling boy, proves to be a relief. Likewise he regards women as natural inferiors who should have a passive role and limit themselves to being “interested bystanders”, i.e. look on and not participate or interfere in the schoolboy’s problems (28). Undoubtedly, Bill is, using the variables of the F-scale, a high scorer. Not surprisingly, Anderson once defined the theme of his play as “judgment by prejudice”: “What does it mean for an individual to be branded as *different*?” (Cf. Adler 1978:72).

It is by no means far-fetched to see Girard’s scapegoat mechanisms operating in *Tea and Sympathy*. The overwhelming crisis is the erosion of the traits and hexis of masculinity which Tom enacts, and which becomes the vortex of the anxiety crisis of the fifties. He is chosen as the *pharmakos*, the pitiable, despicable creature that the community chooses to bull and punish through his expulsion (Girard 2005:99-101) in order to reestablish the unstable balance of the gender binaries. As his name etymologically suggests, Lee (“the direction away from the wind”) ² is the only boy who moves away or provides some resistance to the man’s man model imposed in the dorm. Like Oedipus he does not walk like the rest. Oedipus, or the “Swollen-foot”, is lame. Tom’s way of walking is decidedly different from a he-man’s walk, Al remarks (Anderson

2. O.E. *hleō* “shelter”, from P.Gmc. **khlewo-* (cf. O.N. *hle*, Dan. *læ*, Du. *lij* “lee, shelter”); no known cognates outside Gmc.; original sense uncertain and may have been “warm” (cf. Ger. *lau* “tepid”, O.N. *hly* “shelter, warmth”). *Leeward* is 1666, “situated away from the wind”, opposite of the *weather* side of the ship; *leeway* (1669) is sideways drift of a ship caused by wind. See <http://www.etymonline.com>.

1953:51). Like in the Greek myth, Tom is also abandoned as a child not by his father but by his mother, and in both cases the double bind imposed by the paternal figure (be like me but do not do like me) unleashes the tragedy: Bill Reynolds³ wants Tom to be and do like him, but his command rules out desiring his wife, Laura. Tom is the “monstrous double” which Bill wants to destroy and chooses as the object of unanimous violence (Girard 2005:285-286). Tom, the deviant, becomes the regicide and commits the incest.

On the 23rd of September 1954 *All Summer Long* is presented at Coronet Theatre, New York. Although the play is well received by critics, it proves to be a flop (it only runs for 60 performances). Adapted from Donald Wetzel’s novel *A Wreath and a Curse*, the play is the grim portrait of the internal conflicts of a rural family: an authoritarian father, impersonated by actor Ed Begley, who is powerless to change things around and no longer provides a model of imitation; a crippled elderly brother, Don, who used to be a basketball player and is now confined to a wheelchair; a self-conceited sister who wants to lose her baby because she is petrified to have a big belly and stop being slim; a brother-in-law obsessed about his new Buick; and a young daydreamer, Willie, who is about to celebrate his twelfth birthday. The house is near a river which periodically overflows and is slowly eating away, corroding the foundations of a decayed house. Anderson automatically understands the symbolic underpinnings of the crumbling house: it is a symbol of the disintegration of the family caused by a superannuated patriarchal structure which cannot hold together the members, let alone preserve the foundations of the institution. Dale Bailey (1999), following Leslie Fiedler’s suggestions, argues that the motif of the crumbling house, an essential ingredient of the Gothic genre, contributes to providing a diagnosis of the cultural ills by provoking “our fears about ourselves and about our societies” and questioning everything “we hold to be true – about class, about race, about gender, about American history itself” (1999:6). The house that is finally engulfed by the biblical deluge, a typological motif of clearly Puritan extract (God’s punishment of reprobate elements), stands as a symbol of a dissolving family which can no longer be seen as the preserver of moral values. It is for nothing that Mielziner chooses a skeletal house falling down and a transparent backdrop with water ripples which symbolizes the destructive force of the flooding river.

Dad embodies the residual masculinity model: he gives orders, never grows tired of repeating that he is the breadwinner, and that this is the only truthful natural affection which keeps the members of the family united. Isolated from the rest, unable to talk about something other than figures and numbers, powerless to stop the erosion of the river yet, paradoxically, preoccupied about appearances (he wastes his efforts painting a house that is nevertheless falling apart), he only feels important when he shows his superiority by the use of violence directed on something as fragile as a chicken, a mirror-like reflection of

3. Reynolds, a name etymologically associated with *ragin* (counsel) and *wald* (rule), fits into the character’s personality, if we see him as the unifying element who attempts to shortcircuit the dissident voices: he rules and dictates after seeking counsel in order to reaffirm the consensus of the community whose integrity and uniformity Tom aims to destabilize.

Willie's deep-rooted innocence. The target of his aggression is the next-door neighbor's poultry which gets through the wire fence into his garden, and which he initially attempts to kill by connecting the fence to the car power. After finding out that the killing method proves to be a failure, he resorts to his shotgun, "a pleased look [...] came into his face" (Anderson 1955:99), and manages to kill one. Although the scene closely follows the 1950 novel, Anderson makes Willie lift the dead chicken and smear his shirt with blood seconds before he is asked to make a wish before the birthday cake on the table. The scene with Gothic reverberations which conflate death and celebration — an oxymoronic juxtaposition absent in Wetzel's novel — marks Willie's rite of passage into adulthood: the loss of innocence, the discovery that violence and destruction is the manly thing to do. Not in vain, Dad comments that Willie has "a heart like a girl's" for he "can't stand to see a chicken killed" (1955:70). In the meantime, Ruth, obsessed about her beauty, attempts to put an end to her pregnancy by rubbing herself on the electrified fence.

Willie evidently embodies the soft masculinity guy. Not only does he favor creation rather than destruction as the answer to vital problems: he never stops building a retention wall that proves a pointless heroic deed for he cannot build up something big enough to stop the flooding waters. While the rest of characters, save for Don who remains both physically and psychologically paralyzed, evade fundamentals and face destruction and violence as self-defense strategies, Willie attempts to save the house and appeals to the ties of brotherhood and unity. He incarnates Huck Finn's romantic innocence (he also builds a raft) but instead of escaping from the civilizing ties he tries hard to keep the family ties from loosening. Thomas P. Adler (1978:59-61) argues that, in addition to increasing the protagonist's age from ten to twelve, a fact which makes Willie the right candidate to go through the rite of passage into adulthood, and saving his life (he actually dies in the novel), Anderson introduces an important symbolic prop that does not appear in Wetzel's work and that parallels the construction of the wall which is never seen onstage: Willie's afghan (a woolen blanket crocheted in strips and squares), a symbol of unity and social cohesion which should be interpreted as an antidote to a slowly disintegrating family. Willie's soft masculinity (we see him knitting the afghan throughout the play); his pointless wall construction, and his preoccupation with the dog's delivery and the survival of the chickens stand in stark contrast with, and can do very little to counteract, Dad's use of preventive violence against imaginary ills and utter ignorance of real problems, Ruth's hatred of sex (a "dirty and filthy thing", 107) and her rejection of offspring (Lady, the dog, should be spayed and she herself wishes to miscarry), Harry's worship of machines (he spends the whole day in the shed repairing or polishing his Buick), and the Mother's untimely prayers and faith in absurd traditions (1955:33).

CONCLUSION

It is precisely the absurdities of the traditional gender division and the family model in post-war America that Anderson encapsulates in his plays. Despite the nostalgic revival of the Westerns during the fifties, hard masculinity and its values (toughness, aggression, resistance to changes, noncooperation in the domestic sphere...) is no longer a model of imitation for the new generations but a masquerade that only leads to emotional isolation, lack of communication and useless violence. Clinging to traditions is not the answer, and societies must not be corporate systems which wipe out any element that undermines their continued existence. Bill's anteroom becomes an empty anteroom at the end of the play. Tom's room with Laura in will signal the triumph of the new soft masculinity over the traditional role. The deviant has won over order and normativity. Despite the homeostatic condition of the social system and its adherence to the traditional values — family is no longer the incontestable basis of society but another prop of the Cold War — the voice that reverberates at the end of Anderson's plays is not Bill or Dad's but Tom and Willie's. The flight from hardboiled masculinity can only bring about a new man — soft and feminine — who, far from being out of kilter with the pressing demands, is capable of facing the burdens of manhood. Despite being rejected as the deviant and becoming the victim of scapegoating, he alone holds the key to the survival of the spirit of America. Willie's Huck-like urge to create and renovate a crumbling house and Tom's sensitivity in a monochrome world emerge as the antidotes to the permanence of a materialistic, prejudiced social order which insists on preserving a bipolar gender division.

In one of the skits of his 1967 production, *You Know I Can't Hear You When the Water's Running*, Anderson will insist (too late, perhaps) upon the same contested truth: man is no longer the center and ruler of creation. In the one-act play *Jack Barnstable* is the playwright who feels unable to make a producer buy his play, for the sole reason that he has decided to present an ordinary man — a husband who leaves the bathroom to hear what his wife says and comes out naked onstage — not as “a romanticized phallic symbol” but “as the miserable, laughable thing it is” (1967:21). It is this shock of recognition — the suspension of the belief in man's supremacy symbolized in the penis — what the producer is utterly reluctant to have. However, the feminist revolution of the times suddenly made the undisputable superiority of man part of a bygone era. Certainly (Anderson knew all too well) it was not the case back in the fifties.

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