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Abject's Time: Temporal Antagonism in Tennessee Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth*

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Abstract: This article examines Tennessee Williams's reformulation of Gothic's central convention in *Sweet Bird of Youth*. Following the convention of American Gothic, this play dramatizes the return of the nation's repressed Other as a nuisance. However, Williams positions this abject figure as temporally disjunctive, that is, out of sync with the political figure who functions as the allegorical rendition of national time and History. Drawing on an expanded form of Julia Kristeva's concept of "women's time", this article argues that the abject's circular and monumental temporalities place him outside the linear as well as teleological temporality of the nation. In addition to that, the abject's temporal conflict with the state runs parallel to his analogous conflict with the process of aging. These intersecting tensions expose how national time acts as a castrating agent akin to the devastating power of physiological time. By dint of temporal asynchronism and the final castration of the abject, Williams exposes the histories and identities that are otherwise doomed to dissolve in the homogenizing force of the national History.

Keywords: American Gothic; Tennessee Williams; Abject's Temporal Conflict; Women's Time; Julia Kristeva.

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1. Introduction

In the introduction to their book *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative*, Eric Savoy and Robert K Martin define American Gothic as "a discursive field in which a metonymic national 'self' is undone by the return of its repressed Otherness" (vii). Despite this unifying topos, the wide array of techniques and themes used by American writers makes it difficult to categorize American Gothic as a historically comprehensive genre. This resistance of American Gothic to "historical comprehensivity" resonates with its political implications, since the form as per Savoy and Martin's definition, problematizes the reduction of the national narrative to one single homogeneous History by exposing the repressed histories of the nation's Others.

As a prominent practitioner of the Gothic tradition, Tennessee Williams has contributed to the genre by incorporating idiosyncratic techniques and themes. His drama plays with and subverts the concept of time and, in turn, History to expose the histories and stories of the outcasts or those who remain outside of the American national time and History. Since "Williams wished to deny [H]istory" (Bigsby 30), all but a few of his major plays, structurally speaking, dramatize individuals who fail to keep pace with the moment and it is, specifically, in his Gothic drama that this lag brings about violence and tragedy.

Among Williams's gothic plays, however, it is *Sweet Bird of Youth* with its final aphoristic pseudo-statement "the enemy, time" (Williams 111) that most straightforwardly explores the theme of time and its ruthless rush that obliterates those who resist integration into it or wish to stand against it. This philosophical theme, per se, has naturally elicited various criticisms that focus on the existential aspects of the play while the political facet of this temporal antagonism and its association with the play's gothic qualities have received no critical attention. Thus, this article aims at unraveling the political associations of the temporal violation and its subsequent repression in this play under the light of Julia Kristeva's "Women's Time". By emphasizing on the marginal temporalities that resist integration into the homogenizing time of patriarchal institutions, Kristeva's "women's time" challenges the linear and teleological time of the patriarchal systems.

By applying this theory to the reading of *Sweet Bird of Youth*, it is argued that through the juxtaposition of these alternative temporalities — the expanded version of Kristeva's "women's time" — with the regimented time of the state, Williams deconstructs the national narrative that offers a monolithic perspective on History, opening a space for the recognition of the marginal histories that have deliberately been dissolved into the

national History. As Shapiro notes, “the nation-state is scripted in ways that impose coherence on what is actually a series of fragmentary and arbitrary conditions of historical assemblage” (80) to create the myth of national coherence. However, it is argued that Williams's gothic serves as a counter-discourse that “challenge[s] the state's scripted ways for writing and performing national and social coherence” (80). Having been written after the Post-World War II, the period “of fragmentation and dislocation, [and the consequent] cultural unmooring we now generally (if too loosely) call postmodern” (Gontarski 7) Williams’s Gothic dramatizes the deconstruction of the long-held repressive ideologies effectively.

This study aims to address the following questions: Why is the protagonist of this play considered the Other of the nation or the abject, in Kristeva’s sense of the word? How does the protagonist’s temporality align with Kristeva's women’s time? In what way does the protagonist’s temporality challenge the nation's monopoly of History? How does this temporal tension contribute to the gothic quality of the play? How does this play embody postmodern characteristics?

2. Review of Literature

In *Communists, Cowboys, and Queers: The Politics of Masculinity in the Work of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams* (1992), David Savran reads Williams's drama in juxtaposition with that of Arthur Miller. While the plot in Miller's plays is apt to follow a linear trajectory, Williams's drama relies heavily on temporal “discontinuity” to create political changes. By creating a rupture between the past and present, Williams saves the moment from the linear progression of time and thereby dramatizes the potential for the same rupture between the present and the future. Savran attributes this temporal fragmentation to Williams's “utopian” and “Messianic” view that enables him to prophesize the “moment that will, in Walter Benjamin's words, ‘blast open the continuum of history’ and produce a new social and political order” (Savran 92).

In *Understanding Tennessee Williams,* Alice Griffin devotes one whole chapter to the thematic analysis of *Sweet Bird of Youth.* According to Griffin, in this play, Williams showcases his ability to create centripetal unity around one specific theme. He deploys all the theatrical elements at his disposal to express the universal theme of the relentless power of time. Williams dramatizes the characters' existential struggle against the inevitable progression of time and their final realization that “life is a journey in time” (Griffin 212).

In *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*, Judith J. Thompson analyzes the construction and the subsequent deconstruction of pagan mythology in Williams' drama. This is to highlight the universal existential themes that man grapples with in modern times. In the chapter dedicated to *Sweet Bird of Youth,* Thompson addresses the existential struggle of the two major characters of the play to retrieve their "youth" or go back to "that mythical Golden Age of paradisiacal beauty and innocence" (134). In this quixotic quest, the ravaging time appears as a barrier that "'castrates' them of all heroic virtues, mythic aspirations, and transcendent ideals" (134).

In *Sexual Politics in the Work of Tennessee Williams: Desire Over Protest*, Michael S. D. Hooper argues that although "Williams's world is made up of forlorn figures doomed not to settle," (104), they are merely shown in relation to their sexual desires and are quite unaware of the social forces that have deprived them of their rights. Their plight is simply the backdrop for advancing the personal drama and making way for the erotic rather than an incentive for public political action to make any social changes.

In *Tennessee Williams and the Theatre of Excess: The Strange, the Crazed, the Queer,* Saddik applies theories of Bakhtin, Kristeva and Artaud to highlight every form of distortion of reality or excess that have been employed by Williams to call the conventions of bourgeois society into question. Since Williams's plays celebrate the outcasts, only excess enables him to go beyond the closed and rational system of meaning to do so, in order to reach the "essence of the real" (6).

In *Law and Sexuality in Tennessee Williams's America*, Jacqueline O'Conner provides a parallel study of the history of legality and attitude toward what was considered to be deviant sexuality and Williams's representation of the same theme in a couple of his works. As O'Conner argues, Williams's representation of his characters and their plights due to their deviant sexuality mirrors the contemporary tension between the deviant and the lawful in society.

As the reviewed scholarly works that explore the theme of time prove, the sole focus has always been on Williams's portrayal of time as either linear or fragmentary. The focus on the linearity and progression of time has given a naturalistic touch to the play where man is shown at the mercy of the existential forces out of his control. On the other hand, the emphasis on the fragmentary nature of time in Williams's oeuvre has rendered his plays apocalyptic. Furthermore, although several scholarly works have examined Williams's portrayal of the revolutionary outcasts in his plays, no critical work has yet studied these social outcasts against the backdrop of their alternative temporalities and the political implications of such temporal violations.

3. Theoretical Framework

In her insightful essay “Women's Time” Kristeva intertwines the concept of time with identity and theorizes about two distinct modes of perceiving time. Patriarchal linear time is associated with History and teleology. Since it is future-oriented, it is the ideal unit to measure the progression of patriarchal institutions in the public sphere from which women have traditionally been excluded. However, by drawing on the historical trajectory of the feminist movement, Kristeva proposes alternative temporal modalities that are asynchronous with the patrilinear time of the state and History. Since these feminine temporalities arise from the biological clock of the woman's body and its functions, i.e., menstruation and pregnancy, Kristeva considers them as “cyclical” and “monumental”. Developing out of women's struggle for autonomy and sociocultural recognition in the second phase of feminism, these feminine modalities prove to be resistant to integration into and annihilation by the patriarchal historical time and “the subjective limitations imposed by this history's time” (Kristeva, “Women's Time” 20) as a result of which a form of ideological antagonism breaks out in the society.

However, unlike what it suggests, this subversive time does not remain in exclusive possession of women; rather the “social groups and ideologies in which the radical positions of certain feminists would rejoin the discourse of marginal groups” (Kristeva, “Women's Time” 17) might also perceive themselves in these alternative temporalities which stand in opposition to the repressive and regimented time and History of the state. In this paper, it is this expanded function of Kristeva's “women's time” that is applied to Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* in order to represent how the temporality of the nation’s Other aligns with women’s time and its subversive function.

The figure of the nation’s Other embodies Kristeva’s concept of abject. Kristeva first used this term to explicate a psychological state linked to feelings of fear and repulsion as a result of encountering what disturbs the stability of the Self. However, it was later expanded to social context to identify that which is “radically excluded” (Kristeva, *Powers* 2) from society because it “disturbs identity, system, order [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4). As Kristeva argues, the abject is expelled because it jeopardizes the integrity of the system, “yet, from its place of banishment, [it] does not cease challenging its master” (2). In *Sweat Bird of Youth,* the allegedly rebellious protagonist who refuses “insertion” into the state time is considered an abject whose temporal violation provides the impetus for the destabilization of the national Time and History.

4. Analysis

Williams's *Sweet Bird of Youth* revolves around Chance Wayne's return to his hometown in the hope of reuniting with his former sweetheart Heavenly, the daughter of Boss Finley, a powerful political figure in the Southern town of St. Cloud. Chance's arrival in the town immediately provokes Boss Finley, who has already decided on "castration" as Chance's punishment for infecting Heavenly with a venereal disease that ultimately left her sterile.

Even a cursory look at the play reveals the allegorical functioning of the setting, plot, and characters. Williams's recourse to allegory and its inherent tendency for translucency and suggestion has enabled him to communicate his political messages without reducing his drama to an austere and narrow political discourse. In addition to that, allegory with its "rhetoric of temporality [that is to say,] its gesturing toward what cannot be explicitly recovered" (Savoy and Martin 6) aligns with the theme of temporal conflicts and coexistence of the temporally discrete individuals whose narratives and temporalities are resistant to integration into the seemingly coherent national Time and History. This allegorical function is most obvious in Chance Wayne's name, which is a "prosopopoeia" par excellence, through which William has aimed at "personifying [and] *giving face* to an abstract" (Savoy 10) entity which in this case is the Other's alternative temporality. Williams has aptly personified and entitled such an alternative temporality as "Chance" since his narrative is a chance to "give [recognition and] value to those lives behind the rush of [H]istory" (Bigsby 46).

Chance Wayne's major conflict as both the title and the denouement of the play suggest, is his conflict with the erosive power of time. However, this antagonism is reverberated in his parallel conflict with the authoritarian Boss Finley whose anti-miscegenation policy and rhetoric of purity of the white, make him the emblem of national Time and History. In fact, "Williams most decisively portrays the pre-Civil Rights white South's peculiar blend of conservative Protestantism, capitalism, and racism through the speech and actions of [this] political demagogue" (Adler 658). As a result, it is through the portrayal of such an allegorical figure—an emblem of national History and the erosive power of time—and Chance's corresponding conflict with both, Williams criticizes the patriarchal and linear time of History, which tends to eliminate alternative temporalities under the guise of national homogeneity.

The allegorical dramatization of Chance reveals that Boss Finley's determined punishment for Chance is more than settling a personal score with Chance. To put it more simply, the plot has some political layers to which Chance's story is only an allegorical façade. By paralleling Chance's story and his tragic doom with that of an

anonymous black figure in the play who is castrated by Boss Finely's men as a result of Boss's anti-miscegenation policies, Williams adds dimension to Chance's character and his seemingly existential crisis. Although Williams's play does not feature the black person and his story only provides a backdrop for Chance Wayne's, one cannot help noticing the similarity between the two figures and their common destiny which is castration. Thus, Chance becomes the allegorical representation of the Other who has been previously repressed, and his portrayal in the play follows the tradition of American gothic that "is organized around the imperative to repetition [and] the return of what is unsuccessfully repressed" (Savoy 4) to haunt the narrative as a trope. As a result, Boss Finley is determined to keep Chance at bay from Heavenly whose purity must be protected from pollution just like that of the white Southern women. Heavenly's purity, which is suggested by the white dress she is made to wear by his father all the while he gives his speech about the necessity of segregation of the races, is juxtaposed to the purity of the Southern women and Southern blood that must be protected from what Boss Finely considers as abject.

Boss Finley's rhetoric of purity of the Southern blood by means of which he legitimizes his racially repressive policies, is a ramification of the policy of coalescing multiple temporal co-beings under the overarching patrilinear temporality of the American nation and its teleological gesture toward preserving the historical and temporal homogeneity of the nation. Such a discriminatory policy necessitates a manipulation of the different temporalities or various modes of being in time under the veneer of a nationally monolithic History. Thus, the castration of the random black man becomes the distinctive measure that Boss Finley takes to nullify the temporalities asynchronous with the seemingly coherent national time. This policy is an attempt at obliterating the temporally and historically discrepant citizens in order to prevent the procreation of the mulatto offspring whose genealogies and complexions exhibit the traces of multiple histories and temporalities (that of the black and the white) and thereby deconstruct the myth of national homogeneity and purity.

The hybridization of the setting- the Royal Palms Hotel, where much of the play takes place- with its culturally mixed architecture and design, is analogous to the Gothic trope of the haunted house. It suggests the return of the unsuccessfully repressed Other (with its distinct temporality and history) to the place from which it had been previously banished. This hybridization of the setting is highlighted in the recurrent juxtaposition of two historically distinct designs. The word "Moorish" recurs seven times in Williams's description of the design and architecture of the Royal Palms Hotel where, ironically,

Boss Finley delivers his lecture about the necessity of the segregation of the Black and the White to protect the purity of the Southern blood. For instance, when the stage directions describe "[t]he style [as] vaguely 'Moorish'. The principal set-piece is a great double bed … in a sort of Moorish corner, … over which is suspended a Moorish lamp on a brass chain" (Williams 17). In Act II, Scene ii, this stylistic hybridization of the building is even more underscored by the juxtaposition of the two distinct historical backgrounds: Victorian and Moorish, "A corner of cocktail lounge and of outside gallery of the Royal Palms Hotel. This corresponds in style to the bedroom set: *Victorian with Moorish influence*" (Williams 68, emphases added).

Such historically hybrid designs prefigure the return of the Other (the castrated black guy) as a tropic figure (Chance Wayne) whose presence equally problematizes the coherence of the patriarchal temporality and History albeit in an allegorical vein. Since Chance is the reification of the Other (the black) who returns to his place of banishment to haunt it, the temporal dissonance of the Other with the patrilinear time of History has accordingly been reified in the allegorical antagonism of Chance with patrilinear time and its emblem, Boss Finley. Upon his return, when Chance is interrogated by Scudder, Boss Finley's friend and the doctor who evacuated Heavenly's womb, about his return to the town, Chance who is unaware of his mother's death and Heavenly's operation answers, "I've still got a mother and a girl in St. Cloud. How is Heavenly, George?" (Williams 19). Right from the start, it becomes clear that Chance who wallows in nostalgia, is back to resurrect the romance he once experienced with Heavenly. This yearning for the lost past and attempt to repeat it suggests his cyclical perception of time which makes him out-of-sync with the linear time that "rests on its own stumbling block [that is the] death" (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 17) as well as decline to which his mother and his sweetheart have fallen prey. In fact, Chance's total detachment from and imperviousness to the official time is symbolized in the indifferent tone with which he talks about his watch. In response to Princess who asks him about time, he answers, "My watch is in the hock somewhere" (Williams 28).

Instead of synchronizing his life with the patrilinear time and march of history, Chance desires to be in a time loop to recreate the idyllic past. This is metaphorically represented in his desire for reunion with the only living female figure in his life, his sweetheart Heavenly. According to Kristeva, the one "who suffers from reminiscences would, rather, recognize his or her self in the anterior temporal modalities: cyclical or monumental" ("Women's Time" 17). For Chance, this recourse to Kristevan "women's time" which is cyclical (symbolized in his coming back to St. Cloud to visit Heavenly at

intermittent intervals) and monumental (typified by his carrying around Heavenly's photo at the age of fifteen) is both an offensive and defensive mechanism through which he defies patriarchal time and authority (Boss Finley's prohibition on visiting Heavenly) and takes shelter from the vicissitudes of the life that he has been made to lead as a result of Boss's high expectations:

> Chance: Each time I came back to St Cloud I had her love to come back to….
>
> Princess: Something permanent in a world of change?
>
> Chance: Yes, after each disappointment, each failure at something, I'd come back to her like going to a hospital. (Williams 48)

Chance's sporadic visits to Heavenly are more than a physical reunion; rather, he seeks stability and recuperation through his access to the repository of his romantic memories. In addition to that, his cyclical return to his hometown to revive his memories with his sweetheart is an act of rebellion against Boss Finley's patriarchy and his orchestrated plans for Heavenly's future. To put it differently, Chance's memory serves as a cyclical and "feminine mode of discourse that partially subverts more patriarchically embedded [discourses of Boss Finley and what he allegorizes] that comprise linear narrative history" (Adler 655).

In "Time in the Gothic", Robert Miles traces the origins of gothic and identifies such "temporal contrast" in the early gothic fiction where "the pre-modern world of ghosts (timeless, circular, repetitious…)" disturbs "the empty, chronometric, homogenous time of modernity" (Miles 449). While Miles assigns this temporal tension to the dominant ideological fractures between the pre-modern world of the supernatural and the secular modern world during the eighteenth century, this temporal antagonism has since turned into an inherent quality of gothic in general irrespective of the historical context in which it is written. As a result, the alternative temporalities that Miles believes Ann Radcliffe's eighteenth-century fiction, as a gothic prototype, projects can be similarly traced in Williams's play as well. Just like "Radcliffe's heroine [who], typically, finds herself constantly on the verge of being pitched back out of modern linear time, into the repetitions and circularities of 'dream' time" (Miles 429), Chance has synchronized his whole life with the dream of retrieving his memories. His unique way of being in time and defining life is reflected in his description of life as "[w]ild dreams! Yes. Isn't life a wild dream? I never heard a better description of it...." (Williams 71). His recourse to this alternative (circular) temporality or "dream time" leads to an ideological as well as temporal clash between him and Boss Finley who is the reification of the relentless patrilinear as well as national time.

Since Chance "live[s] on nothing but wild dreams" (Williams 72) he lets these very dreams of the past navigate him through his life. In other words, Chance's cyclical time is by no means a restrictive force that has entangled him in the past. On the contrary, for Chance, the past equals the future. This is exemplified in the way he plans to repeat the drama contest he and Heavenly once took part in as adolescents, to ensure his future fame and success. Trying to refresh Aunt Nonnie's memory, Chance reminisces, "at seventeen, I put on, directed, and played the leading role in 'The Valiant,' that one-act play that won the state drama contest. Heavenly played in it with me, and have you forgotten? You went with us as the girls' chaperone to the national contest held in . . ." (Williams 73). He then goes on to reveal that it was then, "on the way home in the train" that he and Heavenly consummated their relationship. This event then turns into a significant milestone in Chance's life and its retrieval as he has planned it, is the only way possible for him to change the course of time and what is commanded by it. That's why he blackmails Princess into orchestrating "a [fake] local contest of talent to find a pair of young people to star as unknowns in a picture you're planning to make to show your faith in YOUTH, Princess. You stage this contest, you invite other judges, but your decision decides it" (Williams 50). Then in an attempt to overpower time and the law of probability in the future, he dictates to Princess, "Heavenly and I win it" (50). When read in the context of the play, the latter proves to possess a simultaneous touch of past and future, even though it is expressed in the present tense. By bridging the gap between the past and the future, Chance intends that the memory of winning the drama contest in the past will have been repeated by the end of the fake contest that he compels Princess to hold in the near future.

Chance's attempt at rediscovering the memory as a firm ground to guarantee the fulfillment of his wish in the future embodies Kristeva's paradoxical tense that is the "future perfect". This anomalous tense encapsulates Kristeva's revolutionary project as the theorist of feminism and, by extension, minorities. In this temporal modality, the focus shifts from the dichotomous view of the past and future to a simultaneous one where time's circularity eradicates the distinction between the past and the future. In other words, the "future perfect" is articulated when "the most deeply repressed past" (Kristeva, "Women's Time" 14) is rediscovered to shape a future that challenges the teleological flow of History. Highlighting the revolutionary power of this temporality, Kristeva defines it as a time when "[a]nteriority and future join together to open that historical axis in relation to which concrete history will always be wrong: murderous, limiting, subject to regional imperatives (economic, tactical, political, familial…)" (*Desire*

in Language 33). Chance's recourse to this revolutionary "historical axis" is witnessed in the way he weaves the past and the future to circumvent his economic and social restrictions. He seeks to capitalize on the memories of his forbidden romance with Heavenly to build up the future as he wishes it to be, not as it is commanded by Boss Finley who is the indicator of History and teleology.

By inhabiting "women's time", Chance makes himself impervious to the state-sanctioned temporality of the capitalist time and the class rigidity it causes. Belonging to an economically disenfranchised class, he hardly sees any prospect of upward mobility ahead of himself. Referring to this stark class division between himself and his peers, he states, "The kids that I grew up with are mostly still here and what they call 'settled down', gone into business, married and bringing up children, the little crowd I was in with, that I used to be the star of, was the snobset, the ones with the big names and money. I didn't have either…" (Williams 44). This lack of status and money renders Chance unworthy in Boss Finley's eyes who "figured his daughter rated someone a hundred, a thousand percent better than me, Chance Wayne" (48). As a result, Chance extricates his labor from the exploitative capitalist system and its relentless class stratification which is an impediment to his matrimonial union with Heavenly. Starting his career as a barman in the Royal Palms Hotel which is the microcosm of the world of commerce and the public sphere, Chance soon quits this job to pursue employment as a gigolo in the private female sphere. In other words, Chance breaks free from the linear, teleological capitalist time that is meant to appraise and accelerate productivity and service; instead, he embraces female sexuality and body temporality by means of which he defies the constraints of the capitalist time that privileges material over emotional. Echoing Kristeva's genderization of temporalities which is the philosophical reverberation of the doctrine of separate spheres and their concomitant gender roles, Gareth Dale defines "capitalist time,"

> as a system of interlocking temporalities under the dominance of capital. To simplify, the pulse is capital's, the wage relation determines the worker's calendar, while the overarching framework is established by states … Outside those structures, 'social reproduction time' tends to be cyclical, and gendered. (n.p.)

Such a dictatorial imposition of capitalist time which coordinates the labor, production, and in general the rhythm of the public sphere, tends toward the erasure of the alternative temporalities in its march toward the telos of production and national wealth. Since the nation thrives on the temporal precision of the capitalist machine, it

tends to dissolve the alternative temporalities into its fabricated myth of common welfare and homogeneity. However, Chance's shift from "capitalist time" to "women's time" is an arrhythmic gesture that refuses to satisfy this equation. This temporal transition is Chance's allegorical attempt at decolonizing the marginal temporalities and labor from the capitalist machine in which individuals are reduced to mere cogs.

In addition, Chance's employment as a gigolo which is "the most fascinating case of a reversal of the sex/gender system" (Clum 141) backs up the temporal tension within the play. By occupying a position that has traditionally been assigned to women, Chance deconstructs the seemingly fixed categories of identity. Highlighting his feminine side and his concomitant temporal disjuncture, he describes himself as having been born "with some kind of quantity 'X' in my blood [after all], a wish or a need to be different…" (Williams 44). The "quantity X" which is raised immediately before the consideration of Chance's "beauty" (a rather feminine quality), then, speaks to the character's fractured self since it alludes to chromosome X which is the only one shared between men and women. This compels Chance to abandon his job in the world of commerce and pursue "the only [vocation] I was truly meant for, love-making" (45). According to Shapiro, the endurance of a nation is contingent upon "the family's moral coherence. [As a result] state-oriented histories … have attempted to appropriate the traditional family with a traditional libidinal structure – patriarchal, heterosexual, incest-resistant and erotically monopolistic – to represent the state as the container of a homogeneous national culture" (Shapiro 86). This owes itself to the fact that families that adhere to the normative frameworks delineated by the nation can sustain "nationalist narrative of undivided and coherent subjectivity for citizens" (86). In the same vein, Chance's shift to his feminine side detaches him from the masculine public sphere of workplace and production and places him in an emotional private space where his feminine qualities, namely his beauty and his ability of empathy are his assets.

Possessing a feminine side, he even withdraws from the war because he is not "able to stand the goddam routine, discipline" (Williams 46). His inability to synchronize himself with the routine and rhythm of the war which reflects the tempo of national life highlights his temporal dissonance with the tempo of national history. Referring to the homogenizing power of national History that tends to dissolve individuals in its teleological rush toward victory, Chance recounts how he decided to abandon the war because,

> I got the idea I wouldn't live through the war, that I wouldn't come back, that all the excitement and glory of being Chance Wayne would go up in smoke *at the moment* of contact between my brain and a bit of hot steel that happened to be in the air *at the same time* and place that my head was . . . that thought didn't comfort me any. Imagine a whole lifetime of dreams and ambitions and hopes dissolving away *in one instant*, being blacked out like some arithmetic problem washed off a blackboard by a wet sponge, just by some little accident like a bullet, not even aimed at you but just shot off in space. (Williams 46-47, emphases added)

In Chance's description, the annihilating power of national time is symbolized in the simultaneity and convergence of the bullet (war) and the body. In addition, for Chance, the national rhythm and temporality are completely antithetical to the personal dream time. As a result, in an attempt to reject the temporality of the national time which is meant to forge homogeneity at the expense of individual lives, he abandons the war and takes shelter in the private sphere of home.

At the end of the play, the convergence of Chance's conflict with time and Princess's acknowledgment that "[a]ge does the same thing to a woman" (Williams 108), highlights their shared vulnerability to dissolution into the patrilinear time. Princess's perception of the hegemonic power of the patrilinear time and its utilitarian fixation on reproduction and practicality makes her aware of the asynchronism of her menopausal aging body with the national time. Suggesting her own alignment with Chance's temporality, Princess points out, "[w]e're still sitting here together, side by side…occupying the same bench on a train – going on together … [through] an old country, timeless" (110). This metaphorical shared bench on a train passing through a timeless country features the "monumental time (eternity)" (Kristeva, *The Kristeva Reader* 187) they both live in and their consequent incompatibility with the inimical patriarchal time that tends to disregard women and the other forms of marginal coexistence in its forward rush.

5. Conclusion

In *Sweet Bird of Youth*, Williams capitalizes on the gothic capacity to mount a critique of the repressive policies that lie at the heart of the national time. The temporal asynchronism of the abject in this play is Williams's unique method of engaging with the topos of American Gothic, which forces a confrontation between the nation and the Other who resists integration into the national narrative and History. As such, the play's exposure of the pent-up histories reflects the shift from a monolithic national History to a plurality of histories that challenge its authority, making it a postmodern gothic. As Jean-François Lyotard argues in his *The Postmodern Condition*, every form of "grand

narrative [including the myth of a monolithic History] has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses" (37); instead, it has given way to little narratives (*petit récits*) that expose the perspectives and narratives of those occupying a marginal status. Then, by dramatization of the temporal tension between Chance's circular and monumental temporalities which are the expanded versions of Kristeva's "women's time," and the linear and teleological time of Boss Finley, Williams offers a postmodern critique of the grand narrative of a unified national History.

If, as Thompson puts it, Chance's is a psychological oedipal struggle with Boss Finley over Heavenly (138), then, his symbolic castration at the end of the play, finally forces him "to leave the imaginary realm of plenitude for the social-symbolic order" (McAfee 97), which means switching from what Kristeva borrowing from Joyce, calls "mother species" (which is marked by repetitions and eternity) to "father's time" ("Women's Time" 15) and its associated linearity. Chance's submission to his castration symbolizes the triumph of Boss Finley, serving as an allegorical dramatization of the ultimate victory of national time over the alternative temporalities associated with the nation's Others. This villainization of the national time is most conspicuously evidenced at the end of the play where Chance's surrender to his impending castration at the behest of Boss Finley takes place simultaneously with his ultimate succumb to the ravaging power of "the enemy, time" (Williams 110). Chance's final elegiac note, "[t]ime – who could beat it, who could defeat it ever? Maybe some saints and heroes, but not Chance Wayne" (110), then allegorizes the annihilation of the abject's temporality within the enforced rhythm of the national time.

Although Chance's castration, the Gothic equivalent of repression, seems to dissolve his alternative temporalities, Williams's Gothic ultimately exposes the fragility of the national History and its reliance on denial and suppression. In other words, Williams's play deploys allegory to unravel the national History and its myth of homogeneity by bringing to the fore the temporalities that resist incorporation into the national time. In fine, by revealing its falsity, *Sweet Bird of Youth* shows how the grand narrative of nationhood gains credence by repressing alternative (Others') histories.

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