Subversive and Affirmative Women Characters in American Drama of the 20th Century

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Diplomski rad

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Summary

The aim of this paper is to present a comparison and characterization of women characters of the subversive and affirmative American drama. The very beginning of the paper is dedicated to explaining the differences between these two subtypes of drama, and discusses some of their most important traits. It also shows how these plays were received by the audience and the critics. The main section offers a detailed analysis of the major female subversive and affirmative characters, focusing mostly on their reactions and behavior in similar situations and settings. Their characterization is based on some of the most distinctive traits that make them either subversive or affirmative characters. The last chapter analyzes women characters by taking into consideration their attitude to the American dream, success, the role of helpers in their life, and their life choices.

Key words: subversive play, affirmative play, female characters, the American dream, helpers, characterization

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Introduction

In this paper I will attempt to present a detailed characterization of the selected female subversive and affirmative characters of the American plays of the 20th century. At the very beginning of the paper, the focus is set on some of the basic characteristics of both types of American drama. The first chapter points out the theoretical difference between subversive and affirmative drama. By discussing some of their basic characteristics, this chapter offers background that not only influenced, but produced the analyzed female characters. This chapter further shows how those plays were perceived by their audience and the critics.

The second chapter more thoroughly dwells on the subversive drama and the main female characters of the following plays: Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*?. The third chapter offers an analysis of the following affirmative plays and their female protagonists: Craig Lucas' *Prelude to a Kiss*, Robert Harling's *Steel Magnolias*, Dore Schary's *Sunrise at Campobello*, John Van Druten's *I Remember Mama* and Moss Hart's and George S. Kaufman's *You Can't Take It With You*. These two chapters present the characterization of chosen female protagonists on a more individual level and isolate certain autobiographical elements the authors chose to introduce into the plot.

The final chapter presents a more detailed comparison of women characters in terms of elements that these plays have in common and their influence on the characters. Their characterization is based on several common elements that appear in all of the plays: the American dream and the idea of success, other characters regardless of whether they are friends or family (helpers or hinderers) and the question of choice.

1. The Difference Between the Subversive and the Affirmative American Play

According to Frye, a play is a form of literature designed primarily to be performed on stage and mostly consisting of dialogues (Frye 46-47). Sanja Nikčević describes this genre of literature in a similar manner by stating that the play is a written work of art; a text written in a form of a dialogue based on an exchange of replicas between characters that are expressing a certain human behavior. She also adds that the play is rather unique in its form, mainly because it is intended for live performance rather than just reading (Nikčević 21). This paper will greatly be based on her work and contribution to the analysis of the American drama because she introduced a completely new division of the genre. In her books, *Subversive American Drama or Sympathy for Losers* (1994) and *Affirmative American Drama or Long Live the Puritans* (2003), Nikčević introduces two new terms which categorize modern realistic American plays into two groups: *subversive* and *affirmative* plays, according to their attitude towards the American dream.

1. 1. Subversive Plays

Subversive plays negate the American dream and are highly pessimistic and malignant for their characters, who are doomed from the very beginning and destined for failure. These are passive, apathetic, lifeless, weak people that could not be further from success. Even though one of the basic principles of the American dream is equality of opportunities, these characters will never grasp or even come close to experiencing it. Sanja Nikčević describes them as *losers*. According to Puškar, the concept of the American dream erases all the boundaries between social classes, races and genders, providing everyone a clear shot at success, yet all of these *loser* characters still fail to respond to its demands, for which they are harshly judged by their creators (Puškar 2).

In addition to this, Nikčević offers a subdivision of the subversive drama. She divides it into the old subversive drama and the new subversive drama. This division is based on the very attitude of the authors about the American dream, and despite the fact that both of these types dwell on *losers*, they greatly differ. Authors representing the old subversive drama are Eugene O'Neill (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman*) and Tennessee Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*), some of the authors composing new subversive plays are Edward Albee (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Zoo Story*) and David Mamet

(*Glengarry Glenn Ross*). The difference between these two groups of authors and their attitude towards *losers* and the American dream will become clear after the comparison of the old and the new *loser*.

In Miller's play, *Death of a Salesman*, Willy Loman portrays a typical old *loser*. Due to his own incompetence and apathy, Willy aimlessly stumbles from one day into the next, completely falling into the abyss of failure and dissatisfaction. He does not even struggle, and with each passing day, he is sinking deeper and deeper. It is obvious that Miller condemns such behavior because despite Willy's pessimistic portrayal, the author still hopes that his character will fight back and eventually take his rightful place in the society. By introducing successful characters such as Bernard and his father into the plot, Miller reveals that he believes in the American dream, and this is exactly why his punishment of Willy Loman is so severe. He does not simply punish Willy for not being successful, but for not even attempting to move from a single spot and for basing his entire life on illusions, thus dragging down his family with him. His actions and punishment do not fall on deaf ears, for his son, Biff Loman, realizes what a pointless life his father has been leading and that he is now mirroring his image: "I realized what a ridiculous lie my whole life has been" (Miller 78). By allowing Biff to make this conclusion, Miller leaves a bit of open room for a potential future change in Biff's character.

On the other hand, there is the new *loser*, whom Nikčević describes as a "stranger in a world to which he belongs to and where he is born" (24). She claims that this loser is a stranger in his own territory, and that his sense of alienation emerges from his inadequate or weak communication with the society from which he greatly differs. The author's irony is brought about by the fact that these characters have all predispositions necessary to succeed in life, yet they do not. As a good example, we can present one of the main characters of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George. George is a scholar; a member of the History Department at New Carthage University. He is married to Martha, whose father is a highly influential man. Even though this fact might work in his favor, George is still stuck doing the same job for a number of years and merely dreaming about publishing a novel which could bring him a lot of respect not only in his marriage, but in life in general. This novel represents his American dream. To demonstrate his disbelief in the American dream, Albee uses the character of Martha to bring George back to the harsh reality. Every time he even mentions the novel, Albee has Martha ridiculing and humiliating him. It becomes clear that George will never move from that position and that he will not earn any respect from Martha or the society.

One major difference between the old and the new subversive drama is the resolution of the plot. In the old subversive drama authors are almost angry with their characters so they punish them for failing. That is why Miller sentences Willy Loman to death and Williams has Blanche DuBois institutionalized. This punishment symbolizes the end of these characters and the end of all illusions they have so carefully been building. In the new subversive drama, authors do not punish their characters so distinctively. They allow them to live on, yet they remain in the same state of despair and meaninglessness in which we have been observing them throughout the plot.

1. 2. Affirmative Plays

Compared to subversive plays, affirmative plays are much more optimistic, spiritual and, I dare say, didactic. It would be logical to conclude that, if the subversive drama negates the American dream as well as the achievement of success and wealth, the affirmative drama does quite the opposite; it presents a variety of characters who are successful, content, influential, rich and pleased with their lives. In a way, this previous statement is true; the affirmative drama is rich with characters that are successful and content, but not necessarily due to financial success. The affirmative drama "does not discuss business endeavors, coming into fortune, great victories or marvelous discoveries or achievements" (Nikčević 117). Nikčević argues that the affirmative heroes achieve success in the end, but that this success is not what normally falls under the definition of this word. Their success is measured according to how much they have grasped some other life values. After analyzing various affirmative plays, Nikčević managed to isolate certain basic values the affirmative heroes are trying to achieve. She says that their goals are to achieve an inner reconciliation with themselves and with their environment, to accept themselves as they are and to accept life as it had been given to them (Nikčević 118). This is why she formed an inner division of the affirmative drama as well. Depending on the topic of the play, affirmative plays can be about the right to live or acceptance of oneself (acceptance of life, death and flaws) and about the right to happiness or acceptance of others (acceptance of family, partner) (Nikčević 127).

The more optimistic tone of the affirmative plays brings about quite an interesting reaction of the audience. With the subversive plays, the reaction of both the audience and the critics is generally consistent and almost expected, but with the affirmative plays, reactions are

two-sided. On the one hand, the critics both underestimate and undermine the value of affirmative plays by considering them "the lower kind of plays". For example, T. S. Porter asserts that "significant drama deals with the complexities of the cultural situation rather than the fantasy ideal" (22). They only appreciate subversive drama because they believe that it discusses real life situations and presents only realistic outcomes of a harsh existence, while affirmative drama presents situations that are too ideal to be real. The critics even go to such extent that they claim that the subversive writers are *artists*, while the affirmative writers are merely *craftsmen*. Even if the greatly appreciated subversive playwrights toyed with writing plays with certain affirmative characteristics, those plays would simply be ignored by the critics. They would only be mentioned as a part of the author's opus, or analyzed from a subversive point of view.

Even though the critics struggle hard to strip the affirmative drama of every value, the audience thinks differently. Affirmative plays are highly attended and re-attended, which should be a decent argument that they are valuable, yet the critics ignore this important fact in their discussions. While theorizing about this occurrence, they perceive the audience as naïve cattle that need to be fed with affirmative illusions so that they could cope with their lives more easily. In *The Dramatic Event*, Bentley even asserts that:

> While the artist transforms neurotic fantasies into higher reality, the journeyman playwright is doomed simply, like the neurotic himself, to live with them. He does nothing to his fantasies except hand them over to the public. The public is excited by the contact. And the degree of excitement is the criterion of the dramatic critics. (107-108)

Critics like Bentley feel that the affirmative drama is light, bordering on comedy and not dwelling on important life issues, but merely seducing the audience into believing that life is a meadow full of flowers. It is considered unrealistic, full of clichés, superficial, emotional and soft. As if insulting the affirmative plays was not enough, Bentley goes one step further and starts verbally attacking the authors themselves. Feeling frustrated and insulted, he describes one of Chayefski's affirmative plays by stating: "I, too, am an audience and must report that never have I been treated as a smaller or stupider child than by this author" (Bentley 274).

As the result of the audience's affection towards the affirmative plays, the critics will describe the audience by using the same adjectives they use to describe the plays: superficial, emotional and soft. According to them, the audience is not an adequate criterion in determining a play's quality. However, John Simon, the greatest adversary of emotions displayed by both the audience and the affirmative plays, states: "I am perfectly happy with plays about ordinary people as long as these people don't stink with cuteness, improbable lovableness, disingenuousness, smugness ('How much more wonderful to be little, ordinary, average!') in short with dishonesty" (117).

Despite the aversion the critics display towards the affirmative plays, the audience still craves for it. As previously mentioned, people attend and re-attend these plays. Statistics do not lie. According to the list of the most performed Broadway plays, only two subversive plays were listed amongst the thirty most performed plays on Broadway, while the rest of the list was filled with affirmative types of plays (Nikčević 100). Though theoretically neglected, the affirmative play has managed to sneak its way into the hearts of its viewers due to its uniqueness and healthy perspective on life, which is something I will also discuss later in the paper by comparing the subversive and affirmative female characters.

2. Female Characters of Subversive Drama

In the following section, I will name some of the most important subversive female characters and present their characterization. My primary focus will be set on characteristics that make them subversive. The female characters that display these characteristics to a great extent are Eugene O'Neill's Mary Cavan Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey into Night*), Arthur Miller's Linda Loman (*Death of a Salesman*), Tennessee Williams' Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) and Edward Albee's Martha (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*).

2. 1. Mary Cavan Tyrone (Eugene O'Neill: *Long Day's Journey into Night*)

Mary Cavan Tyrone is the main female character of O'Neill's four act play, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. She is the wife of James Tyrone, Sr., and the mother of James Jr. and Edmund. She is described as a fairly attractive woman for her age, though her harmonic outer image does not correspond to her mental state. There is a huge discrepancy between what she thinks she represents and how she behaves in reality. Her loose mental state and the barrier she raises between herself and the rest of her family members, as well as her discontent with the present life situation, serve their purpose as the main key of her inner destruction, pushing her further and further into the welcoming hands of addiction to morphine.

In order to fully portray her character, it is necessary to draw a parallel to O'Neill's childhood and the conditions in which he had been raised, because the character of Mary Cavan Tyrone is a mirror image of his own mother. As a child of the famous actor James O'Neill, Eugene spent most of his life travelling and following his father on his acting tours. Facing constant changes and dynamics in his life, he never actually understood what it was like to have a real home. To his mother, this was not the family life she imagined, yet she followed her husband wherever his tour took him, constantly feeling bitterness and remorse about their lifestyle. Consumed by detest and anguish, she did not even try to establish a quality connection with her children, but she rather remained in her cocoon of negativity, leaving her boys to cope with their loneliness on their own. As if alienation was not enough, she could not cope with her own grief of losing a child, so she started taking pain-relieving drugs to make her existence bearable (Gould 51), exactly like Mary Cavan Tyrone.

Mary's breaking point is the loss of her son, Eugene. After that incident, she behaves like a typical subversive character; she gives in to her grief and depression, and sinks deeper and deeper into the bowels of addiction, completely forgetting the fact that she has two other sons who desperately need their mother. She fails both as a mother and as a wife. She does not even try to create a home that her sons so desperately crave for, which is another similarity with O'Neill's life. Although aware that her behavior is intensively self-destructive, she does not take responsibility for it nor tries to fight it. Other family members are also aware of her mental state, yet instead of attempting to aid her, they merely point their fingers at each other: "It never should have gotten a hold on her! I know damned well she's not to blame! And I know who is! You are! Your damned stinginess! If you'd spent money for a decent doctor when she was so sick after I was born, she'd never have known morphine existed!" (O'Neill 84). They are malignant to each other. In affirmative plays, family represents a harmonic union and a shelter, yet in subversive plays, we see a completely different scenario. Mary's own son ridicules her because of her addiction issues: "The Mad Scene. Enter Ophelia!" (O'Neill 106). They cannot survive as an entity, or individually.

Another important issue to be addressed here is the question of choices. According to Puškar and Nikčević, choices determine characters as subversive or affirmative. The same applies to Mary. Her life has not been easy. The loss of a child is a tragic event, and in combination with a general dissatisfaction with life, disturbed family relations and the feeling of loneliness can seriously damage one's mental state, yet one should find inner strength to overcome such hardships. It would be a typical affirmative trait. However, in a case of subversive characters, we have people making and remaking the same mistake over and over. The difference between a subversive and an affirmative character in this instance would be that such events would bring both of them to their knees, but only an affirmative character would manage to stand back up and walk away. All of the previously named events are just used as excuses, and Mary does not even feel that she has to admit that the choice of using morphine falls strictly on her. According to Margaret Loftus Ranald, Mary "is portrayed as a tortured creature unable to muster sufficient willpower to break herself of her drug habit. O'Neill manages to convey the terror and total denial of the addict superbly, but while the portrait shows some understanding, and even sympathy, it remains at bottom somewhat hostile". Basically, Mary is somewhat portrayed as a victim, yet O'Neill uses a certain amount of aggression when talking about her, and this is the judgment I had mentioned at the beginning of the paper.

All subversive characters have a nasty habit of reminiscing about better times, and the Tyrones are no exception. Mary's nostalgia is additionally fuelled by her addiction to morphine, which often causes her to stumble back into the past when she was a young, happy, beautiful and carefree woman. In her mind, the limits between present and past are getting loose and somewhat erased. To further intensify the weight of these journeys into the past, O'Neill uses soliloquies and psychologically real monologues to depict just how much these images of the past influence his characters. Perhaps the most important scene regarding the past is Mary's entrance at the end of the play, where she appears with her wedding dress: her own symbol of happiness, carefreeness and innocence. O'Neill does not resent his characters for not being able to forget some things in life: "I'm not blaming you, dear. How can you help it? How can any one of us forget? That's what makes it so hard – for all of us. We can't forget" (O'Neill 25). It seems that O'Neill blames his characters exactly because of their inability to surpass the hardships that have been handed to them and therefore does not offer them an exit strategy, but rather leaves them in the same state.

Even though there are plenty of factors conditioning Mary's state, I would like to isolate two key factors that could have been used in Mary's favor: choices and family support. Here I will draw a short parallel to Harling's *Steel Magnolias*, an affirmative play which also dwells on the topic of losing a loved one. In *Steel Magnolias*, the character of M'Lynn Eatenton is struggling to accept the death of her daughter, Shelby. M'Lynn could have broken down just like Mary and given in to some kind of numbing addiction, yet she chose not to. She is aware that life is full of challenges and that we need to accept the things we cannot change: "Time marches on and sooner or later you realize it is marchin' across your face" (Harling 65). M'Lynn's friends play the role of her family, and their support helps her understand that "life goes on; death is something completely ordinary and human, one needs to accept it and resume with his life" (Nikčević 246). Mary never reaches that conclusion, and this is exactly why O'Neill leaves her drifting in the sea of subversiveness, as the rest of her family.

2. 2. Linda Loman (Arthur Miller: *Death of a Salesman*)

"I set out not to 'write a tragedy' in this play [*Death of a Salesman*], but to show the truth as I saw it" (Miller 141). Despite this statement, *Death of a Salesman* is often classified as a tragedy because its plot revolves around Willy Loman, a typical American salesman who is

desperate to succeed in life, but fails at absolutely every attempt. His wife, Linda Loman, is partly responsible for her husband's poor judgment and his lack of social orientation. Unlike Mary, Linda is a loyal wife to her husband and a better mother to her sons, yet her role in the entire family could have been so much greater than she allowed it to be.

The idea of choices is important in the analysis of Linda Loman because she chose to marry Willy Loman, but that is not her biggest mistake. Her biggest mistake is that she blindly and unconditionally chooses to support her husband no matter what he does, thus passively approving of every decision he makes, regardless of whether it is a good or a bad one: "He's only a lonely little boat looking for a harbor" (Miller 54). Her devotion and love only cushion his perception of failure, motioning him to resume with his actions the way he had been practicing them so far. According to Porter, such behavior pushes them into a state of perpetual optimism, which is no longer used as a piece of transparent self-deception, but practically embedded into their personality. "But in the first act all difficulties, past and present, are smothered with pervading optimism" (Porter 140). Porter states that this optimism does not represent a philosophical position anymore, but is rather used to create a cultivated sense of euphoria, which glues the whole family to a single spot, leaving them to live their lives while believing that the impossible merely takes a little longer (Porter 137). Such a state is highly associated with the so called "destructive myth", which Porter also describes by offering a bit more detailed analyses of Linda's character: "While Linda is a mirror of goodness and the source of the family's sense of identity, she is no protection – by her silence and her support, she unwittingly cooperates with the destructive myth" (Porter 147). The destructive myth engulfs the family, and this is not something they cannot fight against; they are not even trying. As suspected, Miller introduces their punishment strictly because of their lack of will to struggle.

To further intensify the futility and senselessness of Linda's trust and loyalty to Willy, Miller introduces the character of The Woman, Willy's mistress. She represents his home away from home, his escape route from all issues he is faced with on a daily basis at home. He cannot find that in Linda because Linda is tightly connected with his failure and is a daily reminder of his downfall. His affair additionally disturbs their family relations, because at one point, Biff becomes aware of it. "His idol crumbles; his father is 'a phoney little fake'" (Porter 143). At that point, not only is Willy stripped of his role as the provider in the family, but also he is stripped of his role as a father and a good husband. Willy does not perceive his affair as something negative; he still greatly cares for his wife and worries about her. Porter states that her character is

contrasted with the promiscuous sex symbol of the Woman and that she is the key character in this subversive construction. He says that she is the character who keeps the family together and by keeping the accounts, loving her sons, encouraging her husband and trying to protect him from a heart-break, "she becomes the personification of Family, that social unity in which the individual has a real identity" (Porter 146). This statement is completely true; while Willy is with the Woman, he is an interesting man, he has a good sense of humor and his persona has no burden, but when he is with Linda, he is only a man who betrayed his family and failed to provide for them. The family environment allows his true identity to surface.

Her efforts to keep the family together do not go unnoticed. Ironically, Willy is the one who notices them most. "I was fired, and I'm looking for a little good news to tell your mother, because the woman has waited and the woman has suffered" (Miller 80). He does not allow others or himself to forget this fact, so he often repeats it: "'Cause she's suffered, Ben, the woman has suffered" (Miller 92). Willy believes that his self-destruction will aid his family, and ease Linda's suffering, yet it only leaves her mortified and confused. Perhaps that is the moment when she realizes all of her efforts to pull her family out of the haze of emptiness have gone to waste: "Willy, dear. I can't cry. Why did you do it? I search and I search and I search, and I can't understand it, Willy. I made the last payment on the house today. Today, dear. And there'll be nobody home… We're free and clear… We're free" (Miller 105).

All in all, from a subversive point of view, Linda does not have as many subversive traits as Mary. Unlike Mary, Linda represents the Family, she is a good mother and a good wife, yet she remains within the subversive domain for a sole reason - her lack of action. Seeing that Willy is constantly lost in his illusions, she can be perceived as the reasonable one who understands that such actions lead to nowhere. Had she acted differently, the family might have had at least a speck of hope for survival. Yet, she did not and she failed just like the rest of them.

2. 3. Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski (Tennessee Williams: *A Streetcar Named Desire*)

A Streetcar Named Desire presents a story that revolves around two female subversive characters, Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski. Blanche, a withered southern belle, comes to visit her sister Stella, who has married a rugged and a bit primitive man, Stanley. Stanley's appearance and behavior do not meet Blanche's standards, yet she eventually allows her deeper, darker, emotional problems to surface in his presence.

Multiple topics and problems are discussed in the play, yet instead of describing them, I will quote the author himself, who, in one of his articles, best described what his plays are about: "Usually when asked about a theme, I look vague and say, 'It is a play about life.'" Just like O'Neill, Williams also introduces numerous autobiographical elements into the plot. Williams' childhood was marked by the same atmosphere readers experience while reading *A Streetcar Named Desire,* and the character of Stanley Kowalski has plenty of common traits with Williams' father. The tyranny Williams experienced while struggling with his writing at a young age is the same tyranny Stella experiences with Stanley when she contradicts him. Stella's and Stanley's life is a lot like the life of Williams' parents, for Williams' father, just like Stanley, had a nasty habit of drinking and going out to play poker with his friends, which was something Williams' mother was strongly against. Her traditional Catholic upbringing was the only barrier that prevented her from leaving him, for she knew that the Church disapproved of divorce. Eventually, she gathered enough strength and obtained a legal separation from Williams' father, thus ending his long-standing tyranny everyone in the family had to endure. This differentiates her from Stella, who never finds enough will power and strength to leave Stanley in spite of his constant aggression and molesting (Gould 12).

One of the biggest challenges Williams sets before his loser characters is the loss of territory. Blanche, Stella and Stanley are removed from their place of origin and placed into a completely new setting, forced to adapt. In this case, the loss of territory does not simply imply change of geographical location, but it implies the loss of basic values and bits of oneself. Not all characters react to this abrupt change in the same way. For example, Stanley Kowalski does not perceive the loss of his original territory (Poland) as something negative: he feels that he has gained so much more by moving to the US. Stella is very similar to her husband, the loss of her original territory does not make her a subversive character because she has successfully adapted to her new life in New Orleans after years of luxurious life in the South, as Stanley states in the play:

> STANLEY: When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them colored lights going! And wasn't we happy together, wasn't it all

> okay till she showed here? And wasn't we happy together? Wasn't it all okay till she showed here, hoity-toity, describin' me like a ape? (Williams 138)

Unlike her sister, Blanche perceives her loss of territory as a complete shock, she is unable to accept the fact that the southern way of life and the values she treasures do not have a place in this society. According to Nikčević, she is a stranger in the world she does not understand or acknowledge, that is why she constantly fills her life with illusions, broken images of the southern way of life, which eventually turn her into a destructive and chaotic character (Nikčević 34). Her twisted perception of reality is not only self-destructive, it influences everyone around her, particularly Stella: "BLANCHE: I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic. I try to give that to people. I do misrepresent things. I don't tell truths. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!" (Williams 144). Even though the loss of territory does not make her a subversive character, Blanche's troubled psyche and fogged perception of reality influence Stella as well, making her remember her past behavior and upbringing. Blanche revives memories of their former life, which results in Stella berating Stanley for behaving the way that he does and trying to adapt their life style to Blanche's expectations and standards. By peeling off the layers around Blanche DuBois, Williams provides a brilliant insight into the Old South myth and everything that it stands for. Porter describes the environment that gives Blanche a sense of belonging and identification as follows:

> The owners of the big house are aristocrats with the appropriate chivalric virtues and patrician vices. The master is autocratic, prideful, gallant; the mistress is a paragon of the domestic virtues. Life on plantation is easy and gay, a round of lawn parties, dress balls and visiting, with an occasional ride around the holdings for the master and mild direction of the house servants by the mistress. The young woman and men spend their time at play and courtship. Coquetry from the lady is never mistaken for indelicacy; exuberance and high spirits among the gentlemen is always tempered with courtesy and sense of humor. (157)

The relationship between Stanley and Stella is highly interesting, because the two of them not only have completely opposing attitudes towards courtship, marriage, social behavior and sex, but they represent two different worlds, classes, ideologies and even historical periods. Blanche DuBois is a typical Southerner; for her, "the ante-bellum days represent an ideal of

gracious living, an ideal that includes a code of personal honor extending into every area of her experience" (Porter 154). According to Porter, this Southern way of life has deeper roots than the success myth Miller presented in his play *Death of a Salesman*: "its roots are deeper and more personal, it exercises a correspondingly greater influence on society" (Porter 154), which explains why Blanche cannot accept and deal with this new, alien environment. Stanley is a simple man, a worker and a former soldier of vicious temper and a short fuse, utterly adapted to the world that surrounds him thanks to his dominating personality: "There is no schizoid tendency in Stanley's personality; he knows his place in the world and holds it confidently. He is quick to protect his rights at home and abroad" (Porter 166). Blanche and Stanley are constantly clashing against each other, and when Stanley realizes that her presence is, in his opinion, negatively influencing Stella, he decides to subdue everything she represents. The rape scene between Stanley and Blanche can also be considered symbolical, because he chooses to subdue her in the most primitive of all ways. During this scene, Blanche's complexes and inner contradictions surface at highest intensity because she is torn between the infused standards of behavior of a southern belle, and her need to find a man to protect her from the antagonistic world that surrounds her. Another interesting fact is that Blanche finds herself a suitor that is more adjusted to her standards than Stanley is, yet she fails to maintain that relationship. She and Mitch have a lot of things in common, he is more elegant and timid than Stanley and his companions, and he carries a suitable touch of romance that Blanche is attracted to. He treats her like a lady and respects her, yet she is inapt to respond to his courtship the proper way, and this destines their relationship to failure.

As previously mentioned, Stella has lost that old lady-like sophistication Blanche is all about, as well as her decency and purity, and she is used to living modestly in New Orleans with her husband, simply fulfilling her domestic duties. Despite this, as Porter states, "she has maintained one of the biggest traits of the old southern mistresses – the traditional submissiveness to her husband" (167). Just like Linda Loman, Stella is devoted to her husband and she has completely adjusted to his regime. Unlike the marriage of Linda and Willy Loman, which was more or less harmless, the marriage of Stella and Stanley is almost malignant because Stella's devotion to her husband knows no limits; she is even willing to endure and suppress physical abuse. Maybe the characteristics of a southern belle are not as distinct on Stella as they are on Blanche, yet they are embedded so deeply into her identity that she cannot help herself but act accordingly. Even at the end of the play, when there is a new life involved, Stella nevertheless chooses to stay with Stanley, thus signing her own verdict as a subversive character.

The ending of the play is much more dramatic in Blanche's case because Stanley's institutionalizing of her symbolizes the final defeat and surrender of the great southern tradition and an ending of an era. The new world has won and according to Porter, Blanche is "forced to withdraw completely into the unreal plantation world" (169). By removing her from his environment, Stanley has successfully defended his territory from an unwanted intrusion and maintained his perception of "family harmony". He knows that by removing Blanche's influence from their lives, Stella will stay by his side at all times, no matter what. The final downfall of the South and the climax of Blanche's subversiveness bring about sympathy in the scene where she sees a gallant gentleman in the doctor who came to collect her and states her signature line: "Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams 178). Here, she is stripped of her role as an enemy and an imposter, and we can only see a broken woman who had no chance of surviving in the cruel society that surrounds her.

2. 4. Martha (Edward Albee: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*)

"Before they slept, they must fight; after they had fought, they would embrace. From that embrace, another life might be born. But first they must fight, as the dog fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in fields of night." (Roudane 39)

The epigraph best describes the odd nature of the relationship of Martha and George, the two main characters of Albee's play. This not at all typical marriage has brought about a lot of questions and different analyses of the play. For example, in his essays, Philip Kolin particularly emphasizes the aspects of social commentary and angry satire apparent in the story, while Matthew Roudane focuses more on the interpersonal dimensions of the play, which are bordering on the metaphysical due to Martha's and George's preoccupation with questions of truth and illusion. Rather than focusing on a single play, John Clum studied several of Albee's plays and drew a general conclusion that *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*? is more negative and darker than some of his other plays. He states that all of Albee's relationships are dominated more by entropy than renewal (Bottoms 9), which is particularly true in George's and Martha's case, as we will see in the further analysis.

The play begins with George and Martha returning home after a faculty party. Their relationship is still relatively peaceful, though their conversations are far from the ordinary. Their balance begins to stir when Martha informs her husband that she has invited guests for a

nightcap. We can already see that she is a remarkably strong woman, who makes her own decisions without even consulting with her husband, which differentiates her from the previously discussed submissive female characters, Blanche and Stella. Nikčević describes them as equals, saying that they are equally dominant, educated and sensible, but that only emphasizes that they are also equally big losers (Nikčević 52). Even though it might seem dysfunctional, their marriage survived all these years precisely because of this characteristic. Albee presents his characters in such a manner that it becomes almost hard to imagine them being with anybody else. Their marriage has always been full of games, deception and challenges that spouses put before each other. The night described in the play is not different. The moment Martha announces they would be entertaining guests, George perceives it as a challenge. Martha's mystery guests soon make an entrance and that is when the real battle between the sexes begins.

They constantly insult each other brutally, not allowing the presence of the two newcomers to remotely disturb their aggressive everyday routine. The spouses both strike where it hurts the most, that is why George describes Martha as a "spoiled, self-indulgent, dirty.-minded and liquor-ridden woman" (Albee 157), and Martha gets even by stating that George is a failure as an academic, husband and in the end, generally a man, "You see, George didn't have much… push… he wasn't particularly… aggressive. In fact he was sort of a … (Spits the word at GEORGE's back.) … A FLOP! A great … big… fat… FLOP!" (84). Here, it becomes obvious that Albee likes to see them as duelists, leeching of the sense of defeat and constantly struggling to regain dominance. Roudane states that they appear "more as two infantile adults recovering from an evening of self-generating hysteria than as caring or conscious individuals" (Roudane 39). Indeed, their constant bickering and childish name calling introduce tension to the scene, particularly visible on their guests, who do not quite know how to handle their hosts. Their psychological competition is initially mild, merely based on teasing and testing, but the tournament makes a sudden turn when Martha raises stakes and mentions their son's existence to Honey. Here, the tables turn and the game is taken to a whole new level. At that point, we see an abrupt change in George. He is aware that their previous verbal arguments and games do not carry any weight compared to this ultimate game his wife has initiated by breaking the rules and sharing their secret with the world.

Their secret is the key illusion of the plot. It binds Martha and George together and keeps them alive as a couple, but only until it is unveiled. The moment Martha mentions their "son" to Honey, their private illusion is broken, and the boundaries between reality and illusion become

blurred: “Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh?” (Albee 201). While they kept the secret to themselves, it was completely harmless and benign, it united the spouses in a way incomprehensible to the rest of the world and to a certain extent, helped them maintain the sanity of their marriage. The moment their secret becomes public, it loses its original role and becomes means of destruction. George is aware that their private illusion has now polluted their real life, turning it into a stage and them into actors who now have to act it out to the extreme. Even though both spouses are lost in the illusion, it seems that George is more aware of the impact it has on their lives than Martha. At that point, he realizes that he must destroy the illusion and bring Martha down from her throne, thus restoring the boundaries between fantasy and reality. He announces her utter defeat through a warning: “We are going on, and I’m going to have at you, and it’s going to make your performance tonight look like an Easter pageant” (Albee 208).

As previously mentioned, Albee has a unique approach both to the audience and to the performance of his plays. As he himself states: “In nine or ten of my plays, you’ll notice, actors talk directly to the audience. In my mind, this is a way of involving the audience; of embarrassing, if need be, the audience into participation” (Bottoms 58). This Shakespearian method of play within a play is visible in George's and Martha's approach to Honey and Nick, who are their audience in the play. By the end of the play, they become so involved that there is no going back, they are literally forced to witness Martha's final defeat. Albee says: “All drama goes for the blood in one way or the other … If the drama succeeds, the audience is bloodied” (60). Honey and Nick are bloodied because George and Martha’s performance triggers a series of their own frustrations and problems, something they have been cleverly hiding at the beginning of the play.

Just like Martha, Honey is also a typical subversive character, yet she is more similar to Williams’ female protagonists. Like Blanche, she does not openly enjoy alcohol, yet she never refuses a refill when offered. She resembles Stella because she is also submissive to her husband, she constantly smiles and laughs at her husband’s bad jokes, struggling to maintain the image of a good wife and a collected individual. She, too, is haunted by both past and future. Her hysterical pregnancy is the sole reason why Nick married her, despite the lack of passion and love in their relationship. At some point, Honey’s delirious babbling reveals a secret she has been hiding from Nick: she does not want to have any children, and according to Nikčević, here lies the key of her subversiveness. Observing the situation from the American dream point of

view it makes her a loser (Nikčević 57). She does not understand life, and this does not go unnoticed by George, who constantly patronizes her and treats her like a child that needs to be taught how to live: "When you get down to the bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone… the marrow… and that's what you gotta get at" (Albee 155). According to Roudane, even though Honey does not understand George's explanation, it represents an emotional highpoint for George, because he becomes aware of what he must do to preserve not only his marriage, but his and Martha's very existence – he needs to purge the son myth from their lives.

Albee defines the intense exorcism scene George performs in Act 3 as "the cleansing consciousness of death" (10). The moment George exercises the demon from their lives, Martha crumbles. Her final breakdown is the exact moment when the couple is restored to reality free of illusions. Disregarding all of their former arguments and bickering, the couple reunites. At the end of Act 3, Martha is presented as a vulnerable individual, holding onto her husband as if holding onto the last straw of sanity. The change in her character is unexpected and dramatic. She transforms from the woman who does not even want to acknowledge her husband's existence: "I swear… If you existed, I'd divorce you…" (Albee 39), into a fragile, confused and lost individual: "MARTHA: It was… ? You had to? / GEORGE: (Pause.) Yes" (Albee 240). Roudane also points out the symbolical importance of lexical elements and dialogues exchanged after their catharsis. While their conversations earlier in the plot have been violent, maiming, insulting and full of linguistic ambushes, the duologue the audience witnesses at the end is extremely soft, calm, and the questions they ask are almost metaphysical. The tone of their conversation confirms the assumption that the exorcism of the son myth brings the couple back into the Real. George's and Martha's relationship has originally been smothered with tensions, hatred and violence, but they eventually make place for tenderness, honesty, forgiveness and love (Roudane 45). Albee does not punish his protagonists at the end of the play, instead, he allows them to purge their lives from the evil that has been deforming their relationship for the past twenty years, leaving room for a new beginning.

3. Female Characters of Affirmative Drama

Affirmative drama has produced a number of interesting characters that contributed to its popularity amongst the audience. As previously mentioned, these characters also face various challenges in life, but unlike the loser characters, they find a way to overcome them with victorious results. The characters I chose to present in this section are Craig Lucas' Rita Boyle (*Prelude to a Kiss*), Robert Harling's M'Lynn Eatenton, Truvy Jones, Ouiser Boudreaux and Annelle Dupuy Desoto (*Steel Magnolias*), Dore Schary's Eleanor Roosevelt (*Sunrise at Campobello*), John Van Druten's Marta 'Mama' Hanson (*I Remember Mama*) and Moss Hart's and George S. Kaufman's Penelope Sycamore (*You Can't Take It With You*).

3. 1. Rita Boyle (Craig Lucas: *Prelude to a Kiss*)

According to Nikčević, *Prelude to a Kiss* is a play based on acceptance of oneself and life, which is one of the basic values of the American dream. The affirmative hero has to accept his role and make the most of it, which means that he has to accept himself exactly the way he is and learn how to cope with everything that life offers, both positive and negative experiences. This is something subversive characters never learn. Nikčević also explains that the process of accepting oneself has three phases. The first phase means that the affirmative hero has to learn that life is a gift, which implies a certain amount of responsibility. It should not be misused or rejected, which is something we commonly witness when reading about subversive characters. For example, compared to some other subversive characters, Martha and George can be considered privileged – they have a good financial status, education and strong connections, yet they do not even attempt to make the most of it. They have been stuck in the same loop of illusions for the past two decades, and even though Albee subtly implies that things might change at the end of the play, it is not something one witnesses, but only assumes that it might happen. Secondly, the affirmative hero must accept death, not as an ending, but as the beginning of something new. In the subversive context, this incident usually has a devastating and permanent effect, because loser characters do not know how to cope with it, so they become a ticking time-bomb and it is only a matter of time before they explode and cause ruination of other characters as well. A good example of this would be O'Neill's Mary Tyrone. Instead of accepting her son's death and devoting herself to her other children, she turns to addiction, separating herself from reality and those who actually need her. The last phase implies

acceptance of one's physical shape, meaning that the characters have to come to terms with what has been given to them by God and make the most of it (Nikčević 155-156).

Prelude to a Kiss tells a story of a young woman called Rita Boyle, who is kissed on her wedding day by a strange old man. It would not be considered a strange event had Lucas not applied supernatural effects to have them exchange souls and bodies in order to teach Rita and his audience a lesson about life. As the author himself states, he wanted "to work out certain things through the process of creating art, and hopefully to reach people". Lucas digs deep into the conscience of his characters and presents issues that prevent them from living and enjoying life to the fullest. This is particularly evident in Rita, a young, beautiful woman who seems to have everything a person needs to appreciate life, but she is incapable of doing so because she is troubled by mental barriers she herself created. She is constantly afraid and perceives the world as a hostile place eager to destroy everything she loves:

> RITA: I'll be lying in bed late at night and I'll look at the light in the room and suddenly see it all just go up in a blinding flash, in flames, and I'm the only one left alive… I can't look at you sitting there without imagining you… dying… bursting into flames…
>
> PETER: No wonder you can't sleep.
>
> RITA: The world's a really terrible place. It's too precarious. (Lucas 20)

It is easy to understand the reasons why the Old Man wants to switch bodies with Rita. He is nearing the end of his life and is very aware of it, and his desire to enjoy youth again can almost be described as noble. He does not want a youthful body so that he could repeat his past habits, he observes it as a new chance at fully appreciating life. He takes better care of Rita's body; he does not drink or smoke and surrenders to carelessness. This is exactly what rouses suspicion in Peter, Rita's husband. Lucas initially suggests that the soul switching would not have occurred had both of his characters not craved for it. Rita's insecurity, her irrational fears and mental barriers allow the transmission (Nikčević 159). Her desire to simply skip life and all of its hardships initiated the process of soul switching:

OLD MAN: I remember now. It was you. Oh god, it was your eyes shining back. And you kissed me and, let me be over there, please, let me skip to the end of all this hard part. I wanted to be you. For one second of one day, what would it be like to just be. And-

RITA: Yes.

OLD MAN: -not be afraid. (Lucas 89)

Lucas successfully teaches Rita a lesson. By taking away her former life he manages to teach her how to truly appreciate it: "RITA: I'm here. I'm not afraid. / PETER: I know" (Lucas 92). Finally, she is able to put her fears behind and lead a healthy, carefree life.

Just like every other affirmative hero, Rita has helpers. Nikčević names Peter as her biggest helper. Unlike Rita, his life was full of hardships yet he managed to develop into a strong individual, highly aware that the world surrounding him can be a hostile place. What differentiates him from Rita is the fact that he never allows this cognition to prevent him from leading a fulfilled life. Rita, on the other hand, had an easy life, always surrounded by people who cared about her, yet she was never bold enough to take a leap into the unknown. Unlike subversive characters, affirmative characters are not granted with an excuse for their state. They need to be in charge of their own destiny and bring valid choices that help them rise above the problems they encounter along the way. Peter does not bring Rita's choices for her, he merely pushes her into the right direction and helps her understand: "PETER: Oh, Rita. Never to be squandered ... the miracle of another human being" (Lucas 92).

3. 2. M'Lynn and Shelby Eatenton, Truvy Jones, Ouiser Boudreaux, Annelle Dupuy Desoto (Robert Harling: *Steel Magnolias*)

Steel Magnolias is a drama that dwells on the departure of a loved one and the way it influences the people who stay behind. Just like subversive characters, affirmative characters are equally shocked and hurt when losing a loved one, but in the end, they manage to overcome the loss and accept death as a normal part of life. Harling's play also has autobiographical elements. His sister died due to kidney failure shortly after giving birth, so it is safe to assume that Harling

experienced everything his characters felt and successfully conveyed all these emotions and knowledge into the play itself, trying to teach his audience and readers that death is simply a part of life and that it should not be perceived merely as an ending, but also as a new beginning (Nikčević 244).

The plot of the play takes place at a beauty salon, where six female characters meet on several different occasions. Even at the first meeting, Harling offers a pleasant and comfortable atmosphere through enjoyable dialogues, clearly portraying the strong bond of friendship these women share. Through series of events, he shows how their friendship evolves into something much stronger and how a tragedy can bring such a little community even closer. The play starts when a local beauty Shelby comes to the beauty salon with her mother M'Lynn to get her hair done for her wedding. The wedding is obviously perceived as a new beginning, it brings joy both to the bride and her mother, as well as to other characters at the salon: Truvy, Ouiser and Annelle. Later in the play, Shelby announces her pregnancy to her friends, and everyone is thrilled except M'Lynn, who is aware of the medical risks and is afraid that her daughter will not be able to sustain pregnancy due to her diabetes. Sadly enough, Shelby dies after giving birth to her child, leaving her friends and family to deal with the loss.

The mother – daughter connection is extremely strong and nourishing, though Harling often puts an emphasis on Shelby's need for autonomy, which sometimes clashes with what her mother feels is the right thing to do. Even though mothers are always very protective of their children, M'Lynn's need to protect Shelby is enhanced by the fact that her daughter is ill, which only intensifies her role of a caregiver. Shelby is aware of her condition and her mother's need to take care of her, yet she constantly struggles against it, often refusing help, and these are all occasions when her desire for autonomy is at its strongest. For example, just before the wedding, Shelby experiences a seizure at the salon and refuses her mother's assistance. According to analysis made by Adler, Rosenfeld, and Proctor, she yearns for independence and strength that would help her go through life on her own, despite her medical problems. Her mother's role as the caregiver is jeopardized the most when Shelby announces that she wants to have a child. This is the moment that defines them both as affirmative characters. M'Lynn is presented here as Shelby's biggest helper, though not in an impertinent way. According to Nikčević, she is a true helper because she simply offers her opinion but does not criticize or attack her daughter for choosing not to listen to her. Shelby, on the other hand, is an affirmative character because she chooses to give birth on her own, despite her mother's concerns and her doctor's warnings. She

does not reject life due to hardships and frustrations, which is often the case with the subversive characters, but she rejects her own life to bring a new one:

> SHELBY: Mama, I don't know why you have to make everything so difficult. I look at having a baby as the opportunity of a lifetime. Sure there may be risk involved, but that's true for anybody. But you get through it and life goes on. And when it's all said and done there will be a little piece of immortality with Jackson's good looks and my sense of style, I hope. Please, please I need your support. I would rather have thirty minutes of wonderful than a lifetime of nothing special. (Harling 47)

The emphasis in the plot is placed mainly on M'Lynn and her coping with her daughter's death, and this is where Harling's other characters come through. Their community becomes a sanctuary to M'Lynn because she knows that she can show just how vulnerable and weak she feels in front of them. She knows that she can shatter into million pieces in front of them because they will put them back together. This is particularly visible after the funeral, as they prove to be M'Lynn's greatest support and assistance when it comes to accepting the God's seemingly absurd decision to end the life of a wonderful, beautiful, young mother and daughter (Nikčević 246). The climax of M'Lynn's emotional state is the point when she expresses her anger and need to punch somebody: "M'LYNN: I-I just wanna hit somebody 'til they feel as bad as I do! I just wanna hit something! I wanna hit it hard!" (Harling 79). She cannot understand why her daughter had to die instead of somebody else who perhaps has less reason to live. In an affirmative sense, Shelby was the logical choice for two main reasons. Firstly, her destiny demonstrates just how unpredictable, senseless and chaotic life can be even for the affirmative characters. Secondly, Shelby was extremely important to every woman at the salon, especially to M'Lynn, and by ending her life and subtly announcing their emotional recovery from the loss, Harling confirmed the basic principle of the American dream that no accident or loss should be perceived like a complete tragedy. One of the main indicators that M'Lynn and the rest of the women will accept Shelby's death is the humor the author presents at the end of the play. Immediately after M'Lynn expresses the desire to hit something, the other women suggest she hits Ouiser, the grumpiest woman of their group. Despite the intensity of the tragedy, the women find a reason to laugh, which indicates that they will all be alright, including M'Lynn.

In addition to being helpers to M'Lynn, the women are also helping each other. Harling introduces Annelle's story as a secondary plot to prove that. Annelle is first introduced to their little community as a stranger with a shady past, but that does not stop the owner of the salon from giving her a job. Little by little, she is drawn into their family more and more till she becomes fully accepted by the rest of the members. Her contribution to the process of reconciliation with fate is the greatest at the very end of the play, when she states that she is going to name her daughter Shelby. According to Nikčević, "her pregnancy continues the line of life, honors Shelby's memory and confirms the fact that all the women will be alright" (247). In my opinion, this is the most distinctive affirmative play of my analysis, not only because it is composed of the biggest number of affirmative female characters, but also because the system of helpers here is the most complex. When one stumbles, the rest will be there to get her back up on her feet, regardless of the severity of the situation. The play is full of positive, true, affirmative values such as faith, support, understanding and loyalty produced by the unique friendship that can overcome absolutely any hardship that life has to offer, which makes it a perfect example of an affirmative play.

3. 3. Eleanor Roosevelt (Dore Schary: *Sunrise at Campobello*)

While analyzing Lucas' *Prelude to a Kiss*, I mentioned one important characteristic of an affirmative play, and that is coming to terms with one's given physical shape and making the most of it. Even if this given physical shape implies some kind of handicap, the affirmative hero must accept it and have a strong desire to participate in the world of "ordinary" people. He himself has to produce a technique that would help him fit into the world that surrounds him and only after he manages to do that, he can face the problems that trouble everyone else. Furthermore, affirmative plays do not revolve around the social rejection of a handicapped person, they rather deal with characters who, for some reason, refuse to accept that handicap or some kind of other physical imperfection. In an affirmative play, "a true hero has to accept his handicap as such and draw the maximum out of it" (Nikčević 270).

All of these characteristics are perfectly visible in Schary's play, *Sunrise at Campobello*. The play describes only one part of Roosevelt's life, from the moment he gets polio to the moment when he makes his victorious speech during the nomination of the presidency candidates. The play describes his fierce battle with the disease and his extremely strong desire

to maintain the normality of his life. One of his greatest helpers is his wife, Eleanor. As previously mentioned, "helpers cannot make choices for affirmative heroes, they help by giving their own opinion about the situation, they give advice or simply heal with their presence" (Nikčević 267). Eleanor cannot do much to help her husband, but her mere presence and soothing words have a nourishing effect on her husband's psychological state and they enhance his desire to get well and actively participate in society. Eleanor is there to listen to him when he is feeling depressed or desperate and to give him strength to carry on. Her faith in him has no boundaries, and that is exactly what Roosevelt needs to recover: "ROOSEVELT: I turned to my faith, Babs -- for strength to endure. I feel I have to go through the fire for some reason. Eleanor, it's a hard way to learn humility--but I've learned it by crawling. I know what is meant -- you must learn to crawl before you can walk" (Schary 48).

Even though most affirmative plays have a certain didactic tone, this one has distinctive didactic traits. Roosevelt is not the only character who has to learn how to cope with the surrounding world, his wife Eleanor has to do the same due to her husband's illness. Her role of the ordinary wife gets upgraded to the role of the politician's wife, which means that she is given certain political responsibilities that she must learn to fulfill. Up to that point, she was a shy woman who would greet Roosevelt's guests upon their arrival, and then retract, leaving her husband and his political companions to their business, but now, she must assume part of her husband's role and represent him in front of their visitors and audience. Her shy nature proves to be a burdening factor that she needs to overcome in order to fulfill her duties properly. She must learn how to discuss important political topics and in order to do so, she must acquire more knowledge about the world to which her husband belongs. Compared to Roosevelt's challenges, hers do not seem too troublesome, and she uses her husband as an inspiration to achieve success in the field of politics. By acquiring this knowledge and new communicating skills, Eleanor learns that her role as Roosevelt's helper does not only revolve around loving and supporting her husband, but that it is so much more than that.

Although Roosevelt has numerous helpers, starting from his family members and friends to complete strangers, Eleanor is his true helper. She knows the limitations of her assistance and never forces him to do exactly as she says. She merely expresses her opinion and allows him to bring the final decision. She knows that he is the master of his own destiny and that is where her true value lies. Nikčević compares her role as the helper with his mother's role. His mother is more persistent with her advice; she wants her son to completely denounce his political role and

go to their estate where he can struggle with his illness in peace. She does not understand that her immense love and worry suffocate him and that listening to her advice would destroy him, both physically and mentally. Eleanor applies her support and love with perfect dosage, and it produces visible, positive results. She subtly heals her husband by constantly reminding him that there are many people who believe in him, particularly those who surround him. For example, she says that his closest friend, Howe, has given up a profitable job in Washington just to visit Roosevelt and help him.

Affirmative helpers have to be just as strong as the affirmative heroes who lead a more fierce battle than the people who surround them, because it is never easy to see people that we care about suffer. The play does not only teach people with physical imperfections how to deal with and overcome their disabilities, but it also teaches people who surround them – the helpers, how to react properly. Nikčević states that affirmative helpers never take advantage of such moments of weakness and desperation, but instead, they learn how to convert that weakness into strength (281).

In order to avoid the typical characterization of his affirmative play as idealistic, Schary uses realistic elements to produce a bigger impact on his audience. He uses real, famous, successful and intelligent people to show that they are no exception to life's hardships. Before committing himself to writing *Sunrise at Campobello*, he spent a lot of time studying Roosevelt's personal life, not only what was written about him, but also what was written by him, to increase the credibility of his work. Nikčević claims that affirmative plays about heroes struggling with their physical imperfections are not numerous because the American dream does not prefer people with a handicap, probably because there is always the possibility that the affirmative play would divert into a subversive direction if the hero does not persist in his intention to succeed (285). Despite this fact, *Sunrise at Campobello* was generally well liked, as proven in 1958, when it was given the Tony Award for the best play.

3. 4. Marta 'Mama' Hanson (John Van Druten: *I remember Mama*)

After discussing the plays that deal with acceptance of oneself, Nikčević mentions plays that talk about the acceptance of others. This particular direction of the affirmative play is also known as the "right to happiness", and the plays that have this topic as the predominating one

can be divided into three groups: acceptance of family members, acceptance of partner and acceptance of what is different. Van Druten's play, *I Remember Mama*, belongs to the first group. Plays that present acceptance of family members can be further segmented into three subgroups: plays about accepting a different family member or in-laws, plays about giving family members freedom to live their own life and plays about the perseverance of family (Nikčević 287). *I Remember Mama* belongs to the latter group.

Affirmative and subversive plays share a common setting for their heroes: the family. As the basic principle for further development of the plot, these two directions of drama develop a family setting in two different ways. In subversive plays, family is usually the community that weakens the individual and does not persist in solving their issues but only intensifies them, as visible in O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey Into Night*. Members show very little support and understanding, and that eventually ruins them. In Miller's *Death of a Salesman* family support is present, but only when it comes to Linda, who shows support to her husband, but does not apply it the right way. Had she directed Willy better, perhaps the outcome of the play would not have been as tragic. In Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, George and Martha create an illusion of family by inventing a child, and their illusion goes to such an extent that it becomes the only connection between the spouses. After studying Albee's play and the concept of family that it presents, Scanlan claims that Albee's original motive was to show that family harmony does not exists. He says that "in reality, the family is a destructive battleground and the urge to dramatize the bloodshed is one of the main sources of energy" (Scanlan 194). In Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, family goes two ways. The relationship between the two sisters is full of superficiality, false values and lies, and the relationship between the spouses is corrupted by oppression and physical and mental abuse.

Nikčević argues that in the affirmative plays "family is also considered the basic community for a hero, but this time, it is a place of strength and positive energy, love and affection; a place of protection and healing. It is a place where the hero achieves true values, and finds understanding and reconciliation" (Nikčević 293). Family is considered a very important factor when it comes to achieving the American dream in general. Scanlan, for example, asserts that the history of America coincides with the emergence of the modern family system, yet in his writings, he is obviously underestimating the role of the family in affirmative plays:

> The world of American family drama shows a concern for family failure and destruction. The power of our plays comes from the intensity of this concern. When we write other sorts of plays, we seem less inspired, less able to fuse form and content. Our comedies of family life, where one might expect to find a benign view of domesticity, underline this fact. Our achievements in family comedy are relatively few and unimpressive. In these versions ideas are untested and unexamined in order to soothe us. (7)

Just like many other theoreticians, Scanlan feels that affirmative plays and their presentation of family are merely light comedies with a temporary effect, lacking the catharsis the subversive drama is so proud of.

I Remember Mama is a play that presents the ups and downs of a Norwegian immigrant family, the Hansons. According to Joseph Mersand, *I Remember Mama* is a play about "various episodes of motherly efforts to protect her home from diseases, attacks, prejudice and hard life in general" (4). Martha 'Mama' Hanson is the heart of the family: she is hard-working, supportive, modest, loving and loyal to every member of her family and keeps them all together. According to Nikčević, "she is the perfect example of an affirmative hero because she accepts everything that life throws at her and is capable of making the best of every single situation" (303). Her life has not been an easy one, she had to struggle with poverty, illness and death, yet when she is asked by her daughter Katrin if she had had a hard life, she simply states: "MAMA: (surprised) Hard? No. No life is easy all the time. It is not meant to be" (Van Druten 45).

Despite all the hardships she encounters in life, Mama manages to maintain her optimism and warmth. Her efforts successfully produce a single functional entity that none of the subversive characters had the luxury of having - a home: "KATRIN: (Reading.) For as long as I remember, the house on the Steiner Street had been home" (Van Druten 79). Mama's home has survived as such an entity for so long because it preserves the balance between safety and freedom she provides for her children. When it comes to safety, Mama has always provided her children with everything that they needed. She sacrifices her own needs and wishes to fulfill those of her children, and she shows that there are no limitations of motherly love and protection. When her daughter Dagmar falls prey to illness and is sent to hospital, Mama is forbidden to see

her. Her devotion, protectiveness and love usher her into the hospital to see her daughter, using every means possible. In addition to safety, Mama Hanson gives her children the necessary freedom they need to grow into self-dependent individuals. She feels that it is important for them to have dreams and to follow them, so she does everything in her power to help them achieve their dreams. The greatest example of this effort is presented at the very end of the play, when Mama tries to reach a famous author to help her daughter follow her true calling (Nikčević 303). She does not suffocate her children with love, thus limiting their personal development, as this is the case with Franklin's mother in Schary's play *Sunrise at Campobello*. She possesses enough love and support for them to know that she is there for them no matter what, but she also motivates them to spread their own wings.

As mentioned earlier, Mama's role in her children's lives is of extreme importance. Not only does she guide them through life, she also teaches them modesty. She is aware that money is necessary, but she never teaches her children to strive simply towards material wealth. She is extremely realistic, and believes that wealth does not necessarily imply happiness:

> KATRIN: But... rich people... aren't their lives easy?
>
> MAMA: I don't know, Katrin. I have never known rich people. But I see them sometimes in stores and in the streets, and they do not look as if they were easy. Wouldn't you like to be rich?
>
> MAMA: I would like to be rich the way I would like to be ten feet high. It's good for some things, bad for other. (Van Druten 45)

Just like Williams' characters, Mama Hanson is also an immigrant; a stranger brought into the new territory. What differentiates her from Williams' characters is the fact that she peacefully adapts to the new society. Unlike Stanley, she does not dominate the new territory, but she accepts the fact that it functions differently from what she was accustomed to, and she successfully adapts to the newly acquired values, never completely discarding her heritage.

3. 5. Penelope Sycamore (Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman: *You Can't Take It with You*)

In his column for the *New York Evening Post*, the critic John Mason Brown describes the play *You Can't Take It With You* in the following way:

> In a world in which the sanity usually associated with sunshine is sadly overvalued, *You Can't Take It With You* is something to be prized. It is moonstruck, almost from beginning to end. It is blessed with all the happiest lunacies Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman have been able to contribute to it. The Sycamore family is the most gloriously mad group of contented eccentrics the modern theatre has yet had the good fortune to shadow.

As John Mason Brown asserts, it is a story about an extremely eccentric family and its diverse family members, each consumed by their own story and issues, who function completely harmonically despite their differences. The main emphasis is placed on the love story of young Alice Sycamore who needs to introduce her boyfriend to her family, but is afraid that their eccentricity will scare him away. Just like all affirmative plays, this one does not revolve around success in terms of material wealth, which is considered temporary, but is based on family values that are permanent and highly treasured. Before writing the play, Hart and Kaufman had pondered over the ideas and characters they could use to make the plot more interesting. Each dug deep in their family tree, isolating the most interesting of the members and finally inserting them into the two families described in the play. At one point, they even described the play as "the play about the mad family" (Andrew 36). According to Andrew, they first focused on the characters, composing background stories for every member, only later attaching them to a certain plot: "Each member of the household was given his share of special interest – snake-collecting for one of them, playing the xylophone for another – and when all were assembled, they were fitted into three episodic acts held together by thinnest of story lines" (36).

The two most important female characters in the plot are Penelope and Alice Sycamore. Penelope is Alice's mother, she is an extremely warm, loving and supportive mother and wife. Her main goal in life is to make sure her children are happy and family relations undisturbed. Just like Mama Hanson in *I Remember Mama*, she also believes that everyone should be doing

what makes them happy. She is the best example of this, because she often spends time writing plays and painting, even though she is not very good at either. Alice can be described as the black sheep of the family, because she lacks the eccentricity other members of the family exhibit. Hart and Kaufman describe her as follows:

> She is a lovely, fresh young girl of about twenty two. She is plainly GRANDPA's granddaughter, but there is something that sets her apart from the rest of the family. For one thing, she is in daily contact with the world; in addition, she seems to have escaped the tinge of mild sanity that pervades the rest of them. But she is a Sycamore for all that, and her devotion and love for them are plainly apparent. (238)

She is aware that her family is different and that the newcomers need some time to get used to such a diverse group of people, which is why she is afraid to introduce her future husband to them. She feels that their eccentricity would not be cushioned by having a stranger in their house and that it would be too chaotic for Tony to handle it. Her doubts and fears are justified, because the moment Tony sets foot in their house and introduces himself to Alice's family, Alice's grandpa offers him a tomato, which Tony politely, yet confusedly, rejects. Alice is reluctant to leave Tony with her family even for a minute, pessimistically believing that this interaction might harm her relationship: "ALICE: Well, here I am, a vision in blue. Apparently you've had time to get acquainted. PENNY: Oh, yes, indeed. We were just having a delightful talk about love and marriage. ALICE: Oh, dear. (She turns to Tony.) I'm sorry. I came down as fast as I could" (Hart and Kaufman 249).

In Scene 2 of the play, Alice's belated conversation with Tony best describes the way Alice perceives her family. She speaks of them very lovingly, but at the same time, presents them as an irreconcilable difference between her world and Tony's. Both of them are aware that family connections cannot simply be discarded, but it seems that Alice's family is a bigger issue to her than to her future husband: "ALICE: No it isn't… it's never quite that. I love them, Tony… I love them deeply. Some people could break away, but I couldn't. I know they do rather strange things… But they're gay and they're fun and… I don't know… there's kind of nobility about them" (Hart and Kaufman 259). Her insecurity and pessimism are alleviated by Tony's

soothing words. He, like a true affirmative hero, believes that the differences between their families should not stand in the way of their happiness: "TONY (releases her hands): They won't have to change. They're charming, lovable people, just as they are. Everything will work out… you're worrying about something that may never come up" (Hart and Kaufman 259).

Alice and her romantic issues are highly important for the plot of the play in general. According to the authors themselves, her "ingenue role is crucial to the success of this play because without the love story there is no narrative line in the play". As the only "sane" member of the family, Hart and Kaufman assigned her the "duty to keep the infinitesimal plot alive amid the assorted character studies" (Andrew 41). Had it not been for their love story, the play would simply revolve around a big number of versatile characters lost in their own worlds and would lack the didactic tone. Owing to this love plot, *You Can't Take It With You* is often called a new Romeo and Juliet story.

Despite of their different interests and oddity, the Sycamore family embodies those true affirmative values, and regardless of the fact that Alice feels that Tony might be chased off by them, he recognizes those values and envies Alice. This is particularly visible in Tony's conversation with his father at the end of the play: "TONY: Because I wanted to wake you up. I wanted you to see a real family – as they really were. A family that loved and understood each other. You don't understand me. You've never had time. Well, I'm not going to make your mistake. I'm clearing out" (Hart and Kaufman 310). By accepting her family without any restraint, he helps her express her full affirmative potential by making her understand that she has nothing to be ashamed of. He helps her understand that there is nothing wrong with being different as long as they love and care about each other as much as they do, and this is also the point Kaufman and Hart are trying to send to their audience.

4. Comparison of Characters

After a thorough analysis of the plays and the affirmative and subversive characters on an individual level, I will attempt to present a comparison of female characters according to several most important and common factors that shape their personality and influence their course of life: the notion of success and the American dream, the contribution of helpers and the question of choice.

4.1. Success and the American Dream

As already mentioned, Nikčević used the notion of the American dream as a classifying principle and made a division amongst the plays according to it (39). In this section, however, I will not be analyzing the American dream as an organizing principle, but I will rather present its role within the frames of the selected plays. The American dream, as one of the most important references both in the subversive and the affirmative plays, is constantly present and it influences all the characters, their behavior and choices. However, even though it influences all the characters, it does not do so in the same manner or with the same intensity. In the subversive plays, the American dream seems to be the motivating force; it appears in some form of potential success that characters try to achieve but eventually fail. For example, in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James Tyrone moves a lot in pursuit of his dying career, and he makes his family accompany him. His former glory and preoccupation with himself make him neglect significant issues that require his attention, like his wife's mental state. Due to James' preoccupation, Mary suffers from serious care deficit in the moments when she requires it the most. Mary can be described as the victim of James' American dream, and even though there are many other factors that contributed to her psychological state, this is one that cannot be neglected.

One of the subversive plays completely based on the pursuit of the American dream is Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Willy Loman is the most extreme example of an underachiever because, as Porter states: "Miller's hero is not simply an individual who has determined on an objective and who strives desperately to attain it; he is also representative of an American type, the Salesman, who has accepted an ideal shaped for him and pressed on him by forces in his culture" (127), which is the notion that makes Willy's failure even worse. Willy also sacrifices his family for the sake of his potential success. When drawing a parallel between O'Neill's Mary and Miller's Linda, it is necessary to say that even though they are both subjected to their husbands' goals, they have a different role in them. Mary's role is chaotic and seemingly distant

from her husband's attempts to revive his former glory. Linda is different, she "stays in her place, never questioning out loud her husband's objectives and doing her part to help him achieve them" (Porter 147). They are both (un)consciously contributing to their husbands' failure. Quite the opposite is the character of Martha in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, who intentionally and repeatedly strives to destroy every last ounce of her husband's hope in terms of success. She is highly destructive when it comes to George's dreams and yearnings, and this makes her different from the other female subversive characters of this analysis.

The question of success and the American dream does not only revolve around the present time but also around the past, which is particularly visible in two characters: Mary Tyrone (*Long Day's Journey into Night*) and Blanche DuBois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*). They share the same strong connection to what they perceive as the glorious past, and they have both created a defense mechanism against the present. Mary turns to drugs that provide the only connection to the period when she used to be happy, while Blanche completely rejects to act in concordance to her surroundings.

Affirmative characters react and perceive the idea of the American dream in a different way. They learn to cope with life's hardships in a healthy way and enjoy small things, which makes room for a whole new perception of success. Female characters from *Steel Magnolias* are an excellent example of this. Just like Mary Tyrone, M'Lynn loses her child and needs to find a way to cope with her pain. Ironically, M'Lynn and her friends share a stronger connection than Mary Tyrone does with her family, and their support helps her deal with the grief. In Mary's family, it seems that every member is a separate unity, struggling with their issues on their own. Their relationship has no warmth, support, and is not as complementary as the relationship between M'Lynn, Truvy, Ouiser and Annelle. Had the Tyrones shared a stronger bond, perhaps Mary's bond to her past would have faded away with time, helping her turn more towards the future.

In *I Remember Mama* and *You Can't Take It With You*, the authors present two families that are a personification of success. Van Druten's Marta 'Mama' Hanson directs her entire life to the land of opportunities, where her goal is not achieving material success, but simply having enough to provide for her children. Needless to say, her inspirational devotion and love for her children do not go unrewarded. *You Can't Take It With You* presents a variety of characters of versatile origin. Each of these characters has their own issues, just like the members of the

Tyrone family, yet they do not allow those issues or differences to come between them. None of them have a substantial wealth or idealistic goals, they are satisfied with what they have and that is the key of their success.

4.2. Helpers

Even though Nikčević mentions "helpers" as one of the characteristics of the affirmative plays, subversive characters all express the need for helpers, yet they do not have them. Most of the subversive characters are apathetic and preoccupied with their own misfortune to even perceive another human being in trouble, as it is the case with the Tyrones. In Schary's play, *Sunrise at Campobello*, Roosevelt overcomes his disability thanks to his will power and Eleanor's support. Had Eleanor been overwhelmed by the situation and her fear of fulfilling some of her husband's duties, she could have just neglected her husband's need for help, thus making his road to recovery extremely arduous or even impossible. In Lucas' *Prelude to a Kiss*, Peter may seem a passive helper to Rita, because he accepts her the way that she is, full of irrational fears and doubts, and does not impose his opinion on her, but he provides his support simply by being there for her, holding her when she needs it and loving her despite her flaws.

In affirmative plays, the roles of helpers are not fixed. Every character can be a helper to another character, which is particularly visible in *Steel Magnolias*. If a community of people, whether family or friends, is functional, the system of helpers will also work. One of the subversive characters that comes close to the definition of a helper is Miller's Linda Loman. She has the necessary qualities of a helper, but her efforts are supporting the wrong goal. That her efforts are all in vain is made evident by Willy committing suicide at the end of the play. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the situation is a bit different. Even though Martha and George seem to be competitors more than spouses, in a way, they can be described as helpers to each other precisely because of the fact that they would not be able to survive without each other. They complement each other in a bizarre way and the peculiar understanding they have for each other has maintained their marriage alive for so long.

In subversive plays, many characters can be defined as hinderers. They obstruct the development of other characters in an active or passive way. For example, Williams' Stella is passively obstructing Blanche's mental recovery by trying to create an image of luxury in her own modest home and by not objecting to Stanley's choice of institutionalizing her. In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, James is a passive hinderer to Mary. Even though his sons warn him

about his wife's psychological state, he does not do much to help her. His attempts of assistance are merely a formality because he does not possess any honest desire to help her recover. Even though I have previously applied the notion of helpers on Martha and George's relationship, Martha clearly comes closer to the definition of an active, aggressive hinderer than to a helper. She relentlessly attacks her husband like a hungry lioness and her efforts to make him lose his credibility are countless.

The affirmative system of helpers would not function in the subversive plays, because the subversive characters are completely unable to use potentially good opportunities, as we can see in Willy Loman's case. Just like all the other subversive characters, Willy would rather hold onto unreachable ideas of success, symbolized by his Uncle Ben in the play, than make one honest attempt at something realistic that might actually bring him and his family to the road of success.

4.3. The Question of Choice

The question of choice is highly important in terms of success, failure, happiness and misery. All the characters, both the subversive and affirmative, make their own choices that eventually determine the outcome of the play. They choose to be helpers or hinderers and to succeed or fail. Mary herself chose to marry James and follow him wherever his career took him, Linda chose to marry Willy and blindly support his decisions and Stella not only chose to marry Stanley, but she chose to remain with him despite the physical abuse and the fact that he was responsible for the institutionalization of her sister. She chose to perceive his decision as a good one and do nothing to influence it. They all brought it upon themselves by their own transgressions and simply went with the flow. Maybe these initial decisions did not seem wrong at the time, but eventually, the characters should have realized the kind of impact they would have on their lives. In most of these subversive plays, the characters have already surpassed that point of contemplation when they could have understood the negative consequences of their decisions, but still, they do absolutely nothing to change the course of their lives. The affirmative characters, on the other hand, are also put before numerous challenges, yet their decisions distinguish them from the subversive characters. They choose to be strong, patient and tolerant, and with the support of the people who surround them, they manage to surpass every challenge that life puts before them.

Conclusion

The paper clearly displays the difference between the subversive and the affirmative characters, with a special emphasis and additional analysis of the main women characters appearing in the selected plays. As seen, the subversive female characters rarely have a clear direction in their lives or well-sorted priorities. Basically, they have very little control over their lives and are stuck in an endless loop of failure, just like the rest of the characters appearing in the plays. Even though the authors of the old and the new subversive drama have a different attitude towards the American dream, they do very little to allow their characters to achieve any kind of success. On the other hand, the affirmative female characters are portrayed more optimistically. Their authors invested more faith in them as well as the American dream, which is why they created special characters, called "helpers". This is one of the main differences between the subversive and the affirmative characters, which is why I chose to add helpers as one of the key factors that influence their course of life. In addition to that, these characters strive to succeed and achieve the American dream, and while doing so, they bring certain choices that shape their life journey. Even though the subversive plays had been more popular with the critics, precisely this optimistic and didactic spirit of the affirmative plays has managed to generate its bigger popularity amongst the audience. In a world full of hardships and misery, people needed at least a small dosage of optimism and faith, and despite the objections of the critics, the public has very eagerly accepted both the affirmative characters and their life stories.

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