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## **Nelson Rodrigues and modern tragedy**

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### **Abstract**

Brazilian playwright Nelson Rodrigues is the author of a very peculiar dramatic work, whose main characteristics are related to a poetics of the excess and a modernization of tragedy. There are two trends in his works: one that is closer to universal and mythical aspects of life, and another one that is closer to the historical and daily aspects. His own life was full of tragic events which made him feel that tragedy is a dimension that intrinsically belongs to humanity's trajectory in this world. So the tragic sense of life was part of his world view and his philosophical conceptions. It was then natural that this tragic world view would be present in his literary creation at the several genres he explored, especially in his dramatic works. But his tragic approach is always mixed with melodramatic events and an excess of feelings, actions, and the grotesque, so that it frequently becomes comic at the same time. Nelson Rodrigues was influenced by both the high fine literature of the Western tradition and the subliterate of the beginning of the 20th century, and his mixture of them together makes up an original and very interesting creation. This paper fundamentally approaches the tragic as belonging to the playwright's life — as well as his world vision — and also belonging to the works of Rodrigues by analyzing events in his, his readings, the opera and cinema techniques he was familiar with in order to reflect about their influences on his work, as well as to discuss formal aspects and subjects that make it possible to consider his dramatic works as belonging to the tradition of tragedy at the same time that he subvert and recreates the tragic standards in his own fashion.

**Keywords:** *Nelson Rodrigues, tragedy, tragic*

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## **Нельсон Родригес и современная трагедия**

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### **Аннотация**

Бразильский драматург Нельсон Родригес – автор очень своеобразного драматического произведения, основные черты которого связаны с поэтикой избытка и модернизацией трагедии. В его творчестве есть два направления: одно ближе к общечеловеческим и мифологическим аспектам жизни, а другое ближе к историческим и бытовым аспектам. Его собственная жизнь была полна трагических событий, которые заставили его почувствовать, что трагедия – это измерение, которое неотъемлемо принадлежит траектории человечества в этом мире. Так что трагический смысл жизни был частью его мировоззрения и его философских концепций. Тогда было естественно, что это трагическое мировоззрение будет присутствовать в его литературном творчестве в нескольких жанрах, которые он исследовал, особенно в его драматических произведениях. Но в его трагическом подходе всегда смешаны мелодраматические события и избыток чувств, поступков и гротеска, так что он часто становится одновременно и комическим. На Нельсона Родригеса повлияла как высокая художественная литература западной традиции, так и subliterate начала XX в., и их смесь составляет оригинальное и очень интересное творение. В статье рассматривается трагическое как принадлежащее жизни драматурга, его мировоззрению и творчеству путем анализа событий в его произведениях, чтениях, оперных и кинематографических приемах, с которыми он был знаком, чтобы отразить их влияние на его творчество, а также обсудить формальные аспекты и темы, позволяющие считать его драматические произведения принадлежащими к традиции трагедии, хотя он ниспровергал и воссоздавал трагические стандарты на свой лад.

**Ключевые слова:** *Нельсон Родригес, трагедия, трагический*

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### Introduction

Author of seventeen theatrical plays, Nelson Rodrigues is the most important Brazilian playwright. He is the author of a work which revolutionized the theatrical production in Brazil, raised Brazilian dramaturgy to the level of the best achievements of other genres in Brazilian literature, and paved the way for the emergence and development of other important playwrights.

The revolution in Brazilian theater promoted by Nelson Rodrigues involved technique, subjects, language, and the types of characters on the stage. Subverting the comedy of customs performed with a Portuguese accent, the *vaudeilles*, the corny melodramas and the pseudo-philosophical plays that dominated Brazilian theater at the time of the playwright's debut and made up Latin America's theatrical tradition to that time, Nelson Rodrigues belatedly carried out the modernization of theater in Brazil.

In opposition to the verbosity and literacy that were then rampant on the stages, Rodrigues's dramaturgy is carried out through simple, direct and agile language, making that his characters spoke like Brazilians do, generally using colloquial and more relaxed forms. Technical resources of expressionist, naturalist or even surrealist nature are frequently used, causing surprise and a feeling of strangeness in the face of the basic melodramatic atmosphere. Short scenes, rapid progression of dramatic action, predominant division of plays into three acts with no time interval between them indicate technical procedures peculiar to modern theater. The tragic events in the plots are frequently comic at the same time. His humor comes from the ridiculous names of some characters, excessiveness and melodramatic exaggeration, wordplays, grotesqueness of situations and characters, displacement of real people who are put into fiction, and farcical elements.

### Material and methods

I have studied Nelson Rodrigues's works for a long time, and I have even published a book about tragedy and the tragic in Nelson Rodrigues and the American playwright Eugene O'Neill, comparing the two of them. [1] For this article, I have basically taken advantage of the main books used in the previous research, but adding new ones, which I have recently known. Most of them are exposed below, in the references.

As for the methods, my approach focuses on Nelson Rodrigues's biography, his literary influences, a theory of tragedy in his plays and other writings, the way his works can be organized. A conclusion ties all these developments.

### Results and discussion

Nelson Rodrigues's characters are obsessive, passionate, neurotic, abyssal beings, always placed in extreme situations, taking their flaws and psychopathy to

the ultimate consequences. Hence, they almost always find a violent end through death by homicide or suicide, madness, flight or absolute solitude. The petty bourgeoisie and the lower class of the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro are predominant in his dramaturgy. From time to time, the figure of a tycoon appears, and this is someone who thinks he can control everyone, that his money can buy everything. The atmosphere, the typical Brazilian characters and the *carioca* slang, however, do not prevent the universality of his plays, which focus on the fundamental problems of human condition. The reality Rodrigues presents is constantly cruel, annihilating of the characters' ideals, which almost always end up in frustration, low self-esteem, dehumanization.

The starting point of his characters' tragedy is repressed sexuality, which is deformed by prejudice, hypocrisy, and cynicism of the practices and customs of social, religious and moral nature. With his pessimistic view of life and humanity, Rodrigues sees the way society is structured as extremely corrupt, with human actions governed by irrationalism, which results in lack of real communication between people. Abhorring the dissolution of the individual into the shapeless mass, the playwright values the dignity of those who resist the mediocrity and the most conventional ways of behavior. He sees the trajectory of man on Earth as essentially solitary. There is always a clear notion of Destiny determining the course of human existence. The tragedy of our species consists in the fact that, being finite and limited, we carry a longing for infinity and eternity as a condemnation. Thus, the world is a stage where people have to cope with anguish and suffering. His characters are always seeking to dignify themselves by living or at least the hoping to live an eternal love, by achieving a glorious death that rescues them from the mediocrity of the life they lead, by resisting the temptations of dirty money and sex unrelated to love, by the decision to assume their nature and their vocation despite the coercion of customs and hypocritical moral codes. Sábato Magaldi, the most important interpreter of Nelson Rodrigues's work accurately summarizes his existential thought:

Having received the typical Christian education of the Brazilian urban middle class, the playwright preserved his belief in divinity and basic moral precepts until the end of his life. The difficulty of observing these precepts is the thing that sharpens madness. Lost on this earth, man is torn apart because of a lost unit, so that he/she is an inconsolable orphan of God. Life is insane raving in a hostile terrain. The permanent feeling of deceit remains — life plays a trick on everyone. (...) The vocation for evil is counterbalanced by the certainty of a superior norm, which would govern the universe. Believing in divinity, doing anything is no longer allowed — man participates in an order, obeys

ethical precepts, believes in a hierarchy of values that discipline coexistence. Morality gives meaning to conduct. (...) From countless symptoms, it is easy to conclude that Nelson did not welcome reality. At best, it bothered him, because of the numerous dislikes that accompany it. Commonly people have varicose veins and fat deforms. The burden of prosaism compromises the possible romantic assortments. (...) The meeting of a couple does not obey to fortuitous circumstances — it is marked by a true machination of Destiny, commanding two beings groping in the dark. There is no doubt that Rodrigues's belief stems from his deep romanticism, which fights against the unavoidable mistakes of everyday life. An admirable observer of reality, the playwright registers so many disagreements and detachments which are permanent determinants the lonely trajectory of the human being in this world. This doesn't prevent him from believing in the possibility of eternal love, or at least pretending that it exists [2].

The personal and family tragedies that marked the playwright's life, as well as those he covered as a journalist, make up the substrate of Nelson Rodrigues's conceptions related to life, which are reflected in the ideas expressed in his works. As for the formal aspects of his plays specifically, three main sources stand out: the readings carried out by the author, cinema and the melodramatic in its most diversified manifestations [3].

Nelson Rodrigues was a compulsive reader. Especially in his youth, he used to read all sorts of almanacs, children's and trivia magazines, newspaper serials and, to a large extent, the melodramatic sublitterature of the nineteenth century. Ruy Castro, a Nelson Rodrigues biographer, points out some writers and books to which the future playwright, journalist and writer of serial stories himself had accesses during his adolescence:

You would call these readings sublitterature, and the worst kind of sublitterature: *Rocambole*, by Ponson du Terrail; *Love Epic*, *The Lovers of Venice* and *The Loves of Pardaillan*, by Michel Zévaco; *The Mysteries of Paris*, by Eugène Sue; *The Martyr Wife*, by Enrique Pérez Escrich; *The Bronze Women*, by Xavier de Montépin; *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the endless *Memoirs of a Doctor*, by Alexandre Dumas Sr.; the fascicles of *Elzira, the dead-virgin*, by Hugo de Amé-rica; and an almost infinite amount of sublitterature.

The authors varied, but deep down it was the same thing: death punishing sex or sex punishing death — or both things at once, in the case of lovers who decided to die together. The form is what was sensational: intricate plots involving impossible love, blood pacts, sinister parents, unreachable purity, dark revenge and corpses in bulk. One or another author added a touch of even more perversity by condemning the heroine to leprosy or tuberculosis, evils as common in these novels as runny nose [4].

Later Nelson Rodrigues would meet the great universal writers, acquiring the habit of frequently citing authors such as Dante Alighieri, Shakespeare, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Balzac, Zola, Machado de Assis, Eça de Queiroz, Pirandello and O'Neill in his chronicles. Among these, the one to whom Rodrigues felt like a true spiritual brother was Dostoyevsky, because of his pathetic characters, his obsessive and tormented temperament, his tortuous style.

The main influence on the daring formal innovations of Nelson Rodrigues's drama is certainly in the cinema of the first half of the 20th century. As a journalist during that time, Rodrigues was a regular spectator of such movies. With little formal education, never having attended university, unaware of the literary and theatrical tradition of the Occident at the time of his debut as a playwright, it was in cinema that the future playwright came into contact with fast-paced narratives, unusual scene cuts, flashbacks and flashforwards, a non-linear development of the action in time, multifaceted spaces of modern reality, dialogues close to the natural speech of everyday life, a psychologism that arises from the appropriation of the psychoanalytic vulgate by art.

As for the melodramatic, the authors and works cited above by Ruy Castro leave no room for doubt about Nelson Rodrigues's attraction to melodrama, whose procedures are a constant presence in his fictional works. Also a constant spectator of operas, of which he became a critic in the newspaper *O Globo*, Rodrigues was in frequent contact with the melodramatic universe typical of this genre, too. It is also his biographer who tells us about the playwright's strange taste in music: "Beniamino Gigli or Tito Schipa singing arias from Italian operas, Vicente Celestino in "O Ébrio" (*The Drunk Man*) and "Ontem Rasguei o Teu Retrato" (*Yesterday I Tore Up Your Portrait*), Cauby Peixoto in "Conceição" (*Conceição*, a woman's name) and from there down to frankly steakhouse singers. He liked operettas, Neapolitan songs, boleros, tangos, fados — in short, whatever you mean by dramatic and exaggerated rhythms and melodies" [5]. As for these manifestations of the melodramatic in literature, music, theater and cinema, Nelson Rodrigues not only was greatly influenced by a genre that he would subvert, creating works of real aesthetic value, but also found elements in them that helped to shape his notorious morbidity. In addition, the melodramatic is at the base of his "bad taste" — of which he was proud — that is evident in most of his "unpleasant theater", of his fearlessness of ridicule and his praising the sincerity of the actor who overacts.

As for Rodrigues's tragic view of life [6, 7, 8, 9, 10], there will be a specific part below to discuss it.

Finally, there is the problem of dividing Nelson Rodrigues's dramaturgy into thematic blocks, with di-

dactic objectives, aiming to make it easier to understanding the whole of them. In the playwright's critical fortune, two classifications were enshrined, that of Hélio Pellegrino and that of Sábato Magaldi.

In 1965, Hélio Pellegrino published the article "The Work and *The Kiss on The Asphalt*", in which he points out the existence of two strands in the playwright's work. The first one, known as the "mythological cycle", consists of the plays *The Wedding Dress*, *Family Album*, *Black Angel* and *Our Lady of the Drowned*. For Pellegrino, these works "belong to this inaugural, genesis cycle, where the author, focused on the deepest roots of his unconscious, seeks to find his personal, founding mythology, at the same time that, in this research, he expresses essential problems and situations of the species" [11]. In this phase, the playwright, uncompromised with realistic and objective verisimilitude, poetically and intuitively approaches myth and the mythical dimension, exposing primitive and fundamental aspects of human nature:

Man, in his journey towards consciousness, or rather, in his search for the *logos*, always starts from myth, from the fertile and obscure ground of his soul, where the founding situations boil in all their naivety and terrible cruelty. It is this world, this pre-logical humus that Nelson Rodrigues, in his effort to structure himself and his work, seeks to work and transcribe. (...) The language is solemn, poetic, and incantatory. The verb of the myth participates in its supra-rational condition. The images and verbal symbols are loaded with an intuitive, illuminating, supracolloquial sense. There is nothing, in these plays, of the everyday banality, of the suffocating prosaism that, later, in his second creative phase, would be the material explored by the great playwright [12].

The second phase of Nelson Rodrigues as a dramatist, for Hélio Pellegrino, will focus not on the mythical and timeless man, but on the historical and finite man, "immersed in his specific ecology, a resident of the suburbs, riddled with contradictions, poisoned by banality, but alive, living in his tragic condition of being marked by sin and death, and such will be the clay from which Nelson Rodrigues, after *The Deceased Woman*, will sculpt his theatrical work" [13]. For Pellegrino, this second phase is a necessary development of the first one, and this historical man would be an unfolding of the mythical man of the first plays. The poetics of the previous strand is succeeded by a prosaic trend: after the solemn language comes up a colloquial expression, after the divine comedy of heroic beings comes up the human comedy of mortal and mediocre beings.

Such conceptions by Hélio Pellegrino are at the base of Sábato Magaldi's studies about the theater of Nelson Rodrigues. Deepening, unfolding and enriching Pellegrino's ideas, which remained within the scope of an article, Magaldi groups the playwright's

works into three blocks, called "psychological plays", "mythical plays" and "*carioca* tragedies", trying, as far as possible, to be attentive to the chronological order of these works.

The psychological pieces present characters who act "under great tension", "on the verge of breaking the censorship of consciousness" or who in fact "tear the border of consciousness and realize themselves mostly as an external projection of the subconscious" [14], and also face moral dilemmas arising from the conflict between their volitions and the repressive control of a hypocritical morality. In this group, Magaldi includes the plays *A Sinless Woman*, *The Wedding Dress*, *Waltz No. 6*, *Widow but Honest* and *Anti-Nelson Rodrigues*.

The mythical plays make up a cycle of works — written in the 1940s — that carry out an aesthetic project which the playwright called "unpleasant theater". Definitively breaking the barriers of the conscious, Nelson Rodrigues "dives into the primitive unconsciousness of man. (...) After exploring the deepest individual truths, the next step is to establish the archetypes, the myths that are at the origin of our 'vital' forces" [15]. The characters in these plays — situated outside historical time and living in a non-defined place — act at the whim of extreme impulses of their passions, tearing themselves apart in the expression of a sexuality that they cannot resolve in terms of nature or culture. This group includes *Family Album*, *Black Angel*, *Our Lady of the Drowned* and *Doroteia*.

Finally, the *carioca* tragedies deal with the reality of historical man — more specifically, man immersed in daily life — situated in well-defined time and space: the author's contemporaneity and the suburbs of Rio de Janeiro. Creating plots, characters and setting similar to those of his stories in the newspaper column "Life as It Is...", inspired by the *faits divers* that, as a former police reporter he knew very well, Nelson portrays the prosaic, the ordinary existence of popular classes in Rio de Janeiro without giving up the universal aspects that have always characterized his works. He also had no intention to transmit a social or political message. By the way, Sábato Magaldi emphasizes: "The psychological and the mythical impregnated its hard social sap. A playwright who avoided the political pamphlet, knowing the bad literary results of proselytism of any kind, he ended up making a painful testimony about the precarious surviving conditions of the financially disadvantaged classes" [16]. This set comprises the plays *A Deceased Woman*, *Forgive Me for You Betraying Me*, *The Seven Kittens*, *Golden Mouth*, *The Kiss on the Asphalt*, *Otto Lara Resende or Cute but Paltry*, *All Nudity Shall Be Punished* and *The Serpent*.

Sábato Magaldi draws attention to the way in which all of Nelson Rodrigues's works are inter-



twined, forming a cohesive universe: “an aspect is never shown in isolation, under penalty of impoverishing the fiction in the writer’s universe. The psychological pieces absorb mythical elements and the common man issues of the *carioca* tragedy. The mythical plays do not forget the psychological exploitation and touch of the *carioca* tragedy. The *carioca* tragedy assimilates the psychological and mythical world of previous works” [17].

As in Pellegrino’s classification, Magaldi’s identifies two trends in the playwright’s work: one with a universalist trend, composed by the psychological and mythical plays; and another one showing a historical, local and daily life man who is the typical character in the *carioca* tragedies.

Both aspects of Nelson Rodrigues’s theater are marked by a poetics of excess and by a re-updating of tragedy according to modern parameters and the peculiarities of its fictional universe.

At the core of the author’s worldview lies a sharp tragic sense of life. His biography shows us that he had an extraordinary existence, full of twists and turns of fate, transcending in action the plots of his own plays. Thus, he takes his life experience as a substrate for all the literature he elaborated. He himself often said that every time there was a murder in his plays, there was a re-enactment of the death of his brother Roberto, murdered by a woman belonging to Rio de Janeiro’s high society. She was offended by an article that appeared in a newspaper owned by Rodrigues’s father. This event left indelible marks in the playwright’s spirit. Another peculiar feature is his habit to bring real people onto the stage or to make his characters quote some of his friends, enemies or media outlets on stage with humorous intentions or to throw them a critical barb. He even goes so far as to quote himself. Such is the case, for instance, in the play entitled *Anti-Nelson Rodrigues*, in which one of the characters is his journalist friend Salim Simão; *The Kiss on the Asphalt*, in which his fellow police reporter Amado Ribeiro, from the paper *Última Hora*, is portrayed as an absolutely unscrupulous journalist; from *Widow but Honest*, in which the director of the newspaper *A marreta*, presented as a “press gangster”, is called Dr. J.B. in an evident allusion to *Jornal do Brasil*, an important Brazilian news outlet; *Our Lady of the Drowned*, in which he portrays the perfidious Drummonds, in a reference to the poet Carlos Drummond de Andrade; *Otto Lara Resende or Cute but Paltry*, in which the name and a famous sentence pronounced by a fellow writer and friend are quoted at length. In one of the houses where the Rodrigues family lived, a trunk with old clothes and a diary was found, and this episode ended up in *The Wedding Dress*.

His experience as a journalist in the passionate press of yesteryear, the training in the context of cus-

toms and morality prevailing at the beginning of the 20th century, his living in the suburbs, attending prostitute houses, coping with serious illnesses, his knowledge of football and the *carioca* typical language are important autobiographical elements that underlie Nelson Rodrigues’s worldview and his peculiar style.

Personal and family tragedies, in addition to those he covered as a police reporter at an early age, cut deep into young Rodrigues’s soul and helped to shape his conceptions. Among the most influential events in the making of his worldview, one can mention the murder of her brother Roberto Rodrigues, the death of his father — just three months later — from pain and sorrow, the acquittal of the murderer, the experience of hunger and all sorts of deprivation when he was a young man, the discovery that he had tuberculosis and should go to a sanatorium, the death of his brother Joffre from the same disease, smoking a lot, the loss of a large part of his vision at the age of 25, living with a persistent ulcer. Later, the heavy hand of fate would continue to cause suffering to the playwright and the ones he loved. On several occasions, his illnesses brought him to the brink of death. His daughter Daniela would be born with cerebral palsy. His brother Paulo Rodrigues would meet a terrible death. And in 1972, during the most violent period of the military dictatorship in Brazil, his son Nelson Rodrigues Filho, an armed resistance militant, was arrested and tortured by agents of government repression. Regarding the assassination of his brother Roberto because of a report published on his father’s newspaper, for instance, he writes in his book of memoirs:

My theater would not be the way it is, nor would I be the way I am, if I hadn’t suffered in my flesh and soul, if I hadn’t cried Roberto’s murder until the last tear of passion. (...) December twenty-sixth, 1929. I never freed myself from her cry again. It was the astonishment of seeing and hearing, it was that astonishment that others did not feel in their flesh and soul. And I alone, one day, will die hugging the cry of my brother Roberto. Roberto Rodrigues [18].

As we can see, Nelson Rodrigues’s life was marked by a tragic series of paradoxes and ironies that remind the *moira* activity for the ancient Greeks. Considering himself as a conservative and proclaiming himself as “reactionary”, he produced a libertarian work and was one of the most censored authors in Brazil at a time when censorship existed and was part of the repressing machine on the arts. Moralistic and visceral Christian, he was attacked by important Christian intellectuals who issued precisely moral judgments about his works. Defender of the military dictatorship in his chronicles and interviews, friends with the fascist president Médici, he had his son Nelsinho arrested and tortured during that criminal’s government. An apologist of capitalism and the United States during the

Cold War, he intervened several times, using his influence with the dictatorial regime to get his friends of the left wing who were arrested to be freed. Frequently proposing premarital chastity, attacking loveless sex, and saying that all true love is eternal, he had many mistresses, frequented red light districts, and married three times.

If the autobiographical context and the whirlwind of misfortunes do not explain the playwright's work, there is no doubt that they are the foundations of his peculiar worldview, which will find formalization in the tragic nature of his drama.

How is the tragic sense of life manifested in his works?

A clear presence of characters and events marked by an inexorable fate from which one cannot escape stands out in Nelson Rodrigues's plays. Differently, however, from being a consequence of divine designs, the way in which fate acts in his plays results from the dramatist's pessimistic conception of man as a fragile, ignorant, incoherent, desperate and somewhat maddened being in the face of illogicality of life, indifference of nature, lack of love and uncontrolled sexual impulses. The inevitable destruction to which the human being is led — and which it also provokes — brings with it the renewal of the world's face, since it takes place in a kind of myth of the eternal return in which the closure of a cycle painfully brings the beginning of another one. According to Sábato Magaldi:

Nelson sees chaos, disorder, death in a torn apart humanity. That's why most of his plays parade murders and suicides. Antunes (*a Brazilian theater director*) is right in observing that, once the cycle of destruction is over, a new creation is imposed. In *Family Album*, Heloísa, who escaped the curse of Jonah's family, unites with another man and has offspring. One cannot forget that, although Silene, the youngest daughter destined for marriage with a veil and wreath, in *The Seven Kittens*, is no longer a virgin and she keeps the fruit of love in her womb. Seeing the pregnant cat, she killed it with clubs, but the seven kittens jumped out of her, in a gust of life. And Arandir, in *The Kiss on the Asphalt*, condemned himself to death at the moment he wanted to pawn his wedding ring, in order to get the money that would allow his wife to have an abortion. He is then involved in a plot that results in his assassination. Ironically, a new cycle must begin when Selminha gives birth to Arandir's son. Birth responds to death [19].

Victim of the terrible conspiracy of the universe and of human incapacity, inserted in the formless and mediocre mass, Nelson Rodrigues's characters manage to dignify themselves only by going through a process of individuation that consists of standing out of the mass and resisting alone. [20] Such would be the heroism possible for the man of mass society. This

is the source of the admiration the playwright repeatedly expressed for men like Oswaldo Cruz, a doctor who led the struggle against an epidemic in Rio in the begging of the 20<sup>th</sup> century through a mandatory vaccination campaign; General Charles de Gaulle during the 1968 student protests in Paris; Dr. Stockmann — the protagonist in the 19<sup>th</sup> century play *An Enemy of the People*, by the Norwegian dramatist Henrik Ibsen — who is right against his entire society. Among Nelson's many famous phrases are the reflections that "all unanimity is stupid" and that "public opinion is mentally ill" [21]. In his theater, the appearance of an individual who stands out from his/her community or his/her social group is very frequent, either because he/she was isolated or because of some attribute or special quality. This makes that he/she has to face his/her own destiny, such as Arandir in *The Kiss on the Asphalt*, Edgard in *Otto Lara Resende or Cute but Paltry*, Golden Mouth in the homonymous play, Joice in *Anti-Nelson Rodrigues*.

The presence of protagonists of high condition essentially marked by ambition of power or glory is part of the tradition of tragedy. Within the scope of their mediocre lives, Rodrigues's characters generally nurture, as the great ambition of their existence, a longing for eternal love in a world that would have tainted true love through the practice of sex just for the sake of sex. For him, this represents a kind of fall from paradise that generated all sorts of evils that afflict humanity. Suicide pacts, mutilations, escapes are carried out as desperate attempts to perpetuate, honor or prolong the fullness of love, which is usually brief and escapes lovers due to the action of a cold, brutal and inept reality to conspire against the romantic aspirations and ideals of the couple, causing enormous suffering. Regarding ambition, one cannot fail to remember two pathetic characters who were equally betrayed by life, such as Zulmira, from *A Deceased Woman*, and Golden Mouth. The first, having had an ordinary and empty existence, aspires to a belated glamor in death — in the form of a luxurious coffin and an impressive funeral ceremony. The second, born in a sink in the bathroom of a whorehouse, aspires to take revenge on his extremely vulgar origin by showing off his solid gold dental arches as a symbol of the economic power he conquered as a baron of crime. Furthermore, he plans to be buried in a golden coffin. The fate of these debased characters resembles that of the traditional protagonists of tragedy: their ambitions prove to be in vain. However, unlike the classical tragic protagonists, who die with dignity, Zulmira and Golden Mouth do not manage to reach, in death, the desired transcendence. She is buried in an ordinary coffin, on a day when her husband does not fail to show up at Maracanã stadium to watch the expected football championship final. As for Golden Mouth, he

is murdered, and his corpse is taken to the morgue without his golden teeth, which were stolen. He had no time to order and pay for the making of his sumptuous coffin.

As is known, curses and condemnations are recurrent elements in ancient tragedies. Certain characters of Nelson Rodrigues carry in their history, in their body or in their psyche the mark of curse or condemnation. Geni, in *All Nudity Shall Be Punished*, was cursed in childhood by her own mother, believing that she was inexorably destined to die of breast cancer. The stigma of illness and disability haunts characters such as Glorinha, in *A Deceased Woman*, who in fact has a cancer in her breast; *Doroteia*, in the play with the same title, becomes a leper; and Décio, in *The Serpent*, sees his marriage fall apart due to his sexual impotence before his own wife. In this chaotic and corrupt world, a series of cursed loves emerge for subverting the fundamental principles of civilization, as in the case of numerous incestuous relationships in *Family Album*; homosexual infatuation, such as that of Aprígio for Arandir in *The Kiss on the Asphalt* or

that of Glória and Teresa in *Family Album*. [22] This gives origin to a process of revenge, such as the one undertaken by the Bridegroom in *Our Lady of the Drowned*; is an expression of a morbid and limitless sexuality, like that of Peixoto by Maria Cecília in *Otto Lara Resende or Cute but paltry*; involves a man with a rigid bourgeois morality and a prostitute, as in the case of Herculano and Geni in *All Nudity Shall Be Punished*.

### Conclusion

The exemplary trajectory of Nelson Rodrigues's protagonists makes them remarkable figures who are almost always destroyed at the end of his plays, whose outcomes are lavish in suicides, murders, alienations in madness or flight, and abandonment to the most absolute solitude. [23] These events, which are usually described as tragic, provoke, on the part of those who witness them in the plays, poor and even indifferent reactions, proving their insensitivity to the suffering and annihilation of others, as well as the pessimistic view of the human being that is a constant in the works of this playwright. [24]

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