

## LITERARY DEPICTIONS OF A CITY

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*Abstract: The present paper will focus on two literary creations which have the fabulous city of New Orleans as their setting and which reveal the many-sidedness of the city. A Streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee Williams’ play, which made the New Orleans streetcar so famous, focuses on the tropical atmosphere which makes people desire, while John Kennedy Toole’s A Confederacy of Dunces is the perfect example of why New Orleans is known as “The Big Easy”. Focusing on different aspects of the city, both literary pieces reveal new facets of New Orleans, either by relying on the characters’ background or by playing with history for the delight of the reader.*

*Keywords: the music of a city; gumbo ya-ya; the Quarter; French vs./ and English; the voice of the streets.*

### *The Voice of a Quarter (while A Streetcar Named Desire Passes by)*

Tennessee Williams’ play opens with the description of the New Orleans setting - it all takes place in the old French Quarter, where all kinds of people mix together in the New Orleans spirit:

“The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between L&N tracks and the river. The section is poor but unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey [...] The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. [...] A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar-room around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This ‘blue piano’ expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.” (Williams, 2000: 115)

Throughout all the scenes the piano will be heard, because what can be more specific for the city than an African-American playing the blues, over and over again? It is only here that life is always accompanied by music, a corresponding music for each quarter. Tennessee Williams will provide for the play all these little details which define New Orleans, introducing at first the essential ingredient of life. The opening scene will also provide the reader with an image about the people who live in the Vieux Carre: “Two women, one white and one coloured, are taking the air on the steps of the building. The white woman is Eunice, who occupies the upstairs flat; the coloured woman a neighbour, for New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town. Above the music of the ‘blue piano’ the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping.” (Williams, 2000: 115).

The French Quarter is indeed the part of the city where people, due to history, mingle and relate to each other, no matter their colour. Being the oldest part of New Orleans it is, contrary to the opinion of the new multicultural schools, the part where not tolerance makes the rules (because tolerance will always imply a certain degree of superiority from the speaker's point of view), but cohabitation. The two women, of different "colours" are depicted as having a conversation, the kind of conversation that generates the local *gumbo ya-ya*: the gossip which only in New Orleans can, at any time, turn into written history (see Saxon, L.; Dreyer, E.; Tallant, R.; 1998: v). The white woman will answer later in the scene: "*Por nada*, as the Mexicans say, *por nada!*" (Williams, 2000: 119) – a foreign language, not her own, can become in New Orleans an integral part of one's speech pattern, because that is what *gumbo* is all about. Thus the use of Mexican words is as natural as the use of English ones, the character identifying with this language, which became her own. In New Orleans one cannot talk about distinctive ethnical features (with all the extensions of the word "ethnical"), about "my language", or "my kind of food", because they all have turned, long time ago, into a common heritage, where distinctiveness is regarded as the antonym of cohabitation.

To this charming neighbourhood comes Blanche DuBois, looking for her sister Stella. Her appearance contradicts all "quarter rules":

"Blanche comes around the corner, carrying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building, then again at the slip and again at the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. She is about five years older than Stella. Her delicate beauty must avoid strong light. [...] Eunice (finally): What's the matter, honey? Are you lost? Blanche (with faintly hysterical humour): They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields!" (Williams, 2000: 117)

Blanche has indeed nothing in common with the place: she rather belongs to the American part of the town, erected because New Orleanians did not want to have anything to do with the rather savage taste of their new national colleagues. And above all she is in the wrong place because of her skin: the city cannot accommodate people sensitive to strong light, since humidity, excessive heat and sun are the ingredients for the local summer. More over she cannot understand street directions so specific for this city: here street names and geographical coordinates bear a local imprint which is impossible for a foreigner to understand (see Lacoste, 1997: 33-4). But she has to get over her "shocked disbelief" and her stereotypes about living conditions, if she wants to stay in New Orleans with her sister.

Their family background is rather common for Louisiana: the DuBois sisters were born on their father's plantation and grew up enjoying all the luxuries which wealth could offer. But after the death of the father, Blanche had to solve all the financial debts, while Stella chose the opposite direction in life. Blanche pretends that she had all the men in her life (after the tragic suicide of her homosexual husband) because she was lonely, but one may easily presume that she chose this way of living due to reasons so familiar for the New Orleans ladies: comfort. Although poor now, her luggage contains only genuine furs and expensive jewelry. Coming from this background, the city in which Stella chose to live is like the eastern border of their former plantation: unimaginable and not suitable. Her questions may be the same with those of other foreigners: "You sit down, now, and explain this place to me! [...] Never, never, never in my worst dreams could I picture – Only Poe! Only Mr Edgar

Allan Poe! – could do it justice! Out here I suppose is the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir!” (Williams, 2000: 121).

A city like New Orleans must indeed be explained to new-comers, since it does not fit in any box-like description of the American cities. For the exquisite lady it is more one of those remote, exotic and terrifying place, where Poe would frame one of his most ghostly stories. Stella’s answer is honest, but incomprehensible: “Aren’t you being a little intense about it? It’s not that bad at all! New Orleans isn’t like other cities.” (Williams, 2000: 121). Blanche, although inheriting the local spirit due to her French name, will understand only later that this particular city does not have to and cannot be explained. It is simply itself.

The shock of the city will be forgotten when Stella’s husband, a Polish immigrant but who is now a fool-blooded American, steps into the picture. For Blanche he is the very definition of the Darwinian picture on mankind: “He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. [...] Branching out from this complete and satisfying centre [i.e. women] are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink and food and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears the emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer.” (Williams, 2000: 128). Blanche cannot understand his ways and is appalled by the violent scene she witnesses between husband and wife. She interferes, takes her sister away to the neighbour and plans for them both to get away as soon as possible. She does not see that spouse violence is a local custom, that people get violent and kiss each other in the same half an hour. And that gambling is the local equivalent of what going to theatre is for other places. The poker nights are an inheritance of the “good, old days” and men will never be ready to give them away for the satisfaction of their family.

Her attempt at adaptation means getting friends with a sensitive local man, but who, after finding out about a hotel in her past where she used to meet men, proves to be like any other man from any other Quarter. At first she worried about her looks, saying that she cannot go out because she is not properly dressed. Stella’s reply “That don’t make no difference in the Quarter” (Williams, 2000: 155) is so true and genuine – she understands the Quarter, and became part of it due to the language used, so specific for the less educated. Only when Blanche gets literally mad does she start to resemble the city: “Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are!” (Williams, 2000: 213). But by now she is not perceived as eccentric, because she never was: her attempts to drive away the heat (and implicitly the city) by long, hot baths did not help her weak nerves, while the constant “street cries like a choral chant” (Williams, 2000: 156) have strange resonances in her head. She will be finally taken away by doctors from a mental institution, although she believes that it is her imaginary wealthy gentleman that will rescue her for ever.

The play has all the local ingredients mixed together into a unique flavour. Immigrants and prostitutes walk the streets of the quarter, go to the French market, while street vendors advertise for their products in the same, old song. There will always be the voice of the street in one’s head because these streets never go to sleep, they are continuously alive, even during those “rainy afternoons in New Orleans when an hour isn’t just an hour” (Williams, 2000: 173). In this city the opposite of death is not life, but desire. The “brutal desire” that keeps Stella and her husband together, reigning over violence and gambling. That kind of desire that separates two worlds: the one of the rich former plantation owners and that of the poor inhabitants of the French Quarter. The inability to enter the life of the Quarter and to accept its different sort of charm will drive Blanche away into an inner realm, more comfortable but more dangerous than the loud streets. While here the piano will never be interrupted, nor the

gambling abandoned. One does not give up an inheritance, no matter its contents, for the foreigner trying to change the rules of the old New Orleans life. The voice of the French Quarter will always remain distinctive, bearing its flamboyant manners throughout the centuries.

### *A Flamboyant Confederacy of Dunces Is about to Have a Meeting*

The novel *A Confederacy of Dunces* will help us understand why New Orleans has won the reputation of being “The Big Easy”, the city where people take things rather easily, where parties and flamboyant characters replace working hours and serious conduct. Our character, Ignatius J. Reilly, will make a triumphant entrance from the very first page:

“ A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor cap Ignatius J. Reilly’s supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people [...] Ignatius himself was dressed comfortably and sensibly. The hunting cap prevented head colds. The voluminous tweed trousers were durable and permitted unusually free locomotion. Their pleats and nooks contained pockets of warm, stale air that soothed Ignatius. The plaid flannel shirt made a jacket unnecessary while the muffler guarded exposed Reilly skin between earflap and collar. The outfit was acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards, however abstruse, and suggested a rich inner life. Shifting from one hip to the other in his lumbering, elephantine fashion, Ignatius sent waves of flesh rippling beneath the tweed and flannel, waves that broke upon buttons and seams.” (Toole, 1980: 13-4)

This rather exquisite look will mean only trouble for Ignatius. But I should properly introduce him now in order for us to understand his social standing in the New Orleans society: in the previous outfit he is waiting for his mother to finish shopping at the local store. Although he has graduated the university and has an MA, he is still living together with his mother and refuses to work, since ordinary people cannot truly appreciate his efforts. He is rather an “intellectual” (although he dismisses any form of [post]modern intellectualism), staying at home, reading (preferably Boetius, his favourite Middle-Age writer), writing his journal and also a book about the failures of the century. Thus one could easily label him as an eccentric intellectual who has nothing in common with our city.

And still: while waiting for his mother, a policeman wants to arrest him due to his exotic appearance. His explanation is indeed relevant when talking about New Orleans: “ ‘To tell you the truth, he looked like a big prevert.’ ‘A Pervert, huh?’ the sergeant asked greedily. ‘Yes’, Mancuso said with new confidence. ‘A great big prevert.’ ‘How big?’ ‘The biggest I ever saw in my whole life’, Mancuso said, stretching his arms as if he were describing a fishing catch. The sergeant’s eyes shone. ‘The first thing I spotted was this green hunting cap he was wearing.’ [...] ‘He got away. This woman came out of the store and got everything mixed up, and she and him run around the corner into the Quarter.’ ‘Oh, two Quarter characters’, the sergeant said, suddenly enlightened.” (Toole, 1980: 28). Obviously they were heading towards the French Quarter, the ill-famed New Orleans neighbourhood. In the eyes of the police the two, mother and son, cannot be but some of those famous hustlers, “two Quarter characters” – and one knows that one has to expect the worse when talking about these kind of people.

Another woman, a decent citizen, tells about Ignatius' look: "His outfit was a little bizarre. I thought he was a performer of some sort when I first came in, although I tried not to imagine the nature of his act." (Toole, 1980: 31). Every citizen of New Orleans knows that the local people are renowned for all kinds of "performances", that they may be either rehearsing for Mardi Gras or working in some infamous place where such a presence is required. At the same time neither the police, nor the citizens, are shocked about what they see: they take it as it is, because being a New Orleansian implies a certain degree of flexibility (when it comes to exotic characters).

Given the circumstances, Ignatius is shocked by the attempt of the police to arrest him:

" 'Is it the part of the police department to harass me when this city is a flagrant vice capital of the civilized world?' Ignatius bellowed over the crowd in front of the store. 'This city is famous for its gamblers, prostitutes, exhibitionists, anti-Christians, alcoholics, sodomites, drug addicts, fetishists, onanists, pornographers, frauds, jades, litterbugs, and lesbians, all of whom are only too well protected by graft. If you have a moment, I shall endeavor to discuss the crime problem with you, but don't make the mistake of bothering *me*.' " (Toole, 1980: 15)

His knowledge of the New Orleans underground proves to us that, in the 1960s, when the novel was written, the scene hadn't changed much: the same old gamblers and prostitutes were having a decent living back in the old quarter, while the police did the best they could: nothing. Patrolman Mancuso, the one attempting to arrest a mother and her son, stands for the local police, unable throughout the centuries to do something about any type of criminals. The headquarters will force him to take the most ridiculous disguises, to patrol the whole quarter in search of a real criminal. And though his intentions are good, he cannot come out of the situation which the local police has witnessed for centuries: he is simply unable to spot the "bad guys", even if he meets them on every street and every corner. Instead, he is very good at bowling, a sort of correspondent of the good, old gambling policemen used to practice.

Although Ignatius J. Reilly pretends to loathe the city, he cannot leave it. His only attempt to go for a trip beyond the city limits proved to be a disaster. The place offers him, a man with large horizons, every detail that he could find in the "outside" world, it has all the ingredients of a metropolis. And although he refuses to admit it, he is a part of the city, playing trumpet and lute as any true New Orleansian would, enjoying the life of the streets (even if only in order to criticize and "deconstruct" it) and the dubious characters.

His mother, Irene Reilly, is the very voice of the city: " 'Oh, Miss Inez', Mrs. Reilly called in that accent that occurs south of New Jersey only in New Orleans, that Hoboken near the Gulf of Mexico. 'Over here, babe.' " (Toole, 1980: 16). The language of New Orleans is indeed having a personality of its own: the words and the way in which they are uttered could not be traced in any dictionary: " 'He's proolly somebody's grampaw.' [...] 'I am, [...] I got six granchirren all studying with the sisters.' " (Toole, 1980: 17). The conversation between Mrs. Reilly and Miss Inez has also its own local touch: the ladies, wanting to prove that they are familiar with each other, enter the world of lovers' talk, without realizing it: their names simply vanish in front of sweet words as "darling", "precious", "sweetheart". It is the old language of the streets that they carry in their blood, a local inheritance which was meant to last.

The old gentleman who is so proud of his six "granchirren" is Mr. Claude Robichaux, a very "local" character due to his name. He stands for all the history of New Orleans, its French roots, as do his grandchildren: they are educated, as in the old days, with the "sisters", i.e. Ursuline sisters, the very definition of New Orleans decency and morals. Mr. Robichaux, on the other hand, is always afraid of "them communiss" – they are, for him, like a new sort

of plague that threatens the city, an ideological equivalent for the old fear: the Voodoos. He probably never read anything about them, since his spelling of the word is extremely charming: just like you hear it. For him almost anybody might be and even is a communiss: he will finally ask Mrs. Reilly to give up her son, himself obviously a communiss, if she wants to spend the rest of her life with him. And she will, dutifully, obey.

On their way out from the sight of the police, mother and son end up in an establishment in the French Quarter, *The Night of Joy*. Here works a young girl, Darlene, who is only trying, for the moment, to make customers drink (just like the ladies who worked at Tom Anderson's club used to do – because prostitutes were not allowed to serve drinks in any other place than their own). But she is not satisfied with her present work, dreaming to be “an exotic”. She will finally convince her employer, Miss Lana Lee, to allow her to present her new number: she, dancing with her parrot, which undresses her. Her stage act reminds one of the Oyster Dance, so famous in the old days, an exotic number indeed of a girl “dancing” with an oyster.

In order to convince Lana Lee about the importance of such an act for the business, she decides to study the papers advertising nights of joy: “ ‘Look in the paper, Lana’, Darlene said. ‘Almost every other club on the street’s got them an animal.’ Lana turned to the entertainment pages and trough Jones’s fog studies the nightclub ads. [...] ‘Look at this. They got a snake at Jerry’s, got them some doves at the 104, a baby tiger, a chimp...’ ‘And that’s where the people are going.’ Darlene said. ‘You gotta keep up with things in this business.’ “ (Toole, 1980: 117-8). The city will, apparently, never forget its fame of exoticness and will reinvent itself with every new century. The whole “zoo scene” reminds one of Emma Johnson’s old animal-shows, where even King Carol of Romania was seen to attend (the witness was not sure if he had become a King at that time – see Rose, 1974: 158).

Because the act does not seem refined enough for Lana Lee, she decides to add a more local twist to it:

“ ‘This act could become her theatrical masterpiece. That bird had star quality. We get you a big plantation dress, crinoline, lace. A big hat. A parasol. Very refined. Your hair’s on your shoulders in curls. You’re just coming in from a big ball where a lot of southern gentlemen were trying to feel you up over the fried chicken and hog jowls. But you cooled them all. Why? Because you’re a lady, dammit. You come onstage. The ball’s over, but you still got your honor. You got your little pet with you to tell it goodnight, and you say to it, ‘There was plenty beaux at that ball, honey, but I still got my honor.’ Then the goddamn bird starts grabbing at your dress. You’re shocked, you’re surprised, you’re innocent. But you’re too refined to stop it. Got it?’ “ (Toole, 1980: 232-3)

The old plantation days, when balls were dictating young ladies’ lives, are revived in the middle of the twentieth century: you got to give the audience what they want to see and it is the old glamour of the slave-era that they are missing. What Lana Lee apparently forgets is that she has a black working for her, Jones, who, at the sight of the act, charmingly comments: “Now we really back on the plantation.” (Toole, 1980: 233). He was employed by her because the police regarded him as a possible criminal and she, realizing his delicate situation, pays him the minimum she can. Jones, on the other hand, does not feel that he became a member of the community, but only that he enjoys now “a nigger job [i.e. sweeping the floors for Lana Lee] and nigger pay.” (Toole, 1980: 66).

John Kennedy Toole’s depiction of Jones as the spokesman for the coloured people is indeed charming. Having a moment’s rest Jones leafs through *Life* magazine, given to him by Darlene, explaining that the magazine helped her developing: “Jones tried to plow through an

editorial about American involvement in the Far East but stopped midway, wondering how something like that could help Darlene to become exotic, the goal that she referred to again and again. He turned back to the advertisements, for they were the things that interested him in magazines. The selection in this magazine was excellent. He liked the Aetna Life Insurance ad with the picture of the lovely home that a couple had just bought. The Yardley Shaving Lotion men looked cool and rich. That's how the magazine could help him. He wanted to look just like those men." (Toole, 1980: 66-7). In a world where he was depicted as the "bad guy" all his life, Jones has no other choice but to identify with the white men: society has taught him that they are the only ones who can enjoy good housing and a luxurious life. On the other hand, all the ads of the time were exclusively white: there was no *Ebony* magazine giving sound advice about curly hair and good creams for a black skin. However, Jones does not give up sarcasm and tries to "take it easy", like any New Orleanians would:

"Hey! You sound just like the Lee mother. Too bad you two ain met. She love you. She say, 'Hey, boy, you the kinda fool oldtimey nigger I been lookin for all my life.' She say, 'Hey, you so sweet, how's about waxin my floor and paintin my wall? You so darlin, how's about scrubbin my tawlet and polishin my shoe?' And you been sayin, 'Yes, ma'm, yes, ma'm. I'm well behave.' And you been bustin your ass fallin off a chandalier you been dustin and some other whore frien of her comin in so they can compare they price, and Lee star throwin some nickel at your feet and say, 'Hey boy, that sure a lousy show you puttin on. Han us back them nickel before we call a po-lice.' Ooo-wee. [...] Ain that fine. Whoa! I never go to school more than two year in my life. My momma out washing other people clothin, ain nobody talkin about school. I spen my time rollin tire around the street. I'm rollin, momma washin, nobody learnin nothing. Shit! Who lookin for a tire roller to give them a job? I end up gainfully employ workin with a bird, got a boss probly sellin Spanish fly to orphan. Ooo-wee. [...] I'm workin in modren slavery." (Toole, 1980: 142-3)

Toole finds the perfect language for Jones, the vivid language of the street, but in which no trace of minstrelsy can be felt. His replies are always genuine: he indeed stands for the African-American who grew up in back-o-town, lacking education and guidance and thus forced to indulge in the little box with his own label (carefully added by the white men, just in case someone wants to change the boxes between them): "I already finish your flo. I turnin into an expert on flos. I think color cats got sweepin and moppin in their blood, it come natural. It sorta like eatin and breathin now to color peoples. I bet you give some little color baby one-year-old a broom in he han, he star sweeping his ass off. Whoa!" (Toole, 1980: 178).

Ignatius, on the other hand, has the perfect white answer to the situation of the African-Americans. His comments about the influence of jazz are like old excerpts from *The Mascot* or *The Picayune*: "In my innocence I suspected that the obscene jazz issuing forth from the loudspeakers on the walls of the factory was at the root of the apathy which I was witnessing among the workers. The psyche can be bombarded only so much by these rhythms before it begins to crumble and atrophy. [...] Obviously continual response to the music had developed within them an almost Pavlovian response to the noise, a response which they believed was pleasure. [...] I must admit that my body moved with surprising agility; I am not without an innate sense of rhythm; my ancestors must have been rather outstanding at jigging on the heath." (Toole, 1980: 133). Suddenly aware of the background he has inherited, Ignatius recognizes that jazz and its rhythm is part of his New Orleans inheritance and that, even if he wants to dismiss it, it comes back to him at rather awkward moments. Accordingly, he starts to identify with the black race, while tracing, in his own humour, their common

element: both Ignatius and the coloured people exist “outside the realm of American society” (Toole, 1980: 134).

After a car accident, Mrs. Reilly sends her son to work. He firstly works for Levy Pants, but succeeds to start a riot in the factory and is fired. He subsequently revives old New Orleans when he starts to work as a street vendor, selling weenies from a cart he pushes around the neighbourhood. He is sent after his first days of work to the French Quarter – his response redefines the area one more time:

“ ‘What?’ Ignatius thundered. ‘Do you think that I am going to perambulate about in that sinkhole of vice? No, I am afraid the Quarter is out of the question. My psyche would crumble in the atmosphere. [...] The French Quarter, an area which houses every vice that man has ever conceived in his wildest aberrations, including, I would imagine, several modern variants made possible through the wonders of science. The Quarter is not unlike, I would imagine, Soho or certain sections of North Africa. However, the residents of the French Quarter, blessed with American ‘Stick-to-it-tiveness’ and ‘Know-how’, are probably straining themselves at this moment to equal and surpass in variety and imagination the diversions enjoyed by the residents of those other world areas of human degradation.” (Toole, 1980: 221; 237-8)

He is even more outraged when the owner of the company forces him to dress in a pirate outfit: *gumbo ya-ya* pretends that the pirate Lafitte owned a house in the French Quarter, which is always pointed out as such to the visitors – although it is certain that he never lived there. Ignatius’ own commentary about the whole situation brings back to our memory forgotten lines of the New Orleans history: “[M]y pirate costume [was] so great a success that it had apparently convinced him [the owner of Paradise Vendors, Incorporated] that we were back in the golden days of New Orleans when gentlemen decided matters of hot dog honor at twenty paces.” (Toole, 1980: 240). And he proves to be a real good imitation of the pirate, since all the tourists in the Quarter want to have their photograph taken together with him – the modern variant of witnessing history.

While working in the middle of exoticness he meets Dorian Green, a flamboyant homosexual in search of the old, funky spirit. His views on the city are very poignant: “ ‘Oh, what a fun this has been: you’re a gypsy. Tommy’s a sailor. The marvelous policemen’s an artist.’ The young man sighed. ‘It’s just like Mardi Gras, and I feel so left out. I think I will go home and throw something on.’ “ (Toole, 1980: 264). For him New Orleans has kept its old spirit alive, encouraging any kind of behaviour as long as it is out of the norm: “That’s what’s so wonderful about New Orleans. You can masquerade and Mardi Gras all year round if you want to. Really, sometimes the Quarter is like one big costume ball. Sometimes I can’t tell a friend from a foe.” (Toole, 1980: 268).

The Quarter has indeed preserved much of the old spirit: while they are having the conversation, another character is hiding in the St. Louis Cathedral: it is the man who does the errands for Miss Lana Lee (packages containing pornographic pictures) and who hides in the same cathedral where the Ursuline sisters were preaching for sinners and where Marie Laveau was having her catholic prayers. Everything revives the past here, one way or another.

Ignatius is invited, after the previous conversation, to a party at Dorian Green’s house, where three girls are not particularly fond of him and start to fight like in the old days. They will be, in the end, arrested by the police like the charming ladies we have read about in the nineteenth century. People do not change in the Quarter, and neither do old habits die. New Orleanians still sit on the banquette until midnight because their houses are too hot; street vendors still contribute to the continuous sound of the streets; in the back-o-town live the

same coloured people, in the same precarious conditions; people still remember duels, exotic dances and pirates; and *the gumbo ya-ya* is more present than ever.

Not even the houses have changed:

“Some prosperous gentleman had built the house in the late 1700s to house a ménage of wife, children, and spinster tantes. The tantes had been stored up in the attic along with other excess and unattractive furniture, and from the two little dormer windows in the roof they had seen what little of the world they believed existed outside of their own monde of slanderous gossip, needle-work, and cyclical recitations of the rosary. But the hand of the professional decorator had exorcised whatever ghosts of the French bourgeoisie might still haunt the thick brick walls of the building. The exterior was painted a bright canary yellow; the gas jets in the reproduction brass lanterns mounted on either side of the carriageway flickered softly, their amber flames rippling in reflection on the black enamel of the gate and shutters. On the flagstone paving beneath both lanterns there were old plantation pots in which Spanish daggers grew and extended their sharply pointed stilettos.” (Toole, 1980: 320)

The identity of the people is as confusing as that of the old buildings: Ignatius is depicted as a Magyar (due to his piratical look) by Dorian Greene’s friends, while a Spanish (or Mexican) girl working at the *Night of Joy* sees him from her point of view: he is rather “Latin”. In New Orleans people will always see in their neighbours all mixtures of blood and, for one time, they may even be right. One could hardly depict somebody or something that is missing in this city.

And even the newspapers seem to have remained the same. After arresting Lana Lee and her pornographic crew (obviously by mistake) our policeman is extremely proud of himself; but not so Mrs. Reilly (because “by accident”, as all things happen to Ignatius, he was also part of the scene that evening): “ ‘Read what it says underneath the pictures, boy.’ Mrs. Reilly stuck a finger into the newspaper as if she meant to lance the photograph. ‘Just read it, Ignatius. What you think people are saying on Constantinople Street? Go on, read that out loud to me boy. A big brawl out on the street, dirty pictures, ladies of the evening. It’s all in there. Read it, boy.’” (Toole, 1980: 348). As any true New Orleanians, what she worries about most is the voice of the neighbours, whispering behind her back. She obviously does not understand that this voice is the city itself – it stands for what New Orleans has always been over all the centuries. And this is the sort of inheritance that one cannot dismiss so easily. It was the *gumbo ya-ya* that created the city and made it so exotic and different in the eyes of the others. And it will also be the one telling every single story, past or present – so that one day it may be written down, in the blank pages of history.

*A Confederacy of Dunces* reflects perfectly the different aspects of New Orleans: the back streets filled with flamboyant characters, exotic appearances who are born at dusk, a language which embodies the very soul of the city. And from all these arises Ignatius J. Reilly, the character who takes life as it is, who rejects the city, but only in order to redefine himself in the very terms of New Orleans itself. He is the “Big Easy”, the one who surveys the streets, with all their vice and virtue, desperately trying to find virtuosity among the local sinners. In the end he gives up his search, preferring to watch them fascinated from the side, while his homosexual acquaintance praises the “Mardi Grarian” aspect of life in a city that needs no more definitions, that stands for everything that is out of the ordinary. And yet so charming, in its own kind of way.

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