

An Interpretation of Blanche's Tragic Fate in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

This paper mainly focuses on Blanche's personal factor and social factors that caused the tragic fate of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* written by Tennessee Williams. The illusion of Blanche is one of the author's delicate creations. On the one hand, Blanche wanted to go after a new life and true love; on the other hand, she was not scared of confronting the fact of life. The division of her individuality led to her tragic fate. Blanche was a victim of two vicious systems: feudalism of the old South and capitalism of the rejuvenated union. The moral standard and value of life made her incapable of doing something. She regarded men as the anchor for her life and lacked resolution to live in the society. Finally, she was dropped by men as well as the society.

Key words: Blanche; Tragic fate; *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is a world-known play-writer following after Eugene O'Neil. He vivified the middle period of the 20th century and occupied a primary place in the theater production of America. Williams set his plays' background in Southern America, while the forcing manner on theme in his plays pushed them worldwide,

giving him a large audience and tumultuous applause. As a prolific playwright, Tennessee Williams is especially honored for his several famous plays, of which *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an indispensable one. It was written in 1947 and was one of the masterpieces in American drama history in the 20th century.

Stories and plays are rooted firmly in Williams' life. He has poured his soul into them. His use of set and setting, of lights, music, screen projections and so on in the play remain as fresh as they are original. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is such kind of play which is a story of damaged people. It discovers the soul of modern man and concerns about of modern people's spiritual life. In this play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the tragic heroine Blanche Dubois is a faded Southern belle, who is dismissed from her teaching job in Auriol, Mississippi, and disgraced in her hometown. So she seeks solace and refuge with her married sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski who are living in New Orleans. However, Blanche and Stanley have different values and life styles. To revenge Blanche for making mischief between him and Stella, Stanley is determined to bring Blanche's discredited past to light. From then on, Blanche has been subjected to the torments mentally and physically, which results in her nervous breakdown finally. Based on the thought above, this essay is centered on the causes of Blanche's tragic fate.

2. PERSONAL FACTORS

As a Southern belle of aristocratic origin, she was born and grew up in her beautiful "Belle Reve", where the Southerners are very romantic. After suffering deaths and other destruction, she is on the verge of lunacy. She feels insecurity and wants to find protection and her lost dream all the time. Having failed in getting protection, she is always absorbed in her own world of fantasy and daydreaming. For Blanche, fantasy is a way to escape

a world of reality, which she feels dissatisfied with. So she could only rely on illusion to comfort herself and make up the gap between what she hoped and imagined and the reality. Her illusion was the methods to escape from the actual situation. And her desires and self-esteem could only come true in a particular way, namely, in her illusions. She was so dependent on her illusions, so the moment her illusions were shattered, the tragedy would begin to burst.

At the beginning of the play, Blanche impresses the reader as the image of a white, graceful Narcissus. She has been thirty-year-old and has lost her youth, her husband, her inheritance, her home, her employment and nearly all her family, but she still dresses herself as a graceful lady. Having nowhere else to go, she has to arrive in New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella because Stella is the only person she could depend on. Though Blanche is in such an embarrassing situation, she still arms herself with her pitiful daydreams and her ladylike behaviors. In her world of fantasy, she is still a Southern belle, who is as beautiful as lily-white Narcissus. She even daintily dresses herself "in a white suit with fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district" (William, 2009, p. 3). For Blanche, she dares not accept the fact that she is old and has no charm for men though her beauty is fading with ages. When she first sees Stella, she says to her: "let me look at you.... glare!" (William, 2009, p.6) After meeting Mitch, Blanche told Stella she wanted to "deceive him enough to make him want me" (William, 2009, p.55). Through it, we can have a major insight into Blanche's illusion on man. But Blanche has learned from her mistakes from husband and honestly gives an effort to take it slow. She tells Stella that she would get hold of herself and make her a new life. In Scene Nine, when Mitch comes to see her, Blanche "rushes about frantically, excited her breath is audible as she hiding the bottle in a closet...is so excited her breath is audible as she dashes about" (William, 2009, p.83).

Blanche's hope in a future with Mitch rests in his believing in her strongly enough to make her fantastic words reality. But Blanche's last hope of getting love is shattered. Mitch's act of turning on Blanche's light explicitly symbolizes his extermination of the fake persona she has concocted. He realizes that Blanche's deceptions have relied on the obscure reality. Blanche's breakup with Mitch forces herself to be immersed in illusions, not the other way around. After Mitch leaves, Blanche sits before the mirror, places a tiara on her head, and speaks out loud, flirting with imaginary suitors. She speaks of boozing and carousing after a late-night party. Suddenly a glance at herself in a hand mirror upsets her, and she angrily smashes the mirror. Defeated, she tells Mitch that she has viewed him as a cleft in the rock of the world that she could hide in. A little later, she compares

her past to "an old tin can on the tail of the kite" (William, 2009, p.88). Of her soldier boy-friends, Blanche remarks as "the paddy-wagon would gather them up like daisies" (William, 2009, p.89). The strangest one is her hope that Stella's baby will have eyes "like two blue candles lighted in a white cake" (William, 2009, p.79). These improper images show the reader some hints that Blanche is at least a little abnormal in her mind. She must have belonged to an illusionary world, in which those images are unexpected for the normal people in reality. Whatever Williams may have intended, Blanche Dubois is trapped by the poverty of her imagery which reflects the poverty of her dreams, which also predicts her tragic fate. Because this illusionary world of Blanche is so fragile that it will collapse at the first blow, it can only be depended on the "kindness" of people around her. Unfortunately, Blanche is challenged and destroyed by a strong antagonist, Stanley Kowalski, whom she correctly views as her executioner.

All in all, Blanche is a dreamy type, a neurotic. She is a tragic figure in the play. Whenever she finds the opportunity, she looks to the sky or moon as if she is not a being of this earth. After her fatal encounter with Stanley, she gets ready to be sent to the mental hospital and says: "I can smell the sea air. The rest of my time I'm going to spend on the sea. And when I die, I'm going to die on the sea. You know what I shall die of? I shall die of eating an unwashed grape one day out on the ocean." (William, 2009, p.102) All the romantic imagination mentioned above shows Blanche's flight from a world of reality.

3. SOCIAL FACTORS

Firstly, and most obviously, Blanche's plantation origin marks her as the Southern aristocrat. Blanche grows up in the transitional period from the old to the new. At that time, the South America dominates the plantation economy. Secondly, after the Civil War, black slaves are given the so-called liberation, but the plantation economy does not die, and its shadow has been shrouded on the people. Though Blanche's parents do not have slaves, they still have a manor. As a plantation owner's daughter, Blanche whose life is very rich and whose heart is full of tranquil, has received good education in her early age with a certain romantic and hedonistic outlook on life. The superiority of the southern plantation makes her live in a worry-free life. Even before Blanche appears on the stage, Williams informs his audience of her southern belle qualities. He shows that Blanche's beauty must avoid strong light, immediately giving his audience the expression that Blanche is a soft creature who must be prevented from life's harsh realities. More of Blanche's southern belle attributes come to light in the play's opening scenes, for Blanche has expectations to be treated like a queen. Her southern belle traits show up vividly in

this play. In it, Blanche advises Stella to leave Stanley. She cannot understand why her sister, who had been raised southern plantation just like herself, has married such on a grand, modern, abrasive, dominating male. Blanche doesn't stop insulting Stanley's lack of manners. However, she goes on to state that there is something subhuman about him, telling Stella that he is more like a caveman than a modern human. With the family's financial problems, she begins to feel the pressure of life for her, realize that life is not perfect. However, because she always believes in the sincerest heart, she cannot immediately accept the ugly side of life. Successive blows exhaust her physically and mentally, and Blanche becomes lonelier and lonelier. Feeling depressed and alone, Blanche wants to break through the fetters. Subconsciously she wants to restore the previous carefree life. Two extremes suffer great for such a weak woman. Blanche could not find a better way to live in such a simple world. All of a sudden, she is not able to accept such big difference psychologically and mentally. For her, she could not face the ugliness in the life directly. So, she needs protection and barriers to cover up the weakness of the heart. Perhaps because of fear, Blanche needs someone to accompany. It seems to be the only way to fill the emptiness, that is, intimacy with strangers. Blanche is resorted to such extreme sexual liberation, but results to a tragic fate. Because of her bad affairs with her student, she is cast aside, and is dismissed from public office. She has nowhere to go. In Scene Two, Blanche makes a comment about Stanley to Stella: "Oh, I guess he's just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume, but maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve." (William, 2009, p.25) Blanche's statement suggests that, under normal circumstances, Stanley would be an inadequate mate for a member of the DuBois clan because of his inability to appreciate the subtler things in life, whether material or spiritual, jasmine perfume or poetry. And, DuBois family can no longer afford luxuries. Since Blanche and Stella no longer belong to the Southern elite, Blanche recognizes that Stella's child unavoidably will lack the monetary and social privilege that she and Stella enjoyed. The South in which Blanche grew up is a thing of the past. Like Stanley, Stella's child may lack an appreciation for perfume and other fineries, but Stanley will likely teach him some survival skills that Blanche lacks. The fact that Blanche's lack of survival skills ultimately causes her downfall underscores the new importance such skills hold. Williams ever depicted the episodic construction of the play in this way, to keep it "on the tracks in those dangerous, fast curves it made here and there" (William, 2009, p. 93). Blanche's tragedy can be exactly seen as a tragedy of that time. Williams harbors a theme by composing this play to express the controversy between the Old South and New South. Blanche stands for the Old South. She is gentle and romantic, while Stanley interprets the crude forces of

violence, vulgarity and insensibility. A brutal new order of the New South rises up sharply. Hilditch (Kolin,1993, p. 54) remarked the play is actually a classical study about the destruction of a romantic protagonist committed to the ideal but living in the modern age, a broken world, a wasteland growing... more animalistic. So the conflict between Blanche and Stanley is a sort of collision between two opposite cultures. The traditional and old culture was bound to decline and disappear under the impacts of the modern and new one. Thus, Blanche's tragedy would arise inevitably and she was just a victim of American cultural conflict.

Blanche cannot endure Stanley's rudeness and impoliteness. As a typical gentlewoman growing up under the influences of the Southern traditional thoughts, she was disgusted with Stanley's vulgar behaviors. She was used to putting all the men in the fixed modal of Southern gentleman. However, Stanley had been using his actions to subvert Blanche's values, such as, taking off his clothes casually without regard to Blanche's feeling and implementing violence and brutality to Stella, which was in violation of Southern traditions. However, as a vulnerable woman, Blanche was not able to defend for her ideas and concepts. In the New South, physical strength and wealth seemed to be more feasible than the morality. Stanley, with well-developed muscles and reckless personality, would not make his so-called enemy Blanche's any thought have their way, which was just as the modern industrial economy would not make the traditional plantation economy have any development. Thus, Blanche's failure in the fight with Stanley can attribute to the fading of a kind of backward culture. Being different from Blanche, Stella is assimilated by a new culture completely. Facing Stanley's egregious behaviors, she reflects them with the attitude of tolerance and tacit acceptance. So, in New South, blending into the new culture was the most fundamental condition for survival, while Blanche had always been in opposition since arriving in New Orleans. Though Stella, as her only relative, nearly forgave Blanche's inglorious past and encouraged her to pursue a better future, she did not accept any substantial ideas of Blanche. Most of the time, she took the perfunctory attitude at Blanche who was out of tune with the new culture. Therefore, it was better to remark Blanche as a victim of cultural conflict than an unfortunate individual.

Arriving in New Orleans, Blanche encountered the other two important men in her life, namely, Stanley and Mitch. Yet, the blow they brought to Blanche could also not be underestimated. Getting to Stanley's territory, Blanche had no other choice but to live with him and had to be subject to his rule. Stanley had a very strong sense of domination, and believed that any woman around him whether his wife Stella or someone else had to obey him. He never submitted to woman's romance

and coquettish beauty. He tended to go after the feeling of reality. Conforming to his feeling from the heart and satisfying his unlimited desires were his optimum needs. Blanche who always strove for the exquisite lifestyle was bound to be defeated by Stanley's random and impulsive temperament. In the days living together with Stanley, Blanche was as humble as a humble servant, while Stanley had always acted as a high-ranking king. In the meantime, the only thing making her feel gratified was her fortunate encounter with Mitch, whom Blanche could entrust the rest of her life to, while Stanley betrayed her to Mitch. Mitch had no scruples about their affections and deserted her resolutely. Thus, Blanche fell into despair and never stepped out of the darkness again.

CONCLUSION

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche is a personality who has got access to the virtual world of the American people. By the tragic fate of Blanche and her disappointed fight for love and new life, Williams revealed the dilemma of the southern women were facing with and expressed tremendous sympathy for them. In this play, Williams also described a world which is governed by men, in this world the females are perceived as a group that can be served as men's contentment in sex and self-approval of their domination in current society. Furthermore, the notions of society restrict the ideal women for marriage. Blanche was regarded as a woman who was immoral and had no right to get married.

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire* solves no questions; it draws no conclusion on ethical issues. It is only the ruthless description of Blanche Dubois. She might be part of the most tragic characters in those modern plays. Actually, there is nothing except desperate love, horror, and faint and powerless whoop in this play. With his distinctive way of writing plays visual language, and thematic preoccupations, the author demonstrated the tragedy of Blanche by depicting her mental breakdown, thus conveyed his compassion for the southern women's misfortune in the period of social transition, and focused the readers' attention on the fate and situation of southern women in America.

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