

# An Analysis of the Conflicts in *Thunderstorm* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

## ANALYSE DES CONFLITS DANS *L'ORAGE* ET *UN TRAMWAY NOMME DESIR*

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**Abstract:** This paper probes into the uncertainty of human destiny and the inadequacy of human capacity in coping with complex circumstances through the analysis of the external and internal conflicts that are imposed on the two women characters, Fan Yi in Cao Yu's *Thunderstorm* and Blanche in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Through close analysis of the all the elements of the conflicts, the paper points out that though the two women protagonists try every means to survive in an indifferent and cruel environment and pursue their passion for love, freedom, and independence, their constant conflicts with unconquerable force that come from social ethical codes and patriarchal ideology prevailing in their societies, they are incompatible to this force. Thus we can conclude that it is their internal conflicts that bring them constant suffering and lead to their inevitable tragic end.

**Key words:** external conflicts, internal conflicts, struggle, personality, disillusion

**Résumé:** L'article présent explore l'incertitude de la destinée humaine et l'insuffisance de la capacité humaine face aux circonstances complexes à travers l'analyse des conflits externes et internes qui sont imposés sur deux héroïnes : Fan Yi dans *L'Orage* de Cao Yu et Blanche dans *Un tramway nommé Désir* de Tennessee William. Après l'analyse minutieuse de tous les éléments des conflits, l'article indique que bien que ces deux protagonistes fassent tout pour survivre dans un environnement indifférent et cruel et poursuivent leur passion pour l'amour, la liberté et l'indépendance, leurs conflits constants avec la force insurmontable qui vient des codes éthiques sociaux et l'idéologie patriarcale prédominant dans leur société, elles sont incompatibles avec cette force. Ainsi, nous pouvons conclure que ce sont leurs conflits internes qui leur entraînent la souffrance constante et conduisent à leur fin tragique inévitable.

**Mots-Clés:** conflits externes, conflits internes, lutte, personnalité, désillusion

### INTRODUCTION

Both *Thunderstorm* by the Chinese famous playwright Cao Yu and *A Streetcar Named Desire* by the American playwright Tennessee Williams are epic plays that reveal the uncertainty of human destiny and the inadequacy of human capacity in coping with complex circumstances. As it is suggested in both plays, the heroines, Fan Yi and Blanche, are passionate women with strong personalities that constitute their strong desire for love and freedom—a high goal in their life that is supposed to be fulfilled through their own struggle. However, because of their ignorance about the complexity and cruelty of the reality and their irrational indulgence in their passions for love, hatred, revenge,

and desire, they encounter contradictions in their fulfillment of their goals that throw them into endless conflicts with reality. Their lack of adequate knowledge and irrational perception about complex situation as well as their inner conflicts only induces misery and downfall to themselves. Analysing the two female characters, we find how each of them become frustrated and disillusioned in their struggle with the reality.

### 1. EXTERNAL CONFLICTS

External conflicts are the important elements that control the lives of Fan Yi and Blanche and bring about great contradictions to them. Though both Fan Yi and

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\* Received 3 December 2006 ; accepted 6 March 2007

Blanche possess some noble features in their personalities and have somewhat lofty social backgrounds, their destiny is doomed from very beginning. Like most Chinese women at the beginning of the 20th century who come from rich and educated families and women from American well-to-do families in the 20s of the 20th century, Fan Yi and Blanche are desirable women who are passionate, bold, and proud, filled with youth and vitality. Fanyi is sensitive yet strong. She is open to new ideas, looking for freedom, love, happiness, and independence. As her son Chong says about her: "You're not just an ordinary mother. You're the most courageous, the most imaginative, the most sympathetic of mothers--sympathetic to my ideas" (Cao, p. 81). However, Fan Yi's desire for freedom, and her vitality are repressed in the Zhou's house. We can have a glimpse of her sorry condition from what the playwright Cao Yu writes about Fan Yi: "Her passion is a fire which would never die out, but God simply let her grow in the sand,... Although she is proud, she has to beg for her living in a sewer" (Cao, p.13 ). Compared with Fanyi, Blanche has been a romantic and lovely young girl who used to live in wealth and luxury. Like Fanyi, she is also well-educated, poetic, passionate and courageous. Unlike Fanyi, whose destiny has been decided by others from the very beginning and who was tricked into the Zhou family, Blanche has a mind and a body of her own and she has stepped in to the Stanley's home voluntarily. There is a quality of strength, persistency and a hard determination in her unsettled, untamed, desperate personality. She has come to the New Orleans to search a new life that she expects would upgrade her from her former sins and revive her morality, which will probably assure her of love that she has lost and always cherished. However, both Fanyi and Blanche suffer the same pitiful fate under the patriarchal monarchy. The former lives in the harness of the Chinese traditional doctrine of "three obediences and the four virtues", in which her husband is the oppressor; the latter, Blanche, lives under the pressure of her former guilt and the social rules, in which her brother-in-law Stanley is the tyrant in the family.

Though Fan Yi is proud in nature and has a fantasy for life, she is in constant conflict with the feudal ethical code, with her husband and step-son, and with her own passionate nature. The moment she is "tricked" into Zhou's family, she faced the reality that frustrated her and threw her into endless suffering. She has to stay at home like a prisoner in jail, with no right to associate with people outside of the family. She has to beg for her living in a sewer. Fan Yi says to her son Chong: "Don't think I'm your mother. Your mother died long ago. She was crushed and smothered by your father. After all these eighteen years of misery in this soul-destroying place, this residence of the Zhou family that's more like a prison, married to a hateful tyrant" (Cao, p. 80). In Zhou's house, Puyuan is the only authority. His will is the law which may not be violated by any one in the house. Under his tyranny, Fan Yi's passion, her desire for freedom, and her vitality are repressed in the Zhou

house. The scene of Zhou Puyuan makes Fan Yi drinks medicine is the climax of conflicts between the oppressing and the oppressed. To Zhou Puyuan, to make Fan Yi obey him is more important than her taking the medicine. To Fan Yi, to sustain her dignity and identity is somewhat more difficult than earning a decent existence. When confronted with her husband, all she can do is to resort to other members in the family for help. Considering Zhou Ping her spiritual support, she expects Ping to help her and protest against his father, as her son Chong did; but she is only disappointed when Zhou Ping goes down on his knees and "persuades" her to drink the medicine. Such humiliation and insult makes Fan Yi indignant but helpless. Fan Yi's indignation and frustration are further reinforced by Zhou Ping's betrayal to her. In the increasing conflict between Fan Yi and Zhou Ping, we see the approaching of Fan Yi's tragedy, as Zhou Ping is the person who follows his "father's heroic example and throws over the one person who really understands and loves" him. Zhou Ping's seduction of Si Feng without knowing that she is his half-sister involves Fan Yi in a set of extremely complicated and abnormal human relationships and conflicts that finally crushes her.

As to Blanche, Blanche shows her courage by stepping right into the new environment and begins her adventures in the new world full of evils and danger. However, in all her ignorance of the complexity of the reality in the New South, she fails to foresee the force that shatters her dream and finally destroys her. The moment Blanche steps out of the streetcar named desire and into her sister's home, she is brought face to face with an ugly reality which contrasts with her beautiful dreams and fills her fragile psyche with horror, uneasiness, and frustration. She finds the place where her sister and her brother-in-law live cramped, foul and ugly, completely different from what she expects. Her sister's crazy life with the brutal Stanley shocks her. Even the shouting of the venders gets on her nerves. But the real threat to her illusion of a mean existence comes from the malicious Stanley, who represents the cruel reality. "Stanley represents the amoral force of nature, irresistible in its attraction, an animal incarnation of Dionysus and symbol of unbridled lust. The center of Stanley's life is said to have been 'pleasure with women'. His vengeful spirit and savage brutality are reflected in Stanley as he tracks down Blanche's corrupt past and cruelly destroys her with its exposure" (Thompson, p. 39). With ill intentions, Stanley strips Blanche of all her romantic pretensions and reveals her attempts to disguise her true nature. What's more, because of Stanley's ill act, her soul-mate, Mitch, with whom Blanches intends to revive her fantasy of her youthful love, dumps her after the Stanley exposes to him her sinful past and convinces him of her unworthiness. As to Stanley, his need to preserve his complete authority at home drives him to take delight in the power of hurting Blanche, whose presence seems like a threat to his authority. In all his mercilessness, he gives her the bus ticket to return to Laurel where she

comes from. Blanche cannot stand up to this kind of attack. She has been humiliated by Mitch, and now she is being forced out of her sister's home. But Stanley will not stop here. In Scene 10, her fantasy is destroyed by the intrusion of harsh reality and the broken mirror anticipates the forthcoming disintegration of Blanche's already fragile psyche.

## 2. INNER CONFLICTS

Compared with the external conflicts they are confronted with in their maneuver of their fantasy and their struggling, inner conflicts in both Fan Yi and Blanche are more remarkable and yet devastating. Had Fanyi and Blanche been average women with a peaceful mind of soul and modest desire for their life they would have been easily compromised with the world in which they live and live a peaceful life till the end. However, the untamed character in their personality has made this supposition out of the question. Both women have a passion like a fire which would never die out, and would try every means to nurture it, regardless of social ethical laws, or even at the cost of their lives. To Fanyi, her incestuous act with her step-son is a revelation of her suppressed passion and a means of revenge on the patriarchal oppression in her circumstances. To Blanche, her seduction of the 17-year-old boy and her sexual involvement with strangers are the embodiment of her indulgence of her sexual desires and smothering of a lonely heart. However, both of them cannot avoid their tragic fate of being treated badly by people and depressed by the society in which they are living. In such a stifling atmosphere they cannot get a breath of freedom. As to Fanyi, passion as a most remarkable characteristic in her personality is suppressed from the very beginning of her marriage and will be initiated and released once there is such stimulus. As to Blanche, passion is all the context of her living that she will take no efforts to suppress it, as it has brought her all the psychological content and sexual pleasure that are imbedded in her life. Both Fanyi and Blanche take pains to let their passion grow.

Fan Yi is bound by the feudal ethical code and is prepared to resign herself to a life of loneliness and meaninglessness, when Zhou Ping steps into her life. Zhou Ping stirs her cooled heart and throws her into a great passion of love regained. Fan Yi considers Ping her spiritual support, as Blanche sees Mitch, and clings to him persistently and painstakingly. It is her illusion that Zhou Ping will bring her hopeful future in life and give her freedom, respect, and dignity, which have been deprived of her by her husband. Unlike Blanche, who sometimes has her own insightful vision of reality, Fanyi is completely blind to the complex situation and totally neglects the possible consequences of the reality and indulges herself in her passion of love, which, in view of ethical standards, is incestuous and

unforgivable. Probably she has been so deeply involved in her passion that she can not rationally reason out the consequences, or, she does not care at all what reality will bring to her. When Zhou Ping shifts his love to the maid Si Feng and confesses to her that he has been troubled by his conscience for having committed an act betraying the confidence of his father, Fanyi does not look at things that way. She tells Ping, "I don't regret it. I've never regretted anything" (Cao, p. 147). It is her belief that with her self-assurance and persistency in her character, she can win out in the end, without caring what disaster will bring to herself or to other people. Here, the image of a courageous but ruthless woman is presented to us. When disillusioned, her intense love turns into hatred, then finally turns into revenge. The turning point occurs when she learns that Zhou Ping is going to Lu's home to meet Si Feng, she cannot control her jealousy and follows him and shuts the window to block the way out for Zhou Ping. As I see it, her act of shutting the window is symbolic as far as her relationship with Ping is concerned, in that she completely shuts down her hope for the future with her own hands. She tries to arouse his sympathy for her as an ill-used and forlorn wife, but her plea falls on deaf ears. Desperate and angry, she recalls his oaths of immutable love made in moments of passion, but Zhou Ping is disgusted by her reminder of a past that he wants to forget. However, she makes one final effort and pleads with Zhou Ping to take her away with him, even agreeing to let Si Feng live with them. She even turns to her own son Chong for help. But to her surprise, Chong agrees that Si Feng should leave with Ping. After all these reconciliatory efforts have failed, Fan Yi warns Zhou Ping that she will not bear being wronged by two generations of Zhou's. Since it is a hot, suffocating summer afternoon, Fan Yi dismisses Zhou Ping with an ominous and symbolic remark: "All right, go then! But look out, now, the storm is going to come" (Cao, p. 149).

As to Blanche, her horrible experiences of early life fill her heart with misery and make her suffer, as her short marriage has left her nothing but painful memory of regret and guilt that haunts her all her life. Despite the fact that her reputation has been stained by her former sins, she still cannot get herself out of the indulgence of her passion for lust and love on the assumption that "she must pretend to be the innocent romantic in order to attract men, she hides her past, her age, and her sexual appetites" (Tischler, p. 52) for the purpose of her adaptation to a completely new environment that endows her with a combination of emotions: hope, excitement and fear. "Blanche, out of loneliness and desperation, rationalizes everything she does until she can assure herself of a motive that involves charity or nobility in an expression of her dainty exquisite self. Her life has become loose in the most degraded sense, but she clings to an elegance to which she insists her taste and sensitiveness entitle her" (Hawkins, p. 27).

In coming to New Orleans, Blanche attempts to

escape memories of a past that has brought her both happiness and miseries, and transcend the guilt-haunted soul of her former sins. However, her fantasy is mingled with her unhealthy passions and makes her contradictory with the reality. Her memory of her first love and her former experiences keep haunting her all the time that she fails to forget it but descends deep and deeper into her fantasy. Though she has lost her dignity and even identity in her past experiences, she drags with her all the airs and pretenses which are meant as a means of her survival in the new environment of New Orleans. She tries to retain her nobility through her graceful behavior, eloquent speech and her occasionally insightful vision of reality. She is addicted to strong drinks, cigarettes, and long baths. Her ritual cleansing restores Blanche to a state of former innocence. Her obsession with the dimness of lights serves as the symbol of reality that she dares not to face with rather than the means to hide away the signs of aging of her. It is probably her wish that reality should be cloaked in illusion.

As she cannot find a healthy way of dealing with reality, she pursues her fantasy with abandon without trying to suppress her passions. As love is an embodiment of her passion which is so dear to her and has haunted her all the time, Blanche nevertheless attempts to possess a romantic present through the "magic" of the imagination. As she confesses to Mitch: "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (Williams, p. 545) Her relationship with Mitch is greatly romanticized by her as Mitch is a mere shadow of her youthful dreams who makes up the loss of her youthful romantic love. Her association with Mitch revives her original desire for love, but brings her mingled emotions of tenderness and frustration. Her lust for the paper boy is also the revelation of her romantic fantasy and her sexual desire as "she hopes for deliverance from her destructive sexuality by reenacting as fairy tale the sordid reality of past experience, but no story she tells can save her from herself" (Thompson, p.38). Her confrontation with Stanley gives her complex emotions: both fear and attraction, which reveals "the dual world of Blanche's existence and the tension between Blanche and Stanley" (Corrigan, p. 86). Stanley demonstrates that reality is as brutal as she fears. She has no choice but to retreat totally into illusion.

Both of Fanyi and Blanche suffer their tragic fate as a consequence of the shattering of their illusions by cruel reality. As to Fanyi, the man she hates controls her life, and the man she loves betrays her. As to Blanche, the man she hopes for rejects her, and the man she despises takes her by force.

### 3. STRUGGLE AND DESTRUCTION

Reality has stripped away both Fanyi and Blanche's illusions and forces them to face animal reality. Though

reality has set up obstacles in their fulfillment of their dreams, their passion for life and love does not subside. On the contrary, they become more furious than before. In this sense, both women can be said courageous, for they would never give up easily until the very end, even at the cost of their own lives, or the lives of other people. In *Thunderstorm*, Zhou Ping is the brutal person who shatters Fanyi's dream while in *Streetcar*, Stanley is the true embodiment of such brutality. However, when we consider the purposes and approaches involved in their struggling, we can find great difference in Fan Yi and Blanche: Fan Yi struggles to win her love where her passion is directed and indulged while Blanche struggles simply for a mean existence.

Fan Yi has been showing courage and strength in revolting against patriarchal oppression and daring to break the bonds of tradition to fight for her happiness, risking universal condemnation. Fan Yi starts to revolt against his autocracy by telling Ping that his father is "the biggest hypocrite of the lot", and that he is his father's illegitimate child. When Ping mentions that his father's family is a respectable family, Fan Yi retorts furiously by blaming her husband for his cruel oppression: "Father! Father! To hell with your father! From you of all people! Eighteen years I've been in this respectable family of yours. I've heard all about the sins of the Zhou's ---and seen them ---and committed them myself. Not that I've ever considered myself one of you. What I've done I've done on my own responsibility" (Cao, p.135).

Fan Yi's actions, which are propelled not by her mind but by her feeling, conform to her words. Her way of struggling is through revenge. When cruel reality gradually unfolds before Fanyi, she is driven into extremes. Out of despair, she sets out to destroy the love between Ping and Si Feng by revealing the shameful secret between Zhou Ping and herself to Zhou Puyuan and the family. By this time, the only thing on her mind is revenge. This is a woman for whom love and hate are extreme, in whose nature strong love mingles with cruel hatred, as we have seen above. Her final action unexpectedly exposes the incest between Zhou Ping and Si Feng, and results in her own son's death, as well as the death of Si Feng and Zhou Ping. Her revenge not only reveals her ruthless feature of her character, but also exposes her frustration in face of reality that has driven her into maliciousness.

Fanyi's passions of love, hate, and revenge show that she is incompatible with cruel reality. Her incest with her stepson can be regarded as protest regardless of the consequences; her revenge, like "a cornered bear will still fight", shows her willingness to go to extremes. When she loves, she loves with a fiery passion, and when she hates, she hates fiercely, with a hatred which can destroy. Thus her indignation at, and contempt for, the Zhou finally erupts like a volcano, destroying the entire Zhou family and herself along with it.

Blanche, though as courageous and ruthless as Fanyi,

is more sensitive and tactful in dealing with the circumstances she confronts in reality. Unlike Fanyi, her perspectives of struggle are for the purpose of existence, without any intent of hurting other people. However, like Fanyi, as a frantic and trapped woman, she is still proud, still determined to survive. Her chief means in her struggle is pretenses and deception. At the beginning of Scene IX, after being attacked by Stanley, she anticipates the disaster closing in on her. When Mitch appears, Blanche senses “something’s the matter”, and resorts to the tactic of pretending that “nothing had been discovered”. Even as Mitch begins to confront her with the truth, she seeks to brush aside anything that is bothersome. She wants to pretend everything is fine. She also lies about things that concern her. But she is not a malicious liar; she lies from weakness, from immaturity, from a fear of reality. She tells Mitch that she speaks of the world as it ought to be, and as people would prefer it to be. She lies because she has a taste for a fantasy life better than her reality.

Fragile as her psyche is, Blanche does try to fight her battle with Stanley, though her struggle appears so weak and fruitless that she can hardly avoid her tragic fate of destruction. In Scene 4, unable to persuade Stella to leave Stanley and flee with her, Blanche launches the attack on Stanley by depicting him as ape-like and primitive. Her act only extends the conflict between her and Stanley to a struggle for the preservation of civilization itself. When confronted with Stanley, Blanche’s first impulse is to manipulate her charm and beauty to win him over. Through her flirtation with him, we can find that she does show her attraction to him in the beginning. Then, when she is insulted by Stanley, she tries to challenge him by belittling him. However, when she finds it hard to reconcile with Stanley, she resorts to her sister and tries to persuade her sister to leave him and stay with her somewhere else. Her action is just a revelation of fear of facing crude reality, symbolized by Stanley, and also a revelation of another side of her character, selfishness. In Scene 10, when Stanley begins to approach Blanche, she tries to avoid him. She breaks a bottle, trying to use the top as a

weapon to fight against his intrusion. So far Blanche is at the end of the rope and finds reality so horrible and intangible that she puts herself at Mitch's mercy. She asks him to save her, and he refuses. When he leaves, so does Blanche's last hope at salvation. Thompson points out: “Blanche transforms her own degradation into a romantic courtship ritual of hope and promise; and by the dignity with which she confronts her end, she imaginatively restores to her shattered psyche and debased identity the romantic roles of “Queen” (Thompson, p.27). Being forced to face the kind of reality that she refuses to recognize as significant is the cause of Blanche’s breakdown.

Their struggle with the external forces are measured heroic and outstanding, but their internal conflicts cause their inevitable tragic end. In other words, Fan Yi and Blanche’s misfortune comes not just from outside, but mainly from within—from their irrational passions and their ignorance of the real situation of the reality. The solution for both Fan Yi and Blanche is going mad.

## CONCLUSION

As what the two plays reveal, the female protagonists are in constant conflicts—both external and inner, which brings their fantasy in fierce confrontation with cruel reality and finally makes them disillusioned. Though, Fan Yi and Blanche exert great efforts to pursue their passion for love, freedom, and independence, their maneuvers are in constant conflict with unconquerable force that come from social ethical codes and patriarchal ideology prevailing in their societies. Though strong in their character, Fan Yi and Blanche are not compatible to this force and become crushed, both physically and mentally. If we say external conflicts are the elements that bring them great obstacles in the fulfillment of their soul’s goal, it is their internal conflicts that bring them constant suffering and lead to their inevitable tragic end.

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