



An Explanation on Blanche's Tragedy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Received 14 February 2014; accepted 30 May 2014

Published online 25 June 2014

Abstract

This paper mainly focused on the character and social origin that caused the tragedy of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* written by Tennessee Williams. The personality of Blanche is one of the author's fantabulous 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. *A Streetcar Named Desire* proposes an incisive comment on the way institutions and manner of postwar America imposed restrictions on women's lives, and also demonstrates the embarrassing situation of Southern women in contemporary society.

Key words: Blanche's tragedy; Streetcar; Desire

Zhang, Q. (2014). An Explanation on Blanche's Tragedy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 8(3), 106-110. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/4885>
 DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/4885>

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is a famous playwright 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. "While O'Neil was the tragic dramatist and Miller remains the theatrical of the ethical, Williams emerged as the poet of the heart (Elia, 1963, p.370)." 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.

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire* depicts the degeneration of a Southern beauty whose name is Blanche Dubois. Blanche, who was formerly a teacher, arrived at New Orleans and look for shelter to her sister Stella. Blanche is scornful of her sister's living environment. Blanche's insolence aroused the immediate hatred of her sister's husband named Stanley Kowalski. Stella left her patrician family to search for the sexual satisfaction gained from Stanley, and even got pregnant with his child. At poker's night, Blanche unconsciously annoyed Stanley. Stanley cast the radio out of the window and also hit his lover Stella hard. However, Stella came back to Stanley and hugged him with passion as he cried and called for her forgiveness. The next morning, Blanche attempted to persuade Stella to stop her relation with Stanley. But Stanley was wrong with hear their conversation. He began to make an investigation on Blanche and knew her notorious past. And this had made Blanche depressed. When Blanche's relationship with Mitch was progressing, Stanley informed her disreputable past to Mitch and Stella. Mitch chose not to forgive Blanche and finally left her. Blanche was mentally collapsed. At that time, Stanley committed criminal assault to her and even sent her into bedlam.

Williams had used a perfect plot line in *A Streetcar Named Desire* which is constituted by "opening situation", "complicating circumstances", "apparent success", then "the flaw discovered", "thickening clouds", "sudden catastrophe", and "after math". To a certain degree, a person's personality could decide his final fate. The contradiction in Blanche's personality results in her

difficulty in adjusting to the so-called “complicating circumstances”. She made a virtual world that can disguise the “flaw” and created an illusion of “apparent success”. But when her “flaw” was exposed, Blanche got a “sudden catastrophe”. From this perspective, this play could be seen as a spiritual tragedy and the “complicating circumstance” had caused the heroine’s tragedy. The “flaw” is an obvious and a permanent feature of Blanche. She could not avoid this feature despite the fact that she had been trying to create a new life for herself. It is the society that finds her “flaw” and makes her to suffer the pain again. Therefore, to some extent, Blanche’s fate can be called the tragedy of society. Her tragedy stems from her contradictory character and the cruel society.

1. BLANCHE’S PERSONALITY RESULTING IN THE TRAGEDY

Blanche was living in a southern plantation and was educated in a traditional way. When she was little, her character was kind and innocent. She was in the expectation of a beautiful future. But with the declination of her whole family Blanche began to feel the hardships and could not confront the reality and the injustice of her life. The first thing stroke her was that her husband Allen, who was once a kind and pure man, was discovered to be a gay. When she discovered that, she got extremely astonished because of her innocent attitude toward sex and the puritan morality. When her husband turned to her for an excuse, she scolded him by saying his behavior “disgusted” her. Her words finally resulted in Allen’s suicide. So Blanche had been punishing herself from her deep mind from that time. At the same time, Blanche’s whole family suffered a sequence of incidents. She was tortured by all these misfortunes that made her gloomy and she could not face with the sharp drop in her life. Blanche expected that she could do away with these bounds and has a new life that is carefree. These factors made her to be detained in an unbalanced states.

In her struggle, Blanche had chosen a wrong way unfortunately. She began to have intimate relationships with strange men due to the simple idea. Blanche wanted to fill her emptiness as well as punish herself. She fought against the tradition via her sexual relations with men. The innocent personality of her leads her to easy believe in men and rely on men to resolve all the problems of her life. Contrary to her hopes, she could not make up the hurt she had suffered although she had gained temporary

happiness. Moreover, she gradually lost her fame and possession owing to her behavior and was treated as a dissolute woman. Then she was expelled out of her hometown and was going to live with her sister’s house. Despite the fact that she was located in a bad circumstance, she still hunger for a bright future.

Nevertheless, Blanche could not evaluate the current situation correctly in a different circumstance. She often went extreme which indicates her contradictory instinct. On the one hand, she had a rational attitude toward the current situation. For her tomorrow and her sister’s benefit, Blanche tried to do what she could. She tried carefully to explain the loss of Belle Reve to Stanley, preventing the conflicts between Stanley and her; she had gained an insight into Stanley and suggested her sister to leave him. She also shared mutual tastes with Mitch and loved him courageously. On the other hand, she established an illusion to escape her from the actual world. If she met something dedicate, she always sang herself into the illusion to alleviate her pains and search for comfort. Besides, she still wanted to retain her past image in the expectation of enhancing her confidence. Nonetheless, the miserable past life often turned up in her mind and made her hysterical.

The split of her personality made her incapable of making right options when facing the reality. She clung to her southern cultural character and behaved her picky styles. While in a brand-new circumstance, her style is no longer a rational way of life. After she came to her sister’s home, she implied her sister that her life is of a low standard. She rejected Eunice’s kind suggestions and was not patient with other’s kindness. Actually, she was fearful that she would be deceived and hurt for another time. Blanche cares too much about the other’s views of her since she was looking forward to obtaining other’s acceptance and concealing her past. When her sister required her to “volunteer the information-if you want to tell me”, Blanche replies: “you thought I’d be fired? ...I was too exhausted by all. . . suggested I take a leave of absence” (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1826). Thus we can conclude that Blanche’s heart was hurt for another time by her sister’s question. Blanche asked whether there was any liquor and said that it can release her from stress. Blanche rambled in her statement in order to keep her little confidence and prevent her from being hurt again. She had concealed her miserable past and anxiety, so her sister could not know it and offer her help timely, and her sister didn’t even speak to her in the end of the play.

Williams had successfully characterized Blanche’s brittle, sensitive and innocent personality which caused the tragic fate of her. She is sentenced to be rejected by the society since she could not be accepted by the society. Regardless of the fact that she had attempted to demonstrate a new image, her contradictory personality made her incapable of confronting the actual world

and establishing a new perspective of life. She strived positively for other's respect, but she was not confident with herself. Therefore, the tragic fate of Blanche rests with the complex experiences under her complex personality.

2. ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL ORIGIN WHICH CAUSED BLANCHE'S TRAGEDY

2.1 Blanche's Reliance on Men

Blanche represents the typical southern gentlewomen. When she was wearing her ball gown at the outset of the scene ten—a whimsicality which instantly precedes the most prosaic and cruelly verbal of degeneration (Rape)—she was ageing southern beauty attempting to recall a time now past. She was a representative of her culture and social background, a symbol of a lost generation.

The rules and regulations in the plantation indicated the decisive role of men in the routine life and production. The women in the plantation had to make a living by relying on males and the asceticism which is a doctrine of puritan still exists in their minds. In brief, the gentlewomen were content with their current status in a society which is characterized by men. With the declination of the plantation regime, the gentlewomen and their men had lost their fields, possessions and social status. Their casual life was gone forever and it is difficult for these women to adjust to the new and cruel situation. They always cherished the memories of their affluent and conservative life before.

Under the historical background, the life of Blanche had changed a great deal. When she was a little girl, she had considered the southern gentlemen as a shelter and regarded her former husband Allen as an ideal figure. Nevertheless, as a puritan, she could not accept that her beloved husband was homosexual. It is a nightmare that she could not get rid of. After her husband had committed suicide, Blanche finally lost her spiritual reliance. She did not look to be independent and was looking forward to a brand-new life by relying on men. The feeling of loneliness made her hunting for men's protection, even in a 17-year-old young man. It is obvious that she could not obtain the sincere love and pleasure by having intimate relationships with strange men.

Caught in an inherently corrupt body, she drank liquor as a way to abreact her pain, and her compulsive bath was lifted to a rite of baptism: "*Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, feeling like a brand new human being!*" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1832). It was not only an aspiration for a new life, but also her hunger for marriage. And Mitch was her right man. She loved him very much and established an imaginative world in order to get his trust:

Stella. I want his respect. And men don't want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly,

especially when the girl is over-thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to -the vulgar term is-'put out.'... I want to deceive him to make him-want me. (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1850)

Blanche had hoped that Mitch could be an anchor for her life. If Blanche's relation with Mitch got failed, she might confront a situation that provides few prospects for a financially bankrupt, widowed woman who was near the middle age. Although she admitted that she had played an important role in her husband's suicide to her beloved, she still hides her real age and the whole past which gave rise to potential problems in her later life.

After the poker's night, her sister Stella's passiveness was countered by the distortion and conversion of Blanche's pursuing for resolutions to what she considered as Stella's dilemma. Blanche is determined to get in touch with a former boyfriend named Shep Huntleigh, who was a Texas oilman, while the irrationality of her opinion was clarified when she attempted to form a Western unification message by using an eyebrow pencil on a facial tissue. Though Blanche reckoned that her sister's husband was a cruel marauder, she was impulsive to turn to another man as a rescuer. There was a delicate irony in her reflexive reversion to the Southern beauty's customs of thinking--psychological reliance on paternalism of protection by men for the unaided women. Just the time after she had said, "*I am going to do something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new!*" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1844) The desperate property of her status is evident in her mental intentions to make herself believe that the chivalrous males still exist in the world. Shep Huntleigh was once a wooer of Blanche. In Blanche's mind, Shep was an ideal figure of a chivalrous man who was rich and noble that was proper for her to rely on. Although Shep was married at that time, she had wished he could offer her economic support which could help Stella and her escape from Stanley. After a while, as Blanche's mental state worsened, she got an illusion that Shep was on the verge of take her away became all too real for her, despite the fact that he never appeared.

In the last scene Blanche regarded the doctor as the savior she had been waiting for a long time. Despite the fact that he is not the type of person as Shep, Blanche thought he was. Blanche's reliance on the kindness of strangers but not on herself can be made clear that she has not managed well in her life. Blanche found a way to save her honor despite everything and become the type of women she had been making a great effort to be. Blanche regarded the doctor to be a gentleman who knows all about how to respect a woman. We can note that it is an easy procedure to regard him as the rescuer upon whom Blanche had been conditioned to depend on.

The figure of Blanche shares some similarities with Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*: They were both southern beauties who have grown up on the plantation;

both of them had experienced the imminent war and lost their families and possessions. However, Scarlett could adapt to the Southern society when the war came to an end and then she strived to get back to Tara. On the contrary, Blanche was lacking in the skills to survive and soaked her in the illusion of the old Southern brilliance. Social tradition of the old South had depraved Blanche thoroughly and she was vulnerable to the rule or invasion by men. As a matter of fact, strangers were only keen on having sexual relation with her and Blanche paid heavily for it: residents in Laurel expelled her out of her hometown; Stanley and Mitch did not show any sympathy to her. "*The one that says the lady must entertain the gentleman*" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1853), it indicates the Blanche's tragic destiny that she was not difficult to be abandoned by men.

2.2 Blanche's Cultural Travel

Blanche was the outcome of the old southern economy of the plantation. She took over the standard behavior in the older South culture from her forefathers. However, the cultural possession she held was harmful to her indirectly. As a puritan, Blanche was not in a position to forgive her husband's homosexual relationship with others and this had caused his suicide indirectly. Furthermore, Blanche inherits her ancestors' hypocrisy and obscurity over sex. Their "*epic fornications*" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1834) had given birth to the poverty of the young generation and the missing of Belle Reve. Such being the case, Blanche began to degenerate either due to "*panic*" leading her to "*hunting for protection*". Because of her evil reputation, Blanche was expelled out of her hometown; she became a sufferer of Puritanism under which she was brought up. Because Blanche was not just a withered remnant of Southern gentility, she was intently avoiding a world which she couldn't command and had done something terrible to her. She had stuck around during a long time of deaths in her family; every death gradually deprived her of strength and put her prospect into loneliness. Blanche's marriage with a charming boy who anticipated her for spiritual safety was destined from the very beginning; even though she had been a super girl, she couldn't have rescued it. In order to survive by instinct, Blanche went to Stella's home in New Orleans. Her sole aim was tantamount to seek a new life for herself in a different place. Nevertheless, New Orleans was not the right perfect place she was hoping for. The Elysian Field was a discomfiting, awful place featured by noisy environment, filled with the hoarse sounds of the street vendors selling tamales; the continuous rhythms of the honky-tonk "*blue piano*" the human sounds of brawling and of breathless hysterical laughter. Blanche came to the brutal environment which characterizes the law of the jungle. Kazan wrote in his rehearsal notebooks: "*Blanche come into a house where some are going to murder her...*" (Elia, 1963, p.366)" 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*" (Tennessee,1978)."

In a sense, Blanche and Stanley were fighting for Stella and Mitch--all of them would want to pull them beyond the reach of the other. However their conflict was more fundamental and was running through the entire plot. Actually, they represented two inconsistent forces--manners and manhood. Blanche was the representative of the Old South's intelligent romantics and commitment to appearances. Stanley stood for the New South's cruel chase after prosperity and financial realism. Blanche was once the holder of an estate left behind by her father and a highly educated woman; while men like Stanley, Mitch and Steve were workers and they knew nothing but alcohol, women and fight. Robert Bray regarded this transfer of papers blending with bloodiness as a crucial conceptualization in the development of the institution of society from the old South, loaded with its past, which was stood for by Blanche, to the postwar era and urbanized and industrialized society in which Stanley's hierarchy had showed influence.

In the face of a surprised guest, Stanley asked the affairs in his stride. His utterance amounted to nothing more than joyous vulgarity. His self-righteous exchange with Blanche indicated him to be callous--he scarcely allowed Blanche break in when he evaluated her beauty quickly; as Blanche passes the pokers, she greeted in a polite way: "*Please don't get up.*" Stanley broke her up: "*Nobody's going to get up, so don't be worried*" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1836); the fact that Stanley coarsely took all of Blanche's possessions out of her luggage demonstrates that his trampling on the degenerating old South culture which Blanche was standing for. At the poker's night, Blanche turned on the radio and started dancing with Mitch. Stanley stood up, rushing to the radio, and cast it out of the window. Stella shouted at Stanley and was hit by him; Stanley also defied Blanche's in this way:

You come here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray and cover the light bulb with the paper lantern, and to and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p.1872)

The criminal assault in Scene Ten was a symbol of the ultimate extermination of the old South's elegant illusion world by the brutal but vivacious present. Blanche's cultural benefit was repulsed in each place and she was in a gloomy statue which was unrecognized by others. She had no proper place to live and no outlet to abreact her sufferings; she could wait for nothing, but the ultimate tragedy in the end.

Blanche' tragedy was either the outcome of the vicious system--the feudal regime of the old South, and she was also the sufferer of the other system: the capitalism of

the regenerated unification. She was living in an age in which the conventional moral force was mighty. The moral standards of pilgrims indicated autarchy in every respect of life, which had a profound influence on Blanche's later life.

Blanche remains prisoner to the traditional notions about the women of the old cavalier South: economic dependence was the order of the day, and so women like Blanche were ill-equipped to survive in a changing world by any means except physical attractiveness. Blanche attempts to use her fading good looks to win the hand of a charming suitor. ... Blanche must keep a proper balance, being 'gay' enough to entertain and entice the gentlemen caller without being so sexually forward as to turn him away. Affecting charm and manners, she pathetically tries to keep alive a way of life that has been lost. (Thomas, 1990, p.40)

With the declination of the manorial economy, she still attempted to adapt to the unfamiliar but ruthless society by her patrician manner. People did not show any sympathy to Blanche's experiences; instead, they considered her as another kind of person of a different culture. She needed the concern from others, but finally running into loneliness; she wanted affection from gentlemen, but only being conceived by the actuality. She entrusted wishes to her fascination and manners to make her dreams are achieved. Nevertheless, the society did not give her opportunities, but only transforming her, controlling her, and ultimately leading to her destruction. Kazan once said: "The crude forces of violence, insensibility and vulgarity crushed the representative of light and culture." (Thomas, 1969, p.176).

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 forceless 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 the 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 the America.

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