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Quest for Identity in Tennessee Williams "*The Streetcar Named Desire*"

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Abstract: The 20th century generation, especially the one, which finds itself drowned in the oozy ocean of the Second World War trauma, is reluctant to show any kinds of belonging to the existing perturbed world. It finds its soul and mind fettered and shackled in the dark dungeon of alienation. This sense of alienation creates nothing more than nostalgia for the days, which are no more. This study is an attempt to have deep journey into the disturbed and alienated worlds of the characters of Tennessee William's '*A Streetcar Named Desire*', which are in constant quest for identity. The study tries to display the tragic plight by presenting a contrast in Blanche's life. Earlier in her life, she had been a gentlewoman, whereas the action of the play shows her gradual disintegration into an aging destitute, who has become alcoholic and nymphomaniac. The study tries to fulfill its purpose through two worlds represented by Blanche's parental home at Belle Reve and her sister's home at New Orleans.
Key words: Alienation; Identity; Disintegration; Nymphomania; Nostalgia

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INTRODUCTION

The decades of the 1950's can be labeled as transitional and also the crucial one in the history of modern America. The Americans, like people of many countries of the world had not fully recovered from the shattering experience of the Second World War. The faith in the human institution as such had been lost. The increasing disintegration of family-institutions was obvious. As Hooti & Rashidy (2010, p.1-2) comment:

> Every day we pass one another on the street, yet we do not know each other, and we least bother to enter into relationships. We seem to have lost the sense of communal life as we seem to be phobic to sociability. Eventually, it leads to a world of isolation, a world where man finds himself separated by the cemented barriers of indifference.

In the face of dominant issues such as labor strikes, the feminist movement, the Korean war, the conflict in Vietnam, the civil-rights movement, McCarthyism and the cold-war between the Power Blocks, the Americans felt disillusioned and insecure as they had been, during the 1930's and during the second World War. Thus, the post-war generation was completely disillusioned.

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The loss of self and the quest for it has been the pervasive theme in contemporary American literature. Though the problem of the quest for identity was very much there even in the nineteenth century, or even much before, the contemporary writers seem to work out new equations. The contemporary concept of the 'self' branches out into philosophy and epistemology. Western literature and philosophy had from the beginning to wrestle with the problem of the dichotomy between the polarities such as intellect and intuition, reason and emotion and as a corollary, art and life.

Catholic philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel seemed to find no way to resolve the dichotomy. Interestingly, this problem branches off ultimately into the polarities of self and society. And since the contemporary civilization is technological, the individual self is threatened with the loss of identity. Freudian thought conceives personality as a series of tentative psychological states. Consequently, it is very difficult to postulate a permanent self. As a result, in the ultimate analysis, the quest for self-knowledge and by implication, integration becomes still more complex. The concept of self remains ambiguous and rendered more so by Freud's assumption of sex as the unilateral propelling force behind human activity. It reduces self to the quest for self-gratification. Similarly, from the anthropological and sociological points of view, identity is co-related with status, age, sex, family, profession and nationality. All these and some more categories actually define the external milieu but do not solve the problem of identity.

This predicament which is peculiarly modern, has been recognized by European phenomenologists, the most outstanding being Heidegger and Garbriel Marcel. They maintain that this problem is, as John Edward Hardy says (Shastri,1988, p.2), essentially one of, ''defining the connection between one's inward experience or being, one's wish, one's private desire to be and the strange compulsive meaningless duty merely to maintain existence in the community of material needs.''

Gabriel Marcel (Shastri,1988, p.2) describes this dilemma as "a result of deep historical causes which can as yet be understood only in part…." As a result, according to Gabriel Marcel (ibid), the individual "has been led to see himself more and more as a mere assemblage for functions." Man must therefore, define himself in terms of a community of selves.

The search for identity assumes a new relevance in the writings of Sartre and Camus. The philosophical implications of their thought, articulated in drama, fiction and philosophical tracts have been a powerful factor in American literature. The conception of the hero, especially in American drama shows a deep philosophical involvement with the currents of existential thought. The common feature, which the American dramatists and the existential writers share, is the anxiety about the absurdity of contemporary life. As such, the concept of despair forms a recurring pre-occupation together with the attempt to find ways out of this. As in the existential view, man's personality is determined by his innate, intrinsic dualities. And if these dualities are in conflict with the roles, which the society expects the individual to play, the inevitable result will be suffering. This suffering is borne along. But it is significant that this is the very source of the quest or the search for knowledge and identity. As Freedman (Shastri, 1988, p.3) aptly points out:

> Personality is suffering. The struggle to achieve personality and its consolidation are a painful process. The self-realization of personality pre-supposes resistance; it demands a conflict with the enslaving power of the world, a refusal to conform to the world. Refusal of personality, acquiescence in dissolution in the surrounding world, can lessen the suffering and man easily goes that way. Acquiescence in slavery diminishes suffering, refusal increases it. Pain in the human world is the birth of personality, its flight for its own nature.

The problem of quest for self in the western tradition has largely been encountered through a philosophical framework. Consequently, literary works, which posit the problematic of self, are generally analyzed from philosophical/ psychological perspectives. However, modern man finds himself entrapped in various problematic situations in his everyday life, owing to the rise of capitalism and the complexity of social structure. These social factors, which may apparently look trivial, generate several threats to an individual's self. Therefore, the researcher has not addressed the discussion of quest for identity in a philosophical context. The present study examines the search for identity in the concrete materialistic context of man's social existence, instead of theorizing on identity in the abstract jargon of philosophy. The analysis of identity primarily relies on the life situations of the characters in the play

under discussion. As a result, a philosophical discussion of the concept of self has been minimized, in preference to the focus on the multiple situations from everyday life, which play a vital role in the process of self-realization.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first performed in December 1947, two years after the grand success of his earlier play *The Glass Menagerie*. The play ran for 855 performances and won Williams another Drama Critics' Circle Award along with the Pulitzer Prize. Despite the criticism for representing abnormal aspects of human psychology through the characters in the play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* has acquired the status of being a classic text of American literature. The theme of alienation in the play is dramatized through the tragic plight of a Southern widow, Blanche Du Bois, who finds it difficult to come out of her self-sustained world of the aristocratic glory of the past. Williams has depicted the process of quest for identity through Blanche's encounters with the world, where she seems to be a misfit. In presenting Blanche's character, Williams has artistically blended psychological and social aspects of the search for self. The twin influence of psychological and social factors on Blanche's life evokes issues such as withdrawal from reality, guilt, sexual behaviour, gender based encounter and the North-South cultural contrast. Temporality plays an important role in dramatizing the agonizing quest of Blanche for identity in an alien world.

The conflict between illusion and reality is the principal source of irony in the search for identity dramatized in the play. An individual finds himself helplessly marooned in an island of alienation, when he finds a wide gulf between dreams and awakening, as Hartong (2005, p.149) pertinently comments:

> A dream seen from within a dream may not seem to be a dream at all. Things may happen in a certain way and nothing but awakening will reveal the dream to be a dream. When the dream ends, all strife and struggle in the dream to achieve something is recognized as having nothing to do with awakening. Within the dream, getting somewhere may seem an option, but outside the dream all attempts by the dream characters are seen as irrelevant to the natural occurring awakening.

It is possible to argue that the entire play revolves round Blanche's efforts to adjust to her surroundings. All the other characters in the play, in a sense, exist merely to foreground Blanche's crisis of identity, which arises out of her failure to live in a realistic world with realistic notions of life. Blanche is constantly haunted by the distressing memories of her patriarchal home, Belle Reve, which literally means 'Beautiful Dream'. Her origin at Belle Reve is aristocratic, but her present belongs to New Orleans slum. Thus one of the several personality problems of Blanche is her inability to drown the doubly lost aristocratic past; her family estate had been lost by the male members of her family in their "epic fornication." (Browne 1959, p.126) The decline of Blanche's essentially patriarchal family also represents the collapse of the Old South, which perpetrated sexual immorality and violence under the protection of the Cavalier myth. While Blanche's sister Stella could escape the animal aristocratic world of Belle Reve, Blanche was doomed to remain there, only to imbibe certain false aristocratic notions about life, which she could not escape throughout her life.

The action of the play involves Blanche's stay with her sister Stella, who lives with her husband Stanley Kowalski in a two-room apartment in New Orleans. Although both the sisters, Stella and Blanche, exhibit commonness in terms of their escape from paternal authority through their marriages, they differ in their choice of life partners and the differential consequences of their choice. Stella's choice of Stanley is based on passion, whereas Blanche's selection of the poetic Allan Gray is based on her preference for delicacy and refinement. However, to her horror, she discovers that her artistic husband, Allan, is, in fact, a homosexual. Unable to tolerate this shock, she behaves with Allan in an insulting manner, which has a profound psychological effect on him and leads to his suicide. While Blanche is still struggling with her unrealistic notions of life, she incurs the additional burden of guilt for having been responsible for the suicide of her husband. After the death of her husband, Blanche throughout her life seeks to avoid the inevitable fact of human mortality. At a psychological level, desire presents to her the antidote to prevent death. If death symbolically represents the power of time,

Blanche's actions can be read as attempts to neutralize this power, by always seeking younger men as her companions. Her desire for these young men also becomes a psychological weapon to fight death.

Blanche comes to live with Stella at a point in her life when she has been rendered a destitute, after the loss of her parental home 'Belle Reve' and the death of her husband. She had been thrown out of the small Southern town where she worked as a schoolteacher. In the family of her sister, Blanche is engaged in a subtle game of power with her brother-in-law Stanley, who perceives her to be an intruder into his comfortably settled male-dominated conjugal world. Stella rejoices in her physical surrender to Stanley, which presents a contrast to Blanche's own sexuality. In Mitch, Blanche begins to see the possibility of starting a new life. However, Stanley subverts Blanche's prospect of getting married to Mitch. It is also interesting to observe that Mitch is a heavily mother-dominated man and can be seen as a parody of Blanche's first husband. Stanley's perception of Blanche as a disruptive force, which could destroy his power over his wife, leads to a serious consequence for Blanche. Her false pride is demolished by Stanley, partly out of revenge and partly as a measure to arouse her from an illusory life, through an act of calculated rape. In fact, Blanche herself was responsible for provoking Stanley to assault her. This event completely destroys Blanche's ego and her sanity. The rape episode in the play is a significant landmark in Blanche's journey for the quest for her identity'. After the assault she is completely broken and taken to asylum, whereas her sister Stella continues to live with her husband, pretending not to have been affected by what had happened to Blanche.

A Streetcar Named Desire is Williams' dramatic statement on the American life in a wider sense. Through this play the playwright makes visible the power of human instincts, which affect the everyday life of people. It is not a play about passions and desires remote from the common everyday reality. Instead it depicts what every American and in a larger sense, every human being might experience. The tragic plight of Blanche Du Bois in the play becomes representative of American social life more than any epigrammatic slogan.

The power of the play lies in the fact that it erodes the boundary between life on stage and life off the stage. This is because whatever is depicted on the stage constitutes the contemporary reality of American social life.

The play explicitly focuses on feminine psyche in different contexts, giving rise to a dramatic typology of women. On this typology Jones (1961, p.111) writes:

There are basically two types of women in the plays of Williams : the women who are the relics of the moribund traditional of gentility in which Williams himself was reared, women who are unable to accept the twentieth century and who prefer living in the illusive and legendary world of something that never really was – the mythically cavalier Old South; and the healthy, uncultured, basically sensual women, usually of Latin origin, by whom Williams has been attracted in his more recent plays, and who seem to have been conceived by their creator, if not as representatives of a sort of salvation, then at least as attractive earth-goddesses whose salvation is their own sexuality.

Blanche belongs to the first type in the above extract. This is because she always lives in the memory of her aristocratic past at Belle Reve, her paternal home.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams presents himself as a poet of a decadent aristocratic world. The world in Williams' plays is the world of New South, which is predominantly dominated by the aristocrat. Williams' world represents the first generation of Americans and their blue-blooded wives. This is a fragile world, which is characterized by short-lived beauty, animal-sex and aristocratic deviations. Generally the world of South in Williams' plays is the world of frustrated human desires, ambitions, and failures, a world from which success has been skillfully alienated. It is also the world of the past, available only through memory. However, the characters in Williams' plays remain firmly rooted in this anachronistic world of past and refuse to move with the time. When these characters are presented on the stage by the playwright, they have already been damned.

The identity crisis Blanche faces arises due to the men in her paternal home, who had to sell their "epic fornication." Blanche struggled hard during this phase of degeneration of society. Moreover, she was left alone in her father's house after the marriage of her sister Stella. In Blanche's own words "I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it!" (Williams, 1971, p.126-henceforth Williams)

Blanche at once transforms into a representative woman, struggling hard to prevent the disintegration of her own family as well as the society as a whole, on a larger level. However, Blanche too could not sustain this pressure of rapid decay and death and lost the battle for the protection of her paternal home at Belle Reve. The deprivation of truth and intimacy at Belle Reve initiated Blanche's early marriage. On this predicament of Blanche, Sahu (1990, p.79) comments:

> With the liquidation of family, these fragile individuals find themselves exposed to a hostile and rough weather, to an impossible fate. They feel rootless and lonely. They are alienated from their homesteads, from their society, from their old ways of living and also from their own selves.

Thus Blanche's problem is the loss of a self which had been sustained in an aristocratic and extravagant male world, now lost, and her inability to rediscover and redefine herself in the changed context of her stay in her sister's 'happy' conjugal world. As Ashmore, Jussim & Wilder (2001, p.24) comment, ''The need for social comparison is aroused when there is uncertainty about one's standing on some dimension of self-evaluation, uncertainty that can be resolved by comparing one's own position to that of *relevant others".*

Blanche's frustration in life, to a large extent, arises out of her inability to define herself in a feminine paradigm. She seems to always seek a male centre for the definition of herself, which she finds neither in her father's family nor in the man she marries. Holditch (1993, p.140) points out that "for much of her life, Blanche's difficulties stemmed from the lack of a forceful patriarchy". Blanche's male forbears proved weak men, who left behind only mortgage and debt. Blanche seeks to neutralize the weakness of her paternal males by marrying a youth, who unfortunately for both, turns out to be a homosexual. Her unsympathetic reaction to the disclosure of Allan Grey's homosexuality does not so much reflect Blanche's disgust for homosexuality, as it reveals her intense frustration with irresponsible and weak men in her life, both in her father's family as well as outside her paternal relations. At the same time, Allan Grey is also to be blamed for Blanche's strong reaction, because it was Allan who, through his homosexuality, heightened Blanche's insecurity caused by the lack of strong and responsible men in her life. Allan further wrongs Blanche when he exhibits his ultimate weakness through suicide, in reaction to Blanche's telling him: "you disgust me…." (Williams, p.184) Thus Blanche's self is threatened by the absence of adequate male power, which she makes the defining parameter of her identity.

Blanche's psyche frozen in the past is depicted by Williams through her sexuality. After the suicidal death of her lover-husband Allan, Blanche turns into a nymphomaniac. Her sexual behaviour, characterized by promiscuity, can be seen in a dual perspective. On the one hand, it becomes a means of purging her of the guilt of causing the death of her husband. On the other hand, her sexual orgies with younger men become a psychological necessity for her to fight the fear of death. Thus Blanche's nymphomaniac behaviour is not merely a biological characteristic; it reflects her threatened self at a psychological level. In the words of Hirsch (1979, p.32): "sex is Blanche's way of punishing herself for her betrayal of her homosexual husband". Blanche's sexual escapades with the soldiers passing by, culminate in her seduction of a seventeen year old pupil in her English class. As a result of this seduction, she was asked to leave Laurel.

In a sense, Blanche's sexuality depicts not so much her frustration in sex, as her defeat in love. There is a remarkable pattern in her intimacies with strangers, which foregrounds a search for self through sexuality. Blanche always chooses young men as her sexual partners, whether they are army enlistees, high school students or for that matter a paperboy – all are nearly of the same age. The choice of young men symbolizes her desire to retrieve the lost past. She is constantly haunted by the tragedy in her marriage. Through these young men, Blanche makes a futile attempt to travel backwards in time and nullify her conjugal tragedy by hoping for a happy ending in her romantic relationships. Through her sexual encounters Blanche makes a desperate attempt to convince herself of her youth and feminine desirability. In a sense, through her affairs with young men she tries to stop time, which is not only impossible but also unavoidable. Precisely this problematizes Blanche's quest for identity. Her search for self is anachronistic in the sense that she tries to rediscover her identity not with reference to the present circumstances of her living, but through the past, which she has lost.

It is also interesting to observe that the men Blanche seeks are approximately of the age of her husband at the time of his committing suicide. As has been said earlier, in these counters, there is more an element of nostalgia than an absolute lust. For example, in the last scene, Blanche envisions a romantic death at sea while she is under the care of a very young doctor on the ship. Similarly, to her the embarrassed paper boy is "like a young prince out of The Arabian Nights" (Williams, p.174), whereas she looks at soldiers gathered up "like daisies from the lawn at Belle Reve''.(Williams, p.206) But above all, they are " young, young, young".(ibid) It could also be argued that through these promiscuous encounters Blanche seeks to recover that part of herself which was lost when she walked suddenly " into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn't empty". (Williams, p.183) This implies that Blanche's romantic involvement with young men constitutes her efforts to recapture her lost innocence and purity and also her power of empathizing with others, a capacity she lacked while dealing with the disclosure of her first husband's homosexuality. This explanation could present another side of Blanche, eclipsed by her first impression on others as a seductress. In seeking the seventeen year old boy after her "intimacies" with men at Hotel Flamingo, Blanche exhibits a quest for innocence and purity, which she cannot regain. Her act of allowing the young man leave the apartment with his innocence intact, except for a kiss, depicts a kind of vicarious experience of innocence which Blanche has already lost. It is thus clear that Blanche's superficial nymphomania has a deeper subtext of returning to the ideal, innocent and pure past of her life.

Blanche's sympathetic and kind approach to the young boy presents a sharp contrast to her earlier cruel reaction to her husband. She can even be blamed for not responding compassionately to the disclosure by Allan about his homosexuality. Blanche can be seen as caught in a conflict of emotions at the sudden revelation of Allan's homosexuality. On the one hand, she desires to express the essential human compassion towards Allan, on the other, she is filled with disgust for his treacherous act. The result of this inner struggle manifests itself in two ways. First, she tries to maintain a façade and strong personality, by pretending as if nothing had happened. But at the same time, she cannot tolerate this façade of normalcy for long bursts into a tirade aimed at Allan, which leads to his suicide. Blanche's guilt is evident in her own words:

> [Allan] came to me for help. I didn't know that…All I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! … I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself. (ibid)

Thus throughout her life Blanche is unable to get rid of the guilt of having led Allan to suicide.

However, a deeper perspective at Blanche's situation might exonerate her from the self-inflicted guilt of being the killer of her husband. Blanche had almost idolized her husband. She was not mature enough to receive the disclosure of Allan's homosexuality. The revelation certainly came like a blow to her self-esteem as well as her romantic dreams. Her husband's sexual preference for another man meant to her that she was not attractive enough to retain the love of her husband. At her tender age, she can hardly be expected to understand the biological and sexual compulsions of homosexuality. Blanche had always fantasized Allan as someone "almost too fine to be human". (Williams, p.190) This, in turn, meant an undue strain on Allan who was not sure of his masculinity. It is true that Blanche's reaction to Allan was unsympathetic. But at the same time Allan also had expected too much from her, in wanting her to save him somehow. He expected her to provide "a cleft in the rock of the world that he could hide in!" (Williams, p.205) Blanche was not competent enough to fulfill this expectation/ demand of, Allan, because she never had a trusting, frank and intimate relationship with Allan. For her, he was only a fantasy, which was broken.

In her relationship with Mitch, Blanche repeats the basic incompatibility between herself and Allan, with the reversal of gender roles. Here Mitch is younger, being in a similar situation as she was in, with reference to Allan. She seems to have the same expectation from Mitch, as Allan had from her. Thus the playwright had reinforced the element of illusion in Blanche-Allan relationship, by depicting its counterpart in Blanche-Mitch relationship.

The foregoing discussion shows that the most fundamental obstacle in Blanche's discovery of herself is her temporal fixation. She finds herself to be fixed to an ideal world of the past, which has been lost and which can never be a reality again. In other words, Blanche's quest for identity is thwarted by the

wide gulf between the ideal and reality. This gulf can more effectively and rationally explain her sexual promiscuity, rather than a stereotypical and symptomatic labeling of Blanche as a nymphomaniac. In every encounter with a new man, she seeks the "company of love" which she can never get. This is because while entering into a relationship with a new man, she has an ideal image of her lover, which is defeated in reality. In a sense, she continues to seek new men because she finds too many Allans. Blanche Du Bois is not merely an individual character, she transforms into an American legend. She represents the last remnant of a decadent agrarian aristocratic order on the verge of extinction. This decaying world was somehow able to balance its metaphysical and religious pretensions with the demands of the flesh. Blanche represents the obsolete ideal past of a society, which cannot co-exist with the present, whose reality is in sharp contrast with the ideal. She mentally belongs to a highly idealistic world of the past, as a result of which she is unable to adjust to the Naturalistic order of the post World-War II years, represented by the urban New Orleans. Blanche's tragedy is due to her incompatible self in relation to the society around. She desperately tries to sustain a dying dream, which cannot survive in a pragmatic and animalistic world of twentieth century. Blanche's life in the play shows an actual dislocation from one world to another. These two worlds are represented by her parental home at Belle Reve and her sister's home at New Orleans. The sharp gap between the reality of Belle Reve and New Orleans provides impetus to Blanche's quest for self.

Williams has used the city of New Orleans as a powerful symbol in the play. It represents the world of sins of the flesh and hence a powerful influence of Naturalistic forces. Although there is similarity in Belle Reve and New Orleans, as far as the Naturalistic forces are concerned, the symbolism associated with New Orleans is far more complex than it appears to be. New Orleans differs from the world of death and destruction at Belle Reve in appending the denial of death to the drama of Desire and Romance. The "Ideal world" of Belle Reve falls a prey to lust and death, thereby generating the thesis that in a biological universe, Romance, if at all possible, is only of a limited duration. From this point of view, Blanche's escape from the world of Belle Reve can be seen as an attempt to seek permanence of her romantic ideals. It is also interesting to observe that both at Belle Reve and New Orleans, Blanche's one-point program is to protect her illusions, because the absence of illusions is a threat to herself, which is constructed on unrealistic notions about life in its various manifestations.

There are several layers of illusion depicted in the play. For instance Blanche's loss of Belle Reve depicts the multiple illusions involved in her experience of loss. On the one hand, she loses her romantic dream of life in losing Belle Reve, on the other, the loss of Belle Reve is double, in the sense that Blanche has lost not the Belle Reve as it was, but a version of her fantasy involving the Mississippi plantation. Thus the loss of Belle Reve is significant to Blanche more at a symbolic level rather than merely at a physical level. Her struggle at Belle Reve is dedicated not so much to a concrete reality of the place as it is to her dream for which she "stayed and fought", "bled" and "almost died." (Williams:126) The decay and disintegration visible at Belle Reve is agonizing to Blanche because this decadence for her symbolizes the death of her dreams. Thus she dedicates her life to protecting not the real Belle Reve, but an "ideal" version of it which represents an aristocratic glory to Blanche and thereby becomes a defining parameter of her *self*. From this point of view, Blanche's loss of Belle Reve can be seen as a loss of her *self*. When she comes to New Orleans, she makes attempts to recover her lost self. She does so not in the contemporary context of New Orleans, but in terms of the illusory world of Belle Reve.

At New Orleans, Blanche's struggle is to desperately guard her illusions. Thus it can be said that Blanche seeks a frozen or dead self, because her self is anachronistic in relation to the reality of New Orleans. She lives at New Orleans under the protection of her illusions as fragile as the paper lantern. These illusions become necessary for her to protect her ideal image of herself. In fact, Blanche herself is aware of the indispensability of illusions in maintaining her self. This is evident when she says to Stanley, "After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion."(Williams, p.281) Blanche practices this belief in her everyday life, for example, she romanticizes her name, when she tells Mitch that her name in French means "white woods. Like an orchard in spring!"(Williams, p.150) However, Blanche's arrival at New Orleans puts her in a situation of crisis, by reducing her romanticism to a mere sentimentality, as reflected, for example, in her choice of the "Paper Moon" (Williams:186) song.

Blanche is too afraid to accept reality as it is. This is revealed when she says, "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action."(Williams, p.150) While her struggle at

Belle Reve was to maintain a status quo in order to protect her self-image of being a gentlewoman, Blanche's efforts at New Orleans are devoted to adapting the place to her "ideal". This is because the world of New Orleans is a gross travesty of her romantic ideals. She has a complaint to Stella that the living conditions of the Kowalski family are not appropriate. In response to this criticism, Stella tries to reassure her by saying, "New Orleans is not like other cities." (Williams, p.121) Blanche cannot tolerate the absolute Naturalism, which characterizes Stanley-Stella relationship. The animal like "nakedness" of Stella's home is revealed when Mitch finds her self-conscious of not being "properly dressed" and reassures her, saying, "that don't make no difference in the Quarter." (Williams, p.155) Mitch's response highlights the contrast between Blanche's perceptions and the reality of Stella's home. Instead of adjusting to the new reality, Blanche makes a desperate and futile attempt to reform the household of Stella to suit her dreams. This is symbolically reflected in her acts of placing a paper lantern over the harsh light and putting new covers on the furniture, thereby trying to modify the environment according to her own needs.

Blanche tries not only to modify physical objects around her, but also the people. She herself admits: " I've done so much with this place since I've been here." (Williams, p.202) Even Stanley complains to her just before the rape that she has spread powder and perfume throughout the apartment and put up the paper lantern. He says, "And Lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile!" (Williams, p.213) In a sense, Blanche changes the identity of people around her, at least in her mind. The newspaper boy becomes for her a "young Prince out of The Arabian Nights." (Williams, p.174) Mitch, who is a little clumsy and socially immature, is seen by her as "a natural gentleman, one of the very few that are left in the world." (Williams, p.179) Her tendency to live in a world of fantasy by transforming ordinary people into ideal human beings is further reflected when she is alone in the apartment with Mitch. At this moment, she refuses to switch on the light because in the absence of light they can pretend to be Bohemians in "a little artist's café on the Left Bank in Paris!"(Williams, p.177) Instead of the light, Blanche lights a candle and declares, "Je Suis La Dame aux Camellias! Vous etes Armand!" (Williams, p.177) Thus Blanche, in her search for identity, has created a double task for herself, guarding her romantic dreams and also adapting people to her dreams.

Blanche's search for identity follows a trajectory of self-destruction, in which the milieu of New Orleans acts as a catalyst. In fact, Blanche has lived very closely to death – in being a witness to the deaths of relatives and the suicide of her husband Allan. Her ostracism is also a kind of symbolic death. In the almost surrealist scene in which the Mexican woman in the street is selling "flores para los muertos", Blanche mutters to herself, "Crumble and fade and – regrets – recrimination … If you'd done this, it wouldn't've cost me that!" (Williams, p.206) The five-month stay with the Kowalski family accelerates Blanche's decay, which in fact, had already begun at Belle Reve. During her stay in the apartment of Stanley, Blanche completes the graph of her degeneration. The circumstances in Stanley's apartment compel her to face the harsh reality of her existence. In Mitch, Blanche hopes to find "a cleft in the rock"(Williams, p.205) which Allan was looking for in her. In a sharp contrast to her inherent aristocracy, Stanley brings her face to face with violence, culminating in the ultimate violence of her rape. It is quite paradoxical that Blanche's search for self results not in a discovery of her true self, but in the destruction of the self. Every moment of her stay in Stanley's home leads her to realize the reality of the hollowness of her existence. The final rape scene can be seen as her symbolic death, thereby negatively completing her journey into her self. The act of her disgrace through rape and the subsequent mental collapse is ironical, given the fact that it happens on her birthday. Thus the significance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* lies in the fact that it dramatizes the negative possibilities in the search for identity in the sense that it foregrounds the empty reality of the female protagonist. Although it is basically a play about the gradual disintegration of a woman deeply fixed in the aristocratic past, which no longer exists, Stanley plays a vital role in highlighting the identity crisis of Blanche Du Bois. He becomes the active agent in the invisible process of her self-destruction. According to Holditch (1993, p. 159), ''Stanley's destruction of Blanche results from his determination to protect the status quo, in which he is the Populist King, from any usurpation by female royalty, as well as to protect his cave from another invading animal''.

The function of Stanley in the play is to concretize the abstract conflict Blanche has always faced. At Belle Reve, she faces the contrast between her ideal image of the aristocratic family into which she is born and the horrifying reality of disintegration of this family, caused by her imprudent male ancestors.

When she comes to the Elysian Fields, she once again finds herself locked in a patriarchal order, of which Stanley is the unquestioned king. It is beyond doubt that Blanche has been utterly frustrated with the inadequate men in her life. Her paternal relatives could not protect the glory of Belle Reve. Similarly, her husband Allan proved to be a homosexual and could not provide her an alternative to her "weak" male relatives. Even Mitch turns out to be similar. Stanley's Naturalistic masculinity provides a sharp contrast to the earlier males in her life. Blanche enters the apartment of Stanley at a point where she has become utterly disillusioned with the patriarchal order. That is why she desires an association with Stella as her sister and not as "Mrs. Stanley Kowalski." Blanche's quest for identity is most vividly dramatized through her encounter with Stanley, who represents the victory of patriarchal power over Stella. Thus Stanley's role is to foreground the inconsistencies of Blanche's character.

The struggle between Blanche and Stanley represents the conflict between the delicate refinement of aristocracy and the rugged defiance of Naturalistic forces characterizing modern life. The entry of Blanche into the Kowalski household represents a disruptive force, which Stanley tries to resist through his violent masculinity. Before the entry of Blanche, there is perfect harmony in the Kowalski family. Stella has willingly accepted Stanley's vision of patriarchal home as heaven. Blanche challenges this male hegemony, right from her "shocked disbelief" (Williams, p.117) to an open articulation of disapproval. It was but natural for Stanley to be cruel towards Blanche, who represents for her the destruction of his authority over his wife. Thus both Blanche and Stanley fight to maintain status quo, in their own ways. While Blanche wishes to see Stella in her maiden identity, Stanley is concerned about maintaining his power over Stella. Blanche's attempts to reform Stanley imply disrobing him of his identity. Blanche is clearly an intruder into the small apartment of Kowalski's and it is very natural for Stanley to adopt any measure to drive her away.

The war between Blanche and Stella could also be seen at a psychological level. The difference between the two lies in their differential conjugal fates. Stanley shares a successful marriage with Stella, in all respects. They make noises and the success of their conjugal devotion to each other is reinforced by the behaviour of the couple upstairs. In contrast to this, Blanche has had an unhappy marriage, subsequent to which she has turned a pervert. Thus at a conjugal level, Blanche seeks to corrupt the matrimonial sanctity of the Kowalski family. Stanley says to Stella,

> Stell, it's gonna be all right after she goes and after you've had the baby… God, honey, its gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way that we used to and get the colored lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us. (Williams, p.195)

Blanche is further shocked when Mitch tells her about the couple upstairs. "There's nothing to be scared of, they're crazy about each other." (Williams, p.155) There is every reason for Blanche to feel self-conscious and jealous at the normalcy of her sister's married life. Blanche becomes upset about the Kowalski family because in their happy conjugal love she can see the reflection of her own defeat in love.

Blanche's imaginary fear of extinction at Belle Reve finds a tangible manifestation in the character of Stanley. While confiding to Mitch, Blanche says, "The first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me." (p. 351) Surprisingly enough, in the otherwise unrealistic perception of Blanche, the perception of Stanley as her destroyer turns out to be realistic. While hurling a plate on the floor, Stanley expresses to Stella, "That's how I'll clear the table!" (Williams, p.194) He further says,

> Don't ever talk that way to me! Pig – polack- disgusting – vulgar – greasy! – them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens? … (He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor) My place is cleared! You want me to clear your places?

Thus the war between Blanche and Stanley is dramatized at symbolic, psychological and physical levels. The encounter between Blanche and Stanley represents a conflict between Stanley's "Napoleonic code"(Williams, p.133) and Blanche's Dionysian disruption of that order. This leads to the observation that in A Streetcar Named Desire the search for self inevitably involves the clash of two opposite selves – one represented by Blanche and the other by Stanley. Thus the presence of Stanley is necessary in the

play because it provides a defining background against which the inconsistencies of Blanche's self become visible.

> In Stella Blanche can see her own self, which is imprisoned in the patriarchal psyche of Stanley. Therefore, she desires to retrieve Stella from the clutches of Stanley. She even tries to provoke Stella against Stanley. This is depicted very vividly at the end of scene IV. In her speech Blanche says, ''He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! … Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the Stone Age! …Don't – don't hang back with the brutes!'' (Williams, p.163)

Blanche obviously is enticing Stella to run away with her in a chaste female bonding. Stanley, however, overhears this speech, which naturally spells a doom on Blanche's plans. Stanley derives pleasure in exposing Blanche's hypocrisy, reminding one of Henry Fielding, who says in the preface to *Joseph Andrews* that exposure of hypocrisy provides the greatest pleasure. This is clearly reflected in Stanley's attempts to discover Blanche's murky past. Stanley shows a male loyalty towards Mitch by trying to prevent him from being seduced by Blanche. This male bond parallels the female bond between Blanche and Stella. The quest for identity in the play, thus, is mediated by a gender based politics of relationships. The most powerful manifestation of this politics of gender is Blanche's attitude to Mitch, whom she considers a poor girl's Shep Huntleigh and not a husband who is to be loved. Stanley seeks to defeat Blanche by undermining her power as a seductress of Mitch. Seduction is the most powerful weapon at the hands of Blanche. Baudrillard says on seduction, "To seduce is to appear weak so as to render others weak; to avoid the question of truth" (qtd. in Bedient, 1993, p.53). Instead of allowing Blanche to seduce Mitch Stanley provokes her to be seduced, which leads to her ultimate disintegration as an aristocratic woman.

Although the entire action of the play revolves round Blanche and she certainly gives the impression of being the heroine of the play, Stella appears to be the real heroine of the play in Darwinian terms. This is because Stella, unlike Blanche, is adaptable to change and thus, knows the strategy of survival. The character of Stella is a foil to that of Blanche's because she is more realistic than Blanche. She has a dynamic personality and does not remain fixed to the world of Belle Reve. Stella suffers from no illusions about her position as a woman and individual. This facilitates her in accepting the male dominance of Stanley, which makes her happier than Blanche, though in purely pragmatic terms. Although like Blanche, Stella has also lost her identity in the loss of Belle Reve, she tries to evolve a new self after her marriage to Stanley, instead of lamenting the loss of a family tradition. The function of Stella's presence in the play is to demonstrate the alternative possibility in Blanche's life, had she learnt how to adapt to changed circumstances. Like Blanche she has no pretensions. The contrast between the two sisters exhibits the necessity of personal and social adaptation in order to survive. Blanche is a psychologically complex woman. Stella's attitudes and behaviour provide an indirect explanation to the problems faced by Blanche. Stella's life explains why Blanche suffers the way she does. The absence of certain personality traits in Blanche is complementary to their presence in Stella's characters.

Stella becomes an indirect cause of the disgrace Blanche has to face from Stanley. This is because out of pragmatic considerations she encourages Stanley's brutalities. In a sense Stanley's rape of Blanche is not something unusual for Stella, because she has always accepted, without any resistance, what might be called a "marital rape". The love-making shared by Stella and Stanley has a violent touch to it. For example, Stella was "thrilled" at Stanley's breaking the light bulbs with her slipper on their wedding night. This shows that far from feeling any disgust at Stanley's animalistic actions, Stella celebrates his wild masculinity. This violent romance enacted by Stella and Stanley parallels the relationship between Rhett Butter and Scarlett in one of the most romantic scenes in the greatest romance novel of all times, *Gone with the Wind*. There are also echoes of D. H. Lawrence in the naturalistic man-woman relationship between Stella and Stanley. It is even possible to conjecture that Stella herself does not want Blanche to stay in her house and that is why she encourages Stanley's flirtations with her sister.

Stella's response to both Blanche and Stanley is spontaneous rather than being the result of preconceived ideas. The views of Kauffman (qtd. in Morrow, 1993, p.68) sound appropriate when he says: "systems poised between order and chaos come close to fitting many features of cellular differentiation during ontogeny". Stella represents this balanced mediation between the extremes

represented on the one hand, by Blanche and on the other, by Stanley. Her *self* is a balanced combination of extreme traits, which help her survive in the animalistic world of Stanley. Another reason for Stella's survival is the stability of her social relations in New Orleans. In contrast to Blanche, Stella generally appears to be a flat character, always preoccupied with the pragmatism of everyday life. She is thus considerably responsible for the tragic plight of her sister. However, at the end, Stella exhibits a sudden reversal of character, through her reaction to Stanley's purchase of the bus ticket. She says, "In the first place, Blanche wouldn't go on a bus."(p. 191) This reaction is quite ironical, because although outwardly it sounds like a resistance, at a deeper level it implies a stoic acceptance of the idea of sending Blanche away.

The action of the play shows that both Blanche and Stella are consumed by a male dominated world. Blanche meets destruction because she chooses to openly revolt against the male tyranny, through her opposition to Stanley. At the same time, Stella loses her *self* because she has exchanged her identity for the stability in her conjugal and social life. In this sense, Stella's character comes out to be a complex character at a deeper level. With reference to Blanche and Stanley, she appears to represent the middle path. However, in relation to her sister Blanche, Stella seems to be another defeatist alternative. The play depicts the quest for identity in neither successful through the idealistic approach of Blanche, nor through an extreme pragmatism and submission. As pointed out by Anca Vlasopolos (qtd. in Winchell, 1993, p.140), "Stella joins the entire cost of the play in expelling Blanche at the end." Thus the presence of Stella reinforces the identity crisis of Blanche.

Mitch is a minor character in the play. He is hardly a grown-up man and has a boyish perception of the feminine world of Blanche, who directs her to the "little Boy's Room" (148) soon after meeting him. The function of Mitch in the play is to foreshadow the violent attack on Blanche's illusions. Mitch symbolically exposes Blanche to reality when he tears the Chinese paper lantern from the bulb, protesting to Blanche that he "never had a real good look" (p. 203) at her. When Blanche asks him whether he meant insulting, Mitch replies, "No, just realistic." (ibid) Mitch's presence reinforces Blanche's fear of reality, as revealed in the following avowal of her Romanticism':

> I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, Yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it. (pp. 203-204)

The role of Mitch in the play is to act as a confidant of the opposite sex and to reveal her past; Blanche confesses to Mitch: "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers." (p. 204) Mitch's presence helps Blanche live in the past. He reminds her of her tender husband, who wanted to confess to her his homosexuality. In a reversal of role, as though, Blanche desires to get rid of her guilt, by confessing her intimacies with strangers to Mitch. She tells him: "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with." (pp. 204-205) However, she does not give in to Mitch fully, beyond kisses because she fears the loss of her respect in the eyes of Mitch. In a sense, Blanche's encounter with Mitch takes her back to the past when Allan was alive. It is as though through her relationship with Mitch, Blanche wishes to re-enact her past devoid of the tragedy of Allan's suicide. Thus the dramatic function of Mitch is two-fold. He serves to simultaneously sustain and break Blanche's illusion.

CONCLUSION

The above discussion of *A Streetcar Named Desire* manifests a complex trajectory of the theme of alienation. This study has tried to show the identity crisis of Blanche through several perspectives, represented by Belle Reve, the city of New Orleans, Stella, Stanley and Mitch. The action of the play shows that an individual has to seek his/her self in multiple personal and social contexts and not just through a single framework. By bringing together the social and psychological factors, the study has vividly highlighted the problematic nature of the theme of alienation in the twentieth century. Thus the significance of *A Streetcar Named Desire* lies in the fact that it dramatizes the negative possibilities in the quest for identity in the sense that it foregrounds the empty reality of the female protagonist.

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