

TRUTH AND ILLUSION

IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' *A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE*

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Abstract

The following paper discusses some of the motifs ubiquitous to Tennessee Williams' oeuvre, namely truth and illusion as they are presented in one of his most famous plays, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The author endeavors to portray these motifs through an analysis of the characters' behavior and the subsequent, tragic consequences in order to reveal the humanness of Williams' characters who are just like the playwright himself, all marred by alcoholism, depression and loneliness.

Keywords: *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois, truth, illusion, psychological breakdown

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Tennessee Williams' early success is largely based on the strength of his unforgettable female leads, such as the southern belles of *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, who are strong, articulate and assertive, yet often tender and vulnerable (Hovis, 2003). Cruelly extracted from the only context that gives her life meaning, Blanche DuBois becomes a victim, while simultaneously fighting for survival, as the obsolete and old-fashioned values that she adheres to fade away. The brutality and harsh reality characterizing the social milieu of the 20th century do not allow for her gender consciousness to evolve, creating a final and tragic inability to distinguish the truth from illusions she exploits to provide refuge for herself.

The very beginning of the play mars Blanche as a scarlet-lettered woman, a recognizable and uninvited outcast, whose indiscrete sexual behavior distorts her image of a teacher as a “[custodian] of culture” (Bartlett & Cambor, 1974). She endeavors to maintain a mental equilibrium, pirouetting on a wire, balancing her own personal interpretations of masculinity and femininity, superiority and inferiority, supremacy and subordination. What is revealed about her, in scene seven of the play, is crucial information uttered by her sister: “... you’ve got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did” (Williams, 2000, p. 209). It is exactly this crucial information about her belonging to a defunct social stratum of nobility that will be her downfall. She is portrayed as the epitome of a Southern belle, a social phenomenon rooted in the idea that women “might escape the rule of the patriarchy that the oppositions of white/black, master/slave, lady/whore, even male/female might collapse into an anarchic conflagration threatening to bring down the symbolic order” (Roberts, 1994, p. xii). Being instructed that her essential trait is her physical beauty, she finds herself lost in a state of perpetual panic about her fading looks. Needing a physical touch, yet conditioned by Southern Puritanism to control and subdue, preferably eradicate, her libidinal desires, her coquettishly prim mannerisms do not fool anyone into believing her virginal. Thus, it becomes evident that the only temporal stage where her haunting obsessions are victorious over reality is the past, which she desperately and unsuccessfully tries to hold on to.

Blanche was conditioned by a childhood of wealth, money and constant tending of her every whim. She was a Victorian model of the pure and chaste angel of the house, and her entire behavior exuded antebellum chivalry code, fortifying the already

ubiquitous and potent stereotype. Taught that “a cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding, can enrich a man’s life – immeasurably” (Williams, 2000, p. 211), she perceives her sole purpose in life an almost legal commitment to courtship, girly romances and finally, marriage to a rich and always older, wealthy male member of the Southern gentry, and “if she was pretty and charming and thus could participate in the process of husband-getting, so much the better” (Seidel, 1985, p. 6).

This idea calls to attention the duplicity of Blanche’s behavior with Mitch. Having been forced to adopt the socio-cultural role of asexual maternity, Blanche is aware that her time is ticking away. Tradition states that “the heyday of the belle is short-lived; from a debut at sixteen or seventeen to the threat of spinsterhood by nineteen, her career lasts for the few short years in between” (Seidel, 1985, pg. 61). Someone as complex and perceptive as Blanche would likely not be interested in someone as dull and simple as Mitch, at least not for long, and that even the game she is playing with him is a lie: she wants to marry him not because she loves him, but because she wants to secure her own future (Hovis, 2003). Her so called game of deception, willing and conscious, though naïve and calamitous only to herself, is merely the result of her upbringing. Thinking she would marry the first man she falls in love with and live a fairy tale life makes Blanche vulnerable to the harsh realities of life, which is why the Blanche who gets off the streetcar named Desire is not the same Blanche who lived and loved in Belle Reve. Stella explains this to Stanley perfectly: “You didn’t know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change” (Williams, 2000, p. 136). Thus, Blanche changes by developing an outer self that serves to protect her inner self from scrutiny and judgment (Hovis, 2003). Her utter unwillingness to change is evident in her words to Stella:

Well, Stella – you’re going to reproach me, I know that you’re bound to reproach me – but before you do – take into consideration – you left! I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I’m not meaning this in any reproachful way, but *all* the burden descended on *my* shoulders... you are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I! I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it! (Williams, 2000, p. 126)

The days after the Civil War had created a mythical, legendary ideal of the Old South, which inspired awe with its abundance of opulence, social order and courteous

living, and Blanche is all too eager to join in. While enslaved African Americans saw the past for what it really was, the clanking chains, the Southern gentry produced sounds of clanking glasses, but this did not bother Blanche one bit. On the contrary, she enjoyed all the luxury of social pride and honor a genteel, plantation owning family could afford. This was her refuge, and the eventual deterioration of this image, the disappearance of this safe economic system her world was grounded in, had a profound effect on her psyche, equaled only to her painful experience of marriage.

Consequently, the repercussions of losing Belle Reve are devastating to Blanche. She finds herself in life situations she thought were far below her, while in fact, she merely follows in the footsteps of her ancestors, who lost their grand estate due to “grand fornications” (Williams, 2000, p. 173). While praised and revered for their gentility and refinement, her ancestors are revealed to have indulged in carnal pleasures. This inability to sustain two sides within herself, will eventually lead to a vivid illustration of her utilization of sex to obliterate her conscience. While Stella removes herself from the insalubrious surroundings and allows herself to be brought down to earth by Stanley, accepting her raw sexuality and exploring it with him, Blanche cannot consign to oblivion the manner in which she was raised, and continues to inhabit delusions, tirelessly waiting for her knight in shining armor to come and take her away.

While Stella’s marriage unshackles and simultaneously redeems her, Blanche’s first and only marital affair does the opposite. It plunges her into dark depths of self-denial, guilt, revulsion and antipathy, leading her to a sagittal path of nymphomania and prostitution. Her first rendezvous with a broken illusion transpires when she finds out that her beloved husband Allan, “this beautiful and talented young man,” was in Stella’s words, “a degenerate” (Williams, 2000, p. 198). Blanche refers to herself as being “unlucky,” “deluded” and that there was something which might have pointed to the outcome of their tragic love story, “a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking” (Williams, 2000, pg. 201). Like many other Williams’ characters who come across other people that reveal occluded or ringent signs of homosexuality, Blanche feels repulsed, enraged and shows an utter lack of understanding for his sense of guilt. She feels betrayed by the person who was everything to her, spitting all of her venom in his face on the dance floor: “I know! I know! You disgust me!” (Williams, 2000, p. 203). Feeling pangs of

conscience and as if wearing the mark of Cain for the fact that “he’d stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired” (Williams, 2000, p. 160), Blanche lives her life as a penance for this sin. Even though she did not directly pull the trigger, she was nonetheless, an integral part of the society which considered homosexuality an immoral deviation of the human existence, and thus, she was guilty. Only later does she come to realize that he came to her for help, for sympathy, but her constrictive upbringing could not allow for this. Thus, the Varsouviana polka plays in her mind, incessantly, a madman’s song of the end of a life.

During the course of the play, Blanche continues to play the role of a Southern belle and hysterically holds on to it, regardless of the fact that she lost their estate Belle Reve and that she was forced to leave her job, on account of a certain indecency with her seventeen year old student. Despite all the immoral and decadent things she has done, she continues to carry herself with arrogance and ornamental poise, while in reality, she comes across as a hysterical, insensitive, and narcissistic individual, forcing her vision of herself on others by pathetic exhibitions of her flashy, but obviously cheap clothes. She does not act the way she feels like, but rather forces onto herself as well as others, this charade of lady-like behavior, demanding attention and affection from all those who surround her.

Simultaneously, she is absolutely petrified of losing beauty, becoming aged, unsightly, unwanted and unloved. She dexterously eludes telling anyone her true age, relying on the gentlemanly behavior of men not to dare ask a lady such a question. Old age brings her closer to death, decay, becoming insignificant and forgotten, which is in stark contrast to what she has been endeavoring to become all her life: the adored centre of attention. For the same reason, she also refuses to appear before Mitch in broad day light, emerging from the shadows only as a dim manifestation of a seductive silhouette. The faint lights and the contemptibly inexpensive red Chinese lantern she buys mirror her escape from veracity and her incapacity to acknowledge and cope with the true state of things. Light, a notion always closely intertwined with truth and exposure, has the same appetiteness for Blanche: it threatens to expose her numerous deceptions. The sun and bright light during night divulge Blanche’s true age, which is why she never takes walks with Mitch in broad daylight. Additionally, she does not turn on lights when they are inside, she lights candles under the false pretext that it allows them to behave as if they

were in a café in Paris. She can hide her true face in semi-darkness, but light reveals her for what she really is: an aging woman who desperately holds on to the last pieces of her artificial beauty. Furthermore, she takes numerous baths during the day, as if she wants to cleanse and purify herself from all the dirty things in her past, which she tries to forget and conceal from others. These baths refurnish her with a revitalizing pick-me-up, both physical and emotional, though only for the moment. As she herself will come to realize, profound purification does not come easily.

As even the best of pretenders tend to make a slip-up and expose themselves for who they truly are, the scene with her seducing the young boy, who brings the newspaper, affirms her as a hypocrite. She only proclaims herself chaste and morally righteous, because she is aware of the fact that it is the only way she could keep Mitch interested in her long enough for him to marry her. Nonetheless, not even this feeling of urgent desperation refrains her from returning to her old habits of trying to seduce minors. The lyrics of "It's Only a Paper Moon," the popular 1940s ballad Blanche sings while bathing, encapsulates Blanche's state of affairs with regard to Mitch. She sings, "It's a Barnum and Bailey world / Just as phony as it can be / But it wouldn't be make-believe / If you believed in me." Blanche's hope in a future with Mitch is recumbent on his believing her act - or in him taking her words for gospel staunchly enough to make the act reality. The song emulates the rosy glasses everyone tends to be in possession of during this infamous state of being in love. However, it also simultaneously foreshadows the fact that if a love is based on illusions, such as the case with Mitch and Blanche, the person deceived will very soon and very easily fall out of love, feeling ashamed for having been deceived by a bewitching liar.

Mitch is deficient in both formal manners and education, two things which would rate him very highly in Blanche's eyes, a fact that makes him an imperfect choice for her, but as it was previously mentioned, she herself acquiesces that she is not in the position to be finicky. Despite all their differences, they do have two fundamental things in common: agony of suffering and solitude. Blanche lost her husband and Mitch the girl who gave him the cigarette case with the poetic inscription: "And if God choose, I shall but love thee better - after death!" (Williams, 2000, p. 149). Both nursed their parents through lingering deaths and for both, this close encounter with loss had a profound influence on their psyche. In Mitch, it engendered sincerity and openness, while these

traits are nowhere to be found inside Blanche's thinking processes. She continues to be disingenuous, even with people who offer nothing but the truth to her, in an effort to mold reality into a suitable make-believe refuge from harm.

Likewise, Mitch represents a very common figure in Williams' plays, the character of the gentleman caller. Most of Williams' characters inhabit some kind of an illusion where the determining turn point must take place, after which their lives will become much better, as if by magic. Blanche wholeheartedly believes that she might start a new life with Mitch, merely because the alternative is deficiently repugnant for her, all the more so that she does not even dare enter this part of her psyche, which does not cling to the antebellum chivalry code. She has been taught that male companionship is a woman's means of survival in the face of social convention. The only social protection she can count on is that of marriage and family. Thus, she perceives Mitch as her last prospect of being socially and morally accepted, which is her imperative and self-imposed prerogative. Nevertheless, Blanche continues to paint a deceitful portrait of herself for Mitch, at the same time drowning her sorrows in alcohol. The more she drinks, the less she has to deal with her current, throbbingly painful situation, and it is clear that in order to resolve her present, she has to confront her sordid past. Thus, the *Varsouviana* polka, music which played when her young husband committed suicide, paired with the intoxicatingly effective powers of alcohol, deepens Blanche's descent into illusion and further away from reality.

As for her sisterly relations, she would never be able to forgive Stella for marrying Stanley, whom she considers to be brute, animalistic and socially below her, and whose main amusements are gambling, bowling, sex, and drinking. Stanley, whose family comes from Poland, emerges as the new, heterogeneous America which belongs to new Americans who lack refinement, education and spirituality, to which Blanche does not belong, because she is a relic from an outdated, dysfunctional social hierarchy. This enduring, antagonistic relationship between Blanche and her arch nemesis Stanley epitomizes the struggle between appearances and reality, between what is real and what certain characters want to perceive as real. From the moment Blanche walks into their house, Stanley is able to see right through her. He is not dazzled by her cheap, showy clothes and neither is he sympathetic towards her after hearing the tragic story of Blanche's short marriage from Stella. He perceives Blanche as someone who survives

by thinking up ways to get money from men and he fears Stella and himself were swindled by Blanche, who spent their, actually only Stella's, part of the inheritance. Thus, he employs all his efforts to expose Blanche for what she really is.

He is one of Williams' atypical characters, who are secure in their own skin and who feels completely satisfied living in his household, in which he is the king. He himself says so in the play: "Be comfortable is my motto" (Williams, 2000, p. 129). He is a primitive pagan who sees nothing wrong in his way of life and who feels perfectly at home in the Elysian Fields, the name given to the ancient Greek version of the afterlife. Stanley lives a perfect life, Hades with a conquered Persephone, in harmony with who he is and what he expects others, especially women, to do for him. He has no issues with his animalistic outbursts and considers his home a haven, where he is free to be the jungle king. Unlike Blanche, he does not suppress any part of his persona, allowing for his sexuality and vitality to be always at the top. He harbors no concocted illusions and with him, the cards are always on the table, opened. This is why Stanley does not believe a word Blanche says; her helplessly flirtatious persona is wasting its charm on him. He decides to conduct an investigation of his own, and confront Blanche about Shaw, which proves to be the first exposé of Blanche's dirty past. Up to this point, the reader is all too eager to believe Blanche's story, but this is when her fabricated account begins to crumble, as she offers very little effort in endeavoring to conceal her knowing who Shaw is. Naturally, Stanley immediately informs his poker and bowling buddy, Mitch, thus tearing to pieces Blanche's last chance of happiness and a normal life.

Consequently, Mitch appears before Blanche completely heartbroken and drunk, and his turning on the light symbolizes his exposure of her true intentions and of her personage, while destroying the image she created of herself. Darkness was her ally in her battle for Mitch's affection; it gave her the freedom to describe things as they ought to be and not as they are. She herself tells Mitch on one occasion that she prefers magic to reality. Now, the truth is out and Blanche, in broad daylight, is left to her own devices. Mitch manages to break Blanche's illusions and from this point on, she is doomed to descend into madness.

It seems that Blanche's sexual duplicity and romantic delusions have been the source of her fall. Yet Blanche is also the victim of social circumstances. Having been

born in a privileged position of high society, what was required of her, unobjectionably, was a complete suppression of desire, while her sense of wealth and status were allowed to roam free. All of this led to the anger of new Americans who did not consider this social landscape a fair one. Just as they were dissatisfied, so is Stanley, and he transforms Blanche into his victim, by disclosing the details of her sordid past, thus contributing directly to her tragic fate.

But Stanley's cruelty toward an already too fragile and psychologically unstable Blanche does not end here. What he does next completely shatters Blanche's weak persona and sends her to the point of no return: "We've had this date with each other from the beginning" (Williams, 2000, p. 219). In order to show his physical and psychological supremacy over her, he violently rapes her. This rape also denotes the final and ultimate demolition of the Southern genteel fantasy world, represented by the psychologically broken Blanche, by the cruel but energetic present, represented by Stanley. He brings out the animalistic and devouring New South in which there is no room for fairy tales, knights in shining armor or romanticism. The present is the time of animal instinct and common sense, where Stanley has demonstrated the supremacy of primitivism over civilization, of male over female, of physical over the psychological.

From this point on, Blanche completely shuts herself in her own imaginary world, forever waiting for the perfect husband – Shep Huntley. He represents the last shred of an already dead code of conduct, the chivalric gentleman. He is her final fantasy, the one which she will continue to hold on to, even in her insanity. For her, he is Godot, the one who has all the answers, and if she is only patient enough, he will come and reveal all that is needed for happiness and serenity. Unfortunately, the only gentleman caller who finally does come for her is the doctor, leading her away to the asylum. He is a poor substitute for the perfect man she has been waiting for, but at least he has arrived. He is neither the down-to-earth Mitch, nor the dream beau Shep Huntley. He is reality, knocking on the door of her house, ready to tear it down at any minute. Blanche's dependence on the kindness of strangers rather than on herself is the pivotal reason she has been bruised so frequently in life. She pours out her heart to Mitch on one occasion: "Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now" (Williams, 2000, p. 264). The poor, understandably delusional Blanche still does not comprehend the gravity of her past situation; that the idea of the kindness of strangers she so

desperately believes in is far from the truth. Strangers have not been kind to her unless she had something to offer which was worth their time. And, it usually was, hidden in the murky rooms of the Tarantula Arms. Consequently, the strangers of the past and the present are not what she hopes them to be. There are no chivalric knights and gentlemen who will come to rescue her from the mud she was pushed in, by her own promiscuous behavior.

Although Williams adopts the characters of Stanley and Blanche to represent polar extremes on the spectrum of reality and truth, he uses the character of Stella to depict the midpoint of these two modes of existence. Stella, like the great majority of people, is realistic about certain circumstances and events in her life, and self-deluded about others. For instance, she is comfortable in acknowledging the commonness of her husband and the shabbiness of her domestic surroundings, simply because of the passion the two of them have in their marriage: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant" (Williams, 2000, p. 162). She has found the well out of which she extracts nourishment for her sexual desires, while Blanche's life is devoid of this crucial sustenance.

However, despite all the help she intends to offer her sister, Stella does have a line she will not cross. Either consciously or subconsciously, she is unable as well as unwilling to admit the possibility of rape taking place, even more that her husband was the perpetrator. She relentlessly continues to consider it a figment of Blanche's already distraught psyche, as she witnesses the tragic end of a life. Blanche, on the other hand, with her retreat into hysteria and madness, as she refuses to acknowledge anyone but the gallant doctor who is to take her away, is actually offering Stella the easy way out, by allowing her the privilege of not facing the truth of her husband's deed. This way, Blanche's inability to speak for herself on this matter, creates a protective matrix around Stella, tolerating yet another instance of self-delusion. Thus, Williams concocts these two differentiating filial characters, with Stella as the mediator between Stanley's animalistic, cruel and brutal reality and the romantic devices and plots Blanche utilizes in handling her day to day problems. In the end, due to her sister's descent into madness, Stella can continue with her life as before. If nothing else, Blanche has done at least one good deed.

Consequently, at the end of the play, Blanche completely loses herself in her own personal fantasies, and is finally able to find sanctuary from life's cruel blows that she did not know how to handle. Her insanity emerges, just like the one of the unnamed narrator in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper," where both she and Blanche find no other solution, no other escape than retreating fully into oneself, leaving the objective, demanding, judgmental world behind and closing the door forever. Ironically, both heroines cannot express themselves and cannot live in the world they were born. Their only means of escape is to flee mentally into a private fantasy of their own choice. It is important to note, however, that Blanche's deception of those around her is not perpetrated out of malice and cruelty, out of an inhumane desire to hurt and deceive others; rather it is a heart-rendering depiction of a person unable to cope with social and temporal changes, of a pathetic and heart-broken retreat to a romantic time when she was beautiful and for that, loved. To live in illusions means to live in pain. One cannot fully retreat into illusion without completely descending into madness, and sometimes, like in Blanche's case, the reality is overly harsh and unforgiving, while only illusion provides a soothing and sheltered experience.

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