Realizing The Traumatic Psyche Of The Protagonist In The Play A Streetcar Named Desire

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Abstract

This paper uses Blanche DuBois, a character from Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire," to investigate the notion of the new women of 20th-century American society. Based on Clara Thompson's psychoanalytic ideas of character development, it also examines Blanche's mental collapse at the play's conclusion. Rather than actively resisting them, societal and economic standards shape women's mentality, Thompson argues. Defiance of these standards poses a danger to the established patriarchal order and forces women into unfair competition with males, which may lead to psychological distress. When Blanche DuBois's emotional condition is consistently undermined and stifled by the old or traditional culture, she finally experiences a mental breakdown that exemplifies the spirit of the new women demanding independence and privilege like the male members of the society.

Keywords: Cultural Factor, Economic Factor, New Women, Patriarchy, Women's Psychology

INTRODUCTION

Compared to men, women have fundamentally different personalities. The cultural framework in which we live informs the images of what we normally regard as masculine and feminine in look and conduct. Women's minds are moulded by society to the point that they cannot imagine making it on their own; before marriage, they rely on their mothers and fathers, and after marriage, the wife's husband is expected to provide for her. Also, this notion is ingrained in women from a young age, making it more likely that they would exhibit and defend patriarchal practices and views. Most of Tennessee Williams' plays feature stereotypically weak, reliant, and helpless American women. But in the play A Streetcar Named Desire, he introduces a female character, Blanche Dubois, who is radically distinct from previous female characters in Williams' plays. The peculiarity of Blanche mirrors the spirit of the 'New Women', a phrase commonly used to raise an economically independent woman in the late nineteenth century who demanded social, political, and educational equality among men. Williams uses Blanche to stress the importance of being yourself and making

your own decisions while simultaneously demonstrating the destructive effects of a collision between modern and traditional ideals. The purpose of this paper is to analyze Blanche's actions and words from a psychoanalytic standpoint to understand better what led to her undoing, drawing on American psychoanalyst Clara Thompson's theory of the psychology of women, in which she describes the significance of cultural influences in personality development. Sarah Grand, an Irish feminist writer, used the term "new women" in her 1894 article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" for the North American Review. The suffrage movement of the nineteenth century, which gave women the ability to vote and independence in a variety of socioeconomic spheres, as well as the fact that it stirred up debate and posed a danger in both England and the United States, were the driving forces behind the formation of New Women.

Additionally, the western states' industrialization and urbanization growth improved adult women's employment and educational opportunities. The New Woman movement began to play a significant role in the complex social transformations that resulted in the redefinition of gender roles, the consolidation of women's rights, and the defeat of male supremacy toward the end of the nineteenth century. These independent, educated women desired intellectual freedom to discover who they were and what their real identities were, which was not acceptable in the contemporary world of the 20th century. As a result, they had to deal with an overwhelming scenario, which Sarah Grand summarised in the following words:

> "Women were awaking from their long apathy, and, as they awoke, like healthy hungry children unable to articulate, they began to whimper, for they knew not what. They might have been easily satisfied at that time had not society, like an ill-conditioned and ignorant nurse,….shaken them and beaten them and stormed at them until what was once a little wail became convulsive shrieks and roused up the whole human household. Then man, disturbed by the uproar, came upstairs all anger and irritation,…added his old theories to the din, but, finding they did not act rapidly, formed new ones and made an intolerable nuisance of himself with his opinions and advice." (Sarah Grand, 271)

Psychoanalyst Clara Thompson agrees, stating that this shift in women's personalities threatens women and places them in unequal competition with males. Almost every facet of men's and women's lives, including social, cultural, economic, and sexual aspects, is still dominated by this bizarre race. In her paper "Cultural Pressures in the Psychology of Women," Thomson provided a perspective on the status of women in the United States in the 20th century and outlined many ways that women's psychology has evolved in light of cultural factors. She clarifies that the cultural and social conditions created by the so-called "superior" male members of society shape the personality of every woman, whether she is a conventional or modern woman. She claims that although women have recently had access to opportunities in business, education, and some other outdoor pursuits, "this is still primarily a patriarchal culture, and although many values are changing and these changes are generally working to the benefit of women, the patriarchal situation still presents barriers to a woman's free development of her interests." Furthermore, the recent circumstances are dangerous since they often pit women against males in unfair competition.

By unequal, the reference is not to biologic inequality, but an inequality resulting from prejudice and the greater advantages offered the male" (Thompson, 233). According to her, situations like this lead to women developing a "masculinity complex" in their personalities. They want all the exclusive privileges given to males because they have a macho issue. Blanche, a New Woman in the play A Streetcar Named Desire, is portrayed as possessing this "masculinity complex." She is one of these women who was born and raised in a wealthy Old South household. She has the opportunity to pursue good education since she is affluent, and as a result, she develops a more refined and sympathetic disposition than other underprivileged women of the day. Her personality is changed in a

new manner, making her more receptive, intelligent, and libertarian. This causes her to develop a "masculinity complex" early on. She desires total autonomy to manage all aspects of her life, including social, economic, and sexual matters, in her manner. However, the society's male members have already established certain standards and conventions that Blanche will never be able to surpass. Thus, Blanche's "masculinity complex" and patriarchal society's social and cultural norms are continuously at odds with one another. According to Thompson, the economic structure of the society is the primary cause of this clash. Women are denied the right to live their own lives and the ability to oppose males because of their financial dependency on men. Achieving personal freedom requires a strong economic standing for women. Women are denied complete equal rights if they are economically reliant on males. Hence, "intellectual freedom, the 'power to think for oneself,' depends on financial freedom" (Woolf, 106).

Men dominate society in nineteenth-century America, holding positions of power, money, and even authority over women. They established their standards for judging society and the general populace. Women at that period had personalities that forced them to see being monetarily and psychologically reliant on males as extremely normal. To please men, women had to maintain a lovely look, act sweetly, and flirt with them. As a result, it was inevitable that women would lose their identity when confronted with rigid standards imposed by males and conventional rituals. Blanche is from the South of America, where the economic system is based on a plantation that prevents women from engaging in productive work so that they cannot achieve economic independence. Blanche must accept the position of a high school teacher, which is seen as a respectable career for women, even if she is forced to work outside due to financial needs. However, Blanche's self-assurance as an independent woman is short-lived since a teacher's salary does not allow her to maintain the high-born lady spirit she has lived at Belle Reve. She, therefore, continues to date other guys in Laurel. She has no other options since she is both economically weak and alone. She cannot tolerate the current economic situation, which makes a living her usual life difficult. Blanche, a lady, raised in love and luxury, cannot accept her position of inferiority. According to Thompson, "any situation which curbs spontaneous development in either sex, as a woman's lack of opportunity and economic dependence on men, can lead to early rigidity narrowed outlook on life" (Thompson, 238). Blanche experiences exactly this; she cannot consider the broad implications of her actions. She makes a morally repugnant decision and continues to date many guys. She does not see this as unethical since it serves two objectives for her simultaneously, instilling the new ladies' spirit. She discovers financial help on the one hand and a fantasy world to escape the harsh reality.

However, Blanche's "so-called" immoral sexual conduct is one of the main factors contributing to her tragedy. Women are seen as sex objects or simply possessions in the patriarchal culture. Since "the cultural attitude toward the sexual lives of women has been one of denial," Blanche should not dare to embrace sexual independence. Typically, masochism and passivity are vital elements of a woman's sexual desire (Thompson, 235). Therefore, Blanche's depicted immorality in Laurel does not go up with the story of purity characterizing a prototypical lady. The patriarchal culture does not support this route of having relationships with other men because it seeks to undermine the conventional image of a woman and her household function. In the end, Blanche loses her job as a teacher and is exiled from the community.

Blanche thus loses both her money resources and her reputation in her hometown of Laurel. Blanche is forced to seek safety at Stanley Kowalski's home in New Orleans, her brother-in-law, since she has nothing left except a dark history and "a trunk" that only contains her clothing and some useless documents. As a result, Blanche is now financially exposed to Stanley. Blanche discovers a worse condition in New Orleans; "Her look is one of astonishment and incredulity. Williams wrote this deliberately to highlight Blanche's distinction from other characters: "Her appearance is incongruous to this setting" (Williams, 15). Stanley Kowalski lives in this environment, a wonderful

representation of a civilization where men predominate and like being men. Williams uses the tension between Blanche and Stanley as a metaphor to explore the difference and conflict between the new women and the old society. In the play, Stanley makes a claim. "Every Man is a King! I am the king around here" (Williams, 107). Sister of Blanche, Stella, accepts it without hesitation. However, Blanche is unique because she is open and disobeys society's expectations of women. Whatever we call it, her ego or "masculinity complex" precludes her from tolerating any prejudice against women. She doesn't think Stanley is a more advanced person yet; instead, she refers to him as "something-sub-human- something not quite to the stage of humanity, yet" Williams, age 72 Because Stanley is a representation of masculinity and a member of the old society, she refers to him as "the survivor of the Stone Age" because he is unable to comprehend the energy and power of modern women.

Blanche's male side comes out in her actions on many occasions when visiting her sister's residence. It's freedom like Stanley's, which she's looking forward to. She's an alcoholic with a desire for dominance, and she's shown an interest in challenging Stanley and his friends in poker. Blanche declares during Scene 3 that Poker is Fascinating. A little chitchat, if I may? (Williams) However, Stanley does not permit it. Stanley has repeatedly hurt her fragile sense of manhood in this context.

In contrast to Blanche, Stella is happy to participate in the social rituals dominated by men and therefore gives credence to Blanche's new worldview. Stella can't be kept away from Stanley, not by threats and beatings. Blanche can't believe Stella's callous indifference to her plight, as she has submitted to Stella's humiliating and merciless treatment without putting up a fight. The only reason Stella's condition isn't worse than hers is that Stella is "not being sensible about it," in her opinion. She wants to find a way for herself and Stella out of this situation. She tells Stella; "I'm going to do something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life!" (Williams, 73)

For Stanley, Stella is a chance to demonstrate his authority and masculinity; yet, "Blanche is a threat in the way of demonstrating his masculinity" (Vaughn, 61). Stanley senses the danger of losing what is his with Blanche's arrival. She becomes a threat to his way of life since she is a strong force and a higher entity that he cannot comprehend. She has never permitted him to rule as "king" in his home, representing the social assumption that women should always be subordinate to males. Blanche has consumed Stanley's food, drank alcohol, and utilized his home, yet she still disparages and opposes him. Stanley's experience and the typically male-dominated world are both completely fresh.

Therefore, a common man like Stanley must respond violently when he feels threatened. Stanley, who belongs to this group, cannot allow Blanche to violate the long-cherished standards and ideals established by the so-called superior male members. Because, in Stanley's or the world's view, a pleasant social existence requires a subservient woman like Stella and an authoritative male counterpart like Stanley. "Stella supports the patriarchy and is allowed to survive as Stanley's wife; Blanche is destroyed because she cannot find her identity or role in the patriarchy and is slowly forced into marginalization" (Vaughn, 93). Blanche struggles to stand up for both her and her sister's uniqueness. Stanley senses the danger of losing what is his with Blanche's arrival. She turns into a threat to his way of life. She has never permitted him to rule as "king" in his home, representing the social assumption that women should always be subordinate to males. Blanche has consumed Stanley's food, drank alcohol, and utilized his home, yet she still disparages and opposes him.

Stanley's experience and the traditional, male-dominated world are completely fresh. Therefore, the common man—like Stanley—must respond violently when he feels threatened. Stanley, who belongs to this group, cannot allow Blanche to violate the long-cherished standards and ideals established by the so-called superior male members because Stanley and patriarchal society believe that only a social existence with a subservient woman like Stella and an infallible male counterpart like Stanley can be tranquil. Blanche is an unyielding rival and an intrusive threat that has

to be eliminated. In New Orleans, the sexuality-related hypocrisy of society is once again exposed. Mitch highlights the discrepancy between how the new women act and what kind of conduct is publicly demanded by society by rejecting Blanche and asserting that she is not the perfect lady he thought she was. Williams reveals the dual moral standards of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century American culture and how they impacted women in this passage. Stanley also corrects Stella over Blanche's illicit business. However, nobody in the community cares when Stanley rapes Blanche when she is home alone. Williams says in the play, "since earliest manhood, the centre of his life has been a pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens."(Williams, 29). It makes clear that only males have the freedom to pursue their sexual desires as they see fit in this world. After the play, Blanche's rape by Stanley deflates her as a person and eliminates her masculine concept. This encounter shatters the notion she had about women's equality with males. Because no one questions Stanley's cleanliness after the rape, it demonstrates society's incongruous moral standards.

This rape never torments Stanley's conscience, but Blanche's mental equilibrium is severely damaged. Blanche is unable to form a partnership with authority. Williams gives Stanley the advantage over Blanche, dispelling the notion that society encourages masculinity in women by giving them access to some of the more privileged chances enjoyed by males. Following that, "having no path of their own to follow, women have tended to copy men" (Thompson, 239), and this mimicry of men places women in an unwelcome contest with men. However, society perceives a danger when these adult girls continue to play a significant part in that conflict and pushes them back to where they were before. Some women, like Blanche, cannot accept the prejudice and the "traumatic experiences which keep alive the attitude of inferiority" while the game is still ongoing (Thompson, 239). She, therefore, leaves up this world for Stanley since she realizes that it is still too prejudiced for her soul to be diffused there. Because Stanley behaves appropriately for his position in society, he succeeds. Blanche knows she is an outsider in this world, but since she refuses to accept her proper position in society, she is despised and even is ready to enter an institution. "She is rejected even by her sister and is thrown to a place, the mental hospital, where she will not "cause disturbances" (Zak, 71). Sill this world is for Stanley, symbolically for the manhood, women are the second citizen here.

However, Blanche's breakdown at the play's conclusion may be seen as upholding Stanley's conventional masculine dominance. Her predicament serves as a criticism of what most women are destined to face when they want more power in a culture that is mostly male and where men would stop at nothing to maintain their position and level of dominance. Despite all of the challenges women face in this culture, they are compelled to live at the margins to avoid upsetting the established power structure.   Williams conveys the concept that women start with much cruelty via Blanche. Women's freedom of choice, equality with boys, and the right to use force are taken away from them by males since they are stereotyped from an early age as being physically and intellectually inferior. Unquestionably, a woman's compromised personality has been greatly influenced by her teaching to be conservative, particularly concerning her physical well-being and self-interests. Therefore, it will take a long time for anybody to liberate themselves psychologically and physically from this socially built notion, even an educated and independent woman like Blanche. Women won't be able to achieve their goals of freedom, equality with males, and advantages unless we fundamentally alter our culture and foster the natural psychological development of all women beginning in utero.

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