Gender Struggle and Women’s Predicament in Tennessee Williams’ A Street Car named Desire.

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to shed light on the theme of Gender Struggle and Women’s Predicament in Tennessee Williams’ A Street Car Named Desire. The paper tries to show William's dealings with the critical social themes like Men's Brutality and women's predicament. The paper exposes the complete shift of the balance of power between the genders in America after the two world wars. Williams illustrates society's changing attitudes towards masculinity and denounces the society's attitudes towards women in America at that time. He rebels against the cruelty of the modern age and regrets the disintegration of the values of the south and their being replaced by the disruptive forces of modern life. In the end of the play, brutality and ruthlessness of the main male character Stanley, win over gentility and delicacy of Blanche, the main female character in the play. Stanley beats his wife Stella horrifyingly and rapes his sister-in-law Blanche, showing no remorse. Yet, Blanche is an outcast from society, while Stanley is the proud family man. The play then has a moral lesson and social satire as a literary work belongs to the school of art for the sake of life and not art for the sake of art.

Tennessee Williams wrote on isolated and lonely people of America and especially women. The heroines of his plays all suffer from physical or emotional injury and seek fulfillment from a mate. In the words of Arthur Ganz "He is especially expert at creating sympathetic women like the faded southern belle in the Class Menagerie (1945), the
touching spinster in The Night of Lquana (1961) and the pathetic Blanche in A Street Car named Desire. (1947) "

The plot of Street Car Named Desire can be summarized in a story a desolated woman named Blanche DuBois. Reared in Old South aristocratic traditions, she lived elegantly in the family homestead, married a man she adored, and pursued a career as an English teacher. But her life fell apart when she discovered that her husband, Allen Grey, was having a homosexual affair which has led to his committing suicide. Blanche sought comfort with other men, many men. Then, she was fired by the authorities after she had a relation with one of her seventeen-year-old students. Meanwhile, relatives died and she could not keep up the family home. Eventually, creditors seized it. The play begins when Blanche arrives in New Orleans to stay with her sister, Stella, and her crude husband, Stanley Kowalski. Though scarred by her past, Blanche still tries to lead the life of an elegant lady and does her best, even lying when necessary, to keep up appearances. When Blanche begins to fall for Mitch, one of Stanley's friends, Stanley finds out as much as he can against Blanche to discourage the relationship. He succeeds, finding out, by way a co-worker, about her relationship with the student and her exploits at the Flamingo Hotel, and other things. After Stanley presents a bus ticket back to Laurel to Blanche on her birthday, Stella goes into labor and Stanley takes her to the hospital. When he returns, however, Mitch has come and gone, telling Blanche that she is not clean enough to live in the same house as his mother and therefore can't marry him. Stanly is alone with Blanche. She struggles to get away, but is subdued under his strength and is raped. Blanche goes mad.

A Street Car Named Desire is characterized by the noticeable absence of the male protagonist who has heroic qualities. Indeed, the polar opposite of what a literary chivalric hero might be, is represented in the leading male character of the play, Stanley Kowalski who is muscular, forceful, and dominant. His domination becomes so overwhelming that he demands absolute control. This view of the male as a large animal is revealed in the opening of the play where Stanley is
Stanley is described by Blanche as a "survivor of the Stone Age". She says about Stanley that "He acts like an animal, has animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talk like one! There is even something – subhuman-something not quite to the stage of humanity" (p.70).

Stanley is further depicted in this primitive light by numerous traits that he exhibits: uncivilized manners, demanding and forceful behavior, lack of empathy, complete selfishness, and a chauvinistic attitude towards women. That is quite evident through his bad treatment of his wife Stella. He beats her and is impolite to her in front of other people. He rarely takes her suggestions and often scolds her. Stanley only acts kindly to Stella when he wants her to satisfy him physically.

Male characters of the play A Street Car Named Desire believe that the only responsibility for women is to be their husbands' service and to be good wives. On the other hand, society forces women to have dependence on men. Both Blanche and Stella see male companion as their only means to achieve happiness. Stella is mistreated by her husband, but she refuses to abandon him. Blanche sees marriage as her only possibility for survival. She looks at her marriage to Mitch as her means for escaping destitution and when he rejects her because of Stanley's gossip about her reputation, she immediately thinks of another man, the millionaire Dhep Huntleigh, who might rescue her.

Stanley is clearly the more dominant figure over Stella. Throughout the play there are numerous examples of the power he possesses of her. One of the examples of his severity towards his wife is in the first scene of the play when he throws a piece of meat up to Stella as he turns the corner heading for the bowling alley. He makes no motion to stop, run up the stairs and explain to his wife what’s going on, similar to what would occur in an equal relationship. Instead he continues down the street like a boy with no responsibilities. When Stella asks him about his destination and if she could come to watch, he agrees but does not stop to wait for her. This scene demonstrates how Stella follows Stanley along, and serves him according to what he wishes to do and when he wants to do it.
Stella is often abused physically through various incarnations of male violence. There are two examples of Stanley's maltreatment of his wife. The first one is when Stella at midnight asks him about when will be the end of the poker game and he gets mad and hit her:

**Stella:** How much longer is this game going to continue?
**Stanley:** Till we get ready to quit.
**Blanche:** Poker is so fascinating. Could I kibitz?
**Stanley:** You could not. Why don't you women go up and sit with Eunice?
**Stella:** Because it is nearly two-thirty A.M....

[A chair scrapes. Stanley: gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh.]

**Stella:** [Sharply.] That's not fun, Stanley. (to Blanche) It makes me so mad when he does that in front of people. (p. 63)

Shortly after this incident, comes the second incident when Blanche turns the radio on in spite of Stanley's objection. He gets furious and snatches the radio and throws it from the window. Stella objects his rude behaviour, he beats her hard in front of the guests although she is pregnant:

[Stanley stalks fiercely through the portieres into the bedroom. He crosses to the small white radio and snatches it off the table. With a shouted oath, he tosses the instrument out the window.]

**Stella:** Drunk, drunk animal thing, you! [she rushes through to the poker table] all of you - please go home! If any one of you one spark of decency in you-

**Blanche:** [Wildly.] Stella, watch out, he's... [Stanley charges after Stella.]

**Men:** [Feebly] Take it easy, Stanley. Easy fellow,-let's all-

**Stella:** You lay your hands on me and I'll... [She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow, Stella cries out. Blanche screams and runs into the kitchen. The men rush forward and there is grappling and cursing. Something is overturned with a crash.]
Blanche: [Shrilly.] My sister is going to have a baby!  
(pp., 65-6)

In scene eight, Stanley responds to Stella’s request to clear the table in the following way:

Stella: Your face and your fingers are disgustingly greasy. Go and wash up and then help me clear the table.

[He hurls a plate to the floor.]
Stanly: That’s how I’ll clear the table! [He seizes her arm.] Don’t ever talk that way to me.
Pig- Polack-disgusting-vulgar greasy!
[…She cries out in protest…Her husband and his companion have already started back around the corner. (p. 82).

This call for violence is not a mere consequence of the physical inequality between the genders, but is an example of male abuse of power and position, in order to further their own dominance. Yet Stella is not affronted by such actions, and instead remains true to the stereotyped submissive female.7

When Stella first met her husband, she realized he had a violent temper, and she was somehow thrilled by this fact. She was warned of his nature before they were married, but she couldn't help falling in his admiration. Stanley takes care of her and knows what is best, and she knows she cannot take care of herself. When Stella chooses to remain with Stanley, she chooses to rely on, love, and believe in a man instead of her sister. Williams does not necessarily criticize Stella—he makes it quite clear that Stanley represents a much more secure future than Blanche does.8

Stella and Blanche are sisters, and this blood relationship suggests other similarities between the two women. They are both part of the final generation of a once aristocratic but now moribund family. Both show a great deal of culture and sensitivity, and because of this, both seem out of place in Elysian Fields. Finally, both Stella and Blanche are or have been married. It is in their respective marriages that we can begin to trace the profound differences between these two sisters.9
Williams uses Blanche and Stella’s dependence on men to expose and critique the treatment of women during the transition from the old to the new South. Both Blanche and Stella see male companions as their only means to achieve happiness, and they depend on men for both their sustenance and self-image. 

Before one can understand Blanche’s character, one must understand the reason why she moved to New Orleans and joined her sister, Stella, and brother-in-law, Stanley. She went there because her belongings in the world amount to a trunk full of gaudy dresses and cheap jewelry. Our compassion for Blanche increases as Blanche’s fear of death manifests itself in her fears of aging and of lost beauty. She refuses to tell anyone her true age or to appear in harsh light that will reveal her faded looks. 

She tells Stella about the reasons of her coming to her house saying "I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can’t be alone Because as you must have noticed- I ’m– not very well " (p.55 )

Stanley and Blanche become as polar opposites, with Stella as the link between them Stanley and Blanche become mortal enemies, and Stanley dedicates himself to Blanche’s destruction. The clash between Blanche and Stanley according to Singni Lenea Falk is "inevitable" for they represent two opposite views of life.

Stanley’s interference in his wife’s affairs, with regard to the Napoleonic Code, a code of law recognized in New Orleans from the days of French rule that places women’s property in the hands of their husbands. Stanley is upset over loss of Belle Reve property and possibility of Stella being cheated by Blanche, He addresses his wife Stella saying:  

Stanley: Have you ever heard of the Napoleonic Code?  
Stella: No, Stanley, I haven't heard of the Napoleonic Code and if I have ,I don’t see what it-  
Stanley: let me enlighten you on a appoint or two ,baby.  
Stella: yes?  
Stanley: In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic Code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa… (p. 32).
Blanche says to Stanley, after he accuses her of depriving Stella out of her inheritance:

*There are thousands of papers, stretching back over hundreds of years, affecting Belle Reve as, piece by piece, our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications — to put it plainly! . . . The four-letter word deprived us of our plantation, till finally all that was left — and Stella can verify that! — was the house itself and about twenty acres of ground, including a graveyard, to which now all but Stella and I have retreated. (p. 61).*

Blanche cannot accept that the past is gone to stay and she maintains an air of superiority over people like Stanley. She in her turn also urges her sister to leave her husband in the name of progress and civilization. She says that Stanley resembles an animal more than he does a man.

*God! Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella my sister, there has been some progress since then! Such things as art—as poetry and music—such kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! that we have got to make grow! And cling to and hold as our flag. In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching . . . Don't hang back with the brutes!"* (p. 70).

Blanche seems to be interested in Mitch who is one of Stanley's friends. He is unmarried man lives with his ailing mother. Blanche tells him that she’s younger than Stella (although she’s five years older) and that she is in New Orleans to look after Stella, even though she is there because she has nowhere else to go. She also says she is an old maid schoolteacher (although she was married once to a homosexual who committed suicide), and that she teaches high school
English (although she was forced out of her job for having an affair with a student).  

For herself, Blanche sees marriage to Mitch as her means of escaping destitution. Men’s exploitation of Blanche’s sexuality has left her with a poor reputation. This reputation makes Blanche an unattractive marriage prospect, but, because she is destitute, Blanche sees marriage as her only possibility for survival. In the romance with Harold Mitchell, Blanche finds another sensitive, lonely person who just like her, needs tenderness and love. This is quite clear in the following conversation between them.

**Mitch :** You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be— you and me, Blanche?  
**Blanche:** Sometimes— there is God— so quickly. (p. 78).

When Mitch rejects Blanche because of Stanley’s gossip about her reputation, Blanche immediately thinks of another man—the millionaire Shep Hunteleigh—who might rescue her. Because Blanche cannot see around her dependence on men, she has no realistic conception of how to rescue herself. She does not realize that her dependence on men will lead to her downfall rather than her salvation. By relying on men, Blanche puts her fate in the hands of others.  

Williams suggests that Blanche’s sexual history was a cause of her downfall. When she first arrives at New Orleans, she says she rode a streetcar named Desire, and then transferred to a streetcar named Cemeteries, which brought her to a street named Elysian Fields. This journey allegorically represents the journey of Blanche’s life. The Elysian Fields are the land of the dead in Greek mythology. Blanche’s lifelong pursuit of her sexual desires has led to her eviction from Belle
Reve, her keeping out from Laurel, and, at the end of the play, her expulsion from society at large.\textsuperscript{15}

At the end of the play, when Blanche's secrets were revealed, she retreats into her own private fantasies enables her to partially shield herself from reality’s harsh blows. Blanche’s insanity emerges as she retreats fully into herself, leaving the objective world behind in order to avoid accepting reality. At the end of the play, the Frightened Blanche picks up the phone receiver and requests the number of “Shep Huntleigh of Dallas,” who she says is so well known that she need not provide the operator an address. Stanley emerges from the bathroom in his pajamas. He leers at her. She smashes the top of a bottle and threatens him with the jagged edge. He subdues and rapes her.\textsuperscript{16}

When Geraled Weales discusses the theme of what the play is about, he refers to a letter which was sent by Williams to Joseph I. Breen the chief sensor of the Production Code, making a plea to retain the integrity of movie version of A Streetcar Named Desire. In this letter Williams says: "The rape of Blanche by Stanly is a pivotal, integral truth of the play, without which the play loses its meaning, which is the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, and the delicate by the savage and brutal forces of the modern society." \textsuperscript{17}

John Gassner argues that "A Street Car named Desire communicated a sense of crass fatality; of life of a woman  destroyed by frustration in love against which pretensions and illusions are a pathetic and futile defense"\textsuperscript{18} Joseph Wood Krutch when discusses the case whether Williams was subjective or was having dramatic objectivity concludes "But though there is in the pays certain dream like or rather nightmarish quality, the break with reality is never quite made, and nothing happened that might not be an actual event." \textsuperscript{19}

Kenneth Tynan argues that Blanche represents the south in one way or another, he adds that most of William's writings deals with the
south in naturalistic manner and portrays it as decent he then concludes that the fall of her represents the decline of the past: 

*When, finally, Blanche is removed to the mental house, we should feel that apart of civilization is going with her. Where ancient drama teaches us to reach nobility by contemplation on what is noble, Modern America drama conjures us to contemplate what might have been noble, but is now humiliated, ignoble in the sight of all but the compassionate.*

Although, some sympathy also goes to Stella who puts up with more than she needs to as she takes the abuse from both her husband and sister which create a harsh reality for herself. She wants to please her sister and wants to have the love of her husband. Yet, she is passively submissive to her husband. In the words of Durant de Ponte "Blanche is ultimately lost and thus becomes a fit subject for modern tragedy" the sympathy then according to him must clearly go to Blanche rather than her sister Stella, who has copulated and joined the enemy.

Benjamin Nelson agrees with Ponte and when discusses the question "with whom does the writer’s sympathy lie?", he says "I do not possibly see how they could favor anyone but Blanche DuBois", he goes on arguing that "for Blanche chooses the dream of the past and becomes the victim of this impossible choice. Her greatness is that she does choose it rather than make the adjustment which Stella makes… for Blanche destruction is preferable to barbarism". Signi Lenea Falk in his discussion of the play, refers to the words of the critic Brooks Atkinson who found the play as "almost unbearably tragic because The audience are profoundly moved as they have been sitting all evening in the presence of truth." Thus, the classical concept of catharsis is existed and the moral lesson is successfully delivered to the audience.
Conclusion

Society’s mistreatment of women is vividly represented in the characters of Blanche Dubois and her sister Stella the two sisters who used to live in the glory days of the South, when their Belle Reeve estate provided them with a genteel life that is no longer possible for either of them. One of the sisters, Stella, has accepted her misfortunes and is contentedly wed to Stanley Kowalski a working man. The other sister, Blanche DuBois, cannot face the acceptance of her faded past and the bright light of reality. Blanche comes to visit Stella and Stanley and is horrified by their dour environment. Blanche is portrayed as a tragic heroine. The play presents a tragic conflict between the sensitive, neurotic Blanche Dubois and crude, animalistic Stanley Kowalski. Stanley is depicted as a symbol of a brutal male-dominated society. The themes of A streetcar Named Desire are mainly built on conflict, the conflicts between men and women, the conflicts of race, class and attitude to life, and these are especially embodied in Stanley and Blanche. By representing these truths to the masses, Tennessee Williams poses a question to society, as to whether or not these representations are accurate hoping that his works will contribute in social reform.
Bibliography

Notes


6. Ibid, p. 139.

7. Falk p. 87.


12. Falk, p. 86.


16 Ibid, p. 2076.
22 Nelson, p. 145.
23 Falk, p. 87.