

Blanche's Destruction:

Feminist Analysis on *A Streetcar Named Desire*

LA DESTRUCTION DE BLANCHE:

ANALYSE FÉMINISTE SUR *UN TRAMWAY NOMMÉ DÉsir*

WEI Fang¹

Abstract: *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a famous play written by American playwright Tennessee Williams, for which he was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1984. He is highly praised and eulogized for its delicate construction, refined writing, vivid characters and provoking thoughts. It mainly deals with the conflicts between two symbolic characters, Blanche DuBois—a fading gentlewoman of the Old South--and Stanley Kowalski, an industrial, urban immigrant with unrefined characteristics. In particular, Blanche, as the representative of delicate and fragile southern female images, has been the focus of discussion. This paper analyzes this typical controversial heroine from the perspective of feminism in terms of social culture, economic factor and women's psychology to find out the main factors for her destruction.

Key words: desire, feminism, social culture, economic factor, women's psychology

Résumé: *Un Tramway Nommé Désir* est une célèbre pièce écrite par le dramaturge américain Tennessee Williams, pour lequel il a reçu le Prix Pulitzer pour le Drame en 1984. Il est très apprécié et louangé pour sa construction délicate, son écriture raffinée, ses personnages vivants et d'inspirer la réflexion. Il traite essentiellement les conflits entre les deux personnages symboliques, Blanche Dubois-une dame fanée de vieux Sud - et Stanley Kowalski, un immigrant urbain industriel avec la caractéristique non raffinée. En particulier, Blanche, comme le représentant de l'image des femmes du sud délicat et fragile, était le point focal de la discussion. Ce document analyse cette héroïne typique controversée du point de vue du féminisme en termes de culture sociale, facteur économique et psychologie des femmes à connaître les facteurs principaux de sa destruction.

Mots-Clés: désir, féminisme, culture sociale, facteur économique, psychologie des femmes

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law. Wuhan, Hubei, 430073, P. R. China.
E-mail: annweifang@163.com

* Received 24 December 2007; accepted 18 March 2008

INTRODUCTION

Tennessee Williams is widely considered the greatest southern playwright and one of the greatest playwrights in the history of American drama, whose masterpieces include *Glass Menagerie*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Rose Tattoo*, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Night of the Iguana*, etc.. In these plays, he creates many unforgettable characters, especially lonely, depressed, coward and mind-distorted southern female images. As one of the most recognizable characters in American drama and a fading but sexy Southern belle, Blanche DuBois suffers from the death of her husband who has turned out to be homosexual and committed suicide, the loss of her ancestral home and the passing away of her elder relatives. Guilty and grieve, she dates with a variety of men. Finally her reputation is ruined and she is dismissed due to having an affair with a young boy in her school. And then she turns to her sister Stella for help, who lives in the slum of New Orleans where she is acquainted with Mitch, the brother-in-law Stanley's fellow worker. Blanche dreams to start a new life with him, but the dream is broken due to her conflict with Stanley. In the end, their final, inevitable confrontation—a rape—results in Blanche's nervous breakdown, and she is sent to a madhouse. Like a delicate and fragile work of art handed down from American Old South, she cannot get rid of a set of hypocritical, strict and controversial moral standards and shows difficulty in adapting to modern culture. She is doomed to undergo misfortunes, lose self and finally go to destruction.

1. SOCIAL CULTURE--THE MENTALITY OF THE SOUTH

It is reasonable that almost every person's fame is closely related to the place where he/she grows up, so it is necessary to probe into briefly the history of the South and its cultural background in order to have a deeper investigation of the heroine's destruction.

The prewar South is full of contradictory memories. The Southern plantation economy set a division between planters and slaves. The slaves worked all-day long under the whip, whereas the rich planters behaved like feudal lords and lived a luxury life. Under the influence of such an economic environment, the upper class of the South believed "itself to be unique, because it projected itself as such through its writers and spokesmen, because it manufactured a folklore of plantation aristocracy, of the magnolia paradise of the antebellum days, of the Greek society and the peculiar institution of slavery, of the Lost Cause, of White Supremacy, and of the need to be born there to understand it all, and Southerners repeated this litany so many times that it became true—or almost so." (Horton, 1987: 377) Then the framework of the South can be established: its social pattern is based on manor; its civilization is permeated with idealized chivalry; its ruling class behaves as an aristocracy, either a gentleman or a lovely lady. They live in large mansions, own lots of estates, and have colorful social life. It is a "world singularly polished and mellow and poised, wholly dominated by ideals of honor and chivalry and noblesse" (Li, 2004: 21), where Blanche was brought up and used to live for years.

In fact, the self-contained and self-sufficient South is an epitome of patriarchal society. Simone de Beauvoir points out in her book *The second sex*, "males don't interpret females according to females themselves, whereas they regard females as independent ones... males can be taken as the reference to define and distinguish females, while the reference to define and distinguish males cannot be females. 'She' is the Essential in opposition of the Inessential. 'He' is the subject and the Absolute, whereas 'she' is the Other." (Beauvoir, 1998:11) From the above arguments, it can be seen that there exists a relation of subordination and dominance, the essential and inessential, object and subject, and the other and self between males and females. Therefore, in patriarchal society, males stand at a positive position and females play a passive and inessential role. Charlotte Perkins Gilman also considers gender as the core of analysis to reveal the fact of gender oppression, pointing out that the females' dependence on males is not due to physiological difference but the result of coercive act of male culture (Jin, 2004:367). Particularly Kate Millet holds in *Sexual Politics* that the gender relation between males and females is a kind of power one, that is "sexual politics" (Jin, 2004:595). Similarly, in the south, the men as the center

of the society control money, power and even women. They form their own standards to evaluate the society and other people. Women live a life of dependence on them, both economically and mentally. And there is another obvious feature here. That is the tendency toward idealism, romanticism and hedonism. Women have to keep beautiful appearance, behave graciously and flirt with men in order to please them. It is inevitable that women would lose their self when faced with traditional customs and strict standards set by men.

2. ECONOMIC FACTOR

Marxism feminist theory argues that economic factor is the root of the oppression that women suffer from (Luo, 2004:100). The economic dependence on men deprives women of the right to dominate their own fate and the strength to struggle against men so that they are reduced into the Other affiliated by men. British writer, Virginia Woolf thinks that women's independent economic status is the material foundation to obtain personal freedom. If women are dependent on men economically, they are deprived of all the equal rights (Wu, 2005:69). The economic structure of plantation in the South removes women from productive labor so that they cannot obtain the independent economic status.

Even if Blanche is forced to work outside because of economic necessity, she has to choose to be a teacher in a high school which is regarded as a decent occupation of women. And as Blanche tells Mitch her miserable situation, "A teacher's salary is barely sufficient for her living expenses. I didn't save a penny last year and so I had to come here for the summer." (Williams, 2005:1179) Evidently, her meager incomes are barely enough to maintain her extravagant life. So, it is quite natural that she has to turn to men for help after the suicide of her husband, death of relatives and loss of her manor, and she considers it the only choice to face the cruel environment, as she says, "Whoever you are-I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams, 2005:1203) She is in and out through the gate of the second-rate hotel of Laurel and keeps dating with different men until she is banished from the town. Then she doesn't have any thing to her name except a dishonorable past and a trunk that just contains her clothes and some worthless papers, so she has no alternative but to seek refuge from her sister Stella in New Orleans. In Stella's house, she seduces her brother-in-law Stanley when meeting him for the first time, because she understands that she needs his financial support when she stays there. She says, "...maybe he (Stanley) is what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve." (Williams, 2005:1156) But her behavior of Southern culture of delicacy and romance doesn't fit in with Stanley who is an animalized person with peevish disposition. It is an irony that just immediately after she resolves to Stella at the poker night "I'm going to do something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life," (Williams, 2005:1166), she turns to a married millionaire Shep Huntleigh for financial support. Her excuse is that she only has "sixty-five measly cents in coin of the realm" in the purse. Thus having recourse to this millionaire seems an effective means "to get hold of some money" and "the way out." (Williams, 2005:1166) However, the help call and the message are not sent out. And her next proposal is Stanley's fellow worker Mitch, by whom she wants to get rid of the destitution and the dependence on Stanley. She thinks if the marriage with Mitch happens, she can "leave here (Stella's home), and not be anyone's problem" (Williams, 2005:1173) and live a stable life. But things do not turn out as one wishes. When knowing her past, Mitch abandons her ruthlessly. After she parts company with Mitch, she is so depressed that she creates an illusion for herself, in which she has received a telegram from Shep Huntleigh inviting her to a cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht. Without exception her luxurious life is again built on the support of men, even in an illusion. Actually, this millionaire may not exist at all, and just appears an imagined person in Blanche's one-sided statement. He stands for an ideal symbol that can bring material strength of dependence and guarantee for women, more exactly for Blanche. That he never shows up and gives the substantial aid to Blanche may suggest that if women place their hope and fortune on men, their oppressed and subordinate status can never be changed, and their dream of happy life is bound to break. In short, women's economic dependence on men in patriarchal society serves as one of factors that result in Blanche's destruction.

3. WOMEN'S PSYCHOLOGY

Feminists believe that patriarchy not only suppresses women in such aspects as politics, economy, society, culture, education and so on, but also mistakenly defines women's psychology as being unilateral, unsound, irrational, illogical and impulsive. Under this kind of bias and discrimination, women's psychology is easily distorted, and cannot develop healthily. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche is a contradictive lady with very complicated character, which will be illustrated from the aspects of sexual desire, fantasy for bright future, and hypocrisy and pretension.

3.1 Sexual Desire

Blanche's sexual desire can be explained in two aspects.

On the one hand, as the key word in this play, "desire" also serves as one of main factors that contribute to Blanche's tragedy. She is brought up in traditional South, a place full of aristocratic smells. She receives good education and knows how to behave as a decent and graceful noblewoman. However, her inward desire is always so powerful that it defeats her reason, and finally swallows herself.

First of all, Blanche's deep love to her husband Allen and his death ignite the fuse of desire. In South, a kind of puritan ethics are carried out, and homosexuality is universally unacceptable as an immoral deed. It is this idea that is implanted into Blanche's mind since she's young. Naturally, when she finds the boy she loves deeply is a homosexual, she is shocked and hurt, and doesn't know what to do but pretend. Her reaction leads to the suicide of Allen; it is a forever-existing wound in her heart. After that, she begins to retaliate upon the puritan ethics, because they ruin her happy life forever. It seems the death of her husband is the catalyst of breaking the fetters of ethics, and her desire erupts ever since. She indulges herself in sexual desire, and develops intimacy with one stranger and another. Even she is expelled from the school because of her dishonorable action on a seventeen-year-old boy. However, her rebellion cannot release her. Instead, the more men she dates with, the more confused she feels. Thus the stronger the desire becomes, the deeper she bogs down. And the final result is destruction.

Actually, "desire" is also responsible for the decline of Dubois family. As Blanche explains to Stanley about the loss of Belle Reve, "...our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchange the land for their epic fornications..." (Williams, 2005:1155) The old generations hold themselves up as pursuers of strict ethics, whereas they implement another set of moral standards in the dark. Their "epic fornications" destroy Belle Reve, and leave nothing but debts to their offspring. Meanwhile, Blanche inherits their double attitude on sexual desire. Even though she tries to behave like a decent gentlewoman, she cannot conceal her strong sexual desire, because "desire" is deep-rooted as a part of her nature. When she meets Stanley for the first time, she asks him to do up her buttons. At poker night, she deliberately stands in the light only in her silk brassiere and white skirt to attract others' attention. Even she employs her charm to flirt with a newspaper boy. All these can fully indicate her innate desire. And also it is her desire that gives her a deathblow. Based on the fact that Stanley knows Blanche's notorious past and regards her as a profligate woman, when facing a lady only in "a white satin evening gown" (Williams, 2005:1193), it is impossible for him to remain unmoved. So eventually when his wife is sent to hospital to have the baby, he rapes her, which makes her mentality collapse. It can be seen that Blanche's inner sexual desire inherited from Dubois family has gone wild since the death of her husband, and it plants the bitter fruit of her destiny.

On the other hand, Blanche's dissolute behaviors reveal her fear on the deficiency of men's protection which leads to the deep dependency on men. She internalized the rules of patriarchal society, and considers men to be the whole of life. When she is married to Allan who has a poetic temperament, she feels she is the happiest one in the world, as she describes, "When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me." (Williams, 2005:1180) But the fact that Allan is a homosexual gives her a heavy blow, and even his suicide forces her to go to extremes. Therefore, she turns to other men for the substitution of her husband and seeks for

protection to dispel fear. Maybe only through dependence on various men, flirtation with them and even sleeping with them, can she fill up her empty heart, and find a shelter and sense of security. Mitch is just her last shelter, where she may “have a rest” and “breathe quietly again” (Williams, 2005:1173), even though he is just an ordinary worker and doesn’t have any indication that he is “superior to the others” (Williams, 2005:1158). In thousands of years’ patriarchal society, men’s status in women’s mind is just like God’s position in people’s minds—the absolute authority, according to which women must worship, submit to and attach themselves to men. Since man is God of woman, how can Blanche be away from men?

3.2 Future and fantasy

If females created by Williams in his plays are assertively seen as compliers of natural impulse and desire, their intricate characters are covered. In fact, they do hold the aspiration for full value of life and bright future, including Blanche, as she says in scene 4, “What you are talking about is brutal desire-just-Desire-the name of that rattle-trap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...”, “It brought me here.-Where I’m not wanted and where I’m ashamed to be...” (Williams, 2005:1168)

Though Blanche who has a notorious past and bad reputation has suffered from all kinds of misfortunes, she is still a lady looking forward to happy life in her nature. Deep down, she not only pursues desire, but also wants to get warmth existing among people and a shelter to settle down. Actually, her desire reflects her longing for the happy life.

In patriarchal society, as a woman who has to be subordinated to men, Blanche is brave enough to fight against fetters and challenge men’s authority in order to alter her miserable situation and thus live a happy life. After Stella leaves Bell Reve, Blanche shoulders all the burden of her family. In spite of losing all the estates, she has indeed tried her best. She cannot avoid failure just because it is an undeniable reality of any helpless woman in a patriarchal society. She lodges at her sister’s house, but her pose of arrogance, nobility and romance is incompatible with the rude, irritability and realism of her brother-in-law Stanley. During the argument of property, she tries to be brave and mature, and she declares to Stanley, “I’m not young and vulnerable any more”. (Williams, 2005:1155) Faced with Stanley’s violence to her sister at the poker night, Blanche dares to express her disgust to Stanley’s primitive nature and distain openly, calling him “an animal”, “sub-human-something not quite to the stage of humanity yet”, and “survivor of the Stone Age” (Williams, 2005:1169), and even she encourages her sister to leave him. She is steady, brave, idealistic, bearing the Southern culture and memory in mind. Sorrowfully, when she is stuck in trouble, men are always the ones to whom she resorts. She writes a help message to her admirer Shep Huntleigh who is an oil millionaire. Actually, he is the representative of ideal men with incalculable wealth and high social status in her illusion. She implores Mitch to marry her, which can serve as a counterattack to Stanley as well as an approach to a new life. But Mitch is not her savior. He adores her just like an idol, and it is based on a series of strategies Blanche has practiced on him, namely pretension, concealment, lies and so on. When he discovers her past, he states clearly she is “not clean enough to bring in the house with my (Mitch’s) mother.”(Williams, 2005:1193) He strips her of the last ray of hope to a new life. Therefore, her dependence on men as the most effective and even the sole approach to brightness reduces her glorious future to a fantasy and brings about her tragedy.

3.3 Hypocrisy and pretension

Hypocrisy and pretension constitute another facet of Blanche’s character. What lies behind the hypocrisy and pretension is her lack of sense of security and the need of protection. She indulges in the past glory and romance, but the contradiction of the inner nobility and the degradation in reality tortures her a lot. Since she is unable to adapt to the new environment and culture, she chooses to be an escapee. She knows much about the rules set by men in the new South. That is she has to please men in order to

survive, and she adopts several strategies, namely, pretension, make-up, elegant dresses, flashy language and so on.

She is good at pretension. When she discovers Allan is a homosexual, she pretends “nothing had been discovered” (Williams, 2005:1180). But later she behaves hysterically, “very drunk” and “laughing all the way” (Williams, 2005:1180). Her pretension consequently causes death of her husband. Without being able to help her husband, her statement “I loved him unendurably” (Williams, 2005:1180) just becomes senseless. When she stays with Mitch, she behaves like an innocent and pure virgin with “old-fashioned ideals” (Williams, 2005:1178). When Mitch wants to embrace her, she responds, “Now, Mitch. Just because Stanley and Stella aren’t at home is no reason why you shouldn’t behave like a gentleman.” (Williams, 2005:1178) She uses all kinds of strategies to “deceive him enough to make him-want me (Blanche)” (Williams, 2005:1173), as she tells Stella. She also conceals her true age, because she thinks, “Men don’t want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over-thirty.” (Williams, 2005:1173)

Besides, Blanche is oversensitive about her looks, because she firmly believes that only beautiful and elegant women can be attractive to men, which may bring sense of satisfaction and success to her. So she prepares a set of equipment to dress herself up at moments. She brings a trunk with her, in which there are a lot of nice but cheap clothes, fake jewels, and the make-up powder. When she first meets Stella, she is afraid of showing her untidy appearance, saying “But don’t you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested.” (Williams, 2005:1144) Later she shows off her slim figure before Stella, “I haven’t put an ounce in ten years, Stella? I weigh what I weighed the summer you left Belle Reve.” (Williams, 2005:1145) When she goes back home to see poker players of Stanley, she is reluctant to enter inside, “Wait till I powder before you open the door. Do I look done in?” (Williams, 2005:1157) Her attention to outward appearance has run to excess. It reveals a typical mentality of women distorted by patriarchal society—everything is done to cater for men.

In addition, Blanche also tries to avoid strong light to obscure her declining physical beauty. When she meets Stella at the first time, she asks her to turn off lights till she looks better. Later when she notices the naked light bulb in Stanley and Stella’s bedroom, she buys a Chinese lantern to cover it and soften the glare. Even Mitch discovers in scene 9 that she “never want to out till after six”, and it is always “some place that’s not lighted much” (Williams, 2005:1191). Dim light is a weapon to conceal sense of fear as well as her fading beauty. Only in dimness can she feel comfortable and confident of herself. Only in dimness can she escape the realism and get the magic she wants.

Last but not least, Blanche always employs her flashy language to show that she is a genteel lady who has received good education, and meanwhile she considers old-fashioned manner of speech to be a way to conceal his sexual indulgence. Firstly, because immersed in Southern culture that emphasizes romance and poetic sentiment of life, Blanche likes talking gently and indirectly. When she enters Stella’s house, and complains about the messy environment there, she applies the refrain of Allan Poe’s gothic ballad to make her words less harsh. She also has a profound literary background: She remembers that the lines in Mitch’s cigarette case are extracted from a sonnet by Ms. Browning; she knows many famous writers and poets, such as Poe, Hawthorne and Whitman; she calls herself “the Lady of Camellias” and Mitch “Armand”; she cites many allusions in conversation, such as “Eureka”, “Pleiades” and “the Seven Sisters”. So, there is no doubt that she is a cultivated lady, but all her intelligence and breeding is to “entertain the gentlemen” (Williams, 2005:1175) and “enrich a man’s life immeasurably” (Williams, 2005:1195). The most powerful evidence is her flirtation with Mitch in French “Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir?” (Would you like to sleep with me this evening?) (Williams, 2005:1177), which extinguishes the last trace of elegance on her. Therefore, even though she is well educated, the knowledge and literary attainment of Blanche don’t really belong to herself, and they are just the instruments to attract men and the evidence to show her hypocrisy and pretension that trap her deep in her own allusion, unable to extricate herself out.

CONCLUSION

Blanche is one of such females born and brought up in Old South who feels difficult in mastering her own fate and facing conflicts brought by industrialization and commercialization under the restriction and oppression of patriarchy, and only hides herself in imaginative world to release herself. Williams extends his great sympathy to this victim of patriarchy. However, it is evident from what Williams depicts about women that once they yield themselves to patriarchy, instead of struggling indomitably for their freedom, their miserable situation will not be changed.

REFERENCES

- Beauvoir, Simone de. (1998). *The second sex*. (Tao Tiezhu, Trans.). Beijing: China Books Press.
- Horton, Rod W. & Edwards, Herbert W.. (1987). *Backgrounds of American literary thought* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- JIN Li. (2004). *Literary females and female literature*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Researching Press.
- LI Li. (2004). *Women's growth: a feminist approach to Tennessee Williams's works*. Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House.
- LUO Ting. (2004). *Feminist literary criticism in West and China*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.
- Williams, Tennessee. A streetcar named desire. Alison Booth, J. Paul Hunter, & Kelly J. Mays (Eds.) (2005). *The Norton introduction to literature* (shorter 9th ed.). New York, London: W. W. Norton & Company.
- WU Qinhong. (2005). *Virginia Woolf and feminism*. Beijing: China Social Science Press.