

"Fifty Percent Illusion": Blanche's Struggling Femininity in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract:

Blanche Dubois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a character highly regarded to be a victim of her own trappings. However, the pattern of behavior she showcases in her persona is actually a reactionary response to the reprehensible failures of patriarchal figures she was taught to adore. The familiar misconceptions regarding a flawed reading of her character on paper is due to majority of her character arc that lies beyond the scope of the play's timeline. Therefore, by focusing on Blanche's own storytelling and her psychological development as an epiphenomenon of that primary action of patriarchy, we learn Blanche has been a victim of patriarchy but in a radical way. Unlike other modern heroines she demands her stereotypical sheltering in patriarchal structures, and hence exposes the impotence of that system.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, Blanche, American drama, patriarchy, feminist analysis.

The sociological conditions governing a woman's life in the modern post-war American society project anxieties regarding her identity. Blanche Dubois, in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is that conflicted, alienated individual one easily finds in Williams' plays which generally focus on the psychological turmoil of its characters. Blanche's character represents that point of contention where the glorious past of aristocratic South clashes with the emerging liberal economy of the North. But the definitive personal conflict which disrupts Blanche's sense of reality is the overpowering patriarchal establishment which she finds lacking in its support for female empowerment. Blanche has been brought up in a system of relations where the plantation-based economy has proved itself incompetent and the male source of satisfaction in the form of her husband Allan has betrayed the trust she put in that patriarchy.

Her young husband with whom she had discovered the fruits of love had been an illusory existence of ideality which she almost worshipped, Allan on the other hand found in Blanche "a cleft in the rock of the world that he could hide in!" (Williams 137). The idealized image of her husband as a man "almost too fine to be human" made the sudden reveal of his homosexuality a shocking revelation to Blanche that she is clearly not desirable (117). Allan's death brought guilt to her but it also brought a hopeless search for that element of

desire which seemed elusive throughout her life. Lonely and heartbroken Blanche then suffered another failure of patriarchal promise of protection by the hands of her own forefathers who ran down the house and family fortune indulging themselves in “epic fornications” (45).

Suffering through these deviations of her life’s goal to be an established and well-respected woman, she finds herself thrown about cheap hotels, army camps and thrown out of her place of profession due to an affair with a young student. It is in such condition that she arrives in New Orleans slums with hope of finding shelter with the only person who still harbors that idealized image of Blanche Dubois in her mind. Stella treats her sister who is not too old for her with utmost respect and even pity. This is due to her own guilt of abandoning her sister to the torrents of recent times.

It is apparent from the very first scene that Blanche keeps a respectable distance from the penetrating glances of other people. She not only hides face in layers of rouge and other enhancing substances but never really comes out into the light, a feature pointed out by Mitch himself. She is openly judgmental about other people’s habits, mannerisms and doesn’t shy away from sketching their characters in her mind before even truly knowing them. In contrast to Blanche, Stella also holds strong opinion regarding her sister and other people like her own husband but her affection and pity for those very people dismisses all her protective measures in exchange for trust.

Blanche's identity lies in the gap between idealism and reality. She holds an air of aristocratic maidenhood as her perceived sense of being charming to young men suggests. But since she had been cheated of the good fortune and elitist conduct that the plantation of Belle Reve allowed her to possess, the disruption of that promised future propelled her into a glorification of her own past.

These innate intrinsic dialectics of herself, where on one hand she harbors intimate relation with the chronotope of Belle Reve's Blanche and on the other hand carries guilt and regret for past condemn her to a life of recurring follies. The destructive effect of the creative aspect of patriarchal architecture is the female psyche at the receiving end of the failure of American legend undergoes a reality-distorting effect, where an individual like Blanche seeks shelter in those illusions of the past. Instead of breaking the mind and body of the female-as-object of male gaze, Blanche centralizes her desire and demands fulfillment from the patriarchy as a final corrective measure to re-establish her own self she idolized.

Much of Blanche's psychological turmoil remains hidden within her projected self-representation of a fair lady not too shy, not too promiscuous, not too old, not too much of anything but just the right amount of illusion and reality as she says "a woman's charm is fifty per cent illusion" (43). Her devolving personality is subject to great criticism as she forcefully foregrounds

her own personality amongst others. Her entire persona of a dame in protest of virile men presents a challenge to the conventional notions of a subjugated female adapting to the needs of patriarchy. Her own desires and unfulfilled expectations from an establishment that has timely disappointed her, makes her especially suspicious of her reliance on male authority. She shows great distrust of Stanley's ethics of animalistic vigor and dirt-cheap antics and provokes Stella to fend for herself against such violence. There is a fundamental antagonism in Stanley's image of a primordial, brutish patriarchy and Blanche's assertive yet struggling femininity. Stanley also sees Blanche as a threat to his authority over his wife and thus tries to disrupt her consistent self-imagery by help of physical trauma on her body. The acts of non-physical violence had only succeeded in dethroning patriarchy, now the physical rape followed by abandonment by her own sister shatters that last inkling of hope she had placed in people like Mitch and her sister Stella. But the final blow she receives is on her own identity as it is jolted out of suspended animation between idealism and reality towards acceptance of her fate.

Works Cited

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