

The Tragic Image of Blanche Du Bois in Tennessee Williams' Play *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract:

The American playwright Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was raised up by a violent, hard, drinking father, but an affectionate loving mother, a caring grandmother, and a devoted elder sister. This situation made Williams sympathize with the feminine figures in his family.

The tragedy of his elder sister, that concluded with her untimely death, influenced his life and was reflected in most of his future writings including his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

This paper traces the downfall of a modern woman called Blanche Du Bois (the protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.), trying to determine whether the writer intended to portray this character as a 'classical tragic heroine', or not.

Blanche's crises begin with her husband's death and the acceleration of life's bad circumstances, in addition to her inability to control her desires; that culminated in losing her job. Dreaming of revitalizing her hopes in life, she decides to take refuge in her sister's house. Upon discovering her dishonorable past, her brother-in-law humiliates and blackmails her; which drives her insane.

By applying the classical rules of tragedy to this play, we notice that it contains most of the essential elements of classical tragedies. Nevertheless, the protagonist of this play does not appear to qualify as a tragic heroine in the Aristotelian sense. Yet, judging Blanche and her dilemma according to the classical conventions of tragedy might do them great injustice. One should keep in mind that life, human nature, and literature have changed dramatically since Aristotle's days. What used to be considered a heroic deed at that time might seem foolish nowadays. Consequently, we should expect that people's view of life and themselves has become radically different as well. Therefore, the presence of authentic classical tragic heroes in modern literature seems to have become inconvenient. What we might encounter at best, is a modern ordinary tragic figure that arouses pity- precisely like Blanche.

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1. Introduction:

Although literature's function was, and still is, either to teach or entertain, or sometimes both, yet, action, themes, values, characters, and management of most of these have undergone, with the passage of time, dramatic adjustments. The reason seems to be that any kind of literature either copes with the time and people it is written for, or it would not be appreciated. It will be considered either old-fashioned if it handles old problems and adheres literally to the ancient rules of writing; or regarded far-fetched scientific fiction if the vision, action, or characters are out of the norm or ultramodern .

Judging by the old rules of tragedy, Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is definitely a modern tragedy that relates the downfall of a wretched modern character called Blanche- although her fall was not from an eminent position. A close analysis of the protagonist's character will demonstrate that she has no heroic dimensions whatsoever. Her ethics, actions, behaviour, and mentality are far from being pure or spiritual to make her meet the criteria of tragic heroines; as we will realize later.

2. Tennessee Williams:

The American playwright Tennessee Williams was born on March 26, 1914 in Columbus, Mississippi ,and died on February 24,1983.. He grew up in a house dominated by a blustering, heavy drinking, cold father whose long absences- as a salesman- made him a stranger to his children. This created in Williams a sense of fear and disgust towards his father; which made him declare once: "I hated him" ⁽¹⁾On the other hand, it strengthened his connection and reliance on his loving mother, kind grandmother, and dedicated elder sister 'Rose'.

Consequently, he was highly influenced by these feminine figures in his family; particularly his sister with her wild imagination, the wonderful stories she told, and the beautiful games she used to share with him. However, this ideal relationship was interrupted suddenly by Rose's entrance into womanhood, and her illness –schizophrenia- that concluded in her tragic death. This loss devastated Williams, and left its imprints on him; both as a child and as an artist. In his play *Suddenly Last Summer*, he painfully reflects on the theme of her death.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the readers of Williams' plays could feel the unquestionable sympathy with which he portrays his female characters; since many of them have some traits of Rose's personality.

3. The Classical tragedies and their heroes vs. the Modern:

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Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) defines tragedy as:

"a representation of an action, which is serious, complete in itself, and of a certain length; It is expressed in speech made beautiful in different parts of the play; it is acted, not narrated; and by exciting pity and fear it gives a healthy relief to such emotions." ⁽²⁾

Moreover, tragedy presents people; it has a beginning, middle, and an end; it is something more serious than history and gives particular facts; it tells what happened to the tragic hero and what might happen; what he did or what others have done to him. ⁽³⁾

However, since Aristotle's time till the modern age many things have changed, including the meaning of tragedy-although the disastrous end remained a must for any tragedy.

Aristotle believes that tragic heroes must be 'good' or 'fine' (which does not mean perfect); 'appropriate' or 'true to type' ; and 'consistent' or 'true to themselves'. Yet, a 'good' person at the modern age could be defined, according to modern ethics, as the one who 'endures evils' rather than the one who 'performs great deeds'.

Greek tragedy is idealistic; consequently, its tragic hero should be a distinguished person of high estate; a king or a prince of heroic or even divine origin, so that his fall would arouse fear and pity, yet, ennoble him at the same time. But how many people of that heroic or divine race are left now? There might be none.

On the other hand, modern tragedies tend to deal with real ordinary people, who share us our same daily problems, and with whom we might identify ourselves and can sympathize in order to reach a better understanding of the world around us and of ourselves if possible.

It is true that the modern tragedy lacks some of the essential ingredients of the Greek tragedy, yet, this is not surprising; for life itself has changed enormously since that time. Modern society, modern man, and modern problems are not the same of Aristotle's age. The drastic changes, in all the fields of life that took place throughout these centuries were accompanied by an equal change in moral and spiritual values as well. What was considered a disaster or a spiritual death before might not be deemed so nowadays. Loneliness, depression, or even cold relationships might appear more tragic for a modern man than an earthquake. The old privilege of polygamy, for instance, that was an acquired right before Christianity, has become currently a sin in any Christian society. Many other major and minor examples could be given to reveal the total transformation that has befallen modern man's life; and consequently his perspectives.

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Moreover, most modern catastrophes have lost the spirituality that was a distinctive characteristic of the Greek disasters. Modern dilemmas and crises have mostly become of worldly appeal and physical nature.

Furthermore, modern problems, as it seems, have no clear ends. Thus, we may infer that most modern tragedies do not offer clear cut solutions to the problems they present. At its best, the solution might take the form of an escape from the dilemma. Tennessee Williams, among other modern people, admits that he resorted to such a psychological defense mechanism during times of distress, to escape "from a world of reality in which (he) felt acutely uncomfortable." ⁽⁴⁾

Taking into consideration all the drastic modifications that befell man's life and view of himself, it becomes reasonable to assume that the modern concept and vision of tragedy could not remain the same as the Greek's. Thus, the ancient traits of tragedy had to be modified to meet the new needs of modern man with his new type of life, priorities, and system of values.

4. A Streetcar Named Desire:

To apply what we have stated above, as regarding tragedy and the tragic hero, to Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and its protagonist Blanche DuBois, we would better consult the writer on his work first. Williams describes *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a "tragedy of incomprehension"; a caution against societal regression, and "an attempt to discover (among the ruins of our tragic life) a means and a purpose for life in surroundings which seem to offer little ground for hope" ⁽⁵⁾. Using Williams' words, the theme of the play could basically convey the idea that "if you don't watch out, the apes will take over" ⁽⁶⁾. The tragedy of the southern belle, Blanche, begins early during her youth when she meets a lovely young man and marries him, but the lovely husband turns to be homosexual. When she discovers his affliction and taunts him, he commits suicide! The tragic experience not only shocks the aristocratic girl, but gives rise to feelings of guilt and remorse that led directly to her disintegration. This combination of fear and guilt is absolutely one of Williams' favourite themes. He has a firm belief in the universal character of guilt ⁽⁷⁾ and in the enormous impact it has over human souls; that culminates usually in destroying them.

After her sister's marriage, Blanche was left alone to watch over her family, and to face their death one after the other in the town of Belle Reeve. Unfortunately, she was economically insecure; for the family's fortunes have declined. All these circumstances conspired to wreck her that she turned into a victim of neurosis. Her condition deteriorated further that she eventually became a public woman. Her degeneration reached its climax when she allowed herself to seduce one of her young students. Consequently, she was dismissed from her teaching position.

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Pressure of social and environmental forces brought about her downfall, while some individual unconscious forces accelerated that downfall ⁽⁸⁾. On the personal level, her tragedy lies in her inability to balance the physical hunger she needs to satisfy, with the tender feelings she possesses.

Losing the glory and the dream of her of her aristocratic past, she decides to live the present; a present that symbolizes the new style of her life in general, and her new 'desire' in particular.

Williams believes that the most critical moral dilemma of modern life is how to avoid extinction; "to beat the game of being against non-being" ⁽⁹⁾, which might explain Blanche's clinging to desire. She tells Mitch:

"Death- I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it! The opposite is desire." ⁽¹⁰⁾

She wanted anything to fill up her empty life, and when she realized that love has become unattainable, she turned to desire as a substitute. Yet, when she did not get hold of desire, the only remaining choice was death. This theme of life equated with passions and its opposite being death, is another recurrent theme in Williams' work.

Blanche has encountered death many times, one could feel that each time a member of her family dies, something inside her shrinks, collapses, then dies. She tells her sister Stella:

"I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All those deaths! Funerals are quite, but death- not always... Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out "Hold me!" you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw!" ⁽¹¹⁾

The bitter experience of confronting death repeatedly induced Blanche to cling to life with a wild desire no matter what the cost would be. Such a desire represented a sort of preservation and continuity for her existence; yet, in her case it was a desperate one. Isn't she pitiful! Is there anything more tragic than a human being hopelessly seeking shelter in a hostile world that denies him even a decent identity?

To escape from the ugliness of her reality and cover her spiritual nakedness, she takes refuge in Stella's house in "Elysian Fields", New Orleans. She reaches the place by way of two streets; one called 'Desire', the other 'Cemetery'; which obviously epitomizes the beginning and end of her last journey. Her appearance and ornament seem very strange at that place. The way Stanley (her brother-in-law) heaves the meat at his wife tells her everything about his character. The whole scene, including the names, could be symbolic where a representative of a decayed aristocracy, a fugitive, comes in search of peace and tranquility in a "pre-Christian Paradise, where passion and life are one

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and good" ⁽¹²⁾, carried by 'Desire' to her final destination; the 'cemetery' of hopes. Her destruction is brought about by the uncivilized brutal forces that she feared to face her whole life; the sensual aspect of her character which she used to call "brutal desire". She asserts in her opening speech: "They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Field!" ⁽¹³⁾ The word 'They' above could very likely stand for the external elements of society; people and circumstances that gathered forces to play a part in her destruction.

Williams has always been considered the poet of frustration. What he tries to declare in this play is that desire, sympathy, and different approaches to life are shunned, smashed, and disgraced in our today's world.

Therefore, in a final desperate effort to rise above her circumstances and achieve salvation, Blanche descends to the so-called "Elysian Fields", the last station in her fall to hell, putting a mask on her face and an illusion in her mind. Haunted by the glory of the past, she feels superior to the others there and demands acceptance on her own terms.

Reality blinds her eyes, thus, she tries to shun all realities. She covers the electric bulb with a paper because bare reality is too bright to be endured. She says "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action" ⁽¹⁴⁾. Part of her escape strategy was her tendency to cover and shade any glowing reality, including hers. When Mitch tells her "it is dark" she replies: "I like dark. The dark is comforting to me" ⁽¹⁵⁾. And when he tells her that he has never seen her in the light, she responds fearfully saying:

"Light? Which light? What for?...I don't want realism...I'll tell you what I Want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it." ⁽¹⁶⁾

She lies, drinks, dreams, and loves to be praised and flattered; in an effort to escape the real world and live in a beautiful one of her creation where promises could be realized.

The first thing she does upon getting into Stella's house is to drink. She then washes the glass before her sister's return and pretend to be searching for some liquor. When her sister asks her whether she wants another drink, she replies unflinchingly: "No, one's my limit". Then she tells Stanley: "I rarely touch it"; a drunkard and a liar. She tells Mitch that Stella is somewhat older than her, while in fact Stella is younger. Still, she confesses at the end and tells Stella that she laughs at herself "for being such a liar." ⁽¹⁷⁾

Deep inside she felt an urgent need for physical satisfaction as an escape from death. She needed the security of true love, but when she couldn't find it she did not hesitate to wear a mask, disguise her physical desires, and even

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resort to any twisted conduct to fulfill her needs. Tracing her attitude towards Stanley, Mitch, and any other male figure, one could be aware of the tragic situation she has trapped herself in.

Blanche's desire to be praised is confirmed by Stella's speech to her husband, when she tells him: "And admire her and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness!" ⁽¹⁸⁾

Escaping from painful reality haunted even her dreams. She was ready to journey to the unknown to avoid facing life; she says: "How pretty the sky is! I ought to get there on a rocket that never comes down" ⁽¹⁹⁾. However, such dreams were dashed to the ground each time, although she was "light as a feather" as Mitch tells her ⁽²⁰⁾. Being flighty and soft could have another totally different interpretation in her case. Williams might be alluding to her airy temper and her inability to hold her grounds!

She constantly pretends to be virtuous, and speaks a refined, almost poetic, language; either to screen her embarrassment or to earn men's admiration which might eventually lead to love and security- or at least to a settlement with herself and the world.

In a speech about post-war world, remarks that "the only satisfactory thing we are left with in this life is the relations- if they're sincere between people" ⁽²¹⁾, and Considers love as being "the closest we've come". In other words, he concludes that love is the only solution left for the suffering humanity in modern times. This is just what Blanche was longing for. Williams strives sincerely to expose in his plays the real world around us with all its modern problems and needs. John Harrell observes that Williams "is trying to drive home the screaming need of a world-wide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better" ⁽²²⁾. In all of his plays, Williams seems to be concerned with the human relations in modern society; with the lack of sympathy and understanding, and above all with the need for love. He sympathizes with the weak, lonely, defeated, and misunderstood members of this community. In short, with the lost souls that roam aimlessly in this wide wild world without being of help to themselves or to others. What aggravates the situation for such miserable souls is that nobody seems to care for or feel their agony in such an indifferent world.

In Blanche's case, hard luck and social pressure were not the only forces that wove her tragedy. She herself is responsible of putting the final touches to her mischief.

By considering desire an escape from death, she tries to attract men and make intimacies even with total strangers. She tempts a young man who came to collect money for a paper, crying feverishly:

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"Young man! Young, young, young, young man! Has anyone ever told you

That you look like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights? Come on
Over here like I told you! I want to kiss you- just once." ⁽²³⁾

She lures Stanley by asking him the favour of doing "some buttons in back" of her dress. This justifies his speech before raping her when he tells her: "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!" ⁽²⁴⁾. She even wants "to deceive" Mitch "enough to make him-want (her)" ⁽²⁵⁾.

Feeling lonely and rejected amid a treacherous world she searches for somebody who needs her and is able to defend her against the ups and downs of life. She tells Stella:

"I want to rest! I want to breathe quietly again! Yes- I want Mitch....Very badly!

Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone's problem..."⁽²⁶⁾

However, the "apes" of New Orleans society, represented by Stanley, finish what the monsters of Flamingo Hotel have begun. Stanley hated Blanche since the beginning; he wanted to bring her down to the level of his animalistic joy so that she will not feel superior anymore. She thought her sister's house will be a suitable haven for her salvation, where she might not decline further. But instead of opening the doors of heaven, she opened the gates of hell ajar.

Hearing her speak unfavourably of him, Stanley decides to take revenge on Blanche. Digging deep into her past, he discovers her scandalous history before coming to Elysian Fields, and discloses her shameful secrets.

Some critics justify his revenge stating that he did it to protect his home from falling apart, and his marriage from breaking. They even excuse his savage deed of raping her believing that he was preventing his wife from feeling the same superiority Blanche feels over him. We might find a justification for his hatred, an excuse for revealing her secret to Mitch because he is his friend, but what reason could be given to his act of raping her! Is it merely his desire to bring her down to his level, or his inferiority complex that urged him to punish a more refined person, or is it just his thoughtless animalistic appetite stimulated by the absence of his wife that night that brought about that disaster? Choosing any of these reasons as the triggering incentive to his misbehavior, we would deduce that Stanley has added the last straw to her misery. His inhuman deed signifies the climax of the play. He is not only another debasing social force, but seems to be the death blow that muted all her dreams and hopes, and led directly to her ultimate fall.

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Blanche's rape might symbolize the triumph of the savage social forces over the sensitive elements in the modern world, at least for Williams as it seems.

The last scene shows Blanche led by a doctor, after removing his professional appearance; which might indicate that Blanche could return to normal life only by a gentleman who understands her tragedy, or that the brutality of society has driven this woman to insanity and denied her even the reconciliation with herself and life. In both cases the scene tells one thing: sympathy is what modern women need most.

5. Conclusion:

To conclude this paper we may infer that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a modern tragedy that exhibits many of the classical tragedy's features. It presents a serious action, complete and of a certain length acted rather than narrated, and arouses pity. Moreover, it has a beginning, middle, and an end. It conveys a message to the modern audience showing how a modern woman has acted and how life has acted upon her, and finally, it is a quest for life.

Jordan Miller considers the exposition of Blanche's crisis a reflection of the simplicity and directness of moral allegory in Williams' world that tells of "good opposed to evil, spirituality to sensuality and the romantic to the brutally realistic." ⁽²⁷⁾

A careful analysis of Blanche's character reveals that despite all the sympathy with which Williams portrays this character, Blanche cannot be a totally innocent victim although she is not bad by nature. She can in no way represent spirituality in the way 'Tess' in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of The d'Urbervilles* ⁽²⁸⁾ could, for instance. Her speeches, actions, and intentions throughout the play are far from being heroic or entirely guiltless. It is true that she is a helpless creature who enters the enemy camp unarmed and is crushed brutally by all sorts of malignant forces, yet, she has her fair share in creating this tragic condition. Blanche could never be considered a tragic heroine in the Aristotelian sense because she does not appear as a person wholly responsible for her fate, not even fully innocent and guiltless, neither is her tragedy woven by a flaw in her character, and above all she achieves no insight or spiritual uplift.

We may safely conclude then, that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a modern tragedy; since it contains many tragic elements, and because its author declares that he meant it to be a work of tragic intention ⁽²⁹⁾. Nevertheless, Blanche does not qualify as a tragic heroine in the Aristotelian sense; but just a pathetic

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character who delivers the message that: in such a world of tragic emptiness and indifference, people like Blanche should expect nothing.

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ملخص

الصورة المأساوية لبلاش دوبواه في مسرحية تنسي وليامز

عربة اسمها الرغبة

نشأ الكاتب المسرحي الأمريكي تنسي وليامز (1911-1983) في بيت يهيمن عليه أب قاس وسكير ،من ناحيه، ومن الناحية الثانية أم حنون وجدة طيبة القلب وأخت كبرى كانت مثالا للمحبة؛ مما جعل تنسي وليامز متعاطفا مع العنصر النسائي في عائلته. الا ان الموت المبكر لاخته ترك أثرا واضحا على حياته وانعكس ذلك على معظم كتاباته، ومن ضمنها مسرحيته عربة اسمها الرغبة.

يستعرض هذا البحث حالة التدهور التي وصلتها الشخصية الرئيسية في مسرحية عربة اسمها الرغبة ؛ وهي امرأة عصرية تدعى بلاش دوبواه، ويسعى لمعرفة ما اذا كان بالامكان اعتبار هذه الشخصية بطلّة مأساوية بالمعنى التقليدي للمصطلح.

تبدأ مأساة دوبواه بالموت المفاجئ والمبكر لزوجها الشاب فتتسارع الاحداث السيئه من حولها وتتفاقم ازمته بسبب ضعف ارادتها في السيطرة على شهوتها. تتظافر كل هذه العوامل لتؤدي الى فقدانها لعملها فتقرر اللجوء الى منزل أختها ظنا منها أنها ستجد الرعاية والعزاء هناك. الا أن زوج أختها يكتشف السبب الحقيقي لطردها من عملها ويحاول ابتزازها بصورة بشعه مما يقودها الى الجنون.

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عند تطبيق الشروط الاساسيه للمسرحيه المأساويه على هذا العمل، نلاحظ توفر معظم مقومات المسرحيه المأساويه التقليديه فيه، ورغم ذلك فان شخصية بلانش دوبواه لا تحمل المواصفات التي اشترط أرسطو توفرها في البطل المأساوي. الا أن الحكم على هذه الشخصيه ومأساتها وفقا للشروط التقليديه الواجب توفرها في البطل المأساوي فيه الكثير من الظلم والاجحاف بحق هذه الشخصيه؛ حيث يجب أن نتذكر بأن الطبيعه الانسانيه، الادب، والحياة ذاتها قد شهدت تغيرات جذريه منذ عهد أرسطو حتى يومنا هذا. فما كان يعتبر آنذاك عملا بطوليا قد يبدو حماقة في أيامنا هذه. وعليه، فلا بد أن نتوقع تغيرا جذريا في نظرة الناس للحياة ولانفسهم كذلك. لقد أصبح واضحا أن ظهور البطل المأساوي الكلاسيكي في الادب الحديث مسألة لم تعد تتناسب مع الواقع ومع الذوق العام. ان أفضل مايمكن أن نتوقع ظهوره في الاعمال المأساويه الحديثه هو الشخصيه المسحوقه التي تنير الشفقه ولها بعد مأساوي الى حد ما؛ تماما كشخصية بلانش دوبواه.