



RESEARCH PAPER

Sexuality and Death of Desire in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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PAPER INFO	ABSTRACT
Received: August 19, 2017	This paper makes a psychoanalytical study of Tennessee Williams' play <i>A Streetcar Named Desire</i> regarding the ideas of sexuality and death of desire. Tennessee Williams is one of the most exceptional American playwrights. His plays have mostly the implicit ideas of sexuality and death of desire. Psychoanalytic criticism has always had a particular fascination with texts dealing with the psyche and personality of the characters and provides readers better understanding of literary texts. The protagonist of the selected play has been focused to highlight how Tennessee Williams' characters are motivated by their unconscious drives. The protagonist in this play is found to quench her sexual desire, escaping reality, living in her imaginary world and trying to satisfy her innate sexual requirements. Throughout the action of the play, the protagonist is found to be in misperception with respect to the life she is living and is portrayed to be dealing with death of her desire. By applying Freud's psychoanalytic approach, regarding his ideas of id, ego and superego
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Introduction

Williams writes dramas of high emotional conflicts where the characters are trapped in their extreme moment of emotional crises. The pressure of repression that Williams experiences himself throughout his life due to his unfavourable family environment and being a homosexual is transmitted to his characters (Cooper, 1988). Tennessee Williams fashions the characters within the plays as if they are not satisfied with the disparities of their social life. The ecosphere in which his characters animate is unmistakably the United States of the 1930s and 1940s. The effects of warfare on the American society and communal

class shift that cause dislodgment and forfeiture of the American identity are apparent in Williams' writings (Arndt & Solomon, 2003). The playwright exploits the theme of sexual repression to its extreme with the basic intention to show its inherent ambiguity and confusion. For him it is the 'deeper necessity' in order to communicate his own confused sexual identity.

The selected play for the current paper is laden with contradictory beliefs, absurdities and paradigms between desire and sexuality. Often these elements are seen to be playing their roles mutually amidst the coats of differing wants. Every fragment of the selected text from the play falls into one of three categories of *id*, *ego* and *superego*. Sigmund Freud's theory of Psychoanalysis that bases itself on the concepts of *id*, *ego* and *superego* come to play throughout the play. According to this theory the 'id' represents the type of self which does not think of anything else other than fulfilling its desires and needs. 'Ego' represents the types of self and it is a balanced-state between id and the superego and its relationship to both of them. It is the conscious self that looks at the external world through the senses and plays as a referee between the id and the superego. It is able to postpone its needs to avoid unpleasant consequences. The 'super ego' on the other hand is the type of self which pays high attention to moral standards and rules through the contact with parents and society. It is the type of self which tries to achieve desires and wishes but without violating any law or code of ethics or morals (Freud, 1965).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* it is observed that Blanche's past preserves her from progressing with time as the dismay of her past experiences elects each one of her actions. She makes up her own particular variants of reality. Blanche relies upon men for both the social and monetary security they can give. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and other characters in the same play are Williams' tropes of people in or after wartime who need to move into the present reality and to find what they think they have lost from their glorious past.

The aim of the paper is to explore how the element of sexuality has been central throughout Williams' selected play to empower and manipulate others to gain their own desires whether they are physical or psychological and to probe into the psyche of different characters to dig out their desire to embrace death. Further, this paper aims to offer a profound comprehension of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* regarding Freudian psychoanalytical theory. The aim is to understand and analyse the psychological state regarding sexuality and death of desire of the characters in action.

The paper just focuses on the only play by Tennessee Williams' namely *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The elements of sexuality and death of desire are basically extracted, analysed and discussed in the light of Freudian concepts of *id*, *ego* and *superego*.

Literature Review

Psychoanalytic literary criticism in method is influenced by the tradition of psychoanalysis begun by Sigmund Freud and is the most suitable for the present study. Psychoanalytic reading is a literary approach where critics see the text as if it were a kind of dream where the text represses its latent content behind manifest content. Here, a critic analyses language and symbolism of a text to reverse the process of the work and arrives at the underlying latent thoughts (Nitsun, 2013). This paper intends to unveil the mysteries in the literary text, like material longings and sexual cravings that express the secret unconscious desires and anxieties of the author or sometimes of the characters. We get the glimpses of the same while going through the text of the selected play. The most important part of psychoanalysis is the concept of the unconscious mind as a reservoir for repressed memories of traumatic events which continuously give effect on conscious thought and behaviour (Sulloway, 1992). This paper is unique and distinct in the sense that no previous works have used the Freudian tripartite personality approach in analysing the characters in the play under study.

The critical evaluation of Tennessee Williams' plays that are *A Streetcar Named Desire* as well as *The Glass Menagerie*. According to them, Williams' plays contain many essential rudiments including reality, love and death, symbolism, sexual desire, homophobia as well as other traditions that are tragic. On the basis of his brilliant plays' authenticity as well as insightfulness, his plays still hold a place today. However, such minimization disregards to oppress the independence but the craftsmanship of Williams illustrates the underrated human beings floating toward the end of tie. They direct the subsistence of splitting and scrapping beside a surface that is absolute as well as hanging on tight with crude fingers to every last bit of shake higher than the one detained before (Williams 1978).

This play was written in the year of 1947 which was the time of some major alterations of American society's structure caused by various changes. Post World War II, the US saw a period of speedy growth in many facets. In 1950s, two elements became the mark of American society i.e. Capitalism and Consumerism. Nonetheless, this period is also known for Conservatism and homecoming to traditional, cultural values. These had more effect on some people of society and less on others.

Initially, the protagonist of the play Blanche Dubois seems to be typical Southern Belle according to Tennessee Williams. In his play, Williams, in a glorified and deteriorated manner, mostly talks about the declining period of Old South so the role of Blanche as a Southern Belle represents the complexity associated with the background. The model of femininity, Southern Belle, is a distinctive characteristic of literature of Old South and plantation. *A Streetcar Named Desire* written by Tennessee Williams discusses this idea in a relatively critical manner. The dark side of traditional gender role is represented through the character of Blanche Dubois although she makes an effort to use and sabotage them. Her upbringing, change in her conditions and situations and her sad end are highly influenced by two major aspects. Firstly, she is told that she has to depend on men for her comfort as well as security. Her remarkable accomplishment as a

Southern Belle is fulfilled if she is to be sheltered by a husband who will look after her, satisfy her needs, and provide her financial support. This makes her believe that the actual task of belle is to entice and charm the opposite gender and for this she needs to have expertise along with being an innocent flirt. When she is in courtship with Mitch, Blanche Dubois makes her every best effort and performs every action which would make her an ideal example of a belle. Since the belle is required to be such a young girl with a marriageable age and not any elderly woman of age thirty or above, so Blanche creates such an image of herself. For the purpose of awakening Mitch's defensive and caring nature, Blanche assumes and makes herself inexperienced, appropriate and weak (Dean & Lane, 2001).

To be precise, she is laid up in grief and suffering. She has not just only created herself as a gloomy personality but she also considers Mitch her only ray of hope. In Mitch, she looks her bright future and therefore keeps on flattering him. The actions of Blanche portray her as an actress and gender expression that is the vital part of her performance. Blanche has a fragile state of mind and this is a result of her traditional upbringing. Blanche lives in a society and a world that is unwelcoming towards anything untypical, modern or unorthodox and is conservative (Rimmon-Kenan, 2014). She learns that for a woman to express her sexuality is wrong and sinful, and also that every other type of sexuality is atypical and 'degenerate.' Since Blanche is a southern belle, so she does not have to become a sexual being, however, a force that drives her life is desire, since is opposite to death and it takes away her family. Blanche lives in a society where women are seen through two extreme lens of being either a virgin or whore. Blanche's incapability of effectively challenge, oppose and resolve Madonna/whore dichotomy leads to another tragedy in her life. Consequently, her desire of being "that rattle-trap street-car" leads to Cemeteries, and finally to Elysian Fields (Williams, 2011) ends.

Blanche is expected to be both entertaining and charming towards men and at the same time being reserved to sexually putting them off. This contradictory approach has led her to conflicts with Mitch (Adler, 1990). The statement that best demonstrates how complex Blanche's situation is her invitation to Mitch: "Voulez-vous coucher avec moicesoir" (Williams, 2014). It is noted that Blanche Dubois loses her original sexual nature in an attempt to present herself as appropriate and gentle lady (McGlinn, 1977).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the character of Blanche is plotted in a way that it is always fearful of her aging and losing her beauty. In other words, a constant fear haunts her to lose a suitable suitor who will secure her life and fulfil her desires in life. This can be analysed by judging that she always refuses to tell anyone of her age and she never appears in any sort of harsh lights because of a fear of being shown in front of people with her faded looks (Taylor, 2012). Furthermore, Blanche is considered as an extreme animal of sexuality too. Because she utilized sex in the past so as to get survive (as observed through her history as a whore). Exclusively does not her sexual past overflow into her present

(through her enticement of both Stanley and Mitch), she trusts herself to be undeniably more explicitly alluring than she truly is (Shackelford, 1998).

Material and Methods

The Freudian psychoanalytical tripartite has been employed as a tool for collection and to analyse of the data from the selected play of Tennessee Williams such as *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The research is an exploration as it aims at investigation of the various aspects of sexuality and death of desire as depicted in the above mentioned play (Tyson, 2014).

Freud's psychoanalytical theory (1856-1939) is utilized to aid in the interpretation of the two major elements under study, i.e. sexuality and death of desire. Particular extracts from the text of the plays have been extracted to carry out the research. The concealed ideologies and psychological states of minds are studied and brought to focus. Freudian personality theory of id, ego and superego has been brought into action to understand various aspects of personality of the characters that are in action in the play. According to Freud, the human personality can be divided into three parts: the id, the ego and the superego, which respectively refer to our instincts, our reality, and morality. Often times, the id (our instinctual desires) clashes with the superego (our moral concepts) as our id seeks to fulfil our basic needs while the superego seeks to achieve the ideal as the id is the primitive and instinctive component of personality (Tate, 1998). It consists of all the inherited (i.e., biological) components of personality present at birth, including the sex (life) instinct – Eros (which contains the libido), and the aggressive (death) instinct - Thanatos. The id is the impulsive (and unconscious) part of our psyche which responds directly and immediately to the instincts. The personality of the new born child is all id and only later does it develop an ego and super-ego. The id operates on the pleasure principle which is the idea that every wishful impulse should be satisfied immediately, regardless of the consequences. When the id achieves its demands, we experience pleasure when it is denied we experience 'displeasure' or tension. The id engages in primary process thinking, which is primitive, illogical, irrational, and fantasy oriented. This form of process thinking has no comprehension of objective reality and is selfish and wishful in nature (Fonagy, 1999). The ego operates according to the reality principle, working out realistic ways of satisfying the id's demands (desire), often compromising or postponing satisfaction to avoid negative consequences of society. The ego considers social realities and norms, etiquette and rules in deciding how to behave. Like the id, the ego seeks pleasure and is accompanied by no concept of right or wrong. The superego incorporates the values and morals of society which are learned from one's parents and others. The superego's function is to control the id's impulses, especially those which society forbids, such as sex and aggression. It also has the function of persuading the ego to turn to moralistic goals rather than simply realistic ones and to strive for perfection. The superego consists of two systems: The conscience and the ideal self. The conscience can punish the ego through causing feelings of guilt (Ahmed, 2012).

The obvious theme, death of desire is fundamental in the above mentioned plays. The sexual contents that have been pointed out, highlighted and reported in the play were observed as explicit and very controversial in the initial times of the release of this play. The author has voiced up certain areas of controversy such as rape in his play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which was confronted as a major shock at its time. Furthermore in the same play Williams has talked about the rape by brother-in-law, indicating a strong sexual desire ultimately leading to death of the strong sexual desire (Boothby, 2014).

Results and Discussion

The study of *A Streetcar Named Desire* brings to light the various aspects of the play to be psychoanalytical in nature dealing with the natural drives of id, ego and super ego of a human. Various alternating and ironic events have been mentioned in the play that point out sexuality and death of desire. In the play, Tennessee Williams has built the story around the psychological decline of the protagonist of the play, Blanche DuBois, due to reasons that revolve around her sexual desires and death of these desires due to sexual assault that she experienced. This incident leads to further distortion in her mental condition.

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire* displays the slow but steady mental downfall of Blanche DuBois, due to various reasons primarily the one being the homosexuality of her husband, Allan. Blanche views the demise of her relatives and the suicide of her husband, with whom she was in love, as relinquishment, and surrenders herself to a life occupied with what she quotes blatantly, *Intimacies with strangers* in order to fill [her] empty heart (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, p. 23).

The mere id of Blanche towards her sexual behaviour leads to her discharge from the teaching position due to accusations regarding seducing a seventeen year old student. Later she faces similar charges while Blanche seeks asylum in a shabby hotel. Due to this she is evicted from the hotel too. Blanche's sexuality arises just because of the invalidity of her husband, Allan who is a homosexual. This confrontation while she is madly in love with her husband leads her sexual validity towards others. Once she was involved with her student and later with other strangers. In every encounter she tries to find the validity that she desires from her husband (Douglas, 2009). And here the same id shows that the main character of the play, Blanche DuBious, confesses her fragile psychological state right from the beginning of the play by quoting, *I was on the verge of – lunacy, almost!* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, p. 16).

This implies that Blanche is already mentally disturbed even before her brother in law Stanley's domination over her. After being kicked from the hotel the only place Blanche has left to go is her sister Stella in New Orleans. The over whelming encounter she suffers due to Mitch's rejection and later Stanley's sexual violence leads to her complete retort in her world of fantasy (Douglas, 2000).

As Blanche foretells in Scene 6 of the play: *He hates me. Or why would he insult me? The first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner!* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 111).

Blanche explains her discomfort towards Stanley. The conflicts that have been highlighted in the play are a depiction of Blanche's mentioned gut feelings regarding Stanley. The Scene 10 of the play where Mitch's confrontation with Blanche and later Blanche's rape represents the ruthless truth of a woman whose complete existence rests on the conservation of her fantasy world (Akram, 2012). The writer, Tennessee Williams, exemplifies Blanche's mental illness in innumerable ways throughout the play. Blanche's necessity for continuous love and sexuality develops from her feelings of loneliness that she experiences due to the deaths of her family members and especially her husband Allan. Blanche explains that, *Every relationship is but a transient negation in her search for an unattainable reunion...* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 23).

Blanche's id is out of control here but ego restrains her to take any step which could defame her more. As her urge to escape from the implacable world that is beyond her control reveals itself in her desire and madness for bodily pleasures. To her this comes as a medicine that makes her forget the traumas and sufferings of her past, deaths of her relatives, her beloved husband and of transience. Blanche approves this idea in Scene 9 where she elaborates that, *desire is the opposite of death* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 31).

In this play, it has been shown that the character of Blanche is confused between id, ego and superego as she wants to fulfil her needs first and simultaneously she thinks of her relatives and friends that what they will think about her.

In the play, in scene 7, while Stanley is disclosing the truths about the past of Blanche to her sister Stella, Blanche in the background is singing the portentous lyrics, *It's only a paper moon, Just as phony as can be-But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me!* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 121).

Her song describes her mental downfall and the destruction of her personality which is a symbol of ego once and shows the fantasy world Blanche has constructed for herself, so she could feel safe and less ashamed of her past. Blanche is seen to be viewing of her past as merely,

a paper moon, but as long as everybody believed her, it wouldn't be make-believe (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 121).

Even Blanche herself goes on believing this fantasy until Stanley reveals her stifled history to her (Jesmin, 2012). The collocation of this melody with Stanley's expressing Blanche's accurate past arrange an influential scene forewarning how Blanche's psyche is about to be devastated with a representation of everything she is not and what she cannot control (Martin, 2016).

In the scene 3 of the play, Blanche requests Mitch to conceal the dorm light bulb with a paper lantern. She does so by exclaiming that: *I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 23).

This remark by Blanche and her comparison of the naked bulb and paper lantern describe her dubiousness about her own reality. She in her own state of mind is explaining her own mental condition that she cannot handle the bareness of a naked light bulb, indicating the truths about her past and the authenticity that she cannot face. While on the other hand her confrontation with the paper lantern with gentleness indicates the enchantment she wishes to create (Nichole, 2004).

Tennessee Williams has equated the light bulb with Blanche's only love, Allan. In scene 6 of the play, Blanche is found associating her homosexual husband with light by stating: *It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow...* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 43).

Later unfolding Allan's suicide, Blanche quotes, *the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this – kitchen – candle.* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 44).

Upon the demise of her husband, Blanche's broken ego lurches into the representational gloom and darkness offered by the kitchen candle. Since her adored Allan was as vibrant as a striking spotlight, all her sordid sexual affairs with unfamiliar men are epitomized by the kitchen candle indicative of a deprived substitution for the real thing (Rachel, 2007).

In scene 5 of the play, Blanche admits and explains her quest for "safety". She describes it in terms of her failed marriage and sexual validity by her homosexual husband, Allan. Tennessee Williams has written in his words:

I've been – not so awfully good lately. I've run for protection... from under one leaky roof to another leaky roof – because it was storm – all storm, and I was – caught in the centre... People don't see you – men don't – don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 92).

Stanley's sexual assault towards Blanche highlights Stanley's desire to be superior to Blanche which he is only able to show through rape. Stella, while in hospital to bear hers and Stanley's baby, Stanley reveals Blanche's reality to her that worsens Blanche's mental conditions and later rapes her. In Tennessee Williams own words, he describes this act: *marks another turning point in Blanche's life. The rape stripes her of her romantic dreams* (A Streetcar Named Desire, 1947, p. 103).

This act depicts Stanley's opinion to have the right to sleep with Blanche indicative of both sexuality and desire in the play. Stanley mentions that: *We've had this date with each other from the beginning!* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, pg. 92)

This encounter principals to the supposition that Stanley only wants to express Blanche that he is superior to her and he is able to demonstrate that through sex (Shahid, 2008).

In the play Tennessee Williams has voiced Stanley's sexuality through Stella's words. In their relationship sexuality acts as a major driving role since it is very imperative for Stanley. Stella being madly in love with Stanley explains Blanche that: *there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark- that sort of make everything else seem- unimportant* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, p. 63).

Upon hearing this Blanche enters in a state of shock, thinks to herself about the animalistic nature of Stanley. Blanch calls their attraction towards each other as "brutal desire" indicating Blanche's own duality towards sexuality. Desire for Blanch in the play has been quoted as: *desire is just a bad and inferior animalistic feeling, something that is beneath human dignity* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, p. 57).

Blanche's relationship with Mitch is different from Stella and Stanley's relationship. Blanch seeks to find in Mitch protection rather than sexual satisfaction and seeks to marry and live with him till the end of her life. But her desire for protection meets death when Mitch himself refuses to be in relation any more with Blanch and hurts her ego.

The commencement of the play describes Blanche's dichotomous behaviour through the two streetcars, Desire and Cemeteries. Desire positions for Blanche's sexual desire and her durable needs, Cemeteries on the other hand stance for death and demise. Cemeteries depict a place where all her loved ones are buried and also illustrate the death of all her desires. This duality and dichotomy is evident throughout the play even during the play Blanche shows a dual attitude towards sexuality. *I called him a little boy and laughed and flirted. Yes, I was flirting with your husband!* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947, p.52).

At one time she expressed her strong disgust and hatred towards Stanley and at the same time it is evident from the excerpt that she was flirting with her sister's husband. This duality was prevalent in her attitude with men all over. At one point she pretended to be decent and innocent while at the same time she was flirting with many men (Nichole, 2014). It was just because that she wants to find the protection, wealth and sexual satisfaction but all her desires meet death by her own relations.

Conclusion

Thorough analysis of the excerpts from the play reveal, that sexuality is sought as a tool for gaining power or for manipulating others to attain one's own

desires. The study of the element of sexuality advocates that sex is used to manipulate other characters to gain their goals. This indicates towards the practices that were becoming common among Americans of that time. The study of the play also reveals how psychological complexes become a vivacious motive for the characters' desires to meet death, or how the unfulfilled desires lead to submission to death as the only safe resort. Through this discussion it is evident that the characters operate to satisfy their desires and sexual patterns, while satisfying the needs of their id, creating an illusion of reality to satisfy their superego and behaving in a predetermined pattern to satisfy their ego.

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