Pitiful Desire – A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire explores sexual desire from multiple perspectives, presenting it as exhilarating and vital, but also as compulsive and debasing, suggests A Level teacher, Alice Reeve-Tucker.

Being associated with desire, the symbol of the mechanical streetcar 'grinding along the tracks' (Scene 6) sets the tone for how this theme is represented in relation to Blanche DuBois, the play's tragic protagonist; her sexual desire is all-consuming, powerful, and relentless. However, despite her shocking promiscuity, which includes seducing underage boys and working as a prostitute, I would argue that there is also something pitiful about her behaviour. Indeed, Williams' genius lies in his ability to elicit a compassionate, rather than censorious, response from his audience towards Blanche and her transgressive desires. Williams achieves this influence over his audience by crafting a space for Blanche to articulate the tragic reasons behind her self-destructive actions, and by gradually revealing Blanche's self-loathing and fragility, which are exposed in relation to her deteriorating mental state. Moreover, he presents brutally condemnatory responses from male characters, which serve to suggest to an audience that Blanche's behaviour needs to be met with sympathy rather than punishment. Arguably, a significant reason why Williams encourages his audience to pity Blanche is because of his affinity with her: Williams suffered from a compulsive desire for casual homosexual encounters, which, like Blanche, he admitted to pursuing in order to fulfil a deep longing for connection and validation. Such an autobiographical affinity perhaps helps to infuse his depiction of Blanche's plight with complexity and compassion.

A Façade of Purity and Refinement

From the outset of the play, Blanche deliberately presents herself as a morally pure and refined Southern Belle: she wears delicate white clothing, and is initially characterised by her genteel manners and expressions. However, this façade starts to crack when we see her discussing the nature of lust with her sister, Stella, early on. Blanche, who has unexpectedly arrived early to stay with Stella, refers to Stella's passionate feelings for her husband with disgust, claiming that she suffers from:

> *brutal desire – just Desire! – the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another... (Scene 4)*

Blanche reveals that she is really talking about her own relationship with desire when she admits:

> *It brought me here – Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be. (Scene 6)*

Blanche's reference to the streetcar is key: she is presenting herself as having no agency over her desire ('it brought me here'), and she refers to the contraption as a dominating and damaging force ('brutal') that victimises and ensnares her in a never-ending series of encounters she feels helpless to escape ('up one old narrow street and down another').

Compulsive Sexuality

Her inability to control her compulsive sexual behaviour is soon made manifest when we observe her seduction of a 'Young man' who is trying to collect money for a paper. It is an uncomfortable scene to watch: Blanche displays predatory characteristics and acts spontaneously, seemingly without any awareness that her behaviour is inappropriate. Alone with him on stage, she tells him bluntly:

> *You make my mouth water*

before reframing her seductive advances in a romantic light

> *I want to kiss you – just once – softly and sweetly on your mouth*

yet,

> *Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his (Scene 5)*

Her impulsive response is made all the worse because her suitor, Mitch, is about to arrive for a date and she has worked hard to establish herself in his eyes as morally upright. During her date with Mitch, she reveals her own awareness of her hypocritical behaviour when she announces:

> *I guess it is just that I have – old fashioned ideals!*

before she

> *rolls her eyes, knowing he cannot see her face (Scene 6)*

Her hypocrisy is further exposed when the shocking extent of her promiscuous behaviour is uncovered by her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Stanley discovers that just before Blanche arrived at their house, the management at her local hotel

> *requested her to turn in her room-key – for permanently!*

because she worked as a prostitute there. Worse still, she had acquired a reputation for being

> *not just different but downright loco-nuts (Scene 8)*

and is no longer welcome back in the town. Part of this reputation included having her house branded 'Out-of-Bounds' by a local army camp, and being fired from her school teacher job for getting 'mixed up' with a 17-year-old boy [Scene 8]. Blanche's sexual appetite is disturbingly voracious: she has pursued men, and boys, to the point of ruin, and yet, as we have seen, perceives herself as a victim of desires and circumstances that she cannot control.

Sympathy for Blanche

Despite the scandalous nature of Blanche's sexual past, Williams seeks to develop the audience's sympathy for her soon after Stanley's revelations. Blanche opens up to Stella, and thus to the audience, when she explains that her promiscuity is a symptom of a profound need for security and sanctuary. She euphemistically admits that she

> *wasn't so good the last two years or so*

and that she turned to sexual intimacies when vulnerable for a sense of validation, because:

> *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. (Scene 5)*

This need for the protection of men is also bound up in her loss of financial security with the demise of Belle Rêve. Blanche reveals that she wants a relationship with Mitch because it will bring an end to her ruinous desires and unfulfilling one-night stands, and will offer instead an opportunity for permanence in a socially acceptable relationship. However, Stanley informs Mitch about Blanche's past, and he refuses to consider her as girlfriend material. We watch as Blanche desperately tries to explain to Mitch why she had so 'many intimacies with strangers', as they were

> *all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with (Scene 9)*

In particular, she recalls the devastating suicide of her young, gay husband as being the catalyst for her promiscuity, and breathlessly suggests:

> *I think it was panic, just panic that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection – here and there, in the most – unlikely places – even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy. (Scene 11)*

Once again, she frames her voracious desire in euphemistic terms of passivity, as the panic 'drove' her to sexual encounters, rather than being something she had control over. The verb 'hunting' is telling, however, as it reveals her aggressive, primal need for stability, which is the key to understanding the motivations behind her desperate actions.

Mitch's Disgust – Williams' Empathy

Mitch exhibits a dismissive, disgusted reaction to Blanche's past; he fails to sympathise with her plight and instead viciously denounces her –

> *You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother (Scene 9)*

before clumsily attempting to rape her as a confirmation of her morally soiled status. Reflecting on Mitch's devastating response, Williams wrote:

> *he can see only the details of promiscuity, not the underlying panic and need for protection which had forced this upon her. (John Lahr: Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh, 2014)*

It is exactly this ability to perceive the complex psychological reasons behind Blanche's damaging behaviour, and to pity them, that Williams wants to encourage in his audience. His desire to affect the audience in this way stems from his empathy with Blanche's struggles, as he openly acknowledges that his work is

> *emotionally autobiographical [in that] it reflects the emotional currents of my life. (Tennessee Williams: The Art of Theater No. 5, Interviewed by Dotson Rader, Issue 81, Fall 1981)*

Elia Kazan, who famously collaborated with Williams in staging the play on Broadway, confirms what he sees as a deep affinity between the playwright and his creation:

> *I'll put it to you plainly, Tennessee Williams equals Blanche. He is Blanche. (John Lahr: Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh, 2014)*

Blanche's Self-Loathing

By the end of the play, the audience sees that Blanche's futile search for validation via short-lived sexual encounters serves only to increase her self-loathing and her loneliness. She is painfully aware of the chasm between her presentation of herself as a demure, genteel Southern Belle, and the reality of her status: she is an ageing spinster, who is homeless, jobless, and with a reputation in tatters. Unable to bear such pressures, Blanche mentally deteriorates, and her disintegration is completed when she is brutally raped by Stanley. He uses his knowledge of her sexual history as an excuse to debase her further, when he taunts her:

> *Come to think of it – maybe you wouldn't be bad to – interfere with... (Scene 11)*

He implies that she has brought this prospective rape upon herself:

> *We've had this date with each other from the beginning! (Scene 11)*

Like Mitch before him, Stanley punishes Blanche for her sexual past. An audience is encouraged to view these male responses as unnecessarily cruel and harmful.

In the final scene of the play, we meet a brusque, officious nurse from the institution, who cruelly 'pinions' Blanche's arms in preparation for transporting her away (Scene 11). In contrast to such aggressive treatment, the doctor responds to Blanche with gentleness and respect. He 'crosses to Blanche and crouches in front of her', speaks reassuringly, so that her 'terror subsides a little', and then

> *draws her up gently and supports her with his arm and leads her through the portieres. (Scene 11)*

By ending the play with this doctor's compassionate response, Williams is signalling that the audience needs to look beyond Blanche's damaging sexual desires and try to perceive the complex, fragile, woman being driven by them. Perhaps this is the sympathetic response Williams wished he could elicit for himself, when he struggled so painfully with his own self-destructive sexual behaviour.

Article Written By: Alice Reeve-Tucker teaches English at Malvern College.

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