

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS’ “A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE”: PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY

Ms. Sana Khan
Assistant Professor,
Dept. Of English,
Birla College, Kalyan

Tennessee Williams is a leading popular dramatist in the modern American theatre. He is a writer who has been known not only for success but also for the humiliation of failure. Like all great writers, Williams presents a problem that is personal, contemporary and also universal. To an ordinary reader, the plays of Tennessee Williams are unpleasant. They present the morbid aspects of contemporary American life and leave the reader to draw his own conclusions. There are several critics who claim that his plays are psychopathic in their subject matter and characters. The characters seem to belong to the study of psychiatrists rather than to dramatic literature. But the fact is that he wants his play goer must be stimulated to think more about his own life and his own experience.

Williams has raised the problem of sex in his writing which has been a long run study of several ancient writers and psychologists. To many, his name is synonymous with sex on the stage. But sex, to Williams, is not related to bodies but to mind and hearts. He said in one of his interviews, “I don’t want naked bodies in my play. I want naked minds and naked hearts.” Williams’s preoccupation with sexual maladjustment reminds one of the famous modern psychologists Freud. The problem of sexual mystery which is dominant in the plays of Tennessee Williams comes very close to Freud’s discussion of id, ego and super ego. The relationship between these subsystems of id, ego and super ego are of crucial significance in determining behavior. Sexual tensions and experiences as well as problems centering on sexual gratification are important aspects of a person’s life. Sex can be important source of satisfaction and self-realization or a source of anxiety and self-devaluation. Sex is man’s biological need and the failure to meet this basic need may obstruct healthy human development.

Most of Williams’ characters suffer because they have ambivalent feelings of guilt about their sex desires and achievements. They suffer emotional tension and psychological disfigurement caused by the suppression of sexual forces. They also face psychological problems. The conflict of id and ego distorts their personality. “A Street Car Named Desire” is a good example of Freudian sexual psychology in which Blanche is a victim in the conflict of id, ego and super ego. In the play Williams has clearly explored the origins and growth of Schizophrenia. He has shown Blanche struggling to master her conflicting drives of sex and super ego, to live up to an inner image of a Southern belle. “I can identify completely with Blanche”, says Williams, “we are both hysterics”.

“A Street Car Named Desire” was produced on December 3, 1947, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre, New York. The play has been viewed by critics on their own ways as a tragedy, a problem-play and a psychological play etc. In the play Williams has tried to describe two different situations of two different persons. On the one hand Stella is happy and satisfied

within her own conditions whereas Blanche is a dissatisfied lady always disturbed and restless for her sex desires. The dying false aristocracy is one of the factors that cause deformity in Blanche's hypocritical behavior. It is so very disastrous that it may lead a person to asylum. In the play *Lady Blanche* who is guided by her false aristocratic ideals struggles to control and suppress her sexual desires. She leads a normal life until she is in contact with reality. But as soon as she tries to evade it or deny it, she is subjected to destruction.

Stella and Blanche come from a world that is rapidly dying. Belle Reeve, their family's ancestral plantation, has been lost, and two sisters are the last living members of their family. The economic insecurity compelled Blanche to take up a job of a high school teacher. Blanche experienced continuous emotional shock on account of a number of tragic deaths in the family, after Stella got married. She explains it to her sister,

“I, I, I took the blow in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burnt like rubbish! You just came home in time for funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quite, but deaths-dot always...death is expensive, Miss Stella!”

Thus the emotional shock and exhaustion caused by many deaths in the family had worsened Blanche's mental condition by adding up to her financial problems. She belongs to the Southern aristocracy and therefore has all the grace of the class and is endowed with aesthetic, poetic and romantic qualities. Because of her nympho-maniac nature, she fell in love with a seventeen-year old boy who was a poet. But the irony of life did not help her to lead a life of happiness and satisfaction. Unexpected things happened and destroyed her desires. For example, her discovery of her husband's homosexuality results in a shocking disillusionment. She feels a special disgust for him and expresses it to him:

“He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery-love. All at once and much, much too completely...But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking...”

Having seen her husband engaged in a homosexual act, she had felt deeply hurt and disgusted. She told him: “I know, I know! You disgust me...”

Her homosexual husband Allan Gary, being ashamed of his homosexuality and after being discovered by his wife, committed suicide by shooting himself into the mouth. Blanche was thus disillusioned even in the beautiful emotion of love. This event completed her frustration.

Once the beauty of emotional life is marred by her husband's sexuality and eventual death, she seeks refuge in sexual adventures. But the sexual adventures make her disillusionment about men in general and lead her to the sad realization that men are not interested in her life, though they need her physically for their own fun. She has been deserted by men after the sexual need is fulfilled. That is why Blanche craves for the kindness of strangers and some kind of emotional security. The need for security makes her deceive the young and innocent Mitch by attracting him for marriage with her. In spite of her bad reputation and her expulsion from her school seducing a seventeen year old boy, she always talks of her virginity. “Virgo is virgin.”

Instead of accepting the holy institution of marriage, Blanche went on experimenting with a prostitudinal life because of her nympho-maniac personality. She had her sexual fulfillment, but she realized it later that it will not bring her financial, emotional security and social approval which is possible only through marriage.

Stella and Blanche represent two different ways. Stella represents the uninhibited instinctual pleasure that she gets from her husband and everything else is insignificant to her. According to her: "...there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark- that sort of make everything seem- unimportant."

Blanche, on the contrary, calls it animal pleasure and brute desire. Her unwillingness to accept the reality of that desire destroys her. Her illusions arising from her aristocratic convention and her denial of the importance of normal love stand in the way of her satisfaction and happiness.

In the play, Stanley is an exaggeration of Lawrentian lover- the figure of admired male sexuality. Blanche often speaks of Stanley as ape-like and primitive. Stanley represents a very unrefined manhood. Stella cannot resist him, and even Blanche, though repulsed, is in some sense, drawn to him. Blanche became a victim of jealousy and hatred of her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche was in deadly contempt of Stanley on account of his crude behavior. Stanley too was having a firm hidden hatred for her. But in this tussle, Stella was in conciliatory mood to both of them-one being sister and the other, her husband. She was certainly on the horns of a dilemma. She told Blanche:

"But there are things that happen between a man and woman in dark- that sort of make everything else seem unimportant."

It shows that Stella was trying to play her role as a well-adjusted wife to Stanley and a loving and caring sister to Blanche, in a very correct manner. But Blanche seems to have a little bit extreme point-of-view. It shows the tender side of femininity. Though extreme, it has merit.

Blanche: "What you are talking about is brutal- just- Desire- the name of that rattle-trap streetcar that bangs through the quarter, up one old narrow street and down another..."

Stella: "Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar?"

Blanche: "It brought me here- where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be..."

From the conventional point of view, it all sounds as if she was hysterical and abnormal; but on a closer understanding of female psyche, we can very well sympathize with her.

Although Stanley is a Lawrentian kind of womanizer, he has no mental capacity to appreciate the physical beauty of a woman. Except sleeping with a woman, he has no other interest in her- her mind or heart. Because of Stanley's limited understanding of female psyche in general and Blanche's predicament in particular, Blanche's sex scandals are exposed causing her more anguish. In fact Stanley sensed a possible threat to his own domestic security and happiness by the presence of Blanche. Thus incomprehension is combined with vindictiveness in Stanley, who tries to humiliate her by raping her.

Thus in Freudian terms, Stanley is pure id, while Blanche represents the super-ego and Stella, the ego- but the balancing between the id and super-ego is not found only in Stella's mediation, but in the tension between these forces within Blanche herself. She finds Stanley's primitivism so threatening precisely because it is something she sees, and hides, within her.

Blanche is a dreamer and an idealist who dwells in the beautiful world of imagination. Blanche tells her sister Stella: “How pretty the sky is! I ought to go there on a rocket that never comes down!”

This statement holds a mirror to her implicit disappointment with reality and her desire for escape into the ideal world of beauty. As her very name suggests, Blanche wants her life to be as colourful, as lively. She explains to Mitchel the significance of her name, “It’s a French name. It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together white woods. Like an old orchard in spring.”

But the paradox happens to be that her life is full of deaths, graveyards and cemeteries. She does not wish to see the naked ugliness but wants to see it covered with a beautiful veil. She tells Mitchel: “I bought this adorable little coloured paper lantern at a Chinese shop on Bourbon. Put it over the light bulb... I cannot stand a naked night bulb, any more than I can a rude remark on vulgar action.”

Similarly Blanche wants to escape from the trap of the world in to the sea which is a symbol of boundless freedom for her. Before being taken to the mental hospital, she expresses her dream: “I can smell the sea air. The rest of my life I’m going to spend on the sea. And when I die, I’m going to die on the sea... And I’ll be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped over-board at noon- in the blaze of summer- and in to an ocean as blue as my first lover’s eyes!”

The way Blanche DuBois sees her relationship with Mitch and the expectations she entertains in her mind show that she had a practical sense; and she did not want to be socially out casted. For the common mind, she may be considered abnormal, but from the higher cultural point of view, she had the making of an uncommon character.

There is a great similarity between the character of Stanley and Blanche and the parents of Williams. Cornelive Williams, Tennessee’s father, too, was a poker player and a man of cavalier spirit. Blanche somehow is similar to his mother who was from a southern respectable family. Almost all the Southern faded belle who are presented in the plays of Williams as love starved, tender and oppressed by other inhuman characters are the outcome of the character of his own mother.

Many of Williams’ heroines have a repressed sexuality and suffer from guilt pangs or false aristocracy. Lady Amanda of “The Glass Menagerie”, Maggie of “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”, Serafina of “The Rose Tattoo” and Alma of “Summer and Smoke” are all psychologically depressed and disturbed due to their false pretensions and denials of sexual pleasures.

The mother Amanda in the play “The Glass Menagerie” can be very well compared to Blanche. Mother Amanda is a frustrated lady who always lives in the past days. The lady feels to be striving for emotional and sexual pleasure. The lack of these things has made her hysteric. Her daughter Laura is an emotionally crippled girl who lives an excluded life. She has a sense of normality in her but her mother’s over carefulness does not allow her to be normal.

Similarly Alma in “Summer and Smoke” is also a neurotic. Alma Winemiller has a repressed sexuality, though largely unconscious. As a result of her repressed sexuality, she develops fast heartbeat, the sensation of her fingers being frozen and the habit of laughing nervously. There is a constant conflict between flesh and soul. Alma comes from a Puritan background that prevents her from being a lady of her own. Her personality is deformed and morally degraded with the repression of her sexual desire.

Thus the Play “A Street Car Named Desire” suggests that human beings are happy and satisfied when they obey the urge of the natural blood instincts. The hypocrisy of Blanche is

matched by the animal behavior of Stanley. Blanche is rightly punished for the rejection of normal sexual life. The cruelty of killing her homosexual husband is avenged by Stanley- the complete sexual animal. Williams' view on sex and morality are very clear. Man's sincerity to himself is the highest type of morality in the world of Tennessee Williams. The well-being and fulfillment of man as an individual alone should matter in the world.

Bibliography:

A: PRIMARY SOURCE:

Williams, Tennessee: *A Street Car Named Desire* : Penguin Books Ltd, London.,1959

B: SECONDARY SOURCES: CRITICAL WORKS

1. Shaffer, Lawrence :History of American Literature and Drama, Sarup & Sons, New Delhi, 2000
2. Nand, Nitya : The Plays of Tennessee Williams, Classical Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2001