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## THE CRISIS OF TRANSITION IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

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### Abstract:

*A Streetcar Named Desire written by Tennessee Williams is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The year is 1947 - the same year in which the play was written. All of the action of A Streetcar Named Desire takes place in on the first floor of a two-bedroom apartment. The set is designed so that the audience can also see "outside" and observe characters on the street.*

### KEY-WORDS:

Tennessee Williams, Streetcar Named Desire, Blanche, Stella.

### INTRODUCTION

The plot of *A Streetcar Named Desire* generally presents the confrontation of a high-strung sensitive woman with an alien environment. In the play, an individual who carries within her an image of the ideal world is forced to live in a world of very different nature. Blanche who keys her life and thinking to a Southern way of life confronts a different world. The inner world in which she would like to live contrasts sharply with the world in which she has to live. This brings a sharp confrontation between people who cling to the life which is gone and people who idealize the present social norms. The more one thinks about this play, the more one becomes conscious of the difference that time has brought to its characters. Blanche lives in a period of transition. She is too sensitive to forget her past and adjust with the present situation. In spite of all her efforts, she is unable to let go her clutches on her past. Her desire to adjust with the modern society suggests the fact that she is not totally oblivious of the present realities. As she emotionally clings to a different world, all her existential efforts to make adjustments with the present fail. As a consequence, the play ends with the protagonist relapsing into a world of dream and Illusion. People of this sort perpetually live in a world of fantasies, as the world outside are too harsh for them. Their idealistic and emotional necessity predominates over the existential compulsions.

Tennessee Williams in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is concerned with a specific cultural milieu and concentrates on an interpretation of that milieu. Blanche Dubois, the protagonist of the book represents the death of a myth. She represents the passing away of the old South and her tensions suggest the rise of a new culture. Blanche, the Southern heroine is unable to adjust with the present culture because of her different upbringing. Commenting on this crisis, Thomas E. Porter says, "For the Southerner, the past represents a glory and a heritage, its vitality in the imagination makes adjustment to the variegated society of the present difficult" (159). The plot of the play explores the tensions of the representative of the old South who lives in a period of transition between the old and the new. Blanche represents a type and she expresses these cultural attitudes that generate this type. She is a sensitive, romantic soul who tries to adjust to the upcoming melting-pot environment of a big city. The dramatist explores this cultural situation. Blanche's inability to cast off the memory of her southern aristocratic way of life makes her adjustment with the present society

difficult.

Blanche enters the Kowalaski set with the old South in her body and mind. Immediately she finds that the place contrasts with her beautiful dream, the dream to which she clings desperately. The very sight of her sister's place shocks her. When she sees her sister's house she suddenly races back in her mind to the experience of the South. Again through the medium of stage-direction Williams wants to suggest the difference between Stanley and Blanche. When she entered Stanley's home:

Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearls, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. (Williams 117)

On the other hand, the playwright introduces Stanley as :

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the centre of his life has been pleasure with women. (Williams 128)

Stanley and Blanche enter the stage with significant opening lines :

Stanley (bellowing) : Hay, there! Stella, Baby ! ...

Stanley : Catch!

Stella : What ?

Stanley : Meat! (Williams 116)

...

Blanche : They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called commentaries and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields! (Williams 117)

While Stanley's speech is coarse, harsh and boisterous indicating his crude personality, the opening lines of Blanche in contrast are refined and polished. Stanley is virile, loud, aggressive. Blanche is sensitive and delicate.

This is the world of A Streetcar, of time past in time present. Into the settled environment of Elysian Fields Blanche comes as an outsider, a foreign element from another time and place. The sensitivity of Blanche is contrasted with the primitively of Stanley who represents the modern spirit. An understanding of the nature of the society at Elysian Fields gives a proper dimension to the reality that Blanche encounters in the play. Stanley's animality exhibits itself in every scene through his behavior with other characters. In the first scene, when he brings home a package of raw meat from the market and throws at Stella, one gets the picture of a primitive man. He beats his wife when he is drunk. His sensuality and animality find expression most definitely with his rape of Blanche. The lack of sophistication also becomes evident from the way he tries to monopolies the radio and the bath-room. As Blanche complains later, he takes his bath in the bathroom with no clothes on his body without closing the door. It is suggested by Stella to Blanche in the beginning of the play.

Blanche.: Will Stanley like me, or will I Just be a visiting in-law, Stella?

I couldn't stand that.

Stella: You'll get along fine together if you'll just try not-to-well-compare him with men that we went out with at home.

Blanche : Is he so different?

Stella : Yes. A different species. (Williams 124)

Blanche gets a naked picture of Stanley's bestiality that night when he beats Stella.

Blanche : Suppose ! you can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just suppose that any part of a gentleman's in his nature. Not one particle, no! oh, if he was just ordinary! ... There is something downright - bestial - about him. (Williams 163)

Later on, in more details she talks of his bestiality and interprets him as a survivor of the stone-Age.

Blanche : He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits ! eats like one, moves like one, talks like one ! There's even something - sub-human - something not quite to the stage of humanity yet ! Yes, something - ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in anthropological studies ! (Williams 163)

Blanche lives in a period of transition. She is caught between two worlds : the world of Old South which is gone and the present world of Stanleys in which she lives. Mentally and emotionally she lives in her world of past glories and physically inhabits a different world. In A Streetcar Williams deals with this emotional crisis and mental agony which Blanche undergoes. The play exposes Blanche's inner, spiritual world as it is different from her outside world of existence. Commenting on Williams' flair for delineating the emotional level of his characters Francis Donahue says. "Williams has been concerned with underscoring on the stage the hidden worlds in which his characters live, worlds which are usually sharply different from the real world which they physically inhabit" (220). Later on discussing about Williams' subject as a dramatist and his concept of theatre he says, "Williams' new concept of the theatre... has to do with an attempt to present the spiritual and emotional inner world of his characters" (221).

#### **BLANCHE'S VIEW OF NEW ORLEANS:**

There's a classic Simpsons episode in which Marge Simpson lands the role of Blanche DuBois in a musical version of A Streetcar Named Desire. During the opening number, the Springfield cast sings:

New Orleans!  
Stinking, rotten, vomiting, vile!  
New Orleans!  
Putrid, brackish, maggoty, foul!  
New Orleans!  
Crummy, lousy, rancid, and rank!

After the show aired, the Simpsons producers received a lot of complaint from Louisiana citizens. They were highly offended by the disparaging lyrics. Of course, the character of Blanche DuBois, the "faded Southern belle without a dime," would whole-heartedly agree with the cruel, satirical lyrics. To her, New Orleans, the setting of A Streetcar Named Desire, represents the ugliness of reality. To Blanche, the "crude" people that live on the street called Elysian Fields represent the decline of civilized culture.

Blanche, the tragic protagonist of Tennessee Williams' play, grew up on a plantation called Belle Reve (a French phrase meaning "beautiful dream"). Throughout her childhood, Blanche grew accustomed to gentility and wealth. As the estate's wealth evaporated and her loved ones died off, Blanche held on to fantasies and delusions - two things that are very difficult to cling to in the two-room apartment of the her sister Stella and Stella's domineering husband Stanley Kowalski.

#### **CONCLUSION:**

In the play, an individual who carries within her being an image of the ideal world, is forced to live in a world of very different nature. Blanche has keyed her life to Southern way of living. But in the course of time, the society has taken a completely different mode. So, she is suddenly confronted with a different world. The inner world contrasts sharply with the world per se. So, she is bewildered. It is apparent that people of this sort are not in a position to accept the inevitable change. The immortality which they attach with the past experiences in their life makes them isolated from the available reality. Their hearts passionately cling on to an irretrievable past. In the fitness of things, it becomes obvious that Blanche-like people are doomed from the outset. They have attempted to adhere to the traditions which are no longer valid in a world which is full of Stanley Kowalskis.

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Setting of "A Streetcar Named Desire" By Wade Bradford

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