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BLANCHE DUBOIS TRAPPED IN A PANOPTICON

This work is directed towards the different ways of seeing things, while it aims not at explaining, but at understanding the character of Blanche DuBois and her mental struggles seen and anticipated in Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Keywords: Blanche DuBois, reason, madness, Tennessee Williams

"*Sooner or later every woman experiences a crisis like Blanche's*" was my immediate thought when I first saw Elia Kazan's 1951 film version of Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. For Kazan this was "a poetic tragedy, not a realistic or a naturalistic one"[1], so he had to find a way to emphasize its unreality at the very beginning by making a memorable scene of Blanche DuBois's first appearance. The scene in which she materializes out of the steam at a railway station suits the fragility and ghost-like purity of her character much more effectively than the opening of the play itself.

American film censorship during the 1950s was so powerful that it managed to alter certain scenes of the original play, but when one reads the play one finds that the screenplay is almost identical with the original text. What are the differences then? The main difference is in the way we see things, because the camera "changed not only what we see, but how we see it"[2]. It is towards these different ways of seeing things that this work is directed, while it aims not at explaining, but at understanding the character of Blanche DuBois and her mental struggles seen and anticipated in the play. When Kazan noted that he had to "find a Don Quixote scheme of things for each"[3] he was perfectly aware that *Streetcar* owed its popularity mainly to Williams' brilliant description of Blanche's descent into madness, which brings such questions to mind as "*What is it that makes madness so attractive and interesting to explore?*

1 Elia Kazan, "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*", in *The Twentieth Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire, A Collection of Critical Essays,* edited by Jordan Y. Miller, Prentice-Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, N. J., 1971, 21.
2 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, available on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LnfB-pUm3eI
3 Elia Kazan, "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*", *Ibid*.

What is the relationship between reason and madness? Is there reason in madness?" etc. When Foucault said: "We have yet to write the history of that other form of madness, by which men, in an act of sovereign reason, confine their neighbors, and communicate and recognize each other through the merciless language of non-madness"[4], he was searching for that point prior to the separation of reason and madness. The latter is a term which implies judgment, condemnation, a sign that one is "different from" the norm. The attractiveness of madness comes from our dread and anguish, as existentialists would put it, of not conforming to traditional norms and becoming mad ourselves. How many times have all of us been laughed at? It was then, at each of those moments, that we were all madmen, and there is nothing shameful about admitting it as Flaubert did in his *Memoirs of a Madman*: "A madman! That strikes horror. What then are you, reader? What category do you place yourself in? In the category of fools or of madmen? Given a choice, your vanity would yet prefer the latter condition."[5] Madness is attractive then, whereas foolishness is repellent.

Lilian Feder makes the point that in myth and literature madness has always dealt with how a person responds to environmental influences[6], which is also the way Williams uses madness in *Streetcar*. Blanche DuBois comes to seek asylum in her sister Stella's house where she lives with her handsome, but boorish husband Stanley Kowalski. The sordid backdrop of the New Orleans quarter becomes a panopticon for the fading Southern beauty and we witness her gradual descent into madness, which culminates near the end of the play after Stanley rapes his sister-in-law and she is forced to find another, but this time literal, asylum. Depending on the way we see it, Blanche's madness can be interpreted as her own choice, as if she deliberately chooses to withdraw from objective reality and retreat to a world of insanity, or her subjective reality. It would be unfair to mark Blanche as mad from the start, although she is clearly a disturbed woman who is haunted by her memories. Her past is written on a face of delicate beauty that she is reluctant to subject to strong light. Blanche comes to New Orleans with many secrets in her breast which Stanley is resolved to disclose, but she cannot worry about him since her goal is to find protection, and "the tradition of the old South says that it

4 Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, translated from French by Richard Howard, Pantheon Books, New York, a division of Random House, 1965, Preface, ix.

5 Gustav Flaubert, *Memoirs of a Madman*, translated by Andrew Brown, foreword by Germaine Greer, London, Hesperus, 2002, I, 230.

6 See Lilian Feder, *Madness in Literature*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1980, Preface, xi.

must be through another person"[7]. The person she chooses is, naturally, her sister Stella, but there she is met with disillusionment at Stella's domestic situation. For Blanche there is nothing more shameful than for a member of the aristocracy to be quartered in such degrading surroundings, so after repeatedly and unsuccessfully attempting to get them both out of the shameful situation, she takes refuge in drinking and the world of her own imagination. Her futile attempts to find salvation for Stella are the moments in the play when Blanche sounds most reasonable:

> BLANCHE: I have to plan for us both, to get us both – out!
> STELLA: You take it for granted that I am in something that I want to get out of.
> BLANCHE: I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with.[8]

As Blanche reveals one secret after another, the echoing words prove to her that those secrets are true. Before they were uttered it was as though they never existed, as though she was not really aware of having lost "the beautiful dream" and her "star"[9]. Blanche denies being soiled by numberless strangers and tries to wash the dirt off by incessant bathing – but Lady Macbeth could have taught her a lesson or two: one cannot easily wash the damned spots off one's soul. With her rich imagination, she denies living in denial and let her fancy fabricate tales in which she is always be the damsel in distress. A magnificent quality of Blanche's character lies in her use of language, and it is in language that we find the hidden artist in her, prone to believe make-believe. Even her relationship with Mitch, the one "superior to the others"[10], is sustained by the idea that he is her Knight and she his Lady, a tale which Mitch will never understand:

> BLANCHE: We are going to be very Bohemian. We are going to pretend that we are sitting in a little artists' café on the Left Bank in Paris! (*She lights a candle stub and puts it in a bottle.*) *Je suis la Dame aux Camellias! Vous êtes – Armand!*[11] Understand French?
> MITCH: (*heavily*) Naw[12]. Naw, I –

7 Elia Kazan, "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*", *Ibid.*
8 This and all subsequent quotation from Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is from the following edition: Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Introduction and questions by Ray Speakman, Heinemann Plays, England, 1995, 52.
9 The literal translation of Belle Reve is "beautiful dream", whereas Stella means "a star".
10 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 34.
11 *The Lady of the Camellias* is a famous novel by Alexandre Dumas (son), in which a courtesan is saved by Armand Duval's love, but later dies of tuberculosis.
12 "No" in bad English.

BLANCHE: *Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah, quel dommage!* [13]

The comparison to Marguerite Gautier is by no means coincidental. Blanche's conflicting drives of sex and super-ego are exposed through this comparison and also through her later confession that her late husband, whom she calls "a boy", was a homosexual driven to suicide by her disgust at him. Blanche suffers from profound melancholia and her mind is attached to a fixed idea – that she killed her "boy". A word, an image, a polka tune can revive this idea and renew sadness. The need to be and stay desirable is, however, at times stronger than conscience, and she repeats the same mistakes as earlier in her home town, Laurel: she flirts with and kisses the Young Boy who collects for *The Evening Star*; she seduces Mitch into believing that she is a respectable lady; and worst of all, she tries to use flirting as a means of getting what she wants from Stanley Kowalski. Blanche and Stanley have been called "star-crossed lovers"[14], and Blanche is said to have been unconsciously, perversely attracted to "her demon lover"[15], but their relationship is much more complicated than that. Her flirting with Stanley clearly shows her constant need to be found attractive by any man, even by the man whom she deems an animal. But Stanley recognizes and reacts to her flirting as any man would, indeed:

She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser. She throws back her head and laughs.
STANLEY: If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!
BLANCHE: Such as what?
STANLEY: Don't play so dumb. You know what![16]

Although Blanche is clearly meant to be the tragic heroine of the play, her ambiguous behaviour can make her less likeable. Her passionate nature is capable of being misunderstood, as it happens towards the end of the play in the climactic rape scene, when Blanche eventually does not resist Stanley's sexual aggression, but turns into an inert figure, leading John Louis DiGaetani to hastily conclude that all the time she

13 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 70: "Would you like to go to bed with me this evening? Don't you understand? Oh, what a pity!"
14 See *The Influence of Tennessee Williams, Essays on Fifteen American Playwrights*, edited and with an introduction by Philip C. Kolin, McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 2008.
15 See Kaarina Kailo, *Blanche DuBois and Salomé as New Women, Old Lunatics in Modern Drama*, in *Madness in Drama*, Cambridge University Press, 1993.
16 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire,* 26–27.

was "subtly telling him that she (was) more desirable and attractive as a woman than her sister"[17]. Stanley interprets her natural instinct to defend herself from him as an invitation for "some rough-house"[18], which might lead to the conclusion that Blanche was not raped at all! On the surface of things and without an insight into her mental state, this could indeed seem true. But Blanche's mind had already plunged into an imaginary world by that point and, anyway, "[...] some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable"[19]. One cannot but remember Blanche's craving for company at the beginning of the play, and her later desperate seeking for an exit back to loneliness, because ultimately, it is not loneliness that makes us mad, but the "deliberate cruelty" of a fellow man. Jacqueline O'Connor's euphemism for rape – "a violent sexual encounter"[20] therefore cannot be applied to *Streetcar* because it rather diminishes the powerful effect the rape has had on Blanche's mind, let alone the effect on the reader who knows that the rape happens simultaneously with Stella's giving birth to Stanley's baby. In order to fully understand the significance of the rape scene and its connection to Blanche's madness, let us compare this scene with an alternative: another possible way of seeing/playing the same scene. Irene Selznick, the producer of the 1951 movie version of *Streetcar*, suggested the following change: "I felt she (Blanche) would be destroyed more completely if, after resisting, she began to respond and then he (Stanley) changed course and repulsed her. It would be her fatal humiliation. I would have him fling her across the stage and just stand there, laughing savagely."[21] Kazan and Williams had never agreed to this kind of cruelty because it would have left a devastating effect on the tragic trait of Blanche. Both versions are almost equally cruel, but the latter leaves no doubt that Blanche was mad from the beginning and pictures Stanley as the final victor. The original scene, however, mystifies her character and gives the play the necessary pathos. Blanche becomes the victim of the basest crime against individuality, against the will and right to choose.

Streetcar is as much a play about isolation, loneliness, and illusions, as it is about madness. Tennessee Williams shows us numerous ways of alienating ourselves from society, and all these ways come down to the

17 John Louis DiGaetani, *Stages of Struggle, Modern Playwrights and Their Psychological Inspirations*, McFarland and Company, Inc., Publishers, Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 2008, 71.

18 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 112.

19 *Ibid*, 108.

20 See Jacqueline O'Connor, *Dramatizing Dementia: Madness in the Plays of Tennessee Williams*, Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1997.

21 Irene Mayer Selznick, *A Private View*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1983, 302.

same thing: the state of being "different from", hence the state of being mad. Blanche's language and values are so unsuited to the Elysian Fields of New Orleans that she frequently resembles a mythical heroine who came here to die for her passions[22]. Foucault argued that there could be no madness without passion[23], but at the same time passion is not enough to develop genuine madness – it is just the basis for the very possibility of madness. The frightening fact is that we are all passionate beings (as Hamlet said:

> "*Give me that man*
> *That is not passion's slave, and I will wear him*
> *In my heart's core, ay, in my heart of heart...*"[24])

and potential madmen therefore. The play shows the fight between the violent passions of the working class, represented by Stanley Kowalski, and the forces of imagination and art embodied in the character of Blanche. A "potential artist" like Blanche is more likely to succumb to feelings of sadness and injustice; thus her anxiety makes her more vulnerable than the "healthy Polack", but Blanche is aware of her weakness:

> BLANCHE: [...] You healthy Polack, without a nerve in your body, of course you don't know what anxiety feels like![25]

The recognition of one's weaknesses surely is a sign of mental sanity. Blanche cures her anxiety by taking long hot baths, as if to restore the purity which she lost by being "generous" to strangers. And Stanley, who wants to keep things his way, uses her weaknesses against her and laughs at her poetic language, thus confirming her notion of him as a "survivor of the stone age"[26]. On a larger plane, the symbolic fight between Stanley and Blanche is the fight of action against words, of barbarism against breeding, of realism against romanticism, where Stanley's final victory reflects the true state of culture, art, and the societal norms Williams was criticizing. "Williams' homosexuality," says Susan Abbotson," allowed him greater insight into female characters than many of his heterosexual contemporaries,"[27] and, indeed, at times the character of Blanche is used as a mouthpiece for Williams' own critique of contemporary society in

22 In Greek mythology Elysian Fields was the place where heroes went after death.
23 See Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization, A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*, *Ibid*.
24 William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, Geddes & Grosset, David Dale House, New Lanark, Scotland, 2002, Act 3, Scene 2, lines 71-73.
25 Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 91.
26 *Ibid*, 54.
27 Susan C. W. Abbotson, *Masterpieces of the Twentieth Century American Drama*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Connecticut, London, 2005, 45.

which there is no sophistication left, and virtually no social tolerance for anyone. Thus Blanche implores Stella:

> BLANCHE: [...] Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella – my sister – there has been *some* progress since then! Such things as art – as poetry and music – such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! [...] That we have got to make *grow*! And *cling* to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching... *Don't – don't hang back with the brutes*!"[28]

It is in imaginative speeches like this that Blanche discloses her artistic soul. The ability to imagine a better world has made Blanche mad in the eyes of other people, but that madness was like an intoxication of the spirit, not a literal one. The true insanity was triggered by Stanley's brutal assault, and it pushed Blanche completely into the world of imagination, never to return to reality again.

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БЛАНШ ДУБОА, У ЗАМЦИ ПАНОПТИКОНА

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