The Clash of Genders in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract: The world of Tennessee Williams includes a wide range of complex and diverse characters, pointing to the complexity of human nature: Tom, Amanda and Laura in “The Glass Menagerie”, Maggie and Brick in “Cat on a Hot Tin Roof”, Maxine and Shannon in “The Night of the Iguana”, Chance and Alexandra in “Sweet Bird of Youth”, Val Xavier in “Battle of Angels” and “Orpheus Descending”, Alma in “Summer and Smoke”. The dramatic world of the Elysian Fields, the place where the action of the play “A Streetcar Named Desire” is located, is populated by an equal number of female and male characters. The female figures present in the play are Blanche du Bois, her sister Stella, Eunice (Stella’s friend and neighbour), the matron, an Afro-American woman, a Hispanic woman selling flowers. The gallery of male characters includes Stanley (Stella’s husband), Steve, Mitch and Pablo (Stanley’s friends and poker companions), the doctor and a young man. There is a very good balance as far as the importance attached to masculine and feminine characters is concerned: there are two protagonists, Blanche and Stanley, followed by Stella and Mitch, the characters that come after them in order of importance. The play witnesses the clash between femininity and masculinity apparent in the relationship of the most important characters: Blanche and Stanley, Stella and Stanley, Blanche and Mitch. The article will analyze the relationships between these characters as representatives of femininity and masculinity and the changes that may be perceived in their relationships in the unfolding of the action.

Keywords: *A Streetcar Named Desire*; dramatic world; the Southern Belle; sexuality; conflict.

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1. Introduction

Regarded from the point of view of the number and importance of feminine and masculine characters, *A Streetcar Named Desire* achieves a very good balance. The *dramatis personae* include twelve characters, out of which six are females and the other six are males. According to the importance attached to them in the dramatic action, they could be grouped as follows: Blanche and her brother-in-law Stanley, the protagonists of the play; Stella (Blanche's sister) and Mitch (Stanley's co-worker and friend); then come Eunice and Steve, who are the Kowalskis' neighbours and friends; the doctor and the matron; finally, there are the more transitory characters: Pablo, the young collector, the Hispanic woman selling flowers and the Afro-American woman who appears at the beginning of the play. There is a continuous clash between masculinity and femininity apparent in the relationships between the most important characters in the play: Blanche and Stanley, Stella and Stanley, Blanche and Mitch. The article will analyze the relationships between these characters as representatives of femininity and masculinity and the changes that may be perceived in such relationships in the unfolding of the action.

2. Blanche and Stanley: ambivalent gender roles

The main conflict of the play is the one between Blanche Du Bois and Stanley Kowalski. The two protagonists of Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* epitomize through the ambivalent nature of their gender roles the elusive character of the play, which offers multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations, not only as far as the characters are concerned, but also in what concerns its ending.

The names of the two characters are significant for their ambivalent nature. In Scene Three, Blanche explains her name to Mitch, Stanley's poker companion and friend: "It's a French name. It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together mean white woods" (Williams, 1974, pp.54-55). As Susan Tyrell points out, Blanche's name "should be seen in the context of the opposition of light and dark that is a constant reference in the play" (Tyrell, 2013, p. 205). The name brings together two symbols, white and the darkness of the woods, pointing to the ambivalence of Blanche's personality. The same contradictory symbols of light and darkness are to be seen in the name of Blanche's brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski: Stanley means 'stony meadow', while Kowalski is derived from the Polish word 'kowl', which means blacksmith. His name is also a juxtaposition of contraries, combining the idea of light that is to be found in a meadow with

that of an occupation that includes the word 'black' in its name. Moreover, a blacksmith's occupation, as well as Stanley's own occupation are generally specific for industrialized areas, i.e. for urban areas. They stand in contrast with the idyllic rural areas suggested by the meadows or by the woods. So, Stanley's name suggests contrast, but also similarity with Blanche's.

Blanche is a vulnerable Southern genteel woman, a role attributed to women by the Southern patriarchal society, which is incongruous with the new post-war urban order. At the same time, she is what might be called a 'fallen woman', a predator who caught her 'victims' in a web of sordid sexual intercourse.

Stanley Kowalski also defies a simple characterization. He is ambivalent, although his ambivalence is not so clear at times as compared to Blanche's. Thus, Stanley is *both* a "gaudy seed-bearer" (Williams, 1974, p. 29) and a caring husband.

The beginning of the play introduces one facet of each of the two characters. On her first appearance on stage Blanche is associated with the archetype of the Southern Belle: "*Blanche comes around the corner, carrying a valise [...] She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district*" (Williams, 1974, pp. 14-15). Although she is associated with white through her apparel and jewellery, the stage directions introduce a note of ambiguity in the next sentences: "*Her delicate beauty must avoid strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth*" (Williams, 1974, p.15). Therefore, light suits Blanche; too much light, though, might be dangerous for a moth because it may burn. In this context, Stanley's sexuality may be read as the light which attracts Blanche and finally destroys her. So, although the beginning of the play introduces Blanche as a Southern Belle dressed all in white (a sign of purity), there are some hints that deny a simplistic interpretation of Blanche's personality. Ironically enough, in Scene Ten, the climactic rape scene, Blanche is dressed in white again. This time, however, as the stage directions indicate, it is a degraded white colour, suggesting her loss of innocence and purity: "*a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers*" (Williams, 1974, p. 122).

Stanley's appearance in Scene One gives the spectator/reader only one aspect of his persona, i.e. the 'macho' side. Since Stanley is a man of action, the 'alpha male' of the small group of Elysian Fields inhabitants presented in the play, Williams delays Stanley's description in the stage directions in favour of a more vivid presentation via actions and words (or bellowing). In the scene Stanley appears as the prehistoric male hunter throwing a red-stained

packet of raw meat to his wife who is patiently waiting for him at home. The scene reminds one of a very popular cartoon called *The Flintstones*. Instead of Fred Flintstone's shout "Wilma, open this door", well-known to modern audiences, we hear Stanley bellowing "Hey, there! Stella, Baby!" (Williams, 1974, p. 13). The analogy between Stanley and a stone age, ape-like male is reinforced in Scene Four by Blanche: "Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is – Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat from the kill in the jungle! And you – *you* here – *waiting* for him!" (Williams, 1974, p. 72). The stage directions depict Stanley as a clear representative of the male gender - active, independent, strong, coarse: "*Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it [...] Branching out [...] are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, [...], everything that is his, that bears the emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer*" (Williams, 1974, p. 29).

Apparently, the conflict between Blanche and Stanley is that between the Southern Belle, as the representative of a refined, but decaying way of living and the new urban, emerging working class. However, there is much more than that: Blanche is not only a cultivated, stylish and vulnerable aristocrat with euphemistic conversation; she is also a fallen woman, a social outcast that deviated from the well-established discriminating gender rules of Puritan tradition that were still prevalent in the south. Throughout the play Blanche reveals the conflict between the two facets of her personality: the Southern Belle and the woman who tries to find oblivion and re-establish human contact by indulging herself in a kind of therapy through sex. It is the conflict of her dual nature, as Blanche is *both* a Southern Belle and a woman who has lived a life that, according to moral standards, would be called promiscuous. As Verna Foster shows, "Blanche's sexuality seems to her an escape from death – from "the bloodstained pillow-slips" (119) of her dying relatives – but actually leads her to it" (Foster, 2007, p. 117). However, if we are to compare Stanley's sexual intimacies with Blanche's, we realize that both of them are sexually dominant figures – Stanley is the "gaudy seed-bearer", while Blanche is metaphorically presented as a tarantula, a big, dark spider, that catches the victims of her sexual appetite in her arms. The only difference lies in discriminating gender rules, according to which married males are allowed to have an affair, but a woman, even one who is single is normally not allowed to. Blanche may thus be regarded as a sort of rebel figure who departs from the traditional gender role and values imposed by the southern patriarchal society.

3. Stella and Stanley: the moaning and the fury

As mentioned above, the action of Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* starts with Stanley in the street calling his wife who is waiting for him at home and throwing a parcel with raw meat towards her. The image, a kind of stone age parody of the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*, gives a clear image of the roles attributed to the two characters, which are clearly rooted in social archetypes marked by the patriarchal family model. They correspond to the gender roles attributed to men and women in Victorian England and Southern American society: Stanley, a dominant, independent, strong, coarse, bread-winning male is attributed the social sphere, while Stella, a passive, dependent, home-oriented female is restricted to the confines of the domestic life of a wife and mother-to-be.

In most of the scenes Stanley appears as a selfish person, who is interested only in his well-being. In Scene Two, for example, when Stella goes out with her sister Blanche, Stanley cares only about his supper: "How about my supper, huh?" (Williams, 1974, p. 32). He is a violent person, who does not hesitate to throw things out of the window, smash them or even hit his pregnant wife when his dominant status is at stake. In Scene Three, disturbed by music, Stanley snatches the white radio Blanche has switched on and throws it out of the window. When Stella reprimands him and calls him names "Drunk – drunk – animal thing, you!" (Williams, 1974, p. 57), Stanley does not hesitate to hit his pregnant wife. Another access of violence can be seen in Scene Eight. In response to Stella's face-threatening act "Mr. Kowalski is too busy to making a pig of himself to think of anything else" (Williams, 1974, p. 107) and to her implied command to help her clear the table, Stanley hurls his plate, cup and saucer on the floor, while reaffirming his dominant position in the family: "I am the king around here, so don't forget it!" (Williams, 1974, p. 107)

The same Stanley, though, can be a caring, loving person. This rather hidden facet of his personality is revealed in the scenes in which he tries to be reconciled with his wife after an act of violence (Scene Four) or when he feels guilty of misconduct (Scenes Eight and Eleven). Thus, at the end of Scene Three, afraid he might lose Stella - "My baby doll's left me" (Williams, 1974, p. 59), Stanley does not stop bellowing her name until she comes back to him. In Scene Eight Stanley tries to motivate his blunt exposure of Blanche's sordid past through his wish to get rid of the intruder and "get the colored colors going" (Williams, 1974, p. 109). At the end of the play, seeing his wife sobbing when Blanche is taken to the mental hospital, Stanley tries

to soothe her with an erotic gesture: “*He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse*” (Williams, 1974, p. 142).

Stella, on the other hand, has more than one facet. For the most part, she plays the archetypal role of the traditional obedient wife. However, from time to time, Stella emerges as an emancipated woman, who rebels against the domineering position of her husband.

Her first name – “Stella for Star!” (Williams, 1974, p. 18) – and maiden surname – Du Bois – render ambiguity when juxtaposed. The name encapsulates the idea of light and purity (Stella) with that of the darkness of the woods and rural tranquility (Du Bois). Her surname as a married woman suggests darkness and also urban life. Stella’s names point to the contradictions and ambiguities of her personality. She is the one who left the idyllic life at Belle Rêve plantation in order to look for something else (maybe a husband or another lifestyle). Regarded from this point of view, she is an emancipated woman who took her destiny in her own hands. On the other hand, although she is now living in an urban environment, she sticks to the traditional gender roles attributed to women – those of a wife and mother. Her episodes of revolt against Stanley’s violence and domineering position are easily put an end to through the fulfilment of sexual desires. Although Blanche is shocked at the scenes she witnesses, Mitch and the Kowalskis’ friends know how these things end:

BLANCHE: I’m terrified!

MITCH: Ho-ho! There’s nothing to be scared of. They’re crazy
about each other (Williams, 1974, p. 61).

It is no wonder then, that after a night of love, Stella forgives and forgets everything to her sister’s utter bewilderment. The explanation she gives for her “narcotized tranquility” (Williams, 1974, p. 62) is that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant” (Williams, 1974, p. 70).

4. Blanche and Mitch: the lady and the Rosenkavalier

Throughout the play we witness several encounters between Blanche and Mitch that may be said to cover an ascending and then a descending trajectory. Scene Three marks the beginning of their relationship, Scene Six represents its climactic point and Scene Nine marks its ending. It is interesting to notice the symmetrical arrangement of these scenes in the structure of the whole play that includes a total number of eleven scenes. It is also important to notice that each important encounter of the two occurs every third scene in the play. Three is the Triad, the number of the whole,

including a beginning, a middle and an end. The number three is also the number of the man as it corresponds to the body, the soul and the spirit. As can be seen in Figure 1 below, each of the three encounters corresponds to one of the three elements: the first one, occurring in Scene Three, which marks the beginning of their relationship is related to the soul; the encounter in Scene Six is related to the spirit; the final encounter, placed in Scene Nine is related to the body.

Figure1. Blanche and Mitch: patterns of movement in the encounter scenes

The first encounter between Blanche and Mitch is set against the sordid poker game night in Stanley's apartment. Mitch, one of Stanley's companions, feels attracted by Blanche and starts a conversation with her, telling her the sad story of the inscription on his cigarette case. Mitch opens his heart and soul with a confession about his past. The series of confessions will be continued by Blanche herself. The confession in Scene Six, which might be called the loss of Eden, presents her first encounter with love at sixteen and her subsequent journey from innocence to experience. As shown by Ifitimie (2017, p. 32), this confession is interrupted at key points by symbolic audio-visual images: the sound and dazzling light of a locomotive (a clear phallic symbol) passing by, the Varsouviana music that is heard only by Blanche (and the spectators) at key moments in the play. The revelation of the tragic event that marked Blanche's life, which finds a parallel in the tragic loss suffered by Mitch, creates a spiritual bond and a sense of communion between the two: "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be – you and me, Blanche?" (Williams, 1974, p. 96) This is the supreme

moment of spiritual revelation, the *perfect* moment that makes Blanche declare “Sometimes – there’s God – so quickly!” (Williams, 1974, p. 96)

Scene Nine introduces a sequel to Blanche’s confession. The listener is Mitch again, but this time he has learned some sordid things about Blanche’s past from various people, Stanley included. As George Hovis points out, Blanche “delights in transgressing Southern decorum and mocking the chauvinistic gender dynamics of her culture that deny women sexual initiative and forgive men their excesses” (Hovis, 2007, p. 180). There is a clear change of tonality in this second confession: no longer nostalgic or romantic, it displays a sense of mockery and self-irony as Blanche describes her “intimacies with strangers” (Williams, 1974, p. 118) and pictures herself as a tarantula that used to allure men, poor victims of her sexual desire, into her arms. No longer a vulnerable, fragile Southern Belle, Blanche dominates her interlocutor, mocking at the double standard that punished women severely for the same sexual indiscretions that were forgiven in men. Imbued with traditional misconceptions regarding gender norms, Mitch is willing to accept Blanche as a mistress, but not as a wife: “You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother” (Williams, 1974, p. 121).

5. Conclusion

The dramatic world of Tennessee Williams’ play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is populated by an equal number of feminine and masculine characters. The article analyzed the clash between femininity and masculinity apparent in the relationship between the main characters: Blanche and Stanley; Stella and Stanley; Blanche and Mitch. The analysis was performed on each of these pairs of characters as representatives of the feminine or of the masculine gender, with the avowed purpose of revealing the basic terms of their relationship and the changes that might occur in the unfolding of the action.

The study revealed the clash of genders in the play set against an intricate web of relationships linking the multi-faceted characters in the play that are so different in certain aspects and yet so similar in others. These contradictions and ambiguities that regard the characters, the ending and the dramatic structure point to the elusive, modern character of the play, which is open to multiple interpretations. Far from being a weakness, these ambiguities need to be regarded as an experiment with the open or polysemous text.

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