

Short Research Article

Stella's Choice - Re-read A Streetcar Named Desire

GAO Pei^{1*}

¹ School of Foreign Languages, Xi'an Aeronautical University, Xi'an 710077, China

Received: September 8, 2020 Accepted: September 14, 2020 Online Published: September 18, 2020

doi:10.22158/selt.v8n4p10 URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/selt.v8n4p10>

Abstract

Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire reveals Blanche's tragic fate in the period of social change from the perspective of sexual conflict, and reveals the contest between the declining traditional civilization of the South and the emerging industrial civilization in American history. The play renders symbolism to show incisively and vividly the collision between the industrial civilization of the north and the planting civilization of the south, as well as the collision between personal fantasy and the reality of that time. In order to highlight the theme better, the writer skillfully uses various symbolic techniques to make the tragic fate of the heroine full of strong appeal, thus successfully deducing the tragedy of the fall of modern society.

Keywords

A Streetcar Named Desire, Stella's Choice, Existentialism

1. Introduction

"A Streetcar Named Desire" (hereafter called "Streetcar") is considered by Williams to be his own favorite and best work. At the same time, the work has been widely welcomed by critics and readers. It is also the first play to win all three prizes, the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Playwrights Award and the Donaldson Prize. Despite its close connection with the society in which it was published, A Streetcar has retained its enduring appeal because of its vivid and detailed description of the conflicts between different minds. It tells the story of Blanche Dubois, who hails from a down-trodden aristocratic family in the South and, after a period of depravity and dissipation, comes to the home of her sister Stella for support. Many years before, Stella had eloped with Stanley, a Polish-born worker, to live in New Orleans. The dramatic conflict revolves around two very different characters, Blanche and Stanley. In the end, Blanche is raped by Stanley and sent to a psychiatric hospital. The show is characterized dramatic tension, which explains why it still attracts huge audiences so many years after its release, and why its film version is so popular. After reading numerous critical articles on A Streetcar, almost every method of literary criticism has been used to analyze a Streetcar. However, one aspect seems to have

been neglected by most scholars, that is, the existentialism in *A Streetcar*. Therefore, this paper will analyze the main character Stella under the guidance of the basic existentialism viewpoint, in order to interpret this work from a new perspective.

2. A Glimpse of Existentialism

Existentialism is not so much a theory of literary criticism as a philosophical thought. But its representative figures such as Sartre and Camus are both philosophers and litterateurs. They cite existentialist arguments in their literature to prove their point. Therefore, the author thinks it is feasible to analyze literary works such as *A Streetcar* by using existentialism.

Existentialism is a major school of modern Western philosophy whose main concern is the isolated individual being. Existentialists believe that the theories and values of traditional philosophy are only concerned with nonexistent, theoretical people. Real human existence is quite different. It is independent, human, and cannot be summarized or classified. Each individual should be absolutely free and able to find or create meaning for his or her life. Everyone has the possibility of success and failure. A man must realize that he is responsible for the meaning of his life and that he must make choices about his life. But at the same time there is a strong sense of fatalism among existentialists. When people become fully themselves they inevitably feel a sense of sadness about their fate and their final death (Encyclopedia, p. 2310).

From this quotation we can summarize several basic existentialist viewpoints: 1) Human existence is absurd. 2) Human beings have the freedom of choice. 3) Life is a process of self-selection, but having to make choices creates a great burden and pressure on people. 4) Almost all choices have negative consequences. 5) And if a choice is made, people must be influenced by it. Absurdity and free choice are two key words of existentialism. The following article will use these basic existentialist points of view to analyze separately the less noticed but more universal character Stella in *A Streetcar*.

3. Stella's Choice

Many critics in their analysis have focused on the conflict between Stanley and Branch. But C.W.E. Bigsby believed that the real protagonist of the play was Stella. If Williams portrays Stanley and Blanche as two extremes, Stella is a more real figure. She's like you and me, torn between the real and the unreal, between instinctive desires and intellectual upbringing. Stella makes three important choices, each of which has a marked impact on her life.

3.1 *Dream Ranch VS. Nirvana*

The writer tells us at the beginning of the street play that Stella is "obviously from a different background than her husband" (p. 24). We know that she, too, came from an aristocratic southern family and eloped with her working-class husband years ago from a white-columned plantation house in Fond Dream Estate to New Orleans. Blanche accuses her of "abandoning The Manor of Dreams, not me". "Where were you when I fought for her, bled for her, and almost died? You're in bed with your

Polk!” (p. 262). “Stanley credits him with” pulling Stella down from those white pillars and thus saving her. But no matter what they say, it was Stella who chose to escape from the land of dreams to the land of bliss, from the land of depravity to the land of life. She saved herself by making the right choice.

3.2 *Desire VS. Manner*

If Blanche is irrevocably doomed, Stella survives. She resembled an ideal specimen of a fusion of reality and fantasy. She managed to adapt to reality while maintaining her grace and gentleness. Many critics labeled Williams a neo-Lawrencean because of his “exploration of primitive, impulsive passion” and “the rule of the body over the soul” (Bloom, p. 87). For Williams, a healthy, normal relationship between a man and a woman should involve a healthy, passionate sexual relationship. If Stanley followed his desires blindly, Stella was self-conscious enough to obey the call of her nature. Despite their distant origins, Stanley was able to maintain a harmonious and happy marriage before Blanche came along, thanks to their passionate sexual attraction. Stella is not ashamed to acknowledge her desires, and she is self-conscious enough to say the following: “Between men and women, some things happen in the night that make all other things less important” (p. 321). And Blanche, despite her desire to have a healthy relationship, does not confront her desires. So she struggled.

3.3 *Blanche VS. Stanley*

Stella picked Stanley twice. The first time is when Blanche wants to talk about leaving Stanley and going with Blanche, Stella refuses and chooses to continue “hanging out with the savages”. The second was after Stanley raped Blanche. Stella again chooses Stanley, who “cannot believe Blanche’s words and continue to live with him” (p. 405). The first choice can be seen as Stella choosing desire, while the second is choosing reality and giving up fantasy; Choose to abandon waste; Choose life, give up death. Because “life must go on. No matter what happens, one has to go on” (p. 406). She chose not to believe Blanche’s words and put her in a mental hospital. Many critics argue that Stella’s choice is also William’s choice, which is to choose reality. But both agonized over the choice. It’s a choice you have to make. Stella’s choice will undoubtedly change the rest of her life. We believe that for the rest of her life she will live in the regret of “What the hell Did I do to my sister” (p. 416). The last scene tells us that Stella won’t be the same Old Stella. We can’t simply say if Stella made this choice right or wrong, but there’s no denying that her life will change forever

4. Conclusion

The inscription of a Streetcar Named Desire is taken from a poem by Harkeleen. “The Broken Tower”. From the above analysis, this verse perfectly summarizes the existentialist point of view conveyed in the play. All the characters in the play live in a broken world. There is no value, no truth, no meaning. Everyone is isolated and all their efforts to “find a dream partner” are in vain. The end of Blanche’s tragedy comes when she ends up “relying on the kindness of strangers” to retreat from this absurd world to a mental hospital. There the absurd would no longer be absurd, and she would no longer have to choose. There she will finally escape from her desires and find peace in the calm of death. Stanley,

the unconscious modern man, was for a brief moment in his existence. And the choices he made will affect the rest of his life. Because the intimacy he is striving for with others will become estrangement and isolation. For Stella, who had so bravely fled a decadent southern civilization in search of her own happiness, the rest of her life would be shrouded in the consequences of her choice.

From an existentialist point of view, a Streetcar Named Desire seems to present us with a picture of modern man's absurd existence. People make choices, and those choices affect their lives. But Williams is not a total pessimist, because he lets Stella make her choice, because "although he regrets that the Stanleys survive and the Blanche are destroyed, the most valuable advice he can give is to accept that fact and choose to live rather than die" (Berkowitz, p. 92).

References

- Abrams, M. H. (2004). *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Berkowitz, Gerald M. (1992). *American Drama of the 20th Century*. London: Longman Literature.
- Bigsby, C. W. E. (2006). *Modern American Drama 1945-2000*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- Bloom, Harold. (Ed.). (1988). *Modern Critical Interpretations: Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*. New York: Chelsea House Publishers.
- Bock, Hedwig, & Wertheim, Albert. (Ed.). (1981). *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*. Munchen: Max Hueber Verlag.
- Roudane, Mathew, C. (Ed.). (n.d.). *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- The New Caxton Encyclopedia* (7th ed.). London: The Caxton Publishing Company Limited, 1977.