



Death Terror, an Incisive Factor in Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire*: An Existential Psychotherapy

Pegah Qanbari^{[a].*}

^[a]MA., Department of English Language and Literature, University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran.

Abstract

According to Existentialists, death anxiety and fear of mortality are inseparable parts of any human beings, so people throughout their lives are in constant struggle with this force by employing different means of self-defenses such as believing in their “specialness” and an “ultimate rescuer”, which will be shattered and leave the person unprotected from death thereby causing more anxiety. Blanche in *The Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is an individual suffering from severe death terror, which was replaced by other forms of fear. This research paper aims to prove the cause of Blanche’s predicament and her eventual downfall are her untreated death terror.

Key words: Specialness; Ultimate rescuer; Existentialism; Guilt; Isolation; Anxiety

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INTRODUCTION

Blanche’s tragic flaw and the impetus behind all her deeds which led to her downfall was her enormous fear of death. Because people are naturally inclined to make everything permanent, the fact of death inevitability can be trembling. This phobia takes shelter in our unconscious and is not always evident, unless we trace the origin of every anxiety or fear that patients deal with, which always ends up in the fear of death. As Rollo May and Irvin Yalom stated:

If we “bracket” the outside world, if we put aside the everyday concerns with which we ordinarily fill our lives and reflect deeply upon our situation in the world, then we must confront

certain “ultimate concerns” that are an inescapable part of the human being’s existence in the world. Yalom (1981) identifies four ultimate concerns that have considerable relevance for psychotherapy: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. (*Existential Psychotherapy*, 2005, p.13)

Hidden fear of death which took shelter in our deepest layers of soul can come to surface by variety of incidents and can turn into a haunting factor annoying mind and soul. May and Yalom stated: “There is no stronger reminder of existential isolation than a confrontation with death. The individual who faces death invariably becomes acutely aware of isolation.” (Ibid., p.15) In Blanche’s case observing her husband’s suicide scene was a trauma and a prompt for her following actions. It was a reminder of her own death and a point of departure from a calm soul and a peaceful life; it actually opened her mind into the possibility of her own death. The immutable fact of our mortality is not something to come to term with easily; death terror exists in each and every one of us. Blanche’s fear of death is not evidently reflected or declared throughout the drama, it can only be detected through her replacement of this fear by other fears, such as the fear of being recognized as an aged woman or the fear of being abandoned by her boyfriend and remaining lonely or the fear of not being confirmed by others. Fear of death which is an integral part of every person can be replaced by many other things barely recognizable as a distorted form of fear of death. This fear of death had been so entrenched in Blanche’s soul that induced her to cling to every possible shield to be protected or distracted from it. The same authors maintained: “To cope with this terror, we erect defenses against death awareness. These defenses are denial- based; they shape character structure and, if maladaptive, result in clinical maladjustment.” (Ibid., p.13)

Anxiety in the philosophy of existentialism is something inescapable which everyone deals with, to different extents. This anxiety stems from the awareness

of one's condition in the universe. Nietzsche was the one who proclaimed the death of God through his fictional character who was a mad man, in his book *The Gay Science*. Nietzsche's slogan that "God is dead" has nothing to do with the actual death of a living creature, but literally means that once there was a God around whom the whole universe revolved, He was the provider of meaning. But now that the idea of science withered away the idea of God, people no longer believe in His authority that much. When after the world wars people became disappointed with the idea of science as a cure-all remedy as well, and when Christianity declined, the whole universe was on the edge of collapse into nihilism. Nietzsche characterized nihilism as emptying the world and especially human existence of meaning, purpose, comprehensible truth, or essential value.

Existentialists believed in the power and ability of individuals to create their own lives. They rejected that life has any inherent meaning, according to them life is meaningless and it is individuals who should give life meaning. They believed that human beings are totally free and are not bounded by anything, they are free to choose, and this freedom of choice without the interference of external factors such as moral and ethical standards and rules or traditions, entails taking full responsibility for what they do. Michael Watts in his book *Kierkegaard* (2003) says: "Kierkegaard asserts that a most important task of existence is to learn how to be anxious in the right way." (p.166) Here, Kierkegaard doesn't pay attention to those external forms of anxiety. In contrast, in right anxiety one learns that his sins are infinite. In this condition, according to Kierkegaard, the individual needs to have faith. For Kierkegaard mentions that if a person doesn't have faith, he realizes his wrong way of life and this causes a "self-destructive behavior" in him (Watts. 2003, p.166) In another part of the same book Michael Watts (2003) states:

Kierkegaard revolutionized our understanding of the individual and his condition. He recognized that the mood of anxiety can help us to find personal freedom. He emphasized the need to become a 'true individual', passionately committed to a path that has been personally chosen. (p.5)

The most common Existentialist's slogan is "existence precedes essence" which means human beings have no predetermined essence to be defined by, but they are in charge of defining themselves by the choices they make. In other words, whatever happens to anyone is the direct result of her choices and nobody is to be blamed except for herself. Blanche did not define herself, she lets others define her like Mitch, fear of death, Stella, Stanley, her dreamy world, bonds of society, the idea of having a savior and leaning on men to protect her. According to Sartre, she had lived in "bad faith" and had chosen an unauthentic existence and ignored the deepest and most personal aspect of her existence for the benefit

of a superficial way of life. Blanche is guilty because she had not taken her true and original "I" into account. As a result, anxiety pervades his life and her ignorance, indifference and her world of fantasy were shattered by the force of harsh reality which devoid her of life, peace and even her sane mind.

Taking two types of guilt, normal and neurotic into account, Rollo May and Arvin Yalom in their article *Existential Psychotherapy* stated: "Still another form is guilt toward ourselves for failure to live up to our potentialities, for "forgetting being" as Medard Boss puts it (p.3). Yes! Blanche is guilty not because of her numerous affairs, not because of her lies and not because of not confirming to dominant ethical norms of society, but because of not attempting to become what she truly is which is a kind of self-betrayal and self-deprivation. This feeling of guilt is conducive to anxiety. This soul given to you is not something to be ravished, to be deprived or to be betrayed, but it is something to be made sublime. The same authors in recounting one incident happened to Boss's patients mentioned:

Boss (1957b) points out that the patient was guilty because he had locked up some essential potentialities in himself. Therefore he had guilt feelings. "If you lock up potentialities, you are guilty... (or indebted to)... what is given you in your origin, in your 'core.' In this condition of being indebted and being guilty are founded all guilt feelings". (pp.3-4)

Defenses people employ against anxiety are of different sorts. May and Yalom maintained: "Yalom (1981, p.115) describes two major, specific intrapsychic defenses: an irrational belief in personal 'specialness' and an irrational belief in the existence of an 'ultimate rescuer'" (*Existential Psychotherapy*, p.17). Defenses are more troublesome than the sense of anxiety itself for they can be conducive to a great and irreparable loss.

1. "SPECIALNESS"

The same authors defined it as: "Individuals have deep, powerful beliefs in personal inviolability, invulnerability, and immortality." (Ibid., p.17) Specialness was Blanche's most loyal accompanying feeling. Being Born into an aristocratic family, she deemed her status everlasting and herself vulnerable and fortunate forever; that is why after the decline of aristocratic families and the loss of her family plantations, Belle Reve, due to the increasing industrialization, she found herself unable to accept this loss; so oscillation between past and present was the gift of this loss.

When someone as a means of defense believes in her specialness and this specialness is shattered by whatever means available [here, industrialization] that person finds herself desperately unprotected and it can be so severe as to turn a sane mind into an insane one.

2. "ULTIMATE RESCUER"

May and Yalom defined it as:

The other major mechanism of defense that serves to block death awareness is our belief in a personal omnipotent servant who eternally guards and protects our welfare, who may let us get to the edge of the abyss but who will always bring us back. (Ibid., p.18)

Believing in an ultimate rescuer as a means of self-defense as well as believing in specialness can be conducive to a trauma due to the loss of that ultimate rescuer.

After the death of her husband she turned to prostitution, which was used as a shield from death. Choosing young men as her mates gave her a sense of youth and was deemed to be a good means to avoid aging. As Hooti mentioned in his article *Quest for Identity in Tennessee Williams "The Streetcar Named Desire"*:

After the death of her husband, Blanche throughout her life seeks to avoid the inevitable fact of human mortality. At a psychological level, desire presents to her the antidote to prevent death. If death symbolically represents the power of time, Blanche's actions can be read as attempts to neutralize this power, by always seeking younger men as her companions. Her desire for these young men also becomes a psychological weapon to fight death. (Hooti, 2011, pp.20-21)

As Blanche herself mentioned it emphatically, panic was the only determining factor.

BLANCHE. ... After the death of Allan intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with. ... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection. (Tennessee, 1947, p.136)

Dependent individuals who are afraid of loneliness cling to everything to fill that lack, and they do these things out of fear of death. When confronted with the idea of their death, individuals feel isolated and this isolation which is an integral part of existence seemed to be eliminated by taking a partner; while it is not so! People who seek a relationship based on this aim [to avoid being isolated and escape death] ruin the relationship with their attitudes. As May and Yalom (2005) stated:

Although no relationship can eliminate isolation, it can be shared with another in such a way that the pain of isolation is assuaged. If one acknowledges one's isolated situation in existence and confronts it with resoluteness, one will be able to turn lovingly toward others. If, on the other hand, one is overcome with dread in the face of isolation, one will not be able to turn toward others but instead will use others as a shield against isolation. In such instances relationships will be out-of-joint miscarriages and distortions of what might have been authentic relationships. (p.15)

Blanche was a dependent woman who made use of everything in her power to win Mitch and make him her own forever thereby decreasing the fear of death and dying lonely. Mitch was just a shield to fight the power of death; he was a getaway from the intolerable dungeon she had created of death in her mind. Using Mitch as a defense

from death and trying to make him her own by lying were huge mistakes which caused the break-up, Mitch's leaving and Blanche's downfall into madness. The cause of her madness was her lies and the lies were the results of her perverse and incomplete mind.

Blanche was a prostitute who slept with lots of men careless about morality, but in her relationship with Mitch, she was so prudent that she did not let him break the moral bonds between them, nothing more than "a goodnight kiss," (Tennessee, 1947, p.91) not because Blanche cared about morality, but because of the apprehension of losing Mitch; it was all an elaborate pretension.

Additionally, she did not tell him her real age. She constantly tries to pretend to be young and fresh by bathing and wearing make-up and gaudy clothes. Actually she is determined to deceive him by what she is not, to gain him; "I want to *deceive* him enough to make him-want me..." (Ibid.). She was so weak that she was afraid of showing him her real self, for she thought it is flawed. Though it is not aging that flawed, it is dishonesty which Mitch could not endure. At the end of their relationship, when Mitch came to visit her, he told her: "MITCH. You lied to me, Blanche." (Ibid., p.137) he did not tell her that you are not young or pretty enough for me, the cause of his breaking up the relationship was because of her dishonesty. She played the role of a virgin for Mitch, a decent woman who does not let anybody touch her, just because she thought that the criteria of loving someone are age and beauty. "MITCH. I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it-Christ!... Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight (Ibid., p.135).

What was Blanche's egregious error was her tendency to make everything everlasting which is in sharp contrast to the transitory nature of this world; and when this tendency remained unaccomplished, this causes her alienation and discontent. She hung to anything as a means of defense from death; she wished to stabilize her life. She was unable to adapt herself to the current situation; oscillation between past and present was the result of her maladjustment. She wanted to be back to her aristocratic life; she could not let it go. Actually flashbacks to her past life was a means of defense, too. Taking Refuge into her fantasy world was also a means of self-defense. The aim of relationship with Mitch was not mere enjoyment but to get married. Indeed she deprived herself of all the pleasures she could have had in that relationship [like intimacy, love, honesty, friendship] but she chose not to. She was maladaptive and constantly lived in the past or future thereby sacrificing present which was her most precious belonging available.

Certainly the idea of death can be haunting and devastating if being confronted like that. There is a remedy for this ubiquitous phobia. The way Blanche dealt with this phobia [clinging to external shields] was itself

disastrous and the cause of more anxiety. Sleeping with young boys was conducive to her disgrace and dismissal. Choosing Mitch as her savior and his leaving her was a trauma. Concealing her real age and avoiding to be appeared in the light, her lies which were told by the intention of deceiving Mitch into thinking she is still fresh and young and innocent what was not asked for by Mitch, all cooperated to prepare Mitch's leaving. The real remedy for overcoming the fear of death is to understand human situation in the world and accept it, or in Nietzsche's term "to affirm" it and to learn to appreciate it eagerly.

Fear of death is something natural and inescapable which exist within every individual, hidden in the deepest layers of the soul; but how people cope with it is of utmost importance and makes one's attitude towards life. If one thinks deeply about the idea of death, it has actually a redeeming power rather than a destroying one. Just imagine life without the existence of death; it would be somehow taken for granted. But now that we know a day our life comes to end, this prompts us to enjoy life greedily and to be drowned in it passionately and to make the most of it or in Kierkegaard's term to live an "authentic life". On the other hand, there are some naïve people who misunderstand this grace and misuse it as a tool of torture and a means of avoidance of life, having its roots in Christianity which encouraged sacrificing this world and all its pleasures and preparing one's soul for the afterlife. "Nietzsche thought that Western Europeans should face up to the fact that Christian values were no longer credible. Anyone who continued to believe in them was dishonest or 'inauthentic'." (Robinson, 2000, p.7) One of Nietzsche's pivotal insistence was on what he called "life-affirmation" which invited us to be involved in this world and to live our life wholeheartedly and do not believe in the other world. Due to their ignorance and illiteracy, people stuck to traditionally accepted norms having been set by the church to guide them in life, without even considering them. They were following

the rules not because they lead to their happiness or are beneficial to them, but because they are followed by others. "He [Kierkegaard] observed that the majority of people merely exist as part of an anonymous 'public', simply conforming to the dominant way of living and thinking." (Watts, 2003, p.5)

CONCLUSION

The present paper meant to prove the source of Blanche's anxiety is her fear of death which presented itself in a myriad of other ways like fear of being abandoned by her boyfriend, fear of aging and etc. She attempted to make defenses against this fear by believing in her specialness and an ultimate rescuer, both of which led to her eventual failure. Blanche is guilty of bad faith, of not living up to her authentic self and not embracing her real life; her inability to cope with reality and accepting the facts of her life and trying to evade and hide them, gradually paved the way for her ultimate madness.

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