



A Constant Fight Between ID and Ego: Blanche's Tragedy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams famous play *A Streetcar Named Desire* showed readers the tragic downfall of a lady named Blanche DuBois, who falls from a respected school teacher to a frivolous socialite, and finally a "crazy" woman. This paper intends to interpret Blanche's tragedy with Freudian theory of id/ego/superego, focusing on analyzing Blanche's hidden id, and her struggle between the id and the ego under the influence of the social environment and in particular, the two men in her life, Stanley and Mitch.

Key words: Tennessee Williams; A streetcar named desire; Id; Ego

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1. INTRODUCTION

A Streetcar Named Desire, one of Tennessee Williams' famous plays, focuses on Blanche DuBois, a lady and a school teacher who involves herself in a sex scandal with a teenage student, goes to find a shelter under the roof of her sister and the animal-like sister-in-law named Stanley.

There, she finds hope in Mitch, a single man who intends to marry her, but it is sabotaged by Stanley. Later, she is raped by Stanley and ends up tragically in the asylum as a deranged person.

What kind of person Blanche is? Why does she behave like that? What is the cause of Blanche's tragedy? Why do her sister and sister-in-law send her to the asylum in the end though she is not crazy? These are the few questions reader might ask themselves. Because Blanche comes from the Southern bourgeois plantation, and comes to live in New Orleans, a poor section that is a gathering place of blue-collar workers, many critics believe that it is the social conflict that leads to Blanche's tragedy. However, an applying of Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory of the id/ego/superego can also shed light on the explanation of the tragic fate of Miss Blanche DuBois.

2. FREUD'S THEORY OF THE ID/EGO/SUPEREGO

Sigmund Freud divides the human psyche into three parts: the id, the ego and the superego. "The irrational, instinctual, unknown, and unconscious part of the psyche Freud calls the id...it houses the libido, the source of all our psychosexual desires and all our psychic energy" (quoted in Bressler 1999, p.150). It works according to the pleasure principle, which "carves only pleasures and it desires instantaneous satisfaction of instinctual drives, ignoring moral and sexual boundaries established by society" (Ibid.). The ego is "the rational, logical waking part of the mind" (Ibid.). Even though a large part of the ego is in the unconscious, it works according to the reality pleasure, which is "that part of the psyche that recognizes the need for societal standards and regulations on pleasure" (Ibid.). The superego is also a regulating agent, it helps people "to make moral judgments in light of social pressures...the superego operates according to the morality principle and serves primarily to protect society

and us from the id” (Ibid., p.151).

According to Freud, the unconscious is a “dynamic system that not only contains our biographical memories but also stores our suppressed and unresolved conflicts” (Ibid.: 149). Thus one important factor in the operation of the unconscious is repression. Freud believes that many people repress painful memories deep into their unconscious mind, and this act of repression does not take place within the conscious. Therefore, people are actually unaware of the fact that they have buried memories or traumatic experiences.

3. POST-TRAUMATIC DISORDER OF BLANCHE DUBOIS: A REVELATION OF HER ID

Psychological trauma is a type of damage to the psyche that occurs as a result of a traumatic event. Once suffered a traumatic experience, one may re-experience this painful experience mentally and physically. Hence one would try to avoid trauma reminders, also called triggers, as this can be uncomfortable and even painful. One may turn to alcohol and/or psychoactive substances to try to run away from the feelings. And in many cases, the person can be completely unaware of what the triggers might be. Thus, a person suffering from traumatic disorders would much likely engage himself/herself in certain coping mechanisms that are disruptive or even self-destructive, and often without being fully aware of the nature or causes of their own actions.

Earlier in her life, Blanche lives a happy life in an European style plantation called Belle Reve, which is a French phrase meaning beautiful dream. There, Blanche does not need to worry about life, and she has beautiful dreams about her future. She then falls in love with a young boy who later becomes her husband. The boy has “a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s” (Williams 1989, p.95), and he comes to Blanche in search of help that he needed but couldn’t speak of. Blanche, however, does not figure out what kind of help the boy needs, fails to help him or help herself. Later, she finds out that the boy is gay, and during a dance she tells the boy that he disgusts her, which leads to the boy’s sudden suicide.

It is this traumatic experience that begins to change Blanche’s life. She managed to repress the traumatic experience into the unconscious, but since then, it starts to haunt her without her awareness. Because the failure of her marriage, on the one hand, she does not believe in marriage any more, she does not trust men. That explains her flirtatious behavior towards lots of men, and her short term relationship with them. On the other hand, the image of her late husband is deeply engraved on her mind, so that she still has a desire for men like her husband unconsciously, and that is why she involves herself with a

sex scandal with one of her teenage students and the sales-boy who is young, timid, and tender like her late husband.

Another traumatic experience of Blanche is the loss of the plantation and her job. She loses almost all the means to support her life, which leads her to the only hope she has left—her sister. While she knows that it is impossible to live forever with her sister, thus, she is anxiously in want of a husband. This, in a way, explains why she flirts with Stanley and the sales boy, and at the same time wants Mitch to marry her.

Thus the result is that she is constantly in a nervous status, as Blanche herself says that “The searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this—kitchen—candle” (Ibid., p.96). Clearly, without her realizing, the trigger of the traumatic experience would constantly reappear, and mess her life, until the light of her dream is put out, and her hope of a better and happy future is dimmer than the kitchen candle light.

4. BLANCHE’S STRUGGLE BETWEEN HER ID AND EGO

On the one hand, Blanche tries to follow the morality principle of superego and the reality principle of ego. For example, she tries to kill her nervous by taking long hot baths, she dresses herself elegantly in white, she likes to drink alcohol but limits herself within one or two glasses, and she covers the light bulbs with paper lantern to keep herself safe from the seduction of the wild physical pleasure. When she meets the young man, who collects for *The Evening Star*, she flirts with him and kisses him but soon she manages to stop herself: “Now run along, now, quickly! It would be nice to keep you, but I’ve got to be good—and keep my hands off children” (Ibid., p.84). From this particular moment, readers know that she has actually learned her lesson from the sex scandal with her student, and she knows she is going to be punished by society if she continues to lay hands on teenage boys. Thus her ego and the superego are trying to stop her from making the same mistake again, and try to subdue this id of craving for younger boys.

On the other hand, she obsessively indulges herself in the bath tub for so long a time that she becomes enjoy the physical pleasure it brings to her rather than just kill her nervous, she dress herself in beautiful and expensive clothes and wears perfume, and she cares too much about her looks so that she enjoys being complimented of her appearance, she says she can not drink too much yet she always searches the house for alcohol and sometimes drink secretly, she covers the light bulb with paper lantern but deep inside she wants the ‘searchlight’ to turn back on in her life once again, she stops flirts with the young man but she really enjoys doing that and she flirts with Stanley

when she arrives at her sister's place and later tries to seduce Mitch.

Therefore, she is constantly stuck in the struggle between her id and her ego. That is why she behaves weirdly all the time. She behaves innocently yet her life experience indicates the other way, she is attracted to animal-like Stanley yet she wants her sister to stay away from him, she lives in a realistic world yet she always dreams of magic or fantasy. This dilemma makes Blanche behaves like one with multiple personalities.

However, Blanche is in a balanced yet dangerous position. With one careful help she could recover to a normal and sane person, but also with a little push she would fall into insanity and would be crushed. And she is exposed to both forces representing by Mitch and Stanley respectively.

5. STANLEY OR MITCH: DAMAGE OR SALVATION

Blanche's self-struggle between id and ego is reflected specially on two of the characters she encounters, namely, Stanley and Mitch. A comparison of Stanley and Mitch will shed light on how Blanche's fate is affected by them, and on how they reflect her inner self.

Stanley Kowalski, Blanche's sister-in-law, is a man of solid, blue-collar stock, and he is direct, passionate, and often brutal and violent. He takes off his shirt whenever he is inside the house regardless of the people around him, especially Blanche who lives there. Moreover, he is a controlling and domineering man, demanding subservience from his wife and even other people to secure his authority and position. In Blanche's eyes, Stanley is actually a primitive ape driven only by instinct: "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! ... Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! ...all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking" (Ibid., p.72). However, Blanche is unconsciously attracted to this bestial man. When she talks to her sister Stella after Stanley hits Stella during a fight, and when Stella tells her that "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant"(Ibid., p.70). Blanche translates this comment into sexual passion, so she replies, "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another" (Ibid.). While Stella asks, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" and Blanche then responds, "It brought me here". This is the street car name

desire. From this conversation, readers can see that the author Williams is trying to demonstrate how violence, combined with passion and desire, is really difficult to break. Somehow, it indicates that it is the desire that drives Blanche to New Orleans, and eventually to Stanley. As Stanley says to Blanche right before he rapes her, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!"(Ibid., p.180) Therefore, Stanley represents the id side of Blanche, or in other words, Stanley is the one trigger that brings out the id of Blanche.

Mitch, on the contrary, is a deeply sensitive, polite, and compassionate man. He is attracted to Blanche ever since they meet each other. He is a very considerate man in that he would talk to Blanche reasonably and listens to her attentively. To Blanche, Mitch is a good man that she would like to marry. It is to Mitch that Blanche recounts her traumatic experience of her late husband. The talk is quite significant to Blanche, not only because she manages to convince Mitch to accept her, but also because that the talk serves as psychotherapy to her. As she says, "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!"(Ibid., p.96), clearly, she finds hope of salvation after the talk,

However, her salvation does not last long. Soon her relationship with Mitch is sabotaged by Stanley. Because Stanley tells Mitch that Blanche is a notorious 'socialite' before she comes to New Orleans. Mitch then thinks that Blanche is indulged too much into desire to be saved, and he refuses to marry Blanche, and says that "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother."(Ibid., p.121) It is from this very moment that Blanche starts to break down. And later, being raped by Stanley, Blanche is then completely damaged.

Therefore, through the interaction with Stanley and Mitch, Blanche sways between damage and salvation, and this reflects her inner conflict of her id and ego. Blanche herself realizes it, she says to Mitch that "The first time I laid eyes on him[Stanley] I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me, unless—"(Ibid., p.93). However, Mitch quits and rejects Blanche, thinking that Blanche is too overwhelmed by her desire and her id to deserve a salvation, thus Stanley wins the battle at last by raping Blanche. The play ends with Blanche being sent into the asylum, and it is quite significant because it symbolizes the failure of her ego at her inner battle. She completely loses the control of her id.

CONCLUSION

Blanche is a character full of controversies. Her French name 'Blanche' means to white, she likes to wear white dresses, and she is born under the astrological sign of Virgo which means virgin and purity, but in fact, she is quite the opposite of pure and innocent. She does things that she would superficially deny. For example, she likes to drink alcohol, she always secretly drinks Stanley's

alcohol, but she tells others that she has a limit of drinking only one or two glasses at one time. However, the most important controversy of Blanche is the inner conflict of her id and ego, and this conflict is brought clear through her interactions especially with the two characters Stanley and Mitch. The former is a brutal, animal-like man who behaves only according to his instinct, and the later a sensitive, polite and compassionate man who is a possible salvation to Blanche. Respectively they represent Blanche's id and ego. Mitch's refusal to marry Blanche means a failure of her hope of salvation, and being raped by Stanley indicates her failure to control the instinctive id. It is hinted at the beginning of the play when Blanche tells Eunice, her sister's neighbor, how she arrives at the

place, "They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!"(Ibid., p.15) She is leading by desire to destroy and finally to a happy place, but ironically this happy place is the asylum. Therefore, it is understandable that the tragic fate of Blanche actually lies in her inner conflict of the id and the ego.

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