

Applying Jean-Paul Sartre's Theory of "Bad Faith" to Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*: An Existential Study

Pegah Ghanbari^{[a],*}; Razieh Hashemi^[a]

^[a] Department of Linguistics and Foreign Languages, Payame Noor University (PNU), Tehran 19395-4697, I.R. of Iran.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Blanche felt being trapped in a world in which she cannot extricate herself by any means, so she preferred to be ruled and defined by others, an inclination Sartre named "bad faith", letting others define her character, whether the past, her sister, her beloved or her traditional way of thinking that every woman is in need of a male protector; that is why she tried to hide her past, for she thought its disclosure would be an obstacle in her way to ensnare a man so she tried to deceive herself and others into thinking she is what she wanted to be but felt unable and implausible to be. Self deception from which Blanche is suffering, is a form of bad faith. She lived in a world of fantasy with a mask of pretension which was shattered by the harsh reality at the end, when she was driven to an asylum due to her neurotic behavior and mental breakdown for all the pressures she imposed upon herself to keep up appearance but ended up in ruining her instead of saving her.

Key words: Existentialism; Bad Faith; Self-deception

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INTRODUCTION

Existentialism emerged after people's optimism was shattered by World War I, and later the Great Depression

and World War II. After that the spirit of the age was nihilism. The world has no meaning, no purpose, nothing is left actually. Now that there is nothing to hold on to, everyone should strive for creating his or her own criteria. An existential person is someone who does not restrict himself to bonds of society. He is someone who extricates himself from dictations of society, someone who does not care about what others think is true, instead he cares about what he thinks is true. He does what he feels like to do, no matter it is right or wrong according to others. According to Nietzsche, the father of existentialism: "When God is dead, absolute truths are dead accordingly". Shelly O'hara in *Nietzsche Within Your Grasp* (2004) said: "And if there is no God, there can be no ultimate moral or value system. Without God to tell us what is good and what is bad, we must decide for ourselves. So Nietzsche questions all virtues and values and encourages his readers to do the same (p. 20)."

In Sartre's terms "bad faith" is a kind of self-deception, when people delude themselves into thinking that their essence and fate is predetermined and not changeable thereby choosing a life of being ruled and defined by others rather than striving to make their own lives according to their wish.

Tennessee Williams wrote these dramas to criticize society and to share his anger toward the rapid growth of the modern world which devours those who do not adapt themselves to it and empowers those who keep up with it. According to Thomas R. Flynn in his book *Existentialism: A Very Short Introduction* (2008): "... [existentialists] their underlying theme is that the pull in modern society is away from individualism and towards conformity (p.24)."

1. EXISTENTIALISM

Existentialism became widespread after World War II, when most people had lost their hope and faith in progress and the potentiality of reason and faith in

God. The atmosphere was that of a Godless and alien universe which was absurd, with no rules, no ethics, no right and wrong. In this state of distress men unravel themselves from the bounds of tradition and belief in the fake promises made by Enlightenment, and looked into themselves to create meaning for their lives individually

Existentialists' primary concerns are how to live, what it means to be a human being, what is the meaning of life. They are not concerned with economics, politics, and the standards of society; what they believe is the power and ability of individuals to create their own lives. They reject that life has any inherent meaning, it is individual's duty to give meaning to it; meaning is something to be created not discovered.

Despite what some say, Existentialism is not depressing, because it cares about life and the kind of life which is worth fighting for. Introspection, pursuit of self and meaning are essential in this philosophy.

2. JEAN PAUL SARTRE AND THE THEORY OF "BAD FAITH"

A dominant figure in the history of existentialism is Jean Paul Sartre, an atheist who felt being abandoned in a Godless and alien universe. He was a self-declared existentialist and coined the term. The famous quote of existentialism is Sartre's statement "existence precedes essence" which means we have no given essence, God did not endow us with anything, we have no predetermined essence, we define our essence by ourselves. Each person is in charge of creating his or her own essence through a series of making choices from birth to death. Whatever we are, is the consequences of our choices. Choice is of ultimate importance in existentialism. Because human beings are totally free, they can choose their way of life subjectively, and as a matter of fact choosing freely without clinging to external factors such as moral and ethical standards and rules or traditions, entails taking full responsibility for what you have done.

As Sartre mentioned this state of being obliged to make choices when we do not really know for sure what is good and what is bad, and undertaking the responsibility of its consequences create a sense of anxiety. Therefore, those who accept the responsibility for their choices, also welcome anxiety and anguish; but those who are weak, those who cannot bear this burden and evade the responsibility, and do not believe that they are in charge of creating their own characters and lives, have "bad faith". They reject the reality. They deny that they have freedom and responsibility.

In Sartre's terms "bad faith" is a kind of self-deception, when people deluding themselves into thinking that their essence and fate is predetermined and not changeable. As Jonathan Webber pointed out in his book *The Existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre*: "bad faith in the

general sense is not an honest mistake or a conceptual confusion, but rather a form of self-deception motivated by awareness of the freedom whose full acknowledgement induces anguish (p.77)." That life is a matter of making choices rather than something predetermined and just a matter of play-acting by puppet like individuals, is a truism and those who withdraw this, choose not to choose, which is a choice itself.

Sartre in his book *Being and Nothingness* distinguished between inanimate objects or "being-in-itself" and human beings or "being-for-itself". The difference is that inanimate objects are not responsible for what they are, because they are not what they have chosen to be, and they cannot change themselves, and also the aim of their existence is clear, a chair is constructed to be sit upon, a heater is constructed to produce heat. In other words, their characteristics have been defined by someone else. Their essence is defined in advance. But human essence is indeterminate. Their characteristics and essence are defined by themselves. They are capable of change and responsible for who they are, for what they have created of themselves, because they have freedom.

3. ARGUMENT

According to Sartre, an outstanding existentialist, individual's essence is not a fixed one over which they have no dominance, they are capable of altering it by choosing freely and accepting full responsibility for their actions which accompanies the sense of anxiety and despair that drives some coward people into preferring to reject their freedom of choice and let others define their essence and choose instead of them, thereby embrace "Bad Faith".

The main character of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is a woman suffering from self-deception and in Sartre's term "Bad Faith". This self deception arises from her inability to accept the truth of her existence, that she is totally free from the bonds of society, tradition, religion and etc.; as Jonathan Webber (2009) pointed out "Since bad faith is the project of hiding our freedom from ourselves, the very idea of it raises the difficult and intricate question of how it is even possible for people to hide things from themselves (p.88)."

Actually the process of deceiving oneself is a form of "distraction" from truth, rather than deception, as Jonathan Webber (2009) puts it: "One does not tell oneself something untrue, but tries to steer one's mind away from the truth and perhaps towards things that suggest some contrary idea (p.90)." Blanche tries to deceive herself by taking shelter in a cocoon of unreality she wrapped up herself in, the world of fantasy is her refuge from harsh realities. When Blanche created a hell of the real world, it is quite natural that she should harbor into fantasy. When she could not enjoy the real world, it is obvious that fantasy will be a getaway; but this taking refuge in fantasy

only aggravated her condition, because at the end she harshly confronted the reality and reality won as it always does.

BLANCHE. I don't want realism. I want magic! [Mitch laughs]
Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth.
And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! ... (p.135)

For what she had created of herself was not satisfactory, a weak, fragile, dependent, coward, neurotic, maladapted and faithless individual, she had to harbor into some other fake personality which is more to her will and indeed to others. Her attempt in life was to impose pressure on herself in order to not let others find out her secrets, no matter how harmful this process of hiding and torturing was to her soul she was constantly haunted by trying to keep up the surface, to portray and maintain a perfect image of herself and deceive others into thinking she is what she is not! Blanche was full of nervousness most of the time it became an inseparable part of her. "STELLA. You seem a little bit nervous or overwrought or something (p.22)." Constantly living with apprehension is devastating and this was the way she led her life; it is pathetic for a young woman to live in this condition. She was constantly worried about the disclosure of her lies and being disgraced and this apprehension eventually caused her mental breakdown and ruined her life. Throughout this drama many times Blanche was seen going to have a bath to quiet her nerves. "BLANCHE. I think I will bathe. STELLA. Again? BLANCHE. My nerves are in knots (p.52)."

Since her entrance to New Orleans, Blanche lied to everybody about what she had been through, and tried to hide her past. Actually she let the past define her; she clung too tight to the past to let it overwhelm her present and destroy it. She deemed herself still a Southern Belle, while the era of the Old South came to an end. Owning a family plantation defined people's character before the fall of the Old South. Now that the aristocratic tradition faded away Blanche still imagined herself to live in that. An example of "Bad Faith" is that she let her past and a piece of land define her character which without that plantation she is a chaotic, weak, neurotic human being with no confidence. As Jonathan Webber maintained in (2009): "...our past actions would neither determine our present or future actions nor alone provide a sound basis on which to predict them, and it would remain the case that we were on the way to becoming something different from our present and past selves (p.46)." She could not accept that the era of aristocratic family came to an end and industrialization took its place. She could not adapt herself to the changing world and this was her tragic flaw. "STELLA. Then don't you think your superior attitude is a bit out of place (p.79)?" She spoke of Belle Reve as something super precious which its loss would be unbearable and irreparable to their souls. By

wearing elegant clothes, she wanted to pretend to be still a Southern belle, keeping up appearance was of utmost importance to her.

She lied about the reason of her departure, the suicide of her husband, her age, her prostitution, and many other things. Because she was too traditional and limited and too conformed to society's norms, though according to existentialists life has no inherent meaning to restrict people to do the right thing, it is up to them to choose whatever path they wish to, there is no right way.

Another example of "Bad Faith" is that Blanche was looking for a man to lean on and define her character, as her traditional way of thinking demands. "BLANCHE. I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection (p.136)." She wanted to keep Mitch, not because she loved him deeply but because she needed someone to rescue her, somewhere to take shelter in and she assumed him to be her survivor.

BLANCHE. ... I want to deceive him enough to make him-want me ...

STELLA. Blanche, do you want him?

BLANCHE. ...Yes-I want Mitch ... very badly! Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone's problem ...(p.92)

As Blanche mentioned she deceived Mitch for she thought just by deceiving him she could have gain him, not by honesty. She hid her real age. "BLANCHE.Well, age is a subject that you'd prefer to-ignore! (p.127)", her prostitution, she was not even willing to show him her real face, she preferred to talk to him in darkness." BLANCHE. ... Let's leave the lights off. Shall we? (p.99)" but what every man wants in a relationship is honesty and straightforwardness, not youth or beauty in the first place, this is what Mitch himself confessed: "MITCH. ... Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen anymore. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight (p.135)." Instead of giving him a bunch of lies, she could have been honest with him and independent. But Blanche's problem was her dependency on Mitch or every male protector to rescue her, because she was too weak and fragile and neurotic to save herself.

Another example of bad faith is that she constantly kept asking her sister's opinion about her appearance: "BLANCHE. How do I look? STANLEY. You look all right (p.39)." Because she was willing to let others define her. She did not have confidence and faith in herself.

CONCLUSION

Being puppet like and let society gain control over you it will guide you to an unimagined hell, where you are bound to suffer without knowing it was your own choice. As existentialists pointed out the world has no inherent meaning and it is our duty to give it meaning with the choices we make. As Thomas R. Flynn (2008) maintained: "Existentialism is a person-centred philosophy. Though

not anti-science, its focus is on the human individual's pursuit of identity and meaning amidst the social and economic pressures of mass society for superficiality and conformism (p.8)." What caused Blanche's decent into madness was her perspective, the way she looked at things, the way she interpreted different issues and her foolish insistence on tradition and society's standards, her lack of self-confidence and self-determination. Actually everybody's ascent or decent depends on his or her way of looking at the world. The apprehension and anxiety she carried within herself all through her life is the most damageable factor one can hurt oneself with. Neither Stanley nor the society is to be blamed. Blanche's attitudes are to be blamed for clinging to past and for relying on others to define her and give her life whatever meaning they wish.

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