



A Study on *A Streetcar Named Desire* ——From Jungian Perspective

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Abstract: *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a famous representative play by Tennessee Williams, an American drama master. He often discusses the separation between the individual and the modern society, and madness is his eternal theme. The heroine Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* came from a family in the south of the United States. Due to the cruel reality of life her ID was severely repressed. She refused to acknowledge the shadow, stubbornly adhere to the mask personality, and eventually ended into madness. This paper chooses psychoanalysis as the research perspective, adopts Jungian psychology theory to interpret desire, and concludes that Blanche will get a new starting point and enlightenment after the outbreak of neurosis, which is contrary to the traditional theory.

Key words: mask; Jungian; neurosis; shadow

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams is one of the most renowned playwrights of the twentieth century. He is a playwright, good at depicting great psychological depth. *A Streetcar Named Desire* appeared on stage for the first time in 1947 and received tremendous acclaim and all the while people were becoming increasingly fascinated with mental illness and psychoanalysis. This discrepancy between the cultural standards and the cultural consumption of the American 1950s forms the same paradox of impossible desire that is relevant in *Streetcar* and psychoanalytic theory. The 1950s was a time of hypocrisies and paradox, which was adequately portrayed by Tennessee Williams in his play. American's apparent desire for sexual expression and freedom was systematically repressed due to cultural constructs of decency and Judeo-Christian ethics.

2. Jung's Theory of Shadow and Persona

Carl Gustav Jung was a Swiss psychiatrist and founder of the school of analytical psychology. He proposed and developed the concepts of the extroverted and introverted personality, archetypes, and the collective unconscious. Jung visualized the personality or psyche as an organic entity composed of two aspects: the shadow and the persona, or in another word, the physical reality and external reality.

The shadow is an unconscious complex defined as the repressed, suppressed or disowned qualities of the conscious self. According to Analytical Psychology, a person's shadow may have both constructive and destructive aspects. In its more destructive aspects, the shadow can represent those things which people do not accept about themselves. Jung stressed importance on being aware of shadow material and combined it into conscious awareness in order to avoid

projecting shadow qualities on others. The persona is the mask or veneer a person projects to others and as such, constitutes the person's public personality. The persona is the representation of public image. The word originates from a Latin word for mask, and related to the word "person" and "personality". In another word, the persona is the mask you put on before you present yourself to the outside world. It is just the "good impression" that we all wish to show as we fill the roles society requires. However, at its worst, it can be fooled, even by ourselves, for our true self: Sometimes we believe we really are what we pretend to be!

"Neurosis" results from a disharmony between the individual's consciousness and the greater archetypal world. It is the partial imbalance between the psychical and external reality; that is to say, the repressed psychical reality incessantly attempts to return to the conscious but is blocked by the repression of the external reality, and finally they compromise by forming some symptoms. This paper analyzes Blanche's neurosis from Jungian perspective by applying Jung's theory about neurosis. It tries to offer an open interpretation of Blanche's rebirth rather than madness at the end of the play. It is possible that Blanche's consciousness is broadened after the trauma of the rape and the neurotic breakdown. Her inborn intelligence restores balance after her pendulum swings from fantasy and romance to realism and brutality. The whole process can be divided into four phases: repression, reparation, regression and finally rebirth which is quite different from the previous conclusion that Blanche finally has mental breakdown after the rape by Stanley.

2.1 Repression

Blanche, an aristocratic Southern belle with education and refinement, a schoolteacher of English language literature. She constantly alludes to her French background--her French name, French ancestors, speaking French, to demonstrate her honorable familial tradition and her unique artistic taste. She sublimates her loyalty and love for her father into the love for art, literature and French, who endows her with the family name, her French extraction and her cultivation. But mere sublimation is not enough to conduct her libido; she still needs a man sexually to replace everything her father stands for. Unfortunately, her libido is blocked because of being raised as a typical southern gentlewoman. Blanche is fraught with the Puritan ideology to conform to an ideal of purity and chastity. In that sense, Blanche is baffled by a paradox: she needs sex to channel her libido, but she is so cultivated that she cannot be true to her sexual need. A good example is her marriage with Allen Gray at the age of sixteen, which is a rather Platonic one.

All one can tell about Blanche's relationship with Allen Gray is her love for, or in many ways, her worship of him. Blanche not only loves Gray's "extremely good-looking", his stack of poems, but also, in Stella's words, she has actually "worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human" (Ibid., p.165). Blanche's passionate love for such a fine "human" instead of a "man" reveals how she obscures the sexual differences and denounces her own sexuality, which directly exacerbates Allen Gray's confusion about his sexual identity. Though only sixteen, Blanche has already been overly refined and repressed to the degree of near self-negation, including that of both her sexuality and self-dignity. This is the earliest symptom of her neurosis. But Blanche's search for love is hampered by the finding of her husband in bed with another man. Then the series deaths weaken her repression of her own need. So the repressed physical reality returns and finds its release in frequent sexual intimacy. Yet at the same time, she feels guilty and ashamed of her sexuality in the face of the external reality. For example, in the Kowalski house, she timely restrains herself from satisfying her sexual impulse with the young collector "I 've got to be good--and keep my hands off children" (Ibid., p.150). The fact that she feels dirty is apparent throughout the play. Another obvious evidence is that Blanche bathes repeatedly. Her neurotic bathing suggests she is trying to rid herself of personal dirt and calls to mind Lady Macbeth's compulsive hand washing and pitiful lament, "What, will the hands ne'er be clean?" (Ibid., p.113). In the whole process, Blanche's physical reality coexists with her repression. Ultimately, she cannot balance the tension between these two

conflicting aspects of herself. The forces between these two contradictory essences within her ultimately overwhelm her entire being, and leads to her worsening neurosis.

2.2 Reparation / Transference

Consequently, Blanche's desperate need for reparation was logically triggered when she began to lose Belle Reve, and so it is unsurprising to be told that her sexual exploits occurred correspondingly. "I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers!" (Ibid., p.145). Initially she used sexual means in a frantic attempt to ward off the loss of the object. According to psychoanalysis, if the neurotic symptom becomes serious and the self-adjustment does not work, the patient needs to make the symptom explicit by transferring the psychological struggle from the patient's own psyche onto the relationship with somebody, maybe a doctor, or somebody that the patient can talk to. This is why Blanche incessantly searches for companions, such as for strange men: "I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection."; or for Stella: "I want to be near you, got to be with somebody. I can't be alone! Because--I am--not well." (Ibid., p.170). Blanche's neurotic psyche leads her to the successive affairs with strange men; her excessive adherence to the external reality brings her great agony, and propels her to search for something beyond sex to redeem herself, such as for "kindness" and "protection" from strangers, or for a "rest" and marriage with Mitch (Ibid., p.178). "I want to rest! I want to breathe quietly again! Yes--I want Mitch..." (Ibid., p.196). Blanche's final gesture of accepting the doctor "Whoever you are--I have always depend on the kindness of strangers" also demonstrates her willingness to conform to the reality. In the patriarchal world, a woman like her has to depend on the kindness of the man, even if he is only a strange to her. So in Jung, Blanche does not demand for sex, but for the opportunity of transference, for a self-redemption, for someone with sympathy and kindness to share her pains and release her from the ceaseless compulsions.

Sex is not the exclusive manner in which Blanche seeks reparation. She also desperately tries to cling to Belle Reve (indeed her internal "beautiful dream"). The fact that she loses it is an obvious cause of extreme distress and guilt for her, as she assumes prematurely that Stella condemns her for it, "Well, Stella you're going to reproach me, I know that you're bound to reproach me... I knew you would, Stella. I knew you would take this attitude about it... You're a fine one to ask me how went... You're a fine one to sit there accusing me of it!" (Ibid., p.143).

2.3 Regression

Freud viewed libido as sexual energy. Jung, however, disagreed with the sexual emphasis of Freud theory, he expanded the libido construct to encompass all forms of energy. Libido in Jung system is equated with general psychic energy. The principle of opposition holds that conflict between opposing processes or forces, a major tenet of Jung's theory, creates psychic energy. The withdrawal of the libido in the face of an actual obstacle caused the regression. The libido, which could no longer find relief in the outside world, was turned inward and fell back on a wealth of memories into which it breathed new life (Ibid., p.365-367).

Regression is the psychic reversion to childhood desires. When normally functioning desire meets with powerful external obstacles, which prevent satisfaction of those desires, the subject sometimes regresses to an earlier phase in normal psychosexual development.

With her rape, Blanche is tragically given final evidence that her reparation will not be successful. Alan, the loved object, is dead. Likewise Belle Reve, is dead too. Her sexual attempts at reparation result in disaster. Thus, she is forced to regress back into a state of immature (as an infant who fails at the stage between the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions would be). The evidences are as follows: Blanche's fear of death shows her fears of lost beauty and of ageing. She refuses to tell anyone her true age or to appear in harsh light that will reveal her faded looks. She seems to believe that

by continually asserting her sexuality, especially toward young man, she will be able to avoid death and return to the world of teenage bliss before her husband's suicide.

Blanche's lighting, the softness of the Chinese lanterns, helps to make her appear younger, which acts as a part of the performance of her life. Like sufferers of post-traumatic stress, Blanche also lives in two simultaneous times--the past and the present. Onstage, the playing of a Polish waltz marks the flashback to the night that Allan Grey shot himself. The *Varsouviana* means the memory of Allan's death which will begin to replay itself. Her seduction of a seventeen-year-old boy perhaps is of all the evidence we are given, the most viscerally confounding is her kiss with the young man who is collecting for the *Evening Star* in scene five. "You make my mouth water... has anyone ever told you that you look like a young prince out of the *Arabian Nights*?... Well you do honey lamb Come here! Come on over here like I told you! I want to kiss you! just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth" (Ibid., p.140). For Blanche, he is a psychic representation of Alan, which is easy to explain. As she interacts with this young boy, she is again relating to the young boy she married and adored. Hence her kiss is soft and sweet as she gently wants to repair Alan psychically. She also often fancies that the millionaire Shep Huntleigh might rescue her like a prince and a Cinderella. In this phase, Blanche's neurosis actually has been quite serious as she totally gives up the reality and hugs the fantasy she creates.

2.4 Rebirth

After age 35 or 40 the human organism turns its attention inward in an attempt to better integrate the conscious and unconscious elements of the psyche. In an effort to integrate the unconscious, which was largely ignored during the youth stage, with the conscious, the individual becomes more introverted and less extraverted. Spiritual interests may also surface during middle age. The process by which a person synthesizes the conscious and unconscious elements of his or her personality is called individuation or self-realization. The union of opposites, which Jungians ascribe to a transcendent function, further facilitates the process of individuation, seeing as most conflicts in the psyche pit an unconscious attribute against a conscious attribute. By integrating polarities and synthesizing dualities, people become more functional and homogeneous individuals, thus permitting development of the self--the archetype Jung placed at the center of the personality. And in this play, Williams suggests that Blanche is five years older than Stella, who is in her thirties. So it is quite sure that Blanche is thirty-five years old which means she has entered the stage of self-realization.

Finally, Jung principle of entropy states that the psychic system is continually moving toward equilibrium or balance. In short, resolution of conflict contributes to equalization of tension. Hence, Jung visualized a system of energy created by a conflict of opposing forces, that balanced itself, and moved the organism toward equilibrium. According to this theory, we can see the hope that after the rape and all the miseries, under such circumstance, Blanche has no other choice but the doctor, who deliberately caters to her self-esteem as a lady by giving her the due respect. Actually, the doctor's kindness seems to Blanche another chance of transference for her neurosis, which Blanche needs so badly. To put it in another way, Blanche's final reliance on the doctor is her attempt to avoid further persecution from Stanley and the matron, and to gamble her future for a frail hope of kindness from the doctor. After all, she is no longer possible to continue to stay with Stella and Stanley. So she still get a mere chance to rebirth after her reliance on the doctor. This is a clear sign that she is not mad at the end because Blanche still has the ability to judge the reality and conform to it.

3. Conclusion

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, at the end of the play, Blanche's retreat into her own private fantasies enables her to partially protect herself from reality's hammer blows. Blanche is such a split subject who has been greatly confused and tortured by the ambivalence and inconsistencies of her own thoughts and behaviors. The two voices of her psyche are competing violently for utterance. At every moment, she finds herself never a unified one. For such a self-contradictory

person, the sane life is too fractured and frustrating. Thus, in order to escape fully, Blanche has to sense the exterior world as she imagines in her mind. However, objective reality is not an antidote to Blanche's fantasy world; rather, in both the physical and the psychological territories, the boundary between fantasy and reality is transformable. To some extent, Blanche's final, deluded happiness implies that, despite reality's inevitable triumph, fantasy is a vital force at play in every individual's experience.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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