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Analysis of Blanche DuBois

Blanche DuBois is the closest thing Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* has to a protagonist. The entire narrative structure and the reactions of other characters revolve around Blanche's introduction to the scene in New Orleans. Her arrival reveals the truth behind not only Blanche's past but the nature of the other characters when placed in tough positions. Ultimately, *A Streetcar Named Desire* paints a grim reality of a woman who is trapped by circumstance as it peels back the layers on the downfall of Blanche DuBois from an enigmatic Southern Belle to showcasing her as a figure of death. Blanche is coated in tragedy from the moment she arrives and no amount of dressing up her situation and ignoring her past is going to fix the life crumbling around her.

The protagonist is the leading figure in a story who has the most effect on the plot. There is no one with more effect on every aspect of *A Streetcar Named Desire's* story than Blanche DuBois. Despite her unrelenting influence over the story, not everyone agrees that Blanche is the protagonist. Anca Vlasopolos states, in "Authorizing History: Victimization in "A Streetcar Named Desire"," that both Blanche and Stanley are the antagonists of the play since Vlasopolos conflates antagonist with being a villain. This is incorrect because while a villain is characterized by their immoral actions, an antagonist means the person who is facing off against the protagonist and keeping them from getting what they want regardless of morality. Since Blanche is the protagonist, Stanley is the only antagonist because he stops her from living out her lies and

ending up with Mitch. People struggle with the idea of Blanche as a protagonist because they cling to the idea that she is the "hero" of the play and therefore she must also be its "moral key" (Vlasopolos 323). Although Blanche is the protagonist, she is far from a classic hero or heroine with an outstanding moral compass. She is messy and makes plenty of mistakes both before the start of the play and throughout its run as well.

These continued mistakes are why Blanche crashes continuously with Stanley. In her article, "Desire and Decay: Female Survivorship in Faulkner and Williams" Bernadette Clemens' claims that Blanche is framed entirely by her relationship with her sexuality. According to Clemens' the play could be viewed through the lens of Blanche and Stella's "varying sexual responses to the virile Stanley" (Clemens 75). She believes Williams' places the two women as diametrically opposed in the way they interact with Stanley and this is the reason for the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley. Although the power struggle is important it is not exclusively tied to sexuality and less about how the two characters relate to or impact each other but rather how they fight for the attention of Stella. In the article, "Shifting Shapes in Play and Performance: Blanche DuBois, from Witchy Female to Marginalized Other" Raluca Comanelea points out how Blanche is "understood within the context of her power struggle" with the hot-tempered Stanley (12). While Blanche's character isn't tied to Stanley only through sexuality, as the play's protagonist and antagonist they can't function in the story without the other or their actions lose meaning. Vlasopolos notes how similar the two characters are with a "love of costume, their charged sexual presence, their tendency to aggrandize themselves" which is the reason they clash (326). They occupy a very similar space in the world and more specifically in Stella's world which is why she is drawn to both of them and why they can't comfortably share a relationship with Stella.

Because of Blanche and Stanley's clashing roles, there must be a winner in the end and as this play is ultimately a tragedy, Blanche, the protagonist, is the one who falls. This eventual outcome is clear from the moment she arrives in New Orleans at the Kowalski home. As Williams himself points out in the stage directions, Blanche's "appearance is incongruous to this setting" and she sticks out. Blanche being dressed incorrectly for the environment shows how much she doesn't fit in and doesn't want to fit in because she views herself as different, and above, the people around her. The scene lays out her character and the "sources of her authority" in the way she dresses herself up (Vlasopolos 327). Despite her posturing, however, this moment paints Blanche as being lost literally and metaphorically because she can't actually gain as much control as she wants. This comes with a direct comparison to the opening scene where Stanley tosses raw meat at Stella and isn't bothered by her reprimanding him. Stanley doesn't try to hide anything about himself and, unlike Blanche who "reveals more directly" her weakness, Stanley fits in perfectly with this place (Vlasopolos 327). Blanche couldn't figure out how to maneuver in this new environment and that's why Stanley was able to come out on top in the end.

Blanche can't truly be vulnerable or open with the people around her and wants everyone to get a good look at her outward appearance without digging in too deeply. She is "daintily dressed" and gives off the appearance of a "moth" which is harmless (Williams). There is no way that the scandalous rumors about her past could be true when she looks like this, but if she tries too hard to be something she's not the façade will eventually break. Meanwhile, Stanley is upfront about who he is which is why Stella's reprimands, which grow with Blanche's influence, irritate him so much. They go beyond what Vlasopolos calls a "gentle reprimand" in the first scene, but become harsher and even take jabs at his character. Stanley wants to simply exist without people chastising him and acting like they're better than him. This is why he explodes so

violently at the sisters during Blanche's birthday dinner and calls them out for acting like a "pair of queens" (Williams). Unlike, Blanche's soft moth-like way of getting people to look at her, Stanley is brutal and violent which scares people into listening to him. His way of dealing with things has lasting consequences that Blanche can't quite get a handle on which is why she loses out in the fight over control and attention from Stella.

Because of the intensity brewing under the surface, Stanley always watches Blanche with a critical eye and refuses to believe that she might be as harmless as she presents herself. According to Williams Stanley has no sympathy for Blanche because he only sees a "calculating bitch with round heels" (qtd. in Comanelea 15). Stanley would view her this way because of how she spread influence over Stella and he can't quite grasp that Stella might have negative thoughts about him. Anything negative has to be the work of Blanche who he views as trying to undermine him at every turn. As Stanley says to Blanche near the end of the play "not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes" showing how he can only see her as a dangerous figure (Williams). It is this inability to sympathize with Blanche that makes Stanley the perfect antagonist working so hard to make sure her lies don't land and expose the secrets about her past. He is "sharply aware" of the potential threat that Blanche poses to his marriage and this "strikes fear in [his] subconscious" (Comanelea 16). This is why he is so aggressive and unsympathetic to her throughout the play. To Stanley, Blanche is not a victim of circumstance but rather someone planning out every moment and taking advantage of everyone she gets a hold on which is why he can expose her secrets without remorse.

Blanche can't help but impact every character in the story. While Stanley sees only her flaws, Stella views Blanche in a much more sympathetic light and connects to her over their shared childhood experiences. The sisters grew up rich therefore Blanche has high expectations,

so her showing up forces Stella to look a bit closer at her dynamic with Stanley. She starts to "rethink the rules of the game" and becomes more demanding and critical of Stanley (Comanelea 21). Stella didn't have much authority before but she sees the influence that Blanches has over people and begins to exercise this influence in her own way with disastrous results. Stanley is insecure and easily threatened by Blanche and later Stella's critical view of him. When pushed far enough he acts out violently, throwing cups and saucers, and declares himself "the king around here" in order to get Stella to stop reprimanding him (Williams). This is the only way he knows how to reclaim control over the situation and scares Stella into listening to him rather than listening to Blanche.

This form of control ends up working out for Stanley in the end when Stella sides with him over Blanche. Although Blanche's entry into people's lives "brings social instability" it's only temporary (Comanelea 27). While she initially sparks rebellion in Stella, it's her devotion to Stanley and wanting to retain the social order that eventually wins out. She ends up pushing aside all of the negative aspects and events of living with Stanley because it is simpler to live her life that way. According to Comanelea, before Blanche's arrival, Stella was completely consumed by Stanley's influence over her life. It is impossible to escape that sad reality as Stanley convinces Stella to continue following him around while painting Blanche as the one who is the conniving other who can't be trusted. Stella, with Stanley's influence, decides to keep up the "pillars of a patriarchal society" because it provides her with a sense of stability that a life outside of this structure will not (Comanelea 21). This is why Stella ultimately won't believe Blanche's story about Stanley raping her and why she is complicit in sending Blanche away at the end of the play although it clearly upsets her.

Like Stella, Blanche is also trapped in a patriarchal system and has always been dependent on others, usually men, to help her as this is how she explores the world and discovers pieces of herself. She claims to not be “hard or self-sufficient enough” which is why she needs to dress herself up to get people’s attention so they will help her (Williams). Whenever push comes to shove for Blanche, she looks to someone else for aid. At the end of the play, Blanche states directly she’s “always depended on the kindness of strangers” when she is taken away by the doctor. Blanche fears with age she will no longer be able to do that and have a security network. That’s where some of her insecurities surrounding her dynamic with Mitch come in because “a woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion” and crafting herself into want other people want from her (Williams). If the illusion fades, Blanche cannot function as a woman and her life would be invalid. Her “shifting identity” is purposeful in framing to the audience the exact type of person Blanche is (Comanelea 9). She’s someone who is always searching for a way to get ahead and find a comfortable position to live in it’s why she comes to New Orleans and why she sinks her teeth into Mitch in an attempt to get him to marry her. Although she claims to love Mitch, she mostly uses him as a way to deal with her issues rather than actually caring for him as a person.

Unlike Stella, who can find some happiness in her life with Stanley, all of Blanche’s chances at happiness were crushed long ago. After the death of her husband, Blanche was never the same. She clings to his death and the parts of her past she can never have again without ever trying to move forward. For her, death is something inescapable that she sees everywhere, and she even tells Mitch it is “as close as you are” (Williams). Blanche is a lost soul trying to piece herself back together while Stella, is a symbol of life, as she is pregnant through much of the play and finally gives birth at the end. Williams frames Stella as the noble one for her “determination to maintain life and fertility” with all of the death that surrounds her in the figure

of Blanche (Clemens 79). This comparison of the two women shows how they are valued and how Blanche's failure to hold onto anything but death places her in negative contrast with Stella. According to Clemens, women like Stella have to fight against women like Blanche in order to escape "imminent psychological death" (77). Blanche cannot hold herself together, and her mental state crumbles as the play escalates revealing more of her past and pushing her away from people she previously hoped could support her.

Blanche was surrounded by death at Belle Reve, haunted by the death of her husband, and saw a woman selling "flores para los muertos" (Williams). Death symbolically follows Blanche everywhere she goes. Even her fear of aging is marked by the "death of [her] younger [self]" as she moves further from the person she used to be and the life she used to have (Clemens 77). From the moment she steps off the train in New Orleans, her life was destined to fall apart because of her unavoidable association with death. Her arrival in The Elysian Fields references the afterlife of the Greeks and perfectly encompasses how she is "defined by Death" and her fate was sealed from the beginning (Comanelea 9). Williams puts her downfall out in the open for any audience members to pick on and wait for Blanche to eventually crash and burn. Despite the glitz and glamour she presents herself with, there is a desperate and tragic figure trapped inside Blanche who is only seconds away from falling apart.

Blanche's ultimate downfall comes at the hands of Stanley both in how he exposes her secrets to Mitch and rapes her at the end of the play. Kathleen Lant's article "A Streetcar Named Misogyny," focuses on whether or not the narrative actually paints Blanche as a tragic figure or someone worthy of the punishment of rape for her continued lies. Lant talks about how the rape of Blanche dehumanizes her and makes her tragic downfall something acted upon her rather than something that would have naturally come about by the circumstances. Blanche is "tragically

imperfect, but she is fully and flagrantly human" and she is responsible for her actions which would cause problems both for herself and others (Lant). Stanley raping Blanche is demoralizing, but Blanche was already on a spiral downward from the beginning. Her life in Laurel had fallen apart and she was forced to leave plus the deterioration of her relationships with Mitch and Stella. The earlier events of the play already capitalized on the fact that Blanche would never succeed in her goals of marrying Mitch or gaining control over Stella. Stella specifically finds it hard to stay on Blanche's side in the end despite "believ[ing] Blanche's story all along" (Lant). Because while Stella could live with Stanley when following along with Blanche's critique of him. They were minor flaws that could be dealt with and brushed aside. His rape of Blanche is not something Stella could both face and dismiss so she chooses to do one in order to continue living with Stanley. It's a bleak situation but it is what she has to do to survive in this world.

Gilbert and Gubar argue that Blanche is in the wrong for using the men in her life and therefore Stanley raping her "fits her crime" (qtd. Lant). This idea of the punishment fitting the crime buys into the narrative that the world is black and white, and every time someone does something wrong, they must be punished. This take is similar to the movie's ending which shows how the movie, and this argument, misses the point of the play. This completely ignores the very ambiguous take the rest of the play has by putting Blanche's actions into a clear cause and effect dynamic which doesn't fit Williams' narrative. Blanche's actions don't mean that she deserves such a brutal punishment, especially when everything else is falling apart around her. Lant tries to argue that it is "difficult to feel pity and terror for Blanche's plight" at this moment after all that has happened. Blanche's situation is still heartbreaking regardless of her actions. If Williams intended for her to be punished losing out on Mitch by having Stanley expose the truth should be

enough. This scene does more to showcase Stanley's dominance and desperate need to be in control than it does Blanche's moral failing.

If there is a true punishment for Blanche it is her being pulled away from anyone who might support and listen to her to be placed into an asylum. Considering how terrible things turned out for Blanche, some critics "envision her death at the end of the play" even though it's shown she's still alive (Vlasopolos). This shows the recurring nature of death associated with Blanche both within and outside the confines of the play. Although some view death as the better ending, death would have martyred Blanche and made her appear nobler in a way the sad reality of her being placed in an asylum does not. Comanelea believes this is actually a good ending because in the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley, Blanche "is the winner in this game" since she doesn't have to spend any more time around Stanley (10). Blanche isn't a winner just because she got to escape the cruel fate of being around Stanley. Being locked up in an asylum is exactly winning especially for women in this time. Blanche doesn't succeed in getting anything she wanted and comes out worse for wear without any ability to better her surroundings or find peace.

Even with all of the scheming and fighting for a better future, Blanche does not get to escape in the end. She does not get a positive outcome that would reward her for her suffering in the past or the present. It is a harsh reality and Williams doesn't hesitate to show how bad the situation is not only for Blanche but could be for the other women around her as well. They have men to fall back on that Blanche doesn't because they have accepted their reality in a way Blanche never can. This tragic, but inevitable, downfall was set up by Williams from the moment Blanche stepped out onto the stage even though as the protagonist audience members may believe she can come out on top.

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