BLANCHE DUBOIS - THE VICIOUS WOMAN CAUGHT BETWEEN DEATH AND DESIRE

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, published in 1947, was amongst the ones that renewed the old definition of theatre through its theme, motifs, structure, setting and mostly through the complex feminine character it manages to create – Blanche DuBois. As the frail, confused protagonist tries to start her life all over again in New Orleans, she soon finds herself in contradiction and, thus, in conflict with the new emerging post-war American identity, trapping her self in a decaying struggle between Eros and Thanatos. The present essay focuses on the symbols of death and desire, but also on the representations of despair, insanity and spiritual decay starting from Tennessee Williams's play and moving on to Elia Kazan's film adaptation in 1951, Otto Dix's painting *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933), the adaptation directed by Neil Arsenty in 2003, *Moulin Rouge - A Streetcar Named Roxanne*, Willem de Kooning's expressionist painting *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-1953), and the ballet adaptation directed by John Neumeier in 2004.

Keywords: femininity, art, death, desire, insanity

1. The First Encounter with Blanche DuBois in Elia Kazan's 1951 Adaptation

Postwar New Orleans...Great numbers of people flow down the streets taking the form of a vital flux, just like the blood rushing through the veins of a new being. A refined, puzzled woman wandering on the noisy streets without knowing exactly which way to go. The strange smells, the people fighting in a bar, the disorder, the nuns who pass by holding elegantly dressed little girls' hands, all these create the image of a quaint world where all the values seem to be upside down and mixed up. The woman, Blanche DuBois, is looking for her sister. With the help of some neighbours she gets to the place where Stella, Blanche's sister, and her husband are. The encounter makes the two feminine characters burst with emotion.

In Elia Kazan's 1951 adaptation of Tennessee Williams's play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh, the adjectives that come to the viewer's mind after the first minutes with Blanche DuBois are: lost, insecure, sensitive, tired, obsessed with image, vicious, hysterical, voluble. Her face expresses fear and doubt as she is looking for her sister Stella, who could give her the comfort and rest that she so much longs for. Her moods shift with a terrible agility, both happiness and sorrow being expressed at their greatest intensity, while at the same time, covering her face with a veil which works as a mask. Her preoccupation with her looks and with her sister's figure

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suggests her obsession with image. The need to explain herself and her actions without being asked to do so shows a troubled character, who is afraid of both the past and the future, fear that can only be reduced with the help of alcohol. This enigmatic heroine, played by Vivian Leigh, the actress who became the symbol of the traditional South by starring in *Gone With The Wind*, leads the viewers into the life of New Orleans's suburbs, which were chosen by T. Williams to represent the evolution of the American society after World War II.

2. The Symbols of Death and Desire in Tennessee Williams's Play and their Effects on the Central Feminine Character's Evolution

The first encounter with Blanche DuBois in Scene One suggests the state she has arrived at. She seems lost, as Eunice, the landlady, observes. As she enters the New Orleans suburb, filled with loud people of different nationalities and races, belonging to the working class, Blanche is bewildered at all the noise, the agitation, and the apparent decay and chaos. She is an old-fashioned character, who seems to be out of place in this new world that opens in front of her eyes. Her journey to her sister's home is symbolical, more specifically the streetcars that she takes to get there. The first one has the name of Desire, showing her predilection for having love affairs, in search of comfort and escape from a world she cannot bear on her own. The connection with the second streetcar she takes, Cemetery, is a very suggestive one, because lust is the one which has caused her rejection from society. She has become a pariah, being dead for the world she tried to fit in, and now trying to find her peace in the Elysian Fields, the symbolic name of the place where her sister lives. The space where she tries to retreat into an illusionary world is, at first, imagined as one resembling paradise. But Blanche is soon disappointed, when she sees the place that should have been her refuge, but which she characterizes as being "horrible".

Born in a wealthy, traditional family, both Blanche and Stella were raised respecting the old values of society, learning about art, music and literature, being taught to be gentle and feminine, but, while Stella abandoned her home at Belle Reve to seek a new world to which she managed to adapt and even enjoy, Blanche remained to take care of the dead, as she says, in the place filled with the echoes of a dying past. The sight of the bloodstains on pillows and her tragic first love experience with her husband Allen, who commits suicide, leave deep marks inside her sensitive being. Death follows her from an early age, aging and the degradation of the human body becoming an obsession for her. She is eternally preoccupied to be fresh looking, feels the strong need for people to praise her appearance, refuses to be looked at in full light, and is very sensitive about other people knowing her real age. Blanche is showed as a perfect postmodern character who is consumed by her own image, trying to get lost behind an illusion that she so desperately struggles to create. The most representative symbol of death is the one in Scene Nine, when a blind Mexican woman haunts the streets at night selling flowers for the dead.

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This representation of the woman comes at the moment when Blanche is forced by her lover, Mitch, to confront her past actions and reveal her true identity, hinting at her destiny and the things that will lead to her insanity, which may be seen as her death.

Although the image she tries to create is one of a "fair" woman with "old-fashioned ideas", the truth revealed creates a great conflict inside the play, when the two worlds, fantasy and reality, crash into each other, the magic that Blanche loves so much being overcome by reality. It is the moment when a new Blanche, anesthetized with alcohol, emerges from the darkness, one who talks about her youth. Living in the vicinity of death and abandonment drives her to find escape in one of the deadly sins – lust. Throwing herself in the arms of different strangers, without letting any of them discover her true self or enter her heart, she soon becomes known by everyone as an indecent woman and is rejected for not respecting the moral rules.

Desire is also represented with the help of a woman, a prostitute, who walks the streets in Scene Ten. She is out to sell her flesh in order to survive, illustrating the old Blanche, the one before arriving in the Elysian Fields. The scene with the drunkard who attacks the prostitute is also an illustration of the dramatic experience Blanche is about to go through. Towards the end of the play, she is raped by Stanley, being thrown into the abyss of insanity, refusing reality totally and retreating into the womb of imagination and magic. The light and sound effects that Tennessee Williams chose to use, like the shadows and reflections on the walls, the sound of the cries, the polka tune, and the transparency of the walls which permits the viewer to witness both the inner and the outer space events, are all postmodern characteristics, who revolutionize the idea of theatre, and give the possibility to enter Blanche's mental chaos and aggression (Cf. Roudané)

3. Desire – the Deadly Sin in Otto Dix's Painting *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1933)

A painting created by Otto Dix in 1933 named *The Seven Deadly Sins*, although it is an illustration of Germany's decay, can be extended in space to the American society and in time, over decades, to the postwar era. The changes and ambiguities, the struggle to survive and to renew the world aggressively are represented with the help of the seven deadly sins: pride, envy, gluttony, lust, anger, greed, and sloth. The representation which draws attention in Blanche's case is the one of desire, or lust, which shows an exhausted woman exposing her breast hoping to attract. The color yellow chosen by Dix to use for the woman's clothing makes the viewer think of disease and insanity, while the red fabric that shows between the woman's legs symbolizes pure desire, consummated in the sexual intercourse. It can also be noticed that the red fabric takes the shape of a vagina, the woman becoming a sexual object. Although because of her posture she may seem to be enjoying the state of brutal lust, her facial expression and smudged make-up show exhaustion and emptiness of the soul. It was desire that made Blanche become a pariah and enter a labyrinth from which she cannot escape, one that will drive her mad. The

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whole painting of the seven deadly sins could be an illustration of Blanche's weary mind: a quaint place with relics and demons of the past, but also of the present in which Blanche does not fit and that she cannot understand. In the central part of the painting can be seen the representation of sloth that also brings in the idea of death with the skeleton costume that holds a scythe and whose heart has been ripped out of her chest, which may be a representation of Blanche's spiritual death.

4. The Brutal Dance between Death, Desire and Insanity in Neil Arsenty's Video *Moulin Rouge - A Streetcar Named Roxanne* (2003)

The same strong connection between desire and death is visible in the video directed by Neil Arsenty, created after a production directed by David L. Oswald in 2003 starting from Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This collage of fragments taken from the original production is centered around a symbolical tango dance between a Mexican woman and a man. As it has been mentioned, the Mexican woman stands as a symbol of death, while the man can be seen as the symbol of desire or of Blanche's numerous love affairs in which she sought support from the male element. Consequently, the viewer is witness to a dance between Eros and Thanatos, the two forces that guide human existence. The tango dance also has its symbolism. It is known as a very passionate type of dance, full of sensuality and eroticism, but very brutal at the same time , showing the destructive side of strong desire. As Jorge Luis Borges says: "The erotic nature of tango has been perceived by many, but not so its violent temperament. It is true that both are modes or manifestations of the same impulse" (qtd. in "Performance"). It is the destructive dance in which Blanche herself is caught and that throws her mind over the edge of sanity. If at the beginning of the video the woman dances with a mature man, towards the end, there is another partner that enters the stage, a young man, transforming the couple into an amorous trio. This represents the accumulation of characters and events that takes place in Blanche's life and mind, in the outside, but also in the inner world. The past affairs are confronted with the new ones, this being represented through the harassment of the Mexican woman, who the two men 'share' and then kill. An interesting approach to this matter can be observed here – the viewer is present at murdering the symbol of death. This is because, at the end of Williams's play, Blanche does not die physically, but mentally, event represented in Neil Arsenty's video with the help of the woman who laughs hysterically at the corpse. The soundtrack of the video is also very suggestive – *El Tango de Roxanne* composed by Mariano Mores after the song *Roxanne* written by Sting – the tension of the music soaring gradually and bursting out towards the end, when the cries of the male characters and the chorus create a very powerful feeling of the struggle inside the being and of the abandonment in the arms of despair.

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5. The Torment of the Weary Mind in Willem de Kooning's Painting *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-1953)

The torment of the disturbed mind is greatly represented in the expressionist Willem de Kooning's painting, *Woman and Bicycle* (1952-1953). The painter's "violent gestural technique" (Clark 199) and the multiple layers of paint create a very picturesque human being, a woman, judging by her breasts and clothes, with a wide grin on her face. The most shocking aspect regarding this painting is the technique used, giving the feeling that it has been created by a mad man. The lines are chaotic, and the whole painting seems to have been created by a neurotic mind which let all its anxieties run loose in paint and then on canvas. The woman is trapped with a frozen grin on her face and with her crazy, big eyes wide open inside the torrents of thoughts, ambiguities, questions, and, most of all, fears. Starting from the way Tennessee Williams creates his heroine, this painting could stand as the illustration of Blanche's mental self-portrait, especially when referring to the last two scenes of the play, where her sanity becomes more and more obscure.

6. Haunting Flash-backs in John Neumeier's Ballet Adaptation (2004)

Another interesting approach on Tennessee Williams's character is the one presented by the Stuttgart Ballet, directed by John Neumeier in 2004, having Maria Eichwald in the role of Blanche DuBois. The ballet is structured starting from the image of Blanche DuBois sitting on a hospital bed, and remembering her past that still haunts her. The entire play is based on flash-backs, the events not being presented in their chronological order, in an attempt to represent the anxieties of a deluded mind. The gestures of the heroine at the beginning of the play show her as a frightened and passive woman, who soon enters her world of illusion. But this state of mind does not last long, it persists only until hallucination brings the sound of the cat screech that terrifies her, sound used by Tennessee Williams in his play. The ghosts of her past are present through the two men who enter the stage that remind her of the desire of the flesh that has brought her to the point of despair and insanity.

7. Conclusions

Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* has as a central character a woman belonging to the old America, that cannot find her place in the chaotic postwar society. Blanche's struggle to survive and to adapt to an aggressive world and her profound sensitivity determine her to take all the wrong decisions and to hide herself behind lies and alcohol. The much too early and intense encounter she has with death and abandonment leads to her escape into desire and love affairs. The construction of the character is based on plurality, the decoding of her true identity being extremely difficult

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and never ending because of the multiplicity of symbols, her constant oscillation between two elements: death and desire, reality and illusion, this impossibility of stability and adaptation finally killing her spirit as she goes mad.

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