

Feminist Perspectives on A Streetcar Named Desire (emag 99)

Ian Todd ranges across several pieces of Feminist criticism, both from the past and more recently, and demonstrates that there is no one single Feminist reading of Tennessee Williams' play but rather many different – sometimes competing – angles.

In 1947, Tennessee Williams' play A Streetcar Named Desire introduced audiences not only to arguably the most iconic portrayal of a faded Southern belle ever to grace the modern stage but, in Blanche DuBois, to a fictional creation who continues to provoke considerable debate even today.

In this article I will outline how different Feminist perspectives can offer refreshing and alternative insights into both the character and the text itself.

Feminist Criticism

Feminist criticism is a particular type of political discourse that commits itself to deconstructing and making explicit the many ways in which the ideology of male dominance (or patriarchy) infiltrates and shapes the sexual politics at work within a text. Thus, many Feminist commentators see Blanche DuBois as the victim of an all-pervasive and oppressive patriarchal ideology within the play.

Tennessee Williams as a Misogynist

For the Feminist critic Kathleen Lant, however, this patriarchal ideology extends beyond the text to the playwright himself. In her article 'A Streetcar Named Misogyny' she argues that Tennessee Williams – though part of a marginalised and victimised minority – was nevertheless a product of the dominant patriarchy in the power politics of American society. Conditioned by it, he saw no compulsion other than to use Blanche as a crude tool in his misogynistic arsenal to further undermine and devalue womankind by painting her as a little more than a

loud-mouthed and flirtatious whore.

For evidence, she cites Blanche's unwillingness to rescue her husband, Allan Grey, from his slide into self-destruction. Blanche is shown by Williams to offer neither physical nor emotional support for her husband, thus ensuring righteous condemnation by the audience for her inaction.

Moreover, Lant argues that Stanley's sexual assault of Blanche is simply presented by Williams as 'a crime of passion' rather than one of 'violence, cruelty and revenge'. This effectively portrays Blanche as the progenitor of her own victimisation and rape; the act itself becoming the workings of poetic justice perpetrated as just reward for a life of promiscuity. The fact that the play then ends with

Blanche's removal to a mental institution, in Lant's reading, merely serves as the final and conclusive act by Williams to degrade and dehumanise womankind.

Early Criticism

Lant's view that Williams is guilty of misogyny also finds some resonance in early critical reactions to the play. It is notable that when the play first appeared on stage in 1947, many commentators perceived Blanche to be a disreputable and unwholesome figure rather than one whose situation deserved sympathy. Robert Leeney, for instance, the theatre critic in the New Haven Register, described Blanche as a 'confirmed liar' and 'moral outcast' who employed every

feminine whim in her dealings with her younger sister [...] and the assortment of men whose paths cross hers.

The director Elia Kazan also ensured his own stage production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflected this misogynistic view of Blanche. As his production notebook makes clear, he perceived Blanche as a dangerous and destructive force who posed an existential threat both to Stanley's sense of masculinity and the state of domesticity he had established through his marriage to Stella. This directorial interpretation certainly seemed to have had an impact on early audiences, some of whom reportedly cheered at the close of Scene X just prior to the ensuing act of rape.

At a time when the nation was recovering from the trauma of WW2 and intent on promoting the values enshrined in the traditional all-American family, it was hardly surprising that the character of Blanche should be seen as a threat to the domestic ideal of a stay-at-home wife and mother.

Nor should it be surprising that the perception of 'Blanche as villain' is one that has gained some traction in critical circles. In more recent times, for example, both Ruby Cohn ('The Garrulous Grotesques of Tennessee Williams') and Richard Law ('*A Streetcar Named Desire* as Melodrama') have promoted the view that Blanche's rape comes as the result of her own licentious demeanour.

Blanche as Victim

This is not a wholly unanimous Feminist reading of the play, however, with critics all speaking with a single unified voice. In a riposte to Katherine Lant, Anna Vlasopolos ('Authorising History: Victimisation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*') has questioned the assertion that Williams is a misogynist, insisting instead that it is the misogynistic forces at work within society and not Blanche herself that is being condemned by the playwright. Thus, in the final scene of the play, it is (she argues) the indifferent attitude of other characters towards Blanche's removal to an asylum that Williams is condemning as being symptomatic of a misogynistic society that chooses to ignore the suffering of women. It is against this background that Blanche's iconic line:

I have always depended on the kindness of strangers

condemns – through biting irony – the heartless edifice of an oppressive patriarchal ideology.

As for Blanche being compliant in her own victimisation, Vlasopolos points out that Williams' use of stage directions clearly absolves Blanche from any complicity in her rape. In the text, Williams writes:

Lurid reflections appear on the walls around BLANCHE. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form [...] they [...] move sinuously as flames along the wall spaces.

Indeed, Blanche herself is heard to cry out:

Stay back! Don't you come towards me another step or I'll... I warn you, don't, I'm in danger!

Thus Williams, she argues, cannot be seen as being in any way complicit with, or seeming to condone, Blanche's rape.

Blanche Redux

Taking yet another tack, there are other Feminist critics who reject any idea that Blanche is portrayed as the defenceless and passive victim of an oppressive patriarchy. Instead, they choose to see Blanche as strong, self-aware and audacious; someone who is both ready and willing to challenge the patriarchal forces that stand in opposition to her.

In this reading, Blanche is shown to be acutely aware that the patriarchy oppresses women by making them function as either servants or as an objectified source of male pleasure. We see these two elements combine in Scene IV when a heavily pregnant Stella tidies up after Stanley's drunken outburst. Blanche is quick to condemn:

Stop it. Let go of that broom. I won't have you cleaning up for him!

Instead, she offers Stella the chance to leave Stanley and set up a commercial enterprise of their own, free from the patriarchal forces that keep her in a state of submission. Unfortunately for Blanche, Stella has internalised an ideology that promulgates the inferiority of women and she refuses.

Blanche is also astute in discerning how highly the patriarchy prizes female youth and beauty. She realises that only by maintaining the illusion of youth and beauty can she retain some semblance of power in a system that exists to oppress her. Thus, she takes great care to conceal her true age, effectively playing the patriarchal value system at its own game. For instance, in Scene III, Blanche responds to Mitch's comment: 'You are Stella's sister are you not?' with:

BLANCHE: Yes, Stella is my precious little sister. I call her little in spite of the fact she's somewhat older than I. Just slightly. Less than a year.

In this feminist reading, Blanche also attempts to retain some power within the patriarchy by exploiting her sexuality. She appears dressed in virginal white when she first arrives in New Orleans, openly flirts with Stanley, then Mitch, and even the young man collecting for the newspaper. She even adopts the role of the traditional widowed and chaste Southern Belle in her liaison with Mitch by refusing to 'put out'.

Indeed, Blanche shows throughout the play that she is unwilling to conform to the sexual mores that the patriarchy places upon women. Her numerous sexual encounters with the soldiers camped near Belle Reve; the various men she meets in Laurel at the Hotel Flamingo and even her taboo relationship with the young student at her school which precipitates her dismissal, are all in conflict with a patriarchal ideology that means to control the narrative of sexual conduct. Thus, Blanche's sexual history is condemned, while that of her male counterparts is not. We see this most clearly in the hypocrisy of Mitch who claims Blanche is 'not clean enough' to meet his mother, yet is proud enough to boast of his own sexual history in showing off the engraved inscription on his cigarette case by a previous lover.

Condemnation of Blanche's sexuality, however, is not enough. For the patriarchy to survive, its ideology must continually be reasserted and this is achieved through the final actions of Stanley. First, he removes the protection Blanche has constructed for herself by puncturing the web of fabrications she has created.

STANLEY: There isn't no millionaire! [...] Take a look at yourself [...] I've been on to you since the start! Not once did you pull any wool over this boy's eyes!

He then divests her of any remnant of power and autonomy she may still possess over her own body by raping her.

Finally, he ensures any possible future threat is nullified by consigning her to a mental asylum; thereby perpetuating a legacy where a woman who was deemed to have rejected established sexual and social mores was declared insane and institutionalised.

The implication is clear: to challenge the value system of the patriarchy is an act of insanity. The permeating virus must therefore be physically removed from society in order to prevent further contamination. The fact that both Stella and Eunice are complicit in this action clearly demonstrates the extent to which the ideology of the patriarchy has indoctrinated the mind set of Blanche's fellow sisterhood.

Multiple Feminist Readings

Reading *A Streetcar Named Desire* (or, indeed, any other text) from a Feminist perspective does not necessarily lead to a single consensus reading. As in this case, there can be competing interpretations that can not only enhance our understanding of the text under interrogation but also of the nature of sexual politics at work in society itself.

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This article was first published in emagazine 99 (February 2023).

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