



The Paper-Moon Love of Blanche Dubois: an Enigmatic Issue in a Streetcar Named Desire

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Introduction

It is well known that *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) catapulted American playwright Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) into his high reputation and has often been regarded as Williams' greatest achievement and the finest plays of the 20th century. Dennis J. Reardon declares, "The search for the Great American Play can stop with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It's the genuine article"¹. Megan Terry praises, "What I love best about the play is the poetry. Not the words, but the motion, the way the play moves, sweeps in and out of time and forward into our consciousness, emotionally, economically, and politically"². Arthur Miller says that *Streetcar* succeeds in melting emotion into reality and brandishing a flag of beauty on the barren land of commercial drama, thus drawing attention to people marginalized in American society.³ Felicia Hardison Londré concludes, "The art of this magnitude and the mystery of this particular work of art always holds more secrets and more riches no matter how many times it is described, analyzed, or interpreted"⁴. And Harold Bloom describes Williams as "the most literary of our major dramatists" and *Streetcar* as "virtually unique as a stage piece that is both personal and social"⁵. Since the introduction of this work into China, Chinese scholars have also explored it from many aspects, including new historicism, feminism, queer theory, narratology, psychoanalysis, and reader-response theory. Jinmei Zuo says, "The fact that Blanche insulates herself from the reality in self-deception, hibernating in morbid

hallucination, is abominable to others and catastrophic to herself"⁶. [Translated by WEI] Shanghong Li assumes the homosexual theme to be the "Deepest secret buried in the play", and details in his discussion about the androgynous image of Blanche⁷. Guilin Sun applies feminist criticism in exploring Blanche's suffering, and analyses the social significance of this play from feminine psychology⁸. Xiaoli Zhang emphasizes the dominant patriarchal discourse of the play, and claims that Blanche, encumbered with the outmoded morality of the South American plantation, fails to accustom herself to the transformation of American industrial development, loses her sanity, and ends up in the asylum⁹. In word, all previous critics of *Streetcar* agree that Blanche allows herself to degenerate into promiscuity. After losing Belle Reve and her beloved husband Allan Grey, she meets with off-duty soldiers; as a teacher she fools around with one of her students; staying in a second-class hotel called Flamingo, she became Dame Blanche; turned into a town character in Laurel, she is practically told by the mayor to get out of town. Even in Elysian Fields, she cannot change her libertine nature and seduces the newspaper boy by kissing him and admits to her sister that she has flirted with Stanley Kowalski. However, Tennessee Williams contradicts this viewpoint, "Personally I do not think Blanche Dubois is dirty; on the contrary, she is noble. A person suffering spiritual torture is not ugly at all, Blanche is merely tortured psychologically"¹⁰. In fact, a range of

¹Philip C. Kolin (1900) "A Streetcar Named Desire: A Playwrights' Forum," *Michigan Quarterly Review* 29(2): 193.

²Ibid.

³E. Martin Browne (2009) *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Penguin Books, p.6. Following quotes from this book will only be indicated with page numbers.

⁴Felicia Hardison Londré (2000) "A Streetcar Running Fifty Years" in *Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* (Matthew C. Roudane), Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, p.48.

⁵Susan CW (2007) *Abbotson, Masterpieces of 20th-Century American Drama*. Beijing: Press of Renmin University of China, p.49.

⁶Jinmei Zuo (1997) "The Morbid Female in Tennessee Williams' Works", *Shandong Foreign Languages Teaching and Learning*, 4: pp.63-65.

⁷Shanghong Li (2008) "The Tragedy off the Stage", *Foreign Literature Review*, 3: pp.113-121.

⁸Guilin Sun (2006) "An Elegy of Southern Belles", *Hefei University of Industry Journal (Socio-Science Version)*, 8: pp.147-150.

⁹Xiaoli Zhang (2011) "A Tragic Elegy on Modern American Industrial Civilization", *Lishui Institute Journal*, 2: pp.68-72.

¹⁰Ross, Don (1986) "Williams in Art and Morals: An Anxious Foe of Untruth" in *Conversation with Tennessee Williams* (Ed. by Albert J. Devin). University Press of Mississippi, p.38.

unresolved issues in the play still casts a mysterious tint over it: Why does Stanley pull Stella down off the white columns of Belle Reve? Why does Blanche insist she stayed in "Tarantula" rather than "Flamingo"? What is the secret of the Streetcar named Desire? Why does Blanche identify herself with a Chinese lantern? Why does Blanche sing "Paper Moon" while bathing? Why does Stanley claim to have had "this date with each other from the beginning"? Why does Stanley smash all the light-bulbs on wedding night? Why does Blanche call Mitch "Samson"? Why does Blanche claim the cathedral bells as the only clean thing in the Quarter? In order to provide a key to these issues and showcase the subtlest subtlety in Williams's artistic dramaturgy, please allow me to just scrutinize the saccharine song of "Paper Moon" Blanche sings while having a bath. In Streetcar, Blanche is certainly the most important and controversial figure. According to Tennessee Williams, "Blanche is grieved at the death of her husband ...and wishes to expiate her mistake through sex"¹¹. Susan C.W. Abbotson believes, "William's homosexuality allowed him greater insight into female characters than many of his heterosexual contemporaries, and women are certainly at the center of many of his plays In Streetcar it is Blanche BuBois, a grown woman, struggling to survive in a world she barely understands"¹². And Chinese scholar Shanghong Li, after studying Williams' personal life, comes to the assumption that, disguised as a fallen woman, Blanche is in fact an androgyny¹³, because she "in her heart has already turned into Allan. She is simply acting out how Allan might approach a young boy"¹⁴.

However, one significant phenomenon that has been completely ignored by all previous critics is that, while Stanley is telling Stella about what he discovers to be Blanche's licentious past, Blanche is in the bathroom singing a saccharine popular ballad entitled "Paper Moon"; however, according to the stage direction, this song is "used contrapuntally with Stanley's speech" (70), and is "used" so perfectly "contrapuntal" that one cannot help feeling that Williams carefully intends Blanche to defend herself with this seemingly insipid song.

When Stanley says "our supply-man stops at a hotel called the Flamingo", Blanche sings her answer immediately,

Blanche [singing blithely]:

Say, it is only a Paper Moon,

Sailing over a cardboard sea -

But it wouldn't be make-believe

If you believed in me! (70)

She seems to be denying that she stayed in the Flamingo, which is used for all kinds of goings-on; albeit the superficial insignificance of this phenomenon, Blanche's denial is later reinforced on another occasion when she claims that the hotel name is "Tarantula" rather

than "Flamingo" (87). When Stanley says, "even the management of the Flamingo was impressed by Dame Blanche!" Blanche sings her answer,

Blanche [singing]:

It's a Barnum and Bailey world,

Just as phony as it can be -

But it wouldn't be make-believe

If you believed in me! (71)

She seems to be denying the title of "Dame Blanche", an obvious humiliating euphemism accusing her of prostitution, like La Dame aux Camélias in the work of Alexandre Dumas (1824-1895). When Stanley accuses "She pulled the wool over yours as much as Mitch's!" Blanche declares that

Blanche [singing]:

Without your love,

It's a honky-tonk parade!

Without your love,

Its melody played

In a penny arcade... (71)

She seems to be articulating the importance of love, without which all things around would become lowly cheap show. As if the first paragraph is not enough to clear herself of the bad name, Blanche continues to deny Stanley's accusations with a second one. When Stanley accuses "Yes, did you know there was an army camp near Laurel and your sister's was one of the places called 'Out-of-Bounds'?" Blanches defends herself again with the "paper moon" image; when Stanley accuses "A seventeen-year-old boy - she'd gotten mixed up with!" (72) Blanche defends herself again with the "Barnum and Bailey" allusion. Notwithstanding Blanche's desperate defense, it is obvious that neither the people in Elysian Fields nor the audiences or critics believe in her innocence. What then is the significance of the ballad of "Paper Moon", which actually poses a stark contrast and a stern contradiction to the rumors Stanley has been spreading? In close scrutiny, we may realize that something essential about Blanche is already implied in this song. In the eye of a person short of aesthetic perception, the moon is like a mere white piece of paper, and the sea is like a mere blank sheet of cardboard; only those who conceive profound love and possess poetic romance could really appreciate the brightness and crystalness of the legendary moon and enjoy the vastness and serenity of the majestic sea. In the eye of a layman of circus arts, the celebrated circus artist Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810 - 1891) is a mere vaudeville trickster who tries every hard to coax the public for commercial profit, and the miraculous circus kingdom he and James

¹¹Robert Jennings (2008) "Playboy Interview: Tennessee Williams" in *Conversations with Tennessee Williams* (ed. by Albert J. Devlin), p.228. Cited from Shanghong Li, "The Tragedy off the Stage", *Foreign Literature Review*, 3: p.115.

¹²Susan CW, Abbotson (2007) *Masterpieces of 20th-Century American Drama*. Beijing: Press of Renmin University of China, p.45.

¹³Shanghong Li (2008) "The Tragedy off the Stage", *Foreign Literature Review*, 3: p.119.

¹⁴Roxana Stuart, "The Southernmost Desire", in *Tennessee Williams Newsletter* 1, 2 (Fall, 1979), p.6.

Anthony Bailey (1847–1906) established is merely a make-believe phony fantasy; and only those insightful and sympathetic audience could truly appreciate his superb craftsmanship in performance and his artistic distinction from commonplace clownish entertainment. If Williams intends for Blanche to defend herself with this song, Blanche is supposed to be just such a bright and crystal legendary moon, such a vast and serene majestic sea, and such a magic kingdom of Barnum and Bailey. She claims that, without her love, all happenings in the Elysian Fields would be merely a series of coarse shows or a lowly arcade entertainment; however, she has indeed been mistaken by all as a paper moon, a cardboard sea, a phony Barnum and Bailey world, and the true value of her sincere and fervent expression is mistaken to be despicable carnality and

promiscuity. In the coarse world of Elysian Fields, Blanche's sincere self, like a paper moon or a colored Chinese paper lantern, only incurs contempt and humiliation from Stanley and his gaggle of ape friends, who never stop gossiping and libeling about her, until she is brutally raped and incarcerated in the asylum. Devoid of capacity for true love, Stanley, Mitch, Kiefaber and the other Elysian apes become mere walking corpses and good-for-nothings, making merry in bowling games and chop sueying over poker games.

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Conflict of Interest

None