

## The Treatment of Truth and Illusion in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

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In both *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* by Edward Albee, the authors' interest is in the opposition of illusion and reality. In each play, the characters who avoid facing reality take refuge in illusion. For these characters, truth is indefinable at times. The following passages epitomize the views of each author: In the following words of his heroine, Williams presents his view of the way in which reality is distorted by illusion:

I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what *ought* to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it.<sup>(1)</sup>

The following exchange between his two main characters, Albee shows how ambiguous the distinction between truth and illusion is:

Martha: Truth and illusion, George: you don't know the difference.

George: No: but we must carry on as though we did.<sup>(2)</sup>

Though both Williams and Albee deal with illusion and reality, their ways of developing their views are different. In *Streetcar*, the conflict between illusion and reality culminates in tragedy. In order to present this conflict, Williams gives us two points of view: Blanche DuBois' view, which is full of fantasy, and a view of Stanley Kowalski, who represents reality. The struggle between these characters proceeds on the stage and leads to a tragic conclusion. On the other hand, *Virginia Woolf*, the conflict between illusion and reality, although tragic in nature, is developed as a comedy. The battle progresses as a game which is played by all four characters.

The heroine of *Streetcar*, Blanche DuBois, well-bred and sophisticated, has lost everything that she values: youth, love and her home, Belle Reve, which is a symbol of her aristocratic background. However, she does not want to admit that they do not exist for her any more. She has chosen to cling to her tradition and to her past dreams, rather than to adjust herself to her present circumstances. Not only

is the reality of her present life unbearable for her but also her memories of the past—the death of her husband and love affairs after his death. In order to avoid facing these facts, Blanche needs to create a world of fantasy.

At the beginning of the play, we see Blanche as a genteel lady of fragile beauty, who does not fit in to the “raffish Charm” (13) of New Orleans:

Blanche comes around the corner, carrying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building, then again at the slip and again the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district.... Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth. (14-5)

She tries to preserve tradition by using refined speech and manner which are out of time and place. In her sister's shabby apartment, Blanche behaves like a respectable Southern lady. For example, she calls a poker game played by coarse men “a little card party to which we ladies are cordially *not* invited”(37). She also expects other people to treat her as a lady. She needs compliments from other people. She always takes special care of her appearance. Stella, Blanche's younger sister, says to her husband, Stanley: “Admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful. That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness”(33).

We soon notice Blanche's occasional need for alcohol, unbecoming to a respectable lady. Drinking liquor is one of her ways to escape from reality and to console her empty heart. As a lady, Blanche has to conceal her need for alcohol. Every time she drinks, or is offered a drink, she pretends that she does not care for liquor: “One's my limit” (21): “I--rarely touch it” (30). In order to console herself in her loneliness, she needs someone to protect her— a gentleman. However, knowing that her youth and beauty are fading, Blanche conceals her age and dresses herself up with cheap imitation jewels and furs. When she meets Mitch, whom she regards as a gentleman, she lies about her age: “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” (55). Later, when Mitch asks her age, she evades the question skillfully. She always avoids facing Mitch under the bright light.

As I have quoted before, Blanche does not tell the truth but what she wants to be the truth. When Stanley asks her about her furs which are inexpensive imitation, Blanche answers: “Those were tributes from an admirer of mine!” (38) She does not merely tell a lie to delude Stanley. She wishes it were the truth. For Blanche, reality is like a naked light bulb which exposes her age mercilessly. Blanche says: “I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark

or a vulgar action" (55). Her covering a naked light bulb with a colored paper lantern is a symbolic act in the play. In this way, Blanche covers reality with illusion.

However, Blanche has another characteristic other than her fragility. She does not always lose herself in her illusion. She is not blinded by her illusion. She knows both her own power and the power of fantasy. When she feels that her power is not strong enough to confront the terrible reality, she uses the power of fantasy. Hence, she moves in and out of the world of fantasy. The following quotation represents one of the occasions when Blanche confronts reality with no illusion. Pressed by Stanley for an answer about her loss of Belle Reve, she fights back:

All right. Cards on the table. That suits me. (*She turns to Stanley.*) I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth, and this is the truth: I haven't cheated my sister or you anyone else as long as I have lived (41)

The next passage of Blanche indicates her realization of herself:

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft—soft people have got to shimmer and glow—they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a—paper lantern over the light.... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft *and attractive*. And I—I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick (79).

She knows that she needs the power of fantasy in order to attract Mitch. Therefore, when Mitch reproaches her for her lies after revelation of her past, Blanche answers: "I didn't [lie] in my heart" (119).

As Blanche fears, her trick neither lasts long nor helps her. She has come to her sister's home to seek shelter. However, her over-refined manner and anachronistic dreams isolate her more and more. She finds comfort in Mitch, who has also lost love and who needs somebody to console him. However, her trick to attract him finally makes him call her "a liar." Her gentility urges Stanley to reveal her degenerate life in the past, and this revelation destroys her in the end. In this way, Blanche's illusion, which is indispensable to her, looks ridiculous to other people. We see the difference between Blanche's feeling about herself and society's feeling about her. It is Stanley who represents the view of society.

Stanley Kowalski has a different background from his wife, Stella and his sister-in-law, Blanche. He is from "common" people. From their first encounter, we see a contrast between Blanche and Stanley. Blanche is refined and nervous, whereas Stanley is vulgar and powerful. Stanley's power and sexual desire are emphasized by using animals as symbols, throughout the play. In stage direction

Williams describes him as follows:

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens.... He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude image flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them (29).

Blanche also describes Stanley as an animal:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something—sub-human—something not quite to the stage of human yet! Yes, something—ape-like about him,... Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age! (72)

Even Stella calls him a pig.

Once Stanley pulled down Stella off white columns, the symbols of Bell Reve, by his sexual power. For Stanley, women are objects to conquer sexually. As Blanche points out, any witch of a woman cannot cast spell over him.

From the first, Blanche and Stanley detest each other. Blanche regards Stanley as a brute who destroys the aristocracy of her and her sister. She acknowledges his sexual power. When she finds that Stella is pregnant, she says: "I guess he's just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume but maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Bell Reve" (44). Her aristocratic background, however, prevents her from accepting Stanley's sexual power and from admitting her own sexual desire.

On the other hand, Stanley, who cannot handle Blanche as easily as other women, feels that his marriage and his existence as a king at his home are threatened by her. They fight against each other in order to maintain the things they value. It is a battle between the power of fantasy and the power of reality. In his battle, Stanley attacks Blanche with realistic views, and Blanche defends herself with illusion. Blanche's power of fantasy can attract lonely Mitch, but this power is not strong enough to defend her from Stanley's brutal and realistic power. Consequently, her world of fantasy is destroyed by Stanley.

Yet, Williams reveals the weakness of Stanley's realistic view, too. He judges everything by its appearance. Because of this disposition of his, he fails to see the truth in some cases. For example, the fact that he cannot tell the difference between real and imitation furs and jewels indicates his weakness. On the contrary, Blanche, a dreamer herself, is able to distinguish reality from appearance. She recognizes the distinction between the appearance and the reality of death.

And funerals are pretty compared to death. Funerals are quiet, but deaths—

-not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, "Don't let me go!" Even the old, sometimes say, "Don't let me go?" As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, "Hold me!": You'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding (26-7).

Stella, Blanche's sister, has the same background as Blanche, but we see a contrast between these two sisters. Stella has got rid of the tradition of the Southern aristocracy through her marriage to Stanley, whereas Blanche clings to the tradition. Stella chooses to adjust herself to her present environment. Compared with Blanche's tragic marriage to a homosexual, Stella's marriage is happy and healthy. However, after Blanche arrives at her home, Stella is torn between Blanche, who tries to break the tie between Stella and Stanley, and Stanley, who tries to preserve his marriage.

Stella is more realistic than Blanche. She does not need illusion to stick to her past. She has enough sense to abandon her tradition, which has no values in present society. Through her marriage to Stanley, she learns how to live in society. However, she does not face reality. She is blinded by her sexual desire. She cannot live without her brutal husband, the one who helped her to get rid of her tradition. She accepts living a sensual life with Stanley. Blanche tries to awaken Stella and says: "Pull yourself together and face the facts"(64). The following exchange between the two sisters indicates their different attitudes toward sexuality:

Stella: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.

Blanche: What you are talking about is brutal desire—just Desire!(70)

Blanche is a menace for Stella as well as for Stanley. Blanche causes a fight between Stella and Stanley, and Stella is forced to make a choice. Her every decision is a compromise. Her sexual desire and love for Stanley make her avoid facing the facts. After several serious fights with Stanley, Stella always returns to his arms. After a serious fight at a poker game, when he cries out her name, she rushes to her husband. The next morning, we find her in a serene sleep. Her sleep symbolizes that she has closed her eyes to the truth. When Stanley finally reveals Blanche's past, Stella blames him, but their quarrel ends because she begins to go into labor for the birth of her child, and she asks him to take her to a hospital. After Blanche's revelation that Stanley raped Blanche, Stella is forced to decide between Blanche and Stanley. If Stella believes her sister's story, she cannot keep on living with her husband. Her neighbor, Eunice, who is more experienced in life than she is, advises: "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to keep on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (133). Stella takes Eunice's advice.

At the end of the play, we find Stella is soothed by Stanley. She closes her eyes again.

Stanley's rape of Blanche is the climax not only of their battle but also of the entire play. In the beginning of Scene Ten, in which Blanche is raped, having lost Mitch, her last hope, because of Stanley's revelation of her promiscuous past, Blanche has to escape into her world of fantasy. By drinking and wearing white satin evening gown, a pair of scuffed silver slippers, and a rhinestone tiara on her head, Blanche behaves like a lady who has been invited out by a gentleman. When Stanley appears and asks about Shep Huntleigh, her old admirer, she answers as follows:

This man is a gentleman and he respects me. (*Improving feverishly*) What he wants is my companionship. Having great wealth sometimes makes people lonely! A cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding, can enrich a man's life immeasurably! I have those things to offer, and this doesn't take them away. Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession, But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—and I have all of those things—aren't taken away, but grow! Increase with the years! How strange that I should be called a destitute woman! When I have all of these treasures locked in my heart. (*A choked sob comes from her*) I think of myself as a very, very rich woman! But I have been foolish—casting my pearls before swine! (126)

This passage indicates Blanche's conflict between her ideals and her reality. Despite her attempt to make herself a refined lady, she cannot forget the fact that Stanley has revealed her past, and that Mitch has rejected her.

Disgusted with Blanche's story, Stanley calls her illusions "Lies and conceit and tricks!" (127) The rape follows. Stanley's rape of Blanche is the final battle between Blanche and Stanley. The rape means that reality has triumphed over illusion. As he pulls Stella down from the aristocracy to the common world by sexual power, Stanley proves his power over Blanche by raping her. As a result, Blanche loses her sanity. When she is taken to an asylum, Stanley tears up the paper lantern, and Blanche "cries out as if the lantern was herself" (140). This act symbolizes what Stanley has done to her. Stanley strips away her illusion and destroys her. Yet, we cannot simply say that reality has won, and that illusion has lost. Not only Blanche but also Stanley and Stella must compensate for what they have chosen. Becoming insane, Blanche can live in a world of fantasy without being threatened by her terrible reality. Clinging to her ideals as an aristocrat, Blanche loses her sanity but not her dignity. On the other hand, Stanley and Stella will keep on living with their baby. However, in order to preserve his marriage and his position at his home, Stanley has lost his real bond with Stella. Stella looks

stronger than Blanche, the fragile beauty. However, her choice is not determined by her ideals but by her needs. There is no dignity in Stella's life. Refusing to see the truth, Stella chooses to live with Stanley, but she will keep on asking herself, "What have I done to my sister?" (141)

Edward Albee also creates characters who are dissatisfied with their present lives and who try to avoid facing reality. There are similarities between those people and Blanche in *Streetcar*: their dependence on illusion and their need for alcohol. Like Williams, Albee is concerned with the opposition of truth and illusion. However, in *Virginia Woolf*, there is no contrast between reality and fantasy, as is demonstrated in the battle between Blanche and Stanley. Instead, in *Virginia Woolf* the struggle of the four characters is presented in the game they play. In the game, the distinction between truth and illusion is ambiguous, whereas in *Streetcar* Blanche's illusion is gradually stripped away by Stanley.

*Virginia Woolf* consists of a series of games which take place in the living room of a house on the campus of a small college. The game lasts all night long. Absurd and comical, the game evokes laughter. The game is originally intended to conceal the loneliness of the characters, but at the same time it reveals their problems: adultery, abortion, alcoholism, and the emptiness of the childless couple. Martha explains her own sadness and that of her husband, as well as their need for alcohol:

I cry alllll the time: but deep inside, so no one can see me. I cry all the time. And George cries all the time, too. We both cry all the time, and then, what we do, we cry, and we take our tears, and we put em in the ice box, in the goddamn ice trays (*Begins to laugh*) until they're all frozen (*Laughs even more*) and then... we put them... in our.. drinks (185-6).

The following dialogue between George and Nick suggests that many other people in America are also lonely and need to drink.

Nick: Everybody drinks a lot here in the East. (*Thinks about it*) Everybody drinks a lot in the Middle West, too.

Geroge: We drink a great deal in this country, and I suspect we'll be drinking a great deal more, too... if we survive (106).

The older couple, Martha and George, mainly move the game along. George is a kind of director of the game which has strict rules. He names each game and sometimes warns Martha not to break the rules. George is not only the director but also an actor in the game. Martha and George alternately attack each other and defend themselves. The cruel verbal battle between this couple is one of the characteristics of the play. Martha calls her husband "PHRASEMAKER" (14), and Geroge warns the guest: "Martha's a devil with language" (21)

The struggle between Martha and George reveals that they have created a life of

illusion in order to escape from reality. Sometimes they destroy each other's illusions which hide their weakness, and sometimes they cooperate to create their life of illusion. They know that the best way to hurt each other is to strip away their illusion, and they carry this out.

Martha does not conceal her disappointment in George's failure as a husband and as a professor. She compares her husband with her father, whom she worships. Compared to her father, who has a strong body and brain, her husband is not man enough. She despises George because he cannot take over the History Department in spite of the fact that he is married to college president's daughter. She complains:

So, here I am, stuck with this flop... this BOG in the History Department... who's married to the President's daughter, who's expected to *be* somebody, not just some nobody, some bookworm, somebody who's so damn ... contemplative, he can't make anything out of himself, somebody without the *guts* to make anybody proud of him.... (85)

Martha dominates her husband: "I'm loud, and I'm vulgar, and I wear the pants in this house because somebody got to" (157). The story of a boxing game in which Martha beat George, indicates Martha's dominance. She tells this story to their guests because George hates it.

George fights back by revealing the truth which Martha does not want to admit. The fact that she is six years older than her husband irritates her. Knowing that George always reminds her of her age. He never misses chances to tease her about her sexual aggressiveness. He even reveals it to the guest.

Martha and George make up an imaginary son in order to compensate for the loneliness of a childless marriage. However, they even use their imaginary son as a weapon to attack each other. Martha insists that the son used to become sick because of George, and George retorts as follows: "Our son ran away from home all the time because Martha here used to corner him" (120). Martha says that son is ashamed of his father, while George says that he is ashamed of his mother. In this way, their verbal battle is cruel, but it is their only way of communication. Therefore, they need it. George explains this to Nick, who is embarrassed by the severe exchanges between the couple: "Martha and I are merely... exercising... that's all... we're merely walking what's left of our wits" (33-4).

Their verbal cruelty is not limited to themselves. It is directed toward the younger couple, Nick and Honey, and reveals their secrets and their weakness. Nick and Honey, observers of the game at first, are gradually involved in the game.

In contrast to George, a pessimist and a failure, Nick embodies American success. Young and ambitious, Nick is optimistic about his future. In his conversation with George, Nick's shallowness and selfishness are revealed. Nick, disappointed

with his present married life, has illusions about his future success, whereas George retreats from reality into the past. George points this out to Nick as follows:

When people can't abide things as they are, when they can't abide the present, they do one of two things... either they... either they turn to a contemplation of the past, as I have done, or they set about to... alter the future. And when you want to change something.... (178)

George hates Nick's hypocrisy and mercilessly exposes Nick's secret motivation for marrying Honey: her money and her false pregnancy.

Martha recognizes Nick's ambition for his future and exploits it in order to satisfy her sexual desire. After this fails, she uses him as a "houseboy".

You're ambitious, aren't you, boy? You didn't chase me around the kitchen and up the goddamn stairs out of mad, driven passion, did you now? You were thinking a little bit your career, weren't you? Well, you can just houseboy your way up the ladder for a while (194).

George hints at Honey's secret abortion. Honey is also one who avoids facing reality. She fears having a child because she does not want to be hurt. She does not realize what is going on. She does not even notice Martha's adultery with Nick. She just sips brandy and becomes sick.

Thus, the secrets and weakness of the characters are disclosed in the game. However, there is an inconsistency in the stories they tell. We believe a story told by one of the characters, but later confront contradictions in the same story told by another character. We cannot figure out which story is true. Albee's differentiation between truth and illusion is ambiguous. It provokes some questions. Does Martha have a stepmother? Has the story of the boy who killed his parents really happened to George? Did Honey have a secret abortion? When George talks about Martha's stepmother, Nick contradicts him, saying that Martha never mentioned a stepmother. The dialogue between these two men goes on as follows:

George: Well, maybe, it is not true.

Nick: And maybe it is.

George: Might be... might not. (110)

There is another similar situation. When George says, "maybe", Martha adds, "Year: maybe not, too". It is not "maybe *or* maybe not" but "maybe *and* maybe not" that characterizes the game of this play.

The story of the boy who killed his parents is the most ambiguous. George says that this is a story about his friend, and that the boy has not uttered one sound since he was sent to an asylum. Then Martha says that George has written a novel about this story, and that the boy is George himself. Which story is true is not important here. It seems to be more important that George identifies his

own situation with that of the boy who has not uttered one sound for thirty years. As George says, "all truth being relative" (222), there is no definite fact in the game.

However, in the last game, "Bringing up the Baby", we confront the truth that the child of George and Martha is a creation of their illusion. George kills their imaginary son because Martha breaks the rule that they should not mention him outside of the couple. The imaginary child is a form of solace for the childless couple as well as a weapon of attack. However, the mere creation of an imaginary child does not bring enough consolation to Martha. She needs to mention him in order to deceive herself. She says through her tears:

I FORGET! Sometimes... sometimes when it's night, when it's late, and... and everybody else is... talking... I forget and I... want to mention him... but I... HOLD ON... I hold on... but I've wanted to... so often... (237)

Their killing an imaginary child means the destruction of their illusion. George's murder of their child is cruel, but it helps him and Martha to free from illusion. After the game is over, left without illusion, they have to confront reality. Martha confesses that she is afraid of facing reality without illusion. We are not sure of their future. They may accept each other and face reality together. At least we know that they need each other in spite of their cruel battle. Or they may just return to the starting point of a new game. Anyhow, Albee seems to say that illusion is only a temporary shelter, not a permanent one.

The sickness of the characters is serious, but Albee represents their sickness as a game. His comical treatment of serious problems can be most clearly seen in his treatment of death. There are three episodes about murder in this play: a young boy's matricide and patricide: George's mock murder of Martha with a toy gun which turns out to be a Chinese parasol: and the murder of the imaginary child. Every episode is part of a game, George commits his mock murder of Martha like a child after Martha reveals the story of their boxing game to their guests:

*(George pulls the trigger)*

George: Pow!! *(Pop! From the barrel of the gun blossoms a large red and yellow Chinese parasol....)*

You're dead! Pow! You're dead! (57)

Yet, we know that he is really hurt by Martha's revelation of the story, and that his intention to kill Martha might be serious.

In the story about the young boy, death is not treated seriously either. George emphasizes that the boy killed both his father and mother *accidentally*, "completely accidentally without even an unconscious motivation" (94). It is notable that George kills the imaginary child in the same way as the young boy killed his

father—in an automobile accidents. Both of them are killed in the act of trying to avoid a porcupine. These treatments of death seem to indicate Albee's ironic view of life.

We notice that Albee and Williams use the same phrase related to death: "Flores: flores para los muertos.. Flores." However, the way in which each uses this same phrase is different. In *Virginia Woolf*, it is used as a kind of preface of the last game, the murder of the imaginary child. George utters this phrase "in a hideously cracked falsetto" (195). No character has a presentiment of death. On the contrary, this phrase in *Streetcar*, spoken by a Mexican vendor during a conflict between Blanche and Mitch, not only causes Blanche's fear of death but also suggests her loss of her last hope.

In contrast to Albee's mock death in *Virginia Woolf*, in *Streetcar*, death, real and serious, overwhelms the heroine's life. Since the death of her young husband, Blanche has been haunted by death. She feels guilty about his death: he committed suicide after she had reproached him for his homosexuality. Her sense of guilt determines her whole behavior. Since the death of her husband, the reality of her life has been dreadful for Blanche. It causes both her fear of death and her promiscuity. She has had affairs with strangers and even with a highschool student in order to console her lonely heart. She confesses to Mitch:

Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan [her husband]—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection—here and there.... (118)

She continues:

Death—I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are.... We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it! The opposite is desire (120).

In order to conceal her deteriorate life and her loneliness, Blanche needs illusion. As a result, she becomes a victim of her illusion and loses herself in illusion forever. Thus, in *Streetcar* the death of the past dominates the entire play, while in *Virginia Woolf*, death is merely the way of representing the characters' frustration.

Both Williams and Albee describe the conflict between truth and illusion. Whether it is developed as a tragedy or a comedy, the concern of both authors with life is serious. By describing the people who depend on illusion, both authors depict the sickness of contemporary society.

However, Williams and Albee hold different views of truth and illusion. Williams is charmed by the power of fantasy, although he realizes that fantasy is not

strong enough to fight against reality. Therefore, he gives Blanche a certain dignity even in her madness. On the other hand, Albee does not estimate the power of illusion as highly as Williams. As we see at the end of the play, Albee does not regard illusion as a source of permanent rest, although he describes people who console themselves through illusion.

**Notes :**

- (1) Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (New York: A Signet Book), p. 117
- (2) Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Pocket Books, 1962), p. 202.

All quotations are from these editions and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number only.