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Short Article

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Deconstructing Gender in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

Tennessee Williams' famous play *A Streetcar Named Desire* uses a discourse that warrants explication in terms of certain popular parameters of feminist reading. The author's attitude with regard to phallogocentric orientation is rather complicated with the discourse used in the play falling into two distinct categories, that is, the dialogues attributed to characters and the stage directions. In fact, just as deconstructing the oppositions helps establish the sexist orientation in the play, defeating the attempts at entitization/totalization in respect of ideas and characterization, the author too develops fractured dimensions in the light of the notion of trace or self-difference.

Keywords: Gender, Deconstruction, Sexual difference, Streetcar

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In the plays of Tennessee Williams, certain traditional oppositions have been used, constituting, in an essentialist manner, the difference between man and woman. A proper analysis of the modalities of functioning of these oppositions motivated by the spirit of essentialism can help expose a phallogocentric propensity that helps sustain sexual difference. Tennessee Williams' famous play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which involves the use of a variety of related oppositions, warrants an analysis along this line.

Nancy Merle Tishler records Williams' attitude to Lawrence's emphasis on the purity of sexual life as well as his phallogocentrism in the following quotation:

While realizing that much of D.H. Lawrence's work is "chaotic and distorted by tangent obsessions, such as his insistence upon the woman's subservience to the male, Williams believes that "all in all his work is probably the greatest modern monument to the dark roots of creation." And he especially appeals to the playwright as the "life-long adversary of those who wanted to keep the subject (of the mystery and power of sex, and the primal life urge) locked away in the cellars of prudery." (Tishler, 1961)

Thus, while Williams accepts Lawrence's emphasis on the purity of sexual life, for him "sex is not the Lawrentian salvation, but a momentary relief". The above quotation makes clear the fact that Williams is somewhat critical of Lawrence as he looks at Lawrence's "insistence upon the woman's subservience to the male" as a kind of "tangent obsession." Man-woman relationship is one of the most important themes in the plays of Tennessee Williams. Certain biographical factors also highlight Williams' fascination for this theme. Nancy Merle Tishler notes:

Williams' own attachment to his mother was one of the warmest, yet most unfortunate parts of his youth. His world became increasingly feminine, and he became negatively sensitized to masculine crudities.

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In Williams' dramaturgy these two ideas of masculinity and femininity have been profusely dealt with. And, evidently, this opposition remains entangled in the network of different other related oppositions such as nature/culture, animal/intellectual, sexual/spiritual, body/soul, flesh/spirit, Madonna/whore, love/sex, rhetoricity/referentiality, passivity/activity, barren/fertile etc.

Feminists have written off essentialism as involving a perception of the feminine/masculine essence as congenital, as a fallacy of the male. The feminists strictly distinguish the masculine/feminine distinction from the male/female distinction. They label the former as a purely cultural construct, and see the latter as a fundamentally biological distinction. To be specific, "feminist scholarship undertakes to 'deconstruct' the social construction of gender and the cultural paradigms that support it" (Greene and Kahn, 1985). And, "The social construction of gender takes place through ideology . . . Ideology makes contradictions, offers partial truths in the interests of a false coherence" (Greene and Kahn, 1985).

Moreover, literature does not simply involve passive reflection of ideology. It plays a significant role in the construction of the same: "literature does more than transmit ideology: it actually creates it" (Greene and Kahn, 1985). Hence, "Feminist literary critics attend to the collusion between literature and ideology, focusing on the ways ideology is inscribed within literary forms, styles, conventions, genres and the institutions of literary production". Literature "has been made to function as part of a literary tradition that inscribes the dominant ideology and marginalizes women".

II

The Love/Sex opposition in *Streetcar* shapes up in terms of the love stories of and between Blanche and Mitch on the one hand and the sensuality of Blanche, the brutal desire of Stella and Stanley on the other. The sheaf of love letters from the dead poet and the pretty silver case gift from the dead girl seem to be functioning as theatrical signifiers for the 'love' of Blanche and Mitch respectively. Apart from Blanche's sexual experience with the soldiers of the army camp, her seduction of the seventeen-year-old student, and behavior with the newspaper boy seem to constitute her sensuality which is subverted by her rejection of Stanley, defiance of Mitch's attempts to fornicate her, and her pragmatic explanation which justifies her promiscuity: "soft people . . . have got to be seductive . . . make a little temporary magic, just in order to pay for one night's shelter". Similarly, Mitch's 'love' for Blanche is subverted through his attempt to fornicate her.

Obviously, Stanley and Blanche again provide the polarities for the masculinity/femininity opposition. Let us examine the construction of "masculinity" around Stanley:

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. Branching out from this complete and satisfying center are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love of good drink, and food, and games, his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer (Williams, 128).

The above extract from the stage directions in Scene One is a supreme example of sexist discourse committed to rendering the female passive, subordinate and dependant, and celebrating the myth of male supremacy. The use of powerful linguistic/discoursal signifiers like "a richly feathered male bird," "the gaudy seed-bear," and the repeated use of the possessive pronoun "his" are factors among others that constitute Stanley's masculinity. Like "his radio" and "his car," Stella is only commodified into his woman. Stanley's sensual "loud whack" on Stella's thigh, his charging after Stella in the poker night are acts that conform to the spirit of patriarchal ideology. However, the self-difference in Stanley's masculinity becomes explicit in his behavior after Stella move upstairs at the end of the poker scene. His behavior slips out of the constraints of patriarchal ideology as he renders himself weak, subordinate, and dependant: "He breaks into sobs. Then he goes to the porch and down the wooden steps to the pavement before the building. There he throws back his head like a baying hound and bellows his wife's name: 'Stella! Stella, Sweetheart! Stella'". The "baying hound" signifier counterplays the "richly feathered male bird" signifier. At the end of the scene, when Stella comes down, Stanley approaches her beseechingly: "He falls on his knees on the steps and presses his face to her belly, curving a little with maternity". Thus, here, we have a glimpse of a female victor in the form of Stella.

The use of "moth" as a linguistic signifier, the perfume atomizer as a theatrical signifier, and her youth-complex are some of the factors that seem to render Blanche essentially feminine, and thus subscribe to the essentialist/phallogocentric/patriarchal ideology. Her nervous debility and regression into a sex-object are nothing but a part of the same design. However, certain other explanations and signifiers can be easily identified as constituting a strain of, what we call "masculinity" in her character. Her desperate attempts to save the plantation, and her determination to take Stella into custody and get out of the Kowalski set help establish a kind of patriarchal quality in her. In Scene Two, she playfully

sprays Stanley with her perfume atomizer, which highlights her delicacy. But, in the rape scene, as she retrieves herself from the constraints of patriarchal ideology, Blanche faces Stanley with the broken bottle end whereby she proves that she does not belong to the weaker sex, or, to use the title of Simon de Beauvoir's book, *"The Second Sex."* And, Stanley calls her *"Tiger"*, though with a tinge of sarcasm. Hence, there is a counterplay of linguistic signifiers in the form of *"moth"* and *"tiger"*, and theatrical signifiers in the form of *"the perfume atomizer"* and the *"broken bottle end."* But patriarchal ideology soon takes over as Stanley overpowers and rapes her. Highlighting Blanche's self-difference, Benjamin Nelson notes: *"If Blanche is a moth woman in the tradition of Laura Wingfield and Matilda Rockley, she is also a tiger"* (Nelson, 1961).

The patriarchal ideology seems to rule Stanley-Stella relationship in a very significant way. This is a relationship of authority, which is based on a similar politics of hierarchization. Helene Cixous notes: *"The hierarchization subjects the entire conceptual organization to man. A male privilege, which can be seen in the opposition by which it sustains itself, between activity and passivity. Traditionally, the question of sexual difference is coupled with same opposition: activity/passivity"* (Cixous, *"Sorties"*). Among the Williamsian couples, Stanley-Stella relationship is one of the supreme examples of hierarchization of activity/passivity opposition. Stanley plays baseball, Stella watches him play, and this an example hierarchization of the opposition in the larger social context of the play. In their sexual relationship Stanley is the active partner while Stella has been almost reduced to a sex-object. In one of the scenes, Stanley gives a loud whack on Stella's thigh in a sexual gesture in front of his friends. He carries her to the bedroom after she comes down from upstairs at the end of the poker night scene. At the end of the play, *"He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse"*. In contrast, Stella has been immensely passivized. Even, a little bit of smartness through which Stella tries to assert her freedom, i.e., through which Stella's fundamental self-difference momentarily surface, cannot be tolerated in the Kowalski house. Stanley objects to her going out to movies etc. with Blanche. He objects to her operating the radio in the poker night scene. And, in conformity with patriarchal ideology, she is not permitted to react to the story of Stanley's rape of Blanche:

STELLA: I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.

EUNICE: Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going.

Eunice advises Stella against walking out on Stanley because she knows that the only norm in force is, to use Cixous' observation, *"Either the woman is passive; or she doesn't exist"* (Cixous, 1988).

Another important opposition, which warrants discussion, is the Madonna/Whore opposition, which refers to a kind of classification, grounded in *"male attempts to control feminine sexuality"* (Greene and Kahn, 1985). Barret explains the sexist politics with regard to this opposition as follows:

Two images of woman as, on the one hand, the sexual property of men and, on the other, the chaste mothers of their children . . . [are] the means whereby men . . . ensure both the sanctity and inheritance of their families and their extra-familial sexual pleasure. (Barret, 1980).

Thus, in *Streetcar*, although Stella is more or less bestially adjusted to Stanley, she is the one who is given the 'Madonna' status. This is because she is the one who accepts her insubordination, be it at the cost of her conscience. Hence, there is a deliberate idealization of this woman. At the end of the poker night scene, after the forgiving Stella comes down from Eunice's flat, Stanley carries her to the big double bed. And, the next morning we get a picture of Stella that is both idealized and idolized:

Her face is serene in the early morning sunlight. One hand rests on her belly rounding slightly with new maternity. From the other dangles a book of colored comics. Her eyes and lips have that almost narcotized tranquility that is in the face of Eastern idols.

Thus, Williams makes use of the Barthesian cultural code, which helps him 'madonnize' Stella through an allusion to the *"Eastern idols."* The process of Stella's idealization/madonnization comes full circle at the end of the play when a helpless Stella watches Blanche's removal carrying her child in her arms.

Similarly, Stanley revels in the discovery of Blanche's past promiscuity feeling that she is an object of extra-familial sexual pleasure and he could have a go at her. And, later on, he contributes to the perpetuation of that image of the whore around her personality by prevailing upon her. At the same time, the image of the whore is used as a counterpoint to the 'madonna' image privileging the latter over the former with a view to cherishing homely virtues among the women in the family circle, that is wives, mothers, and daughters, and warning them against role-changing.

Likewise, the play involves a process of deconstructing the nature/culture opposition with regard to the characters of Stanley and Stella. At the beginning of the play, Blanche stands for the “culture” element of the opposition in terms of her costumes as well as conduct and ideals whereas Stanley stands for “nature” in terms of his earthiness as well as stark animalism. In the course of the play, a cross-migration of *semes* or units of signifier takes place between their characters as Blanche is stripped away of her cultural self while Stanley assumes the status of, to quote a portion of the title of an essay by Robert Brustein, “America’s New Culture Hero” (Brustein, 1963): “I am not polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it”. Similarly, the metaphors of “pig”, “ape,” “swine” etc. which Blanche had used for Stanley are now hurled back at her in different forms: “wild-cat,” “loco-nut” etc. Thus, in the course of the play, a number of chiasmuses are built with regard to character-idea relationships:

Stanley	Nature	Blanche	Madonna
	X		X
Blanche	Culture	Stella	Whore

The overdose of sensuality which Williams endows his female characters with is partly explained by critics in terms of the “Albertine” strategy, a strategy through which Williams probably impersonates his own homosexuality. Even the anglicized pronunciation of Blanche’s surname “Dubois” has been seen as a symbolic manifestation of Williams’ own homosexuality. Adding to Ruby Cohn’s observations on Blanche’s title, Nicholas O Pagan notes:

If we look even more carefully at the language of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, we may notice that as well as reading Blanche as a woman, it is possible to read her as a gay male. Ruby Cohn points out that “anglicized Blanche’s name is Dubois and under her chaste surface, Blanche’s lust for boys.” We might add that the name Du Bois is also frequently pronounced Du Boy as is in W.E.B. Du Bois. If we consider the French, the “du” can give us either “of” or “from” the boys, giving us Blanche of the Boys or Blanche from the Boys. (Pagan, 1993)

Both Tischler and Nicholas O Pagan discuss Stanley Hyman’s observations on the use of the Albertine strategy in his short story “*Rubio y Morena*”:

He calls the trick the “Albertine” strategy (from the Albert-Albertine reference in Proust): the sexes change places, especially in love affairs so that the female becomes the aggressive; the male the passive party, as in Maggie’s and Brick’s relationship in *Cat*. When the story deals with homosexuality and the author is employing the Albertine strategy, the male is pictured as a female, like the gaunt, masculine girl in “*Rubio y Morena*.” (Tischler, 1961)

Throughout the plays of Williams, thus, “Williams may be seen as substituting the female figure for the male object of desire” (Pagan, 1993). And, this is a kind of metaphoric substitution, which explains the fundamental metaphoricity of Tennessee Williams’ women. Thus, their characterization seems to have been constructed upon metaphoricity/referentiality opposition through which their true and referentially valid nature has been superimposed by metaphoric attributes. But then, at the same time, there is no denying the fact that, as Pagan notes, if “the object of desire is the young male body, then, there is a subversion of the sexual ethics of the time”.

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