

## **THE CONFLICT OF SEX AND MORALITY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' "A STREET CAR NAMED DESIRE"**

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**Dr Nitya Nand**

Associate Professor in Eng

Bapu P G College, PiPiganj, Gorakhpur, UP.India

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**Abstract:**

Sex is a major theme in Tennessee Williams' plays. Tennessee Williams' views on sex and morality are very clear. Sex is a biological need, which must be fulfilled. The conflict of sex and morality is a basic human problem. Williams is not alone to take up this problem in his plays. There are other playwrights also whose concern in their writing was psychological. Williams' famous play *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947) basically deals with the conflict of sex and morality arising from the false aristocracy. It reflects the various aspects of sexual maladjustment in which the rewards of the normal sexual life and the punishment of abnormal sex life are prominent. Stella is leading a happy life with her husband Stanley Kowalski who is a symbol of manliness and "animal joy". He is "with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens".<sup>1</sup> He is able to satiate the sexual desires of Stella that gives pleasure in her life. She, though, belongs to a high aristocrat family, is very happy with her husband even in that dirty quarter of New Orleans. Undoubtedly her satisfaction is based on this happy sexual life that has no hypocritical aristocratic attitudes. In the beginning of the play we learn about happy sexual life of Stella and Stanley. The peace and stability in life, according to Williams, can be achieved only by happy sexual life. The play is indebted to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and as a psychological drama to Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. Like Chekhov, Williams shows the decline of the gentry through the lives of its daughters. Like Strindberg, he deals with class and sexual warfare. The sexual duel between the underlying and the lady ends with the conflict of the latter in both *Street Car* and *Miss Julie*. "Both the plays", According to Richard B. Vowlex "predict an almost identical future. Vitality belongs to the materialists and opportunists; the apes will take over"

**Keywords:** conflict, morality, family, sexuality etc

Sex is a major theme in Tennessee Williams' plays. Tennessee Williams' views on sex and morality are very clear. Sex is a biological need, which must be fulfilled. Suppression of sex drives is disastrous and unhealthy. Man's sincerity to himself is the highest type of morality in the world of Tennessee Williams. The well being and fulfillment of man as an individual alone should matter in the world. Sex is a major theme in the plays of Williams. Thus the concept of sex in Williams' opinion is wide in its sense. It is a free, unrestricted thing that

cannot be tied by anything even by a thing like Marriage. It is the uninhibited desire that seeks its fulfillment by natural means. But when repressed, it comes out in its exaggerated form. It has rightly been said that Williams is, “a visceral rather than a cerebral writer.”<sup>1</sup> There has always been a quaint absorption in the old time Puritan preoccupation with sex, the sin that Dante placed at the rim of hell as it far above and less despicable than fraud and deceit.

The conflict of sex and morality is a basic human problem. Williams is not alone to take up this problem in his plays. There are other playwrights also whose concern in their writing was psychological. There was little humour, however, in the anguished drama of Eugene O. Neill. It was he who gave the American drama its first body of serious psychological work and the vague he established for experimental techniques, neurotic protagonists and sexual symbols had a considerable influence upon the other playwrights of his era. In the plays like *Different*, *The Great God – Brown* and *The Iceman Cometh*, O’Neill anticipated Tennessee Williams in the discovery that tragedy lies in the discrepancy between the ego – ideal and the real. There are some other dramatists who have dealt with this problem. They enriched the drama with plays that are more subtle, more individualized and less self conscious. Lawrence, Ingo, Patrick, Mc Colley, Robert Anderson, Samuel Taylor, all have made major contributions to psychological drama and enlarged its scope even further.

Williams’ famous play *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947) basically deals with the conflict of sex and morality arising from the false aristocracy. It reflects the various aspects of sexual maladjustment in which the rewards of the normal sexual life and the punishment of abnormal sex life are prominent. The play seeks to stress the importance of the fulfillment of sex instinct that is key to the health and happiness in human life. In the play Williams has tried to describe two different situations of two different persons. On the one hand Stella is happy and satisfied within her own conditions whereas Blanche is a dissatisfied lady always disturbed and restless for her sex desires. The dying false aristocracy is one of the factors that causes deformity in Blanches’ character. Her hypocritical behavior, necessitated by one’s concern for position and place in society, extinguishes natural passion. It is so very disastrous that it may lead a person to asylum. Williams believes that false respectability also can cause distortion and deformity in the human personality. In the play the lady Blanche who is guided by her false aristocratic ideals struggles to control and suppress her sexual desires. She leads a normal life until she is in contact with reality. But as soon as she tries to evade or deny it, she is subjected to destruction. She is unfortunate in the sense that her husband is homosexual. After his suicide the degradation takes place in her life. Thus she suffers from the conflict of sex and morality. She has become a sex-profligate with a bad reputation but to overlook all these when she comes to live in the New Orleans she again becomes an intruder

<sup>1</sup>Nancy M. Tischler, *Tennessee Williams:Rebellious Puritan* (New York: Citadel Press, 1961), p.299

to the peace of her sister's family. But she cannot disturb the happy family life of her family. She is taken to an asylum after the brutal rape committed by Stanley.

Stella is leading a happy life with her husband Stanley Kowalski who is a symbol of manliness and "animal joy". He is "with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens".<sup>ii</sup> He is able to satiate the sexual desires of Stella that gives pleasure in her life. She, though, belongs to a high aristocrat family, is very happy with her husband even in that dirty quarter of New Orleans. Undoubtedly her satisfaction is based on this happy sexual life that has no hypocritical aristocratic attitudes.

Her peace is suddenly disturbed by the arrival of her sister Blanche who is facing acute crisis in her life. Possessed by a sense of a false respectability, she is taken as a misfit in that family. She is bitter in her remarks about the husband of Stella and about their living standard.

Blanche: Why that you had to live in these conditions.<sup>iii</sup>

Her attitude towards Stanley is not fair because, he, according to her, does not possess the stamp of genius on his forehead. Stanley is never polite to her simply because he feels hurt by her remarks about their way of living. This faded aristocracy and false respectability of Blanche alienate her from each members of the family.

On the other hand, Stanley is a man of natural growth whose motto is "live and let live" as he himself says, "Be comfortable is my motto".<sup>iv</sup> His greatest quality is to provide sexual pleasure to his wife, as he is a healthy, stout man. Blanche is always critical of Stanley due to her false hypocritical attitude. She has already become neurotic that prevents her from thinking in a proper way:

Blanche: He acts like an animal, has an animal's habit. Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one. There is something- subhuman- something not quite to the stage of humanity yet. Yes- like one of those pictures I've seen in anthropological studies thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by and there he stands by Kowalski.<sup>v</sup>

In the beginning of the play we learn about happy sexual life of Stella and Stanley. The peace and stability in life, according to Williams, can be achieved only by happy sexual life. It is a reward in itself. The satisfaction of basic sex instinct is the ultimate source for the happy normal life. Stella and Stanley are complementary to each other and their staying away even for a few days from each other is unbearably painful to both of them:

Stella: When he is away for a week I nearly go wild ... And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby...<sup>vi</sup>

Blanche, on the other hand, has illusions regarding her beauty, intellect and family background. She fails to realise the secret of Stella's happy life who also belongs to the same family and same background. The death of her homosexual husband is a great setback in her life. She earns a bad name for herself on account of her indulgence in unfair sexual activities. She acquires an art of seeking people like Stanley and Mitch. But she is never fully free from her hypocritical attitudes of aristocracy. At the beginning she admires the manliness of Stanley:

Blanche: My sister has married a man.<sup>vii</sup>

Though Blanche is delicate and tender yet she spoils her delicacy with her false hypocrisies. She is always in an emotional crisis simply because she lives an isolated life. She always pretends to avoid realities of her life that always haunted her. She finds herself a misfit in the society as well as in the family of Stella. Even Mitch knowing the fact about her rejects her. In spite of her bad reputation and her expulsion from her school seducing a seventeen year old girl, she always talks of her virginity.

Blanche: Virgo is virgin.<sup>viii</sup>

At the end of the play Blanche is raped by Stanley who has nothing else to respond to her but his animal life force. He justifies the view of Blanche about himself that he has an animal force and that force can be applied only when one has to go to bed with such a person.

Blanche ...What such a man has to offer in animal force and he gave a wonderful exhibition of that.<sup>ix</sup>

Stella and Blanche represent two different ways. Stella represents the uninhibited instinctual pleasure that she gets from her husband and everything else is insignificant to her. According to her:

Stella: ... there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark-that sort of make everything else seem-unimportant. <sup>x</sup>

Blanche, on the contrary, calls it animal pleasure and brute desires. Her unwillingness to accept the reality of that desire destroys her. Her illusions arising from her aristocratic conventions and her ignoring the importance of normal love stand in the way of her satisfaction and happiness.

Blanche: what you are talking about is a brutal desire-just desire. This unnatural approach to sex ultimately leads her to mental asylum where the doctor becomes a saviour for her. Thus the play suggests that human beings are happy and satisfied when they obey the urges of the natural blood instinct. False respectability and hypocritical behaviour account for sexual maladjustment. Only the animal spirit of her brother-in-law matches the hypocrisy of Blanche. Blanche is rightly punished for her rejection of normal sexual life. Stanley the complete sexual animal avenges the cruelty of killing her homosexual husband. The morality of the playwright does not allow Blanche to live happy because she has ignored the importance of normal sex life and hence she is a sinner.

In the play Stanley is an exaggeration of Lawrentian lover; the figure of admired male sexuality. Here Williams, like Lawrence, has celebrated flesh and blood. "The manliness of Stanley", says David Seivers, "with his originality certainly would have enlightened D.H. Lawrence".<sup>xi</sup> The situation of the play reminds one of Freudian psychology of id and ego ideal. The lady Blanche must pass through a state of mental agony by the conflict of id and the painful failure to repress her natural sexual urge drives her to gallant (like doctor) who will give her shelter.

The play has been reviewed by critics in their own ways. Ruby Cohn in his essay, "The Garrulous Grotesque of Tennessee Williams" says, "Street Car, like The Glass Menagerie, is a poignant portrait of a southern gentle woman who is extinct in the modern world"<sup>xii</sup>

As observed by Roger Boxill, "The play creates a hollow world of lost hope in which imagination is fertile and sensitivity failed to be crushed by mindless brutality."<sup>xiii</sup> Elia Kazan during rehearsals of the play kept a notebook with him in which he stated, "Blanche is a social type, an emblem of a dying civilization."<sup>xiv</sup> Likewise Stanley's behaviour is social too. It is basic animal cynicism of today. Get whats coming to you. Don't waste a day. Eat, drink, and get yours. In the opinion of Donald Spoto the play "dramatizes the internal clash with everyone"<sup>xv</sup> John Gassner of the Theatre Guild observed that, "... The play communicated a sense of crass fatality of life destroyed by frustration in love, against which pretensions and illusions are a pathetic and futile defense."<sup>xvi</sup> Brooks Atkinson in New York Times defined the play as about, "an unequal contest between the decadence of a self conscious civilization and the vitality of animal aimlessness."<sup>xvii</sup>

The play is indebted to Chekhov's *Three Sisters* and as a psychological drama to Stridberg's *Miss Julie*. Like Chekhov, Williams shows the decline of the gentry through the lives of its daughters. Like Strindberg, he deals with class and sexual warfare. The sexual duel between the underlying and the lady ends with the conflict of the latter in both *Street Car* and *Miss Julie*. "Both the plays", According to Richard B. Vowlex "predict an almost identical future. Vitality belongs to the materialists and opportunists; the apes will take over"<sup>xviii</sup>.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Tennessee Williams *A Street Car Named Desire* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1959), p.128

<sup>ii</sup> Tennessee Williams *A Street Car Named Desire* (London, Penguin Books Ltd., 1959), p.128

<sup>iii</sup> 1 bid p.121

<sup>iv</sup> 1 bid p.129

<sup>v</sup> 1 bid p.163

<sup>vi</sup> *A Street Car Named Desire*, p.125

<sup>vii</sup> 1 bid p.137

<sup>viii</sup> *A Street Car Named Desire*, p.167

<sup>ix</sup> 1 bid p.161

<sup>x</sup> 1 bid p.162

- <sup>xi</sup> W. David Sievers, *Freud On Broadway*, (New York, Cooper Square Publishing Co., 1970), p.378
- <sup>xii</sup> Stephen S. Stanton, ed. "The Distorted Mirror : T.W.'s self portraits", in *T.W.: A Collection of Critical Essay*,(New York's Englewood Cliffs, 1977), p.46
- <sup>xiii</sup> Roger Boxill, *Tennessee Williams*, (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987), p.86
- <sup>xiv</sup> Harold Clurman, *Lies like Truth*, (New York's Grave Publishing Co., 1958), p.72
- <sup>xv</sup> Donald Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers*, (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brownand Company, 1958), p.141
- <sup>xvi</sup> Francis Donahue, *The Dramatic World of Tennessee Williams*, (New York P Frederick Unger Publishing Co.), p.36
- <sup>xvii</sup> Brooks Atkinson in new York Times, (4 December, 1947)
- <sup>xviii</sup> Richard B. Vowlex, "Tennessee Williams and Strindbergs" in *Tennessee Williams*, (New York: Twayne Press 1962), p.169

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