

Tennessee Williams' Awareness of Feminist Issues in

A Streetcar Named Desire

—From Readers to Ideal Readers

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Abstract

On the one side, as a male, Tennessee Williams showed a strong awareness on feminist issues because of his special personal experience, which can be proved by his many plays portraying women. On the other side, he expressed admiration to the muscular beauty of men. *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be seen as a play to display the conflict in Williams' mind and to demonstrate his deep sympathy to women. By constructing the confrontation between hero and heroine, Tennessee succeeded guiding readers to the ideal readers to share what in his mind. In this thesis, the author will use the theory of Reader-Response Criticism to explore Tennessee's awareness on feminist issues, and display how he converted the real readers to the ideal ones step by step.

Keywords: Awareness of feminist issues, Ideal readers, Horizons of expectation

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams is the most important playwright in American theatre in the middle years of the twentieth century. He wrote more than 60 multi-act plays and one-act plays in his nearly 50 years writing life. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the most famous one, which “ran for 855 performances and became the first play ever to win all three major awards, the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, and the Donaldson Award” (Londre, 2000).

A Streetcar Named Desire was “the first American plays in which sexuality was patently at the core of the lives of all its principal characters” (Londre, 2000) and another great works to portray women after *The Glass Menagerie*. It interests many readers and critics with its so many mysteries. “It is probably the one most closely identified with the dramatist, and it is certainly the one that has elicited the most critical commentary” (Londre, 2000). Since this play premiered at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York in 1947, many critics did comments on it with different literary critical theories, such as feminism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxism and even postmodernism. They explored the causes of the protagonist Blanche’s tragedy, the intrusion of the modern industry to the old southern tradition, the oppression of women in patriarchal society, the symbolism and impressionism in this play and so on. Many critical theories have been used to interpret it, except for the theory of reader-response criticism, which once used by Xu Jing in Beijing Normal University to analyze the indeterminacy and contradiction in this play.

Tennessee Williams’ awareness of feminist issues has been accredited in the academic circles. He expressed this awareness nearly in his every work and created many impressive female characters, such as *Laura in The Glass Menagerie*, the tempestuous heroin Serafina in *The Rose Tatto*, Maggie the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Roof* and so on. In this play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee also portrayed a typical female character Blanche. By describing the conflict between the hero and heroine, he showed us his strong feminism complex. In this thesis, the author will use the theory of reader-response to explore Williams’ awareness on feminist issues and to display how he succeeded in converting the real readers to the ideal ones to win followers for his feminist idea. In order to do this job perfectly, what the ideal readers look like to Williams will be analyzed firstly, then how Williams changed the real readers to the ideal ones will be further explored and finally how both of ideal readers and real readers were combined.

2. The Ideal Readers to Williams

Although Williams himself do not accept he has been effected by feminism movement at that time, his strong sympathy to women can be seen in his plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams showed his sympathy to the protagonist Blanche by depicting that Blanche tried to ask for help from his sister while she was sent to sanatoriums by her sister’s husband at last. In this play, he constructed ideal readers who share his sympathy towards women and then changed the real readers to the ideal ones.

2.1 The Meaning of Ideal Readers

Wolfgang Iser differentiated two kinds of readers: the “implied reader” and “the actual reader”. He considered the “implied reader” as the one who “embodies all those predispositions necessary for a literary work to exercise its effect--predispositions laid down, not by an empirical outside reality, but by the text itself” (Bressler, 2003). That means the “implied reader” is not the real reader but “the implied accepter that the writer pre-designed in his writing course.” (Qiu, 2005) Walker Gibson applied another phrase to explain this situation. In his essay “Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers”, he said

There are two readers distinguishable in every literary experience. First, there is the ‘real’ individual upon whose crossed knee rests the open volume, [...] Second, there is the fictitious reader—I shall call him the ‘mock reader’—whose mask and costume the individual takes on in order to experience the language. The mock reader is an artifact, controlled, simplified, abstracted out of the chaos of day-to-day sensation”.

No matter Iser’s “implied reader” or Gibson’s “mock reader”, both of them are readers who would accept whatever the writer wants him to accept, which we describe as “ideal readers” in this paper.

2.2 Tennessee and Women

Tennessee once said “I draw all my characters from myself. I cannot draw a character I know it within me [...] everything a writer produces is his inner history transported into another time. I am more personal on my writing than other people” (Liu, 2009). It’s no doubt what are expressed in this play can be a part of his mind.

Tennessee’s childhood underwent in suffering, which brought him trauma as well as the materials for his future writing. His father was a traveling salesman, violent and often drunk. Tennessee once said “I had no way of proving that my father was destitute, [...] he wouldn’t give me a penny” (Ruas, 1985). His mother, Miss Ediwina, the daughter of an Episcopalian minister, was repressed and genteel, a southern belle in her youth. As a child, Williams was sickly, and overly protected by his mother; he was closely attached to his sister, Rose, and alienated from his father. His family members appear as the archetypes of characters in his many plays. The imbalanced effects of male and female members in his family give him the primal attitude towards female. He and his sister had a special intimacy, which was mentioned in many critics about him. As Charles Ruas described in his conversation with Williams, “Tennessee spoke to her [his sister, Rose] as a child, which seems his customary way.” (75) His sister had been suffering mental imbalance and spent most of her life in sanatoriums, except when Williams brought her out for visits. The influences of his sister were great. His biographer notes that in his late work, Rose was the source and inspiration of everything he wrote, either directly or indirectly (Baym, 1989). This situation of his family irritated his premier sympathy to women.

In addition, many records suggest his tendency of homosexual world. Boxill said Williams admitted “[he] had many close relationship with men, although [he] had found them less deeply satisfying than those he had with a few women” (Liu, 2009). These words prove his dual or self-contradicted attitude towards men. As Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, she admires the muscular beauty of Stanley and hates his rudeness at the same time. “Elia Kazan said ‘Blanche is Williams himself’”. Roudane had similar comments about his contradiction. “Like so many of his antiheroes, Williams himself was filled with ambivalence and contradiction. He desired both protection and control.” The conflict between Stanley and Blanche, just as the conflict in the writer’s inner heart, becomes the focus of the play. He just wanted to tell his ideal reader what happens in his soul. The homosexual facts can be a reason for his awareness of feminist issue. He let his readers see Blanche’s tragedy and feel the conflict in his mind. In the end readers are also conscious of the situation of women in

patriarchal society and give their sympathy as Williams' to women.

Furthermore, we should pay attention to William's many women friends, who have great effect on him. Liu liming in his study on the female images in Tennessee Williams' plays had some detailed information. Here we simplify it as follows: Carson Mc Cullers encouraged Williams to keep on with his play *Summer and Smoke*; Audrey Wood was his life-long manager; Maria St. Just, as the prototype of Margaret, is the Cat in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*; Italian friend Anna Magnania is related Serafina, the sensuous, Practical and free love-seeking heroin in *The Rose Tatto*. The well-known actress Tallulah Bankhead is one of the prototype DuBois Blanche.

From the three points above stated, we can conclude that Williams had a strong awareness of feminist issues, which stirs the conflict in his mind. By constructing the conflict between Stanley and Blanche, he showed the readers his deep sympathy to women. He hoped his readers can share what he think and sympathize Blanche, too. Aristotle said a perfect tragedy should excite pity and fear, which emphasizes the effect of works on readers. In order to have his readers' pity and fear, Williams arranged a series of conflicts between hero and heroine with his great dramatic technique.

3. The Course of Converting Readers to Ideal Ones

In order to find an output for his contradiction, Williams created a series of conflicts between Stanley and Blanche. In this course, female and male readers show a changing attitude towards protagonists.

In this play, Mirth can be seen as the representative of the male readers and Stella can be the female one. Iser use horizon of expectation to describe the introduction of writer to readers. That's a reader's expectations about what will or may happen next.

These horizons of expectation change frequently, for at the center of all stories is conflict or dramatic tension, often resulting in sudden loss, pain, unexpected joy or fear, and at times great fulfillment. Such changes cause a reader to modify his or her horizons of expectation to fit a text's particular situation (Bressler, 2003).

By creating the expectation for readers, Williams lead readers to appreciate and hate Stanley at the beginning, to sympathize him in the middle, and to abhor him in the end. The image of Blanche is also changed from angle to witch and to angle. By this way Williams obtained the agreement from both male and female readers to his opinion about feminism. The different scenes have shown how Williams succeeded to realize his goal.

3.1 The Changing Images of Blanche and Stanley

"Elia Kazan summarized each of the eleven scenes in terms of what Blanche wants, makes happen, or has happen to her" (Londre, 2000). The conflict between Blanche and Stanley face to face mainly take place directly and indirectly in scene 3,8,10. In other scenes, both of them just try to win supporters of Mitch and Stella, as well as the readers they stand for. In the 11th scene, Tennessee succeeded in bringing all readers in the area of Blanche, thus changing the real reader to his ideal ones.

In the first two scenes, Blanche and Stanley meet for the first time. From what Blanche said, we know the basic information about her, which arouses the sympathy of readers for the first time. “I was so exhausted be all I’d through my-nerve broke. I was on the verge of –limacy, almost!” (Williams, 1979) We wonder what happened to Blanche on earth. She reproach Stella “You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! [...] I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it!” “I took the blows in my face and my body! All those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Farther, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way!” Blanche’s frailness and hopelessness are enough strong to attract readers’ attention. No matter what she has done, she can be forgiven.

The poker night happened in the third scene. Here Mitch meets Blanche and Stanley shows his violence for the first time. Mitch said “You are all married. But I’ll be alone when she [his mother] goes”. While Blanche appears like an angel, he saw the hope to get rid of loneliness, which what a woman can do for a man. He regards Blanche as an angle. Mitch’s words foreshadow his relation with Blanche in the future. At the same time, we see another kind of married women, represented by Stella, who subordinate their husbands. “Well, you can hear me and I said to hush up!” Stanley roars to Stella. He hits Stella bitterly.

Blanche tried to win the heart of Stella in the following scene. By this description, she also tried to win the support of readers. “You’re married to a madman”, she said to Stella. He acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, takes like one! [...] Yes, something ape-like about him. [...] There he is, Stanley Kowalski, survivor of the Stone Age!” After reading what Stanley did in the former scene, readers would cannot help but accept what Blanche said. Here Blanche herself became a reader to read Stanley. What she described to Stanley buries the seed of her tragedy in the future. Stanley, as the representative of patriarchal society, would not accept a woman’s intrusion.

In the fifth scene, Williams let Blanche and Stella have a good talk. From the words of these two women, the oppression that women suffered in the patriarchal society was displayed, which is the deepest cause for Blanche’s Neurosis. “And men don’t want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly, especially when the girl is over-thirty. They think a girl over thirty ought to - the vulgar term is - ‘put out.’ ...And I - I’m not ‘putting out.’ Of course he - he doesn’t know - I mean I haven’t informed him - of my real age!” Whatever Blanche does is just to satisfy the need of men. When she suffered from a man, she just tries to find protection from another man.

After speaking to the female readers represented by Stella, Blanche has another chance to say the male readers represented by Mitch. “But, honey, you know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she’ll lose.” “I guess it is just that I have - old fashioned ideals!” Mitch as well as all readers would be thinking that Blanche is very innocent and pure. While the following plot makes this horizon of expectation side up and down. At the same time, Blanche, as the rival to Stanley, tries to win her supporters. “He stalks through the rooms in his underwear at night. And I have to ask him to close the bathroom door....The first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me.” As she predicted, it is Stanley who

destroyed her. Hearing what she said about her past, Mitch firmly believes Blanche is the one he needs. “You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be - you and me, Blanche?” Blanche is his angel to drag him out of the loneliness. All readers nearly believe bright future for them in the future. While what happened in the next force readers to modify what they expect.

Stanley’s exposure subverted readers’ impression to Blanche. He draws Mirth and Stella back to his side. Readers are confused with the words of Blanche and Stanly. They need to find out the truth. When facts emerge to the surface, the image of Blanche was changed to a witch. “She has been washed up like poison.” Female readers may have similar response as Stella did, “I don’t believe all of those stories and I think your supply man was mean and rotten to tell them.” They are not willing to believe this fact, but very worried that it’s the fact.

3.2 Patriarchy

Another point we need to mention is the strong tendency of patriarchy. “‘Every man is a King!’ And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!” Stanley used the patriarchal words to show his power over women. If we say Stanley stands for those men who discriminate women directly in patriarchal society, then Mitch stands for those who admire them with deep stigma of patriarchal thought. Blanche’s hope was dashed to the ground in the ninth scene, when Mitch said “You are not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.” Chastity is requirement to women. However, what surprises us is that Stanley can rape another woman when his wife was pregnant. This fact cannot help but convulse readers, especially female readers deeply. Till now, Blanche was reduced to a wholly witch to Mitch. When the last straw disappeared, Blanche can’t find any place for herself. She once expected Mitch could offer her “a cleft in the rock of the world that [she] could hide in.” When her dream broke up, there was really nowhere she could go. She cried “I don’t want realism. I want magic.” However there was no has no magic for her in such patriarchal society.

4. The Combination of Readers and Ideal Readers

The tenth scene is the summit of the conflict. If in the former scenes Williams let his readers wander between Blanche and Stanley, here all readers would express hatred to Stanley and sympathy to Blanche. Stanley shows his animal nature comprehensively here. He raped his sister-in-law when his wife was pregnant. Here readers give up the last trust to Stanley and show full sympathy to Blanche.

Blanche was sent to sanatoriums in the last scene. Blanche’s despairing words “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” Succeeded in combining real readers and ideal readers in one unity. In the play even Mith and other men in the kitchen express their rejection emotion to what Stanley have done to Blanche. Thus both male and female readers at last stand in the same side, which realize Tennessee’s purpose to have both male and female be conscious of women situation. When there is nowhere to stay in the world, sanatoriums may be a good place in certain.

5. Writing Technique

In the play, we can see the deep sympathy of Tennessee to Blanche. Besides by constructing the conflicts between characters to touch readers, Williams also relied on his great drama writing technique to inspire readers' pity and fear, which makes readers more easily to become the ideal readers.

Music and sound effects abound everywhere in the play, which is used to heighten or comment upon a dramatic moment. When Blanche panics, for example, we hear a cat screech in the alley or a locomotive thundering past (Londre, 2000). Lights and the scene of bath were elaborated by Tennessee. The lights symbolize Blanche's shirking from the pass of time. Bathing suggests Blanche's desire to purify herself. The scene of lights and bath are performed again and again to draw readers' attention. Baym said when reading or watching his plays, we become aware of how symbolic scene repeat—the naked light bulb and the paper lantern, the Mexican woman selling flowers for the dead, the “Varsouviana waltz and the reverberating voices. Williams also did well in the effects of language, such as colloquial southern speech distinguishing Blanche from other characters, which covers her confrontation with others. Jacqueline O'Connor claimed “many of Williams' plays take place in confined space, and the setting often suggests that the characters will face permanent confinement at the play's end.” Is it true to *A Streetcar Named Desire*? All its characters move in and out of the house on Elysian Fields, where Blanche ended up to a permanent confinement in sanatorium. All these techniques push Tennessee Williams to the one of greatest playwrights in America, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* the best-performance of his plays.

6. Conclusion

According to reader-response critics' opinion, a work can be finished only by author, speakers, and readers working together. M. M. Bakhtin regarded any artistic work as a social communicating existence by author, readers and the characters in the work (Qiu, 2005). In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Tennessee has done this perfectly. He succeeded in changing the readers to the ideal readers by speakers in the play. He made his readers feel the oppression of women and feel deep sympathy for them, which embodies his awareness of feminist issues. Wendy Wasserstein said “Stella and Blanche are among the best written women characters in any dramatic literature.” (Londre, 2000). Paul Zindel: “Streetcar for me will always be a poetic, brutal, thrilling lesson in how a single brave playwright let his demons and angels dance with every ounce of truth he could know.” (Londre, 2000) Because of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams held his firm position in American literary history. Because of Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* becomes the canon of plays.

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