

Plantation Myth in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Suksham Ahluwalia

Associate Professor

Arya College Ludhiana

ABSTRACT:

Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire deals with plantation myth which has got an important place in the mind of Southerners, and for a Belle like Blanche, it is just not possible to wipe out those images from her mind because, like an uprooted southerner, she has developed a rather passionate longing for her past. In fact, Blanche's recollection of her past provides enough proofs regarding the easy going life at the plantation. However it is only one side of the plantation myth as it exists in the contemporary world. The other side shows its decline and ultimate destruction with the passage of time. In this respect the civil war was the first blow to the peaceful life- style of southerners.

KEYWORDS: *Plantation Myth, Southern tradition, Cosmopolitan and Migration*

INTRODUCTION

A Streetcar Named Desire is Williams' final comment on the decline, debasement and ultimate disappearance of the old southern tradition. In the beginning of the play, one can notice that the tragedy has already occurred : the past has lost its charm and, therefore, the only interest of the spectator lies in knowing the answer to the key question as to whether it would survive for the present moment. However the play ends quite tragically with the final exit of Blanche-the representative of the old world - indicating that virtually no image of old south exists in the new world inhabited by brutal forces. In fact the "confinement of Blanche DuBois is a legend about the passing of the old south"¹ and during the struggle of Blanche against the hostile forces of the society, Williams brings forth the picture of the disturbed era, that is, the post war period in the history of South America, It was a period of transition a period when past and present co-existed affecting each other to a great extent. In this respect the play deals with a specific cultural situation; the hour of crisis in the lives of those who could never adjust themselves to the new environment because of their being deeply associated with the past old days.

The play opens in an old section of New Orleans, the city with a cosmopolitan air. The place, it is noticeable does not belong to a particular class rather it has a mixed neighbourhood. This building has two flats and rest of other houses are "mostly white framed, weathered grey with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables."² The grey colour of the houses is suggestive of the fading away of the old attitudes of the people occupying these places. Also the social life of the people is dyed in a different shade. It no longer revolves around the lawn parties, dress balls and visiting, rather includes Bowling and poker nights. The chivalric virtues and patrician vices are no longer visible in the lives of the people : The mistress is devoid of domestic virtues and the master south lacks gentlemanly traits. The setting of the play thus establishes a picture of post-war (Second world-war) New South characterized by a change not only of period but also of social pattern.

Blanche DuBois, after having failed virtually at every front of her life, comes to stay with her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley who occupy in the above mentioned section a two room flat devoid of any item of luxury. Since this place stands in sharp contrast to the world of romance associated with the plantation myth, the very

sight of Elysian field makes Blanche revive in her mind the good old days spent at Belle-Reve - their ancestral place in the countryside. Just as it is through the memories of Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie*, we are acquainted with the old South, here it is Blanche suggesting through her gestures and unique style the gay life of past as well as speaking about its passage into nothingness. Talking about the details of the plantation myth, Thomas E. Porter refers to the major features as thus:

The image of the large, white, six columned houses set amid acres of lawn and a garden with a periphery of slave cabins and cotton fields provides the proper setting. The owners of the big house are aristocrats with appropriate chivalric virtues and patrician vices. The master is autocratic, prideful gallant: The mistress is a paragon of the domestic virtues. Son and daughter exercise a youthful license in imitating the virtues of their parents. the Negroes are devoted serfs, contented with their lot. Life on the plantation is easy and gay, a lawn of round parties, dress balls and visiting, with an occasional ride around the holidays for the master and mild direction of the house servants by the mistress. The young men and the women spend their time at play and courtship ...³

Apparently, slavery was the foundation stone of planter's superemacy and this "foundation stone was torn away in the abolition of slavery."⁴ The obvious result was chaos in the social and economic order. In the following years of the reconstruction, when the Southerners had hardly made a retreat, they were encountered with a traumatic era depression followed by the second world war which completed the economic decline of the South. Since there was no work left in the country, people fled to cities and it resulted in poor slum areas of overcrowded cities. As Numan V. Bartley points out that

"the vast migration of the southern land was a fundamental demographic fact of the post depression era. Between 1935 and 1970 more than thirteen million people left southern farms. During just the period from 1940 to 1945, more than twenty percent of the south farm population abandoned agriculture... In a traumatic kind of way, the process did more or less conform to contemporary theories of modernization. The process, However, was hardly benign; it uprooted a rural people from the land and cast them in to the nation's cities."⁵

On the other hand, the condition of the rich planters in the country was even more pathetic. "They inevitably failed in their struggles to hold their baronies intact and in part or in whole were sold out. But their land went in this world of poverty, for a song; and since this world boasted nobody able to purchase the whole of such units even at the rate of a song, their holdings were generally broken up into a number of smaller units, which means, not only that the Ownership of the better lands began to be some what more widely distributed, but also that the static economic and social set-up towards which the old South had always moved without ever fully arriving at it was sharply shaken up and loosened, left less firmly established than it had been."⁶

Hence they had lost not only their big houses but also were deprived of aristocratic way of living. But the fact remains that such people could not face humility after being stripped of. In other words, they started taking the help of pretensions to keep their outward show intact. As Blanche tells in the play that it was due to the epic fornications of the male members of family that the ancestral house was lost on mortgages, In highly emotional language Blanche states the tragedy:

There are thousands of papers, stretching back over hundreds of years, affecting Belle Reve as piece by piece. Our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications... Till finally all that was left... was the house itself and about twenty acres of ground including a grave-yard, to which now all but stella and I have retreated. (P. 140)

Hence what has been distinguished in the tragic downfall of Southerners is the fact that even though they were defeated, they never accepted it psychologically. In other words, even though they were deprived of the best of their lives, yet they refused to alter their old aristocratic way of life. The outward blows of war had smashed the Southern world physically but "it had left the mind and will-the mind and will arising from corresponding to and requiring this world- entirely unshaken."⁷ Thus like any other human being fallen upon evil days the

mind of a Southerner was now filled with an immense regret for the past. Blanche DuBois is one such romantic who always remembers past in a nostalgic tone.

Since Blanche is left all alone in her world, she decides to take refuge in a new world inhabited by Kowalskis. Quite early in the play she tells Stella that she no longer can bear her isolation, " I guess you are hoping I'll say I'll put up at hotel but, I'm not going to put up at a hotel. I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, can't be alone !" (P. 124).

Infact, it is quite natural with an individual to crave for a social group. As Fromm Observes, "Man can not live alone and unrelated to others. He has to associate with others for defense, for work, for sexual satisfaction, for play, for the upbringing of the young, for the transmission of knowledge and material possessions. But beyond that, It is necessary for him to be related to others, one with them, part of a group."⁸ Since Blanche's social world is gone, she reaches New Orleans to find new relations in a different world.

It is through these relationships of individuals that Williams brings forth the basic conflicts of the era. In this respect they acquire symbolic undertones. As Joseph Woodkrutch observes, "the existence of a decayed aristocracy was one of the inescapable facts of the society with which he was most familiar... These helpless survivors from the past, feeble and pathetic clingers to a dead tradition, take on the importance of symbols. They are not accidental facts ; they mean something."⁹ Thus an analysis of these relations would help us to understand not only the terms and conditions of contemporary world but also the helplessness of past to survive in the present modern world.

To begin with Blanche and Stella are apparently related to each other. But apart from the outward relationship, they have got another kinship they as descend from agrarian South. In this respect, as Blanche tells Stella, they should make efforts to get hold of old traditions in the midst of modern chaos. Blanche tries to awaken Stella by clarifying the difference between their world and that of Stanley:

He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits!... Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is - Stanley Kowalski survivor of the stone age ! ... May be we are a long way from being made in God's image but... there has been some progress since then ! such things as art - as poetry and music such kinds of new light have come in to the world since then ! In some kinds of people some tender feelings have had some little beginning ! That we have got to make grow ! And cling to, and hold as our flag ! In this dark march towards whatever it is we approaching ...Don't -don't hang with the brutes.(P.132)

Thus Blanche makes the conflict between the two worlds quite clear in her statement. However Stella thinks the other way and therefore leaves Blanche alone to carry the flag and struggle against the Brutes.

The reason for Stella's accepting Stanley's world might be that she had left home early enough to get herself adjusted into new world. In other words, she is not very romantically attached to her past. Also "being somewhat unimaginative, Stella has made the transition easily. She can now read comic books, go down to the table and bowling alley, swap experiences with Eunice and clean up the flat after the poker parties with no sense of degradation."¹⁰ Infact she is sharing a sheer animal existence with her husband. All the same it is only when Stella comes to Stanley leaving her past behind that she is acceptable, otherwise Stanley can never cope with her if she chooses to be somewhat different from them. For instance, while sitting on the table when Stella asks him to wash his hands and help her in clearing the table, Stanley gets furious. In fact he has been experiencing this kind of inferiority complex from the very day Stella's sister entered his house. He can very well smell the high class superiority in Stella's remarks. He gets angry;

"Dont ever talk that way to me ! 'pig-polack – disgusting-greasy ! – them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here ! what do you two think you are ? A pair of Queens? Remember what Huey long said –'Every man is a king !' and I am the king around here, so don't forget it !..."(P.195-95).

Thus Stella can go on with Stanley only if she submissively surrenders before him.

However, this surrender is not possible for Blanche. Since she herself has borne the trauma of the fading away of plantation life, she can never forget that hers was the world much more superior than Stanley's. Though only in her illusions, she still has to play the role of a lady and Stanley finds it difficult to tolerate her 'manor - born superiority'. The result is the clash between the two. As Hirsch Foster observes, "Romantic Blanche and naturalistic Stanley conflict : Culture are fights vulgarity, and is trampled."¹¹

For Stanley, Blanche is an intruder invading her territory. He knows very well that, "the Kowalskis and the DuBois have different notions" (P. 135) and from the beginning he feels ill at ease with her. Blanche's first very appearance marks her out from the rest of the company. "She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves with hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer garden district." (P. 17) Again "the lavish costumes of the belle are part of the tradition and Blanche carries this kind of wardrobe with her."¹² All this irritates Stanley as he feels sorry that he can't afford all these luxuries for Stella. However he accepts it for a while but When he finds Blanche speaking to for Stella against him, he finds her presence to be a threat to his married life. "... and wasn't we happy together ? wasn't it all okay till she showed here ?" (P. 199) He concludes that every thing will be alright with Blanche's leaving their place. Therefore instead of understanding her problems, he only aggravates them. The first clash they had was the result of Stanley's suspicion regarding her details about the Belle Rove. At the poker night, the second clash occurs and in the third clash she is virtually raped by the brother-in-law.

It so happens that Stanley suspects Blanche for her stories from the very beginning. Therefore he made an inquiry about her past and happen to get enough informations based upon the valid proofs regarding Blanche's past life. According to him, Blanche only pretends to be a refined and particular type of girl. He tells Stella that after the destruction of her marriage and "after the home place had slipped through her lily- white fingers ! she moved to the flamingo ! A second- class hotel which has the advantage of not interfering in the private social life of the personalities there ! The flamingo is used to all kinds of going on. But even the management of the flamingo was impressed by Dame Blanche ! In fact they were so impressed by Dame Blanche that they requested her to turn in her room key for permanently..." (P. 186-87) From that onwards, Blanche has been living on a series of intimacies with every one including salesmen and soldiers. And it was not due to her nervous breakdown that she took leave from her school to stay with sister Stella, rather she was practically told by the Mayor of the Town to leave the place after she was thrown out by the school authorities for seducing one of the students.

After coming to know the above - mentioned facts, Stanley gets furious. In fact, all these days he had been suffering from the inferiority complex due to Blanche's aristocratic life style. Therefore he plans to take a revenge by sending her out of place. But before that, one night, after admitting Stella into a hospital Stanley comes back and finds Blanche talking to one of her old admirer - a rich man from the Delta Region. For a while he ignores her conversation but finding her again pretending to be somewhat superior than him, Stanley can't help telling her that he knows all about her past and hence "Viewing her only in the dark light of her sordid and excessive past, he breaks her last thread with reality by raping her,"¹³ Which symbolically represents the apparent victory of new over old world.

Similarly Blanche's relationship with Mitch can be interpreted in the light of Blanche's struggle to cling to whatever gentility is left in the modern world. As Benjamin Nelson puts it, "Mitch is the gentleman Blanche has been seeking for so long. But he is the last remnant of her ideal Big, clumsy gawking, he is a caricature of Southern gentleman, and yet - curiously - he is a gentleman. He is good and he is kind and he sees in Blanche something Stanley can never see: the true quality of a lady."¹⁴ Quite cleverly Blanche singles out Mitch in the group of Stanley's friends. She finds him to be the only survivor who in a way looks like a gentleman and therefore he is her last hope of getting security in this hard and cruel world. She tells the Mitch, "There is so much ...so much confusion in the world... Thank you for being so kind ! I need kindness now. (P. 155) On knowing that Mitch needs her as she, Blanche takes every precaution to get hold of him. She begins with telling him the truth about her husband and married life, but then comes to lies lest he should start hating her. However Stanley, her adversary plays havoc with her high hopes of getting married to Mitch. He tells Mitch all about

her past and makes him tell Blanche in her own language that he can't accept her as a wife because she no longer can play as a 'lady.' Hence Blanche's last hope to survive is gone and she is lost for ever.

CONCLUSION:

Thus the play serves as a social document in so far as it brings out the agony of romantic souls of Southerners with Blanche being their representative. Apart from this it is also a dramatic presentation of an individual in conflict with society. In this respect Blanche the role of a Southern Belle is misfit in contemporary society. As Benjamin Nelson observes "The personal and the literary history of Blanche DuBois is a long one... Many of the elements that comprised Myra Torrance, Cassandra Whiteside, Matilda Rockley, Laura and Amanda Wingfield and Alma Winemiller are fused in to the character of Blanche DuBois. In the play. their plight is given poignant expressions." It is Stella only who understands Blanche's plight. She tells Stanley, "... You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change." (P 198) One is reminded of the sweet and innocent girlhood of Laura and Alma Winemiller being destroyed by the hostile social atmosphere. Hence the play is not only replete with social realism but it also has psychological dimension. Williams probes into the psyche of individual to trace the root cause of degeneration. However, it is noticeable that Williams, here simply projects a picture of transitional period in the society without suggesting any way out. The play ends rightly with a comment on Blanche's tragedy-the representative of the declining old order, "She could not stay here : there was no other place for her to go." (P. 224).

REFERENCES

1. Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama*(1969 ; rpt. Ludhiana: Kalyani Publishers, 1971), P. 153.
2. Tennessee Williams, *Sweet Bird Of Youth.A Streetcar Named Desire, The Glass Menagerie.* ed. E.Martin Browne (1959; rpt. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1983), P. 115. All other textual references are taken from the same edition and page numbers are indicated in parenthesis after every quotation.
3. Thomas E. Porter, P. 157.
4. W.J. Cash, *The Mind Of The South* (1941; rpt., New York : Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1970) P. 103.
5. Numan v. Bartley, "The Era Of The New Deal as a Turning Point in Southern History ,”In *The New Deal and the South.* Ed. James E.Cobb and Micheal V. Namorato (Jackson : University Press of Mississippi, 1984), P.139.
6. W.J. Cash, P.109
7. W.J. Cash, P.103
8. Quoted by Winifred L. Dusenbury, in *The Theme of Lonliness in Modern American Drama* (Gaineville; University of Florida, Press, 1960), P. 141.
9. Joseph Woodkrutch, *Modernism in Modern Drama* (Ithaca: NY, 1963). P. 127.
10. Thomas E.Porter, P.166.
11. Hirsch Foster , *A Protrait of The Artist ; The plays of Tennessee Williams* (1979;rpt., New York; Alfred A knopf Inc.,1970) PP.29-30
12. Thomas E.Porter, P.163.
13. Benjamin Nelson, *Tennessee Williams : the man and his work* (New york :ungar, 1964), P.133.
14. Benjamin Nelson, P.144.