

Review

Blanche Dubois's tragedy of incomprehension in 'A Streetcar Named Desire'

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The present paper elaborates on the concept of self-knowledge in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* based on Carl Gustav Jung's psychoanalytic theory of archetypes. Jung considers the "collective unconscious" as a mental process in human mind from which he/she is not aware. It is the immortal part of man and the unknown psyche of him which is shaped by archetypes - the images, motifs or thematic patterns that occurred regularly in history, literature, or folkways. The aim of the study is to apply Jung's archetypes to Blanche Dubois's psyche in order to find the causes of her disintegration. It is concluded that the lack of self-realization and an unbalanced psyche causes the failure of individuation process and consequently some abnormal behaviors in this character.

Key words: Animus, shadow, persona, self, process of individuation.

INTRODUCTION

A Streetcar Named Desire is arguably Tennessee Williams' most acclaimed play. It won the New York Critic's Award and the Pulitzer Prize with 855 performances and earning 12 Academy Award nominations. Indeed, American theater can be divided into before and after *Streetcar*. With it, American drama in the post-World War II era gained a new subject, vocabulary, and grammar as well as a new openness to deal with taboo subjects. Williams is known for his powerfully written psychological dramas, most of which are set in South and usually portray neurotic people who are victims of their own passions, frustrations, and loneliness. The play's title emphasizes the journey of the play's protagonist, while Blanche's route to her new home establishes the play's central conflict between desire and death, Eros and Thanatos (Eyvazi, 2009:66). Since Williams has a tendency to plumb the dark depths of his characters to find their motivations, among different models of psychoanalysis, the Jungian psychoanalysis model seems to be appropriate.

Carl G. Jung is the founder of analytical psychology. He believes that literature, and art in general, is an essential

element in human civilization. His theories expand the horizons of literary interpretation for those critics interested in psychological approaches. There is no doubt that outside the realm of psychology and psychotherapy, it is literary criticism that has most fully employed the Jungian psychoanalysis. Jung's emphasis is not on the individual unconscious, but on what he calls the 'collective unconscious', shared by all individuals in all cultures, which he regards as the repository of racial memories and of primordial images and patterns of experience that he calls archetypes (Jung, 1969:112).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the audience is confronted with the traces of major Jungian archetypes including persona, anima/ animus, shadow, and self. Studying and analyzing this play, it is found that Blanche is fragmented not unified; so there are some opposites, that is, different archetypes, within her that cause some tensions and lack of self-realization from which she suffers a lot. The present paper shows that the only way for self-knowledge is to unify these archetypes, that is, to be involved in the process of individuation. In order to achieve this, the unconscious archetypes must be realized, and then be brought into relation with the conscious mind.

A Streetcar Named Desire naturalistic depiction of New Orleans's street life whose sights and sounds periodically invade the Kowalskis' apartment serves a symbolic

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and expressionistic function as objectifications of Blanche's mental disorientation and ultimate disintegration. The dispossessed and alienated Blanche has come to her sister, searching for a place where she can belong. Each of the play's 11 scenes represents, according to Kazan, a step in Blanche's progression from arrival to expulsion, in which the playwright called a tragedy of incomprehension. Blanche Dubois, a refugee of the Old Patrician South, makes her way to her sister's doorstep. Blanche is a woman without home or country. The South of her youth is gone; her expectations for marriage and men have been shattered. She wants desperately to leave the past behind her. Her antagonist, Stanley Kowalski, newly home from the war, wants to live as a lord of his domain, in sexual union with his wife. Like sufferers of post-traumatic stress, Blanche also lives in two simultaneous times - the past and the present. In her first moments at the Kowalski apartment, she searches desperately for a drink, telling Stella, "I was so exhausted by all I'd been through my - nerves broke (nervously tamping cigarette) I was on the verge of - lunacy, almost" (Williams, 2002:21). The playwright later reveals that fraternizing with young men was the true cause for her firing, but her claim of nerves seems real enough whatever the alleged cause. She reveals to Stella that she is on edge that she cannot be alone.

The trauma caused by suicide of her husband never left her, and the sudden return of the memory must have looked familiar to families dealing with soldiers who found themselves suddenly mentally transported back to the battlefield. In scene 6, she reveals the cause of her trauma to Mitch: she fell in love with a boy who was a gay, and then she publicly outed him, shouting her disgust for him in the middle of dance floor. Williams mentions in his blocking notes that as she tells the story, Blanche's sudden reactions to sound are in keeping with the symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Her reaction suggests the level of trauma that resulted from her experience.

THE TRACES OF ANIMUS IN BLANCHE

Animus is the archetype of masculine. It is psychic representation of sexual instinct or the manly side of the woman (Abrams, 1999:267). The animus, the unconscious masculine element in a woman, compensates for her conscious femininity - the female elements of her persona. Thus the most feminine woman may be cohabiting psychologically with the figure of a violent hoodlum. Biologically, the animus, the inner man, expresses the presence of a minority of male genes in a woman. Although, it is true that almost everybody falls in love or experiences sexual desire, few people are capable of object of their desire desirable in the first place. Jung (1958:34) believes that: the projection of animus causes mutual fascination.

The archetype of animus is projected on the opposite sex and causes mutual fascination. From another point of view, it can be said that Blanche seeks love and pity, projection and care and she feels she will get all these in her sister's house. Blanche is universal in being a woman dependent on men, aware of her waning physical appeal, terrified of her longing extinction. She drinks to dim her world, seeks to forget her loneliness and when the real world catches up with her, she retreats into the all-out fantasy of madness (Donhue, 1964:83). As an ambiguous figure of the psyche, the animus has positive as well as negative roles to play in a woman's life. When projected, the animus serves as a bridge to the opposite sex. Jung thinks that the animus can only be realized through the presence of a partner of the opposite sex. Blanche tries to satisfy her suppressed needs by relying on strangers. In Jungian terms, she has unconsciously projected her animus onto strange men. Because of her desire for the world of fantasy and her clinging to the emotional life, she will miss the opportunity of realizing and integrating her animus by living with strange men who have received her projection. Consequently, she remains possessed by the animus, and this destroys her life and drives her mad. She cannot distinguish between the world of men and the animus image she has projected on them. It is Blanche's fate to fail to recognize the need to come to terms with her animus until it is too late. She has a wavering personality. Jung believes, "the unpleasant power complex of the female animus is encountered only when a woman does not allow her feeling to express itself naturally (Walker, 2002:54). Blanche never has a successful relationship with her brother-in-law, Stanley. The reason is that sometimes, woman does not accept the man who has received her animus projection. In fact, she loses the chance to realize her animus.

THE TRACES OF PERSONA IN BLANCHE

The persona is a mask we take on in our everyday life, a mask that pretends individuality. The persona is a complicated system for connecting the individual consciousness with society. One could call it a mask that makes an impression on other people. It partly results from the demands of a society that one has to play the role that has been ascribed to him/her. As soon as one deviates from his role, he becomes a suspicious person. A person evolves from childhood as individuals navigate the stereotypes and norms of society, and develop a psychological framework of how to connect the outside world. The word persona itself is derived from the Greek word for mask, and it is one of the five Jungian archetypes: self, shadow, anima/animus, ego, and persona. As it is seen in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche's role is similar to playing a character in a script. Her persona is akin to actors taking on a role for a movie. She tries to put on a persona in order to function without

feelings of anxiety and other mental issues. In an ideal world, the persona reflects the truest nature of the inner ego to the outside world.

In the case of Blanche, complications present themselves when her inner self is in opposition, directly or indirectly, with her exterior persona. For example, Blanche pretends to be a young and happy lady but in fact, she is depressed and nervous in her inside. Psychological conditions such as depression, wavering, and anxiety in her psyche are the result of continued portrayal of her false-self. Exaggerated persona in Blanche smothers her individuality and creates a rift between her true self and her outside self. Her exaggerated persona can be even seen in her appearance and the way she wears clothes. Weals (1965:29) points out that:

Blanche's clothes are a characterizing device and a way of separating her from her surrounding, Blanche is going to be destroyed by the end of the play and Williams wants her first appearance...to imply that end. Costume here becomes a way of foreshadowing the events to come. (29)

If the individual identifies too much with the archetype of persona, it leads to the neglect of the person's inner life, such as the case observed in Blanche. Reading the play, the reader comes to this understanding that Blanche gives a high importance to the persona; that is, the social personality. Because of her desire for social status, Blanche hides the reality about her life and her marriage. Even in relation to her sister, Stella, she does not tell truth about her job. She wants to keep her inner aspect separate from her outer aspect, and this is what cannot be preserved in her relation to others.

THE PROJECTION OF SHADOW

Blanche desires to ignore her shadow and seeks for idealistic world. According to Jung, there is no hope of eliminating the shadow in this world. So, we can discover that, instead of realizing her shadow and making balance between her shadow and her persona, Blanche is condemned to asylum. Jung points out that trying to ignore the shadow "would be equivalent to death" (Jung, 2002:16). This is what happens for Blanche at the end. She undergoes sanity which can be considered as a kind of psychological death to her. For Blanche, Allan's suicide would seem to be a failure in her psyche. She vaunts him not only as a good person but even as an ideal one, for example in scene 6 she tells that "I loved him unendurably" (Williams, 2002:136). When she discovers some elements of his shadow and his dark side in cheating on her and his deceptive homosexuality, she is faced with the conflict of resolving these preclusive

things into her conception of him. Blanche makes intimacies with other men in order to prove her sexual desire which is part of her shadow but she is never successful. Although both Stanley and Blanche have projected the shadow on other people, but the degree of their projections is not the same. It means that the projection of shadow by Blanche is not as extensive as that by Stanley. Therefore, she sometimes tries to accept her shadowy side of her nature. We see that when confronted by Mitch about her past, Blanche tries to defend her reasons for her deceptions, stating: "I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, magic! I try to give that to people, I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what I ought to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me damned with it!" (Williams, 2002:204).

THE SELF AND THE PROCESS OF INDIVIDUATION

Self is the central organizing principle of the psyche which gives cohesion, meaning and direction to the whole psyche. Self is the most important of the collective unconscious. It is the center of the unconscious into which the other parts of the psyche must be integrated. In fact, it causes the harmonious relationship of the other archetypes. In this way, the individual will achieve wholeness. The process during which the self is realized is called individuation. According to Jung, although individuation is the ultimate goal of human life, it is rare for anyone to realize his/her self completely (Walker, 2002:86-87). In this play, Blanche faces different opposites such as: life and death, illusion and reality, past and present, etc. She suffers from the tensions between these opposites which originate from the archetypes of the collective unconscious (Tharp, 1980:57). The only way is to bring the archetypes into a harmonious relationship. But because Blanche is not able to realize her archetypes, she will not realize her "self". Of course, it must be mentioned that she does not succeed to make balance between her inner and outer world. She does not reach to the point in her life to grow her "self". So, the lack of self-realization causes abnormalities in her psyche.

CONCLUSION

Jung detects collective unconscious beneath the layers of personal unconscious which consists of different archetypes. Archetypes are fundamental psychic patterns common to all humans, which influence all of human experiences and behaviors. Man can realize them just through their effects. The traces of the archetypes can be found in literary works. Therefore, literary works such as Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be analyzed within the models of psychoanalysis, especially Jung's. The archetype of self is the most important one. It gives

cohesion, meaning and direction to the whole psyche and brings all the archetypes together. The ultimate goal of human life is the realization of self. This is a long and complicated process called individuation. The traces of Jungian archetypes can be detected in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* desires for some kind of wholeness. She suffers from some tensions within her. Blanche is inflated by persona. It means that she identifies too much with this archetype because she highly desires for the social status. Her making intimacies with strangers cause her to lose the chance to realize her animus. In the case of shadow, it must be said that Blanche projects it to the strangers. At the end, Blanche who fails in the process of individuation and cannot realize her 'self' runs mad. So the source of her abnormal behaviors relies on the lack of self-knowledge and her failure to balance her psyche in order to achieve wholeness.

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