Abstract

Blanche Dubois is probably one of the dramatic characters who has called the attention of spectators, readers and critics ever since the play opened on Broadway in 1947. However, she seems to be inexhaustible in her complexity, for new perspectives can be applied in an analysis of her downfall.

In this paper, we intend to trace her evolution, by studying her journey from the lost plantation’s Southern belle to the nymphomaniac, and child-abuser, who is evicted from her town and is forced to escape and seek refuge in her sister’s house. As she tries to leave her past behind, and forget the reputation of “evil, pervert woman”, she will enter the stairway to hell, and will be condemned to madness as her only way out.

As a final touch in her characterization process, we will try to connect her with other ‘evil’ women that appear in 20th century American drama, like Minnie Foster in Susan Glaspell’s Trifles or Regina Giddens in Lillian Hellman’s The Little Foxes.

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1. Introduction: Blanche Dubois: The Journey From Southern Belle To Evil Woman

Blanche Dubois is the protagonist of one of Tennessee William’s most famous plays A Streetcar Named Desire. Since the opening of this play in Broadway in 1947, Blanche has been one of the characters who has called the attention of critics, readers and spectators. Blanche can provoke contradictory and contrary emotions in every person but she definitely leaves no one indifferent.

Throughout history, Blanche has been largely considered the epitome of the fallen woman punished for her sexual desire. Depicted sometimes as the “dark seductress” and others as the poor victim of an obsolete social system (the mythical and legendary Old South), Blanche Dubois is a character capable of inspiring pity and love and, at the same time, disappointment and hatred on the spectator or reader.

In this paper we will see how society was not ready to accept deviations from the norm and how society transforms Blanche in an evil
woman. The American society of the 1940s – 1950s lived in a double moral standard that affected women, especially single women, in terms of sexuality dividing them into virgins, wives and whores. Women were expected to enact sexuality just for pure biological purposes. When an unmarried woman enjoyed sex “publicly” she was automatically placed in the group of whores. This woman then was considered a pervert, nymphomaniac, morally doubtful person despised by the whole society. This is what happens with Blanche.

2. **BLANCHE DUBOIS**

For this specific analysis of Blanche we will concentrate on scenes IV onwards where her past is revealed little by little and so this helps us to understand her present definition as “evil, pervert” woman. The first clear indication of her happy past within the myth of the southern belle is provided by her sister Stella. However, Stella indicates as well that the reasons for Blanche’s transformation are going to be found in the rules of a society that “force her to change”:

> STANLEY: delicate piece she is  
> STELLA: she is. She was. 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. (ASND, p.198)

Stella is referring to the time when Blanche was still a young girl, when they lived in the plantation house Belle Reve and where both sisters were educated within the myth of the southern belle. Blanche was the perfect example of that myth: young, fragile, delicate and beautiful. As a southern belle, she was urged to marry being almost a child because “ the heyday of the belle is short-lived; from a debut at sixteen or seventeen to the threat of spinsterhood by nineteen, her career lasts for the few short years in between” (Seidel, 1985: 61). Blanche had interiorized these already old-fashioned values and she chooses Allan Grey “a boy who wrote poetry” and who was “extremely good-looking”.

Blanche worshiped and adored this man as well as his talent but all her love and admiration turned into profound disgust when she finds out the truth about her husband. Allan Grey was an extremely talented poet and a man who treated Blanche as a delicate, fragile muse but not really as a wife. Allan did not fulfill Blanche’s sexual needs because, as Stella says gathering the opinion of the whole society, “this beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate”. Allan Grey was homosexual and so he was a degenerate, a pervert in the view of society and Blanche cannot tolerate this.
Blanche feels cheated, disappointed and above all she feels she has been betrayed by someone she adored and loved to the extreme. She spits all her wrath, repulsion and scorn in Allan’s face during a ball. Blanche’s discovery leads him to commit suicide what leaves her with a deep feeling of guilt that she will never overcome. We see all this reflected in her own words, when she explains the situation to Mitch in scene six of the play:

But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn’t like a man’s, although he wasn’t the least bit effeminate looking… he came to me for help. I didn’t know that (…) then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty – which wasn’t empty, but had two people in it … Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino (…) Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and run out of the casino (…) He’d stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired – so that the back of his head had been – blown away! (…) it was because – on the dance-floor – unable to stop myself- I’d suddenly said – ‘I know! I know! You disgust me …’

(ASND, p.p. 182-184)

Blanche feels tremendously guilty of her husband’s death. She was part of this constrictive society that considered homosexuality a perversion, an immoral deviation of the human being and she was incapable of helping him, of understanding him. From that moment onwards Blanche will have the Varsouviana tune resounding, “stuck in her head”, to remind her about Allan’s death. From that moment onwards we see how the mixture of scorn, death and guilt compel Blanche to take refuge in desire, sex, and she developed a strong will to go on living in her self-delusion of youth and a glorious past that will never be repeated, except in her mind. From that moment onwards she will become, in the eyes of Southern society, an evil, perverted woman who goes from pederasty to nymphomania and prostitution.

However, Blanche would offer her own vision, a vision that will make her confront society. It is important to mention that, after Allan’s death, Blanche has to experience many more illnesses, corruptions and deaths. She lives in Belle Reve and the house slips from her hands due to the fact that “grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications” (ASND, p. 140). Sex seems to be directly related with the disappearance of the plantation house. Blanche needs to escape from the
everyday reality of sickness and death and, as she acknowledges, the opposite of death is desire.

She fills up her loneliness and isolation with sexual encounters, hence becoming a prostitute in the eyes of society. She starts by answering the calls of young soldiers who came to Belle Reve at night to solicit her and, when she remembers this, we can observe a melancholy shadow in her eyes. Her voice changes as she recalls the insistent voices calling Blanche! Blanche! And, for a moment, she forgets that this made her become a prostitute and a disgusting woman even for Mitch. Our protagonist’s sexual intercourses with these soldiers increased the self-deception that she was being loved, in spite of the fact that they only wanted sex and they used Blanche just as a sexual object to fulfill their most basic instincts and needs. There is no specific reference to whether they paid her for the services rendered but it seems that Blanche enjoyed these short moments of “love” in her own delusion. What for society is prostitution and immoral behavior in a woman, for Blanche it is life, sex is life, which helps her to create an alternative world where she is loved and admired as she used to be.

After the loss of the plantation house Blanche becomes a schoolteacher. She changes from being ‘the angel in the house’ to work at a school, the most/only suitable job for women. During her stage as schoolteacher she takes a definitive step in her transformation into an evil woman in the eyes of society: she has an affair with one of her students, a seventeen-year-old boy. This is an outrageous monstrosity and now she is considered worse than a prostitute. She is accused of pederasty and this causes her expulsion from the school and from her town. We know about this when Stanley tells Stella the reasons why Blanche was forced to leave school before the term ended. Besides, we witness Blanche attraction for young boys when, in scene five, a young boy appears to collect some money while she is alone, waiting for Mitch at her sister’s. Blanche cannot avoid flirting and seducing the boy who seems to be “a prince out of the Arabian nights”:

Come here! Come on over here like I told you! I want to kiss you-just once-softly and sweetly on your mouth (...). Run along now! It would be nice to keep you, but I’ve got to be good and keep my hands off children. Adios! (ASND, p. 174)

Blanche knows she is being a bad girl in the eyes of society. However, she does not think she is doing something really wrong. She needs to feel sexually attractive for young boys. She needs to know that she still has the power of sex to survive in this world that is destructing her. In Kazan’s film version we can hear her tremulous, soft and tender voice calling that boy and we can appreciate as well a slight change in her tone in the last words of
the quotation. She travels back to the past, to Laurel, as we can notice by her lost look and a change in her face, because “she must be good”. Blanche just needs to travel back to her past, a past in which she was young and beautiful and happy. She needs to have sex with young boys to create this illusion in her mind. She does not feel she is harming anyone beside herself. The boys do not reject her but society needs someone to blame for immorality and Blanche is a perfect target.

When she leaves Belle Reve because she cannot keep the house, Blanche Dubois has to move and she moves to the Flamingo Hotel. This is not the best hotel in town and it is characterized by “the smell of cheap perfume”, the perfume used by prostitutes, a perfume that Blanche does not use. While she is there alone in a cheap room, surrounded by the worst people, she needs to go back and forget about her terrible, unfair present more than ever. Again she uses sex as her only way out, being branded as a nymphomaniac due to the numerous men that visit her. The combination of pederasty and nymphomania triggers an invitation to leave the town and she is not expected to come back again. Where could Blanche go? There was just a place for her and this was her sister’s house in New Orleans, where she is not really wanted and where we will witness her total downfall helped by Stanley Kowalski.

Stanley never trusts “dame Blanche”, he is able to see that there is something more beyond the image she presents to them. In the 1951 film version we see how, when Stanley is close, only one part of Blanche is visible, the other is covered in shadows, to indicate that she is hiding something. She is trying to leave her past behind but this turns out to be impossible. Her sister knows how painful and unfair was Blanche’s failed marriage but Stanley does not pay attention to this. He only wants to pull the mask off Blanche’s face and in order to achieve that goal, Stanley will really become the agent of her final destruction. During her stay with the Kowalskis’ Blanche culminates her process of evil, as she becomes the “Tarantula” who uses her victims for pleasure, the Tarantula who eats her victims and drinks from their youth.

During this stage she plays the role of the Femme Fatale, as she tries to seduce Harold Mitchell in order to achieve redemption. She plays to be the “Dame Aux Camellias” speaking French and dancing with him, even allowing him to kiss her once. She displays all her seductive skills to catch this man, the primary objective of the southern belle. Mitchell feels attracted to what he sees: a beautiful, honorable lady but he cannot see beyond until Stanley discovers everything. This is when Blanche confesses she is the Tarantula who brought her victims to the Flamingo Hotel: “Tarantula was the name of it! (…) that’s where I brought my victims” (ASND, p. 204). This is what society thinks of her, this is what is expected of her and Mitch feels
cheated and, to a certain extent, he feels like one of the Tarantula victims who has been saved just in time.

The Tarantula is just a metaphor to refer to a fallen, promiscuous woman. The Tarantula is the character that Blanche represents for the society of the time and the Tarantula deserves some punishment. Stanley, representing this constrictive patriarchal society, will be the agent of the punishment. What is the most accurate punishment for such a woman? Of course, rape is the best option. The punishment for a perverted, nymphomaniac, and pederast woman is just another kind of sex. She needs to learn a lesson and Stanley is the teacher now. For this society Blanche was the person to blame even for such a disgusting and painful experience as rape is. This destroys all her aspirations and illusions and takes her back to the cruelest reality. The film version uses the smashed mirror to symbolize the rape. This image is going to become the filmic epitome of the representation of Blanche’s destruction.

However, even at this final stage, Blanche defies society because, as Seidel indicates, women were expected “to react to rape not only with shame and humiliation but with suicide”. Blanche has two options to get out of Stanley’s house: suicide, which is the most honorable and easiest one, or life. She chooses life but, with this choice, her only way to escape is madness. Blanche is a natural fighter and she leaves her sister’s place to go to an asylum where she is going to depend “on the kindness of strangers”. The strangers who have always been there for her to depend on, strangers who gave her warm and few moments of company and who helped her to survive in a world where women like her had no chance to live. Blanche has chosen desire over death but we cannot forget that “there are lives that desire does not sustain” (Kolin, 1993: 45).

3. - CONCLUSION

With Blanche we travel back to the South of the beautiful southern belles and the world of gallantry. We accompany her to a confrontation with the cruel reality that will destroy her forever. Blanche moves between the light and the shadows, incapable of living in a new world where she is totally out of place. I will try to prove that Blanche Dubois is just the product of a corrupt society of double standards were women could just be three things: wives (and mothers), virgins or whores. It is unnecessary to indicate in which group we find Blanche. I think that the classification of women in wives, virgin or whores is still being used today. An unmarried woman is the object of pity and contempt if she behaves according to social standards. However, if she is considered to be promiscuous, she deserves to be alone and she will be fiercely criticized. If a man has sexual relationships with a thousand
women he is considered almost a hero. If a woman dares to do so she is worse than a professional prostitute. The analysis of literature and film might be useful to change this unfair situation for women. It is time to take a look back to those texts that many years ago were denouncing a situation that has not changed much.

Blanche is a victim of the society of her time, another victim more of the double standard. Everybody makes mistakes and I think that we all keep our darkest secrets hidden for the rest of the world. Blanche is denied this possibility. Her most despicable and perverted actions are exhibited in front of everybody. She is even denied the right to defend herself. Once she becomes a whore she can do nothing, say nothing because nobody will believe her any longer. The punishment Blanche receives is cruel. A rape is the most destructive, disgusting, painful, despicable and unjustifiable crime. The total annihilation of the self can never be pardoned.

Bibliography


