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BLANCHE:

A Complexity of Attitudes

It is so easy to know how one should feel about the ending of a play written a few centuries ago. But the more up-to-date the play is, the less certain one's response seems to be. When the Greek heroes die on the stage one is moved and sad while at the same time relieved. But when a contemporary like Blanche Du Bois is taken away from the Elysian Fields what is one's reaction? Is one relieved, moved or shocked? Is one happy? George Brandt asks a question similar to it in "Cinematic Structure in the Work of Tennessee Williams": "Precisely to what degree we are supposed to be on Blanche's side, or whether indeed so simple a question of identification arises at all is not easy to determine in the face of Williams's attitudes. Is there not some ambivalence in the text itself that suggests an undercurrent of sympathy with the Kowalski way of life?"¹ Bamber Gascoigne asks the same question in an essay: "Does Williams sympathize with Blanche or with Stanley? ... The truth is that the play is ambiguous in the best sense."²

When Blanche appears she is "daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and hat looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district ... Her

delicate beauty must avoid a strong light."³ She comes to realize too soon that she is not at the right place. She comes from a place which she had to leave just as she will have to leave the Elysian Fields. She cannot belong anywhere though she is trying very hard. She is also trying very hard to keep contact and communicate, but it seems to be too difficult for her. She represents values very different from the world around her. She comes from a family which definitely tried to live up to the traditions and morals of the old South, as Gascoigne puts it: "... she clings pathetically to her faded shreds of Southern gentility."⁴ On the one hand she wants to stick to her old values, but on the other she would like to gain people's sympathy so she uses different faces for different people: one face for Stella, one for Stanley and one for Mitch. She must have had a different face at home, too.

The problem with these faces is that she thinks she uses them very wisely but she does not. Now and then she slips out of one role and begins to play another, mixes two faces and starts all over again. As Esther Merle Jackson interprets it: "In each of his characters Williams presents a composite image, a montage of roles which together comprise the anti-heroic character."⁵ In her efforts Blanche is pitied but at the same time she inevitably becomes ridiculous.

She goes about it the wrong way, too. She wants to be loved or at least liked but as soon as she appears she begins to criticize Stella's home. Instead of trying to understand

Stella, and her feelings, she wants to "save" her.⁶

Even in the most desperate moments she cares about things of slight importance. Although Mitch does not come to her birthday "party" she still insists to everybody that it is her 27th birthday.

The different faces:

1. The face for Stella:

It is very hard for Blanche to keep this face because they have known each other since childhood so Stella knows her very well.

She wants to be accepted and loved by Stella. It proves difficult because Blanche has changed a lot. She has become an alcoholic, she is a failure and she has lost Belle Rêve. She wants to play her rôle so that Stella will forget everything. The problem, as I have said it earlier, is that Blanche goes about things the wrong way. Instead of trying to understand Stella she criticizes her and her home. "I thought you would never come back to this horrible place."⁷ Then she tries to rectify her mistake, but a few minutes later she says: "You sit down and explain this place to me."⁸ As if she had the right to question her sister like that. At this point we only know that she drinks more than she wants people to know. She drinks when nobody is in the room, but when Stella comes in, she pretends she does not know where the drinks are. Stella does not know the truth yet, and she wants to be very polite and patient with Blanche, although she does not like her life-style to be criticized. She really loved Blanche when they were children. That is why she wants

to protect her all the time. 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."⁹

From the beginning there is a great deal of tension between the two women though they are both trying to pretend that they are very much at ease. The tension comes partly from the fact that Stella wants to be happy about Blanche staying with them and at certain points she is happy (childhood memories). But Blanche means a great many problems and Stella senses danger from the moment Blanche arrives. She is afraid that Blanche will not be able to adjust to the circumstances, that there are going to be problems with Stanley and other people around. Stella wants to live by her new standards, consciously or subconsciously she feels that she has betrayed her past, her childhood and home. But she does not want to know. Her fears about Blanche are justified too soon. She has been able - so far - to fulfil the criteria of a woman's rôle without problems: housewife, lover, homemaker, mother-to-be. That is what is expected of her and that is what she wants. Blanche arouses some doubts which have been repressed - is it all right to live like that, is that all a woman is for? Stella would not listen to these questions. Blanche could act as a kind of catalyst for Stella if her statements did not appear so false. Stella could be convinced of the truth of what Blanche says, but none of it is considered valid, because Blanche lives in a world of

delusions and her former life-style shows a big gap between what she says (preaches) and what she does. That is why we cannot fully sympathize with her even when she is totally ruined.

2. The face for Stanley:

Stanley does not like her from the beginning. Reasons: he feels instinctively that Blanche plays rôles all the time, and he also feels that she is nervous and affected. Later on he will dislike her even more for financial reasons: HIS money was also lost when Belle Rêve had to go. He keeps harping on about the Napoleonic code. When he digs up her past, he thinks he is doing what is best for everybody, but particularly for his friend Mitch. Mitch must not marry a woman who is not pure. Only pure women can get married. He also has some unspoken black and white maxims in his collection of moral values: sick people should go to hospital and never mix with healthy ones. He does not worry about pity and sympathy - about motives in people's actions. He is also convinced that a woman is utterly happy when satisfied in bed, and that is all she needs. In his world everything is simple, too simple. His life is that of "animal joys".¹⁰

3. The face for Mitch:

Mitch could mean escape for Blanche. If he married her she would be respectable again. When with him she emphasizes values dead long ago in her character: culture, knowledge and sensibility, intelligence because she knows he falls for these values. She does not even let him kiss her. She thinks

it is important to have dreams and when she is playing this rôle, it is not so much to deceive Mitch but rather that she wants to make reality more beautiful. Reality is too grey for her, it has to be colored, seen through rose-tinted spectacles. That is why she lies about her age, puts a lantern on the lightbulb, does not like too much light, and puts powder on her face several times a day.

Mitch would have remained a completely different person has it not been for Blanche. We would think him different from other men around, in that he is able to sympathize, and share other people's problems. He also seems to be affectionate. As soon as he learns the truth about Blanche he becomes cruel and insensitive towards her, because his real values have been revealed and they are very similar to those of Stanley. He becomes just as hostile as Stanley. His hostility comes partly from hurt pride. There is another component: old and new values clash in him when learning about Blanche's past. The meaning of healthy and sane have been meaning something for him all his life, and Blanche with her "weirdness" begins to remind him of an unhealthy person more and more. He is confused: he cannot possibly change his expectations, values and all his way of thinking. In this dilemma he rather gives up Blanche than his old values. His deep attachment to his mother also prevents him from seriously considering a relationship with Blanche after the truth is revealed. But the decision breaks him, too. He is cruel and insensitive to her because he doesn't find any other way to

express his disillusionment and the feeling of being betrayed. He acts as any "normal" person would in a similar situation. The meaning of "normal" and "abnormal" in this play would need further studying. Elia Kazan says: "The more I work on Blanche, incidentally, the less insane she seems. She is caught in a fatal inner contradiction, but in another society she would work. In Stanley's society, no!"¹¹ So Mitch has been deceived in his expectations and hopes. The difference between him and Stanley is that Stanley has no doubts and remorse about the way he acts, whereas the decision breaks Mitch.

Returning back to the original question: what is one's reaction, to the ending the answer may be: as we cannot fully accept or reject Blanche, when she is eliminated we don't fully sympathize nor do we rejoice fully. The play has a great effect on us because we experience a complexity of feelings and reactions. Even though we could not accept her she will be with us for a long time after leaving the theatre or putting the book down.

N O T E S

- 1 In: *American Theatre* by Gassner. Edited by Edward Arnold. Chapter 8, p. 176.
- 2 In: *Twentieth-Century Drama* by B. Gascoigne on T. Williams, p. 168.
- 3 Quotation from Penguin Books, *Sweet Bird of Youth*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, introduced and edited by E. Martin Browne, p. 117.
- 4 see Note 2., p. 167.
- 5 In: *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* by Esther Merle Jackson, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison and Milwaukee, 1965., p. 83.
- 6 see Note 3., p. 161.
7. ibid., p. 120.
- 8 ibid., p. 121.
- 9 ibid., p. 198.
- 10 Quotation from *The Broken World of Tennessee Williams* (see Note 5.) p. 59.
- 11 ibid. quoted from Elia Kazan's *Notebook for A Streetcar Named Desire in Directing the Play* eds. Toby Cole and Helen Chinoy (Indianapolis, 1953) p. 301.

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