

The unfit female characters in two Tennessee Williams' plays: "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "The Glass Menagerie"

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Abstract

Two female characters were chosen to be analysed in this essay: Laura and Blanche from the plays *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* respectively written by Tennessee Williams (1911-83), an American playwright born in Columbus, Mississippi. There are many essays about these two plays but we decided to write another one because we, like the author, feel sympathetic towards these two characters and writing about them is the way we found to trying to understand why their fate is so tragic and sad. We came to certain conclusions: the two women failed to succeed because the personal features of their personality (tenderness, shyness, romanticism, restraint) contradict the objective and material characteristics of a society in which individualism, Social Darwinism and competitiveness prevail. And although the two plays portray the American society in the late '30s and in the '40s the author, through the characters' fall, criticizes our social "praxis" that was, and still is, based upon the lack of humanity and friendship.

Literature is not the real picture of society because the author perceives the world from a certain point of view, and therefore might transform it. And although there is no direct relation between society and literature it is obvious that the author is a man who lives in a certain period to which he is attached, portraying it but not photographing it. So it is important to become aware of how the author deals with the social environment and how it is turned to literature. It is necessary to find out if he criticizes, worships or impartially exposes society through the fictional universe in which the characters suffer their falls and live their successes. In this essay we are going to show how literature deals with real dimension discussing this matter through the analysis of two Tennessee Williams' plays: **A Streetcar Name Desire** and **The Glass Menagerie**. Tennessee William is an American playwright born in Columbus, Mississippi in 1911

and died in 1983. He produced a lot and his reputation was established by **The Glass Menagerie** (1944) and reinforced by **A Streetcar Named Desire** (1947). In both plays the stories give a realistic picture of some southern American values in the end of the '30s and in the beginning of the '40s. So American life and culture in those days must be discussed in order to understand why some characters, mainly the female ones, fail to succeed in the society they live. We chose Laura and Blanche Du Bois to be analysed because these two women are very similar: both are shy, delicate, weak, dreamy, romantic and because of these features unfit for a very aggressive and competitive world. Because of their behavior, expectations, concepts of love, family and friendship they stand apart from a society whose claims, based upon competitiveness and individualism, they cannot support. In order to understand their unfitnes we have to take a close view into American social and historical context to find out why they cannot integrate themselves into the place they live and interact with it. Indeed they are tragic heroines

whose destinies are determined: loneliness and failure.

After the World War First there was a great increase in American economy. This is connected with the fact that the European countries stopped producing their goods and started depending upon American products during the sad days of the war conflicts. Besides that the American war industry developed a lot selling and exporting war equipment to the allies during the conflict and these sales also increased the American economy. So, because of the war, the USA. developed a lot. The economic growth was followed by a rich cultural period called The Jazz Age in which a hedonistic behavior prevailed. But in spite of this a great crisis devastated the American society in the late '20s. It is difficult to explain why the Great Depression, officially started with the crack of the New York stock market in 1929, happened but there are some reasons which can be presented and some of them may be the following: the overproduction leading to the fall of prices and to bankruptcy of too many businessmen, the maldistribution of national incomes (a huge gap between the poor and the wealthy) and the unreasonable policy that stimulated the stock market speculation. Poverty, unemployment, the crack of the New York stock market, the fall of mass consumption, the bankruptcy of farmers and businessmen revealed a great crisis of Capitalism and its underground philosophy: Neoliberalism. After The Great Depression that followed, the government started planning the economy in accordance with Keyne's ideas which were opposed to a capitalist and a neoliberalist view in which the rules of the market are the only force to guide the social environment. Keyne's ideas demanded the government's full time planning of the economy and controlling of its influences over society. It is the birth's of the Welfare State. Only with the help of the government, could society solve its problems. Capitalism could not handle the crisis alone and the governors had to accept some communist practices to deal with poverty, unemployment and bankruptcy. "The invisible hands of the market" did not work and Neoliberalism started to be questioned. Because of this new social structure the USA could get rid of their problems. This new policy was called New Deal and due to that the American society could recuperate its previous living standard. After this revival, the World War Second broke up and although the USA participated in the conflict the American economy increased for the same reasons exposed above when the World War First was mentioned. After the end of the international

conflict the USA helped many countries, specially Japan and Germany, be rebuilt. The Cold War between Capitalism and Communism started and despite the strong and cruel competition the USA and the URSS developed a lot. It was a period in which the economy, the scientific knowlegde and the living standard increased and reached a positive level not only in the USA but in other countries benefiting many people. This period is called by some historians as "The Golden Years." This golden age lasted until the '70s and in spite of all the wealth that was reached there were many people who were not able to lead a wealthy life. This fact can be explained by Capitalism itself because under this system people have to be strong, competitive, fearless, individualist to be a winner and the ones who are naive, weak, shy, dependent are the losers. So there are the ones who are inside the system accepting the rules and reinforcing them and others, the outsiders, who cannot carry on because they are not prepared to fight. It is the Social Darwinism in which the stronger wins and survives. This emphasis on the individual and his ability to endure by himself sufferings, obstacles, real daily battles lead to the fall of the common view, to the breakdown of the family, making people lose their sense of communal obligation. This individualist view is responsible for too much loneliness and lack of real friendship in society because there is a clear division between the winners and the losers. And in order to prevent people's total failure the government as an impersonal institution, the Welfare State, helps the outsiders, providing them with unemployment security, health care, house, education but not love, friendship or family life. It is the institution that supports the poor, the losers, the old, the abandoned children, the mentally and physically handicapped – all the unfit. Among these are the women, specially before the movements for women's liberation. Before the '60s, women had just little, weak voice in our society. They had to be pretty, young, well- brought up in order to marry a decent man who would support them. Their social value was linked to a traditional institution: marriage. But the traditional family in which there are the good and providing father, the housekeeper mother and the two children is falling apart in a society that worships the self-made-man, the individual, the competitor. So for women the situation is worse because they do not have the same possibilities to get a job that men have and their cultural background forces them to search for a husband who is their only way to reach happiness and security. It is in the context of a capitalist economy and cosmovision

that Tennessee Williams writes his plays in which there are the winners' universe and the losers' one. In "A Streetcar Named Desire" and "The Glass Menagerie" the female characters Blanche and Laura represent two unfit women who do not have the necessary weapons to fight for success: sense of competition and individualist view to achieve a good and secure place in society. Their fall occurs because they are women, they are "peculiar", they are not married, they do not have a family, they live in an ancient world which goes against the modern capitalist lifestyle.

In "The Glass Menagerie" the author portrays the breakdown of the family as a result of this social and ideological infrastructure that is also responsible for the male's escape. Tom and his father abandon the house and Laura and her mother, Amanda, are left behind. They are not able to survive by themselves because in such universe a woman must be married to be respected, to be taken as a decent human being and, consequently, to survive. Laura's mother is married but her husband goes away because he is fond of adventure and cannot stand daily routine and so marriage is a heavy burden for him to bear. After her husband's departure, Amanda hopes Laura can marry a decent man who can support both of them because she knows Tom will follow his father's steps. In fact he is just like his father. He likes adventures: he is an aficionado for movies as if it were a way of escaping from reality. And although Tom loves his sister he goes away in order to lead a different life. He cannot adjust himself to a bourgeois society. He cannot work, he does not have a girlfriend, he cannot support his family, he reads a lot (Shakespeare, D. J. Lawrence) as a way of escaping from real life. Laura and her mother are left aside. Laura is "peculiar", delicate, shy, romantic and unprepared to live in a wild world in which people have to show some attributes such as popularity, cunning, coldness, rationality, etc to achieve a better position in life. Laura lives in a solitary universe, listening to some old songs, dressing her mother's dresses, browsing through her high school album, "living" her mother's stories, keeping a platonic love for a boy from high school, being fond of her little crystal animals – **the glass menagerie**. These lifeless animals are her friends and her favorite one is the unicorn. This mythological animal symbolizes an ancient, imaginary and distant world where Laura lives, trying to protect herself from the tough real world. Her fondness for the unicorn lays on Laura's singularity: she is a different girl as much as the unicorn that resembles a horse

but is different because of its horn. Laura is a complete failure and fails to fulfill all her mother's expectations, specially to marry a "gentleman caller". She does not marry, she is not popular, she cannot learn typing, she cannot work. And although we are sympathetic towards her and hope she has a better life we know from the very moment we meet Laura that she will be left alone. Her failure is made clear when her unicorn is damaged (it falls down and breaks its horn) by the young man, Jim O'Connor, whom Tom invited to come to have dinner with Laura, hoping that he falls in love with her and can marry her. Laura misses the unique opportunity to integrate herself into the real life: the young man leaves the house (he is engaged to another girl) and besides that he breaks by accident Laura's link (the glass unicorn) to her refuge: the imaginary world represented by the unicorn. This passage is rather symbolic because it is the first real attempt to integrate Laura into the real world but it does not work (the gentleman caller will not return). Laura's favorite glass animal is broken. This last fact is ambiguous because it could be Laura's salvation: losing the unicorn, Laura could leave her secluded, fairy-tale world, starting to live an ordinary life but instead she becomes lonelier. She loses something that could give her a sense of identity because Laura's fondness for the unicorn lays on its peculiarity: Laura is a different girl and this fact connects her with the unicorn because this animal looks like a horse but its horn makes it different. So her peculiarity lays on her difference and if she loses that difference she is nothing unless she finds another identity but there is no way of doing that. Laura loses everything: her secluded, fairy-tale world, her identity and simultaneously the possibility of integrating herself into the ordinary life. Jim invades her life, she finds out he is the boy she loved at high school, he is sympathetic towards her, he tries to teach her how to be self-confident but he shows her another world to which she is not prepared and leaves her alone disintegrating her life. Although Laura lives with Amanda, after Jim and Tom's departure, she is lost and completely alone. At the end of the play Tom is far away and still alone thinking about Laura blowing out the candles (he forgot to pay the electricity bill). The years are passing by and Laura is getting old and is still alone. Laura will never be prepared to live in a world in which an individualist and competitive behavior prevails. Tom is trying to live on his own adjusting himself to an individualist cosmovision but he feels sad. He cannot help thinking about Laura. He repents having abandoned her but he is not brave enough

to come back and help her. Tom is the narrator of the play. He is far from Laura but he tells the same story (the fall of his family) again and again maybe in order to understand the whole situation or keep the past alive. He has escaped but his narrative fastens him to his past as he says "Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended to be!". He will probably continue going to the movies trying to get rid of his past and his boring, miserable ordinary life. Laura and Tom love each other but their strength will not be great enough to fight against a hostile world. Their tragic flaw consists of their essential unfitness and no one can help them, neither themselves. They are anti-heroes unable of performing great actions; standing themselves aside. Amanda's effort to teach Laura and Tom how to survive in the outside world was useless. She is also weak, defeated and is not capable of helping them. She is a failure because she tries to mingle different and antithetic worlds: an old one in which kindness, refinement, family, restraint are important values and a modern one in which a strict rationality, a competitive behavior and a selfish social practice dominate. So at the end of the play the family is disintegrated, no one is happy except Tom's friend who is well prepared to win because he has the necessary skills (he works, he is attending a course on public speech, he is a very egocentric person). No one at the end of the journey is really happy but "sentenced to a solitary confinement inside their skins". So the author portrays the sad side of our society in which there are some people who have no voice, no material success, and who are bound to be helped by strangers or by some impersonal institutions like orphanages or asylums provided by the Welfare State.

In "**A Streetcar Named Desire**" Blanche is also an outsider and is not able to integrate herself into a world to which she is not prepared. She was brought up in a rich family so she did not have to make a living in order to survive. She is a refined and educated (she reads the literary classic authors), a ladylike, a woman educated to marry a decent man. But her parents, her relatives and her husband died and she could not manage the material things left by her family. After that she ended up living in a second class hotel (Flamingo hotel) and she started to have love affairs probably to compensate for all those losses. She is very solitary as she says "I need people around me". So having sexual intercourse with different men is a way of escaping loneliness because she can be loved and touched by another human being but

the moral principles that guide society condemn such behavior. On the other hand, Blanche wants to be pure, virgin (she refers to her astrological sign: Virgo). Blanche suffers from an inner contradiction that leads her to bathe many times a day in an unconscious cleansing ritual. She became poor and she had to work as an English teacher to survive but she lost her job because she had an affair with a 17-year-old boy. This fact is very significant because Blanche lost her husband at the beginning of their marriage when they were very young. Blanche found out his homosexual inclinations and although he adored her he committed suicide because he could not face Blanche's delusion. He did not want to hurt her and she, after his tragic death, started feeling guilty because she did not help him. So her affair with the young boy has to be analysed as an attempt to keep her young husband alive. All the same people from Laurel, the city where she lived, held a narrow moralistic view about her affair and so she was requested to leave the city what made her more and more nervous and addicted to alcohol. Blanche is similar to Laura because she is attached to an ideal past: she constantly refers to her early life at the family estate of Belle Reve (when they were rich) and to her dead husband. Her last salvation is her sister, Stella, who lives in New Orleans near the stop of **the streetcar named Desire**. She decides to visit Stella and gets surprised when she arrives at her sister's house because Blanche, like Laura, lives in an unreal world and she dreams of her sister living in a mansion, married to a gentleman but in fact her sister is poor and her husband, Kowalsky, is a brutish man. Although Stella loves her husband she seems like Laura's brother, Tom, because she also loves movies. Probably she is fond of watching films because, just like Tom, she seeks for the adventure that she cannot find or afford in real life. Blanche starts arguing with Kowalsky. He is a matter-of-fact man who hates her polite manners and her imaginary world (she modifies the facts, presenting them as they should be, she refuses to show herself in the sunlight because she cannot accept getting old, she covers the light bulbs with paper Chinese lantern, she declares she does not like reality but magic). For him she represents a kind of a menace to his marital life. She is an intruder that must be put aside and so he starts demoralizing her. Blanche is interested in a friend of Kowalsky's, Mitch, who might be her possible salvation. Kowalsky's friend is quite similar to Blanche and although he lives in a tough environment he is gentle, tender, polite. He was not totally spoiled by the social environment (cru-

el, tough) in which he lives. He falls in love with Blanche and wants to marry her. But Blanche's tragic fate approaches. Kowalsky is too unfriendly to Blanche and turns out to be himself her worst enemy, her "executioner". He looks into Blanche's past in order to prevent his friend from marrying Blanche. He reveals all Blanche's flaws therefore destroying Blanche's possibility of salvation: marry a decent, romantic and tender man. Mitch is told that Blanche is a lonely alcoholic who was banned from the city she lived because of her love affairs. Besides destroying her moral reputation Kowalsky rapes her, leading Blanche to madness. Kowalsky represents the strong who defeat the weak. And "his deliberate cruelty is unforgivable", as Blanche says. No one helps her because they can just support each other. Her sister loves her but she is a woman who is totally dependent on her husband and Kowalsky's friend cannot escape from a machismo ideology that severely punishes female's misconduct. Blanche, like Laura, depends on "strangers, charity and kindness". She becomes very nervous and is taken to an asylum. And although she is considered mad she is very reasonable. She knows exactly what is going on: as always she cannot count on her family in her tragic life but on "strangers' goodness". Again the impersonal institution helps the unfit.

These two plays introduce us to a tragic world in which the female characters Blanche and Laura have no voice, no choice. Their flaw consists in their unfitness to struggle for survival. Their personal features contradict the objective conditions and that's why they fail to succeed. They represent a great number of people who cannot adjust to a rough world in which people have to be popular, skillful, intelligent, charming, fearless and so on, in order to survive, compete

and fulfill the expectations. The two female characters have to live in the outside of the ordinary and healthy society: they share the world with the destitute: the very poor, the mentally retarded, the abandoned children -the unfit.

Tennessee Williams is friendly to the losers and the outsiders. Their tragic fate makes the reader suffer and be aware of the cruel and complex world in which we live. After reading the two plays we are different people: maybe poorer or sadder because we know that it is difficult to be happy in a society which worships the Social Darwinism in which the weak have to be defeated instead of being helped. And although the two plays take place in the American society in the '30s and in the '40s, Tennessee Williams depicts the dark side of our whole society and through his characters and their tragic fates he criticizes the lack of humanity, friendship, love that prevails and pervades most of our social and ordinary "praxis" based upon strict and narrow rationality and strong competition which reinforce and reproduce the social system. We do not "ask for whom the bell tolls because we know it tolls for all of us" specially when people like Blanche and Laura fail to survive in this world. They are weak, losers, unfit but they are human beings and when a human being fails to succeed all our society loses something and must be blamed for.

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