
From the Writer

My paper, “Blanche Dubois: An Antihero,” started with a free write, which I have found for myself to be the best way to begin a paper. The free write concerned Tennessee Williams’s sympathy (or lack thereof) in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and was meant to be a response to three critical articles about the play.

I found what kept me interested throughout the process of writing this paper was how much I disagreed with some of the claims made by the argument sources. I genuinely found some of the statements made by these critics to be quite inaccurate, at least in my opinion, so proving them wrong with the evidence in my paper followed naturally. In any paper one can easily tell if the writer truly believes in his or her argument; admittedly, I have written papers where it is obvious I don’t stand completely on my own side, but this one isn’t one of them.

If I were asked to write another draft of this paper, I would probably boil down the content; I feel I have learned to keep my wordiness much more in check since I wrote this paper. I would also try to interact a bit more with the argument sources instead of using them in mere bits and pieces.

— Lauren Seigle

BLANCHE DUBOIS: AN ANTIHERO

Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* presents an ambiguous moral puzzle to readers. Critics and audiences alike harbor vastly torn opinions concerning Blanche's role in the play, which range from praising her as a fallen angel victimized by her surroundings to damning her as a deranged harlot. Critic Kathleen Margaret Lant claims that Williams prohibits Blanche from the realm of tragic protagonist as a result of his own culturally ingrained misogyny, using her victimization as an intentional stab at womanhood. At another end of the spectrum, critic Anca Vlasopolos interprets Blanche's downfall as a demonstration of Williams's sympathy for her circumstances and a condemnation of the society that destroys her. Despite such strong convictions, debate still exists over Williams's intentions in the weaving of Blanche Dubois' tale and the purpose of the play's moral ambiguity. Throughout the play, Williams's sympathies lie with Blanche; this sympathy proves Williams is not misogynistic but rather condemns the environment that has brought about Blanche's tragic circumstances.

Sympathy for Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is garnered in large part from the obvious trauma she has experienced due to the loss of her beloved husband, Allan Grey. Ironically, this aspect of the play is also one that critics and readers frequently use to demonize Blanche and disprove her role as a sympathetic character. Arguments arise that attempt to lessen the traces of author and reader sympathy in Blanche's widowhood; critics claim Williams believes Blanche behaved hatefully toward her husband or failed him in some manner, leading to the death she now laments. Kathleen Margaret Lant claims that "Williams does consider Blanche

guilty for not saving her husband from his homosexuality . . . and for not showing more womanly support and compassion for the young man . . .” (233). Lant posits that Blanche had a responsibility as a wife to somehow rescue her husband from his own sexuality, and Williams condemns her lack of calm understanding when confronted with a threat to her own happy marriage. However, this claim contrasts with the trauma that the death has caused Blanche, and the implications that the overpowering love she felt for Allan Grey may have been the last true emotion to which she allowed herself to succumb. She refers to her “empty heart” (146) and sadly mentions, “I loved someone too, and the person I loved I lost” (113). Blanche is visibly heartbroken by her loss, which intentionally evokes pity from the reader.

Evidence also abounds that the traumatic loss of her husband was a driving force for the downward spiral that leads Blanche to Stella’s doorstep. The scandalous events that drive Blanche to her ultimate defeat do not begin until after Allan’s death, and she even admits, “After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with . . . I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection” (146). Williams implies that Blanche is not inherently impious; the disintegration of the loving marriage she once clung to dissipates her naïve, youthful innocence and leads her to a sordid path. Blanche’s heartbreak following her first love causes her to descend into the degeneration that becomes her ruin, a fact which lends empathetic justification and a sorrowful light to her actions.

Another situation in which Williams shows sympathy toward Blanche is her most dramatic victimization in the play: her rape. This scene requires careful analysis in order for one to understand that Stanley’s rape of Blanche is indeed an antagonistic victimization and not Williams’s misogynistic idea of poetic justice, as many critics argue. Lant claims in her article that “Williams goes to great lengths to obscure the fact that rape is a political crime . . . making this seem a crime of passion and desire rather than one of violence, cruelty, and revenge . . .” (235). She insists Williams “harbors false notions about rape” and believes Blanche is “a loud-mouthed, flirtatious whore who really asked for what she got” (236). According to Lant, Williams condemns Blanche even as a rape victim and utilizes her as a symbol of justice, a promiscuous woman who essentially

brought her victimization on herself. However, this argument is in complete dissonance with the obvious signs of Blanche's noncompliance in the rape and utterly ignores Williams's vilification of Stanley throughout the play. Critic Anca Vlasopolos states the drive to prove Blanche, or any human victim for that matter, compliant in her victimization is simply the byproduct of "an arsenal of psychoanalysis" and points out that "The 'inhuman voices' and 'lurid reflections' on the walls link the victimization of Blanche in scenes 10 and 11 [in which Blanche is unwillingly seized by the doctors] in a way that dismisses Blanche's complicity in the rape . . ." (165). Indeed, the "inhuman voices" and "lurid reflections" that Vlasopolos mentions are described by Williams during the rape scene as "grotesque" and "menacing" (159), an effect particularly unsettling in conjunction with Blanche's protests of "I warn you, don't, I'm in danger!" (161). The dark, sinister mood of the rape scene disproves the argument that Blanche is in any way compliant with Stanley's violation, discouraging the notion that Williams approves of the rape or intends the audience to view the rape as Blanche's just desserts.

In addition to Blanche's evident noncompliance, Williams's vilification of Stanley throughout the entire play draws a clear distinction between victim and villain in the rape scene. Upon Stanley's first appearance, Williams describes how "[h]e seizes women up at a glance . . . crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them," and in the next line Blanche not coincidentally "*draw[s] involuntarily back from his stare*" (25). This significant exchange sets the mood for the tension between Blanche and Stanley that continues throughout the play. Several times Blanche regards Stanley with a "*look of panic*" (127) or a "*frightened look*" (135), subtle stage directions that further Stanley's dark portrayal and foreshadow his victimization of Blanche. The fact that Stanley is characterized as lecherous and Blanche merely as mentally weak and insecure reflects where Williams's sympathies lie; it does not imply that Blanche brings on Stanley's womanizing cruelty but rather that any woman could become his prey. Williams establishes Blanche's role as Stanley's victim far earlier on in the play than his physical domination of her, and Stanley's menacing characterization implies that Blanche's flawed character does not give her singular potential to fall victim to him.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*'s final scene, Williams makes his

sympathetic tone toward Blanche tangible by exploiting her vulnerability before the indifference of the people and society that surrounds her. In addition to the iconic comment “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers” (178), Blanche’s vulnerability is also illuminated through stage directions such as “*a look of sorrowful perplexity as though all human experience shows on her face*” (167) and “*She turns her face to [the doctor] and stares at him with desperate pleading*” (177–8). Blanche’s vulnerability leaves her sharply exposed before the cold unresponsiveness of the people who witness her defeat and represent the society in which she has been immersed: the men’s poker game resumes abruptly after her dramatic exit, Blanche’s own sister Stella returns her pleas delivered in a “*frightening whisper*” by staring blankly back at her in a “*moment of silence*” (174), and Eunice simply responds to her claim of rape with, “Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on” (166). The other characters in the play, representative of the era’s misogynistic society, choose to disregard Blanche’s plight in accordance with what society expects. Blanche has fallen victim to the brutality of male dominance, yet even the women around her turn a blind eye to her suffering in order to avoid any disruption of their everyday lives.

Lant and Vlasopolos hold different interpretations of this final indifference toward Blanche. Lant claims that *A Streetcar Named Desire*’s ending “dehumanizes Blanche, undercuts her tragic situation, and renders her . . . a maddened hysteric with no place in a well-ordered society” (230). According to Lant, Williams portrays Blanche as a stain on a virtuous, morally correct society. However, Williams’s negative descriptions of the chaotic, domestic abuse-ridden households that the Kowalskis and their neighbors inhabit hardly portray them as examples of a “well-ordered society” (Lant 230). Hence, Williams intends Blanche’s ousting to be a criticism of the surroundings that oust her rather than her as a reject. Vlasopolos mentions, “The fact that audiences feel ambivalent about Blanche is not the problem Williams raises; the problem is rather the audience’s pragmatic shrug at the end of the play” (168). Vlasopolos explains that the permeating air of indifference surrounding Blanche’s final rejection is precisely the issue that Williams wishes to criticize. He utilizes the key characters of the play, who silently watch the doctors force Blanche away to an unknown fate, to represent the cold, misogynistic society in which she has been immersed and from which she is now ultimately rejected. Williams uses the juxtaposition

of Blanche's vulnerability with the indifference of the participants in her destruction to demonstrate further sympathy for her and direct criticism toward her surroundings.

One can easily deduce Williams's sympathy toward Blanche throughout the play and even in the circumstances of her downfall, which gives greater insight into both Williams's perceptions of her role as a character and his own views. Although at first glance Blanche's checkered sexual past and addiction to the attention of men seem to safely secure her a pigeonhole in a womanizing society, in reality her experiences have only broken down her weak spirit and driven her to her downfall. Because of Williams's sympathy, Blanche becomes a tragic protagonist in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and transforms the play into a sort of allegory: Williams uses her plight to criticize the social circumstances that have both shaped her flawed persona and led to her demise. This social commentary leaves Williams's motivations in question: as a homosexual male, why exactly is Williams so sympathetic toward Blanche? One possibility is that Williams's homosexuality in a heavily masculine society rendered him naturally sympathetic toward the plight of women, with whom he probably identified more than with the archetypal male of the era. Another explanation is that, as a homosexual, Williams criticized heterosexuality itself, condemning the sexuality that turns Blanche into a victim, Stanley into a monster, and the rest of the characters into puppets on socio-cultural strings. Although Williams's personal motives are debatable, the story he creates with Blanche Dubois presents a clearly sympathetic portrait of a woman downtrodden by a misogynistic world.

WORKS CITED

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LAUREN SEIGLE is undeclared for her major but is a proud member of the College of Communication's class of 2013. She hails from the depths of southern Massachusetts and would like to partially dedicate the publication of this paper to her first-semester writing professor Mike D'Alessandro. In fact, he was so helpful that Lauren is transferring to Emerson College in fall of 2010 so she can knock on his door in the South End whenever she needs writing advice. This essay was written for Michael D'Alessandro's course, WR 100: The City in Twentieth-Century American Drama.