

Analysis of Blanche's Madness from the Perspective of Trauma Theory

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Abstract

American playwright Tennessee Williams described the tragic heroine Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He used Blanche's madness to reveal the conflict between reality and illusion, morality and desire, reason and madness. Under the guidance of Trauma Theory, this thesis tries to interpret the impact of the war trauma suffered by Blanche, the emotional trauma of the Straight Women & Their Gay Husbands, the trauma of the imprisonment of Puritan thoughts and their effects on her life. And the Memory, Representation, and Recovery of these traumas have a profound impact on her mental state and life, and then demonstrates the traumatic source of her tragic fate.

Keywords

A Streetcar Named Desire; Trauma Theory; Memory & Representation.

1. Introduction

Tennessee Williams, as a celebrity in the mid-twentieth century American theater, created a large number of works with a distinct American Southern color. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of his most outstanding theatrical works, winning major American theatre awards: the Pulitzer Prize, the New York Theatre Prize and the Donaldson Prize. The film adapted from the play has also won a number of awards, including the American Academy Award for Best Actress. This work has been tested through the years and has lasted for a long time. On the world theater stage, it has been continuously presented and performed, and has always maintained an extraordinary charm. In this play, the most impressive is Blanche's character whose personal destiny is full of tragedies. In previous literary reviews, some scholars blamed her tragic fate on external factors, Xiaohua Zhang[15] in "Who Subverted *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Desire or Patriarchy: A Feminist Perspective on Blanche", argues that Blanche's tragic root is that as a woman, she was forced to be subordinate to patriarchal society, and patriarchy overturned "*A Streetcar Named Desire*." It was this oppression that prompted her to do all kinds of crazy actions as a resistance to the patriarchal society. She was eventually sent to a lunatic asylum and became a victim of the patriarchal society. Chang Sun[10] believed that Blanche's tragedy originated from the poisoning of the Southern Puritanism she believed in, and she became a victim of religious belief. Some scholars have also noticed Blanche's madness and behavior. In response to this insane behavior, Jing Xu[13] used Carl Jung's theory to analyze Blanche's neurosis in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. With the further understanding and deepening of the theory of literary criticism, some scholars have excavated the root of Blanche's tragedy, which was brought about by the mental trauma suffered by family and love. But she only focused on analyzing the emotional trauma of family love and love suffered by Blanche, and did not combine the internal and external causes of the tragedy analyzed by previous scholars and make further analysis. In fact, the core concepts of Trauma Theory and the internal and external causes of Blanche's madness tragedy can be interrelated and interrelated.

2. Trauma Theory and literature

Trauma Theory was the core of Freud's early theoretical research. Trauma Theory was put forward in the 1990s by American scholar Cathy Carruth in *The Unclaimed Experiences*, and its contemporary core connotation is: "It is a Psychological reactions to atrocities such as massacres and sexual assaults which may bring and affect hallucinations, dreams, thoughts and behaviors of the traumatized subjects, resulting in abnormal emotions such as forgetting, terror, numbness, depression, hysteria, etc., making the traumatized subjects unable to construct normal individuals and groups Cultural identity." [11] Blanche, the heroine in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, experienced a family downfall and an unkind situation, so she came to seek refuge with her sister, and went through the unfortunate incident of being raped at her sister's house. Tragedy leading to her madness. The source of her tragic fate in life is the material and spiritual trauma she has suffered.

3. The Trauma of War

The American Civil War has become a historical event, but its many impacts on the American South society are far-reaching and long-lasting.

"The modern psychology community has confirmed that the effects of traumatic events often accompany people throughout their lives, and there are even examples of intergenerational transmission." [8] The industrialization of the North replaced the plantation-owner economy in the South, foreign factories replaced the local farms, and the descendants of the original nobles in the South became ordinary people struggling for survival. After the defeat of the war, the construction of factories and the destruction of farms, and the prevalence of capitalism, southerners generally showed a life situation of crisis of belief and spiritual loss.

The Belle Reve manor in the play was once the estate of the Blanche family, but because the southern plantation could not resist the attack of the northern industrial civilization, its decline was just like the southern army that was retreating during the Civil War. In addition, family members have passed away one by one. The manor has long been squandered by grandparents, fathers and brothers who mortgaged the land of the manor for their adultery and scandalous acts. In the end, the two sisters only had the old mansion and a piece of cemetery. In such a situation, Blanche not only suffered from the loss of family affection, but also suffered the blow of the death of her gay husband. She lost her source of income, which made her unable to be the master of her own destiny, and she always cherished the kindness of getting strangers. With begging, the economic damage to the American South and the collapse of values and morals brought about by the trauma of the war left Blanche without financial and spiritual support. She showed a favorable impression of Mitchell, largely not out of admiration, but out of financial distress and seeking asylum, and also to escape Stanley's threat to drive her away. So Blanche is always pitiful, sad and vulnerable in front of Mitchell, hoping to use this gesture to stimulate Mitchell's desire for protection. But when Stella asked if she really "needs Mitchell", Blanche blurted out "All I want is rest!" I want to be able to catch my breath again! "Then the conversation unnaturally changed: "—yes, I want Mitchell" [12]. From these statements we can feel that her ambiguous relationship with Mitchell at this time is just that she sees Mitchell as a Refuge, not a sincere love. Even when her brother-in-law Stanley secretly investigated Blanche's scandal and told Stella, Stella couldn't believe that her sister could become such a morally depraved and vulgar person. After the southern environment was increasingly affected by the assimilation of the northern industrial civilization, Blanche was deeply affected by it, and it was really sad that the impact of the war wounds was long and far-reaching.

4. The Trauma of the Straight Women & Their Gay Husbands Situation

"When people started to focus on gay rights, another closely related group of gays also began to appear in people's field of vision - Straight Women & Their Gay Husbands (gay men's wives)." [14] Blanche belonged to this situation in the drama is undoubtedly.

Blanche at first suffered from the pressure of homophobia and had to choose to cheat marriage. He always kept his homosexuality secret until Blanche accidentally ran into him in the bedroom with a middle-aged man. So she couldn't help saying at the ball, "You make me sick!" [12]. Allen had already suffered from the injustice and oppression of the gay community in the social environment, but now he is faced with the fact that his wife found out that he cheated on marriage and hid his sexual orientation. Because of guilty, he committed suicide. When Ellen died, the pain it brought to Blanche was endless. Traumatic memories are often reproduced in visual or auditory nonverbal form. "Traumatic memories have some unusual features, they are not encoded in literal, linear narratives like ordinary memories of adults," [2] "It lacks verbal narrative and context, and is often encoded in a lifelike sense and images." [2] The music in *In A Streetcar Named Desire* and several young male figures who had physical contact with Blanche became carriers of trauma and representation.

The arrangement of the music in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is very special. Aside from the sound of the piano coming from a bar not far away, the same polka dance appears seven times in the play. This piece of music is by no means played randomly, but rather a deliberate arrangement by Williams, because it always occurs when Blanche recalls the past or is very depressed, which is a re-enactment of a traumatic memory. The music doesn't seem to reach anyone else's ears, but only in Blanche's hallucinations. Not only that, Blanche was always restless when the dance music echoed in her ears, and she was not able to calm down until the last gunshot and the music stopped in the summer. Going back to the source, we find that the dance music turned out to be music played by her gay husband, Ellen, at the dance before he committed suicide. At that time, an angry Blanche rushed to the dance floor and exposed her husband on the spot. Later, while the polka was playing, Allen rushed out and shot himself. Ellen's suicide scene left a deep impression in Blanche's mind. The victim of the same wife was instantly transformed into an indirect perpetrator. These traumatic memory scenes flashed in her mind from time to time, and tortured her again and again. Her conscience made her suffer from self-blame and remorse.

It was this painful self-blame that transformed Blanche from a elegant Southern lady to a seemingly lascivious slut. As a gay husband, there is no physical desire for Blanche, and there is no real love for his wife. Blanche's physical and mental emptiness suffered after her husband committed suicide, and she put on the shackles of "self-blame", and the trauma became more and more deepened.

Blanche's husband Alan is a very handsome young poet. There may be beautiful and romantic memories between the couple. Blanche still deeply misses them. She still has a affection for her husband after her husband's death. However, the deception and unbearableness she suffered as a gay man's wife, as well as her husband's suicide, all caused her pain. We looked at people who had an affair with Blanche after her husband committed suicide, such as when she was teaching at hometown she had an affair with a 17-year-old boy that made her lost her job. In addition, in a scene in Act 5, Blanche is verbally and behaviorally provocative to a young man who comes to his house to pay for a newspaper. She temporarily forgets the painful memories of her same wife's trauma through the fall of the pleasure of the body, but she is obsessed with the different people who has the similar character with her husband, hoping to obtain his forgiveness and rest. It can be seen that the more Blanche loves her husband, the more remorse she feels for her husband's death.

On the other hand, these days when she lived at her sister Stella's house, Blanche kept looking for her brother-in-law Stanley's faults, such as "beasts", "uncivilized apes", "survivors of the Stone Age", etc.[12]. He kept provoking the relationship between her sister and her husband, and persuaded her to leave him. The reason was that she also had a seemingly true love. Now when she sees her sister and her husband being intimate, she is more or less heartbroken. Jealousy, especially in the days when she was degraded to enjoy the physical pleasures, used to paralyze herself, and she hated and envied the good feelings of her sister and brother-in-law. All this pain and suffering is also caused by the trauma of being a gay's wife.

5. The Trauma of Puritanism

Different from external traumas such as war trauma and being a gay's wife trauma, the Puritan ideology of the American southern society caused Blanche's inner trauma. She is well educated, has a graceful, charming demeanor, she speaks elegantly, and pursues "a beautiful heart, a rich spirit, and a gentle disposition". [10] Since her homosexual ex-husband had not had an intimate relationship with her, and because her husband's death made her blame herself, she tried to paralyze and escape these traumas by means of physical pleasure. But her puritanical ascetic thoughts and her instinctive desire to vent constitute a pair of inner contradictions. In contrast to the external trauma, it is mysterious, deep and imperceptible, and even Blanche herself is unaware of this inner contradiction. She showed obvious disgust and contempt for sexual desire, and said nothing about her life of physical indulgence, hiding this unbearable experience in the dark, rejecting her own sexual experience again. This emotional experience is largely related to its Puritan ideological background. Falk once commented that the American Southern women in Williams' plays grew up in "Southern Puritan ideology, bearing the old Victorian etiquette". [3] Such female characters are inseparable from Williams' mother. Living with a Puritan mother since childhood, Williams experienced a Puritan-style strict discipline in his childhood, which formed an extreme personality, which is reflected in his creation as "entangling guilt". The author's puritanical trauma is on display in his characters, not just in Blanche's carnal desires. Puritan moral wounds are all shown in the details of Blanche's life. The Puritan values of New England mainly include: piety, shame, solemnity, honesty, industriousness and economy. She refuses to drink alcohol hypocritically(although she secretly drinks Stanley's wine), can't stand the messy environment, takes baths for a long time to pursue cleanliness, and also installs lampshades and other details. Is she trying to make the corner of her residence clean and delicate and in line with Puritanism? Mary Ann Corrigan believes that Blanche wears a lampshade "dimness hides the signs of aging" and goes a step further by arguing that "Just as the naked light must be toned down by an artificial lantern, so every sordid reality must be cloaked in illusion." [1] So when Blanche's real age is known, her terrible past is revealed, she defends herself with Puritan morality, she talks about her "immortal soul wealth", emphasizes the end of material beauty will disappear. She distinguishes between the two sides of human nature, emphasizing that the beauty of the body "disappears and dies in a flash"; "the wealth of the soul will continue to "grow"; even throwing pearls in front of pigs!" [11] Blanche's long line here is rich in biblical expressions and metaphors. She tried to maintain the position of traditional Puritanism in the American South, but she had already become a rebel of all kinds of rules and regulations. She couldn't start a new life again. Blanche eventually went crazy and fell victim to the traditional ideas of southern Puritanism.

6. Conclusion

There are many reasons for the trauma. For Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the external war trauma, the industrial civilization of the north finally "raped" the southern lady; the trauma of the gay's wife from her intimate husband made her indulge in carnal desires to numb oneself

and escape from reality; the deep-rooted and accepted Southern Puritan Ideology brings the mental trauma of double imprisonment of body and mind. Blanche took a streetcar named Desire to this dim and dilapidated apartment in New Orleans. Her self-consciousness was annihilated, she became mad because of resistance, and enslaved because of submission. She was "gone" with the torrent of desires of this era and society.

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