

Self-Destruction of Blanche: Failure of Ego's Mediation between ID and Superego in A Streetcar Named Desire

Xiuqin Huang

Department of Foreign Languages, Software Engineering Institute of Guangzhou, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

Abstract: This paper is to explore the psychological turmoil of Blanche DuBois, a central character in *A Streetcar Named Desire* written by Tennessee Williams. The breakdown of Blanche's psychological state is analyzed from the perspective of Sigmund Freud's tripartite model of the psyche, specifically focusing on Blanche's failure of ego's mediation between id and superego. By a critical analysis of the text, the research method involves a close reading of the play, examining Blanche's interactions with other characters, particularly her husband, Stanley and Mitch, to reveal her internal struggle to uncover how Blanche's ego fails to balance these conflicting forces, leading herself into madness, which is a direct result of her ego's failure to mediate effectively. The significance of Blanche's inability to reconcile her desires with societal expectations is emphasized, culminating in her psychological collapse. When meeting failure, Blanche suffers from neurosis, which is a way to protect herself from destroying thoroughly by her defense mechanism. This study offers a way to understand the human psyche and the impact of societal pressures on individual mental health when getting deeper insight into the complexities of Blanche's character and the universal struggle between primal instincts and moral restraints.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams; ID; Ego; Superego; *A Streetcar Named Desire*

1. Introduction

A Streetcar Named Desire, is the best play written by Tennessee Williams, one of the most important dramatists in United States in 20th century, who made a significant contribution to American drama circle. Blanche DuBois, the protagonist, who is a southern belle, seeks her last refuge in her sister's New

Orleans's Elysian Fields apartment. When her past of having intimacies with one to another strangers as a prostitute has been found out by her brother-in-law Stanley and Mitch, a man who she sees as her salvation and wants to marry to hide to live the rest of her life with, and when she is raped by her her sister Stella's husband Stanley who is from the lower class, she breaks down and she is sent to the mental hospital at the end of the play.

Under the influence of Freudian psychoanalysis, many novelists and dramatists apply this new writing method to explore the inner world of the characters in novels or dramas. Tennessee Williams is one of them. This paper tries to analyze Blanche's characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* by applying the theory of Sigmund Freud of the relation among the id, ego and superego. There are conflicts between Blanche's id, ego and superego. When Blanche's ego fails to mediate between her id and superego, thus suffering from neurosis, she is doomed to be destroyed in psyche, falling into madness.

2. Literature Review

Critics are interested in analyzing the tragic ending of Blanche DuBois from Freud's tripartite model of the id, ego, and superego, because the id is seen as the primitive impulses and desires, the ego keeps a balance between reality and human's impulses, while the superego follows moral restrictions that confine the id. Many scholars claim that the imbalance and conflict between Blanche's id, ego, and superego lead to her split personality, suffering from neurosis, and eventual mental collapse, thus the root of her psychogenic behavior disorders can be interpreted. Some explore Blanche's destruction from a Feminist perspective, some focus on Blanche's trauma, others analyze the play from the conflicts between Stanley and Blanche. Some scholars put an emphasis on the Blanche's character

from Freud's theory, but few will explore the the impact of societal pressures on individual mental health by the combined analysis with the neurosis which to some extent can save people from total destroy and human defense mechanism.

3. Concepts and Theories of Sigmund Freud

Born in Moravia in 1856, Sigmund Freud challenged the traditional norms of human life and psyche based on his clinical experience. His conception has influenced way of the literary analysis and writings upon readers and authors, offering a new perspective to explore the deeper insights of desire, intentions and the split of personality consciously and unconsciously, even in a contradictory way. Significantly his tripartite model divides human's psyche into 3 parts: the id, the ego and the superego.

Served as the reservoir of primal urges and the origin of mental force, the id is the illogical, intuitive, hidden, and subconscious aspect of the human mind, encompassing individuals' covert longings, most somber aspirations, and the deepest phobias. Governed by the pursuit of pleasure, the id harbors libido, the root of all erotic cravings and the source of mental energy. Acting on impulse, the id seeks instant satisfaction for all its primal urges. The ego perceives the external environment through sensory input, the rational and logical conscious part of the psyche, with much of its functioning occurring beneath the surface of awareness. The ego aligns with the reality principle and moderates the instinctual cravings of the id, facilitating the expression of id's desires in a manner that is not harmful. The superego is the self-critic and the enforcer of ethical norms, inhibiting the id's impermissible impulses. Acting as the internal critic, the superego prompts individuals to make ethical evaluations considering societal influences. Guided by the principle of morality, the superego aims to safeguard society and individuals from the unchecked id. Embodiment of societal moral constraints, the superego stifles desires and inclinations proscribed by society. The superego manifests through self-punishment, potentially instigating an unconscious sense of guilt and apprehension if it acts unchecked. [1]

The ego mediates between the instinctual desires of the id and the demands of social

pressure issued by the superego. When Ego's Mediation fails to keep balance between id and superego, the defense mechanism breaks down, neurosis, or mental disorder, which is a kind of disease characterized by depression, or distress or worries or other negative feelings. Suffering from this kind of illness actually can be treated as a kind of protection entering consciousness.

Some consider Blanche as a gentle, elegant, well-bred southern-born lady from an old but fallen noble family while others look her as a hypocrite, shameless whore, but actually she is regarded as a pitiful woman who can't face the reality and only live in her own creative and imaginative world, destroying herself by unbalanced inner self. And madness is a way of self-protection, escaping from reality and coming into a world of illusion.

4. Analysis of Blanches' Personality by Applying Freudian Theories

The tripartite model of the psyche will thus be applied to analyze Blanche's personality in the case of her marriage, her relationship with Stanley, and with Mitch.

4.1 Blanches' Marriage

It's known that she is trapped in the past. Blanche wants to pursue a romantic life and she married a boy who wrote a lot of love poems to her. Out of id, Blanche acts on impulse, fulfilling her immediate happiness by following her instinctual desire to follow the romantic love. When she happens to find out that her young husband Allan is a gay and when he seeks help from her, she refuses him by her superego, which enforces moral standards, blocking unacceptable impulse of the id, the old-fashion southern way of moral education. From the play, her lines to Mitch showed her struggle of her id. She saw her husband on the dance party with another man and she shows her disgust to her husband. "I saw! I know! You disgust me ..." And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again ..."[2] The phrases "turn on" , "turn off" show her inner conflicts, struggling between her southern value of moral criterion and her impulse. When her id defeats her superego, she is guilty when she knows her young husband killed himself and the guilty blames haunt Blanche who thought it was her

who led her husband to commit suicide. So her ego comes to mediate, she admits she had relationship with many strangers after her husband Allan's death because she suffered from the emptiness in her heart. "I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection, here and there, in the most, unlikely places, even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but, somebody wrote the superintendent about it, 'is woman is morally unfit for her position!'" [3] "Panic" shows her agony and she uses wrong way to get rid of her fears by sleeping around with strangers, but she knows she is morally unfit for her behavior, but she just can not escape from her id, acting on her impulse. Her ego comes to mediate for her husband's death and her frequent one-night stands with many strangers. So she forms a habit of taking endless baths to clean herself. For Blanche, taking baths is a symbol of purification not only physically but spiritually, by this way she could get rid of the guilty feeling of taking the responsibility to shoulder the death of her husband's suicide as well as the sexual peccadilloes with different men who she kept seeking comfort from. It thus forms a vicious circle by seeking temporary comfort to get rid of her fears and guilt for a little while driven by id, but disguised by her superego, so she keeps taking baths to clean herself.

"In the course of the play she seems to undergo a moral education, realizing that the spiritual focus of her life has denied her the vivifying consolation of human relationship. What she fails to understand, however, is the need for a self in which the physical and spiritual combine." [4] The comments show that Blanche's struggles happen between id and superego, the impulse-leading actions and the moral restrictions of the southern value.

At the same time, she is trapped by her past, even her ego can not rescue her. "The past is never dead. It's not even past." [5] She only has history as artifact or illusion, she doesn't live at present and she sees no future.

As Bigsby's comments go like that "Stella could purge whatever inheritance of guilt she might have received. Blanche cannot. Denying herself of being denied the vivifying effect of marriage to the future, she is trapped in the past." So, she isolates herself, leaving herself living in the world of her imagination, which hints that Blanche's incapable of facing the

ugly reality of her past life and the deaths of her family members. "All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard!...Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!'" Her confession to her sister is served as an evidence that she can not escape from the past of the South, the illusion of the past, she lives a life with parade of deaths, she is doomed to be deprived of her future.

Blanche's inner ego fails to mediate the conflict between her id and super ego for the guilty feelings for her husband.

Beside her marriage, she is a person who can not accept the fact that she loses the estate and keeps blaming herself for the loss of the Belle Reve, and the loss of the family members. When a person finds herself tightly encircled, she only memorizes the past with negative feelings.

4.2 The Battle between Blanche and Stanley

At the very beginning when Blanche and Stanley meet, she notices the huge differences including cultural differences and class differences between she and Stanley, of course the conflicts between them are inevitable, especially when she is attracted by the masculinity of Stanley unconsciously. So, the conflicts between Blanche's ego and superego reveal. As the analysis by Bigsby goes, "For Blanche is powerfully attracted by the social crudity and masculine directness which she simultaneously despises." [6] Bigsby is right by pointing out the contradictions of Blanche's inner world. Though for the moment she seems live at present, she still encounters two layers of conflicts: id and superego within her inner self, and the inner self with the attraction of the outside world (masculinity) and fear of it.

In the porker night, when Blanche sees Stanley hit her sister Stella, on the drive of her superego, Blanche appeals to Stella to leave Stanley, which intensifies the conflicts between Blanche and Stanley. As Sambrook's comments are proper, "Blanche's hysterical determination to take Stella away from her husband (which continues into the next scene) is not forgotten or forgiven by Stanley, and makes him all the more determined to be rid of the unwelcome visitor." (23) When Stanley overhears Blanche degrades him as a brutal and ape-like man, "He acts like an animal, has

an animal's habits!" [7] He confesses to Stella that the aggressive visitor is not welcome. "Remember what Huey Long said, 'Every Man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it!" As a controller the family, over Stella, he is proud not to be challenged. But when Blanche comes to the small apartment of the young couple, the situation changes, which rages Stanley, so Stanley takes revenge to Blanche step by step to defeat the safeguard of Blanche's ego.

When Stanley gets the hints of Blanche's flirting words and behavior is more fitting for a prostitute than for a school teacher, he is not a fool, and he takes actions to investigate her past. In scene 2, "Stanley's antagonism to Blanche grows, as do his suspicious about her. Both the motive and the means for her destruction are now becoming clear, as the playwright prepares the ground for the inevitable calamity." [8] Finally, Stanley gets the details of Blanche's promiscuous past. "The trouble with Dame Blanche was that she couldn't put on her act any more in Laurel" [9], the sentence and the following words do frighten Blanche. Later, Stanley gives a ticket back to Laurel as a cruel birthday gift. Then Stanley rapes Blanche one night when Stella is having her labor pains in the hospital, defeating Blanche's ego of mediation between id and superego, leading her to her madness. By raping, Stanley defeats Blanche physically and spiritually. Raped by Stanley, Blanche's ego is unable to mediate the conflict of id and superego of her inner world, suffering from neurosis. When taken away by the doctors from mad house, she finally gets comfort from the strangers in a way of being respected.

4.3 Blanches' Relationship with Mitch

Meeting Mitch, a gentler, and kinder worker than the others in the porker party, Blanche wants to find safety with Mitch, and she thinks that Mitch is the right person to help to get rid of all her negative feelings. She expresses her thanks to God because she meets Mitch with a good wish to marry him and then she could live a peaceful life at present, not living a life in the past. But romantic and naive as she is, her high expectations will punish her. While she hopes to marry Mitch, she is still acting on impulse to follow her desire. It seems fortunate to meet Mitch, but there are conflicts between Blanche's id and superego. On the one hand

she desires to marry Mitch to enjoy a more peaceful time while she can not resist to flirt with a boy coming to collect the paper. It's an urge to self-destruction? Or is it that she has no real desire for the safety of married life because in her heart she cannot commit herself to a permanent relationship with one man? The moth will flutter and not settle down." [10] Although her ego comes out to mediate her id of wanting to marry Mitch by living quite life with him and her superego of being aware of the differences between culture and class, but it seems it fails. And refused by Mitch, who says Blanche is a liar with many lies total inside and outside, Blanche falls into a temporary neurosis by entering a world of illusion with the background of the music, in order to save her from being defeated by her defense mechanism automatically.

5. Conclusion

Blanche cannot get rid of her past guilty feeling and just shoulder great pressure of her ugly past, her ego can't mediate between id which follows the pleasure principle and the superego that fits the reality principle, she is incapable of facing the reality, without the ability to survive and dominate. Dealing with the relationship with Stanley and Mitch, she fails to reconcile her desires with societal expectations though her ego's mediation between her id and superego. She is doomed to come to her psychological collapse. Blanche, symbol of history as artifact or illusion, setting contract to Stanley, symbol of history as dynamic force, meets her fate of self-destruction because of her inability to keep a balance within her tripartite model of the psyche, offering a way for individual to reflect the importance of healthy mental order. To some extent, Blanche's madness can be seen as a way to protect herself from destroying thoroughly by her defense mechanism. Being madness and being sent to the mad house becomes a real escape from the reality, Blanche seems to reach a time of balance among id, ego and superego.

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