



On the Female Sexual Objectification in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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ABSTRACT

Objectification theory, sexual objectification of women, and female self-objectification are new trends in gender studies. When a woman is observed only through her body parts, i.e. as an instrument, she is believed to be sexually objectified. Likewise, when a woman exploits her sexuality, either through wearing revealing clothing or displaying lustful behavior, she is engaged in self-objectification. This paper focuses its attention on the female characters in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* based on the female objectification theory. It examines Blanche's past and present behavior and argues that Blanche has undergone sexual objectification and consequently self-objectification. She unconsciously suffers from psychological repercussions resulting from her objectification, namely, her drinking problem and her immersion in a false sense of reality. Furthermore, this paper narrows its scope of analysis down to Stanley's character as an agent of violence and women subordination and examines his relationship with women objectification.

Keywords: *A Streetcar Named Desire*; female self-objectification; sexual objectification; Tennessee Williams

1. INTRODUCTION

A gifted and distinguished writer, Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) was born in Columbus, Mississippi. His oeuvres encompass a wide range of subjects including plays, novels, essays, short stories, screenplays, and poetry. Noted for his frankness and lyricism, Williams was celebrated as a “poet of the human heart” and the “Laureate of the Outcast” (Leverich, 1995, p. 5). He is often named as one of the three major American playwrights of the 20th century along with Eugene O’Neil and Arthur Miller. His major dramatic works include *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Summer and Smoke* (1948), and *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Williams’s plays are mostly preoccupied with loneliness, sexuality, social isolation, human brutality, as well as southern female images.

A Streetcar Named Desire is a full-length play set in an old house located in Elysian Fields, New Orleans. The story revolves around Blanche, the protagonist of the play. She comes to New Orleans to visit Stella, her married sister, and Stanley, her brother in law. She has lost her family plantation back in Mississippi and left her husband as a teenager when she found out about his homosexuality which eventually leads to his suicide. Blanche is emotionally unstable, mentally disturbed and, therefore, barges in Stanley’s house as the only haven she can find. After scenes of poker game, flirtations, and violence, the play ends with Stanley disclosing Blanche’s true character, raping her and sending her to a madhouse. In regard to Blanche, Williams said in an interview that “Blanche DuBois had a natural elegance, a love of the beautiful, a romantic attitude toward life,” and “My main theme is a defense of that attitude, a violent protest against those things that defeat it” (as cited in Devlin, 1986, p. 45).

As one of the most acclaimed tour de forces, *A Streetcar Named Desire* successfully lighted both the American and Europe stages and drew the attention of many critics. Many scholars have analyzed the play in the light of various critical approaches. For Williams himself, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is about “the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society” (Haskell, 1987, p. 230). Likewise, according to Annette J. Saddik (2007) the play “deals with the transformation from an agrarian to an industrial society brought on by the war and its impact on those left behind, as they struggle to adapt and survive (p. 41). Susan Koprince (1995) worked on the “domestic violence” in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and focused her attention on Stanley Kowalski as an “image of a prototypical batterer” (p. 44). Moreover, Michael Paller (2003) analyzed the play in the context of homosexuality and not a kind of “heterosexist discourse”. He further showed the centrality of Allan Grey, Blanche’s homosexual dead husband, to the play (p. 23).

Very close to the purpose of this paper is a study conducted by WEI Fang (2008). He analyzed the role of Blanche “from the perspective of feminism in terms of social culture, economic factor and women’s psychology to find out the main factors for her destruction” (p. 102). Drawing on objectification theory, this paper attempts to analyze Blanche’s psychology and the ways she is objectified in the American patriarchal society. Despite social culture and economic factors, self-objectification is the main reason for Blanche’s destruction. Her past behaviors, namely, her sexual intercourse with a school boy and her unsavory reputation as a prostitute as well as her present disposition as a capricious sexual machine who is mentally broken down, drinks a lot and is much too concerned about her age are issues discussed in this paper.

The issue of internalization established in the sense of being objectified is also of significance here. Many women cannot handle the demands of patriarchal society in which they live and this problem paves the way for this patriarchal demand to internalize itself at the core of women's thinking. As a result, objectified women usually have a tendency to build a fantasy which holds an acceptable picture of themselves in their society. Abbotson (2005) considered Blanch to be fatally divided caught between the desire to be a lady—young, beautiful, and concerned with old-fashioned Southern ways—and a bohemian—erring and excessive in her appetites” (p. 45) In this paper, we see how Blanche goes through the same process of internalization and since she finds her current status as somewhat unbearable, she creates a fantasy or a new kind of reality which seems more pleasant to her situation.

2. DISCUSSION

First developed by Fredrickson and Roberts, objectification theory explores sexual objectification of women. The theory “places female bodies in a sociocultural context with the aim of illuminating the lived experiences and mental health risks of girls and women who encounter sexual objectification (Szymanski, Moffitt & Carr, 2011, p. 6). In a similar vein, for Calogero Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, (2011) objectification theory investigates “the consequences of living in such a sexually objectifying cultural milieu that socializes girls and women to view and treat themselves as objects to be evaluated on the basis of their appearance” (p. 9). That being said, objectification theory provides a framework for understanding female psychological experiences as a result of sexual objectification and pointing us to a direction to analyze women mental health risks from a new perspective.

Sexual objectification is a form of gender oppression which induces psychological damage to women. In other words, when women are seen as objects of male sexual desire, they are known to be sexually objectified. Calogero et al. (2011) argued that western societies are generally imbued with heterosexuality, therefore, they tend to objectify people, treating them as if they are things. They, further, stated that sexual objectification occurs in two areas: interpersonal or social encounters, and media exposure. “Interpersonal or social encounters include catcalls, checking out/ staring at, or gazing at women's bodies, sexual comments, and harassment. Media exposure spotlights women's bodies and body parts while depicting women as the target of a non-reciprocated male gaze” (Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn, & Thompson, 2011, p. 6). What is dealt with in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is in the domain of interpersonal or social encounters dissected as the discussion goes on.

In a related vein, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) regards a person as being sexually objectified when her sexual parts are considered apart from the rest of her personality and therefore she is seen as a mere instrument. Moreover, for Jean Baker Miller (1986) “When one is an object, not a subject, all of one's own physical and sexual impulses and interests are presumed not to exist independently. They are to be brought into existence only by and for others—controlled, defined, and used” (p. 60).

In like manner, this study attempts to examine Blanche's character as the one following the same trajectory as that of an objectified woman over the course of the play. Blanche DuBois was a loyal child, staying with her family beyond the marrying age for most women. She stayed and protected her family estate, while Stella, her sister, went out to discover the world. After the death of her parents, Blanche becomes sexually profligate. She

is jealous of her sister's married life and cannot relate to her. Thus she becomes maladjusted through the experience of living with Stella, herself a maladjusted person. Gulshan Rai Kataria attributes Blanche's loneliness to be "the beginning of her search for distraction in eros, the opposite of thanatos" (as cited in Bloom, 2009, p. 23). Williams (1947) gives her account thus:

Her [Blanche's] expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a luffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. She is about five years older than Stella. Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth. (p. 11)

Williams's comparing Blanche to a moth symbolically accounts for her fragility and purity. Nonetheless, her clothing or her long baths serve as a disguise for her shameful past. Her preoccupation with her physical appearance makes her an object of desire for men as well as women. "Now, then, let me look at you. But don't you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I've bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!" (p. 16). In opposition to Blanche is her younger sister, Stella. She is described as "a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's" (p. 10). She is from the same aristocratic heritage as Blanche; however, she left Mississippi when she was a teen and married the lower-class Stanley. Blanche's wild sexuality is balanced against the healthy mild sexuality of Stella. Stella subordinates herself to Stanley's way of life although she is superior to him in background. It is difficult for Blanche to fathom out how her sister can put up with her husband and when she asks Stella about it, she responds "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark- that sort of make everything else seem-unimportant" (p. 7). One of those 'things' Stella alludes to, is having sex or a sexual partner. In other words, sexuality is the main reason for Stella's tolerating her domineering husband. From Susan C. W. Abbotson's (2005) viewpoint, Stella's allowing Blanche to be taken to the asylum at the close of the play is to prevent her marital relationship from falling apart and therefore she chooses ignorance over truth.

The most common type of objectification is female self-objectification or what Kroon & Perez (2013) define as "regular exposure to objectifying experiences that socialize girls and women to engage in self-objectification" (p. 16). When a woman objectifies herself, she observes herself as an object or a set of body parts. Blanche objectifies herself through her obsession in her baths, and physical appearance. An example of self-objectification is observed through her encounter with Stanley: "Hello, Stanley! Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand new human being!" (p. 38).

In another scene, when Blanche and Mitch discuss what happened between them the other night, Blanche says "I liked the kiss very much. It was the other little familiarity that I felt obliged to discourage... I didn't resent it! Not a bit in the world! In fact, I was somewhat flattered that you desired me!" (p. 98). Here, Blanche clearly sees herself as an object to be desired and it is a sign of her self-objectification.

The issue of objectification also becomes internalized among women themselves to the point that they partake in the process of making themselves objects which are merely reducible to appearance and nothing more.

STELLA: It's a drive that he has. You're standing in the light, Blanche!

BLANCHE: Oh, am I!

[*She moves out of the yellow streak of light. Stella has removed her dress and put on a light blue satin kimona.*] (p. 54)

Most of the consequences that are associated with self-objectification are related to the mental aspect of this issue. Not surprisingly, this problem may have some effects on the body as well, since it is the body on which they put the most pressure and this masquerade of feelings are veiled by the mask of their physique. On one hand, women strive to hide their feeling of hopelessness and dejection by the male gaze behind their appearance, and on the other hand, they tend to evade any social encounter which might endanger their new made outward identity. In fact, these effects are the result of some efforts done by women to alleviate the impact of the distress they experience in their social encounters. An example is observed in Stanley's behavior toward Blanche who both stares at her and harasses her mentally and physically.

MITCH: Why did you try if you didn't feel like it, Blanche?

BLANCHE: I was just obeying the law of nature.

MITCH: Which law is that?

BLANCHE: The one that says the lady must entertain the gentleman--or no dice! (p. 97)

This example vividly presents the idea that Blanche naturally believes in her objectification as if her role is to "entertain the gentleman." Accordingly, men as the dominant force in such societies tend to keep things in accordance with what may be in service of their benefits and therefore they are "conditioned to find women's subordination sexy, and women have been conditioned to find a particular male version of female sexuality as erotic — one in which they are defined from a male point of view" (MacKinnon, 1989, p. 140). This claim is bolstered when Blanche irritates Stanley fishing for a compliment about her looks:

Stanley: Compliments to women about their looks. I never met a woman that didn't know if she was good-looking or not without being told, and some of them give themselves credit for more than they've got. I once went out with a doll who said to me, "I am the glamorous type, I am the glamorous type!" I said, "So what?" (p. 40)

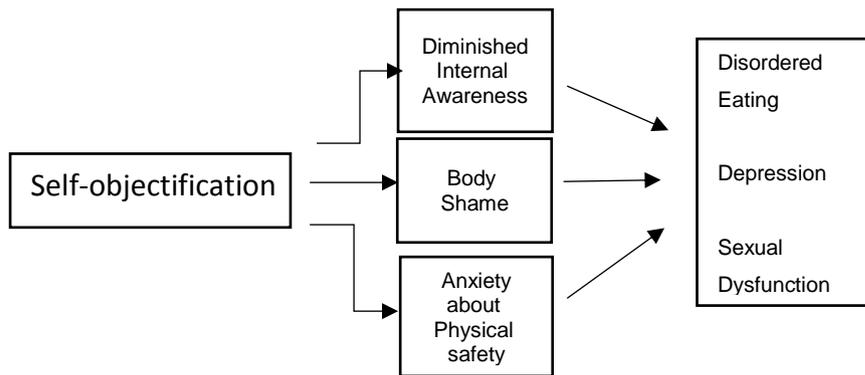
Stanley is, in fact, an emblem of force and oppression men impose on women. He is depicted as a brutal force over the course of the play; the very character in the play who deprives Blanche of the slightest compliment in spite of her constant efforts to make herself beautiful. Williams gives his account thus:

Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens... He sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (p. 28)

He subordinates her wife, Stella, to the point that his absence is associated with longing and loving on her part.

STELLA [*half to herself*]:
I can hardly stand it when he is away for a night ...
BLANCHE:
Why, Stella!
STELLA:
When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!
BLANCHE:
Gracious!
STELLA:
And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby...
[*She smiles to herself.*] (p. 23)

As proposed by Szymanski et al (2011), a brief overview of the key objectification theory tenets is thus (9):



Given that women sexual objectification induce self-objectification, it is important to pay attention to the psychological consequences caused by self-objectification and leading to mental health risks. According to the diagram, women who see themselves as objects for use are likely to be less conscious about their inner beings, to give inappropriate statements toward another person's appearance such as weight or size, as well as to be anxious about their safety. Blanche's preoccupation about her weight is such an example: "you know I haven't put on one ounce in ten years, Stella? I weigh what I weighed the summer you left Belle Reve" (p. 20).

Analisa Arroyo et al. (2014) have discussed in depth the factors that affect women's perception of themselves and the substantial psychological effects of these factors. In what is called age talk, they fully investigate the impacts of an everyday phenomenon having women

as one perpetual part. Age talk is the typical conversation and discourse of women about the topic of age. Assuredly, age is not to be dismissed as a banal issue and, therefore, it does not do justice to its tremendous effects on the psychology of women. Arroyo et al. (2014) consider age as something that “carries with it specific anxieties that go beyond concerns about appearance” (p. 466). They further claim that “aging is associated with the fear of death, fear of loss and bereavement, and as people age, they also develop fears concerning mental function and decline” (p. 477).

Dealing with the caustic effects of feeling old, women usually tend to pretend to be younger than what they really are. In general, many women prefer to misrepresent how old they really are than dealing with what they consider as the harsh side of life called aging. “Aging is also associated with more existential anxieties, as people attempt to come to terms with the meaning of their lives, their accomplishments, and their relationships; such concerns are often manifested in communication (Coupland et al. 1988, p. 477). In what looks like a desperate move to make herself look better, Blanche states: “Stella is my precious little sister. I call her little in spite of the fact she's somewhat older than I. Just slightly. Less than a year” (p. 60). The sense of loss that the feeling of the end of life would convey to someone leads to every kind of endeavor to stick to life evermore. It looks as if Blanche, in her efforts to make an undying image of herself, is ready to take up any kind of tactic to be young again: “I'd much rather forget it--when you--reach twenty-seven! Well--age is a subject that you'd prefer to--ignore!” (p. 127). Apparently, her obvious fondness for men, extremely younger than herself, is to prove herself that she can also be attractive to them like “A seventeen-year-old boy--she'd gotten mixed up with!” (p. 115). Experiencing her sexual life in a retroactive direction, she clings to the smallest opportunities to make younger men desire her again, e.g., the scene she talks to the Young Man:

Well, you do, honey lamb! Come here. I want to kiss you, just once, softly and sweetly on your mouth! [Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his.] (p. 95)

The anxiety of aging becomes more problematic considering the fact that it is somewhat inevitable, i.e. it is enforced. The ineluctability of aging on one hand, and the dissatisfaction caused from the body-image, on the other hand, leads to women's indulgence in self-criticism which the only way out of it is through a deep process of self-objectification. Not being able to maintain their consistency in coping with the assumed demands of society, women usually go into fundamental periods of self-objectification which eventually has destructive effects on their experiences.

Furthermore, the risks such women may encounter include eating disorder, depression, and sexual malfunction. Likewise, this kind of anger and depression in individuals “may then lead to coping via using alcohol or other substances to manage these feelings” (Szymanski et al, 2011, p. 18). In the play, the number of times we see Blanche drinking is quite frequent although most of the times she tries to deny her drinking problem:

I'm not accustomed to having more than one drink. Two is the limit--and three!
[She laughs]
Tonight I had three (p. 59).

Dealing with the anxiety of becoming the object of male gaze would surely be hard to cope with and many women find no better way than nulling their perception. Notoriously desperate, Blanche tries to escape the sad reality of her life by taking refuge in inebriating substances: “The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her, and she seems to whisper the words of the song” (p. 130). Given that, it could be realized that “using and/or abusing substances may be one way that women choose to cope with the excess stress associated with SO and other experiences of sexism” (Szymanski et al, 2011, p. 18). This behavior will most probably take on a progressive course, in other words, the number and quantity of using such substances will increase in the course of time. Not surprisingly, then, Blanche undertakes her habit of drinking whenever she feels depressed.

Alcohol has long been associated with the aggression of men against the manipulation of women. When the men are playing cards and Stella tries to send them away, she encounters Stanley’s reaction: “She backs out of sight. He advances and disappears. There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out” (p. 63). That being said, using of substance is quite noticeable on two different aspects. One is on the side of women themselves related to their getting away from immediate reality. The other one is on the side of men, mostly related to the issue of their violence against women. Whether or not it is done by men or women, the problem of drinking alcohol and other abusing substances leads to some serious social interaction issues and particularly the terms in which they are defined. Accordingly, Szymanski et al. (2011) quoted that “Alcohol has long been linked to men’s SO of women and has been suggested to be both a precipitant of and an excuse for sexually aggressive behavior by men” (p. 24).

Despite her drinking issues, Blanche’s grief also drives her to nymphomania and hysteria. The role of these psychological issues coming from her sordid past is to assuage her pain and grief. Her sexual intercourse with one of her students as well as strangers defamed her character in the town and led to her dismissal from school and expulsion from her town, Mississippi.

Another consequence of female objectification is creating a false reality or fantasy for oneself. Reality is a quite unfixed domain and cannot be looked at in absolute terms. What is meant by reality is the notion that one has of their surroundings and the dimension they have made for themselves to live in. Drawing on the theories of Jacques Lacan, one can assert that our reality “consists of symbols and the process of signification. Therefore, what we call reality is associated with the symbolic order or ‘social reality’” (Homer 81). Our daily experiences are actually shaped in the limits of this process of signification. In other words, the reality is constituted by the relationship one makes between their own identity (their part in the chain of signification) and the bigger system (e.g., society, law, and most significantly our language). Understandably, this could be the case of many self-objectified women who cannot bear the kind of reality they are living in. The moment they internalize the process of objectification is the starting point they participate in building a new reality for themselves. It is often quoted that “women to varying degrees internalize this outsider view and begin to self-objectify by treating themselves as an object to be looked at and evaluated on the basis of appearance” (Szymanski et al., 2011, p. 8). Eventually, women alter their view of themselves and their surrounding world to such an extent that they will finally come up with a new version of reality that is more agreeable to them.

BLANCHE: I don't want realism. I want magic!
[Mitch laughs] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! --Don't turn the light on! (p. 135)

Avoiding realism, craving for magic, misrepresenting the truth etc. are all strategies taken up by Blanche in order to get to a new version of herself defined in totally new terms. Not surprisingly, she avoids any kind of encounter which might expose the reality of her body to others. Gradually, realism as the realism of the social interactions gives its place to another reality which has been wholly modified by the internalized implementations done on Blanche's perception of reality. Ultimately, we find Blanche totally entangled in her dreams of a better life; that kind of life going in the same direction as her thinking of herself as a woman desired by men. She is objectified by men around her and hides behind a mask no more appealing than her immoral, dissipated past. Her self-objectification leads her to numerous mentioned psychological issues which at the end of the play puts her in the madhouse.

3. CONCLUSION

In this study, we attempted to examine Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* based on women objectification theoretical framework. Furthermore, it was elucidated that women's sexual objectification, as the focal point in objectification theory, analyses women's physical appearance as an object of men's desire and explores the mental consequence derived from this objectification. In a similar vein, we saw Blanche's character objectifying herself unconsciously through her past dalliances, and her present weird obsession with bathing, aging, and jewelry. At Blanche's opposite pole, stands her sister Stella. Her early marriage with Stanley saves her the trouble of objectification while brings with itself her subordination. Stanley as an agent of violence plays a crucial role in the lives of these two sisters. His superiority to Stella while he is socially inferior to her, and his sexual assault on Blanche makes him be a reprobate. Furthermore, alcohol, as a tool for Stanley's aggression and Blanche's avoidance of her sordid past, plays an important part in the play so much so that it accompanies Blanche in her world of fantasies. As was noted, Blanche's creating a false-reality for herself and her preoccupation with age is other consequences of objectification explained in this paper.

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