

**The Double Edged Sword of Defense Mechanism adopted by the
select characters in Tennessee William's 'A Street Car Named
Desire'**

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Abstract:

“Put your sword back into its place ”, Jesus said to him, for all who take the sword will Perish by the sword –Matthew 26:52

Tennessee Williams is a playwright of great psychological depth. This paper seeks to probe some of the complexities of human relationship and maladjustment resulting through the constant yet unconscious adaptation of ‘Defense Mechanism’ by the select characters of Tennessee William’s play ‘A Street Car Named Desire’ in light of the theory of Personality propounded by Sigmund Freud. A psychological scrutiny is advanced from this theoretical stance as to how the select characters, namely Blanch and Stella, the female leads resort to different kinds of Mechanisms in the face of domestic and personal adversity. Among the plethora of Defense Mechanisms, such as Idealization, Displacement, Compensation, Repression, Regression, Projection, projective identification, Day-Dreaming, Sublimation, Denial, sexual Guilt, Object Loss and Obligation etc, only a handful of mechanisms such as Denial, Progression, compensation, projection, progression, Regression and Fantasy which are adopted by the select characters of the play is examined in this paper Also Possible practical solutions to overcome the unconscious yet irresistible influence of such mechanisms has been advanced. ‘A Street Car Named Desire’ in light of the theory of Personality propounded by Sigmund Freud.

Key words: Double –edged sword, Defense Mechanism, Psychoanalysis.

Tennessee Williams is one of the most significant playwrights of the twentieth Century who frequently deals, with intricate relationships among individuals as well as neurotics and psychological disintegration. Williams' characters seem frequently to be fractured and insecure, relating dysfunctionality without intimate connections to others or confident self-identity. Understanding the complexities of human conditions is one of paramount importance in Williams' agenda. Adler express this view as follows "virtually in all of Williams' work during the 1940's and 1950's delineating and probing character psychology takes precedence overall else", while Hellman says "Failures of personality are a special theme of Williams" and also plays deal with hypersensitive characters who, from weakness or disability, either cannot face the real world at all or have to opt out of it.

The advent of Psychology and Psychoanalysis has found a fresh inroad in literary interpretation and is immensely helpful in unearthing of emotional trauma of characters. Its incorporation sheds new light in the character analysis, their motives and their outlooks. This psychological genre takes a paradigm shift in exploring and exposing the plight of modern man, his predicament, and sense of desolation, loss, rebellion, defenses and his deep craving for love, assurance in the complex cob web of human relations.

'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams is one of such plays that epitomize all the above mentioned traits in all the round characters especially in Blanche Dubois to a great extent and by Stella to a lesser extent. They are always found frustrated, disturbed and disappointed with their present state affairs in their lives. They often resort to defensive offenses so as to make up their general sense of despair. It's quite normal and natural to be frustrated, angered, disillusioned and gives vent to repressed emotions at the expense of others. Almost every human being under the sun does this at one time or the other. However, it's quite abnormal to always take a defensive stand and denounce the 'Innocent flocks' as the protagonists of this plays do.

Many critics ,in this regard have advanced divergent point of view from a psychological ground describing such individuals as seriously 'neurotics' and 'maladjusted'. Moreover, it seems apparent that the characters in the play especially the female Protagonist Blanche Dubois often time toys with the double edged sword of 'Defense Mechanism' much to the horror of her total disillusionment .It is this particular trait that has triggered my interest to get into the shoes of the characters Blanche in particular to and try and understand what they

feel within, the peculiar device they adapt for their verbal slaughter and what could they have done to avert their misery in my understanding of this play's text.

The Concept of Defense Mechanism

Defense mechanism is an unconscious process, which the individual is not aware of. It is a kind of a mechanism, the way in which something works or constructed and devised by the mind when confronted with an unpleasant conflicting situation in order to protect or retain one's own sense of self esteem, dignity, decorum and thereby avoid discomforts associated with social stigma.

The theories propounded by Sigmund Freud pertaining to Personality and Defense mechanism are of immense help in understanding the nature, cause and the utility of defense mechanism. Freud compared the human mind to an ice berg. Only a little is seen in the little bit of it (the conscious) peaking out above the vast depths of unconscious. Freud has endeavored to explore the unconscious by means of free association-method which involves allowing the subject to talk about whatever comes into their conscious mind however silly or trivial it may appear. Through the analysis of free associations, dreams and early childhood memories, Freud tried to figure out the basic elements of personality. To him personality comprises of three components: the id, the ego and the super ego the inherited components of personality including sex drives and aggression. It operates on the pleasure principle seeking to avoid pain and maximize gratification.

The ego emerges out of the id because one needs to deal with the real world. Thus it is said to obey the reality principle. The super ego manipulates the values and morals of society learnt from one's parents and others, it develops as a result of reward and punishment as one grows up. Somehow the individual needs to satisfy the id's desires. It is all very well for the super ego to control them. But then that does not get rid of them; they are still powerfully present when someone has an urge to do something reprehensible for which the individual will be punished (by our own consciousness). Then a person becomes anxious-a state of tension that a person needs to reduce. One may do that by expression the impulse in a disguised form that society does approve of. Another method is to resort to the modes of reduction or mental alleviation called "Defense mechanism".

Defense mechanisms are unconscious psychic processes that provide the ego with relief from the state of psychic conflict between the intruding id, the threatening super ego

and the powerful influences emanating from the external reality. Due to these forces in the mind opposing and battling each other, anxiety signals an internal danger. These mechanisms readily come into play so as to enable the individual cope with the stressful circumstances at least for the time being. The primary functions of these mechanisms are to maintain anxiety, to protect the Ego and to maintain regression. All these Mechanisms are useful to the individual since they prevent discomfort and lead the source to economy of time and effort. Defense mechanisms like progression, projection, sublimation or compensation, Intellectualization, Deflection or Displacement, Fantasy or Day Dreaming, Escape Mechanism, Idealization, Repression, Regression and Projective Identification are a high light in the works of Tennessee Williams.

Background to the critical analysis and discussion

‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ is arguably William’s most acclaimed play. He himself felt that it was his best, even stating, “It says everything I ever wanted to say”. The play centers fundamentally around Blanche Dubois, her sister Stella and Stella’s husband Stanley Kowalski. Blanche presents herself as an extremely cultivated and cultured woman, taking offence at anything even approaching indecency or vulgarity. She therefore clashes immediately with her new brother-in-law Stanley, a man who is acutely libidinal and sexual. Blanche, however, is not as pure as she suggests. She finds herself with Stanley and Stella after being fired from her job as a schoolteacher because she seduces a seventeen-year-old pupil. This particular seduction was, however, merely the final amongst a string of affairs she has had with men following the loss of her ancestral home, Belle Reve (literally meaning ‘beautiful dream’). Blanche’s conflict, between lost purity and her sexual yearning, seems to be as a result of the loss of her husband Alan. Blanche discovers Alan in bed with another man some time after they were married. Following on this, Blanche announces to him that he ‘disgusts’ her, and he kills himself.

Blanche after a string of traumatic experiences comes to Elysian feeling in order to find a safe haven under the wings of her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley. On one hand, she develops an animosity towards her brother-in-law and engages in a cold war for dominance and authority on the other. The antagonism between these two counter parts reaches its apex when the former rapes the later, throwing her desire to secure a safe corner in the wind.

Ultimately Stanley gains upper hand in the rat race for power and dominance by admitting Blanche in mental asylum. ,

A Streetcar Named Desire is replete with a string of Dynamisms such as Denial Mechanism, idealization, compensation, projection, and escape mechanisms adequately manipulated by the characters to safeguard their stance. Stella, the personification of humility, hospitality, submissiveness and all that go with the goody-goody, is a typical southern belle who often reverts to Denial mechanism as a safeguard against her husbands' accusations of Blanche. It's learnt that Blanche, who has been projected as a refined, cultivated, southern belle of aristocracy is at stake of rejection, humiliation and banishment as Stanley unearths her seedy past and confides of Blanches' Clandestine saga to his wife Stella, she deliberately doesn't heed his words. No doubt, she is conflict stricken, as the revelation about her sister has come (whom she earnestly feels pity for her unfortunate lot) a bolt from the blue. Neither, could she completely ignore the words of Stanley as carrying no water, nor could she remain unperturbed, unmoved as a stone.

As such, she is on the horns of dilemma for she loves both her husband and Blanche. Nevertheless, her reservation of Blanche gains upper hand. Hence she chooses not to heed her husband dispatching his forewarnings as mere 'vituperations' on Blanche by Stanley. Thus out of a sheer attempt to keep her anxiety, frustration, fear at bay she turns Stanley down time and again, and fits into the shoe of Denial mechanism so as to walk steady. It's evident from their conversation that she exploits what is identified as Denial Mechanism.

It is also found out that Stella also takes the tool of 'Progression' to defend and consolidate her slippery stance of being the wife of Stanley. This is evident from her conversation to Eunice. Stella writes after her labour pain is admitted to the hospital whereby Stanley and Blanche are left all alone at home. As the cold war between these two counterparts reaches its culmination, Stanley rapes Blanche in retaliation to all of Blanche's condescension and character assassination of him with an eye to end all her pretensions and illusions. Thus Stella's consistent persistence not to believe the words of her husband is a clear indication that she exploits Denial mechanism to ward off the anxiety, frustrations that would come along with in belief of his words.

Blanche blows the whistle to Stella (on her return from the hospital which shocks her out of wits) the news of which drastically brings crucial change in her perspective and approach towards her sister and the world at large. It is interesting to note that Blanche who has been the repository of Stella's faith is being turned out like a bad penny that too at the hands of her own sister. Not that Stella's 'sweet love' for her sister turned 'sour' all of a sudden but that with a painful awakening, she smells rat in the marital compatibility (which hinges on the basic instincts – libido between her and Stanley) which is now at the peril of disintegration and deterioration in wake of Blanche's rape by Stanley. And that she can't let her life and domestic harmony be splintered at the expense of her 'care' for her sister. She realizes that it is about time she got to be 'careful' rather than 'carrying'.

After all the advent of motherhood seems to have imparted a philosophical insight that in order to survive the battle of life (marital life) one has to learn to be able to roll up with the punches with equal verve. And she is prepared to take the worst (here under the advice of Eunice not to believe Blanche and consent to Stanley's recommendation to admit Blanche to mental asylum) by expunging the episode of rape by her husband from memory, seeking an outlet in the mechanism of Progression. As for Blanche, the pivotal and much controversial character it is a package of compensation, Projection, Progression, Regression and Fantasy that she walks away with.

Blanche is the older sister of the Stella who after her loss of the family estate called 'Belle Reeve' (which in French 'For Beautiful Dream) of her husband Allen Grey (who committed suicide on her knowing him to be a homosexual) of her reputation (by being promiscuous) of her job (for seduction of a boy student of hers) as an English teacher is forced to seek a refuge in lower class with her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. As against her expectations to find a safe haven at the hands of her sister and Stanley, she senses a potential danger in her brother-in-law Stanley which drives a wedge into her desire of procuring a safe corner.

To add insult to injury, the death of her young husband Allen crushes her, haunts her inflicting a sort of 'psychosomatic disorder' which manifests itself in her nerves wreck, and in the alleviation of which, she constantly takes a long compulsive hot baths. Not only does she emerge as a restless, frustrated belle but also a walks past as a lady who has fallen a prey

for 'self guilt'. She feels in some way or the other, she has been the cause of her husband's suicide.

Moreover, it is learnt that she ran away from home and married a young man when she was barely sixteen. Her marriage with Allen did not last for long as she shockingly found Allen was a homosexual, who desperately needed the help of Blanche to come out of 'the vile behaviour'. But instead of lending a helping hand for a man who was caught in the quick sand of Homosexuality, Blanche blatantly betrayed him and his sexual perversion right in front of others. Notwithstanding the social stigma smeared on his face by his own insensitive wife Allen tolls his own death knell shooting himself with a pistol.

It took a short while for Blanche to come face to face with a fact that her young husband Allen needed 'much looks after sexually' and had she quenched his sexual thirst, Allen would have refrained from the vile habit. On the Contrary, Blanche due to her stringent puritanical upbringing deprived Allan of conjugal bliss physically and seems to have paved the path of depravation for Allan morally. Thus in some way or the other she has been the sole perpetrator of Allan's demise which leaves her guilty-stricken. It is this sense of 'guilt' that drives her crazy, leaving a deep 'split' in her 'psyche'

She has to amends so as to be mentally at ease with herself. The only way out is that of 'compensation'. But ironically Blanche who once abhorred prurience and epitomized 'purity' and 'refinement' is left to carry the cross of promiscuity and shame rejection. From this perspective all of her flirting, sexual exploits of innumerable men are in a way of compensation of sexual pleasure she so deprived her young husband of. So all of her machinations, lies, sexual exploits, and flirtations are but 'compensation mechanism' directed to cement the gap of insecurity protection and fear. It is clear from her own words that she entreats to Stella and Mitch.

The conversation between Mitch and Blanche too corroborates the same premise that she uses the mechanism of 'compensation'. Here, Blanche is cornered by the inquisitive Mitch to let the cat out and she ultimately makes a clean breast of her past. Be that as it may, she takes a defense stand that is the façade of protection, security. It is under facade or mask she has been committing adultery with any Tom, Dick and Harry and now that the mask has been torn she is left to fend for herself in the face of adversity. Besides Compensation, Blanche is

also a mistress of the art of dynamisms as she dexterously fits into the claws of ‘Projection’ and ‘Escape mechanism’.

Despite the fact that she is down and out and completely at the mercy of her brother-in-law for her sustenance and provision, still she finds it very hard to come to terms with her destitution. She is still clung to her past glories and aristocratic airs. Furthermore, Blanches’ blatant rejection of reality, results in her misery. Blanche having been taken aback by Stella’s disposition (Stella’s marriage with Stanley her pregnancy through him) tries to project her thoughts into Stella’s mind so that Stella would desert Stanley and prove to be a true feather of southern nobility. In this attempt she incurs more damage to herself than any desired results as Stella, in spite of Blanche’s persuasion, stands by her husband. Thanks to her steadfast love for Stanley.

The conversation between Blanche and Stella provides us with glimpse of the projection mechanism she injects into Stella. Blanche seems to leave no stones unturned when it comes to taking a defensive stand in the face of adversity. Blanche being exposed to all kinds of vagaries of life feels like a fish out of water as a result, retreats to Escape Mechanism. The present world in which she finds herself in is so threatening to her that she is forced to vent her feelings through some outlet or the other. Ultimately she finds a foothold in the world of illusion where she is courted by Shep Huntleigh, an oil millionaire in Dallas. She addresses imaginary letters to him and expects his arrival to on pleasure cruise on the high seas with Shep. Witness to this contention that Blanche often escapes into world of illusion and thus an active user of escape mechanism is clearly proven in their conversation. The ground that Blanche finds an aboard in the world of Escape mechanism is further heightened in the conversation in which she herself blabs out what she really wants – illusions. She retorts to Mitch when the later insists knowing the truth about the former.

Conclusion:

It is clearly evident from the psycho-analytic scrutiny of the play’s texts that ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ is synonymous with defense mechanism. Though Stella, the younger sister, resorts to defense mechanism at times, yet she is quick to compose her temperament and makes necessary amendments in the seemingly deteriorating marital life. On the other hand, Blanche suffers from a kind of ‘inertia’ adjusting herself with the existing climate and also in troubleshooting her inter- and intra -dysfunctional relationships

At this crucial juncture a variety of defense mechanisms enables Blanche and Stella to survive the vicissitudes of life. Dynamisms such as sublimation, Progression, Regression, Fantasy or daydreaming, Projective identification, Projection and the like which operate in an unconscious level comes handy in the characters endeavor to troubleshoot and settle down their personal problems. These adaptive behaviours are fine unless they become entrenched ways of behaving or limit our personality development. Without any shadow of doubt the help in the alleviation of pain, stress and the mental turmoil. Nevertheless, their application in practical life should not be optimal. The proper and frugal administrations of 'dynamisms' bears good as in the case of sublimation and the rationalization since they help channelizing the destructive primitive energies into constructive energies.

Contrary to this the protagonist of this play, Blanche manipulates the tool of defense mechanism to a great extent possible that she ends up incurring heavy loss—the total disintegration of her mind. Thus it is overtly observed that the women protagonist, Blanche in particular, takes the double edged sword of defense mechanism all the time to ward off her insecurity, disappointment, frustrations. Sadly she is not adept at handling the double edged sword of Defense Mechanism and frantically lacerates all and sundry in the vain hope of safeguarding from the sea of trouble that she has created for herself. Above all, she is blind to the Truth that defense mechanism is not a cure for stress, frustration, anxiety and fears. It is only a crutch. It does not build good 'character' or quality of self-confidence but facing reality does. Defense mechanism, at times may seem a harmless if indulged a little or less. Moreover, In the ebb and flow of life one has to try and master the art of making adjustments for which 'Adaptability' and 'Open-mindedness' are a pre-requisite. It is this 'adaptability' and 'open-mindedness' that keeps oneself plodding when the going seems harder and all uphill. After all, life is not static but dynamic and one has got to get going along with it. Sticking to the past only shows a mind that is 'sick' and 'plagued'. One has to be purged of this sickness for which one ought to act responsibly and reasonably.

Life is a perpetual cycle of happiness and hard times and that it is up to the individuals to learn to make adjustments with others, instead of taking opposite stands against it. It calls for a genuine and deep introspection of one's own merits and shortcomings which alone can put an end to the dire use of defense mechanism. And by this alone can one evolve into a well-adjustable being completely in amicable terms with oneself and society at large,

as St. Francis of Assisi points out ‘God grant me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to the difference’

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