

Research Article

Entangled Desires: A Post-Modern Feminist Reading of A Streetcar Named Desire

Dr. Anjana Prajapati

Assistant Professor, Marwadi University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India;
anjana.prajapati@marwadieducation.edu.in

Amee Teraiya

Assistant Professor, Marwadi University, Rajkot, Gujarat, India;
amee.teraiya@marwadieducation.edu.in

Accepted version published on 5 February 2026

DOI <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18493642>

Abstract: This paper examines how desire entangles with illusion, denial, repression, gender performance, and existential futility in Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The study, based on the postmodern feminist theory, examines how patriarchal power systems generate and manage gendered desire, which ends up making female subjectivity weak and disposable. Utilising the gender performativity theory by Judith Butler, the idea of woman as Other by Simone de Beauvoir, the critique of patriarchal violence by bell hooks, and the theory of abjection by Julia Kristeva, the paper elucidates that the psychological breakdown of Blanche DuBois is not a personal problem but one of the structural effects of strict gender expectations. By closely analysing the text, the study shows how Blanche plays femininity as a survival mechanism within a patriarchal economy, which both requires and enforces female desire. The play ultimately reveals the failure of desire as a site of meaning breakdown, as the pointlessness of maintaining feminine identity in a hyper-masculinist social world.

Keywords: performative gender; desire; patriarchy; illusion



Introduction

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a desire does not constitute a happy resolution but rather a volatile site in which identity, power, and meaning continually disintegrate. Blanche DuBois penetrates the domestic and symbolic space of Stanley Kowalski. She provokes a confrontation between two competing gender logics: the aesthetic femininity based on illusion that Blanche demonstrates and the violent, material masculinity that Stanley embodies. Such a conflict shatters the old gender and power structures, and the story concludes with Blanche's mental breakdown. The present article examines the fact that desire in the play cannot be viewed merely in the context of illusion, denial, and gender performance, all of which exist in a patriarchal structure that forms as well as obliterates feminine subjectivity. The destiny of Blanche demonstrates that gendered desire can only be permitted to a degree where it can aid masculine domination; it may tend to be extravagant, unclear, or even threatening, at which point it is suppressed by the means of violence and ostracism.

Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative, interpretive approach to the subject matter, drawing on feminist literary criticism and close reading. It is not aimed at achieving empirical generalisation; instead, it seeks to develop a theoretically informed understanding of desire, gender, and power in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Theoretically, the analysis is based on four interconnected frameworks. The study draws on Butler to examine Blanche's femininity as a stylised act that develops through repetition rather than as a necessity. We pay attention to the way her bodily movements, expressiveness, and aesthetic self-fashioning serve as survival strategies in the eyes of patriarchy. The discussion of the economic dependence of Blanche, her sexual objectification, and internalised self-deception is guided by de Beauvoir and her feminism oriented toward existentialism. Her placement in the study situates her within a social structure that does not allow women to transcend and keeps them in immanence. The analysis of patriarchal domination by hooks can be used to explain coercion of masculinity and normalisation of violence in the cultural and domestic contexts, as evidenced by Stanley. Stella's silence is interpreted as unlikely passive victimhood rather than affective complicity. Kristeva's theory enables us to examine how Blanche becomes alienated from the symbolic order. Her last institutionalisation is considered to be some sort of social cleansing that reestablishes the patriarchal order by eliminating ambiguity and surplus femininity.

Discussion

The relationship of Blanche with desire is nearly completely facilitated by illusion. At the beginning of the play, she tells us that she does not want realism. I want magic!" (Williams 55). It is not merely a quaintness of his own that he makes such a statement, but it is a symptom of a social order that leaves women without material means of survival. The lack of economic and social power leads Blanche to employ compensatory strategies, including fantasies of romantic nostalgia, aesthetic refinement, and moral delicacy. Applying Simone de Beauvoir's concept of the Other



Woman, the self-fashioning of Blanche is the process of internalising patriarchal myths of femininity. De Beauvoir (2011) argues that women have historically been situated as immanence, appreciated for their appearance rather than their agency. The obsessive attention to the lighting by Blanche, who says that she cannot stand naked light bulbs, and any disrespectful comment (Williams 40), is the manifestation of her need to preserve a feminine identity that relies on disguise and aesthetic mediation.

The study adapts a purely textual and theoretical analysis of the play; the performance history or the reception of the performance is not taken into account. Although there are various ways through which Blanche can be understood, the paper foregrounds gender as the key analytic category because it is impossible to isolate her psychological collapse from structural patriarchy. The close reading focuses on dialogue, stage directions, the symbolism of light, bathing, and music, and the interactions between characters. The major scenes, such as the arrival of Blanche, her conflict with Stanley, the poker night, the disclosure of her background, and her ultimate institutionalisation, are examined to track the development of the gendered desire and identity breakdown. Quotations should be understood not as isolated testimony but as performative speech, situated within its social and cultural context.

Desire in the case of Blanche is not only contradictory but also provides her with his acceptance and confirmation; at the same time, it subjects her to moral scorn. Her past sexual life is unveiled, and desire becomes an object of shame; that is, it is one of how patriarchal organisations subject women to sexual surveillance. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity is an appropriate perspective for analysing Blanche's identity construction. According to Butler (1999), gender is not an internal but rather an identity established through a repetitive act that is stylised (Butler 191). Blanche's Southern-belle performance, with her soft voice, delicate movements, extreme humility, and flirtation, seeks to stabilise identity through repetition.

Blanche's femininity is never natural but is well-played. She confessed, I attempt to donate that to people. I lie to them about things; I do not tell them the truth, and I misrepresent them (Williams, 2004, 55) demonstrates a conscious knowledge that gender is performative. However, this act cannot be maintained in Stanley's world, in which femininity has no symbolic value unless it yields to masculine dominion. Butler is correct in her observation that gender performance is a survival mechanism in the face of social duress. Blanche does not lie out of femininity but to survive. Nevertheless, as Butler cautions, one risks punishment for failing to conform to dominant gender scripts. The performance of old-fashioned Blanche interferes with the logic of Stanley's patriarchy, and thus renders her incomprehensible and thus dispensable.

Critical analysis of *A Streetcar Named Desire* has long drawn attention to themes of desire, illusion, madness, and the confrontation between Old South gentility and the period's industrial masculinity. Most of the initial reviews portrayed Blanche DuBois as a tragic hero whose demise was predetermined by inner moral weakness or mental instability (Bloom). Although good, these readings tended to cast Blanche as personally inept and to disregard the play's embedded structural gender politics.



Feminist research later reconsidered its view of the patriarchal forces that propel Blanche to the sidelines. These analyses, inspired by Simone de Beauvoir, focus on the socially constructed figure of woman as Other, particularly in economic dependence, sexual policing, and stylised femininity (de Beauvoir). They note that although Blanche desires something, it must be ornamental and not threaten male chauvinism. Interpretations of Blanche's femininity as performative rather than essential, introduced by critics of post-structural feminism and grounded in Judith Butler, added spice. According to Butler's readings, the gestures and speech patterns, as well as the flirtations of Blanche, are stereotypical repetitions that attempt to uphold a coherent gender identity within an unfamiliar, hostile environment. However, the vast majority of scholarship treats performativity as a thematic concern rather than a sustained analytical approach grounded in rigorous textual analysis.

On the one hand, this work by bell hooks has helped critics of masculinity in the play, particularly when it comes to the issue of Stanley Kowalski as a representative of patriarchal violence. According to the scholars, Stanley's aggression is justified by the cultural discourses of male entitlement and working-class masculinity, and Stella's silence demonstrates the affective complicity of perpetuating patriarchal power (Hooks). There is less research, though, on how such violence is a form of regulation that disciplines female desire. Based on psychoanalysis of Julia Kristeva, the psychoanalytic approach to the disintegration of Blanche is a result of abjection, or her social exclusion and symbolic contamination. These readings creatively follow Blanche's path of madness, yet analyses of feminist perspectives on gender and power often overshadow them.

This is where the current work intrudes into this critical terrain by working to intersect feminist philosophy and post-structural gender theory with psychoanalytic criticism into one cohesive whole. Unlike previous readings that isolate the concepts of desire, madness, or violence, the paper will argue that what makes Blanche abject is the cumulative power of gender performativity, patriarchal discipline, and structural futility of feminine desire within the social order of masculinism. Gender is not a fixed identity or locus of action out of which different actions originate. However, it is an identity constituted tenuously in time, an identity that comes into being through the stylised repetition of acts (Butler 191). Butler extends de Beauvoir's argument, who contends that individuals do not merely become women; instead, they become women. She applies phenomenology and poststructuralism in rethinking gender. To Butler, gender is not a profound inner self. Instead, it is a product of recurring physical activities, gestures, modes of speech, and postures and behaviours that create the illusion of a stable, gendered self. Such repetitive patterns do not acquire meaning unless they are embedded in cultural norms and socially recognised.

Therefore, gender is a social construct that society compels us to maintain: it is not fixed but dynamic and sustained by faith and force. Butler explains how, in the event we do not do gender right, we are punished. When we are under societal pressure, performance is adopted as a survival strategy. As time passes, these norms become normalised and natural, making the process of their construction invisible.



Butler cautions that feminism can perpetuate the patriarchal systems by considering women as a single oppressed group. She says that gender is not merely expressive but performative. It is a regulatory construct that leads us to believe it is necessary, yet it remains possible to dispute it.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois is between illusion and reality. When we consider the concept of gender performativity as developed by Butler, the images of Blanche as a Southern belle clearly become a performance that is done using her body, delicate movements, smooth language, flirtation, and overblown helplessness. The performances serve as survival tactics in a social world that refuses her economic self-reliance and castigates all deviations from normal femininity. It is not that Blanche does not perform femininity, but instead that she presents an antiquated and unfaithful version of it in the hyper-masculine, working-class context of Stanley. Her gender performance disturbs the status quo and renders her unidentifiable, thus disposable. Once her delusional act fails, she experiences social rejection, mental breakdown, and subsequent abjection.

Conclusion

Through a postmodern feminist prism, this paper demonstrates how the desire in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* becomes a site of conflict, where illusion is granted only to feminine subjectivity before it is destroyed by patriarchal force. The case of Blanche DuBois shows that gendering becomes meaningless when social approval is absent and that identity is weak. Desire, instead of liberating women, turns out to be the instrument that trains and ostracises them and obliterates them in a patriarchal hierarchy that cannot bear the vagueness and wastefulness.

Author Contributions: All authors have contributed equally to this work. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: The data sharing policy does not apply to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Works cited

Bloom, Harold, editor. *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*. Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. Routledge, 1993.

—. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. 2nd ed., Routledge, 1999.

—. *Undoing Gender*. Routledge, 2004.



de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, Vintage, 2011. Originally published in 1949.

hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*. 2nd ed., Pluto Press, 2000.

—. *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love*. Atria Books, 2004.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press, 1982.

—. *What Is a Woman? And Other Essays*. Oxford University Press, 1999.

Williams, Tennessee. *A Streetcar Named Desire*. New Directions, 2004.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions, and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s). Magnus Publishing and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions, or products referred to in the content.