

Harold (Mitch) Mitchell's role in the demise of Blanche Dubois in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Literature in English 1: Form and Genre



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ABSTRACT

In Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley Kowalski has often been seen as the main reason why Blanche DuBois mentally falls apart at the end of the play. This is emphasized by the fact that he rapes her and that she subsequently is committed to a mental institution. However, I find that the role of Harold (Mitch) Mitchell thereby is downplayed and underestimated. This article argues that he in fact is the real cause of Blanche's psychological downfall. Critics such as Judith J. Thompson refer to Mitch as elevated to the romanticized ideal of Allan Grey, Blanche's late husband. Blanche sees a potential new husband in Mitch, and when she realizes that he knows about her troubled past, she mentally collapses. While Stanley's final act certainly is cruel and devastating, Mitch's rejection of Blanche is what essentially sets off her final madness.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams; gender roles; mental decline; madness; homosexuality; marriage;

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Introduction

Marlon Brando was a so-called method actor and played the role of Stanley Kowalski both on Broadway in 1947 and in the screen adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1951 (Palmieri). The 40s were very much dominated by the aftermath of WW2 and the 50s by notorious conformity and fixed gender roles. Therefore it was no surprise that Marlon Brando again played the tough, unyielding leading man role in this Tennessee Williams play. Harold (Mitch) Mitchell, however, represented a quite different character, namely a rather soft, boyish and more feminine type. Accordingly, he became an unusual antithesis to the prevalent depiction of a man. This divergence of character in Mitch has sparked an interest in him. In working with this paper, he has been the main focus of the analysis and work in general.

This paper will argue that Harold (Mitch) Mitchell plays a crucial part in the mental collapse of Blanche DuBois in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche's dissolution already and truly starts when she realizes that her shameful past is known to Mitch. The fact that Stanley subsequently rapes her just adds to her misery, but this is not the actual cause of her psychological failure.

Analysis

A Streetcar Named Desire received great praise when it first became known to the public. Even though plays are not precisely the same as novels or poems, the playwrights still function as literary authors in many aspects (Rainsford 57). In plays, the main part is the dialogue. And therefore, most past time events, essential for the understanding of the play, are given in dialogue (Rainsford 59). This is equally similar in prose fiction although some of it here is also conveyed through a narrator. Such a narrator would be a bit odd in a play. It could result in the scenes being very unnatural and contrived. Another important aspect is the amount of descriptions of for example clothes, facial expressions and movements of the actors in plays. These *stage directions* are apparent to the spectators, but less for the readers. In the creation of this paper and analysis, these scarce stage directions have been an all-important tool to really get under the skin of this magnificent play.

Blanche DuBois comes across as a complex and restless character. Not long after she arrives in Elysian Fields, this multiplicity is evident to the reader. Clearly, she has not seen her sister Stella in a long time, but cannot help, but saying instantly upon arrival 'I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn't mean to say that' (Williams 1119). Another example is when Blanche comments on Stella's weight (Williams 1120). This compulsion to tell people exactly what she thinks is also shown later on in the way she bluntly talks about Stanley, Stella's husband: 'Well-if you'll forgive me- he's *common!*' (Williams,1143). This brutal honesty-act gives the impression of Blanche desperately wanting to be close to people around her, but on the other hand her critical and snobbish tendencies hamper that wish, leaving her alone and vulnerable.

Another aspect, which is also conspicuous from the very beginning is Blanche's emotional instability. This is made obvious to the reader by the way Blanche's appearance is described in the stage direction: '...; she is shaking all over and panting for breath as she tries to laugh' (Williams 1119). The fact that she drinks heavily from the moment she arrives, and her need for extremely frequent baths suggest a need for calming herself in as many ways possible, and that carry indications of a declining mental health. These baths and her arriving in an all-white outfit are also suggesting a need for a clean and innocent appearance. One might say that these things are tangible weapons in her fight for peace of mind and atonement. She transcends quickly from one emotional state to another with happiness and eagerness in one moment, and the next moment she is almost in tears. Her theatrical nervousness, permeating the atmosphere, leaves the impression of a woman on the path of dissolution. The reason for this progressive downfall is to be found in her past with Allan Grey, her late husband.

Allan Grey was a homosexual, and Blanche caught him with another man, and eventually this led to Allan committing suicide. Ever since then Blanche has lived with an overwhelming guilt, she believes it was her fault because of the fact that she called him disgusting just before he shot himself. This indicates an immaturity in Blanche and is not the way a responsible, reflecting adult would act. Her lacking ability to see the world and her immediate surroundings in a balanced, nuanced manner contributes to the image of an insecure and very lonely woman. Blanche's first act upon arrival is to put a paper lantern over the light bulb partly to conceal her age, but one may also conclude that she thereby wants to hide who she is as a person. Not to mention all the things she feels she is guilty of in her past. Going all the way back to her relationship with Allan (and even earlier on), Blanche is evidently captain of her own sinking ship.

In the present, she meets Mitch and they make somewhat of a connection. Mitch, this paper argues, is Blanche's Allan of today, and Blanche and Mitch instantly connect upon meeting for the first time in Scene Three (Williams 1133). This coupling is supported by Judith J. Thompson when stating 'From the beginning of their relationship, Blanche attempts to elevate Mitch to the romanticized status of the idealised Allan Grey' (Thompson 35). Thompson continues by saying 'As Allan's analogue, Mitch shares his "softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's"' (Thompson 35). This further indicates Mitch's unusual soft man role, completely opposite to the role of Stanley, a butch, tough man with very little compassion or understanding for Blanche's frail state. This is supported by George-Claude Guilbert: 'His (Mitch's) boyish fragility, clearly is opposed to Stanley's brutish strength' (Guilbert 91). Mitch does not like that he perspires, he talks a lot about his body and physical appearance and expresses his interest in the kind of fabric he wears. His ways and interests are definitely not the average man's of that time, but rather effeminate. This contributes to the idea that Mitch is a likely candidate to replace Allan and heal Blanche's wounds. As it appears, Mitch too has endured a tragic loss which is revealed when he wants to offer Blanche his lighter, and she sees

the inscription on his lighter case. It quotes a famous sonnet by the poet Elizabeth Browning, and this again depicts Mitch's soft, feminine side. The fact that he lives with his sick mother almost overwhelmingly contributes to this image. Mitch explains his loss when elaborating that he lost 'a very strange girl, very sweet-very!' (Williams 1135) It is perceptible that Blanche's response 'Sick people have such deep, sincere attachments' (Williams 1135), refers this concept of an illness directly back to Allan's homosexuality. Guilbert also touches upon the subject of homosexuality, both in Allan Grey and amongst men in general in the 40s and 50s. He postulates that '... many young American men committed suicide because they could not deal with their homosexuality in a heterosexist environment' (Guilbert 90). The fact that the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* completely leaves out the reason for Allan's suicide supports this claim. It also asserts that the post WW2 era was very much dominated by homophobic tendencies. Guilbert, however, does not quite share the view of Thompson that Mitch should be elevated to the romanticized status of Allan Grey. He does nevertheless agree with him being superior, more sensitive and refers to a godlike comparison (Guilbert 103). I see Mitch and Blanche as prospective mutual saviours and they share a more practical union, rather than one of romance. He wants to please his mother so she does not have to worry about him being alone when she dies. And Blanche, well she states it quite clearly when she says "I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! (Williams 1147).

There seems to be a connection between Allan's homosexuality and Blanche's ensuing romantic preference of young boys. She was caught having a relationship to her 17-year-old pupil, and she aggressively kisses the paper boy who comes to the house. Moreover, she continually refers to Allan as a boy, for instance when commenting on the "poems a dead boy wrote" (Williams 1130). One manner of analysing this is to see it as a way of mirroring Allan in her subsequent romantic relations. This particular psychological angle is also offered by Nancy C. Page, when claiming that 'Mitch, however, at least in the beginning, does offer Blanche a source of mirroring' (Page 420). Guilbert agrees with this when saying that '..she is looking for Allan in herself, but she is also looking for Allan in others' (Guilbert 109).

Allan and Blanche were married young, but even so it seems a bit peculiar to refer to him as a boy. It could also be a way of distancing herself from men and thus avoiding deceit and heartbreak. Also, when describing herself, she is somewhat dubious or in fact almost lying. She names herself "an old maid" which could make you wonder why she does not refer to herself as a widow. This would probably be more suitable and preferable, given the age of the play. Here I see two ways of interpretation, namely that she is so ashamed and guilt-ridden that she simply tries to block out the fact that she was ever married. The other is she does not acknowledge Allan as a man and therefore not a husband in marriage. And of course, it could be both at the same time. One way or the other, Blanche is thoroughly marked by Allan Grey's suicide, a fact Nancy Page goes as far as to call '*a trauma*' (Page 422).

In Scene Five, we begin to acknowledge the signs of Blanche's imminent ruin. As mentioned earlier, her excessive alcohol consumption and physical symptoms such as trembling, nervousness and bathing rituals have already given indications of an approaching mental downfall. There is, however, a significant pointer, when Stanley says that he has met someone, who knew Blanche in Laurel and hereby her reaction in the stage direction reads 'Her face expresses a faint shock. She reaches for the cologne bottle and dampens her handkerchief as she answers carefully' (Williams 1145). It goes further on saying: '...She seems faint, looks about her with an expression of almost panic' (Williams 1146). She goes from crying to laughing in an instance (Williams 1147), and one can see these rapid shifts in her mood as another expression of earlier mentioned panic. By now, she is terrified that her dark, secret past will be revealed and that she will again be alone in the world.

In Scene Nine, Mitch comes to confront Blanche with the rumours Stanley has been telling him. The stage directions on page 1163 reads 'The rapid, feverishly polka tune, the "Varsouviana" is heard'. The music is in her mind....and she seems to whisper the words of the song'. She is in a transitory state, between this world and somewhere else and I believe that she knows her tragic demise is inevitable. This polka tune is played whenever she thinks back on her past and Allan in particular and thus is an indicator to the reader/spectator of her frail emotional state of mind. Mitch confronts her with the allegations of prostitution and her dismissal from her job as a school teacher in Laurel. Blanche confesses promptly. She expresses her previous hopes of their future relationship, but showing hopelessness 'I thanked God for you, because you seemed gentle, a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in. But I guess I was asking, hoping- too much!' (Williams 1165). A blind Mexican woman comes around selling flowers for the dead, 'flores para los muertos'. Almost a prediction of her human detour (Williams 1166), and the Varsouviana plays again. Blanche appears to be hallucinating, talking to her dead mother, speaking of changing bloody pillowslips. She utters something about Belle Rêve, which is French for 'beautiful dream', and is also the childhood home that she and Stella lost. (Williams 1166). It is hard to determine whether she has been psychologically frail from childhood. There is a suggestion pointing in that direction when Stella responds to Stanley's ironic 'Delicate piece she is' by uttering 'She is. She was. You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody, was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change' (Williams 1162). No elaboration is given so it is hard to determine for sure, whether being fragile and delicate from very early on in life has set her on her troubled path. Mitch's final heart-breaking rejection of Blanche links back to the way Blanche punished Allan for being a homosexual. She felt stupid, humiliated when she caught her husband with another man. Mitch returns the act by being '...a fool enough to be believe you was straight' (Williams 1165). Not being "straight" might be the ultimate symbolic throw-back in Blanche's face, karma at its cruellest.

It is conceivable that from then on it just goes downhill with the speed of light. Scene Ten introduces stage directions with the words:

Blanche has been drinking fairly steadily since Mitch left. She has dragged her wardrobe trunk into the centre of the bedroom. It hangs open with flowery dresses thrown across it. As the drinking and packing went on, a mood of hysterical exhilaration came into her and she has decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels. Now she is placing the rhinestone tiara on her head before the mirror of the dressing table and murmuring excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers (Williams 1167).

Clearly, she has let go of any sort of effort to remain calm and in control. She is drinking as if there is no tomorrow, and she has given up all attempts to look decent or innocent. She is wearing a soiled and crumpled evening gown with a pair of scuffed slippers. She dresses like a deranged queen, lost and devastated. Her elegant and polished self has completely vanished. Mitch could not save her, so insanity comes to her rescue. It comforts her and shields her from the cold world surrounding her. She talks of ‘an old beau of mine’, Mr. Shep Huntleigh, and she tells Stanley that he is inviting her on a cruise of the Caribbean. (Williams 1168). We as readers are left with the impression that this is not true, there is no beau of the past and Stanley also utters disbelief of this claimed relationship (Williams 1169). This sets off an animal-like pursuit as Stanley in rage chases after Blanche. One can sense the enormous volatility present between the two as ‘he takes a step toward her, biting his tongue which protrudes between the lips’ (Williams 1170). Stanley impersonates a wolf taking a last look at his bait before the final kill. The fact that she tries to defend herself with a broken bottle makes no difference and the rape is initiated when he picks her up, and carries her to bed. It does not explicitly say how he carries her, in his arms (like a bride) or over the shoulder (like a packet of meat). In the movie, this is not even shown, the event is implied in Stanley’s famous last phrase ‘We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!’ (Williams 1171). Nonetheless, she is no longer there in spirit, but instead being preserved from the evil of reality by her unsoundness of mind.

Conclusion

In conclusion, very early on we get indications of Blanche being in a very frail state. Heavy alcohol consumption paired with swift changes of mood add to the picture of a woman in despair. It seems as though she finds interim comfort and hope for the future upon meeting Mitch, who also seeks a soul companion, someone to live life with. Blanche has, however, endured a trauma, when losing her late husband and this haunts her consistently. When Blanche acknowledges the truth, namely that her shameful past has been conveyed to Mitch, all is lost. She hallucinates, enhances her drinking and steadily, but surely slips into madness (Williams 1167). She has now indeed reached her destination in the Elysian Fields, which in Greek and Roman mythology is the resting place of the dead. Madness

saves her from cruelty and personal insecurity. In the aftermath, Stanley viciously rapes her almost like he is entitled to it, with no sign of scruples or guilt. But by then Blanche has already mentally left this world, she is safe now, protected by the loss of reason.

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