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The Rape of Blanche: An Examination of Critical Analysis & Sexist Overtones

Audrey Thayer with Dr. Jocelyn L. Buckner, Chapman University Department of Theatre

There have been many attempts by both critics and audience members to explain and understand the events that led up to the violent rape of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The systematic oppression of women throughout American history has lead to people finding fault within the woman while ignoring the root of the issue – the violent, commanding nature of the man. In examining Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*, I use a modern feminist perspective to challenge audiences to view Blanche in new light as we move to a more equal society.

I approach my thesis by collecting scholarly work written about Blanche, and compiling the most common arguments. By then deconstructing these arguments, I reveal the biases and assumptions that were used, as well as the oft-used sexist and misogynistic language employed by critics to “prove” their observations. My most effective tool was the text itself and my own personal experiences as a female. Here are three common arguments used by critics to justify Blanche’s rape, followed by my rebuttals.

“"You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.” (Williams 121)"

Critics often refer to Blanche’s sexual history when discussing her rape, referring to her as “sexually immoral or as a prostitute and nymphomaniac” (Vlasopolos 324). This conclusion is reached because Blanche sought sexual encounters, and even derived pleasure from them. Blanche’s scandalous sexual history becomes a factor when considering her rape. I believe the audience would find Stanley’s violation of her far more tragic if she was virginal, because he would break something that was pure and whole, rather than already contaminated and damaged.

“"Remember what Huey Long said—’Every Man is a King!’ And I am the King around here, so don’t forget it.” (Williams 107)"

Critics argue that Stanley’s decision to rape Blanche was not premeditated, but instead fueled by lust. However, Stanley draws out Blanche’s terror, torturing her until she feels the need to physically defend herself with a broken bottle. By raping her she becomes a whore in his eyes, who provoked him into sleeping with her. Stanley’s psychological and physical torture of Blanche is not a spur of the moment decision, but a deliberate action to reclaim the power that was taken from him and establish his position as “king around here” (Williams 107). Critics justify Blanche’s rape by chalking it up to karma, arguing that her lack of compassion for her homosexual husband is atoned for when she is violated by Stanley. While Blanche’s outburst was the catalyst for Allan to pull the trigger, Blanche did not force his hand. Allan’s suicide was a choice, his choice, and Blanche’s rape should not be viewed in similar light. Blanche did not have a choice in her rape. Her autonomy was stripped away; she was invaded on the most intimate level. Blanche lay before Stanley, bare, vulnerable, helpless, and undeserving of such a fate.

“"[Blanche] atones for [her husband’s suicide] through her suffering at the hands of Stanley.” (Adam 61)"

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An extension of my research was the creation of a short, 10-minute play featuring Blanche in the asylum. After reading that many critics imagined her dying, I realized I had always imagined her alive and rising above the tragedy that fell upon her. In my play, I explore the effects of rape on the human psyche, as well as the strength and resilience of the female spirit. —AT

References

