

## Concept of Morality in Tennessee Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Dr Sneh Lata Sharma

Assist. Professor  
Dept. of English  
C.B.L.U.  
Bhiwani, India  
shekhar9mar2k@gmail.com

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**Abstract:** *The concept of morality, it is assumed, came into being when human beings developed a sense of community consciousness. Since then, the questions related to "What is moral?" and "What is immoral?" have been the preoccupation of not only the high priests of socio-religious institutions but the intellectual communities also and from time to time the question of morality has been discussed by various authors in their literary works. Tennessee Williams, who calls himself a moralist, explores this concept in his representative plays *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *A Street Car Named Desire* (1947), though from a different angle, as his morality gives us a different point of view to judge the actions and behaviour of his characters. The two plays are the tragedies of the women who fail to adhere to their intrinsic nature, therefore, deviate from their natural behaviour. The present paper explores the problem of morality and the questions related to stereotypical masculine and feminine role-models. The paper also attempts a study of the conflict between real versus put-on roles which sometimes result in total undoing of the characters.*

**Keywords:** *Morality, Stereotypical role models, intrinsic nature, naturalness, sophistication, hypocrisy.*

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The questions related to what is moral and what is not have bothered man ever since he stepped into the hallowed precincts of civilization and culture. Man has always been haunted by issues related to sexuality. With the strengthening of the institution of marriage, the concepts like love, trust, and commitment have become all the more significant. Inter-related with these are the questions pertaining to stereotypical masculine and feminine role-models and their inter-connection with one another. In the process men asserting their masculinity and women playing the coy female caused problems of morality and there was an ongoing conflict in their real selves and their put-on roles. Tennessee Williams' plays very deftly probe into this questioning and in the process, Tennessee Williams endeavours to reach his own conclusions.

What is morality? According to Cambridge Advanced Dictionary, morality is "a personal or social set of standards for good or bad behaviour and character, or the quality of being right, honest or acceptable." Thus, the whole thrust is on being true to one's character, on righteousness and genuineness. In simpler terms, the concept of morality enables a person to use his/her discretion in adopting straight forwardness and avoiding pretentiousness. Blanche of *A Street Car Named Desire* is not right, not honest and hence, not acceptable to her brother-in-law Stanley and her own sister Stella. It is because of her put-on behaviour that even her own Sister Stella sides with her husband and does not believe in her accusation that her husband has raped Blanche.

Tennessee Williams calls himself a moralist and holds fast to his own quest for truth, to his own search for good and evil:

I am a moralist, yes. [...] I want to discover all that is evil and all that is good. I hope that I have a chance to, I hope that the public will bear with me while I continue the exploration. I'm not a very good writer, but I seem to be a man who has this obsession to explore good and evil. (Terkel 91)

Most of Tennessee Williams' characters, male as well as female, are true to their type; they are the embodiment of true masculinity and femininity. As Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* says, "man

is by instinct a lover, a hunter, a fighter” (763). Tom’s ideology is quite in keeping with his father’s whom he describes in the introductory scene:

This is our father who left us a long time ago. He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town. . . . The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words—“Hello—Good-bye!” and no address. (753)

No wonder, Tom, at the end of the play follows in the footsteps of his father and leaves home and his mother and sister to fend for themselves. But then man must have his own way. Like every other male character in Williams’ plays, without feeling any sense of guilt, he leaves home, for he never committed himself to the familial or societal norms,

I travelled around a great deal. The cities swept about me like dead leaves, leaves that were brightly coloured but torn away from the branches. I would have stopped, but was pursued by something. It always came upon me unawares, taking me altogether by surprise. (784)

In fact, in the characters of Tom, his father and Jim from *The Glass Menagerie* and Stanley and his friends in *A Street Car Named Desire* we find the representatives of the social constraints which, as a very sensitive Williams feels, all the time propel the female members and the children of the household to work as social agents to bring upon themselves complete wreck and ruin. Stanley in *A Street Car Named Desire* also is an embodiment of raw male sexuality, and ruthless in his treatment of women—be it his wife or any other woman. He hates Blanche for her trying to bring order and feminine grace to his household. His revenge is complete when after exposing Blanche’s promiscuity threadbare in front of Mitch he rapes her, giving a death blow to every ounce of her feminine pride. Mitch also does not behave any differently, when he wants to have Blanche sexually even after calling her a dirty woman—“You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother” (390). Even Jim O’Conner of *The Glass Menagerie* behaves no better when he initiates Laura in her first kiss in spite of his non-committal attitude to her. Stella is spared only because she completely submits herself before Stanley without ever daring to resist his male authority. All these characters are spontaneous in their behaviour, even if cruel, crude, coarse and uncouth, and hence, can evade the fate of the female characters like Blanche and Amanda.

Actually, it is the ruthless, unrelenting, pristine masculinity of a brute, primitive male that gives the male characters of Williams the clout to sustain the vitality—the very essence which the females lose in an attempt to be socially acceptable. Amanda loses herself to Mr. Wingfield, but clings to her old world of seventeen gentlemen callers who came to see her one Sunday afternoon. She does not allow herself and her children to evolve in consonance with their true nature and brings about her own as well as her daughter Laura’s ruin. Here, it must be acknowledged that deviation from naturalness is immoral. Blanche as well as Amanda’s flights into the past to relive their good old days is evading the reality of life they are incapable of coping with. They are living in a fool’s paradise and think of themselves superior to those around them, whereas they, certainly, are not. They are not honest about their real present condition which they do not accept and so they are not acceptable to others. The tragedy of their lives springs from their inability to judge what is basically required in a given situation. Consequently, Blanche ends in a lunatic asylum and Amanda loses her son mainly because she wants to impose her outdated notions of morality on Tom.

Moreover, in *A Street Car Named Desire* Blanche’s tragedy is that of the failure to adhere to one’s essential morality. Blanche herself adopts the role of a social sentinel and becomes responsible for the suicide of her first male companion—her boy-husband when she makes him feel small and slighted for having been involved in a homosexual relationship. Things seemed normal even after Blanche had found her husband in bed with an older man. She pretended that she had discovered nothing. They went to a casino, drank and danced. But in the middle of the dance, Blanche blurted out, “I saw! I know! You disgust me. . . .” (355). and the boy fired himself in the mouth “so that the back of his head had been blown away!” (355). Here, the young man is punished merely for behaving in compliance with his true nature. For the rest of her life, Blanche tries to fill the gap created by the loss of her husband and disintegrates in the process. She literally

converts herself into a common whore, leaping in the arms of one stranger and then another, finally getting expelled from her school and her city with the appalling accusation of seducing a seventeen year old student. Presumably, at the time of indulging in the act of homosexuality, it seems that her boy-husband felt no qualms of conscience and just satisfied the demands of the body. However, this aberration on his part was regarded as a serious moral lapse by Blanche and she told him all this in no uncertain terms. She instilled such a shame into her husband that he could bear its strain no longer and ended his life. Blanche, with her fake morality, was responsible for his death.

The same Blanche criticizes her brother-in-law for his animalistic urge as if his sexuality is something outside the sphere of socially constrained norms, "He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one. There's even something—sub-human—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet!" (323). Blanche fails to understand Stella's passion for Stanley. The spouses are most compatible with each other because their need for each other is earnest and compelling. Blanche dubs their love and passion as a 'brutal desire', "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just desire—the name of that rattle trap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another.." (321). Here Blanche is practising simulation and dissimulation which are subtle forms of deception. She is an incorrigible poseur. She falsely flaunts her virtue and tries to conceal her shady and shoddy past when she was ever on the look-out for establishing sexual relation with anyone who was available and willing. The conflict between Stanley and Blanche starts when Stanley realizes that she is assuming superior airs and graces. Stanley cannot stand her holier-than-thou posture after he has dug into her past life and discovered the truth about her. The conflict is further aggravated by his fears that she is bent upon wrecking his marriage and his fears are not unfounded. He eavesdrops when Blanche is telling her sister, "Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!" (323).

Stanley even justifies his cruelty towards Blanche and even his act of raping her on the strength of these two arguments. In his view Blanche is just a common whore whom he has been paying handsomely in terms of food, drink and lodging and so he demands his due from her. The conflict, in essence, is between basic candor of Stanley and ultra-sophistication and camouflage of Blanche. Just like Jimmy Porter, the protagonist of *Look Back in Anger* (1957) who rails at his wife Alison, Stanley is ruthless in his tirades against Blanche for she is the representative of the ultra-sophistication which is stereotypical of the aristocratic class. He tolerates her so far as he has hope of getting some share in their family estate, *Belle Reve*. This is, again, stereotypical of his masculine primitivism, for he behaves, as discussed by Engels in his "*The Origin of the Family, Primitive Property and the State* (1884), in line with the primitive patriarchal male who entered the institution of marriage only in order to inherit the property not only of his own forefathers but of his wife's forefathers also. However, this is not to justify Stanley's wicked actions but to explore the reason why he turns so mean, unaccommodating and inhospitable. No doubt, he is callous, cruel, raw, rough and rude but at least, he never tries to appear better than what he is, and in this sense, he is intrinsically moral. Arthur Ganz also writes in his article "Tennessee Williams: A Desperate Morality" that Williams acts as a moralist in his plays rather than a psychologist: "Williams' morality is a special one, but it is a consistent ethic, giving him a point of view from which he can judge the actions of people" (Ganz 123).

Furthermore, escaping from the reality of their own true nature by the exercise of simulation and dissimulation is also a breach of the facet of true morality. In fact, Blanche does not want to break the illusion of appearances that she has created about herself. As Mc Glinn observes, "Blanche's attempt to maintain the image of herself as a correct and genteel lady also leads her to deny her real sexual nature"(McGlinn 513).The stereotypical social conventional morality with which she lashes out at her own husband and her brother-in-law, compels her to smother her own sexuality while setting a trap for Mitch. She expresses a fake annoyance at being kissed by Mitch:

Honey, it wasn't the kiss I objected to. 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! But honey, you know as well as I do that a single girl, a girl alone in the world, has got to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost. (342-43)

Blanche has done with Mitch exactly what she wanted to do as she herself had confided in Stella, "I want to deceive him enough to make him—want me..." (335).

The consequences, nonetheless, are disastrous. She does not have her will. She, in the expectation of getting a financially secure relationship, loses even 'something' that she could have in a relationship which could have been more fulfilling, beautiful and healthier, had Blanche been more honest in her behaviour, more ethical in her principles. As Mitch describes the things in very simple terms, "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" (356). For Blanche also, the relationship had a divine piety at the moment: "Sometimes—there's God so quickly" (356). The fact is that, Blanche is caught up in a net woven by herself. The ostentations of preserving chastity on the part of a promiscuous girl are too much for Mitch to swallow and digest. Hence, he leaves her for good.

To conclude, Tennessee Williams seems to define morality as being true to one's own self. Whenever a character behaves in a hypocritical manner, he or she deviates from his/her natural self and this brings about a total undoing in sexual as well as social terms. Any behaviour even if it happens to be socially or sexually deviant but which is in tune with a character's true self is acceptable to Tennessee Williams; anything which is not intrinsic and natural to a person's character becomes a flaw even if it is socially or sexually straight. Thus, Tennessee Williams evokes his own concepts of what is moral or immoral even if it means going against the mainstream.

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#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Dr Sneh Lata Sharma** is Assistant Professor of English (Guest Faculty) in Chaudhary Bansi Lal University, Bhiwani, Haryana. She is NET qualified and Ph. D. in English from Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak. He did her research work under the supervision of Dr Satish Arya. Her topic was "Thematic Concerns in Taslima Nasreen's Major Novels". She has been teaching English at various prestigious schools and colleges of her area for more than fifteen years.