The use of prestige language in Tennessee Williams's *A streetcar named Desire*

O uso de linguagem de prestígio em *A streetcar named Desire*, de Tennessee Williams

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14859687

Dr. Stuart Noel[1]

Abstract

The article discusses the utilization of prestige language in Tennessee Williams's *A streetcar named Desire.* It explores the character Blanche DuBois, who employs a pretentious and melodramatic language to project an image of high social status and conceal her true nature. Blanche embodies personal and artistic decay that pervades Williams' work. Prestige language is characterized as formal and associated with prestigious social contexts. Blanche employs this language to create a refined and superior image, contrasting with her emotional and mental deterioration. The article also delves into the relationship between Blanche and reality, her pursuit of illusions, and her struggle to maintain an image that doesn't align with her true nature. Through the analysis of the character and Williams's narrative techniques, the article reveals the recurring theme of art and decay in his work.

Keywords: American (Southern) Literature; American Drama and Theatre; English Syntax.

Resumo

O artigo discute a utilização da linguagem de prestígio na peça *A streetcar named Desire*, de Williams. O autor explora a personagem Blanche DuBois, que utiliza uma linguagem pretensiosa e melodramática para projetar uma imagem de classe alta e ocultar sua verdadeira natureza. Blanche personifica a decadência pessoal e artística que permeia a obra de Williams. A linguagem de prestígio é caracterizada por ser formal e associada a contextos sociais de boa reputação. Blanche utiliza essa linguagem para criar uma imagem refinada e superior, contrastando com sua deterioração emocional e mental. O artigo também discute a relação entre Blanche e a realidade, sua busca por ilusões e sua luta para manter uma imagem que não condiz com sua verdadeira natureza. Através da análise da personagem e das técnicas narrativas de Williams, o artigo revela o tema recorrente de arte e decadência presente em sua obra.

Palavras-chave: Literatura do Sul estadunidense; Teatro e dramaturgia estadunidense; Sintaxe da língua inglesa.

[1] Dr. Stuart Noel is Professor of English and Film at Georgia State University in Atlanta, Georgia. He has lectured widely both in the United States and abroad as a scholar of Tennessee Williams and Truman Capote. Dr. Noel founded and chairs the Truman Capote Literary Society. He is the recipient of the 2018 Scholar's Award at the Tennessee Williams Tribute in Columbus, Mississippi, the birthplace of Tennessee Williams. E-mail: snoel1@gsu.edu.

During the middle part of the twentieth century, many authors and playwrights from the South emerged with acclaim. Their topics varied with subjects consisting of themselves, their Southern experiences, and brilliant fictions involving situations and characters with intense Southern narratives in a flowery Southern flavor. One of the greatest figures to emerge from the South is Tennessee Williams. His masterful use of language, including rich description and metaphor, adds to his narrative genius; as James Hafley (1977, p. 761) writes,

> In Tennessee Williams […] what I am awaiting is the excitement of speech itself. This may be called poetic style, or language as gesture, or drama as literature, or—more properly—literature as theater, but it is speech itself. I listen and the language builds and develops itself into structures that both are and lead to the gloriously inevitable.

His greatest works involve characters who find themselves deteriorating from one or more personal struggles which inevitably get the best of them. Many of these characters were at one time artistic, heroic, or glamorous figures who later find themselves in a world of personal and artistic decay. This deterioration seems to parallel Williams's [the artist] personal struggles and despondence. One such character presents the ugly picture of sexual indulgence, the selfish use of other people, and the personification of a dying false image of a *moonlight and magnolias* South. The character tries, unsuccessfully, to conceal this side of herself through her use of prestige language in conjunction with delusions of grandeur with wealth and lineage. Blanche in *A streetcar named Desire* disintegrates when she discovers her young husband with another man. She is forced out of her English teaching position because of various, sordid sexual escapades. Closer analysis of Williams's rich linguistic narration techniques and this character will present a recurring theme of art and decay and the use of prestige language in Williams's work.

Prestige language is an exaggeratedly elevated, pretentious, and oftentimes melodramatic form of one's language incorporating superstandard or more standard speech than usual in order to project a highly authoritative individual identity. According to Woolfram and Schilling-Estes, the authoritative connotations which our highly standard speech carries most likely derive from the fact that those with the most authority in our society speak standard English. Further, speech styles carry personal identification meaning not only because they are closely associated with certain social classes but because they tend to be associated with certain conversational contexts. Features which may be considered to be *elaborated* in form [for example, full forms vs. contractions] tend to cluster together in

speech registers/styles which are typically considered to be more formal and/or of higher social prestige, such as academic lectures and news broadcasts. Members of higher social classes have access to the elaborated registers which characterize formal writings and pre-planned speech events, such as lectures, while members of lower classes are relegated to using the more economical registers associated with casual, face-to-face conversational interaction, since they do not participate in as many planned speech events as upper-class speakers (Woolfram; Schilling-Estes, 1998, p. 234-235).

In *A streetcar named Desire*, Williams presents Blanche DuBois, a most complex and intriguing character who often uses prestige language to project the image of an upper-class speaker and to disguise her darker and complicated self. She embodies various fascinating and contrasting characteristics. Like New Orleans [the locale of the play], Blanche represents two opposing images. One image projects that of genteel, Southern charm and beauty, speaking formally and using prestige language, and the other image reveals that of a soiled, deteriorating façade, full of decadence and illusion. Ellen Bouchard Ryan writes that a host of several attitude studies conducted in several societies have

> demonstrated that varieties of particular language tend to enjoy differential prestige […] within a given society that one particular variety, the standard dialect, incorporates a formal set of norms defining 'correct usage'. This high prestige standard is usually employed predominantly by the social group(s) with the highest social status in that society (Ryan, 1979, p. 145).

Williams said on more than one occasion that Blanche's use of such language was a direct reflection of her personality and character [as a high school English teacher]. Perhaps the character of Blanche DuBois is all-the-more fascinating to examine because in *The kindness of strangers* Williams is quoted, referring to the heroine, "I am Blanche DuBois" (Spoto, 1985, p. 139).

Williams describes Blanche in Scene One as being delicate and fragile, like a moth, and demurely dressed in white. He presents her as "looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth" (Williams, 1971, p. 3). As a middle-aged woman trying to appear younger and sophisticated, physical appearance, manner, and prestigious syntax are extremely important to her. Blanche, as her name implies, appears somewhat pallid, burdened, garishly overrefined and out of place when she arrives at her sister's home. One of the first examples of Blanche's use of prestige language is

when she is asking Stella about her living conditions, "Oh, I'm not going to be hypocritical, I'm going to be honestly critical about it! Never, never, never in my worst dreams could I picture—Only Poe! Only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!—could do it justice! Out there I suppose is the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir!" (Williams, 1971, p. 6). She begins her time with her sister and brother-in-law in this tone, and it continues throughout her stay.

In an early conversation with a possible beau, Mitch, Blanche uses prestige language to set an erudite tone and image. After quoting an Elizabeth Barrett Browning poem to Mitch, he asks her if she is in the teaching profession.

> BLANCHE. Yes. Ah, yes. . .
> MITCH. Grade school or high school or—
> BLANCHE. I teach high school. In Laurel.
> MITCH. What do you teach? What subject?
> BLANCHE. Guess!
> MITCH. I bet you teach art or music? Of course I could be wrong. [*Blanche laughs delicately*.] You might teach arithmetic.
> BLANCHE. Never arithmetic, sir; never arithmetic! [*with a laugh*] I don't even know my multiplication tables! No, I have the misfortune of being an English instructor. I attempt to instill a bunch of bobby-soxers and drugstore Romeos with reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe!
> MITCH. I guess that some of them are more interested in other things.
> BLANCHE. How very right you are! Their literary heritage is not what most of them treasure above all else! But they're sweet things! And in the spring, it's touching to notice them making their first discovery of love! As if nobody had ever known it before! (Williams, 1971, p. 34)

Mitch is impressed with her grace, knowledge, and mastery of the language—that is, before he learns of her delusions and delicate mental and emotional conditions.

She has arrived by way of a streetcar named *Desire,* transferring to another called *Cemeteries*. Williams incorporates the factual names of the streetcars to further describe Blanche and her plight in life. *Desire* describes her desire to project the image of a well-educated, refined, and charming, Southern woman. *Cemeteries* represents her self-made mental and emotional deterioration and deathwish. Her past is a mixture of sin and romance, reality and illusion, the inappropriateness of desire and the mores of society. Her personality is a battle between animal reality and moral appearance. In *Mirror on the stage*, Thomas P. Adler states that Blanche insists on the place of *magic* in life. Blanche says, "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't want to tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth" (Adler, 1987, p. 385). As Harold Clurman notes, she is "the potential artist in all of us […] Her lies are part of her will

to beauty; her wretched romanticism is a futile reaching toward a fullness of life" (Clurman, 1974, p. 12). At one point, in an attempt to recapture life at the family plantation, Belle Reve [that is, *beautiful dream*], Blanche attires herself in the long white satin evening gown, the silver slippers, the rhinestone tiara. However, according to Adler, in a symbolic action, she breaks the hand mirror, "for art cannot camouflage life or stop time, and reality will always betray the dream" (Clurman, 1974, p. 33). She lives in a world of elevated syntax, shades, and romantic melodies that conjure up dream worlds, of indiscretions turned into romances, of alcoholic escape, and of time past.

It is very difficult for Blanche to deal with reality in the harsh world in which she lives. Her feverish and often condescending talk, her attention to her figure and to the showy clothes she brought, and her frequent returns to the whiskey that she later says she *never touches* give an early clue to her state of mind. Her attempt to hold the crumbling world of the family plantation, Belle Reve, has failed. Vague about the loss of the plantation, she tells of spendthrift grandfathers, uncles, father, and brothers who over the years mortgaged the land to pay for their *epic fornications*. She refuses to accept the reality of her life and attempts to live under illusion. She has a false sense of gentility, which is contradicted by a promiscuous past. Her incident of crisis occurred when she discovered her husband was a homosexual, and in a moment of disgust she drove him to suicide. The memory recurs in flashes to haunt Blanche, who only wants to avoid the *blinding light*. She does not want to face the rejection of her husband and the part she played in his suicide.

Criticism of Stella's sordid condition allows Blanche to temporarily forget her own unhappy life. She refuses to believe that Stella is happy in her new way of life, which is so different from the plantation world where they grew up. She judges Stanley, Stella's husband, as beneath them because he is not a gentleman. To play her role in the two-room Kowalski apartment, Blanche has brought a trunk full of clothes, imitation jewelry and costumes. Through her attitude and speech she presents her superiority. She introduces literary and cultural references into the French Quarter dwelling. She alone uses correct grammar and a developed vocabulary. According to Anthony S. Abbott in *The vital lie*, Blanche and Stanley represent two ways of life, and the "real point of the play is that the Stanleys are exterminating the Blanches from the face of the earth" (Abbott, 1989, p. 143). In one example of her use of prestige language, Blanche explains to Stella:

> Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella – my sister - there has been some progress since then! Such things as art -- as poetry and music -- such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching…. don't -- don't hang back with the brutes! (Williams, 1971, p. 323)

Abbott goes on to say that Blanche fights back against Stanley with the only resources she has - illusions (Abbott, 1989, p. 143). An additional resource includes her mastery of language. Nancy Wilhelmi notes that Williams's plays "depict women as seizers of powerful language" (Wilhelmi, 1994, p. 218). Nevertheless, Blanche's attempt to maintain the image of herself as a correct and genteel lady only leads her to deny her real sexual nature. Elizabeth Gordon notes that in societies where social stratification is reflected in speech, women—especially middle class women—tend to use more of the standard or prestige variants than men. "Research in different types of communities, using differing methodologies, has revealed this is a common pattern; it has been shown that, in formal situations, women style-shift more dramatically than men" (Gordon, 1997, p. 47). Blanche often style-shifts when need demands and especially when she feel desperate and cornered.

Blanche's sexual nature asserts itself, however, regardless of her attempts at gentility, and this leads to her breakdown. According to C.W.E. Bigsby, Blanche is "haunted by her own failure to acknowledge a human responsibility - a failure which sends her on a desperate and hopeless flight" (Bigsby, 1984, p. 48). She avoids adult sexual relationships but actively seeks affairs with adolescents. She is fired from her teaching position because of an attempt to seduce a teenage student. She later admits that she has had many one-night stands with the young soldiers of the nearby army camp. Her words and actions show, at one point, her urge to seduce a young newspaper boy. Perhaps Blanche seeks relationships with boys because she feels guilty about the death of her young husband. Though she does not wish for the complications of love, panic drives her to sex when her memories make existence unbearable: "After the death of Alan - intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with... hunting for some protection" (Williams, 1971, p. 386). Her legacy has been death, all the hideous, crushing burdens of the dying that she faced alone. She chooses this road of sensuality, she explains, because of her feeling that the "opposite of death[2] is desire" (Williams, 1971, p. 389). Despite her deteriorating state, even when her appearance is less than desirable, she rarely lets down her defensive guard through the use

[2] As suggested by the symbolism of the two streetcars.

of prestige language. As Edward Finegan explains, "The observations and findings suggest that in more formal styles there is a marked tendency for speakers to use fuller forms and to match form and semantics more closely. This is apparently true of all socioeconomic groups" (Finegan, 1987, p. 156). Although Blanche is from a *prestigious and old southern* family, her appearance and behavior, at times, would not project such.

Blanche's true motive for pursuing sexual relationships, however, is to assuage her insecurity and feelings of inadequacy. Alan, she says, "came to me for help. I didn't know that ... all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way" (Williams, 1971, p. 354). It is this failure that Blanche is trying to resolve by forming relationships with boys. She might be able to satisfy one of them in a way she was never able to satisfy her boyish husband Alan. This sense of inadequacy also accounts for her awareness of her physical attractiveness. Fearing that she will be unable to win a man and knowing that failure will mean she will have to face herself, Blanche pursues Mitch. But she is afraid of a mature man-woman relationship and never really views Mitch as a sexual conquest. She sees him as a "cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in" (Williams, 1971, p. 387). She wants him to protect her from her persistent vision of Alan's suicide. Unfortunately, he is not her prince, and consciously or unconsciously, she assumes dominance in relating to Mitch by her use of powerful/prestige language. Unlike the power play between Stella and Stanley that is overt and often physical, the power struggle between Blanche and Mitch is subtle and verbal.

> MITCH. How old are you?
> BLANCHE. Why do you want to know?
> MITCH. I talked to my mother about you and she said, 'How old is Blanche?' And I wasn't able to tell her.
> BLANCHE. You talked to your mother about me?
> MITCH. Yes.
> BLANCHE. Why?
> MITCH. I told my mother how nice you were, and I liked you.
> BLANCHE. Were you sincere about that?
> MITCH. You know I was (Williams, 1971, p. 352).

Wanting information, Mitch directly asks Blanche her age — a fact that Blanche wants to hide from him. Asking a question is one way of dominating a conversation. The questioner manages "the flow and exchange of messages" (Wilhelmi, 1993, p. 220). Blanche refuses to relinquish such control to Mitch. Avoiding the question while gaining subtle control of the conversation, Blanche answers a question with a question—changing the topic of conversation. In fact, she maintains this pattern throughout this dialogue asking questions,

directing the conversation, giving no information.

Stanley, the antithesis of Blanche, in his ignorance and insensitivity, destroys both her hope and her illusion. Williams polarizes a conflict with the school teacher, Blanche, with her talk of poetry and arts, and the laborer Kowalski, with his unrefined, primal life and speech. He sees through her façade without understanding why she needs one. Stanley takes Blanche's teasing as a flirtatious sign and concludes that they've "had this date with each other from the beginning!" (Williams, 1971, p. 402). The rape shatters Blanche's desperate attempt for dignity and also forces on her what she is too fragile to endure, forceful sexual passion. The tragic result is insanity. According to Ruby Cohn in *Dialogue in American drama* in the final scene, Blanche is "the victim of her own Southern-belle fantasy; the role has become her reality as she seems not to recognize the poker-playing men" (Cohn, 1971, p. 104). Expecting Shep Huntleigh, Blanche responds to the Institution doctor, who Cohn says is both her "Hunter and her Shepherd" (Cohn, 1971, p. 104). Her exit line, addressed to the doctor, intensifies her pathos: "Whoever you are - I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Williams, 1971, p. 418). Cohn concludes that Blanche has found no kindness among strangers and that we may recall Blanche's first use of the word *strangers,* in her confession to Mitch, "After the death of Alan -- intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with" (Cohn, 1971, p. 104). Her heart is lonely and she unfortunately is ill-equipped to face a harsh world of reality and abandon.

Although Blanche DuBois lives with a sordid and pitiful past, which she glazes over with deceit and lies, she is not without redeeming qualities, which evoke sympathy and admiration. It is never her intention to deliberately hurt anyone. Dan Vogel writes: "Blanche DuBois is classic - a nearly perfect combination of tyrannical aspiration, idealism, failure, and dignity, all engendered by her region's history and romantic ambience" (Vogel, 1974, p. 83). For once Blanche is gone, civilized conversation vanishes, Stanley and Stella relax into an almost wordless animal existence as the blue piano music plays and the final words of the play take on full meaning: "This game is seven-card stud," (Williams, 1971, p. 419) which summarizes a bleak, decadent, and unfulfilling life in the French Quarter without the gentle and civilized world of Blanche.

Tennessee Williams's work is characteristically concerned with the conflict between the illusions of an individual and the reality of his/her situation equated with a conflict between truth and beauty. An examination of Blanche DuBois reveals a recurring theme of

art and decay and the use of prestige language to reveal artistry in language and to hide a deteriorating self. His graceful and poetic writing personifies her downfall and deterioration. Her loneliness and disappointment are the things so often strongly feared by the sensitive artists and heroes in the world. Hers is also a special and delicate human spirit that is often misunderstood and repressed by society. As Anthony S. Abbott notes in *The vital lie*,

> Williams's characters lie, dream, form illusions, and retreat into drink, drugs and hallucination primarily to protect themselves from hurt. We must view them primarily as victims. In a *Life* interview Williams said, 'For me the dominating premise has been the need for understanding and the tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance.' He asks us to look beneath the surface and not to judge. All are figures the traditional world would be quick to condemn: their lives are dominated by illusions. But Williams asks us to understand them, to see *why* they have become what they are, and, finally, to love them (Abbott, 1989, p. 139, our emphasis).

Blanche is afflicted with a psychic illness growing out of her inability to face the harshness of human existence. She is a sensitive, artistic, and beauty-haunted creature who is avoiding her own humanity while hiding behind her use of prestige language. And she embodies a partial projection of Williams himself. No one understood this isolation more than Tennessee Williams. This call for understanding lost souls in a modern civilization on the verge of human aesthetic and artistic decay comes not from just the writings of the playwright, but from the heart of the artist and idealist himself. Williams's masterful use of language to describe his characters and situations serves him well as he presents people who hide a part of themselves behind syntax, appearance, and illusion. It is this lyrical linguistic narrative that moved James Hafley to compare Williams's work with opera, "the theater of Williams is a drama of language itself as art, as fine art" (Hafley, 1977, p. 762).

References

ABBOTT, Anthony S. **The vital lie** - Reality and illusion in modern drama. Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1989.

ADLER, Thomas P. **Mirror on the stage**. West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 1987.

BIGSBY, Christopher W. E. **A critical introduction to twentieth-century American drama**. New York: Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, 1984.

CLURMAN, Harold. **The divine pastime**: theatre essays. New York: MacMillan, 1974.

COHN, Ruby. **Dialogue in American drama**. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971.

FINEGAN, Edward. On the linguistic forms of prestige—Snobs and slobs using English. In: BOARDMAN, Philip C. (Ed.). **The legacy of language**—A tribute to Charlton Laird. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1987.

GORDON, Elizabeth. Sex, speech, and stereotypes: why women use prestige speech forms more than men. **Language in Society**, v. 26, n. 1, p. 47-63, 1997.

HAFLEY, James. Abstraction and order in the language of Tennessee Williams. In: THARPE, Jac (Ed.). **Tennessee Williams**: a tribute. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977.

PHILLIPS, Susan U.; STEELE, Susan Steele; TANZ, Christine (Ed.). **Language, gender, and sex in comparative perspective**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

RYAN, Ellen Bouchard. Why do low-prestige language varieties persist? In: GILES, Howard; ST. CLAIR, ROBERT N. (Ed.). **Language and Social Psychology**. Baltimore: University Park Press, 1979.

SPOTO, Donald. **The kindness of strangers** - The life of Tennessee Williams. Boston: Little, Brown & Company Limited. 1985.

VOGEL, Dan. **The three masks of American tragedy**. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1974.

WILHELMI, Nancy O. The language of power and powerlessness—Verbal combat in the plays of Tennessee Williams. In: GOLDIN, Cynthia (Ed.). **The text & beyond**: essays in literary linguistics. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama, 1994.

WILLIAMS, Tennessee. **A streetcar named Desire**. The Theatre of Tennessee Williams. v. 1. New York: New Directions, 1971.

WOOLFRAM, Walt; SCHILLING-ESTES, Natalie. **American English**. Madden: Blackwell Publishers, 1998.

Works consulted

BAUGH, Albert C.; CABLE, Thomas. **A history of the English language**. Upper Saddle River: Prentice Hall, 2002.

BERGER, Charles R.; BURGOON (Ed.). **Communication and social influence processes**. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1995.

SVALASTOGA, Kaare. **Prestige, class and mobility**. New York: Arno Press, 1979.

Submitted on: Apr. 20, 2023
Accepted on: Aug. 7, 2023