# The Portrayal of Female Characters in Theodore Dreiser's Sister Carrie and Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire

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J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and Pedagogy

Petra Blažeković

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Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Sanja Runtić, Full Professor

Osijek, 2020

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Završni rad

Mentor: prof. dr. sc. Sanja Runtić

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## Table of Contents

## Abstract

This paper analyses central female characters in Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). It argues that both Dreiser's Carrie and Williams' Blanche are "fallen women" who act and present themselves as someone they are not. It also contends that in their attempt to escape poverty and the miseries of life, both characters are led by strong desires, but that eventually, they attain the opposite from what they hoped for. Even though, unlike Blanche, whose madness and trajectory of decline reveal that she obviously gets punished for her transgressive behaviour, Carrie gets "rewarded" through her social ascent, Dreiser's heroine is also indirectly punished as she eventually fails to find happiness and her desires remain unfulfilled. Apart from exploring the relation of these texts to their respective socio-historical backgrounds, the analysis also focuses on elements of naturalism – determinism in particular – that shape their heroines as fragile females in a brutal world ruled by men and define them as victims of circumstances beyond their control.

***Keywords***: *Sister Carrie*, Theodore Dreiser, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams, Blanche DuBois, Carrie Meeber, female characters, Southern belle, "fallen woman," determinism

## Introduction

Theodore Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* (1900) and Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) share an important feature – the core characters of these works are women, Carrie and Blanche, who are being driven by their desires. In order to explore this feature, this paper will compare the two characters focusing on their personality, actions, desires, and social background. Although written decades apart from each other, both Williams's play and Dreiser's novel were considered somewhat inappropriate due to their main characters' actions, which were considered atypical by the society of their time. Both texts provide a critique of American society, condemning the way women were treated. Since both of these literary works contain elements of realism and naturalism, whose main features lie in depicting reality closely and objectively and in portraying the lives of middle- and lower-class characters whose fortunes are determined, among others, by social and economic forces, in order to understand them, one must be acquainted with social and cultural changes in America as well as with the position of women of the time they were written.

The first chapter of the paper provides an insight into the position of women in late-nineteenth- and mid-twentieth-century American society. The second chapter takes a closer look into the life of Carrie Meeber, the heroine of Dreiser's novel, focusing on her ascension from "rags to riches." The third chapter analyses Blanche DuBois, an aging Southern belle and a "fallen woman" who struggles with accepting the true reality of her life. Consequently, the last chapter compares the lives of the two main protagonists, describing how both of them eventually became the opposite from what they initially wanted.

## 1. The Position of Women in Late-Nineteenth-Century America

In order to understand the true significance of Dreiser's novel *Sister Carrie* and Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the actions of their female heroines, one has to be acquainted with the historical context of these works.

The novel *Sister Carrie* was written in 1900 and is also set in that time, at the turn of the century, when American society underwent tremendous changes due to the aftermaths of the Civil War and industrialization. According to Runtić, the period between the 1870s and the 1910s was the era of the greatest social changes American history (*Vrijeme buđenja* 17). At the end of the nineteenth century, a rapid growth of cities was more than evident, and, consequently, the population was expanding. More and more people migrated from rural to urban areas, seeking employment that would ensure their means for existence. However, as Runtić states, as the market competition increased, the wages decreased, and the working conditions deteriorated (*Vrijeme buđenja* 18–19). All of those social changes are reflected in *Sister Carrie*, whose main protagonist, Carrie, also abandons her hometown to look for a new life in the city: "When Caroline Meeber boarded the afternoon train for Chicago, her total outfit consisted of a small trunk, a cheap imitation alligator-skin satchel, a small lunch in a paper box, and a yellow leather snap purse" (Dreiser).

Alongside these changes in America at the turn of the century, the position of women in society also changed dramatically. In the preindustrial period, women were the ones whose main duty was to take care of their home and children. However, things changed greatly when women started working and pursuing their own career. According to Runtić, the educational profession was one of the first domains of women's public action (*Vrijeme buđenja* 26). Namely, as most men were away in the period of the Civil War, in the 1860s, which caused a lack of male teachers, women were the ones who stepped into the education system and entered the teaching profession. That is how, over the years, the position of a teacher became mostly "women's profession" (*Vrijeme buđenja* 26). The heroine of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois, was a teacher too: "No, I have the misfortune of being an English instructor. I attempt to instill a bunch of bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos with reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe!" (Williams 56). Runtić states that the possibilities of a woman's work outside her home increased with industrialization. Since a woman's attempt to enter the public sphere was considered humiliating and

compromising to her husband and dangerous to her children (Hareven qtd. in Runtić, *Vrijeme buđenja* 26), the number of employed women increased only at the turn of the century, from four million in the 1890s to 5.3 million in the 1900s, and most of those women held the occupations such as housekeeper, labourer, manufacturer, teacher, and clerk (*Vrijeme buđenja* 26). On the other hand, the occupations of higher social significance were extremely hard for women to obtain (*Vrijeme buđenja* 26). Likewise, on her arrival in Chicago, Dreiser's Carrie also has a hard time finding any kind of job: "She was a work-seeker, an outcast without employment, one whom the average employee could tell at a glance was poor and in need of a situation" (Dreiser). When she eventually finds one, her wage of $4.5 is quite miserable and insufficient for her everyday needs.

According to Atkins, "of those married women who were employed a larger percentage were younger women." The same author also explains that "women were marrying at a younger age and perhaps felt working could enable an earlier marriage rather than waiting until the couple could rely on the man's earnings." Accordingly, at the turn of the twentieth century, the position of women in society gradually changed due to new occupations being offered to them. Slowly but surely, women started gaining more and more rights, which enabled them to make their living completely on their own. This can be seen in the characters of Carrie and Blanche, who, although being unmarried, earn for themselves – one as a teacher and the other one as a famous actress. However, despite this, society has always imposed restrictions on the lives of women. Life was not easy for a single woman in the respective periods described in these texts, especially if she tried to stand on her own feet, such as Carrie did. It was even harder for Blanche, who, after losing her job, comes to her sister's place hoping to find a man who is willing to marry her and thus help her escape poverty but soon realizes that no one would marry an aging Southern belle who hides her real age, especially after finding out the real truth about her.

*A Streetcar Named Desire* was written in 1947, the period of post-war America. The play is also set in the time when the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II severely changed American society. Young men returned from the war, ready to settle down and start their families. Such is the case with Stanley Kowalski, Blanche's brother-in-law, who also fought on the battlefield, got back as a decorated soldier, and married her sister Stella. The play mirrors cultural tensions that pervaded American society after the war, and it also serves as a critique of the way women were treated during that time. After the war, the middle and

lower classes came to the spotlight as the true carriers of the American spirit. The working class, proud of itself because of its efficiency and its hard work, became the proper example in American society (Gros 337). Consequently, the chivalry and the aristocrats of the Old South died out, becoming undesirable in the eyes of society. The values of the Old South came to the verge of extinction as the industrial economy took over the country after the war. *A Streetcar Named Desire* juxtaposes the values of the American South, represented in the character of Blanche, to the new ethics of industriousness set after the war, represented in the character of Stanley. One important feature of the Old South is certainly the Southern belle stereotype, which, according to Oklopčić, "rested on a set of very strict class, race and gender traits . . . it went without saying that belle was white and of aristocratic origin" (1). The fact that Blanche is one of the last representatives of the Southern bellehood gives her the right to be condescending to anyone whom she finds to be "common," which especially applies to Stanley. Williams' Blanche is very proud of her Southern origin and is full of false propriety. Also, she has a hard time accepting the modern world she lives in and constantly expresses nostalgia for the Old South, especially for her lost mansion, Belle Reve. According to Oklopčić, Williams is aware of the fact that his heroine cannot survive in the modern world:

> His *A Streetcar Named Desire* is, for sure, a perfect example of this, for at its center is Blanche DuBois. Through this woman character, Williams appears to celebrate the gentility and sensitivity of the Old South as well as the Southern belle as its greatest ornament. But, as the representative of Southern Renaissance, he himself is ambivalent as well as suspicious about the possibility of the belle's permanent affirmation in the modern world. (1)

## 2. The Portrayal of Carrie Meeber

At the beginning of *Sister Carrie*, readers are introduced to the character of Carrie, a young country-girl who travels to Chicago to find work there. We learn that she is staying at her sister and brother-in-law's apartment: "It was in August, 1889. She was eighteen years of age, bright, timid, and full of the illusions of ignorance and youth" (Dreiser). According to Gelfant, the novel begins with "a poignantly needy heroine, a poor working-girl without a job, skill or money" (178). On her train trip to Chicago, she meets a charming, good-looking salesman named Henry Drouet, who immediately sparks interest in her: "There was something satisfactory in the attention of this individual with his good clothes. She could not help smiling as he told her of some popular actress of whom she reminded him" (Dreiser). When Carrie finally meets with her sister Minnie and her husband, Hanson, she finds out that they live a pretty monotonous life – Hanson gets up very early to go to work, and Minnie takes care of the baby. Carrie realises that they expect her to find work almost immediately and senses that her sister is not so thrilled to have her at her home, even though the two of them have not seen each other for years: "She had invited Carrie, not because she longed for her presence, but because the latter was dissatisfied at home, and could probably get work and pay her board here" (Dreiser).

Carrie has a hard time finding a job, and when she eventually finds one in a shoe factory, she loses it due to sickness. That is when she finds herself at the crossroads – she can either go home or abandon her sister's tiny flat and ask Drouet for help. Eventually, she chooses the latter, not having the slightest idea that by doing this, her life will change dramatically. She becomes Drouet's mistress and, in return, gets a new place to live in – a cosy apartment and huge amounts of new clothes, all paid by Drouet. However, she hopes that Drouet will soon marry her, but he has no such intentions. Her relationship with him starts due to his insistence to help her, and although she has some moral concerns in the beginning, she eventually accepts his generous help: "To her, and indeed to all the world, he was a nice, good-hearted man. There was nothing evil in the fellow. He gave her the money out of a good heart – out of a realisation of her want" (Dreiser).

Carrie respects and admires Drouet because he helped her in most difficult times, but that admiration and respect do not prevent her from indulging in an affair with George Hurstwood, a successful manager of Fitzgerald and Moy's saloon and Drouet's friend. Carrie

is a pretty girl, and her new fine clothes and manner only intensify her beauty: "She began to get the hang of those little things which the pretty woman who has vanity invariably adopts. In short, her knowledge of grace doubled, and with it her appearance changed. She became a girl of considerable taste" (Dreiser). It is no wonder that Hurstwood becomes infatuated with her: "Carrie, on the other hand, had the blood of youth and some imagination. Her day of love and the mysteries of courtship were still ahead" (Dreiser). Not only is Carrie pretty, but she is clever as well: "She really was not enamoured of Drouet. She was more clever than he. In a dim way, she was beginning to see where he lacked" (Dreiser). Hurstwood, on the other hand, has that something which makes her attached to him: "When Hurstwood called, she met a man who was more clever than Drouet in a hundred ways. He paid that peculiar deference to woman which every member of the sex appreciates" (Dreiser).

Eventually, upon discovering that Hurstwood is married, Carrie decides to forget about him, but he forces her to flee with him to another city. They end up in New York and start living together. There, Hurstwood finds a new job but with a salary that is incomparable to the one he had before. For some time, they manage to live quite harmoniously. However, Hurstwood begins to stay out in the evenings and rarely takes Carrie with him as he believes that she enjoys the domestic life. Carrie soon befriends the Vances, a wealthy couple, and starts comparing herself to Mrs. Vance. This causes her to view her life in a different way – now her apartment seems commonplace and insufficient. However, things change for the worse when Hurstwood loses his job and does not find another one. Now Carrie becomes the provider for both of them. She finds a job as an actress and makes her way to the top. On her way to fame and glory, she abandons Hurstwood as she no longer wants to spend money on his rent and food. She leaves him twenty-five dollars and a note saying that she is leaving him. Hurstwood soon becomes a beggar and commits suicide. By contrast, Carrie becomes a famous actress, earning one hundred and thirty-five dollars a week. Yet, although she accomplishes everything she wants and achieves her dream of becoming wealthy, she fails in one thing – being happy with herself. Even though "Dreiser's little actress now has everything she wanted: money, clothes, comfort, recognition, rich men proposing marriage" (Gelfant 179), still, she feels that she needs more.

From the very beginning of the novel, one thing is certain – Carrie has always felt that she deserves something better than she already has, and was never truly satisfied with herself, even after reaching wealth and glory. At the beginning of her working-career in a Chicago

factory, "She felt as though she could hardly endure such a life. Her idea of work had been so entirely different" (Dresier). She is not satisfied with the kind of life in which she spends endless hours working for a miserable wage. She also envies the wealthier city girls for their fine clothes and appearance: "She felt ashamed in the face of better dressed girls who went by. She felt as though she could be better served, and her heart revolted" (Dreiser). All the time, she desired something, eventually letting her desire eat her up from inside. Her desire was always connected with money and material goods, especially clothes: "Fine clothes to her were a vast persuasion; they spoke tenderly and Jesuitically for themselves" (Dreiser). Her need and desire for new clothes are so strong that she neglects to pay the rent and food in order to buy herself more clothes. According to Nia, "Carrie remains to the end full of insatiable longings; in other words, she remains poor in spirit as she becomes dependent on external signs for her happiness" (53).

In the eyes of society, Carrie is a "fallen woman" – she lives with two men, Drouet and Hurstwood, out of wedlock. However, it is not this that bothered the public after the novel was published; it was the fact that Carrie's sinful behaviour did not lead her to doom. On the contrary, instead of falling, she rises on the social scale. The former ignorant, naive girl becomes famous and wealthy, while at the same time, her second lover, Hurstwood, rushes to his doom. Yet, instead of punishing his sinful heroine, Dreiser treats her with sympathy, allowing her to rise up the social scale while falling morally. According to Runtić, "the answer to the question how Dreiser excused his heroine for rising by falling, lies, paradoxically, in the question itself: by making her rise" ("American Naturalism Revisited" 450). Carrie is a perfect representative of American consumer culture, which Dreiser, as a social commentator of his time, alludes to throughout the entire novel. According to Nia, "Dreiser in this novel realistically portrays a rapidly developing society in terms of the production of commodities and the needs corresponding to them at the same time" (56). Nia also states that the city in *Sister Carrie* "is full of enticing objects which lead Carrie to ambition and desire for luxury" (53). When Carrie is moneyless, she becomes enthralled by the city, its shop windows and lights, and later, when she acquires more than enough money for her needs, "her ambition is not diminished but intensified" (Nia 53). According to Nia, Carrie "comes to measure happiness by the material things she sees" (54). Throughout the novel, she thinks that money makes people truly happy, but once she reaches everything she wants, she still dreams, not finding inner satisfaction:

> Oh Carrie, Carrie! Oh, blind strivings of the human heart! Onward, onward, it saith, and where beauty leads, there it follows. Whether it be the tinkle of a lone sheep bell o'er some quiet landscape, or the glimmer of beauty in sylvan places, or the show of soul in some passing eye, the heart knows and makes answer, following. It is when the feet weary and hope seems vain that the heartaches and the longings arise. Know, then, that for you is neither surfeit nor content. In your rocking-chair, by your window dreaming, shall you long, alone. In your rocking-chair, by your window, shall you dream such happiness as you may never feel. (Dreiser)

It should be noted that at the end, we find Carrie, a famous actress, sitting in her rocking-chair, dreaming of happiness that she will never truly experience. Although she is an object of men's desire, she chooses to be alone, refusing the applause of the outside world, eventually losing her touch with reality.

## 3. The Portrayal of Blanche DuBois

The main protagonist of Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is Blanche DuBois, a former schoolteacher from Laurel, who, like Carrie, comes to live in her sister's apartment in New Orleans due to the loss of her ancestral home, Belle Reve. When Blanche gets off a streetcar and comes to Elysian Fields, a neighbourhood where her sister Stella lives with her husband, Stanley Kowalski, she is flabbergasted. She can hardly believe that her sister lives in such a place:

> *Blanche comes around the corner, currying a valise. She looks at a slip of paper, then at the building, then again at the slip and again at the building. Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance is incongruous to the setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district*. (Williams 3)

We find out that Blanche did not expect to find herself in such a place, given the fact that her former residence was a mansion. While she nervously awaits for her sister in her apartment, Blanche finds a bottle of drink and pours it for herself: "She pours a half tumbler of whiskey and tosses it down. She carefully replaces the bottle and washes out the tumbler at the sink" (Williams 8). This suggests that Blanche suffers from alcoholic addiction, but she tries to hide this secret from everyone else. After the initial shock, Blanche finally meets her sister Stella: "For a moment they stare at each other. Then Blanche springs up and runs to her with a wild cry" (Williams 8). Apart from being an alcoholic, Blanche is also hysterical and emotionally unstable, which can be seen from her demeanour when she talks to her sister: "But don't you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I've bathed and rested! And turn that over-light off!" (Williams 8). She worries so much about her appearance that she cannot stand being looked at unless she is washed and groomed. She also scorns Stella for living in such poor conditions and worries about her privacy in the apartment after she finds out that there is no door between her and Stella and Stanley's room. Eventually, she confesses that she lost Belle Reve and her job because she was "on the verge of--lunacy" (Williams 11) and worries whether she and Stanley would get along. Namely, Stanley is of Polish origin and of different background than the two sisters – he belongs to the lower working class, and this fact upsets Blanche heavily. When Blanche meets Stanley, she is very nervous and full of false propriety,

while Stanley, on the other hand, treats her casually and makes himself comfortable around her by removing his shirt in front of her. Stanley is a brutish, primitive character who possesses zest for life and whose main pleasure is women – he is all that which Blanche cannot stand, and that is why she becomes so condescending toward him. She cannot grasp the fact that her sister has dismissed her Southern origin and married such a brutish man. Because Blanche and Stanley are total opposites, conflict between them is inevitable – but Blanche is the one who gets the worst of it, eventually being sent away to a mental asylum.

Throughout the play, Blanche is portrayed as an impulsive, vain, fragile woman who lives in illusion and madness. In order to understand her behaviour, we have to recall her tragic past. When she was only sixteen, she was madly in love with a boy who was somehow "different." After they married, she discovered his homosexuality, and subsequently, her young husband committed suicide. This tragedy affected her badly, and she was never the same person again. She becomes a woman with strong sexual urges and with many lovers, although she "pretends to be a woman who has never known indignity" ("A Streetcar Named Desire") in order to find herself a husband. Blanche finds a potential suitor in Mitch, Stanley's clumsy, good-hearted friend, who starts courting her. After she tells him of her late husband's secret, Mitch and Blanche become fond of each other: "You need somebody. And I need somebody too. Could it be--you and me, Blanche" (Williams 103). However, their happiness is short-lived. Stanley quickly sees through Blanche and discovers her dirty little secret – the real reason why she has resigned from her job. Namely, she was involved in a relationship with one of her students, and when the school superintendent found about it, she got fired. Having nowhere else to go, eventually, she came to her sister's place. After Stanley tells Mitch about this, Mitch intentionally misses out Blanche's birthday party. However, they meet the same night, and Blanche confesses him the whole truth about what kind of a woman she really is:

> Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan--intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection--here and there, in the most--unlikely places--even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but--somebody wrote the superintendent about it--"This woman is morally unfit for her position!" (Williams 128)

After hearing this, Mitch scorns her for lying to him about everything, even about her real age. He feels disgusted by everything he hears and tells her that he does not want to marry her anymore because she is "not clean enough to bring in the house" (Williams 131) with his mother. Upon hearing this, Blanche hysterically chases him off. This incident is one of the two that drive Blanche to madness.

The other one happens that same night, after Stella is sent away to have her baby. Stanley returns to his apartment and finds Blanche "placing the rhinestone tiara on her head before the mirror of the dressing-table and murmuring excitedly" (Williams 131). They are both drunk, and they start chattering. Blanche tells him that she is soon going away with a millionaire named Shep Huntleigh, and although Stanley realises that she made that up, he proposes to "bury the hatchet" (Williams 135). Blanche refuses to do this and talks about how foolish she has been, "casting my pearls before swine!" (Williams 136). At the word "swine," Stanley's mood changes for the worse. Blanche continues her false story until she realises that Stanley knows the whole truth. She panics and tries to run away, but Stanley grabs her and "picks her inert figure and carries her to the bed" (Williams 141). By the loud, pulsating music, it becomes evident that Stanley rapes her. After this scene, Blanche completely loses her touch with reality and starts living in illusion.

One thing characteristic of Blanche is the fact that she feels proud of her Southern origin and her French name, which means "white woods." According to Nikčević, Blanche has always gladly stressed her French origin and descent (30). Nikčević also states that the loss of Belle Reve represents a real loss for Blanche that she cannot get over (30) Unlike her timid, submissive, and modest sister Stella, who neglects her aristocratic Southern heritage by marrying a man of Polish decent, Blanche can never do such a thing because she values her origin too much. She refuses to accept that her sister loves such a brutish, violent man as Stanley, and she cannot believe that her sister is able to adapt to a new life in a two-room apartment without a maid. She scolds Stella for abandoning Laurel for a suburban life in New Orleans.

Although she is an aging Southern belle, Blanche tries to do everything to make herself appear young and attractive in front of men. According to Oklopčić, "Blanche is brought up in the Southern tradition of idealization of woman's beauty. She perceives herself as a beautiful object which has to be properly decorated in order to sell well" (1). That is why

she pays special attention to exterior beauty features – her clothes, jewelry, perfumes, and her hair. Her self-esteem depends on admiration of men and her main goal is to get married in order to escape poverty and misery. She is aware that her delicate beauty is fading and is particularly sensitive to being looked at under direct light, which is why she insists that light bulbs in the apartment be covered with paper lanterns: "I cannot stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action" (Williams 54).

Blanche is a hurt woman – hurt by Stanley, society, and her family. Life has not been kind to this fragile and sensitive woman. Concerning everything she has been through one cannot help but see her as a victim of circumstances and feel sorry for her. The misfortunes she experienced in her youth eventually lead to her own life ending as a tragedy as she is eventually forced to go to a mental asylum:

> In close succession to her husband's death came the deaths of her father, mother, sister Margaret and an old cousin Jesse, each contributing to her loneliness and fear of death and disease. Stella by then had left and settled with a Polish master-sergeant Stanley Kowalski, visiting only briefly for funerals. Blanche who had to pawn the estate to meet the medical and funeral expenses soon found it slipping from her fingers and had no means to retrieve it. (Kataria 23)

## 4. Carrie vs. Blanche

Carrie Meeber and Blanche Dubois, as main protagonists, share some similar traits. Both Carrie and Blanche are representatives of "fallen women," though for entirely different reasons.

Carrie, on the one hand, is a poor, young girl at the beginning of the novel, who gradually becomes a "fallen woman" in the eyes of society because she puts her materialistic nature before her moral values. She "falls" due to her desire to promote herself and move up the social ladder, which she does successfully. Blanche, on the other hand, is already a "fallen woman" at the beginning of the play. This is due to her reckless sexual behaviour and the fact the she loses everything that made her stand out in the first place – her husband, mansion, and youth. Eventually, Blanche, who once had it all, is destroyed, both physically and mentally.

Also, both heroines present themselves in a different light from what they really are. Carrie does this by imitation: at first, she copies the other girls' manners, their way of walking, and eventually, she becomes a woman of considerable taste. However, she acts all the time; she never reveals her true self: "She possessed an innate taste for imitation and no small ability" (Dreiser) This ability for imitation helps her with her career as an actress and helps her immensely in making her famous. Like Carrie, Blanche also acts, actually pretends to be a woman who has never known indignity, but in reality, she is far from it. She is a woman full of dirty secrets, which she tries to hide rather unsuccessfully. Apart from hiding her drinking problem, she also tries to hide her past and the real reason why she lost her teaching position. We can see how she pretends to be an innocent woman with Mitch, whom she seduces, but offers him no more than a kiss. However, throughout the play, we learn that she has engaged in intimate relationships with many men. Although both heroines act, pretending to be someone they are not, Blanche does this in order to find herself a husband, while Carrie does it in order to advance her position in society.

Another trait that connects Carrie and Blanche is the fact that they both attach too much importance to looks and outer appearance, especially clothes. They both love to show off with their newest attires, and they enjoy grooming themselves. Carrie neglects to pay the rent and other costs in order to buy herself some more clothes because the old ones are not good enough for her, demonstrating how grand her obsession with clothes actually is:

> "Put on the old clothes – that torn pair of shoes," was called to her by her conscience in vain. She could possibly have conquered the fear of hunger and gone back; the thought of hard work and narrow round of suffering would, under the last pressure of conscience, have yielded, but spoil her appearance? – be old-clothed and poor-appearing? – never! (Dreiser)

Blanche also gives too much importance to clothes. The only thing she carries with herself when she visits her sister is a trunk full of clothes:

> STANLEY: It looks like you raided some stylish shops in Paris.
> BLANCHE: Ha-ha! Yes – clothes are my passion! (Williams)

Although she passionately enjoys clothes, all the clothes she has are actually inappropriate for the setting of the apartment. Unlike her modest sister Stella, Blanche enjoys sporting a wardrobe of showy, cheap-looking clothes – a trait that has to do with her Southern origin, as she was taught to always be dressed nicely.

However, there is one characteristic in which Carrie and Blanche differ vastly – their origin. While Blanche is very proud of her Southern origin and often pines for the "old days," Carrie is ashamed to be a poor country girl and does everything to escape poverty. Also, throughout the novel, Carrie is constantly future-oriented – she finds a way to improve her social status, while Blanche is past-oriented, full of illusion and madness.

## Conclusion

To sum up, Dreiser's Carrie and Williams' Blanche are both "fallen women" in the eyes of society who act and pretend to be someone they are not, presenting themselves as women of high moral and social standards. Both of them are directed by a strong desire, which eventually leads them to the kind of life they could never have imagined. In their attempts to escape the miseries of life, they achieve the opposite from what they hoped and desired. Blanche succumbs to madness and disillusionment, while Carrie finds no real pleasure in her life, although she acquires everything she has ever dreamed of. Although one could say that they both got what they deserved, it is evident that one of them is punished for her actions by becoming mad, while the other one gets away with her "crime" by living prosperously. However, the end of Dreiser's novel signals that Carrie's "punishment" lies in the fact that she has failed to be happy with herself. In addition, both Dreiser and Williams used elements of naturalism, i.e., determinism, in depicting their heroines as fragile females in a brutal world ruled by men whose happiness depends upon them. Although it seems that both of them exhibit more vices than virtues because of their socially unacceptable deeds, one should not judge them because of their actions. On the contrary, if we view them as victims of circumstances that are beyond their control, both Carrie and Blanche are to be sympathised with rather than condemned.

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