A Psychoanalytic Insight Into Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*—Psychic Strength From Defense Mechanism

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This paper attempts to analyze Blanche’s psyche in relation to her employing defense mechanism to restore her mental health and herself in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) by the American playwright Tennessee Williams. It focuses on her replacing reality with fantastic embodiments or illusion. She has taken unacceptable impulses into acceptable forms by unconsciously blocking the impulses such as superego and thereby reducing agony for the earlier traumatic experiences left indelible marks on her mind, and anxiety for survival. Her anxiety becomes too overwhelming that her ego urgently employs defense mechanisms to protect her. With her new hopes and dreams she desires to replace the highly stressful loss. Under mental and social stress, her illusion and her falsification of reality nevertheless became unable to overcome recurring trauma-causing situation in reality and her healing process thereby leaving her on the verge of extinction.

*Keywords*: trauma, defense mechanism, illusion, denial, rationalization

**Introduction**

Humans, on both conscious and unconscious levels, in general, are in fact prone to alleviate internal stress and mental complications. So, they create and use defense mechanisms that serve as a mental cushion or protective shell to prevent stress lest they would lose their existence. Let the author first state briefly what defense mechanism is. It is an unconscious mechanism aimed at reducing anxiety. It was first discussed by Sigmund Freud as part of his psychoanalytic theory and further developed by his daughter, Anna Freud, who clarified and conceptualized the term. Freud described how the Ego uses a range of mechanisms to handle the conflict between the Id, the Ego, and the Superego, whereas Anna introduced the principle of inner mechanisms that defend the ego in her book *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defense* (1936).

**Defense Mechanism**

In fact, all defense mechanisms share two common properties: They often appear unconsciously and tend to distort, transform, or otherwise, falsify reality. In distorting reality, there is a change in perception which allows for a lessening of anxiety, with a corresponding reduction in felt tension. Defense mechanisms work by distorting the id impulses into acceptable forms or by unconscious blockage of these impulses. Anna described 10 different defense mechanisms: denial, displacement, intellectualization, projection, rationalization, reaction formation,
regression, repression, sublimation, and suppression. Later, researchers have added some more defense mechanisms to the list: compensation (first described by Alfred Adler), dissociation, fantasy, identification, undoing, and withdrawal.

**Defense Mechanism in Relation to Blanche**

In proposing defense mechanism in relation to Blanche, the author will explore how it has arisen from three different scenarios such as when a great external threat is posed to her ego, next when her id impulses—which desire gratification—conflict with superego values and beliefs; and therefore when her id impulses are in conflict with each other thereof; as well as at what period Blanche had a traumatic experience that initiated her neurosis—according to Freud, it arises from inner conflicts and can lead to anxiety, anticipatory tension, or vague dread persisting in the absence of a specific threat—and later psychosis after her rape. Neuroses can be rooted in ego defense mechanisms. Her young husband Allan Grey’s death directed her to troubled path so does the losing of Belle Reve, the ancestral mansion, by foreclosure; the death of her father before the outbreak of World War II, followed by mother’s death, and several relatives. She had to deal with those post war and mental trauma alone, nay, she was fired from her high school job as an English teacher at Laurel in Mississippi, and evicted by the hotel. These are some great external threat posed to her ego. She wanted to repress her recurring thought of Allan, being overwhelmed with shame for the disclosure of his homosexuality to Blanche, shot himself. But she could not in fact as the memory haunted her. In so doing unconsciously, not only did she relive this early life sucking trauma which Freud termed as fixation to the trauma, but also she felt a measure of guilt or responsibility. Throughout the play, Blanche will hear Polka music corresponding with the different aspects of Blanche’s mental anguish and her gradual increasing emotional deterioration leading to lose her grip from reality.

**Defense Mechanism Giving Psychic Strength**

Therefore, the profound effect of the wrenching experiences followed by the fixation to the trauma and the subsequent repression thereof commence her neurosis. It is her creative mind that makes her enable to perform its function in coordinating the neurological and mental responses that are necessary for everyday activity. She disguises the truth from herself and her sexual promiscuity from others in order to ease or avoid the discomfort she feels in certain situations (physical or emotional), and to prevent her sins from being discovered. In this way, defense mechanism operating within her psyche gives her psychic strength to go on. Here lies her reasoning to adopt some mechanisms in the forms of denial, repression, rationalization, fantasy, undoing, etc.. She has defended herself from the harsh reality by denying reality and truth and by rationalizing the false, that is to say, her falsification of the reality which she employs before her entrance in Elysian fields in her brutish brother-in-law Stanley’s house and after her coming here to live with her sister Stella Kowalski. She said: “There was nowhere else I could go” (Williams, 1947, Scene 9).

**Effort of Improving Emotional Health**

At this juncture, the author would relate Blanche’s long series of shallow love making affairs (both genital and sexual) in relation to her id impulses which are in conflict with superego values and beliefs. The idea is that she needs gratification for her seething soul but the social norms do not respond to that rather it prohibits and
threats her id or desire comes thereof. We know that the death of a loved one is one of life’s most difficult experiences; so is to Blanche. She had to struggle with many intense and frightening emotions, including depression, her future life, agony due to desperate loneliness and mostly her self-realization of her loneliness, guilt for Allan’s death, and anger as observed in her angrily smashing the mirror.

Since she felt isolated and alone in her grief in that case having someone to lean on could help her through the grieving process which she had to do in fact. In this way, she has tried to improve her emotional health. As she explains herself, her promiscuity in Laurel resulted in her desire to assuage her pain, to compensate and atone for her guilt for unconsciously driving her husband to death. With similar cause she was associated with soldiers of a nearby army post in Laurel and also having relations, the author should rather say supportive relationships, as a treatment and one of the key words in health education, with one of her students which reinforced her dismiss from the school. She sought and maintained such bond only to assuage her panic. Same was the flirtation with the young collector. She admits outright to Mitch:

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. (Williams, 1947, Scene 9)

Her pain was to lessen in intensity over time but the sadness, desperate alienation never completely went away. She is time and again haunted by that repressed memory making her existence intolerable. Sex became the substitute for shelter, protection, because sex was not exercised for it is own sake but for the sake of getting marginal gratification by which she could temporarily forget the agonizing aspects of her life. She has run for protection not for sex from under one leaky roof to another leaky roof and was caught in the centre. She rationalizes to Stella and to herself: “People don’t see you—men don’t—don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you’re going to have someone’s protection” (Williams, 1947, Scene 5).

Rationalization as Defense Mechanism

Particularly what she wanted was her protection from the harrowing vision of Allan’s suicide which always slips from her and thereby leaving her on the verse of moral depravity so to say. It marks the point of her rationalization of her promiscuity. Rationalization is such a mechanism by which one’s self can be strengthened. It is definitely applicable to Blanche. In psychology, rationalization is the process of constructing a logical justification for a decision that was originally arrived at through a different mental process. This process can range from fully conscious to mostly subconscious. It creates a block against internal feelings of guilt. Simply put, rationalization is making excuses for one’s mistakes, and by doing so one avoids self-condemnation or condemnation by others. As a societal being, she must respect the reality of the world and the superego representing the learned and internalized set of values and ethics, which gives the individual the sense of what is right and what is wrong to think, feel, and do. Her superego got deactivated here or she has violated social norms only to restore her mental health. Simultaneously, her Ego does not allow her to press her into extinction. So, she tries to survive by satisfying her id. Blanche has frequently acted out with substance or alcohol abuse. Her excessive drinking, smoking serve as substitutes for human relationships, and an endeavor to satisfy her id. To
psychologists, a neurotic frequently acts out with addictions as substitutes for human relationships. The substitution serves as her defense.

**Denial as Defense Mechanism**

Her existence in mental crisis demands violating superego principles to get peace. When her anxiety for survival becomes too overwhelming her ego as a task has employed defense mechanisms to protect her from extinction. In restoring herself, Blanche employs denial as shield to protect herself from the more unpleasant aspects of external reality. Denial, in fact, is an ego defense mechanism that operates unconsciously to resolve emotional conflict and to reduce anxiety by refusing to perceive the harsh reality. It is being utilized in a situation in which a person experiences a fact that is uncomfortable or painful to accept. For instance, she rejects that her beauty is fading instead insists that it is not true, despite an overwhelming evidence of fading of her physical charm due to her growing age. She is definitely aware of the fact but she denies outright only to feel better, to strengthen her mind lest she would extinct. She uses paper on lantern, goes on date with Mitch in the evening, and lies or hides her exact age to hide her fading beauty and reality. From psychoanalytic lens, the subject may deny the reality of the unpleasant fact altogether (simple denial), admit the fact but deny its seriousness (minimization), or admit both the fact and seriousness but deny responsibility (transference). The ability to deny or minimize is an essential part of what enables an addict to continue her/his behavior in the face of evidence that appears overwhelming to an outsider. Denial filters out data and content that contravenes their self-image, prejudices, and preconceived notions of others and of the world. Blanche’s denial makes her conceive of her own image as true because reality and truthfulness become an antinatural tendency in her make-believe world that is essentially false. Nevertheless, such falsification has meaning to her as she believes herself to be truthful. Says Blanche to Mitch about her denial of truth, “I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it!” (Williams, 1947, Scene 10).

**Fantasy as Defense Mechanism**

In addition, her ego has employed fantasy as mechanism for her defense. Blanche’s unacceptable desire to gratify herself to forget the earlier trauma was denied and felt threatened with punishment by the society dismissing her from the school. This anxiety leads to repression of the above desire for some time though did not last long for her desperate loneliness and excruciating stream of agony flashing across her mind incessantly. The threat of punishment related to this form of anxiety was not internalized in her psyche. Her superego did not intercede against the desires of the ego as a result. She employs fantasy, including day dreams, which is a way to escape real problems. When her reality is the opposite to that of happiness imagining that she is rich in spirit and beautiful in mind leads her to feelings of happiness though it is marginal. She said “Beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—and I have all of those things” (Williams, 1947, Scene 11). It is beneficial to the restoration of her emotional health. She makes herself appear attractive to new male suitors. Blanche depends on male sexual admiration for her sense of self-esteem and self-help. Many self-help methods are based on fantasy: covert rehearsal, covert sensitization/desensitization, empathy, etc.. Blanche’s lies give her the life she dreams of living. Blanche tells Stella that she wants to deceive Mitch into wanting her. She wants to affect someone else through a type of
deception which will make Blanche feel better about herself. She lies that Shep has sent her a telegram inviting her to join him on his yacht in the Caribbean. Stanley does not believe her. Blanche seems to believe her lie and story so much that it becomes her truth.

**Undoing as Defense Mechanism**

Moreover, the defense mechanism undoing is at work in Blanche’s psyche. It is based on the notion that it is possible to make amends and to correct mistakes made. In essence, it involves feeling guilty and trying to do something to undo the harm that have been inflicted. It aims at reversing a feeling by acting in some opposite or compensatory manner. Blanche’s interminable baths, which she calls hydrotherapy, function as a metaphor for her make-believe purification to cleanse herself of her sordid past and reputation. Blanche thought that it was her failure that she could not help Allan. She says: “All I knew was I’d failed him in some mysterious way” (Williams, 1947, Scene 6). She thought that she might be able to satisfy one of her sexual partners in a way she was never able to satisfy her boyish husband. It also marks the point of her rationalization of her promiscuity. By marrying Mitch, a cleft in the rock of the world that she could hide in, Blanche hopes to escape poverty and the bad reputation that haunts her. Though he was her last chance of salvation from ruin Stanley’s relentless persecution of Blanche and his disclosing her past promiscuity foils her pursuit to marry Mitch, by implication, her attempt to shield herself from the harsh truth of her situation. Blanche’s horror intensifies due to Stanley’s violent behavior and her protection, so, she begins to find a way out of the situation. In such a unendurable situation, her old suitor named Shep Huntleigh would be able to provide the money she and Stella need to escape. Blanche begins to compose a telegram to Shep. When Stella laughs at her for being ridiculous, Blanche reveals that she is in fact completely broken. Blanche, alone in the apartment once more, drowns herself in alcohol and dreams of an impossible rescue. In this way, she, unaware of reality, hopes the chivalric Southern gentleman savior and caretaker (represented by Shep Huntleigh) will rescue her. But it is also extinct. Blanche is left with no realistic possibility of fulfilling her illusion of future happiness as a result. In addition, the identity Blanche has constructed for herself begins to disintegrate. She begins to lose ground in her battle. Thus, here also her mechanism of undoing and illusion are shattered.

**Falling of Blanche’s Make-Believe World**

Blanche, on the eve of her rape by Stanley, goes to the phone and desperately tries to make a call to Shep Huntleigh for help, though she does not know his number or his address. It certainly proves the intensity of the necessity of her defense. Stanley terrorizes Blanche by shattering her self-delusions. The back of Blanche’s make-believe world falls away. She finally retreats into hysteria and madness which we surely term as psychosis as reality is now beyond her touch. She started to live in the world of fantasy she had created, instead of facing the real world and real challenges to feel well as earlier in the play. After her rape with the termination of her illusion she does not terminate her reverie rather she has continued it as in her lapsing into a reverie about her upcoming vacation, imagining that she is going to travel with Shep and she will die at sea from eating a dirty grape with a handsome young ship’s doctor at her side. Therefore, it has become pathological. She is taken to the mental asylum in consequence.
Conclusions

Having discussed defense mechanism in relation to Blanche in A Streetcar Named Desire, it can be said that she has defended herself over a long period of time in spite of the neurotic and psychotic conditions but the harsh reality has got upper hand and uprooted her world of dreams and illusion. She has not promoted moral-centered approach to life as she feels and rationalizes it as useless in soothing her seething soul, in restoring her mental health. It leads her to cope with the agony of her deceased husband and to deal with post-trauma and bounce back from adversity thereof. Her family (sister and her overpowering brother-in-law) remains unable to understand her bereavement process specially the latter. He did not support her through agony and anxiety for protection as well as survival for a healthy life to help her wedlock with Mitch. Instead, he completely shatters her future hope and dream thereby hastening her mental extinction.

References