

The Use of Prestige Language in Tennessee Williams's "A Streetcar Named Desire"

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Abstract : In a streetcar Named Desire, Tennessee 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 what some linguists refer to as "hypercorrection," and the other image reveals that of a soiled, deteriorating façade, full of decadence and illusion. 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). 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. 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. 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. 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.

Keywords : American drama, prestige language, Southern American literature, Tennessee Williams

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