

Conflicts in *A Streetcar Named Desire* on the Basis of Discourse Analysis

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Discourse analysis as a method could be used in studying texts and analyzing language users. Through the discourse analysis of the dialogues between characters in the play of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, this paper explores the connections and differences among the three conflicts embodied in: gender conflict, class conflict and the conflict between desire and reality.

Keywords: conflict, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, turn-taking, power, discourse analysis

Introduction

In the United States 1940s, the old civilization of the South was gradually replaced by industrialization. Southerners underwent major changes both on the material and spiritual levels, and Southerners' spiritual homes were lost with the loss of their material homes. American dramatist Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a work that reflects the background of this era, which is full of conflicts: the conflict between male power and feminist power, the collision between the traditional American civilization in the South and the modern civilization in the North, as well as the contradiction between reality and desire. Working as limiting factors, the conflicts of gender and class can be overcome, while the conflict between reality and desire is fundamental and insurmountable. From the perspective of discourse analysis, this paper intends to explore three conflicts in the play progressively: gender conflict, class conflict and the conflict between reality and desire.

Gender Conflict Caused by Inequality

Williams was deeply influenced by D. H. Lawrence and valued the relationship between men and women (Hendrick, 1969). In Lawrence's view, the relationship between men and women is the most basic relationship between people. The contradictions and conflicts in the relationship between Blanche and Stanley in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are a reflection of real society at that time. This section attempts to analyze the conflict discourse in parts of the play *A Streetcar Named Desire* through the analysis of turn-taking mechanism and impolite language analysis, so as to better understand the conflict between the characters. Gender inequality is a relatively superficial conflict in this drama. This inequality is not only reflected in the marriage relationship between Stanley and Stella, but also in the conflicting dialogue between Stanley and Blanche. Stanley has

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always placed Stella and Blanche in a disadvantaged position, constantly oppressing them in terms of words and actions. Among them, Blanche and Stanley's conflict between men and women is the main theme of the whole play.

The following is an excerpt from Scene 2. Stella tried to persuade Stanley to leave the room in order to avoid an unnecessary quarrel between Stanley and Blanche. But Stanley did not listen to his wife.

STE: Indeed they have, thank heavens I-I'm going outside. You come out with me while Blanche is getting dressed.
 STA: Since when do you give me orders?
 STE: Are you going to stay here and insult her?
 STA: You're damn too tin' I'm going to stay here.
 [Stella goes out to the porch.] (p. 38)

Here, Stanley uses a provoking question, obviously in an indirect impolite tone, to reply to Stella's request. After two rounds of disputes, Stella finally chose to end the conflict in the form of silence, showing her surrender to her husband. For Stanley, "Since when do you give me orders?" is a declaration of his sovereignty, and it also quells Stella's momentum, achieving his wanted result—staying there.

The following is an excerpt from Scene 2. Stanley, who was playing cards with his friends at home, shouted at Stella and Blanche who were chatting rudely.

STELLA: You know that one upstairs? One time the *plaster* cracked-
 STANLEY: You hens cut out that conversation in there!
 STELLA: You can't hear us.
 STANLEY: Well, you can hear me and I said to hush up!
 STELLA: This is my house and I'll talk as much as I want to! (p. 55)

Both Stella and Stanley use impolite language here. Stanley interrupted Stella and Blanche's talk by extremely rude words.

Meanwhile, the indirect impolite tone used here has two functions. The first function is that it reflects Stanley's overbearing and rough character, Stanley's male chauvinism is evident from this provocative question. The second function is that it reveals gender inequality in the marriage. In the face of his wife's instructions, Stanley brutally maintained his position as the head of the family, thinking that he was the one who had the right to speak and could execute the instructions, so he went against his wife.

The work shows the conflict between masculine power and feminist power. Blanche and Stella live in a society under the rule of patriarchates. They were from the old aristocratic southern family and received southern lady education. "They demonstrate two different types of femininity in the play, yet both find themselves dependent on men" (Raphel, 2021). In their consciousness, women are accessories of men. Maintaining beauty and elegance, southern ladies are all strictly required in order to satisfy men. They have been attached to men and cannot control her own destiny, struggling in the patriarchal society all her life.

Blanche's younger sister, Stella, is a tragic female character due to her conflict with her husband Stanley. The traditional patriarchal society restricts women to the family, and Stella is "an epitome of patriarchal society" (Wei, 2008, p. 103). She is completely dependent on Stanley, not only emotionally but also financially. Stella does not get a job and completely relies on her husband. Having being beaten by Stanley during pregnancy, she was pleased with the pocket money that she got, though a little as it was. Stella has no economic independence and right in the family. She often suffers from Stanley's violence. From Stella's neighbors, it's not the first time that Stella has suffered violence. When faced with the male abuse, Blanche chose to resist, and

was finally abandoned by the cruel reality. Stella chose to endure it, and had to give up her sister. When she heard that her husband had raped her sister, she preferred to believe it was a lie. In the closing scene, when her sister Blanche was taken away, Stella was sad and wept, but was satisfied with Stanley's sensual comfort. Stella's compromise and obedience show that in the dominant patriarchal society, women are in a helpless situation.

The conflict between Blanche and her brother-in-law Stanley marks the peak of the contradiction between patriarchal and feminist rights. The first conflict broke out even before Blanche settled down. As Stella's husband, Stanley believed that he should have the right to inherit the property. Without the access to the property, he suspected that Blanche had embezzled it and argued with her. Blanche's deliberate display made him aware of his poverty and felt awkward in front of Stella. The second conflict stemmed from Blanche's discrimination against Stanley's Polish origin, which exposed his low self-esteem. The third collision was in the fourth scene. Blanche noted that Stanley was acting like a beast, while she always strives to show an elegant self in front of everyone. In contrast, as a Polish immigrant, Stanley did not have any opportunity or conditions to enjoy the chic lifestyle. As the spokesperson of the patriarchal culture, Stanley will never allow her to insult himself, and the most thorough and realistic way for him is to rape her. In the confrontations between Blanche and Stanley, Blanche's female sense of resistance became more and more apparent. Blanche has the courage to pursue equality in marriage, to resist patriarchy, and to fight for women's freedom. Therefore, Blanche's battle shows that she no longer waits passively, and that she despises the laws of this patriarchal society. She would no longer succumb to the patriarchal society, but instead strived for her rights.

The gender conflict is surmountable despite the domination and oppression of women by men in a patriarchal society. Through this work, the author's "awareness of feminist issues" is exposed and it explains the necessity of equal gender relations for the establishment of a harmonious society, which is in operation throughout the world with the progress of society (Yan, 2018, p. 112). Compared with gender conflict, class conflict is more difficult for one to cross, which is also part of Williams' concern.

Class Conflict Between Stanley and Blanche

Impolite speech in drama is the basic component of dramatic conflict discourse and plays an important role in the process of interpreting dramatic conflict. This part takes the theory of indirect impolite language as the framework to analyze the relationship between power and conflict reflected in the dialogue of the play.

First of all, the disharmony and even conflicts between men and women reflect the contradictions and conflicts of different social strata. Class conflicts are embodied in the contradictions of the conflicts between men and women. The conflict between Stanley and Blanche can be seen as the irreconcilable conflict between the industrial civilization in the north and the manor economic civilization in the south, referring to class conflict. Gender conflicts can be reconciled, while class conflicts are much more difficult to be reconciled. The class conflict between Stanley and Blanche was subtly reflected in the dialogue between her and Stella and Stanley. The following are two excerpts extracted from Scenes 2 (pp. 32-47) and 4 (pp. 69-82).

Excerpt 1:

STE: What do you want me to do?

BLA: Pull yourself together and face the facts.

STE: What are they, in your opinion?

BLA: In my opinion? You're married to a madman!

STA: No! (p. 72)

Excerpt 2:

STA: I'll have a look at them first!

BLA: The touch of your hands insults them!

STA: Don't pull that stuff!

BLA: Now that you've touched them, I'll burn them! (p. 44)

From the dialogues above, we can see that Stanley is a madman in Blanche's mind that his approach would make Blanche feel insulted. Based on the social Blanche, it is a typical representative of plantation economy in the southern United States. Blanche thought she was superior to others as she inherited traditional values from the south.

Table 1 shows the number of turns, impolite utterances and the average times of impolite utterances which are respectively possessed by Blanche and Stanley from Scene 2.

Table 1

Quantitative Analysis of the Dialogue between Stanley and Blanche

| Character | Blanche | Stanly | Total |
|--|---------|--------|-------|
| Turns | 17 | 17 | 34 |
| Impolite utterances | 6 | 7 | 13 |
| Average times of impolite utterance (T/IU) | 2.8 | 2.4 | 2.6 |

As is showed by the table, both Blanche and Stanley use impolite utterances quite often. This index shows that both sides are unfriendly towards each other. With the framework of adjacency pairs, most of the questions asked by Stanley are answered by Blanche with dis-preferred pairs. The class conflict reflected in this kind of deliberate unfriendliness also has deep social reasons.

Before the outbreak of the American Civil War, the plantation economy of slavery was the economic basis for the survival of plantation slaveholders. Puritanism, which strangled the nature of nature and propagated asceticism, was the yoke that imprisoned people's minds. In the southern plantation economic system, in order to decorate their own appearance, the plantation slaveholders successfully designed the southern women to be elegant, well-spoken and proficient in the image of southern ladies in piano, chess, painting and calligraphy.

After the outbreak of the American Civil War, the new industrial class in the North occupied the dominant position of society. Stanley, as a rude but very masculine and handsome man, is extremely in pursuit of softness and materialism, and is synonymous with "machine" and "material". So, Blanche defined Stanley, a crude, drug-sniffing materialist, as a lower "animal" (p. 80). But from this dialogue, we can see that Blanche is now a lone soldier. Her comrades have long been "assimilated" by the other side, and she is still in the last desperate struggle to maintain the civilization and ethics of the old South that she believes in.

The class conflict between Blanche and Stanley is evident from the first moment they met. Blanche disdained Stanley's sweat and rude laughter, while Stanley thought Blanche was hypocritical and affected. At the same time, because Blanche told her sister Stella many times about the aristocratic education they received in childhood, criticized Stanley's rudeness and uneducated, and persuaded Stella to leave Stanley with her, Stanley's prejudice and guard against Blanche increased day by day. At the same time, he hears some information that doesn't match Blanche's own description, so he goes in and reveals all Blanche's secrets. Blanche then embarked on her tragic path. The last confrontation between the two takes place when Stella gives

birth to a child and Stanley rapes Blanche. In this conflict, Stanley defeats Blanche with raw and overwhelming force, declaring the inevitable victory of the class he represents.

“What is the use of devising finely ground definitions of tragedy unless they can be serviceable to one’s own time?” (Gassner, 1958, p. 5). In the 1940s, the post-war population structure of the United States was complex, and a large number of immigrants entered the war. Because of their natural geographical location, they not only avoided the war, but also obtained the war wealth. The arms trade of speculators has led to the rapid development of the arms industry. In the face of war and wealth, the idea of the supremacy of power and interests is rampant in all corners of American society. As Anca Vlasopolos said in his article: “...and it hears the jungle sounds that take over and drown out the blues piano” (Vlasopolos, 1986, p. 336). Class conflict is the product of different times, but with the progress of society and the increase of social inclusiveness, this kind of conflict can be eliminated. Relatively speaking, the conflict between reality and desire is insurmountable.

The Conflict Between Desire and Reality

Because of the limitations of the social environment at that time, the gender conflict and class conflict gradually weakened with the development of humanism and democratic spirit, and even became reconcilable. As the driving force of human development, desire has always existed, and the conflict between its progress and the backwardness of reality cannot be solved.

According to Tennessee Williams, the meaning of desire is expressed by what Blanche said in this play, “The opposite (of death) is desire, so do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder!” (p. 138). Desire can make people truly feel that they are living in the world. Things change. Promises can be broken. Beliefs can be abandoned. Emotions can be changed. What in real life can be truly immortal is human desire. Desire that detached from reality will lead people to madness and even death. This is the core idea of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

In this work, Blanche, as the heroine, has been struggling between desire and reality, which doomed her tragic ending. Throughout the text, her reluctance comes from the following aspects (The data in Table 2 is obtained by analyzing the whole script).

Table 2

Analysis on the Sources of the Heroine's Reluctance

| Blanche | |
|------------------|--------------------------|
| Desire | Reality |
| Peerage | Depend on sister |
| Noble soul | vulgar life |
| Hope for love | Be thought as prostitute |
| Youth and beauty | Get no younger |
| Romance | Materialistic society |

Blanche has been pursuing desire, but in getting along with others, her desire gradually shattered. As the basic form of communication, conversation has a great influence on the construction of Blanche’s spiritual world. Through turn-taking and discourse analysis of her conversation with others, we can explore the identity change and psychological development of Blanche. For example, here is the quantitative analysis of the last conversation between Blanche and Mitch (pp. 130-140).

Table 3

Quantitative Analysis of the Last Conversation between Blanche and Mitch

| Topic | Invitation | | Disagreement criticism | | Confession | | Marriage | | Sum | |
|-------------------------------|------------|-------|---------------------------|-------|------------|-------|----------|-------|---------|-------|
| | Blanche | Mitch | Blanche | Mitch | Blanche | Mitch | Blanche | Mitch | Blanche | Mitch |
| Figure | | | | | | | | | | |
| Number of turn | 4 | 2 | 12 | 13 | 22 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 40 | 19 |
| Average length of the turn | 31.25 | 4 | 16.92 | 17.69 | 20.72 | 7 | 5.5 | 10.5 | 74.39 | 39.19 |

This plot takes place when Mitch learns about Blanche's past and comes to confront her at night. Unbeknownst to him, Blanche was still in a happy nervous mood, expressing his delight at Mitch's acceptance of the invitation and criticizing him for being late. She talked to herself in more than 120 words.

Mitch gradually showed his intention and asked Blanche about her past. Although Blanche panicked, she still argued unflinchingly in order to maintain her self-esteem and fight for love, leading to the fact that the number and length of the turn of them were basically the same at this stage. Then, when pressed and insulted by Mitch, finally, Blanche calmly confesses her past in a deep voice that is completely different from hers, and Mitch remains silent. During this period, Blanche retained absolute control of the turn. However, when Blanche thinks Mitch's kiss is to forgive her and marry her, he tells her that she is "not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (p. 139), causing Blanche to collapse and scream, and without further rebuttal, rather to send Mitch out the door with just two sentences.

From Table 2, we can know the change of control of the turn, and the status and psychology of the speakers can be more intuitively reflected. Combined with specific discourse analysis, we can explore the purpose and state of mind of the speakers in a certain controlled position. In this plot, Blanche's desire for love is so utterly destroyed that she ends up screaming in pain. When she controls the turn (confession), it does not mean she is in a dominant position in the argument. It means that she is making a lengthy plea for love. When she gives up the fight for control of the turn (marriage), it doesn't mean she gives up, but it means that she is sad for her desire dashed, angry and accusing Mitch. In fact, at that moment she is in the highest control position of the conversation, and even makes Mitch finally run away, even though she is the loser actually.

The Old South of the United States has very special cultural characteristics and historical background. The legacy of early European colonialism, the adherence to the principle of states' rights, the impact of the American Civil War and the legacy of slavery all contributed to the uniqueness of the Old South. Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a representative of Southern Lady. She has received a good education since her childhood, but all of this education is to serve the patriarchy. The value of the existence of Southern Lady is to please men. Under such education, all of her beautiful manners and speech are value oriented to please men. Being dependent on men has become a Southern lady's instinct, a deep-rooted value, and an inescapable fate. This is the root of the tragic fate that she cannot escape, and also the original sin that she struggles with all her life.

But Blanche had a strong desire, the same psychological trait that contemporary Old Southern women had. She did not want to face the changing society, but took the way of hiding into her heart to constantly aftertaste the glory of the past (Suponitskaya, 1992). Blanche chose the most primitive method—she followed her heart's instinctive desire and realized her self-worth by releasing her pursuit of romantic love. But what she did not understand was that this kind of realization was actually the phantom imagination, especially the behavior of

placing one's own self-realization on others, finally leading her to death. Her unrealistic desires make her suffer in the real world, but when those desires are broken, Blanche ends up mad and dead. The irreconcilable conflict between desire and reality makes Blanche doomed to march toward a tragic end.

Conclusion

A Streetcar Named Desire is a play full of conflicts. Under the conflict between the two social cultures, the people affected by culture are also being tested. The distinct gender characteristics, class concepts or people's desires which all reflect the collision and conflict of two cultures. However, the first two conflicts can be reconciled, but the conflict between desire and reality has always existed. Desire, as a part of human life, drives human progress, but also makes human beings understand the cruelty of reality.

Tragically, in this play, Blanche, the heroine, is at the center of all these conflicts, which ultimately leads to her tragedy. Reality knocks Blanche up again and again, but Blanche has been trying hard to step into reality when the great pain of reality cannot make her from the beautiful fantasy. Blanche wants to escape from reality through desire, but unrealistic desire will only accelerate the process of Blanche's demise.

Through the discourse analysis of the above-mentioned parts, a deeper understanding could be achieved with regard to individual characters, collective relations and major conflicts of the play. The characters do have cultural symbolism, which makes us realize that we are not only watching a story of ups and downs, but also experiencing and analyzing the collision and development of the culture.

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