

TRANSITIVITY IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S *A STREETCAR NAMED
DESIRE*

Olfa Gandouz

University of Gabes, Tunisia
olfagandouz@yahoo.fr

Abstract. The present paper shows how the use of language reflects female dilemmas and constructs the psychological profile of female heroines in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Halliday's transitivity system will be employed to examine female mobility in *Streetcar*. The focus will be on the opposition between Blanche's refusal to adjust herself to the values of the New South and Stella's social compromise. Blanche's split between the values of the utopian old South and the New one deepens her physical, emotional and psychological dislocation. The paper will also delve into the attitude of female characters concerning their repression.

Keywords: transitivity, female identity, gender, material process, mental process, relational process, heteroglossia, fixity

The centrepiece in the grammar of experience is the transitivity system
Halliday, *On Language and Linguistics* (2003, 383)

The rationale behind using Halliday's approach is to "show why and how the text means what it does" (Halliday 2003, X). Our paper intends to create interdisciplinarity between linguistics and literature as we will deploy linguistic tools to decipher the female quest for survival in a patriarchal society. The first part aims to study the way in which transitivity helps the audience perceive Blanche Du Bois's physical and psychological dislocation in a new Southern American context. Transitivity is defined by Halliday as "all phenomenon and anything that can be expressed by a verb, event, whether physical or not, state or relations" (Halliday 1976, 159). Put differently,

transitivity consists in going beyond the grammatical structure of the clause and in understanding the implied meaning. The first type of processes is the material process. It introduces the physical action and delineates the relationship between the character and the real world. Within Halliday’s model, the material process is defined as “one about which useful work has been done in relation to news reporting (...). In the material process clause, participants can be one of two kinds: *doers*, which are referred to as actors, and *done to*, which are referred to as goals” (Delin 2000, 28). In the play, the material process is based on the physical existence of Blanche. There is a stark contrast between Blanche’s aristocratic elegance and the working-class people’s casual dress. Stanley is the representative of the proletariat and is “roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes” (Scene 1, 8). The brother-in-law criticizes Blanche when she is elegantly dressed “as if she were arriving (...) at a cocktail party in the garden district” (Scene 1, 9). The material process is based on the action of Blanche: the doer of action or actor is Blanche; the process is the idea of arrival and the location is a cocktail party. This material process underscores that Blanche’s outstanding appearance is not in line with the new urbanized way of life in New Orleans. Blanche often relapses into the past, she reckons that her mission resides in invigorating the values of the mythical South and in fighting for the revival of the idyllic Belle Reve. In this context, she scorns Stella for betraying her aristocratic roots and boastfully asserts: “You are the one that abandoned Belle Reve, not I. I stayed and fought for it, bled for it, almost died for it” (Scene 1, 18). The material process is punctuated with the use of successive verbs of action “stayed”, “fought” and “bled”, the recipient of action is Belle Reve. We notice through this process that the Southern belle accentuates her heroic deeds and foregrounds her desire to freeze the past glory of the South, which used to be an earthly paradise. Blanche is nostalgic to the age of plantation that is different from the new South where chivalric values started crumbling down.

The denigration of Blanche by Stanley and her exclusion from the

new Southern social fabric can be noticed through Stanley's mental process. In his *Introduction to Functional Grammar*, Halliday writes: "mental processes are processes of feeling, wanting and seeing. They are not kinds of doing, and cannot be probed or substituted, by the verb 'to do' (...). The lack of a substitute verb can render some things unsayable" (Halliday 2014, 125). The mental process is helpful in detecting the way of thinking of some characters. For instance, Stanley is astonished by the sight of authentic jewellery (a symbol of Blanche's aristocratic flair): "A solid gold dress, I believe! And this one! What are these here? Fox pieces! Genuine fox fur pieces, a half-mile long" (Scene 2, 26). The process of cognition is suggested through the use of the verb "to perceive". Stanley is the sensor and the phenomenon is "a solid gold dress." We infer through this mental process Stanley's failure to recognize that jewellery is a sign of belonging to plantation aristocracy. The voice of the sayer shows that there is a chasm between the past and the present and that Blanche is not accepted because she refuses to grasp the passage of time and to get adjusted to the principles of the New South, where the maxims of Southern belle hood fade away.

In addition to the sartorial appearance, Blanche's fixity is made explicit through her artistic orientations and her appreciation of the literary heritage. Heteroglossia¹ is useful as it shows the polyphony between different voices. Halliday affirms the importance of heteroglossia as it shows the "constantly shifting relationship between the text and its environment" (Halliday 2002, 51). Blanche is not able to accept the new social environment in the South and she is still influenced by the literary heritage of her ancestors. In her quest for platonic love, she repeats some verses from her Elizabeth Browning's Victorian sonnet - "And, if God Choose, I shall but love thee better-after death!" (Act 3, 43). She is dreaming of an eternal love that cannot wane after death. This belief in heavenly love contributes to the formation of Blanche's romantic soul. Her romanticism is noticed through some activities like dancing. Indeed, "Blanche waltzes to the music with romantic gestures" (Scene 3, 43).

She dances on the tones of a Viennese waltz entitled “Wien, Wien nur du allein” (Scene 3, 43). This waltz outlines the magnificence of utopian love, as it gives a “sentimental expression of love for old-time Vienna, the city of dreams” (Ehrenhaft 1985, 7). The dreamy quality helps her refresh the myth of the old South in a modern oasis devoid of romantic preferences.

Blanche is excluded from the South when Stanley offers her a ticket to Belle Reve because she threatens the serenity inside Stella’s flat. She is seen as the troublemaker; that’s why she ends up being confined in a clinic. The image of the candle can explain her fragility; she observes that “candles aren’t safe, candles burn out in little boys’ and girls’ eyes, or wind blows them out” (Scene 8, 88). Her observation contains a relational process²: candles (carrier) are not (process) safe (attribute). We deduce through this relational process that like the candles which are threatened to burn out, Blanche is threatened to be denigrated in the New South. Unlike Blanche, who sticks to the principles of the old South and undermines the importance of mobility, Stella has understood that mobility is a necessary step of cultural development and defined it as the compromise between the old and the new values. Stella opts for complicity and submission in order to survive within the mainstream New Southern community. Stella survives because she applies her husband’s rules about “the survival of the fittest” and his belief that luck is constructed and not related to heritage. She affirms: “to hold front position in this rat-race, you’ve got to believe you’re lucky” (Scene 11, 108). The use of the spacial placement “in this rat race” and the goal of believing in luck testify to Stella’s belief that luck resides in accepting the reality of being the spouse of a working-class man and, thus, in leaving the memories of the past behind.

Stella’s adaptability to the new system is recognized when she refuses to raise her rebellious voice and rejects Blanche’s demands of overthrowing Stanley’s patriarchal hegemony. She addresses her sister: “You’re making too much fuss about this (...). He was as

good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself" (Scene 4, 49). This sentence includes a relational process: the token is Stanley and the value is the lamb. This process shows that Stella easily forgets her husband's domestic violence. Stella is different from her sister in the sense that she accepts the insults of her husband; she orders her sister to stop being noisy and making much fuss about Stanley's humiliation of his wife during the poker night. Indeed, Stella is more practical than her sister because she longs for security and accepts Stanley's harshness for the sake of leading a peaceful life. Stanley's triumph stands for his dominance over Blanche and his ability to control her. His predominance and the affirmation of male power are further noticed through the dichotomy between Blanche's "social death" and Stanley's rebirth. In the final scene, he reveals himself with a voice thrilled with the victory: "Now, honey. Now, love. [He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse] Now, now, love. Now, love" (Scene 11, 118). Stanley is relieved when Blanche quits his house because he has the opportunity to celebrate the love of his wife without any threat. "There is a systemic pattern of co-selection, which can be observed in relation to tense selection and the selection of material processes" (Lukin 2004, 267). The present is the dominant tense: Stanley is clearly concerned with the present and he refuses to unearth the ghosts of the feudal past when the proletariat used to be undermined. The material process is noticed when Stanley excludes Blanche: "You left nothing here! Unless the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" (Scene 11, 115). Stanley uses a derogatory language and debases Blanche since she refuses to adjust her parameters and accept the changes in the new South. The failure of Blanche to acquire some power is noticed through the lower tune of the blue piano. When Blanche is raped, "the blue piano goes softly. She turns confusedly and makes a faint gesture. The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step toward her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips" (Scene 10, 107). The act of fainting suggests the presence

of a behavioural process³ (Blanche is the behave; “makes a faint gesture” is the process) that invites the audience to grasp Blanche’s psychological turmoil. The state of dizziness evokes Blanche’s detachment from reality after being punished by Stanley. From the standpoint of Stanley, Blanche deserves to be punished as “[she is] guilty of abusing and using sensitive men so that her punishment, her rape-fits her crime” (qtd. in Lant 1999, 229). This motivation betokens that the rape of Blanche is brought about by her social degradation without probing into her inner psychological workings.

To conclude, the female dwellers of *A Streetcar Named Desire* have different reactions to the new changing face of the American South. Transitivity has shown the passivity of Blanche as she is not involved in the process of change. The older sister has a backward glance as she refuses to set her old parameters and chooses to adopt the new system. She is threatened of extinction as she uses a romantic jargon in an animalistic world reigned by apes. Her tragic error remains her failure to understand that fluidity of time cannot be recaptured. She reacts passively to mobility and the passage of time by being fixed in the idyllic South. Freezing the past leads to her immersion in magic and makes her fall in insanity. The wish at re-enacting the past and constructing her own identity by imposing the old values make Blanche to be ostracized by Stanley, who excludes her from the geographical boundaries of the new South. Unlike Blanche, who is still admiring the old Southern gentility and residing in the remote past, Stella has adjusted her old principles to make them suitable with the modern South. She is an active participant in the process of mobility. She is victorious in the race of the fittest because she has apprehended that adaptability is the best reaction to mobility; it is a prolific survival strategy that helps her remain alive in a new Southern jungle dominated by brutal creatures. In reality, “what characterizes the fittest is the ability to adapt to circumstances, an ability which Blanche ultimately does not possess despite her claim that she does” (Saddik 1999, 66). Stella is more practical because she has the capability of being complicitous

with the new Southern order. Mobility necessitates the presence of sacrifice and Stella succeeds socially at creating a compromise with the new social order at the expense of her female freedom.

NOTES

1. Heteroglossia is a term coined by Bakhtin and it refers to “another’s speech in another’s language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a refracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse” (Bakhtin 2004, 324).
2. Relational Process: “he verbs that most frequently occur as the process of a relational clause are be and have” (Halliday 2014, 262).
3. Behavioural processes: “They are processes of (typically human) physiological and psychological behaviour” (Halliday 2014, 248).

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