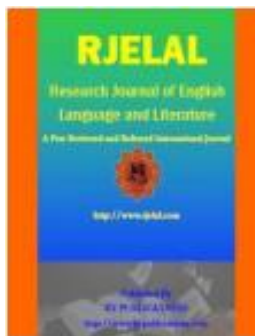




SUBCONSCIOUS DESIRES: THE ROLE OF REPRESSION IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' 'A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE'

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of repression in Tennessee Williams' iconic play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Through an in-depth analysis of the characters and their subconscious desires, it uncovers the pivotal role repression plays in shaping the narrative. The paper argues that repression is not only a defense mechanism employed by the vulnerable characters to protect themselves, but also a tool to mask their true desires and maintain societal norms. The paper begins by examining the character of Blanche Dubois, the protagonist of the play, whose repressed desires are manifested through her veiled promiscuity and refusal to confront the reality of her fading beauty. Through her interactions with the other characters, particularly her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley, the paper highlights how Blanche employs repression as a defense mechanism to protect herself from the harsh truth of her past and present circumstances. Furthermore, the paper delves into Stanley Kowalski's character, the embodiment of primal desires and uncontrolled aggression. It argues that Stanley's repression of his own insecurities and vulnerabilities leads him to assert dominance over others, particularly Blanche, in order to maintain his self-image as a masculine force. The dynamics between Blanche and Stanley serve as a microcosm for the larger themes of repression and desire in the play. Overall, this research paper explores the intricate interplay between repression, desire, and societal expectations in Tennessee Williams' play. Through an in-depth analysis of the characters and their subconscious desires, it sheds light on the underlying psychological complexities that drive the narrative. The paper demonstrates that repression is not simply a psychological mechanism, but also a powerful force that shapes the characters' motivations and interactions, ultimately leading to their downfall.

Keywords: Repression, Subconscious desires, Psychological turmoil, Human nature, Unconscious mind, Guilt, Conflict, Psychological toll.

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Introduction

Repression, a concept deeply ingrained both in psychology and literature, is defined as the unconscious defense mechanism employed by the

human mind to block out painful or undesirable thoughts, memories, or feelings. Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, extensively discussed repression in his works. In his book *The Interpretation*

of Dreams, Freud asserts, "We shall follow the rule not to consider dreams as the fulfilments of wishes, but shall take them as thoughts warded off from consciousness by the repressive full force of the censorship" (Freud 17). This quote highlights how repression functions as a defense mechanism to protect the conscious mind from confronting distressing desires or memories.

Repression has long been a central theme in literature and psychology, and Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is no exception. The play's exploration of the human psyche brings to light the intricate interplay between desire and repression, shedding light on the destructive outcomes that ensue when one denies their innermost longings. Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a classic play that delves deep into the psychological complexities of its characters. The themes of desire, illusion, and reality are explored through the lens of repression, which plays a pivotal role in shaping the fate of the characters.

To fully comprehend the relevance of repression in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, it is essential to delve into the background of Tennessee Williams himself. Williams, a renowned American playwright, was no stranger to personal struggles and emotional turmoil. His own experiences of repression and psychological conflicts heavily influenced his works. As John S. Bak explains in his book *Tennessee Williams: A Literary Life*, "Williams' life was marked by bouts of depression, anxiety, and ultimately, addiction, which were often linked to his own repressed desires" (Bak 42). Williams' inclination towards exploring the depths of human psychology resonated in his characters, including Blanche DuBois, Stanley Kowalski, and Stella Kowalski.

Moreover, the significance of repression as a literary device cannot be overlooked. Authors have long utilized repression to create complex and multi-dimensional characters, leading to compelling narratives. As renowned literature critic, Harold Bloom, contends in his book *Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire*, "Repression functions not only as a thematic element in the play but also as a narrative device to drive forward the plot and intensify the internal conflicts of the characters"

(Bloom 57). Bloom's insight sheds light on how repression serves as a powerful tool for authors to delve into the depths of human psyche and create engaging stories that resonate with readers. This research paper will dive into the intricacies of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, exploring the role of repression in shaping the characters' subconscious desires. By drawing upon the background of Tennessee Williams himself, alongside psychological and literary perspectives on repression, we can gain a comprehensive understanding of the significant role repression plays in the play's narrative and characterization. By analyzing the repressed desires of characters such as Blanche, Stella, and Stanley, we can unravel the complexities of their relationships and the conflicts they face, ultimately shedding light on the underlying themes of desire and illusion.

Blanche Dubois: The Veiled Desires

Repression is a psychological defense mechanism in which unacceptable thoughts, feelings, or desires are pushed into the unconscious mind. Underneath the surface of "*A Streetcar Named Desire*," Williams weaves a complex web of repressed desires that manifest themselves in the characters' actions. Blanche Dubois, the complex and enigmatic character in Tennessee Williams' "*A Streetcar Named Desire*," is deeply entwined with the exploration of promiscuity, reliance on illusions, and the use of repression as a defense mechanism. Blanche's veiled desires, rooted in her troubled past, showcase her desperate search for validation, her tendency to escape into a world of fantasy, and the impact of societal norms on her repressed desires.

Blanche's promiscuity is a prominent aspect of her character, representing her desperate need for attention and attempts to find fulfillment through sexual encounters. The text provides glimpses of her promiscuous nature, such as her admission to Stella: "I've got to be seductive, Stanley" (page 48). Blanche recognizes that her allure and sexual appeal are crucial elements in her pursuit of affection and validation. Her promiscuity is also linked to her desire to escape the harsh realities of her past, as she explains to Mitch: "You think I'm going to stay here and be caught and be put to the... bed!" (page 82).

Blanche seeks solace in fleeting connections to mask her emotional pain and regain a sense of control over her own life.

Blanche's reliance on illusions acts as a coping mechanism, allowing her to shield herself from the harshness of reality. She often retreats into a world of fantasy, creating a facade of elegance and charm to hide her inner struggles. This reliance is evident when she states, "I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action" (page 10). Blanche's aversion to harsh lighting symbolizes her fear of confronting the truth and her preference for living in the shadows of her illusions. By perpetuating these illusions, Blanche creates an alternative reality where she can temporarily forget her troubled past and find solace in her imagined world of beauty and desire.

Repression serves as a defense mechanism for Blanche, enabling her to avoid confronting and acknowledging painful memories and traumas. Blanche's repression is linked to her tragic past, including the loss of her family's ancestral home and the deaths of loved ones. She attempts to repress these painful memories through denial and avoidance. When questioned about her promiscuity by Stanley, Blanche adamantly denies any wrongdoing with a touch of theatricality: "I don't want realism, I want magic!" (page 145). Her rejection of reality and preference for illusions is a manifestation of her repressive tendencies as a means to protect herself from the emotional turmoil caused by her past actions.

The impact of societal norms on Blanche's repressed desires cannot be overlooked. Coming from a traditional Southern background, Blanche is burdened by societal expectations and moral standards that constrict her ability to freely express her desires. The rigid norms of society force her to wear a metaphorical veil, preventing her from embracing her true self and desires. Blanche acknowledges the weight of societal judgment when she tells Stella, "A single girl... walking here alone... at this hour—I do not think it is respectable" (page 107). Society's judgment and the fear of tarnishing her already dwindling reputation restrict Blanche's ability to pursue her desires openly, leaving her constantly

restrained and suffocated by the expectations placed upon her.

Blanche Dubois in "A Streetcar Named Desire" is a complex character whose veiled desires, reliance on illusions, and use of repression serve as powerful explorations of her internal struggles. Her promiscuity serves as a desperate plea for validation and a means to escape her troubled past. Blanche's reliance on illusions acts as a shield to protect her from the harsh realities of her life, allowing her to create a semblance of control and beauty. However, the impact of societal norms weighs heavy on Blanche, leaving her repressed and unable to fully express her desires due to the fear of societal judgment. Ultimately, Blanche's story serves as a poignant reflection of the consequences of denying one's true desires and the detrimental effects of living a life veiled in illusions and repression.

Stanley Kowalski: The Dominance of Repression

Stanley Kowalski, a force of primal masculinity, embodies repressed desires in a different manner. His repression manifests through aggression, domination, and violence. His inability to express emotions freely creates conflicts with those around him, particularly Stella and Blanche. Stanley's repressed anger and frustration culminate in the rape of Blanche, a shocking act that epitomizes the consequences of repressed desires. Stanley Kowalski, the iconic character from Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire," is a prime example of the dominance of repression. Throughout the play, Stanley's aggressive behavior and primal desires serve as a driving force, overshadowing any insecurities or vulnerabilities he may possess. This ultimately leads to Stanley's exertion of dominance over Blanche, the fragile and mentally unstable sister of his wife, Stella.

One of the most notable aspects of Stanley's character is his aggressive behavior. From the moment he is introduced, Stanley exudes a raw and untamed masculinity. He is described as having "animal joy in his being" (Williams 50) and possesses a physicality that is both intimidating and overpowering. This aggression is evident in his confrontations with Blanche, such as when he forcefully rebukes her attempts to control the

situation: "Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig—polak—disgusting—vulgar—greasy!' – them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here! What are you two? A pair of queens?" (Williams 75). Stanley's primal desires also play a significant role in his character development. He is driven by his physical desires, which often manifest in a sexual and aggressive manner. This is particularly evident in his relationship with Stella, where he often exhibits dominant behavior. Stanley's primal desires are described as "animal habits" (Williams 53), highlighting his inability to control or suppress his base instincts. His primal desires are characterized by his need for control and power over those around him, as evident in his interactions with Blanche. However, beneath Stanley's aggressive and domineering exterior lies a repressed individual. Despite his outward display of aggression, Stanley represses his insecurities and vulnerabilities, burying them deep within himself. He resents Blanche's intrusion into his life, as she threatens to expose his less desirable qualities. As Stella mentions, "No, Stanley is too busy making a pig of himself" (Williams 44), indicating that Stanley's aggressive behavior is a way to deflect attention from his own shortcomings.

Stanley's repression is further evidenced through his interaction with Blanche. As Blanche becomes more unstable and fragmented, Stanley senses an opportunity to exert dominance over her. He capitalizes on her vulnerability to break her down mentally and emotionally. Stanley's desire for control manifests not just through his aggressive behavior, but also through his manipulation of the truth, distorting reality to manipulate and dominate Blanche. This is exemplified in his final confrontation with her when he reveals a painful secret from her past, shattering her fragile sense of self: "Hey, Stella! ... All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father – mother – Margaret – that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But you can't put the blame on Mitch. Didn't he ever tell you he had a sick mother?" (Williams 180).

Stanley Kowalski, with his aggressive behavior, primal desires, and repression of insecurities and vulnerabilities, represents the dominance of repression in "A Streetcar Named

Desire." His relentless pursuit of power and dominance over Blanche ultimately exposes the destructive nature of repression. Stanley's aggression and repression may initially appear as signs of strength, but upon closer examination, they reveal the emptiness and brutality of his character.

The Interplay of Repression and Desire

The interplay of repression and desire is a central theme in Tennessee Williams' play "A Streetcar Named Desire." The dynamics between the two main characters, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski, exemplify the complex nature of this interplay. Both Blanche and Stanley are driven by their repressed desires, which significantly influence their actions and relationships throughout the play. Ultimately, the consequences of their repressed desires lead to their respective downfalls. Blanche DuBois, a fading Southern belle, is a character plagued by repressed desires. She is haunted by her past, the loss of her family's estate, her failed relationships, and the perception of her fading beauty. Blanche's desire for love, attention, and security is evident; however, her repression prevents her from openly acknowledging or achieving these desires. As she states, "I want to rest. I want to breathe quietly again. Yes—I want Mitch ... And I want to be seduced by him and him alone" (Williams 86). Blanche's repressed desires drive her to seek solace in illusions and fantasy, creating a false reality to escape the harshness of her present circumstances.

On the other hand, Stanley Kowalski represents the embodiment of primal desires. He is driven by his physical urges, his need for control, and his dominance over those around him. Stanley's desire for power and dominance is evident in his treatment of both Blanche and his own wife, Stella. He continuously asserts his authority and demands respect, often through aggressive and violent means. Stanley's repression lies in the deeper layers of his character, as he represses any insecurities or vulnerabilities he may possess. This repression manifests in his aggressive behavior as a means of asserting control over others. The interplay between Blanche and Stanley is characterized by a constant power struggle fueled by their repressed desires.

Blanche's desire for security and love clashes with Stanley's desire for dominance and control. This tension leads to conflicts and confrontations throughout the play, with Stanley often exerting his dominance over Blanche. For instance, when Stanley finds out about the loss of Belle Reve, Blanche's family estate, he uses this knowledge to undermine her and gain power over her: "Now we've touched the bottom. ... Belle Reve's gone. The place is ours now, Stella's and mine, where I got in and out bearing what I could of her. ... I am the king around here" (Williams 45).

The consequences of these repressed desires become evident as the play unfolds. Blanche's reliance on illusions and her inability to confront her past eventually leads to her emotional and mental unraveling. As Stanley uncovers the truth about her past and exposes her illusions, Blanche's fragile sense of self crumbles, resulting in her inevitable downfall. Similarly, Stanley's aggressive and dominant behavior ultimately leads to the destruction of his own relationships. His repressed insecurities and vulnerabilities finally come to the surface, and Stanley's brutish actions alienate him from those around him, including Stella. The interplay of repression and desire in "A Streetcar Named Desire" serves as a catalyst for the characters' actions and relationships. Blanche's repressed desires for love and security, contrasted with Stanley's primal desires for dominance, create a power dynamic that drives the narrative forward. However, the consequences of their repressed desires lead to their ultimate downfalls, as the illusionary world constructed by Blanche collapses, and Stanley's aggressive behavior isolates him from those he cares about. Through these characters, Tennessee Williams explores the destructive effects of repressed desires on individuals' lives and relationships.

Conclusion

This research paper has delved into the role of repression in Tennessee Williams' play, "A Streetcar Named Desire." Throughout the paper, we have examined the interplay of repression and desire, focusing on the dynamics between the main characters, Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. We have explored how their repressed desires greatly

influence their actions and relationships, ultimately leading to their downfalls. Firstly, we analyzed the aggressive behavior and primal desires exhibited by Stanley Kowalski. His dominance and control over others were driven by his repressed insecurities and vulnerabilities. His aggressive behavior and exertion of power over Blanche demonstrated the destructive consequences of repression. In contrast, Blanche DuBois represented the embodiment of repression through her denial of desires and escape into illusions. Her repressed desires for love, security, and a longing for the past shaped her actions and relationships. As Blanche relied on illusions to mask her reality, her ultimate downfall came when her repressed desires were exposed by Stanley.

The significance of repression in shaping the narrative was highlighted throughout the paper. Repression created an underlying tension between the characters, driving the conflicts and power struggles that propelled the story forward. It served as a catalyst for their actions, leading to the unraveling of their lives. Overall, this paper has shed light on the profound role that repression plays in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Williams masterfully portrays the consequences of repressed desires, exploring the psychological complexities of his characters and the destructive outcomes that result from denying one's true desires. The interplay of repression and desire not only propels the narrative but uncovers the raw, primal nature of human beings. Through this exploration, Williams emphasizes the importance of acknowledging, confronting, and embracing our desires as a means of finding redemption and fulfillment.

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