

What are the effects of the contradictory elements in the behavior of Blanche and Stella in Tennessee William's A Street Car Named Desire and of the Antigone and Ismene in Sophocles's Antigone?

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Man is an embodied paradox, a bundle of contradiction¹. The behavior of human beings and their characters depends on how their psychological environment is. It also depends on the way they perceive the world around them. This can be clearly seen in both the plays namely A Street Car Named Desire and Antigone. Blanche and Stella as well as Antigone and Ismene, although brought up in their respective families, turn out to be completely opposite from each other in terms of social behavior.

Right from the start it is shown by that Antigone tries to persuade Ismene. She is portrayed as having a strong character and has a lot of tries to influence her sister. She knows that her sister loves her and could not bear to see her die if she buried her brother Polynices. Antigone who is a protagonist in the play pressurizes Ismene indirectly. At one point she says, "... Do as you like, dishonor the laws the gods hold in honor"² (63). Ismene on the other hand is shown to be submissive character by Sophocles. She loves her sister as she knows that she is going to be left alone if something happens to her. She in reply says " I'd do them no dishonor... but defy the city? I have no strength for that."³(63)

Tennessee Williams in A Street Car Named Desire has shown his protagonist in Blanche. She tries to dominate Stella. Blanche treats anything of not her opinion, as beneath her. While she is doing this she ignores the fact that she has lost everything and she is living with her sister. She is shown to be implicitly dominating over Stella by being condescending. This can be seen when Stella compliments Blanche on her health and in reply she hears, "...But you- you've put on some weight, yes you're as plump as a little partridge! And it's so becoming you!"⁴ (9) Blanche here is being sarcastic. She does not stand for any thing she is saying. In fact she is so much interested in her self that she does not care what is happening around her. Stella being a calm and quiet girl takes this as a part of her life and has been doing it for a long time now as she states "You never gave me a chance to say much Blanche. So I just got in the habit of getting quiet around you."⁵ (8) We are shown that she is very obedient to her sister because she knows that she cannot win the argument so there is no point in arguing.

¹ The Concise Oxford Dictionary Of Quotations (Page 76)

² Sophocles Antigone (Page 63)

³ Sophocles Antigone (Page 63)

⁴ Williams, Tennessee A Street Car Named Desire (Page 9)

⁵ Williams, Tennessee A Street Car Named Desire (Page 8)

In Antigone the character of Antigone is very loyal to her family. She plans to bury Polynices without any fear of laws. She says to Creon after accepting that she had buried her brother: "...Nor did I think your edict had such a force that you, a mere mortal, could over ride the gods, the great unwritten, unshakable traditions... But if I had allowed my own mother's son to rot, an unburied corpse- that would have been an agony..."⁶ (82). She is very concerned about the status her family has had. She thinks she is the only savior of the status that her family has had. She assumes that, that by doing this she would be doing something heroic but she is mistaken as she as we see later in the play that she is inviting Creon to humiliate her, which exactly happens later on. Ismene, Antigone's sister, refuses to help her, as she is a good citizen and wants to obey the law and Creon. At one point she says to Antigone, "What? you'd burry him when the law forbids the city?"⁷ (61). Sophocles tries to show that Ismene is being intelligent and is aware of the fact that it is better to stay alive and maintain the name of the family rather than keeping the status without any member if the family essentially being alive. She had a slight idea of Antigone's fate she did want to stay alone as she is shown to be a more obedient character. She uses the law as a pretext for the above-mentioned reasons.

Antigone is shown to be a very stubborn as well as optimistic to an extent of foolishness. She has decided to burry her brother, she is proud to do it. She makes sure that she does it irrespective of the resistance caused by Creon. She is shown to be a very brave character as well. When Ismene tells her not to what she is doing. She replied, "...I will burry him myself. And even if I die in an act, that death will be a glory..."⁸ (63). She does not care about her fate as long as she is victorious in carrying out what she was planning to do. Ismene, shown as a very clever girl tries to make Antigone understand and deals with the situation more maturely. She realizes the consequences of what Antigone is planning to do and therefore she has a different perspective of the situation. She explains this to Antigone by saying "... I, for one, I'll beg the dead to forgive me- I'm forced, I have no choice – I must obey the ones who stand in power. Why rush to extremes? It's madness, madness..."⁹ (64) Ismene is a very considerate sister. Later on in the play when Antigone is sentenced to death she even pleaded in front of Creon to save her life but all in vain.

Blanche has always been living in illusions. She thinks that she is living in reality but in fact she is not. She is always presenting fake personalities. Her former husband shot himself after she publicly showed her hatred for his homosexuality. This experience with him makes her degrade herself to love whoever she can, who provides her with protection for a certain time and satisfies her sexually. She brings herself into an illusion for the longest time as she erases those bad experiences. At one point she says. " I don't want realism... I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be the

⁶ Sophocles Antigone (Page 82)

⁷ Sophocles Antigone (Page 61)

⁸ Sophocles Antigone (Page 63)

⁹ Sophocles Antigone (Page 64)

truth¹⁰”(109). When she is raped, that is the first time she actually sees reality. She tries to explain this to Stella, but she does not believe her because of the illusion she had created and showed till that point. Stella is totally different and she lives in reality. Stella’s standing up against Stanley proves her real approach to things, because she knows that she is actually in love with him and is getting the love back which makes her believe that she is living in reality. She could go to any extent to keep her marriage. She is simplistic and is happy essentially with Stanley.

To conclude, both Williams and Sophocles represent the contradiction in us in choosing to make their protagonists one half of a sister relationship, the other half representing law order, conventional and social norms. Blanche here is has had immoral sexual relations with men in her past life and Antigone is trying to burry her brother although it is against Creon’s laws. Both the protagonists do not pursue the norms of the society and go completely against it

In case of Antigone she is inflexible, hopeful and very hasty. Her fate is completely because of her own mistake. She dies in the end. In Williams play, Blanche is living in illusions she is doomed in the end by becoming an alcoholic and ends up getting raped by Stanley.

Ismene is dealing cleverly with the situation and tries to save her sister. Her sister suppresses and she is shown to have a lot of influence over her. Stella is living in certainty rather than her own idealistic world. She is also obscured by her sister but she ends up standing next to Stanley and gives birth to his child.

No matter what ever the case is. Human beings are bound to take shape according to the environment they are living in but their individual characters determine the result.

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¹⁰ Williams, Tennessee A Street Car Named Desire (Page 109)

