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Author(s) : Vishma KUNU

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Buddhist Reflections on an American Tragedy: A New Reading of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Vishma KUNU (Temple University)

Ⅰ. Introduction

In recent decades, American interest in Buddhism has surged. It appears the Buddha's 2500 year-old teachings are increasingly finding relevance in the 21st. This is attested by a plethora of local sitting groups and organized retreats, online dharma talks, mindfulness programs, and magazines for the American practitioner. How might we understand this embrace of Buddhism? The Buddha was acutely concerned with the human condition, and he condensed his observations about it in his assertions that to live is to desire (*taṇhā*), and desire is painful (*dukkha*). Is this not a universal theme, if not a perennial diagnosis? Perhaps Buddhism finds a comfortable home among Western audiences today, precisely because it addresses universal and timeless concerns. Interest in this ancient tradition often sends modern practitioners digging for instructive material in dusty episodes from canonical material, or looking to a seasoned meditator/teacher for guidance. This gives pause for thought about novel devices that might be utilized to communicate Buddhist ideas to modern audiences. Since the Buddhist tradition has long utilized stories for didactic purposes, I suggest that we think of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (*Streetcar*) as a modern addition to Buddhism's repertoire of instructive narratives. My contention is that an analysis of *Streetcar's* setting and main characters in terms of concepts central to early Buddhism, such as *dukkha*, *taṇhā*, *saṁsāra* (cycle of rebirth), *lobha* (greed, infatuation, craving, lust), *dosa* (aversion, hostility), and *moha* (delusion), reveals the play as a fresh device for communicating Buddhist ideas.

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Ⅱ. *Streetcar* as Buddhist Story

Buddhist philosophy, history, and doctrine often occupy center stage in scholarly studies while its popular narratives, involving talking animals, supernatural beings and everyday people, are relegated to the sidelines as folklore or simplistic tales for children. One of the most impressive compendiums of Buddhist stories that have suffered such a fate until recently is the *jātaka* collection of 547 tales purporting to be accounts of the Buddha's previous lives. The *jātakas* were transmitted orally and committed to writing only around the 5th century CE when they took on a fixed form in a five-part structure. From an early period in Buddhist history, these tales were the subject of visual representations at prominent sites such as the Bharhut Stūpa. Today, they adorn temple walls and are still told in Buddhist communities as a means of conveying paradigms of behavior with a Buddhist moral. The importance of storytelling in Buddhism comes into greater relief when we consider the time and effort required to preserve these narratives in an originally oral environment, and the fact that the verse portions of the tales, considered the oldest kernel, are canonical.

Martin Wickramasinghe, drawing our attention to the literary aspects of *jātaka* stories, observes that at the core of these narratives is the "real raw material of life," free of embellishments that move us away from actual experiences of people. He compares the character types found in the *jātakas* with those in Fyodor Dostoevsky's novels, recognizing similarities in their conflicts at the very basic psychological level (4–5). Since the Buddha was concerned with the eradication of craving that gives rise to unease in everyday life—which requires clear perception of reality as it is—it is not surprising that such stories would remain a central component of Buddhist instruction for more than two millennia. The conversation between Buddhist stories and Williams' *Streetcar* begins in light of their realistic depictions of human action and tendencies.

Reading or viewing *Streetcar* as a story about ordinary people engaging in everyday activities brings poignant, human universals into focus, making it an apt vehicle for displaying *Buddhist* ideas to present day audiences. It is useful to quote Jordan Y. Miller at length, in his assessment of *Streetcar* as expressive of realism in the manner of playwright and novelist, William Inge. He writes of *Streetcar's* language and character:

> Here are very ordinary, completely unromanticized, and rather unlovely

> people, immediately recognizable as members of contemporary society, unvarnished, unpolished, behaving in a wholly "natural" manner. They speak a blunt, straightforward language, with actions to match. They are surrounded by the heat, the noise, and the general contamination of an environment created and maintained by their own kind, and what goes on within that environment has no effect beyond the narrow limits of the world visible upon the stage. The problems of the search for individual happiness and security and the day-to-day conflicts of one person with another are those of an indefinite number of others equally unimportant and undistinguished. Neon lights flash, trains roar by, radios blare, couples fight and make love. The rest of the universe takes little note of them. (9)

But *we* might take note of them, though, *because of* their ordinariness.

At first glance, the Buddha and Tennessee Williams seem like an odd pairing, especially since the former is an ancient Indian renunciate who founded a world religion, and the latter, a 20th century American playwright. In comparative literature studies, the reader might seek to uncover affinities between texts and traditions, identifying influences on an author's writings that support a particular reading or interpretation. My approach to reading *Streetcar* through the lens of Buddhism is distinguishable from this. I have found no scholarly evidence suggesting Williams was familiar with Buddhism or that it shaped his works, and moreover, such a connection is irrelevant to my project. Certainly, Williams did not compose *Streetcar* with the intent to communicate Buddhist ideas. If tales involving unadorned characters manage to capture the bare churnings of everyday life, a titillating tale set in New Orleans featuring Stanley Kowalski, Stella Kowalski and Blanche Dubois fits the bill. It is Williams' discernment and honest knowledge of people that compel us to consider *Streetcar* in light of the Buddha's claims concerning the human condition.

Ⅲ. A Buddhist Reading of *Streetcar*

1. The Setting

If the Buddhist tradition has long utilized stories to convey its teachings, subtle and gross, why not one involving a rattle-trap street-car named Desire

that bangs through the French Quarter of New Orleans? This vehicle clamors through Williams' pages, on movie screens, and stages today, shouting a Buddhist buzz word, *desire*, articulated by the Buddha in the second noble truth as thirst (*taṇhā*). The Buddha identifies desire as the main impetus for all human unease (*dukkha*). He explains this insatiable drive gives rise to further becoming and is of three kinds: sensual craving, craving for existence, and craving for nonexistence (that is, for this to be and for that not to be) (Walshe 346). To merge Williams' vehicular imagery with the Buddha's outlook on the human predicament, we are all travelers on this streetcar beside Blanche Dubois, transferring to another called Cemeteries, and even if we were to disembark at Elysian Fields, that blissful (or not so blissful) abode is only temporary and we must get right back on the rattle-trap that keeps running. Toward the end of the play, Blanche asks, "Is that street-car named Desire still grinding along the tracks at this hour?" (85).

Most of us experience desire, craving, or thirst firsthand with regard to sensory pleasures, yearning to unite with the pleasant and avoid the displeasing in hopes of satiation. This is characteristic of the sensuous sphere (*kāmāvacara*), one of three realms of existence articulated in the Buddhist tradition. In this mode of existence, the Buddha claims that the endless hankering to appease our appetites leads to unease, because we expect the objects of our desire, whether an experience, or material thing, to endure, when in fact they are insubstantial, fleeting and subject to decay. Impermanence (*anicca*) is pervasive and apparent if we take a closer look, but yet still, we demand more of the world; we want things to last, but all phenomena arise and pass away (Wallis 127). Concerning desire and the transient nature of our contentment as it plays out in our lives, William B. Irvine writes, "[Some individuals are] on a satisfaction treadmill. They realize that the desires they satisfied in the past did not give rise to lasting happiness and that in satisfying these desires they were dealing with the symptoms of the problem of desire, not getting to its roots" (280).

With regard to the dramatic depiction of the afflictions of desire in the sensuous sphere, what better setting is there than the French Quarter of New Orleans where the transient abiding of sights, smells, tastes, sounds, and all there is to be felt, ooze with tantalizing attractiveness and repulsion? Williams suitably establishes the context for illustrating the proliferation (*papañca*), that ensues from desirous sensory contact by describing the setting in Scene One as weathered and faded, appealing to our tactile and olfactory senses as he writes, "You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river

warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee" (13). He tugs at our ears throughout the play, reminding us of the music of the "Blue Piano," which "expresses the spirit of the life that goes on there," and, he does not stop there. Noting its rickety stairs and quaintly ornamented gables, Elysian Fields, he says, "unlike other corresponding sections of [poor] American cities, has a raffish charm" (13). We want to dwell there, if only for the duration of eleven scenes. This location, rich and sultry in its decay, is carefully selected for its ability to contain the very human appetites of Stanley, Stella and Blanche, and for its abundance of bait on which we might feed, until we are hungry again.

2. The Inhabitants

Phillip Weissman, drawing on Sigmund Freud's writings on psychopathological characters, distinguishes Williams from other playwrights in "his uncompromising completeness of portrayal." He claims, "Williams' characters are not always favorably responded to by audiences. However, there is rarely a lack of emotional response in either his critics or supporters. There is also rarely a moment in the unfolding of his plays in which one is not 'in the grip of his emotions, rather than capable of rational judgment'" (57–58). It is exactly this emotive response that can lead the viewer or reader to discern the human condition having encountered the ordinary and troubled lives of the inhabitants of Elysian Fields. Their specific longings may not be the same as ours, but familiar modes of daily existence permeate this drama and one cannot so easily turn away unaffected.

The Buddha identified three roots of harmful action, called *kilesas,* meaning stain, defilement, or soiling, that cause torment and toxicity. These three are *lobha* (greed, infatuation), *dosa* (aversion, hostility), and *moha* (delusion). Wallis explains, with reference to the popular Tibetan depiction of the Buddhist cosmos known as the wheel of becoming (*bhāvanācakka*), that, "these three qualities are represented by a rooster, a snake and a pig grabbing on to one another's tails at the very hub of the wheel. This depiction is consistent with the Buddha's view that [the *kilesas*] are fundamental driving forces operating at the very heart of existence" (95). These roots are present in all of Williams' characters, as they are in all individuals, keeping us entrenched in the cycle of further becoming. The triad of greed, aversion, and delusion operate in conjunction with one another conditioning our lives. An analysis of the behavioral tendencies of Williams' main characters, Stella, Stanley and

Blanche, allows us to glean insight into each of these roots. At the risk of oversimplifying the combination of *kilesas* in each character, it is arguable that Williams' depiction of Stella is particularly marked by *lobha*, Stanley, *dosa* and Blanche, *moha*. Within the microcosm of the sensuous realm that is the French Quarter of New Orleans, their actions unfold, revealing the forces dictating our own daily lives that often go unnoticed.

Stella Kowalski is the epitome of one motivated by *lobha* (greed, infatuation). *Rāga* and *taṇhā* are synonymous *lobha*, with capturing the qualities of lust, thirst as craving as well. In a world of sensual affliction, she is ensnared in the eager yearnings for pleasure that is, by nature, transient. In the opening scene of the play she catches the bloodstained package of meat her husband, Stanley, heaves at her, crying out in protest and laughing breathlessly (14). Lust is an overpowering current in the sense realm where we find Stella sexually longing for Stanley in a manner that is characteristic of a drug addict, with Stanley as the dealer. Theater director, Elia Kazan, in his *Notebook for A Streetcar Named Desire*, describes her as doomed, plain out of her head about Stanley, and asserts that she has to stop herself from crawling after him (25). Stella reveals to her sister, Blanche, recently arrived from Mississippi, that she can not stand it when Stanley is away for a night, and when he is gone for week, she nearly goes wild and cries on his lap like a baby upon his return.

When, in a drunken rage on a poker night, Stanley strikes Stella while pregnant, she flees their home only to return that very night at his beckoning, coming together with him with "low, animal moans" (Williams 60). Hungering for satiation through pleasure, even in the face of detriment, is depicted here as primal. He lifts her up, takes her inside, tempts, and appeases her, and trapped in the whirlwind of his brutish ways, she tolerates his habits and cannot see that he does any wrong. In fact, the morning after, Williams shows us Stella lying in the bedroom, her eyes and lips having that "almost narcotized tranquility that is the faces of Eastern idols" (62). In her blissful serenity, she explains to her frantically concerned sister that it was not anything serious, that when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen, and that he did not know what he was doing (63). Blanche appeals to her sister to awaken from her stupefied slumber, but Stella has already accepted the money Stanley gave her "to smooth things over" (68), and she responds, in a matter-of-fact manner, "[There] are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" (70).

Stanley Kowalski is a raw, indulgent and unrefined man whose modus

operandi is *dosa* (aversion, hostility). Aside from hitting his pregnant wife, he smashes light bulbs with Stella's slippers, breaks plates and a radio. His hostility is directed toward his wife and friends at points, but the most formidable manifestations of his aversive tendencies are present in his interactions with Blanche, as his tactless probing comes into conflict with Blanche's elusiveness and flagrant taste for appearances from the outset. Even though Stella describes Blanche's fragility to her husband, he is unrelenting in his efforts to destroy his sister-in-law (Williams, 109). He threatens to take her jewelry to an appraiser and her plantation paperwork to an attorney, he does the legwork to find out why she lost her teaching job, left Mississippi and came to Elysian Fields, then reveals the sordid details to his friend, Mitch, who was Blanche's last redemptive hope. He gets her a bus ticket back to Laurel, rapes her while his wife is in labor at the hospital, and serves as a catalyst to Blanche's psychological demise (34–36, 43). Stanley, in Scene One, reeks of malice toward Blanche, and in the presence of family, friends and doctors who have come to take her at the close of the play, Stanley says to her, as only he could, "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and old empty perfume bottles—unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you. You want the lantern?" (140). Not an ounce of compassion or sympathy exists in primitive Stanley for Blanche, a woman desperately in need of a new start.

When we first encounter Blanche DuBois, she is a frazzled mess; lost, shaking, panting for breath, anxious, nervous, tapping a cigarette and slurping down liquor. She even informs Stella that she is not very well, that she is going to be sick, and as the drama unfolds, we see the extent of her illness (23, 31). Blanche is deeply enmeshed in the fabric of *moha* (delusion), burdened by a squalid past involving the suicide of a young lover who she learned was homosexual. She was dismissed from a career as a teacher due to her wanton ways, had lost the plantation, encountered death, and was running from a life of prostitution by which she supported herself. Of Blanche's predicament, Brook Atkinson writes:

> [She is] hysterical from a long and shattering ordeal … [clinging] desperately to illusions of refinement—pretty clothes that soothe her ego, perfumes and ostentatious jewelry, artifices of manners, forms and symbols of respectability. Since she does not believe in herself she tries to create a false world in which she can hide.… There is no hope for Blanche.… She will always have to flee reality. (33)

Blanche's actions bear the stench of a clouded state, and she continuously tries, to no avail, to refresh herself by bathing. Donning a cheap, rhinestone tiara, Blanche weaves a flimsy world of security in the proliferation of her imaginings, including the fabrication of a savior figure, Shep Huntleigh. Refusing to see things as they are, and protecting herself from being seen in plain light, she places a paper lantern over the naked bulb. She is ironically honest in her dishonesty, calling herself deluded, revealing outright that she does not want realism, but magic, that she misrepresents things and does not tell the truth, but what *ought* to be true (Williams 95, 117). Elsewhere, she admits to fibbing a lot and claims that a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion (41). When the naked light bulb is turned on, she screams and covers her face. At the end of the play, she allows the doctor to lead her "as if she were blind" (142). In her flight from what is right before her eyes in search of security, Blanche is the most tragic among Williams' characters. She is perhaps representative of many people today who struggle with confronting the disappointments inherent in life, relying on fabrications and medication to simply keep going.

3. Ending and Beginning Again

Through this analysis of the *kilesas* in terms of the characters of Stella, Stanley and Blanche, we are able to discern through the lens of Buddhism, Williams' vivid portrayal of human ills. The streetcar named Desire, which transports one to states of dissatisfaction looms throughout the work, and in the end, nothing is resolved. Brooks Atkinson, a reviewer of a 1947 production of *Streetcar* for the *New York Times* notes:

> [Streetcar] has no plot, at least in the familiar usage of that word. It is almost unbearably tragic … [T]heatergoers frequently ask in self-defense, "What's the good of harrowing people like that?" (32)

Atkinson goes on to say that he introduces these negative comments to "establish some perspective whereby 'Streetcar' may be appreciated as a work of art." In fact, he claims, "people do appreciate it thoroughly," as they "come away from it profoundly moved and in some curious way elated. For they have been sitting all evening in the presence of truth, and that is a rare and wonderful experience" (32). It is a response of this nature that lends weight to my claim that *Streetcar* can be utilized as a didactic narrative. Similar to

the *jatakas'* honest depiction of the churnings of everyday life as noted by Wickramasinghe, we find in *Streetcar* a story about ordinary people with whom we might identify, even if it is unbearably tragic. After Blanche is led away by the health professionals at the end of Scene Eleven, and nothing is resolved within the play, the reader or viewer might be able to turn an eye toward their own habituations. It is outside of the performance that one must attend to the root of the problem, namely, desire, and seek to bring it to a halt.

According to Buddhism, desire is not only the root-cause of our ongoing dissatisfaction, but it also keeps us entrenched in a world of our own manufacturing where we are subject to repeated birth and death (*saṁsāra*). This round of rebirth, or wheel of becoming, is represented in grandiose, cosmological fashion by the Tibetan *bhāvanācakka,* with its various realms of existence. In the present context, it might be useful to consider *saṁsāra* on a more observable and mundane scale, where individuals perform actions driven by *taṇhā* and the *kilesas,* continuously repeating and reinforcing habitual patterns. *Saṁsāra* is akin to a whirlpool with strong currents that from the Buddhist standpoint, is difficult to go against, especially without the awareness necessary to recognize everyday, detrimental behavioral patterns. Williams' characters engage in cyclical and generative processes throughout the play and *they* might not see themselves, but *we* do, and can learn from them. The very last line of the play marks the beginning of a new game of poker, and even if we do not consciously identify with, or like Stanley, Stella and Blanche, we may discern at a visceral level something of their problematic habituations in the undercurrents of our own lives.

The final scene of *Streetcar* opens with Blanche bathing, yet again. Some weeks have passed since Stanley raped her, acting upon his hostility (*dosa*) toward her, coupled with the desire (*taṇhā*) to satisfy his animalistic urges. Stella wonders if she should believe her sister's story about the rape and confides in her friend, Eunice, that she could never go on living with Stanley if it were true. In this opportunity for Stella to dislodge herself from her tendency to crawl after Stanley, Williams teases us with the possibility of Stella going against the currents that color her life. Eunice, however, advises that she should not ever believe it. "Life has got to go on[,]" she says, "no matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (133). Indeed, misery loves company, and good friends (*kalyāṇamitta*) are hard to find. As Blanche is led away, Stella sobs with "inhuman abandon," and Stanley finds "the opening of her blouse" (142). Similarly, Blanche's famous last words, "Whoever you are—I have always

depended on the kindness of strangers[,]" (142) keenly illustrate the powerful clutches of the whirlpool that is *saṁsāra*. In her perpetual flight from reality and the baggage of her past, our tragic heroine finds comfort in constructing a new world among those who are unfamiliar. We can almost hear the streetcar named Desire grinding along the tracks in the background, as we leave our characters in much the same state as we found them.

Ⅳ. Conclusion

This treatment of *Streetcar* through a Buddhist lens is in no way exhaustive, but I have suggested an approach to interpreting the drama that might entail a rich, innovative reading. By drawing Williams and the Buddha into conversation with each other, I highlight salient intersections between their articulations about humanity with regard to universal themes such as desire and dissatisfaction. Reading *Streetcar* as a Buddhist story brings this American classic into focus as an apt vehicle for displaying Buddhist ideas to present day audiences in a manner distinct from *dharma* talks and canonical episodes. To ignore the age-old Buddhist practice of utilizing stories for didactic purposes is to discount a major facet of its lived tradition. Because the Buddha's teachings remain relevant to our 21st century lives, it is imperative that we identify novel devices that the practitioner might find instructive, and this project advances *Streetcar* as a suitable addition to the repertoire of Buddhist narratives.

Stories allow us to imagine ourselves in the place of one or more of its characters and to try on multiple perspectives. *Jātaka* tales frequently express an ideal to be cultivated as part of Buddhist practice, such as generosity or forbearance, presenting the hearer or reader with a paradigm of how they *should* behave. We may not find models to emulate in Williams' *Streetcar*, but as the sensuous story draws us in, we encounter complex, everyday characters, against which we may measure ourselves. Perhaps sitting in the presence of truth for an evening, watching unembellished people take no note of their own habituations, might provoke a single viewer to dislodge herself from her own patterns of dwelling in the world. Like Stella, Stanley and Blanche inhabiting Elysian Fields, we are steeped in desire through and through, but the Buddha urges us to see each moment is fresh, and no one is irreparably lost to the churnings of *saṁsāra*.

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Abstract

This essay brings Tennessee Williams and the Buddha into conversation with each other by way of an analysis of *A Streetcar Named Desire* through the lens of Buddhism. Even though Williams and the Buddha are about 2500 years apart, I argue that there are intersections between Williams' keen observations about human nature and the Buddha's teachings. I bring these connections into relief through a consideration of *Streetcar*'s setting and main characters, Stanley Kowalski, Stella Kowalski and Blanche Dubois, in terms of fundamental, early Buddhist concepts such as desire (*taṇhā*) and the three defilements (*kilesas*). The Buddhist tradition has long utilized stories for didactic purposes and through this analysis, Williams' play comes into focus as a fitting, modern addition to this storehouse of instructive narratives.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Buddhism, *jātaka, taṇhā, kilesa, saṁsāra*

Vishma KUNU holds a BA in Philosophy, and Religion and Society at SUNY Albany, and MA degrees in Religion at University of Georgia and Buddhist Studies at SOAS, University of London. She is currently a PhD candidate in Religion at Temple University and her dissertation is about renunciant stories in early Christianity and Buddhism. She currently teaches Humanities and Religion at Valencia College in Orlando, FL. Her research field is Comparative Religion and Literature and her interests include Buddhism and Christianity in Antiquity, Ancient Trade Routes and Cross-Cultural Exchange, and Buddhism in America.
vkunu@temple.edu

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