

CAN THE ANALYSIS OF THE PLAY *THE STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* BY TENNESSEE WILLIAMS THROUGH THE SOCIAL MODEL OF DISABILITY, ENCOURAGE THE DEVELOPMENT OF CRITICAL THINKING?

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Abstract

Teaching and developing students' ability to think critically is highlighted as one of the tasks of modern education and a part of curricular documents in various countries. Teachers are expected to teach the students how, and not what to think, emphasizing the change of focus in modern education, whose demand becomes a critical reflection on the content of teaching, and not exclusively its adoption and reproduction.

Tennessee Williams's play *The Streetcar Named Desire* although written in 1947 is frequently staged in theatres all over the world. The plot depicts family and social relations and, among others, the destiny of Blanche, a character with anxiety disorder, an alcoholic, labelled sexually deviant, older, who instead of being supported by her family, ends up in a mental institution.

The goal of this paper is to analyse the presentation of characters in the play through the social model of disability, the central thesis of which is: disability, that is physical or mental impairment, is undoubtedly a limitation of functionality for each individual; however, disability also arises because of social processes. The way the disability is presented in the play can be a basis for teaching understanding, empathy and tolerance as well as correct decision-making as the foundation of critical thinking.

Keywords: *Tennessee Williams*¹, *drama*, *The Streetcar Named Desire*², *social model of disability*, *critical thinking*.

1. Introduction

Teaching and developing students' ability to think critically is highlighted as one of the tasks of modern education and a part of curricular documents in various countries, including Croatia. Teachers are expected to teach the students how, and not what to think, emphasizing the change of focus in modern education, whose demand becomes a critical reflection on the content of teaching, and not exclusively its adoption and reproduction. In his paper, *The Challenge of Teaching for Critical Thinking*, Portelli (1994) asks several questions considering critical thinking, including: Can critical thinking be taught? Is critical thinking generalizable or is it directly related to specific subjects? Should it be taught on its own or incorporated throughout the entire curriculum? When should it be taught? Are children capable of dealing with critical thinking situations? How can critical thinking be evaluated? Should critical thinking be based on problem-solving or on problem-seeking? Are the critical and creative opposed or two sides of the same coin? Why is critical thinking deemed important for teaching? To what extent can critical thinking help resolve ethical and political issues, which arise in teaching? Considering these and other questions, it is necessary to expose students to different contexts, which arise from their immediate and indirect environment, but also from history, art or literature. Reading literature works from different perspectives engages the participants in analysis, synthesis and evaluation that leads to the development of critical thinking (Duron, Limbach, & Waugh, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, Tennessee Williams's play *The Streetcar Named Desire* and the characters of Blanche DuBois, Stella and Stanley Kowalsky were analysed through the social model of disability. This analysis could be a basis for teaching about stigmatization and discrimination, but also about understanding, empathy and tolerance as well as correct decision-making as the foundation of critical thinking.

^{1,2}Translation from Croatian language is the work of the author.

2. Critical thinking

Critical thinking includes the component skills of analysing arguments, making inferences using inductive or deductive reasoning, judging or evaluating, and making decisions or solving problems. Background knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for enabling critical thought within a given subject. Critical thinking involves both cognitive skills and dispositions. These dispositions, which can be seen as attitudes or habits of mind, include open and fair-mindedness, inquisitiveness, flexibility, a propensity to seek reason, a desire to be well-informed, and a respect for and willingness to entertain diverse viewpoints. There are both general- and domain-specific aspects of critical thinking. Empirical research suggests that people begin developing critical thinking competencies at a very young age and, in theory, all people can be taught to think critically. Teachers are urged to provide explicit instruction in critical thinking, to teach how to transfer to new contexts, and to use cooperative or collaborative learning methods and constructivist approaches that place students at the centre of the learning process (Lai, 2011).

Critical thinking skills are related to several other important learning outcomes, such as metacognition, motivation, collaboration, and creativity. Metacognition supports critical thinking in that students who can monitor and evaluate their own thought processes are more likely to demonstrate high-quality thinking. In addition, the ability to critically evaluate one's own arguments and reasoning is necessary for self-regulated learning. Motivation supports critical thinking in that students who are motivated to learn are more likely to persist at tasks that call for critical thinking. In turn, learning activities and assessment tasks that call for critical thinking may spark students' motivation because they represent something new and are more challenging or interesting. Students possessing critical thinking dispositions, such as a willingness to consider diverse perspectives, may make better collaborators, and opportunities for collaboration may promote higher-order thinking. Finally, creativity requires the ability to critically evaluate intellectual products, and critical thinking requires the open-mindedness and flexibility that is characteristic of creative thinking (Lai, 2011).

3. Disability studies

Disability studies within the framework of the humanities is a relatively new discipline. Until the end of the eighties and the beginning of the nineties of the twentieth century, discussions about disability were mostly conducted within the fields of medicine, psychology and social work, and today the social model of disability has been adopted, where the status of persons with disabilities as a minority comes to the fore. Current research does not define disability as a disease, nor does it advocate its treatment or correction. It points out the meaning, position and role of disability that exists in a particular society, linked to stigmas about a disability, to mechanisms of social exclusion of persons with disabilities, and to the mechanisms of their representation in artistic practices, including literature (Paternai Andrić, 2019).³

3.1. Models of disability

Disability was studied, observed and shaped according to different models throughout history, but for the purpose of this paper, two models are relevant, the medical and the social model. The medical model requires that a person with a disability should adapt to society through operations, medical treatments, rehabilitation and the like, whereby individual conditions or needs are generally not taken into account. The person primarily tries to fit into the existing social norms and moulds, in the family or in an institution, where the institution is often seen as the best, if not the only possible, position for a person with a disability. (Paternai Andrić, 2019).

Martin Oliver, a disabled activist and lecturer, who coined the phrase 'social model of disability', (Oliver, 1983) stresses the need to focus on the social aspects of disability. (Retief, & Letšosa, 2018). Society "disables" individuals by excluding or discriminating and creating affective, sensory, cognitive or architectural barriers. The social model demonstrates that the problems disabled people face are the result of social oppression and exclusion, not their individual deficits. (Paternai Andrić, 2019). In the analysis, it will be shown how Blanche DuBois was treated through both models. Related to the mechanisms of disability representation in artistic practices, literature is revealed as an interesting medium for literary representation because it is a "mediated" way of experience, it represents a "possible world" and a potential mirror of reality, it constitutes a world suitable for the imaginary practice of empathy. (Paternai Andrić, 2019).

³Translation from Croatian language is the work of the author.

4. *The Streetcar Named Desire* and models of disability

In the Pulitzer-winning play *The Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams elements of social and medical models of disability can be observed. Blanche DuBois, a woman of about thirty, whose homosexual husband committed suicide and the family plantation was ruined and eventually lost because of financial problems, finds comfort and escape in alcohol and promiscuous behaviour. After the improper relationship with a seventeen-year-old student was revealed, she loses her position as a schoolteacher and comes to New Orleans to stay with her younger sister Stella and her husband Stanley Kowalski. Blanche's disability is "invisible" in a way; she is an alcoholic and suffers from some sort of psychological issues that lead to a nervous breakdown. In her struggles, she seeks help from the family: *BLANCHE: Well-anyhow-I brought nice clothes and I'll wear them. I guess you're hoping I'll say I'll put up at a hotel, but I'm not going to put up at a hotel. I want to be near you, got to be with somebody, I can't be alone! Because as you must have noticed-I'm-not very well ...* • [Her voice drops and her look is frightened.] *BLANCHE: Yes. [During the pause, she looks up 'at the sky] There's so much-so much confusion in the world ... [He coughs diffidently] Thank you for being so kind I I need kindness now.* (Williams, 1947). Her sister Stella left the family estate when she was very young and later married Stanley Kowalski, a handsome working-class man of Polish origin, but born and raised in the USA, who possesses financial and emotional control over her. He is physically abusive and compensates for it with passion and money. *STELLA [crossing to bureau]: Stanley doesn't give me a regular allowance, he likes to pay bills himself, but this morning he gave me ten dollars to smooth things over.* (Williams, 1947).

The ideas promoted by the social model were preceded by Goffman's study on stigma. (Goffman, 2009). All those subjects who possess some character trait that sets them apart from the environment and portray them as different are stigmatized: their difference comes to the fore, other characteristics of that subject are ignored due to their difference, and the individuals themselves are isolated or abandoned. As Goffman states: there is only one complete man in America who has nothing to be ashamed of - young, married, white, urban, northern, straight, Protestant, father, democratically educated, employed, fair complexion, ideal weight and height, with good sports results (Goffman, 2009), and Stanley Kowalski fits almost completely into this image. On the other hand, Blanche represents the deviation from the norm, she is an unmarried woman, unemployed, who loses her position as a teacher due to her improper behaviour and will probably never get a new teaching position. Her coming to New Orleans didn't help her change her perspectives and start over, because her attempts to begin a new life with Mitch, Stanley's friend, were ruined by Stanley, who reveals the secret about Blanche's behaviour to him so he decides not to marry her. *MITCH: I don't think I want to marry you anymore. BLANCHE: No? MITCH [dropping his hands from her waist]: You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.* (Williams, 1947). Stanley's position of power was jeopardized by Blanche's coming, she is expressing her honest opinion of him to Stella: *BLANCHE: In my opinion? You're married to a madman I STELLA: No! BLANCHE: Yes, you are, your fix is worse than mine is! Only you're not being sensible about it. I'm going to do something. Get hold of myself and make myself a new life!* On the night Stella gives birth to their child, Stanley violates Blanche and pushes her into a mental breakdown. Her future is determined through the medical model of disability; she is institutionalized, and removed from the family and society. Stella was not able to help her. By ignoring the fact that her husband molested her sister and choosing not to trust her, she tried to keep her own family from falling apart. If we consider the social model of disability, where disability is created by the environment and social relations, Stanley was the executioner of Blanche's final exclusion from society.

4.1. *The Streetcar Named Desire* and teaching critical thinking

In order to use this play or any other literary text in teaching critical thinking it is necessary for the teacher to prepare and gain insight into what he/she wants to achieve with it. The development of critical thinking is a process and teachers can choose various strategies and approaches. In their paper, *Critical Thinking Framework for any Discipline* Duron, Limbach and Waugh suggest a 5-Step model to move students toward critical thinking. (Duron, Limbach, & Waugh, 2006). For the purpose of this paper, this model will be used to provide an example of using *The Streetcar Named Desire* in teaching critical thinking. Step 1 is to determine learning objectives. One of the objectives can be to analyse the treatment of women according to the social model of disability. The teacher should provide information about the model and give students the opportunity to get to know it. Step 2 suggests teaching through questioning. Questioning is a vital part of the teaching and learning process. It allows the teacher to establish what is already known and then extend beyond that to develop new ideas and understandings. Questions can stimulate interaction between teacher and learner and challenge the learner to defend his or her position, (i.e., to think critically). The students will form their views on the treatment of women in the play, and make conclusions about the differences in the approaches toward women. Questions about prejudices and

stereotypes can be raised, because, if the students can recognize them, they can evaluate them critically. When teachers plan, they must consider the purpose of each question and then develop the appropriate level and type of question to accomplish the purpose. All students need experience with higher-level questioning once they become familiar with a concept. Thoughtful preparation on the part of the teacher is essential in providing that experience. Step 3 suggests practising before assessment. In order to make learning more active, teachers need to learn how to enhance the overall learning experience by adding some kind of experiential learning and opportunities for reflective dialogue. Open-ended questions about the existence and lack of empathy shown to Blanche could be raised. The students can engage in a reflective dialogue with themselves by writing a journal or portfolio, or with other students, which will provide the opportunity to hear different points of view and learn to respect other students' opinions, even if they do not agree with them. In step 4 the teachers should review, refine, and improve their classroom approaches. Teachers should strive to continually refine their courses to ensure that their instructional techniques are in fact helping students develop critical thinking skills. To accomplish this, teachers should monitor classroom activities very closely. Step 5 suggests providing feedback and assessment of learning. (Duron et al., 2006). According to Fink in *A Self-Directed Guide to Designing Courses for Significant Learning* (Fink, 2003) teacher feedback, like assessment, compares criteria and standards to student performance in an effort to evaluate the quality of work. However, the purpose of feedback is to enhance the quality of student learning and performance, rather than to grade the performance, and, importantly, it has the potential to help students learn how to assess their own performance in the future. Development of critical thinking, as a result, is difficult to assess, but the way students present, explain and give arguments to support their opinions could be assessed.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of the well-known literary text as the play *The Streetcar Named Desire* to encourage the development of critical thinking can be useful because using a literary text might provide the distance necessary to observe the issues from different perspectives. Literature is, even when it seeks inspiration from the real world, only an image or a mirror of it, and discussing and critically observing the problems from the text provides the students with the opportunity to analyse, use reasoning, evaluate and draw conclusions. Literary characters can encourage identification and understanding or provoke empathy. Encouraging students to analyse literary texts from different angles and observe the world around them broadens their horizons and prepares them to analyse, synthesise and evaluate information from various sources, and justify their points of view, which is the foundation of the development of critical thinking.

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