

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS TO STREETCAR PRESENTATION

What you are about to hear is the journey of a medical student, now a 1st yr psychiatric resident, who wanted to enlarge her understanding of psychiatric illness.

She chose as her focus the Tennessee Williams' iconic play "A Streetcar Named Desire" because the protagonist, Blanche Dubois, is referenced in many psychiatry articles and books as the epitome of narcissistic/histrionic personality disorder.

The question that Idris posed was: what is the difference between a play, a fiction, and a case report? Is there anything we can learn from reading or attending a play that we can't learn from a summary of symptoms?

Perhaps the key lies in what Williams' himself wrote about his intent in writing Streetcar: "To show the complexity of human experience that exists within one individual"

Blanche is indeed psychiatrically impaired – she likely suffers from a plethora of disorders, including cluster B personality disorders, anxiety, alcohol abuse, and PTSD. But what Williams helps us to see – and helped this future psychiatrist to see – is her humanity. Blanche is not simply a victim of mental illness, she is also a victim of terrible trauma and of troubling family dynamics, as well as a victim of the societal constraints and stereotypes imposed women in the 1940s South. Even more importantly, however, Blanche is more than a victim – she is also a survivor.

Learning about Blanche enlarged Idris' appreciation for the strength and resilience of people with psychiatric illness. She came to see less as the "other" and as more similar to all of us – driven by desires, longings, fears, seeking safety, wanting a better life.