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An Althusserian Study of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: An Ideological Entanglement

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ABSTRACT

In the Marxist perspective in general, and in Althusser's ideas in particular, every individual is controlled by the society's dominant ideology and its apparatuses called Ideological State Apparatuses and Repressive State Apparatuses. Individuals are not at all free agents of their own lives, but it is the government deciding on the nature of the normal and the abnormal. Individuals are unconsciously instilled with the ideas and ideologies of the dominant class of the society who defines their worldview and mannerism. Therefore, the ruling class, by a variety of ways, 'hails' its subjects and makes them behave according to its own codes. In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), this struggle and clash of ideologies are embodied in the characters of Stanley and Blanche who are regarded as a threat to the dominant ideology. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to clarify the high points of this struggle and to indicate how the ideology of southern America is hailed by Industrialized America.

Keywords: *Louis Pierre Althusser, ISAs, RSAs, South America, American Dream*

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1. Introduction

A Streetcar Named Desire has been a well-received work in its era and it is, also, one of the most well-read plays in American literature. Martin Gottfried ranks this play alongside with Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* "as American masterpieces of post-war years" (as cited in Adler, 1990, p. 10). Tennessee Williams' plays primarily deal with human desires and repressions without explicitly taking into account any social critique. In his *The Moth and The Lantern*, Adler asserts that "Tennessee Williams, the other distinguished dramatist of the post war period, is unlike Miller, not primarily a social playwright" (1990, p.2). Burt has also mentioned the same notion about Williams, claiming that "Williams rejected the role of sociologist, arguing that 'What I am writing about is human nature'" (2008, p. 149). However, Marxist criticism in general and Marxist literary criticism in particular, strives to find the hidden ideologies, mostly politically oriented ones, embedded in the text of which even the author himself is unaware. "Knowledge is a

process, therefore, in which it is possible not to see what you are looking at" (Ferretter, 2006, p. 55). According to the Marxist theory of criticism, any work of literature is basically a social superstructure representing other social institutions of the society. Literary texts are then viewed as the "products' of the economic and ideological determinants specific to that era" (Abrams, 1997, p. 149).

This idea was initially proposed by Althusser who found, in Marx's *Capital*, the features undetected by other sociologists; he later referred to this reading as 'symptomatic reading', in which one is to set aside the author when trying to search out the hidden elements. Symptomatic reading is mainly the process of discovering what is unthinkable within the text while producing meanings based on the symptoms which are not self-evidently presented inside the text. In fact, symptomatic reading aims to detect the unconscious structure of the text beyond the manifest surface resembling Freudian discovery of "latent content" beyond the



“manifest content”. We do not need to, Macherey believes, involve ourselves in “the ideological fallacies by which [the text] has so far been characterized” (as cited in Ferretter, 2006, p. 60). Having this notion in mind, this paper aims to get beyond the intention of the author which is to reveal the nature of human interactions, in order to expose the societal facets of this play through symptoms expressed within the text. As it will be discussed later, the play abounds with American Dream-related ideologies seeking to maintain the dominance of a group of people over the others. These ideologies and their relationship will be discussed through symptomatic reading in order to expose the latent content of the work.

2. Althusser's Views:

Although its economic dominance declined during The World War I, the bourgeoisie continued maintaining its dominion through its ideology, which is a set of beliefs and values forming the way a given society deems and, consequently, pictures reality serving to ensure the continuance of the dominance held by the ruling class. Thus, New-Marxist thinkers came “to the notion that the supremacy of any class in a society does not originate exclusively in its economical prominence but also owes a lot to its dominant status in the realm of ideology” (Keshavarz & Abjadian, 2011, p. 102). Althusser’s view of ideology also reflects the idea that everything in a given society is controlled and conditioned by ‘the dominant ideology’, which Althusser defines, in his book *For Marx*, as follows:

An ideology is a system (with its own logic and rigor) of representations (images, myths, ideas or concepts, depending on the case) endowed with a historical existence and a role within a given society...Ideology, as a system of representations, is distinguished from science in that in it the practico-social function is more important than the theoretical function (function as knowledge) (2005, p. 231).

There may be a strong mistrust in Althusser’s view in the concept of ideology which he contrasts with science; therefore, one may assert that ideology does not provide individuals “with real historical conditions of society” (Ferretter, 2006, p. 76). He believes that ideology prevents “capitalist crisis from becoming a transition to communism” (Wolff, 2004, p. 2). Hence, the understanding raised from ideology is nothing but a misunderstanding; the individuals within the society keep

following and misrepresenting the world via these ideologies since “there is some reward or benefit to us in doing so” (Ferretter, 2006, p. 79). Basically, the dominant ideology is not but an illusion of the reality which is to legitimate the existence of the ruling class leading to the justification of the exploitations and abuses practiced upon the lower class which results in their fixation into the position exerted upon them.

Althusser describes his theory of ideology in the form of what he calls the ‘Priests and Despots’ theory of ideology, according to which: “[Priests and Despots] ‘forged’ the Beautiful Lies so that, in the belief that they were obeying God, men would in fact obey the Priests and Despots, who are usually in alliance in their imposture...” (Althusser, 2004, p. 163).

The ruling class consolidates its hegemony using both “consent and coercion” (Keshavarz & Abjadian, 2011, p. 103). These two are what Althusser later called ISAs and RSAs which work along with each other in order to maintain and retain the dominance of upper-class; consequently, in Althusser’s view, the ideology has a materialistic existence.

The significant difference between these two forms of apparatuses is that ISAs work mainly through ideology, while RSAs act using physical force. Althusser himself explains these apparatuses in his *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*:

This is the fact that the (Repressive) State Apparatus functions massively and predominantly by repression (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology (There is no such thing as a purely repressive apparatus.). . . The Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if only ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic (There is no such thing as a purely ideological apparatus.) (1971, p.146).

In a general sense, ISAs work to “[inculcate] children and adults in specific ways of imagining” (Wolff, 2004, p. 4), to show them that they are the members of the society and must “work in that direction” (Keshavarz & Abjadian, 2011, p. 117). ISAs aim to establish subjectivity in given individuals. “All ideology ... interpolates individuals as subjects” (Ferretter, 2006, p. 75); therefore, they believe that their subjectivity is “internally self-generated” (Wolff, 2004, p. 5) but not something injected from an outside source. In his essay

“Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” Althusser considers ideology as eternal, hence, “[individuals] are always already subjects” (Rivikin, 2004, p. 699).

The widespread dominant ideology of the ruling class results in what Althusser calls ‘interpellation’ of the individuals within a society as a result of which the individuals become subjects of the ideology and accept its rules and conventions without thinking about the possibility of “imagining – indeed positively disbelieving – that there could or should be any other system of relations” (Ferretter, 2006, p. 91). Althusser puts this as follows:

Ideology ‘acts’ or ‘functions’ in such a way that it ‘recruits’ subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or ‘transforms’ the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called interpellation or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: ‘Hey, you there!’ (as cited in Rivikin, 2004, p. 699).

During the process of changing individuals into subjects, ISAs play an undeniable role in that they transmit the dos and don’ts to the subjects who passively obey; thus “it becomes the only ‘truth discourse’ and variation from it looks odd” (Keshavarz & Abjadian, 2011, p. 103). Thus, not only the ruling class injects the illusions of identity into the individuals as “subjectivity”, to use Althusser’s term, but also, it works purposefully to make the individuals internalize this “subjectivity” as a self-produced possession. This will be achieved through the application of ISAs manipulating individuals’ self-definition through an illusion of autonomy.

[3. Althusser and *A Streetcar Named Desire*](#)

American Dream, first introduced by James T. Adams in his *The Epic of America*, is defined as a set of promises characterized by equality for individuals within the land of America in a way that every individual, regardless of his/her origin, can reach whatever they are able to. Accordingly, individuals are deemed to be equal to each other and be judged solely based on their achievements and abilities. This idea was so widespread that America came to be thought of as ‘the land of prosperity’, retaining the Garden of Eden. However, at the beginning of civil war in America, Harold Clurman argues, “American Dream has become distorted to the dream of business success. Salesmanship implies a certain element of

fraud: the ability to put over or sell a commodity regardless of its intrinsic usefulness” (as cited in Moseley, 2009, p. 52). It fails to fulfill its promises because “the success of the American Dream rests on the misery of the many” (Tyson, 2006, p. 58). The failures of American Dream are also justified in the way that the blame is shifted to the subjects ignoring the flaws of the concept. In fact, the claim is that the prerequisite to “financial success is simply the product of initiative and hard work” (Tyson, 2006, p. 57).

American Dream, in Marxist perspective, is an ideology among others, reinforcing the dominance and superiority of the ruling class within society which leads the individuals towards the “false consciousness” to prove the dominant ideology as the pure truth. Accordingly, quite a few ISAs are identifiable in this ideology such as consumerism, rugged individualism and the superiority of American race serving the class interests of industrialized America which can be traced in Williams’ play *Streetcar* especially through the interactions and clashes between Stanley and Blanche.

The title of the play dramatizes the major conflict based upon which the whole drama revolves. After arriving to New Orleans, Blanche tells Eunice asking for the direction: “They told me to take a streetcar named Desire and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at--Elysian Fields!” (Williams, 1947, p. 11). The “desire” in the title drives Blanche to the “Cemeteries”, symbolically death represented as Kowalski’s house in which she is not able to free herself from the previous mistakes ending up in a mental hospital, being an emotional death.

Through the whole course of interactions between characters, one may observe the ideological struggle between the industrialized America and the previous agrarian America or American South. Blanche, being the representative of American South, sets out to be in conflict with Stanley, being the agent of industrialized America; the resulted conflict may be figured as the conflict between “desire and death, *Eros* and *Thanatos*” (Burt, 2008, p.152).

In *Streetcar*, female characters are sunk into a pure and elusive idealism. As both women are originally from Southern America, the immediate context in which they have been brought up plays an important role in this “tendency towards idealism, romanticism and hedonism”



(Fang, 2008, p. 104). Southern America, as a patriarchal society, has internalized the inferiority of women and, thus, the superiority of men which has led to female figures of the society as being fragile and dependent regarded as “Others” surrounding the centeredness of men. “Blanche and Stella are the last remnants of the Southern idealism” (Abjadian, 2010, p. 640¹). Stella, as a wholly dependent figure in this play, is the one constantly hailed by the dominant ISAs, mostly by her husband, thus she cannot initiate any important and dramatic change due to her pure allegiance to Stanley. Even in the last scene, she does not believe the claims of Blanche regarding the rape; Stella misinterprets actual incidents as a result of being hailed by the dominant ideology inculcated everywhere throughout the play by Stanley: “Stanley: ... Remember what Huey Long said-“Every Man is a King I” And I am the king around here, so don't forget it” (Williams, 1947, p. 124). In fact, the dominant ideology of Stanley makes the subjects detach from the realities, leading them to interpret the world in line with his own interests.

Stella reinforces Stanley’s ISAs and their dominance by acknowledging that Stanley possesses a great quality in him which differentiates him from others and paves the way for his prosperity. Stella’s immersion in American Dream makes her ignorant to the reality and as Tyson puts it “in large part, the middle class is blinded by their belief in the American dream” (2006, p. 57):

Stella: Stanley's the only one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere.

Blanche: What makes you think Stanley will?

Stella: Look at him” (Williams, 1947, p. 54).

This is highly analogous to what Willie Lowman claims; he believes that an inherent genuineness, which is called the quality of being, guarantees, however in vain, the success of his children in *Death of a Salesman*. However, one can see the failure of such worldview.

Stella is so much overwhelmed and manipulated by the ISAs that she considers the misery around her as something normal, so she has internalized the dominant ideology. Stella “matches the sociological profile of the battered woman; for she is essentially a submissive, self-deprecating wife who tolerates and excuses her husband’s behavior” (Koprince, 2009, p. 49). When there is a clash between Stanley and Blanche, she justifies Stanley’s violent behavior as something expected: “I’m awful

sorry it had to happen, but it wasn't anything as serious as you seem to take it. In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen” (Williams, 1947, p. 71). Even when her sister wants to enlighten her about the miserable situation in which she is living, she responds: “I’m not in anything I want to get out of” (Williams, 1947, p. 72). Thus, Stanley manipulates Stella by the variety of the ways, the most of important of which is convincing Stella that the presence of Blanche is the main nuisance in their life:

Stanley: When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them colored lights going! And wasn't we happy together, wasn't it all okay till she showed here? (Williams, 1947, p. 129).

While Stella is considered as a ‘good subject’ tolerating the ideologies the dominant ISAs imposed on her by the industrialized America which is represented by her husband, Blanche resists these ISAs and tries to reconstruct them with her own ‘petit-bourgeois ideology’. The reason could be sought in Woolf’s appreciation of economic independence which she believes to be the starting point for the women in order to gain intellectual freedom defined as “the power to think for oneself” (Woolf, 2001, p. 125). In her *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf elaborates the idea that a woman must have money and a room of her own. She argues that the economic independence is the ground to nourish other types of freedom. Woolf announces Aphra Behn as the woman possessing freedom of the mind. Aphra Behn, like Blanche, lost her husband and, consequently was led towards economic independence which brought her the gift of intellectual freedom. In fact, “the economic dependence on men deprives women of the right to dominate their own fate and the strength to struggle against men so that they are reduced into the Other affiliated by men” (Fang, 2008, p. 104). Therefore, Stella is a dependent figure with no economical possession; she is easily inclined towards Stanley and she is the “good subject” while Blanche is a “bad subject” of the society. Yee believes that the submission of a wife results from her financial dependence (2011, p.16) which is truly the source of Stella’s dependence and obedience.

The lack of economic independence leads to women’s attachment to the

dominant ideology. In this case, losing her properties, Blanche is forced into a journey for seeking financial support which provides the situation for Stanley, the mouthpiece of the dominant ideology, to gain the power of control over her. Blanche is a victim of conventionalities or the dominant ISAs of the American South; her goal is a change from a southern belle to a southern lady. Having lost all her property in Belle Reve, she recurses to Stanley and “by coming to New Orleans and placing herself at the mercy of her relatives, admitting that she has lost Belle Reve, Blanche becomes economically vulnerable to Stanley’s plans to extricate her from the apartment” (O’Connor, 2005, p. 107). This is the time when, because of her economic dependency, Blanche succumbs to the ideology of industrialized America represented by Stanley. Blanche’s failure is very telling of the failure of American Dream which fails to fulfill the wishes of the individuals.

Althusser believes that though the society is controlled and ruled by the bourgeois ideologies or ISAs, there exist some other discourses alongside with it which he called ‘petit-bourgeois ideology’ or ‘proletariat ideology’ and these two sorts of ideologies are not equal. Althusser “emphasizes that the ideologies of the subordinate classes are correspondingly subordinate discourses” (as cited in Ferretter, 2006, p. 80). One may recognize that throughout the course of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche’s petit-bourgeois ideology is suppressed and subordinated by that of Stanley.

“Stanley is the agent of emotionless present-day society” (Abjadian, 2010, p. 641). He trespasses the rights and the freedom of others around him and makes everybody a ‘subject’ to his ISAs standing in contrast to what Blanche, as the representation of Southern America would expect. “Southern culture of delicacy and romance doesn’t fit in with Stanley who is an animalized person with peevish disposition” (Fang, 2008, p. 104). Stanley’s ruthless use of ISAs and RSAs portrays him as “a batterer—a man whose aggressive masculinity and desire for control are perfectly consistent with the profile of an abuser” (Koprince, 2009, p. 49). All his life is concerned with sex and physical pleasures while he enjoys harassing Stella and Blanche, since he can dictate his dominance on them. “He is a sexual predator and a happy patriarch of his own small kingdom” (Bloom, 2005, p.21) to

whom women are the objects of sexual pleasures; eventually, one of these female figures turns out to be a serious threat to Stanley’s system of ideology.

Stanley tries to maintain his dominance over his territory, so that it cannot be invaded by intruders such as Blanche. He tries to convince everyone who is in touch with Blanche that she has had a life of promiscuity and debauchery. “He ruthlessly engages in exposing Blanche as a fraud, a prostitute, and an alcoholic, mercilessly destroys veils of ‘magic’ Blanche wrapped herself in, makes her look old and cheap in the light of the bare electric bulb, and, by imposing his reality in the form of the rape on her, eventually wins” (Oklopčić, 2008, p. 12). Stanley assures Stella that after Blanche’s departure their life goes back to a normal situation. Nevertheless, the audience knows that such a promise can never be accomplished and they “[are] aware of the loss and human waste represented by Blanche’s journey” (Burt, 2008, p. 154).

Stanley: Stella, it's gonna be all right after she goes and after you've had the baby. It's gonna be all right again between you and me the way that it was. You remember that way that it was? Them nights we had together? God, honey, it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way that we used to and get the colored lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us! (Williams, 1947, p. 125).

The poker night scene represents a group of male fellows who run their community by “total exclusion of women” (Adler, 1990, p. 20). This ISA which is an indispensable part of American Dream is mostly on the part of men as Rugged Individualism. This ISA is against the welfare of the society since “each individual focus on his own affairs heedless of the others” (Tyson, 2006, p. 60).

Blanche uses animal similes to describe Stanley and his fellows, this way she opposes Stanley: “I think of myself as a very, very rich woman! But I have been foolish—casting my pearls before swine” (Williams, 1947, p. 146). This use of animal simile emanates from the eternal enmity between Blanche as the representative of southern ideology and Stanley as the mouthpiece of industrialized America; between tradition and modernity.

Blanche: He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something-sub-human-something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something-ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in-anthropological studies! Thousands and



thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is-Stanley Kowalski-survivor of the Stone Age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you-you here-waiting for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking His poker night!-you call it-this party of apes! Somebody growls-some creature snatches at something-the fight is on! God! Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella-my sister-there has been some progress since then! Such things as art-as poetry and music-such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching.... Don't-don't hang back with the brutes! (Williams, 1947, p. 80-1).

However, Blanche herself is overwhelmed by the ideology and ISAs which dictate women to marry a respectable gentleman. "She thus, in the tradition of the antebellum Southern belle, tries to 'save' herself and her sister Stella from inappropriate way of life at Stanley's home by looking for protection in another man" (Oklopčić, 2008, p. 8). Even though at the beginning, Blanche started her struggles in order to gain independency and individuality, after her financial status gets shackled, she desperately searches to restore her dependency on men of which she is unable to escape as a victim of the patriarchal society:

[She] shows a lot of emotional dependence on patriarchal system. Even in the last scene she seeks refuge to the doctor though she knows it is totally in vain. "critical struggle between [two different] ways of life" (Jackson 59) – as the struggle between Blanche's traditional, civilized, artistic, and spiritual self and Stanley's modern, primitive, physical, and animalistic other (Oklopčić, 2008, p. 9).

As an absolutely subordinated subject of the ideologies, Blanche cannot find any remedy or solution to free herself from this situation, hence she has to "adopt the role of the belle in an effort to survive within a social milieu in which they are disempowered" (Hovis, 2007, p. 171). As an obedient of Southern ideology, Blanche has the tendencies "to keep beautiful appearance, behave graciously and flirt with men in order to please them" (Fang, 2008, p. 104). She acts in a way that a woman is accepted within a given society and abides by the existing ISAs; one of the ways is to dress properly in formal

occasions. She is constantly worried about how she appears to others: "I'm not properly dressed" (Williams, 1947, p. 68). Southern ladies, including Blanche, "are women who are acutely aware of being watched and heard because they have been reared in a culture with a strict decorum for the accepted behavior of its women" (Hovis, 2007, p. 171).

"Even though she tries to behave like a decent gentlewoman, she cannot conceal her strong sexual desire, because "desire" is deep-rooted as a part of her nature" (Fang, 2008, p. 105). Due to her loss of fortune, Blanche resorts to having a sexual affair with a seventeen-year-old schoolboy which is completely justifiable in a sense that she strives to restore the idealized world in which she previously lived in. "Her sexual experience is the consequence of being victimized by an indifferent society that does not cooperate with her to heal her wounds" (Abjadian, 2010, p. 643). In fact, the desire is the leading motive forcing her into the journey she took in the first place and also, it is the ultimate becalming source she finds to relieve her soul.

In this clash of ideologies, Blanche is the one who is highly vulnerable and resorts to the world of illusions. She fabricates a story about Mitch in order to alleviate her pain. "But then he came back. He returned with a box of roses to beg my forgiveness ... Our ways of life are too different. Our attitudes and our backgrounds are incompatible. We have to be realistic about such things. So farewell, my friend" (Williams, 1947, p. 146). This act of departure from realities is the result of her entanglement with the southern ISAs since it celebrates the "admiration and idealization of chivalry, i.e. the concept of men courting and worshipping women, is one of the results of her upbringing" (Fang, 2008, p. 103).

In order to escape from the ISAs forced on her by Stanley, Blanche seeks shelter in her illusions leading to her mental breakdown. As Corrigan maintains, "the conflict between Blanche and Stanley is an externalization of the conflict that goes on within Blanche between illusion and reality" (Corrigan, 2005, p. 87). Blanche, in the end, cannot bear the harshness of the reality.

Blanche's past, as well as her present, is a mixture of sin and romanticism, reality and illusion, personal excessiveness and social discipline. These are all elements that would justify a rendering of Blanche as hypersensitive, tragic woman who is,

because of her uniqueness, forced to create her own world on principles of exclusion, isolation, and imagination (Oklopcic, 2008, p. 10).

This contradiction between the world of illusion made by her and the realities being revealed to her is evident in the scene in which she confronts Mitch near the end of the play: "I don't want realism. I want magic! [Mitch laughs] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it-Don't turn the light on!" (Williams, 1947, p. 135). This explicates that, Blanche's ISAs have been subordinated to those of Stanley's or American Dream, and the acceptance of this subordination was too heavy for her; this is the defeat of American South. In fact, "it is evident from what Williams depicts about women that once they yield themselves to patriarchy, instead of struggling indomitably for their freedom, their miserable situation will not be changed" (Fang, 2008, p.108).

4. Conclusion

Althusser believes that all the individuals are chained and entangled within a very sophisticated network of ideas. They are either mentally or physically controlled by the systems of ISAs and RSAs, respectively, hence they behave and take action based on those systems. Therefore, the individuals deprived of their liberty and functionality become subjects to the dominant ideology. *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains the ideologies of American Dream which manipulates the individuals and serves the ideology of Industrialized America. Stanley, the mouthpiece of these ideologies, subordinates all the characters to his own ideology. Being a serious threat to Stanley's ideologies, Blanche tries to restore her lost agrarian ideologies, though she is entangled in the network of Industrialized America and has lost all her hopes. Eventually, as it was clarified, she and her beliefs are both abused and subordinated by Stanley in a way that she is doomed to total mental collapse. However, Stella appears as a good subject fully obedient and, as she is described by Koprince, "a submissive, self-deprecating wife who tolerates and excuses her husband's behavior" (Koprince, 2009, p. 49). Stella has been totally defeated by the dominant ideologies.

End Notes: ¹ The translation of Abjadian, A. (2010). *A Literary History of England, Volume X* is done by the authors.

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