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A Streetcar Named Desire:

Two Southern Belles, Blanche and Stella

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Tennessee Williams, one of the greatest American playwrights in the 20th century, spent his early childhood in Mississippi and moved to St. Louis at the age of eight. Regarding this experience, he writes that “Neither my sister nor I could adjust to life in a Midwestern city.”¹⁾ Thomas E. Porter comments, “The ideals and attitudes that Williams absorbed in his Southern childhood establish the perspective from which he wrote his plays.”²⁾ It is not too much to say that *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is his attempt to dramatize his strong attachment to the South.

The author himself explains as follows:

I write out of love for the South... [It] once had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember — a culture that had grace, elegance, and inbred culture, not a society based on money. I write out of regret for that... I write about the South because I think the war between romanticism and the hostility to it is very sharp there.³⁾

The tone of the play is set by the playwright’ elegiac yearning for the past. However, nostalgia discloses his divided psyche. By dramatizing the fall of the sensitive but degenerate heroine, Blanche Dubois, the author creates a tragedy of a Southern Belle preoccupied with the obsolete idea of the mythical South. Williams has Stanley Kowalski, her brutish brother-in-law, expose her artificialities, make-believes, and lies hidden under the mask of the genteel tradition, which often constitutes the Southern virtues. Moreover, Blanche herself has ambivalent feelings toward her ancestral plantation. She loves the gracious living, past glories that the ante-bellum ideal represents, but almost subconsciously she denies it. Although his sympathy is always with Blanche, as a serious writer he reveals the futility of the myth rather than fully indulge in it.

Such a paradoxical portrayal makes Blanche Dubois an elusive character, who attracts and confuses readers. A very unsympathetic summary could be: she is a proud and unhinged teacher turned prostitute. Sympathizers may view her as a delicate and distraught beauty who is cruelly destroyed by Stanley. Blanche arouses compassion and revulsion simultaneously in the readers’ mind, making the play all the more absorbing.

Furthermore, the appeal of the play lies not only in Blanche but also in Stella, Blanche’s sister. In his *Memoirs*, Williams reveals an interesting episode about Thornton Wilder, a highly acclaimed dramatist of his time, who came to see the play:

After the New Haven opening night we were invited to the quarters of papal audience. We all sat about this academic gentleman [Thornton Wilder] while he put the play down as if delivering a papal bull. He said that it was based upon a fatally mistaken premise. No female who had ever been a lady (he was referring to Stella) could possibly marry a vulgarian such as Stanley.⁴⁾

Although Wilder criticized the characterization of Stella as being unrealistic as a former belle, this is exactly what Williams meant to present. Williams portrays Stella as the opposite of Blanche. She appears to be free from any pretentious behaviors that Blanche likes to demonstrate. She is satisfied with the present

life, apparently not missing the past glory and heritage. In a sense, she has distanced herself from the ante-bellum past. However, as we see later, she becomes another victim of the tragedy. Stella is never a foil to Blanche though she is often regarded as one. In this paper, I would like to compare two Southern Belles and focus on how Williams dramatizes his Southern experience by portraying these two women.

The drama is set in Deep South, New Orleans. So fascinated by the city, Williams often recognizes it as his home; more than half of his works were written there. It continued providing him with artistic inspiration, stimulating his creativity with its free atmosphere. In 1946, from the window of his apartment on St. Peter Street, he saw daily “the rattle trap old streetcar named Desire” running up and down the street.⁵⁾ That experience became the basis of the play.

New Orleans, which the playwright adores, is portrayed in the play as a cosmopolitan town with “a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races” (469).⁶⁾ A Mexican woman is often out on the street, selling “flores para los muertos” (546). When the play opens, you can see a white woman (Eunice, the landlady of the flat) and a black woman out on the street, taking the air, engaged in an endless chat. In addition, with all its “raffish charm” (469), the district where the Kowalskis live is a rather poor area. In Scene 1, when Blanche first appears on stage, she looks totally incongruous in Elysian Fields. Quite symbolically, she comes to the place, feeling lost. With her unforgettable first line: “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” (471), she asks the direction from Eunice. When she is assured that it is the right address, she becomes upset in disbelief. The area’s decaying atmosphere is far beyond her expectation.

Such a feeling of loss or incongruity is emphasized by her appearance as well. “... a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat” (471) might be suitable for a tea party but it is certainly out of place. The author emphasizes that her manner is that of a refined background. According to the author’s stage direction, her clothes and manner suggest she is like a “white moth” whose “delicate beauty must avoid strong light” (471). It is a perfect symbol for her, as she hates to be seen in the sunlight. We will learn later she prefers to cover the naked bulb with a Chinese lantern or refuses to meet Mitch, her admirer, during the day. Her too much concern for youth makes her avoid direct light. Yet, it is clear such an attitude looks out of place in the relaxed and carefree spirit of the Elysian Fields, which ironically means “paradise” in Greek. Such depictions let us predict that she would be an unwelcome guest here. In fact, from the beginning till the end, she is a displaced person, looking for security and comfort.

In this unusual paradise, Blanche encounters Stanley, her archenemy. In a series of emotionally-charged scenes, Williams portrays how their mutual antipathy gradually turns into hatred. Some critics who analyze the play in view of a social and cultural framework identify Stanley with a rising postwar urban-industrial culture, while Blanche epitomizes the dying southern agrarian culture: “His violent abuse of Blanche is a destruction of a class as well.”⁷⁾ They live in entirely different worlds with different social standards and values, hardly tolerating each other.

Stanley is a 28 year-old former Master Sergeant in the Engineers’ Corps. We are not told what exactly he does for living except for Stella’s explanation: “he’s on the road a good deal” (478) for a plant. This characterization reminds us of the author’s father, Cornelius Coffin Williams, who worked as a traveling salesman for various companies. According to Elia Kazan, who directed both the theater and the film versions of the play, “His father was of coarser stuff, a drummer and, (...) constantly away from home and like Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) loved ‘Long Distance’ and finally disappeared for good.”⁸⁾ Being a womanizer, he had a constant fight with his wife, Edwina who, by contrast, was often termed as “puritanical.” A critic views Edwina as an embodiment of the genteel tradition of the South: “a tradition

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compounded of grace, sensitivity, love of the beautiful and above all else, decorum.”⁹⁾ Some of Edwina’s character traits are reflected in Blanche.

On the other hand, Stanley is symbolic of machismo just like Cornelius (he called effeminate Tennessee “Miss Nancy”). He says he cannot stand any pretenses and polite manners, declaring “be comfortable is my motto” (482). In the stage direction, Williams illustrates Stanley as “a richly feathered male bird among hens” (481) who has found pleasure with women the center of his life. Animal images repeatedly appear as his symbols: “Male bird” (481), “There’s something downright — bestial — about him!” (510), “something — ape-like about him” (510), and “casting my pearls before swine!” (551). While Blanche uses such harsh words to show her disgust, the words suggest his impulsive ebullient vitality and energy; he is as free as a wild animal which refuses any control from outside.

As a virile and coarse young man, when he meets Blanche for the first time, what he does is to take off his shirt soaked in sweat. Removing his shirt in front of Blanche is an act of showing off his masculinity and the way to impress her who should dominate. Probably predicting the impending clash, he shows who is to prevail by forcing his rules on her. Obviously, Blanche is an unexpected guest, as Stella was hesitant to tell him about her visit. Stanley must be intimidated by her presence from the start. Considering the differences of their upbringing, he tells Blanche, “I’m afraid I’ll strike you as being the unrefined type” (482). The words show that he has an inferiority complex and instinctive antipathy toward the standoffish sister-in-law, whose show of aristocratic elitism unnerves him.

What characterizes him best is his straightforward simplicity. He claims that he hates to conceal his feelings. Therefore, his manner of communication with others is always asking them to “lay... [her] cards on the table” (488). Such preference of realism is in clear contrast to Blanche, who loves to treat a serious confrontation “as a joke” and loves to “flirt” (491). As a result of the cruel disclosure of her past by Stanley, she is compelled to confess to Mitch, “I’ll tell you what I want. Magic!... I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth” (545). Due to such fundamentally different approaches to life, their skirmishes eventually culminate in a serious show-down.

The first clash takes place in Scene 2, when Stanley is told by Stella that they have lost their ancestral plantation, Belle Reve. Outraged and suspecting that Blanche has swindled Stella, he begins to rummage through Blanche’s trunk for legal papers without her consent. When Blanche gets out of the bathroom, she finds her trunk virtually “exploded.” In spite of the shock she may have felt, she is determined not to give in to it. She tries to get hold of herself by pretending to take it as a joke, treating him as a “little boy” and even flirting with him. She resorts to coquetry, which in the South should not be regarded as indelicacy. When in great agitation Stanley cites “the Napoleonic code” to demand his share of Belle Reve, Blanche responds mockingly, “My, but you have an impressive judicial air!” (489) and sprays him with her atomizer. Belittling him with a touch of coquetry is a basic stance she takes to approach her adversary, which is by no means effective.

Moreover, she often puts him in a double-bind situation, which was first defined by Gregory Bateson, an anthropologist. Usually it involves two people; one is termed as a “victim,” while the other is often in a “higher position.”¹⁰⁾ As Stanley is secretly threatened by the class difference, he views Blanche as being in a “higher position.” Usually, repeated contradictory messages the victim receives prevent him from acting freely; namely they bind him. For example, as the compliments she gives are backed with contempt, they hurt him and exacerbate the quarrel. In Scene 2 she says, “You’re simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think” (488). She sends conflicting messages, therefore Stanley can hardly trust her words and total miscommunication starts. Also in Scene 5 when they talk about the

astrological signs they were born under, she puts him on edge by saying: “I bet you were born under Aries. Aries people are forceful and dynamic. They dote on noise!... You must have had lots of banging around in the army and now you’re out, you make up for it by treating inanimate objects with such a fury” (513). Since she praises in a tone backed with contempt, Stanley tries to break away from the double bind imposed on by the sister-in-law who, he believes, tries to control him.

When Elia Kazan directed the stage version, he was concerned how to maintain the balance of power between the two characters. Along with his sensuality and physical appeal, Marlon Brando, who makes every word sound like the “expressions of an intense inner experience,”¹¹⁾ totally overwhelmed Jessica Tandy’s daintiness with his powerful performance. It must be really difficult for an actress to play this role, as she must convey Blanche’s moth-like delicate sensitivity as well as her tiger-like strength. The author explains that Blanche “was not adaptable to the circumstances that the world had imposed on her... She fights to the end. She’s a tiger. Extreme tigers are destroyed, not defeated.”¹²⁾ She appears to be a “moth,” but she is extremely stubborn. She is so desperate that she becomes even domineering in order to protect her own inner world; otherwise, she cannot confront the harsh physical reality. Stanley and Blanche are inevitably squared off in a struggle over who is to dominate.

The second clash comes in Scene3, which is independently named “Poker Night.” In the scene, the relationship between Blanche and Stanley grows even more strained. The scene also highlights how Stanley is susceptible to emotional turmoil: outburst of anger, violent action, sudden remorse and a childlike cry for forgiveness. When Blanche and Stella return home from a night out, Stanley, together with three others, is still engaged in a poker game. He has already been irritated over a losing streak. Upon returning home, Blanche occupies the bath and begins to chat with Stella in a cheerful mood. Stanley shouts at them, demanding them to “cut out the conversation” (496). Since Kowalskis’ flat has only two rooms with only portieres in between, it is hard to preserve privacy. As he has already been annoyed by Blanche’s show of contempt, it is natural that he begins to see her as an intruder into his domestic territory and escalate the hostilities. Ignoring him, she turns up the radio, begins to have a talk with Mitch, and even dances with him. When Stanley irritably crosses the room to turn it off, Blanche returns “his looks without flinching” (497). Such a show of defiance outrages him so much that he throws the radio out of the window. This, in turn, sparks his fight with Stella. Here, Stella takes sides with Blanche. Stanley’s irritation also stems from his underlying fear that he may lose Stella’s allegiance. Therefore, he mercilessly begins to investigate his in-law’s scandalous past to get rid of her.

In contrast to a strong presence of Blanche, Stella appears to be a mediocre character. Stella tells Blanche, “I never had anything like your energy,” while Blanche responds, “I never had your beautiful self-control” (476). She always serves Blanche, quietly running errands for her, ready to take care of all the expenses necessary for Blanche’s prolonged stay. Deep down she has sympathy for her sister, who is lonely and delicate and, who she believes has not recovered from the tragic loss of her husband, Allan. He shot himself to death, after Blanche hysterically accused him of his indecent conduct with another man.

Blanche and Stella share little in common except that they are of a Southern aristocratic background. With all her upbringing, Stella is portrayed as a calm down-to-earth type of person who can often make a level-headed judgment. She is in control of herself and fully content with her life. She has come to terms with “reality,” while Blanche is living in her illusory world. She is twenty-five years old now and according to Blanche she left the plantation ten years ago in “the summer Dad died” (476). Obviously she left home when she was really young. Blanche complains that Stella came back only at the time of funerals, therefore it is clear they have not kept in close touch with each other except the occasional exchanges of letters. Williams does not reveal any background information about her: what made Stella leave home to launch

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her new life at such an early age, or how she met Stanley. Remaining elegant, Stella has now adapted herself to the entirely new environment and has been enjoying it.

Stella even tells Blanche, “I like to wait on you, Blanche. It makes it seem more like home” (516). She hardly contradicts her sister, pretending to believe Blanche’s pretext to stay at her place. Though bewildered and weary, she refrains from showing anger over Blanche’s blunt remark about her shabby apartment: In Scene 1, Blanche mercilessly describes French Quarter as “the ghoulish-woodland of Weir” (472), yet Stella just responds matter-of-factly, “No, honey, those are the L & N tracks” (472). She knows too well that arguing with Blanche just excites her. Williams lets Stella analyze Blanche’s personality several times. In Scene 2, after disclosing the loss of Belle Reve to Stanley for the first time, Stella tries to calm Stanley who is already agitated, and pleadingly asks him to “admire her dress and tell her she’s looking wonderful, “ as it is “her little weakness” (484). In Scene 5, after Blanche’s sentimental confession of her past misdemeanor, she flatly responds: “I don’t listen to you when you are being morbid” (516). While Blanche seems to have little interest in Stella, Stella understands Blanche’s personality very well.

In spite of her seemingly quiet presence, Stella is never an obedient little wife who is always willing to acquiesce in others’ demands. Loving her husband and sympathizing with her sister, she tries to work as a mediator between Blanche and Stanley. From time to time, she defends her husband against Blanche’s verbal attacks and also fights back against Stanley for her sister’s sake. Like Blanche, Stella has some fiery nature. For example, in Scene 2 when Stanley rummages through Blanche’s possessions and mistakes her cheap jewelry for diamonds, Stella argues “You have no idea how stupid and horrid you’re being” (486), or in Scene 3 when Stanley throws the radio out of the window in outrage, she bravely shouts at him: “Drunk — drunk — animal thing, you!” (500). In this scene, her yells provoke Stanley to beat her. However, as we see later, her fidelity to her husband does not change in Scene 4. She is easily coaxed into forgiving Stanley when he passionately pleads. After the violent fights come sensual reconciliations. That has been the pattern of their marital relationship before Blanche shows up. Also at the end of Scene 4, upon returning from work, Stanley eavesdrops on Blanche and Stella’s conversation. Despite Blanche’s derogatory remarks on him, Stella embraces him “fiercely” (511) to show she is not affected by Blanche’s insults.

Stella knows what she really wants from her life. She says she admires Stanley for his “drive” (496). Despite her honest confession that she has had to “adjust” herself to what Blanche calls “his civilian background” (478), she happily recalls their wedding night when Stanley smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of her slipper, which Blanche abhors. She admits to even having been “thrilled” (305) by it. In short, she is so desperately in love with him that she confesses, “When he is away for a week I nearly go wild!” (478).

Stella admits her attraction to him is mainly physical. In Scene 4, after Blanche condemns her for returning to the brutish husband, Stella in a straightforward manner concludes that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark — that sort of make everything else seem — unimportant” (509). In response to Blanche’s high-flown speech that it is just a base despicable “desire,” which happens to be the name of the streetcar as well, Stella, as if to challenge her sister, further insinuates, “Haven’t you ever ridden on that streetcar?” (509). Although apparently upset by the connotation, Blanche keeps a straight face and avoids talking straight about her concealed past linked to “desire.”

As we have seen, Stella is true to her “desire” and loves to face up to the facts. On the other hand, Blanche prefers illusions. She believes that to remain seductive a woman has to “put on soft colors, the

colors of butterfly wings, and glow — make a little — temporary magic...” (515). With regard to her preoccupation with illusion or appearance, Laurilyn J. Harris analyzes that she is trapped in a “beauty myth”:

Blanche is caught up in what Naomi Wolf labels “the beauty myth,” which has as its basic tenet the assumption that female self-worth is determined by physical attractiveness, and that “a high rating as an art object is the most valuable tribute a woman can exact from her lover.” A woman who accepts this premise remains forever vulnerable to outside opinion, and her satisfaction and self-esteem rise and fall according to the amount of male homage her beauty elicits.¹³⁾

She highly values appearance, because that is the trick she can use to depend on men. Her lavish wardrobe, which in reality is made up of cheap fur for summer use and glass jewelry, is indispensable for her to play the role of a plantation belle.¹⁴⁾ While Blanche is susceptible to “outside opinion” to maintain her own self-esteem, Stella is not affected by it at all. Stella looks back on her past and says, “the best I could do was make my own living” (478), on the other hand Blanche has been looking for “one night’s shelter” after another for “protection” (515). Stella is far more independent than Blanche is. Felicia Haridon Londré quotes Kazan, who argues that “to find protection, which in the tradition of the old South, must be through another person.”¹⁵⁾ As Kazan suggests, such an attitude could generate from a typical Southern Belle psyche. For example, in Scene 4 soon after Blanche calls Stanley a madman and condescendingly orders Stella to leave him, she soon comes up with the idea of seeking help from Shep Huntleigh, her former beau. Londré says: “There is a subtle irony in her reflexive reversion to the Southern Belle’s habits of thought — that is, emotional dependence on a patriarchal system of male protection for the helpless female” (56).¹⁶⁾

Her too much dependence on others may prove her loss of a sane mind, as well. William Styron, in his compelling account of the agony of mental illness remarks that dependence on others is a natural outcome of loss:

At a later date, I would gradually be persuaded that devastating loss in childhood figured as a probable genesis of my own disorder; meanwhile, as I monitored my retrograde condition, I felt loss at every hand. The loss of self-esteem is a celebrated symptom, and my own sense of self had all but disappeared, along with self-reliance. This loss can quickly degenerate into dependence, and from dependence into infantile dread. One dreads the loss of all things, all people close and dear. There is an acute fear of abandonment.¹⁷⁾

At the onset of Scene 1, just a reference to her lost husband by Stanley starts “the polka” in her mind, which is a tune played at the time of his death. From time to time, the auditory hallucination — the polka and the gunshot — strikes her. It suggests she has been devastated by her husband’s death, oscillating between sanity and madness from the very start. It is inevitable that she seeks dependence on others.

Unlike Stella, Blanche is more complicated in her idea of desire. Her desire is carefully concealed in an old-fashioned morality. Blanche talks about her “desire” to Mitch openly for the first time in Scene 9, after her past as a prostitute was revealed. “Death — I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are. [...] The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder?” (547). She, then, goes on to confess her experiences with young soldiers at the nearby camp. Here, clearly desire is placed in opposition to death. After the successive experiences of loss, she desperately craves for “kindness” of others, but it is only gained in an extreme manner: she ends up seeking “intimacies with strangers to fill her [my] empty heart with” (546). As her impressive last line shows, she has “always depended on kindness of strangers” (563). Ironically, unlike Stella, her desire leads her to corruption and insanity.

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Another interpretation of “desire” can be a strong drive to live, reminding us of “Eros,” the opposite of “Thanatos” (death drive). Blanche has already lost Belle Reve and her youth. Her life has been deprived of energetic life force. Besides her disillusioned marriage which was ceased suddenly by her husband’s suicide, Blanche has been forced to witness a succession of deaths in her family. The author fills Blanche with the ominous “death” symbols, while Stella illuminates with “life” itself. She is pregnant, and quite symbolically in Scene 11, in contrast to Blanche who is virtually terminated in insanity, she is now a mother of a baby girl. It is not too much to say that Blanche is secretly envious of Stella, as she has what Blanche really wants, ebullient life. Her bitter attack on Stanley partly reflects her distorted jealousy and her secret attraction to him. Stanley with full of life force, even if it is “like an animal” (510), has what she has been missing. Elia Kazan even came to a conclusion that “Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her.”¹⁸⁾

Blanche’s envy of Stella derives partly from the fact she was able to leave the crumbling death-filled antebellum plantation, the iconic mansion of the Old South. Stella has distanced herself from such a mythical image of the mansion as “a great big place with white columns” (472). Referring to Thomas Porter, Prenshaw writes that in Blanche’s characterization “an admiration of the tradition perfectly balanced by a rejection of it.”¹⁹⁾ In Scene 1, soon after a seemingly emotional reunion with Stella, Blanche begins to launch a barrage of reproaches against Stella as to the loss of their ancestral home. She accuses bewildered Stella of leaving her behind and abandoning the place. She claims in a hysterical manner, “all the burden descended on my [her] shoulders” (478) to hold it together. She “stayed and fought for it [Belle Reve], bled for it, almost died for it” (479), while Stella was “in bed with your [her] — Polack!” (480). This sudden irrational outburst of emotions may reflect her secret hatred of the place.

While Blanche has complex feelings toward Belle Reve, Stella is neither boastful of her background nor showing it off. The loss of Belle Reve is indeed a shocking event, yet she tells Stanley, who excitedly demands detailed explanation from Blanche and the disclosure of legal papers, “There weren’t any papers, she didn’t show any papers, I don’t care about papers” (484). Belle Reve has already become something in the past. On the other hand, Blanche identifies herself with Belle Reve. Belle Reve appears to arouse love and hatred in Blanche. She loves daintiness, sophistication, or Southern gentility which her ancestry plantation might conjure up. This is the source of her pride. She refers to Belle Reve to remind Stella of the differences between Stanley and themselves: “I take it for granted that you still have sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with” (509). However, in reality, what she experienced there was a succession of deaths in her family: “The long parade to the graveyard! Father, Mother! Margaret, the dreadful way” (479). She had to live with the dying relatives, whose funerals were expensive. She could have left it just as Stella did. Probably sense of responsibility as well as that of vanity kept her there. It is quite an ironic turn of event that they lost Belle Reve in exchange for the ancestors’ “desire”: “piece by piece, our improvident grandfathers and fathers and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications — to put it plainly!” (490) In the end, everything but “the house and some acres of ground including the graveyard, to which now all but Stella and I [Blanche] have retreated” (491) was lost. Here again, desire is closely linked to death.

When Williams refers to home and family in his other plays, there are often opposing feelings of love and hatred. For example, in *The Glass Menagerie* Tom, self-proclaimed poet narrator, is eager to escape home, just as his father did, yet he is trapped there. Although he hates his overprotecting mother, he finds it hard to abandon Laura, extremely shy and fragile sister, who is frightened of the real world and is unlikely to function there. At the end of the play, Tom, now away from home, remorsefully delivers soliloquy, calling out Laura’s name, “Oh, Laura, Laura, I tried to leave you behind me, but I am more faithful than I intended

to be!”²⁰⁾ Home haunted the author’s imagination, becoming the resource of his creativity, evoking mixed feelings: affection, pangs of nostalgia and hatred. Those feelings are well illustrated in Blanche’s reaction to the loss of her “home,” Belle Reve.

For Blanche, the prospect of marrying Mitch becomes the last hope to free herself from the death-filled past. She wants him desperately, as she needs security. Blanche becomes interested in him, as they seem to share loneliness and sensitivity: both of them have experienced the losses of their dear ones — her husband and his girl friend. Mitch, whose mother is severely sick, needs to settle down before she passes away. Obviously, Mitch is not a perfect partner for Blanche: far from being aristocratic, the man “on the precision bench in the spare parts department” looks unlikely to “get anywhere” (495). He spends his time working out with the weights and swimming at a gym to develop abdominal muscles. He is timid when he worries about perspiring a lot in front of a lady. Blanche’s love of language, appreciation of art and music is far beyond his understanding. To highlight the oddness of the couple, the author stresses his awkwardness in contrast to Blanche’s feigned sophistication. In Scene 3 at the first meeting with Mitch, she dances waltz elegantly to the radio, while Mitch moves his body like a “dancing bear” (500).

Although they look odd, Blanche is intent on carefully luring him into her orbit. She alludes to the troubles in her sister’s home, i.e. Stanley’s rough attitude to her: “I can’t stand a naked bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action” (499). Thus, she hints at Stanley’s hatred towards herself, and tries to attract Mitch’s attention. Naturally, as Mitch is sympathetic and respectful of Blanche’s gentility, he tries to soothe her to show his kindness.

Mitch’s blind admiration or devotion to Blanche satisfies her, but she cannot love him as he is. Judith M. Thompson says: “The story of Blanche’s relationship with Allan Gray — from its romanticized beginnings to its cruel conclusion — is reenacted by Blanche with Mitch in a diminished, retributive version.”²¹⁾ I agree with her analysis of “reenactment.” If this relationship completes with a successful ending, it can make up for her past failure with Allan and help her regain confidence as a lady. Pretending to be pristine and pure brings her back to her first romance as a plantation belle, when she was more naïve and innocent.

With the magic of imagination, she is fixated on transforming this serious mother’s boy into an idealized romantic young gentleman like Allan. She pretends to be a lady, turning him into a “Rosenkavalier” (520). She even encourages him by calling him a “natural gentleman, one of the very few that are left in the world” (525). Therefore, she punishes him when he keeps his hand on her waist after his lifting her. She admonishes him, “Just because Stanley and Stella aren’t at home is no reason why you shouldn’t behave like a gentleman” (524). Mitch, as if he were a servant of the plantation rather than a cavalier, sheepishly responds, “Just give me a slap whenever I step out of bounds” (524). Though he is not equipped to fully appreciate the Southern code of behaviors that Blanche teaches, he pathetically tries to obey whatever order she wantonly gives.

Blanche’s behavior appears to be domineering, but Laurilyn J. Harris discusses Blanche’s lack of self-esteem. Quoting R.D. Laing, she states that it derives from her distorted “self-consciousness” :

As R.D. Laing points out in *The Divided Self*, “Self-consciousness... implies two things: an awareness of oneself by oneself, and an awareness of oneself as an object of someone else’s observation.” Blanche’s preoccupation with how she “looks” does not spring from narcissism or vanity, but from her crumbling sense of self-worth. As she grows more and more unstable, under the pressure of Stanley’s unrelenting contempt and his awareness of that part of herself she most wishes to hide, she frantically seeks to create a romanticized, reassuring self-portrait that she can study endlessly in the living mirrors within her sphere of influence — particularly Mitch and Stella.²²⁾

She needs Stella and especially Mitch as a “responding mirror” to reassure herself that her idealized self-

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image is still effective. She misrepresents herself as a “prim and proper” (517) maiden, as this is the self-image she wants to create and wants others to believe in. In a way, she depends on Mitch, as he is an unwavering admirer who idolizes her and boosts her currently low and fluctuating self-esteem.

Eventually, however, she lost her last hope. Even though she claimed, “I never lied inside” (546), her lies hurt Mitch deeply. Her attempt at the reenactment ends in a “cruel conclusion.” Mitch finally refuses Blanche’s pretenses, demanding “what I [he] been missing all summer” (547). Mitch’s rape attempt ends up in failure due to Blanche’s resistance, but Stanley’s actual rape occurs in Scene 10 on the very night when Stella is in labor. Outraged by her lies, they try to destroy her and her pretentiousness with the act of violation.

The next scene starts with a poker game in which Stanley boastfully calls himself a survivor of severe situations at war: “I believed I was lucky. I figured that 4 out of 5 would not come through but I would... and I did” (555). It sounds like his declaration of victory over Blanche, as she is about to be placed into a mental asylum after failing to survive the fight with Stanley. However, in this scene, rather than Stanley, the portrayal of Stella is more noteworthy. She helps Blanche dress up for the trip to the asylum while feeling guilty all the time. She is not sure of her decision to send her there.

In panic, Stella confesses her doubt about her husband to Eunice, “I don’t know if I did the right thing... I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (556). Eunice responds, “Don’t ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going” (557). Her seasoned advice may somehow reassure her, but the couple’s healthy relationship will never be the same. Stella has to live with an endless suspicion of her beloved husband.

In the Hollywood film version, in consideration of the severe censorship which does not allow a rapist to go unpunished, Stella runs into Eunice’s room with her newborn baby, leaving Stanley behind. It implies that she will punish Stanley for his abominable act. In the original play, however, Stanley “kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse” (564) as if to soothe her. It is not clear how Stella responds to Stanley. She just abandons herself in “complete surrender to crying” (564). Formerly in Scene 3, Stanley’s loss of temper is forgiven, as the brawl is settled with a passionate act of reconciliation. This time it remains ambiguous.

A critic finds some hope in the last scene. He associates the baby who is born when the brutal violation by Stanley takes place with Blanche. Both of them appear wearing blue: Blanche is dressed in a Della Robbia Blue, the color of Madonna’s clothes, while the baby is wrapped in a blue blanket:

By giving her the child in answer to her [Stella’s]plea for Blanche who is leaving, and by having the child wrapped in a pale blue blanket, a colour we have come to associate with Blanche, Williams clearly suggests an identification between the tragic fall of one and the birth of the other.²³⁾

Does the birth of the baby offset the tragic tone created by Blanche’s internment? It is hard to agree with the analysis. The undertone is too poignant regardless of the birth of the baby.

Ronald Hayman analyzes the scene by taking the author’s biographical background into account. William’s sister, Rose, who fell victim to schizophrenia, was forced to undergo a lobotomy, after insisting that she was sexually molested by her own father. Stella’s feeling of guilt and distress could be that of Williams’ mother, Edwina, who authorized the operation:

Tennessee also rubs up against his own obsessions when he makes Stella refuse to believe Stanley has raped Blanche. Rejecting Rose’s allegations against her father, Edwina had punished her with a lobotomy. In writing the poignant sequence in which Blanche is led away by the doctor and nurse to internment in a mental house, Tennessee was reenacting the family story.²⁴⁾

Edwina’s sense of guilt was shared by Williams himself, who is said to have harbored lifelong regret over

his sister's surgery.

In addition to the biographical fact, the “blue piano” played at the end of the scene emphasizes a bleak tone. It takes us back to the opening of Scene 1 where the same tune is played; on the surface everything seems to return to normal, but in the couple's relationship, there is a huge chasm, which has not existed before.

The very last scene lets our focus shift from Blanche to Stella, making us realize this is not just a tragedy of Blanche but also that of Stella. Hayman further writes that “It can almost be said that Stella represents young America, torn between its loyalty to antiquated idealism and the brutal realism of the present, while Blanche incarnates the pretensions of the old South...”²⁵⁾ In the last scene, by losing sanity, Blanche withdraws into her ideal world of a Southern lady. She is gracefully escorted by the doctor, as if she were a lady on vacation. Although Stella has long isolated herself from the Old South and accepted the present, finally she is betrayed by it. She is compelled to face harsh realities that Blanche has detested.

Porter views Stella at the last scene as a “stock persona of the plantation mistress. The mistress is traditionally submissive to her husband; as lord and master, he carries on his own affairs while the wife occupies herself with domestic matters.”²⁶⁾ She has lost her vivaciousness and been reduced to a mere obedient mistress. Warren French predicts her bleak future as follows; “in the still patriarchal South a woman with a baby might have no alternative” but return to her husband.²⁷⁾ What is painful about Stella is that she has no one to turn to but Stanley, who has destroyed her own sister. She has to confront the reality of the “patriarchal South,” though she has given up the status of a Southern Belle.

By portraying the tragedy of Blanche, Williams poignantly dramatizes the myth of the South, which intensely captivates her mind. Also by portraying the tragedy of Stella, he brings home to us the reality of the patriarchal South. Almost 60 years after the first production of the play, the two Southern Belles' drama still resonates with readers and theatergoers.

Notes

- 1) Thomas E. Porter, *Myth and Modern American Drama* (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1969) 155.
- 2) Porter 155.
- 3) Donaldo Spoto, *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* (Boston: Da Capo Press, 1985) 139.
- 4) Tennessee Williams, *Memoirs* (1975; New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2006) 135-6.
- 5) Ronald Hayman, *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else is An Audience* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993) 110.
- 6) Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in *Tennessee Williams Plays 1937-1955* (New York: The Library of America, 2000) 546. Further references to the play appear in parentheses in the text.
- 7) John M. Roderick, “From ‘Tarantura Arms’ to ‘Della Robbia Blue’: The Tennessee Williams Tragicomic Transient Authority,” *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire: Modern Critical Interpretation*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988) 94.
- 8) Elia Kazan, *Elia Kazan: A Life* (1988; New York: Da Capo Press, 1997) 348.
- 9) Peggy W. Prenshaw, “The Paradoxical Southern World of Tennessee Williams,” *Tennessee Williams: Thirteen Essays* ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1980) 5.
- 10) Yujiro Nakamura, *A Study on Witch Randa* (Tokyo: Iwanami, 1990) 191.
- 11) Kazan 343.
- 12) Cecil Brown, “Interview with Tennessee Williams,” *Devlin* 277.
- 13) Laurilyn J. Harris, “Perceptual Conflict and the Perversion of Creativity in *A Street Car Named Desire*,” *Confronting Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire* ed. Philip C. Kolin (Westwood: Greenwood P, 1993) 88.
- 14) Porter 163.
- 15) Felicia Hardison Londré “A Streetcar Running Fifty Years,” *The Cambridge Companion to Tennessee Williams* ed. Matthew C. Roudané (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997) 52.

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- 16) Londrè, 56.
- 17) William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness* (1990; New York: Vintage, 1992) 56-57.
- 18) Kazan, 350.
- 19) Prenshaw, 13.
- 20) Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* in *Tennessee Williams Plays 1937-1955* (New York: The Library of America, 2000) 465.
- 21) Judith M. Thompson, *Tennessee Williams' Plays: Memory, Myth and Symbol*, Rev.ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 2002) 34.
- 22) Harris, 86.
- 23) Henry I. Schvey, "Madonna at the Poker Night: Pictorial Elements in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*," Bloom 109.
- 24) Hayman 113.
- 25) Hayman 112.
- 26) Porter 166.
- 27) Nancy M. Tishler, "Tiger — Tiger!: *Blanche's Rape on Screen*" *Millennial Essays on Tennessee Williams: Magical Muse* ed. Ralph F. Voss (Tuscaloosa: U. of Arizona P., 2002) 64.

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