

# A Reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Tennessee Williams's Realism Through Ambiguity

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Tennessee Williams ( 1911–1983 ) is one of the most studied playwrights in American drama, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* ( 1947 ) has been considered as one of his best plays. Many critics and scholars of Williams interpret the heroine, Blanche, as a victim and the hero, Stanley, as a victimizer. I think, however, Blanche leads and directs by herself toward the tragic ending. Blanche and Stanley are collaborators as well as accomplices. Analyzing Williams's theatrical devices, such as symbolism, comparison, and contrast, I aim to clarify what Williams depicts in his characters. While doing so, I try to probe into unwritten parts in the text, or hidden parts on the stage. For I believe this is the realism that he experiments in his fictive world and makes it happen in the imagination of the audience.

## Introduction

*A Streetcar Named Desire* has been performed by theater groups in various languages since it debuted with great success on Broadway in 1947.<sup>1</sup> The film version starring Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando has since become a classic Hollywood production.<sup>2</sup> In 1998 it was transformed into an opera by

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André Previn.<sup>3</sup> I have seen the 1951 film version and Edward Hall's latest Broadway show, which premiered on March 26, 2005.<sup>4</sup> American drama easily attracts a multi-generational audience, and "it is, inevitably, more remarkable on the stage than in the study"<sup>5</sup> as noted in Harold Bloom's introduction to his edited collection of essays on *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In this paper, however, I deal with this play as a text rather than a performed piece, admitting that I cannot be totally detached from my presence as a member of the audience. I believe that a close reading of the text may create a new dialogue with the playwright, for the work itself is as strong as the piece on the stage.

Williams's precise descriptions of stage setting, costumes, and the mood of his characters are as powerful as the dialogue between his characters, and through them we can become closer to the characters. As Mary Ann Corrigan has pointed out, "Williams's setting is emotionally charged and as usual, described in great detail in the stage directions."<sup>6</sup>

Before I begin my reading, I would like to comment on the first stage director, Elia Kazan, one of the first interpreters of the text as well as a collaborator with Williams. Kazan's "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*" reveals how he directed the drama, but it is both abstract and concise. He writes about the four main characters: Blanche, Stella, Stanley, and Mitch, clarifying the differences between them and giving them the "spines" which are the central elements of their reality. According to Kazan, Blanche is a traditional woman who seeks to find protection, and Stella is a passive woman who "hold(s) onto Stanley." Stanley is a man "with a kind of Naivité," but "keep(s) things his way." For both Stella and Stanley, Blanche is the antagonist. Unlike this couple, Mitch considers Blanche as a "lever," who could allow him to escape from his mother. Elia Kazan directs the drama with these "spines" in mind.<sup>7</sup>

These simplified judgments of the characters do not tell us much about the essence of Kazan's and Williams's collaboration as stage-director and playwright. However, they do show that

Williams allows himself bold interpretations to make the stage as powerful as possible. Williams knew that his characters had already been given souls when he completed the work, and so any directors of the play could interpret his work in their own way. More than half a century later, readers of the text are allowed to interpret in their own way. I aim to add another possible reading to the already numerous interpretations made by scholars and critics, while focusing on the devices Williams uses to stimulate the imagination of the audience, the reader.

## Approaching Williams's Devices

Williams employs devices of comparison and contrast in many notional layers and uses a variety of symbolism liberally both in his lines and in his stage properties. His repeated use of invisible existence or auditory device is also notable. Williams, as a romantic poet and as an experimental dramatist, leaves an imaginative space for his readers.

In a 1961 interview Williams remarks, "If you write a character that isn't ambiguous you are writing a false character, not a true one."<sup>8</sup> He believes that ambiguity is indispensable to inject soul into his characters. The idea is similar in this play. Although he is precise about his use of symbolism, persistently employing the mechanical technique of comparison and contrast, he still tries to keep his characters ambiguous and the hidden scenes more open to his audiences. Symbolism, unwritten information, and hidden scenes are carefully calculated and can be connected with verbal elements or visual props.

The most ambiguous character, and therefore considered the protagonist of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is Blanche DuBois. Williams uses plentiful symbolism to delineate her emotional conditions or states of mind. A critic of the *New York Sun*, Ward Morehouse, starts his comment on the first performance on December 3, 1947, as follows, "Tennessee Williams has written a gaudy, violent and fascinating study of the disin-

tegration of a Southern belle....”<sup>9</sup> Louis Kronenberger, in his preview for *New York PM* of December 5, 1947, regards “his Blanche DuBois, whose gradual disintegration is the subject of his drama.”<sup>10</sup> These are the comments made immediately after the first performance. And even before, while creating the first stage, Elia Kazan admits, this is Blanche’s play. In his notebook, he writes, “This is a poetic tragedy. We are shown the final dissolution of a person of worth.”<sup>11</sup> This “person of worth” clearly refers to Blanche DuBois. Since then, scholars and stage directors of this play have interpreted Blanche as the protagonist. The Williams scholar Mary Ann Corrigan goes even further, not only admitting the playwright’s “control of his symbolic devices” but also suggesting the audience look at “the world from the limited and distorted perspective of Blanche.”<sup>12</sup>

It is worth focusing on Blanche as a character delineated through various forms of symbolism before examining other devices, such as comparison or contrast with other characters. As for Blanche’s costumes, Williams employs a variety of color tones. In her first appearance, she wears “a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat.”<sup>13</sup> ( 15 ) When she asks Stanley to button her dress as a form of flirtation, her dress is flower-printed. When she comes out of the bathroom in several scenes, she is “in a red satin robe.” In the climax with Mitch, who finally calls her a liar after learning about her checkered past, she is again in red. In another climax, where Stanley rapes her, she is in a “crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels.” ( 123 ) And in the last scene, she is given a Madonna image with “a pretty blue jacket.” ( 135 ) Williams employs all the possible images for a female character in conventional fiction for his protagonist: from the pure innocent girl in white to the fallen woman in red, and then to an idol in sacred blue.

Among the props, the Chinese lantern is one of the most frequently discussed.<sup>14</sup> Blanche, who cannot bear the direct light of a naked bulb, covers it with a lantern. She is associated with dim

light or candles in most scenes, which is effective in showing her obscurity. Her drinking habit, which leaves her mind unclear and dizzy, should be mentioned here also as a calculated element.

As for the use of audio devices, Williams employs either audible sounds or silence. There is the music heard only to the ears of Blanche when she is totally detached from the outer world. This is the polka music always related to her late husband, Allan Grey, who killed himself at an early age. Blanche has been haunted by the image of his death. Judith J. Thompson calls this “an aural symbol of Blanche DuBois’s guilt-ridden memories of the past”<sup>15</sup> When Blanche first appears on the stage, she is in a white costume with a big suitcase. The color white symbolizes innocence and purity, yet the suitcase suggests the burden she carries both physically and mentally. Williams provides her with these double images from beginning to end.

As many critics and scholars describe Blanche as a victim, she is to be banished in the end.<sup>16</sup> The playwright does not allow her to go on with her life in this fictive world. Why does Blanche have to leave the community? Why is she always associated with the image of death? What is left after her departure? Analyzing each character and comparing and contrasting each in their relationships, I hope to illustrate Williams’s realism, which exists only in its relevance between elements and which is reached only by the imagination of viewers or readers in the process of pursuing the chains of reasoning. It is a space created by the playwright for the audience to employ their imaginative powers.

## The Opening in Pairs

The story begins in an early May evening in New Orleans. It has just started to get dark, and Williams uses a turquoise blue sky as background. The apartment is described as an “atmosphere of decay” ( 13 ) in its grayish white color. There are two

women—one black, the other white—on stage. Two male characters appear: Stanley and Mitch. Stanley is the male protagonist compared and contrasted most often with Blanche DuBois—one of the most historic heroines in American drama. Mitch is his friend as well as her could-be husband.

This is described on the first page of the text as a stage direction, and it allows the readers of the text to visualize the scene before getting into the story, while in the theater, it is merged together with the first sound of Stanley: “Hey there! Stella, Baby!” ( 13 ) This first line, which releases the audience from the condition of waiting, is described as “bellowing.” ( 13 ) Stella answers him: “[mildly]: Don’t holler at me like that....” ( 14 )

The contrast between Stanley and Stella is shown in the tones of their voices, which differentiate their manners or even social backgrounds. However, immediately after these lines, a form of communion by the couple is presented. Stanley throws a red-stained meat package to Stella, and she catches it, chastising him and laughing. It is obvious that Stella, who comes from a genteel background, now accepts Stanley, who belongs to a rather vulgar class in terms of manners. There exists one more thing than their social backgrounds. The meat connotes the flesh as opposed to the soul. The action of catching the meat performed by the couple may be contrasted with the love between Blanche and her late husband, which I discuss below.

After the stage has been set, Blanche, elegantly dressed, appears carrying a suitcase. It is obvious that she is a visitor or an outsider. The stage direction says, “Her appearance is incongruous to this setting.” ( 15 ) She is incompatible with the neighborhood. It is not only her outfit; her manners also do not belong to the setting. “There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth.” ( 15 ) Williams was so confident in attributing the image of a moth to the protagonist that he even used the word *moth* in one of his proposed titles of the play.<sup>17</sup>

Judith J. Thompson, mentioning the conventional mean-

ing for a moth as an “innocent soul,” emphasizes the mental condition of Blanche at her first appearance on the stage. Thompson sees the myth of paradise lost in the given elements. The love Blanche shared with Allan is similar to what once existed in Eden before humans were exiled. Williams lets Stella, who is the only one that knows about Blanche’s pure soul, talk about the days before her lost paradise. Stella says, “But when she was young... Blanche didn’t just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human!” ( 102 ) Seeing Allan in such god-like terms, true love for Blanche can exist only in a paradise where “flesh and spirit were ... united in shameless love ... and ( there was no ) division between God and man, soul and body, dream and reality.”<sup>18</sup> For Blanche, Allan was a beautiful boy with this love of Eden, a pure soul. However, she blamed him or even hurt him when she found that he had an affair with an older man. The pure boy, who was also a poet and therefore sensitive to words, could not continue his life after having been abused by Blanche’s harsh words, “I saw! I know! You disgust me....” ( 96 ) Since then, she had been suffering from a sense of guilt caused by her actions.

Carrying this past with her, she appears on stage. Her condition of the mind is simply characterized by Eunice: “What’s the matter, honey? Are you lost?” ( 15 ) As a reader of the text, we may connect the image of a moth, mentioned in the stage directions, to this woman in a white suit on the stage. And at the same time, these first words offered to her may be taken as a statement of a suffering soul after paradise lost.

In answer to the question, Blanche says, “They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries....” ( 15 ) It is notable to see the title finally given the play used here in her first line on the stage. Williams puts the essence of his work in this opening scene very intensely, almost before the audience has a chance to blink. This carefully calculated choice of words invites readers to search the elements that let the given symbols function.

After the contrast between Stanley and Stella, and that

between initial stage setting and what Blanche carries with her from the past, the names of the streetcars connote opposite meanings. If “Desire” is related to life, then “Cemeteries” represents death. The streetcar names mentioned here are important, but we cannot ignore Blanche’s first three words, “They told me.” This phrase suggests that she has followed somebody’s advice or navigation. In the same scene Williams does not neglect to clarify the social differences between the established clan and immigrants. Stella and Blanche DuBois belong to an aristocratic family in the South, and the Kowalskis belong to a working class of new immigrants.

Williams, who is particular about stage settings, also employs dualism in his work. Blanche is introduced to the interior of the apartment. There are two rooms on the stage—a kitchen and a bedroom—and a hidden bathroom. Williams draws his reader’s attention to Blanche’s body. As Williams introduces his characters in pairs or gives stage directions employing contrastive concepts, he depicts normally balanced female body in pairs, such as shoulders, legs, hands, eyes, ears, and lips. Then he distorts them one by one. “Blanche sits in a chair very stiffly with her shoulders slightly hunched and her legs pressed close together and her hands tightly clutching her purse as if she were quite cold. After a while the blind look goes out of her eyes and she begins to look slowly around. A cat screeches. She catches her breath with a startled gesture.” ( 18 ) The deformed parts of her body can be taken as an incarnation of her agony.

### Comparison and Contrast: Similarities and Differences

As revealed in the opening scene, the symbolism employed by Williams is beyond conventional realms and each character on the stage, described with comparative or contrastive devices, does not stay within their initial image. In the first scene of the sisters’ reunion after a long separation, Williams



puts an invisible fun-house mirror between Blanche and Stella. When they meet, the stage direction first says, "For a moment they stare at each other." ( 18 ) With the mirror at the centerline, they face each other as twins. Then the audience is gradually informed that they had quite different pasts. The second stage direction shows the same postures but with opposite expressions: "Blanche stares at her. She smiles at Blanche." ( 20 ) After that Blanche fires off questions in rapid succession about Stella's modest lifestyle. Although Blanche is tense, Stella is calm and shows some satisfaction in her living condition with her husband. The third move is described as follows: "They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. Blanche slowly nods her head and Stella looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table." ( 26 ) They appear as identical twins. Here at this moment the sisters share their reality for the first time: They have lost Belle Reve, their childhood home.

In the scene of Blanche's confession, Williams again uses contrastive device. He lets Blanche distinguish the difference between death and funeral, which are semantically parallel. Blanche says: "... funerals are pretty compared to deaths." ( 26 ) Williams makes one see the cruelty of dying as contrasted to the calmness of funerals in a detailed picture drawn by Blanche, "Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!'... But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers." ( 27 ) Blanche blames Stella for not seeing the harshness of the death of Belle Reve while she lived in comfort with Stanley. Later I mention how Williams punishes this insensitivity on Stella's part.

Although Blanche takes the lead in the conversation with Stella in this scene, with Stanley it is opposite. He showers Blanche with questions, and she answers them one by one; Stanley offends and Blanche defends. Williams sketches this scene like a boxing match. In the first round, Stanley is the winner. The fatal blow here is the question Stanley asks about her husband. Telling about his death as a young boy, "she

sinks back down,” then “her head falls on her arms.” ( 31 )

The second round is performed in scene two. Unlike the first confrontation, Blanche controls the conversation. She asks, and he answers. She even offends him with a kind of weapon, an atomizer. She “playfully sprays him with it.” ( 41 ) This act is followed after her words, “My, but you have an impressive judicial air!” ( 41 ) Williams lets Blanche perish Stanley’s masculinity as well as his manly smell. Although Stanley violently reacts against her move, slamming the atomizer down, Blanche is capable of dealing with his excited violent action. She answers him with laughter, and later tells her sister that this incident was a flirtation with Stanley. This is one of the few occasions in which Blanche acts superior to Stanley. In most scenes it is Blanche who falls down on her knees at the hands of Stanley’s physical and verbal attacks. Stanley even violates Blanche in her absence. Existence in absence is one of the devices Williams uses to depict characters and their relationship with a second half or pair.

## Invisible Existence: Blanche ( 1 )

After learning from Stella that the DuBois have lost their family property, Stanley starts to investigate Blanche’s belongings. Without hesitation, he opens her suitcase in the presence of his wife. He does not possess any sense of guilt about this act, going about it in a rough and violent manner. Ignoring Stella’s reproach, he strides into the bedroom and “pulls open the wardrobe trunk standing in the middle of the room and jerks out an armful of dresses.” ( 35 ) While this violent act is taking place in the middle of the stage, Blanche is in the bathroom, whose door is only partly visible to the audience. “He hurls the furs to the daybed. Then he jerks open small drawer in the trunk and pulls up a fist-full of costume jewelry.” ( 36 ) There are Stanley and Stella alone in the bedroom, but the man-handled trunk emphasizes the existence of Blanche. Stella strongly accuses him, but it is all in vain. Williams describes the

couple's complicity in violating Blanche's possessions, which is to be a premonition of the tragedy to come. Williams in this scene gives a schematic presentation of each character: Stanley as a destroyer; Blanche as a victim; and Stella as a passive conspirator.

The suitcase represents Blanche herself. Williams introduces the character in the first scene carrying it. It contains her clothes, the documents related to her lost property, Belle Reve, and the poems written by her late husband, Allan. For Blanche, clothes are her passion,<sup>19</sup> Belle Reve is her root, and Allan is her love.

As Blanche's character is presented to the audience in her absence in the first part of scene two, we also learn more about Stanley, or Williams's depiction of him, in his absence in scene four. Except for the last moment in which he is deeply hurt by overhearing Blanche's harsh comments about him, the stage is dominated by the two sisters: Blanche and Stella.

## Invisible Existence: Stanley

The two women are pictured quite differently in scene four. The stage direction notes that Blanche's appearance "entirely contrasts with Stella's." ( 62 ) Although Williams expresses identical parts of the sisters in their first appearance on stage together, he depicts distinct differences between Blanche and Stella in this scene.

The first character on stage is Stella. She is lying on the bed basked in sunlight. By placing her hand on her belly, Williams describes Stella as a sacred woman waiting for a baby to come. On the other hand Blanche looks exhausted from lack of sleep. She appears at the outside door, which is "slightly ajar on a sky of summer brilliance." ( 62 ) This is the only one time of exposure of Blanche in daylight. Williams's description of Blanche under the sun reveals the realistic decay of her appearance. Since she is aware of her physical decay, Blanche chooses only evenings for meetings with a

suitor, Mitch, and avoids direct electric light on her face. Unlike Stella, who is comfortable in the morning sun, Blanche looks restless. "She presses her knuckles nervously to her lips...." ( 62 )

Williams not only fashions a beautiful contrast between the two characters but also illustrates one character's double personality. As the morning sun cannot hide Blanche's reality as a decaying object, it unveils the opposite side of Stella as a sacred goddess expecting a baby. One hand is on her round belly, while the other hand is holding a colorful comic book. In this way, Williams portrays dual meanings of sex in describing a pregnant woman: sacred ceremony and sensual pleasure. This earthy realism is emphasized more by the existence of Stanley, although he does not physically appear on stage. There exist his belongings: "Stanley's gaudy pyjamas lie across the threshold of the bathroom." ( 62 ) The existence of Stanley divides the sisters.

Williams depicts what Stella has and what Blanche does not: in other words, what Blanche lacks, she therefore seeks. We gradually learn that this inferred existence is incarnated in Stanley. Without Stanley on the stage, the audience learns more about him. Stanley is the key character representing the desire that traps Blanche and finally destroys her. Desire or death is the problem.

A gratified Stella amusingly confesses the details of her wedding night with Stanley to her sister: "He smashed all the light bulbs with the heel of my slipper!" ( 64 ) Although this seems like the character of "a madman" to Blanche, Stella takes it as a thrill. The kitchen is in a mess with empty bottles from the previous night's party, which creates a decadent scene on the stage. Blanche warns and urges her sister to leave her husband, but Stella refuses adamantly. She says, "... I am not in anything that I have a desire to get out of." ( 65 )

It is notable that Williams puts the word *desire* in Stella's lines. Unlike her sister, Stella is free from desire's grip. In other words, since she possesses Desire, she doesn't need any form of desire. Stanley is the incarnated form of it:

Stella: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.

Blanche: What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of the rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...

Stella: Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?

Blanche: It brought me here. —Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be. ( 70 )

Here Williams employs an audio effect. Following the stage direction, "Outside, a train approaches" ( 71 ) Stanley returns. The audience notices his appearance, while the two women continue talking about Desire. Without noticing his presence, Blanche delivers a harsh criticism of Stanley. Williams describes this incarnated form of the word *desire* through Blanche's comments as if the fragments were parts to compose the man. Stanley is *common, ordinary, plain, downright, bestial, like an animal, sub-human, ape-like*. These are criticisms of her brother-in-law as well as expressions of her fear about him. When she is in this stage of catharsis, launching offensive comments, there again come the sounds of a train. As expected, Stanley is now on stage. We may say that the dialogues between the two sisters are a long prologue to the appearance of this incarnated form of Desire.

## Invisible Existence: Blanche ( 2 )

Unlike conventional plays, which consist of two or three acts, Williams constructs his best play with eleven scenes. Yet if we divide the play into three as with other plays, we may do so according to the seasons: the scenes from one to four are in early summer; the middle scenes five and six are in the height of summer; and the rest, from seven to eleven, take place in the beginning of fall.<sup>20</sup>

As I have clarified Williams's techniques of crafting images or symbols, I cannot leave out his time-settings. "Mid-September" as the beginning of fall suggests Blanche's descent. It is also her birthday month, and the scene starts with Stella "completing the decorations" ( 97 ) for the birthday supper.

There are flowers and cake on the table. Stella has arranged the flowers to celebrate her sister's birthday, but for the audience, informed that it is the last month of her pregnancy, flowers could also be for the baby. Even the words "completing the decorations" connote a destined result. Besides, Williams's frequent use of dualism allows us to attribute an opposite meaning to this birthday party. Flowers for Blanche's birthday could even be for her funeral as an analogy. For in the later scene in which Blanche disputes with Mitch, Williams employs a blind Mexican woman who sells flowers for funerals as a character who scares Blanche.

Once more in this scene Williams reveals Blanche's character without her physical existence on the stage. While he offers a space for imagination for each member of the audience or reader by employing a variety of theatrical devices, such as symbolism or metaphor, one particular stage setting—the hidden bathroom—has great effect in the scene of revealing Blanche's secrets.

As Williams depicts Stanley or his allegorical meaning without his presence, he also reveals Blanche's past by hiding her image from the audience. Conventional uses of the bathroom, especially taking a bath as a metaphor, provides a meaning of purification. Although Williams uses this bathroom as a metaphor on many occasions, its interpretation is different depending on how it is used or who uses it. For Stanley it is simply a place to urinate or to cool down, which means it gives him physical release; for Stella it is a place to wash off her tears or to make up, which means a place for preparations or arrangements; and for Blanche it is a place to take a hot bath to sooth her nerves, which gives her mental release. In this scene with Blanche singing in the bathroom, it contains a conventional meaning of baptism, but it is not limited to this

alone. Blanche, who is mostly in white or soft colors, appears now in a red satin robe from the bathroom. The color red clashes with the image of purification. Blanche should, of course, be purified in the bathroom according to the conventional image, but on stage here she appears as a flirtatious woman bathed in perfume.

In scene two, where Stanley is rummaging through Blanche's belongings, Blanche is out of sight. But then Blanche emerges from the bathroom in a red robe and says, "Hello, Stanley! Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand new human being!" ( 37 ) This is a conscious flirtation. As in this earlier scene, he employs the same device one more time. But this time in scene seven, the playwright adds another device, such as Blanche's singing voice or laughter from the bathroom.

The longest bath time for Blanche onstage is in this evening scene. Like the former scene, only Stella and Stanley are on the stage and Blanche is in the bathroom. Stanley reveals Blanche's past piece by piece as he did with her dresses, furs, and accessories in the former scene. It may occur to readers or viewers that Blanche is washing off her dirt in the bathroom. The audience listens to Stanley's accusing voice, Stella's curious but painful voice, and Blanche's singing voice with occasional interruption and hysterical laughter accompanied by the sound of running water. Williams uses the lyrics of the song "It's Only a Paper Moon" overlapping the cruel disclosures by Stanley of Blanche's recent past.

In contrast to ever increasing "lies" revealed by Stanley, Blanche sings away "blithely." Williams has Blanche sing as if she is denying what is coming out of Stanley's mouth. First Stanley erases Blanche's pure lily-like image, revealing the filthy rumors of her past at a "second class hotel." ( 99 ) The audience hears Blanche singing "Say, it's only a paper moon, Sailing over a cardboard sea—But it wouldn't be make-believe, if you believed in me!" ( 99 ) When Stella is offended by him, the audience hears, "Without your love, It's a honky-tonk parade!" ( 100 ) It is as if Blanche were appealing to her sis-

ter for love. Stanley's second disclosure is that Blanche was not allowed to come back to her school because she was fired due to an immoral relationship with a student. Williams then injects the song line, "It's a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be—" ( 101 ) Stanley's words are more highlighted by the stage direction, "In the bathroom the water goes on loud; little breathless cries and peals of laughter are heard as if a child were frolicking in the tub." ( 101 ) Blanche's filthy past with a young boy is overshadowed by the harsh memory of Allan. The hysterical laughter heard from the bathroom belies her agony.

Williams, however, allows the audience to sympathize with Blanche while interpreting the meaning of the song lyrics. Stanley judges Blanche as a liar. Stella first accuses him, saying "It's pure invention! There's not a word of truth in it ...." ( 100 ) But it is she who lets him continue to talk about her sister. Having both of them for the enemy, it is unrealistic for Blanche to confront the accuser in person. Williams, therefore, employs the form of a poem. It is not Stanley but the audience from whom Blanche seeks sympathy. She puts a slight but ardent hope to be understood by somebody in her fictive world represented by a paper moon. We see Williams's romantic lyricism in this scene.

## What Is Left in the End? Blanche Leaves and Stella Conceives in Agony

Again in the final scene, "the building is framed by the sky of turquoise." ( 131 ) And all the characters are on stage. Stanley and his friends are playing cards in the same way as in scene three, "the poker night." In the bedroom Blanche's suitcase is wide open showing her dresses, reminding the audience of the scene in which Stanley pulls her belongings out. Eunice appears as she always does in the middle of a crisis. The stage directions say it comes back to the beginning. The only difference is that the suitcase is open to be packed one more time,



which hints that Blanche is to leave the apartment.

Stage settings, actions, and words of the characters are now repeated, but in reverse. In the poker night scene, Blanche encounters the party of four. Before she comes into the house, she cares about her appearance. Blanche says, “How do I look?” and Stella answers, “Lovely, Blanche.” ( 47 ) Then inside the house, introduced to the men, Blanche politely says, “Please don’t get up.” Stanley reacts harshly saying, “Nobody’s going to get up...” ( 48 ) In the final scene, instead of coming in, Blanche is going out. Still in the bedroom now, Blanche asks, “How do I look?” Stella offers the same comment, “Lovely.” ( 138 ) Then in the kitchen, Blanche again shows her politeness and says, “Please don’t get up. I’m only passing through.” ( 138 ) Unlike before, all three men stand up, leaving Mitch alone still sitting down.

Recreating the scene, Blanche’s additional words—“I’m only passing through”—are used for emphasis. I believe Williams wants to inform the audience of Blanche’s momentary existence as well as her eternal leaving from the fictive world. Moreover, these words remind readers of the play’s epigraph, quoted from “The Broken Tower” by Hart Crane:<sup>21</sup>

And so it was I entered the broken world  
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice  
An instant in the wind ( I know not whither hurled )  
But not for long to hold each desperate choice. ( 5 )

We may read this poem replacing the word “I” with “Blanche” in its relevance to the play, but it is also possible to read this epigraph as Williams’s declaration as the author of this fictive world. Like Blanche, who tries to capture a moment of truth in her relations with anyone around her, Williams constructs his drama showing imaginative routes for the audience to trace the truth.

There is another action that is repeated in the final scene; it shows Blanche as if she were a blind woman. At the end of scene two, where the men are coming in for the poker game and the

sisters are leaving for the evening, Stella is showing the way out to Blanche. Blanche says, "Which way do we go now, Stella—this way?" Stella answers, "No, this way. [Stella leads Blanche away.]" And Blanche joyously adds, "the blind are leading the blind!" ( 44 ) Although it is not Stella who leads Blanche away, Williams repeats the identical scene in the end. Blanche lets the doctor take her hands this time. "She allows him to lead her as if she were blind." ( 142 ) This line follows Blanche's last words: "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." ( 142 ) As Williams adds image one layer upon another, Blanche's words may remind the audience of the secrets revealed by Stanley.

There is one realistic notion created in the last scene. After Blanche leaves, the community continues as it had been before she arrived. Williams has Stella listening to these words from her landlady, Eunice, "Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going." ( 133 ) But Stella will not be the same anymore; she is now to assume the agony from Blanche. As she falls into Eunice's arms regretting what she has done to her sister, wondering if she has done "the right thing," she is no more the same happy or insensitive woman who cannot distinguish between dying and funerals. Here the audience remembers Blanche's words in the opening scene, "Funerals are quiet, but deaths—not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you 'Don't let me go!' ...." ( 26–27 ) The image constructed here is parallel to Blanche's struggling before she finally gives in. She says, "I'm not quite ready." ( 137 ) "She cries out," and "she screams." ( 140 ) Williams does not kill Blanche physically, but looking at Blanche's interpretation of dying, I conclude, as have other critics, that Williams suggests Blanche's death in the end.

This is a classic American tragedy. Not only is Blanche destroyed in the end but also her sister, described as a comparative half with Blanche, begins to suffer from a sense of guilt. It is just as Blanche did from the memory of the suicidal death of Allan, who triggered the chain in the tragedy.

## Notes

1. Premiered on December 3, 1947, at the Barymore, New York. Marlon Brando as Stanley, Jessica Tandy as Blanche, directed by Elia Kazan, and designed by Jo Mielziner. This play won the Pulitzer Prize.
2. Also directed by Elia Kazan. Like Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh also performed on the stage: As Blanche directed by Laurence Olivier in London. The film was nominated for twelve categories and won four Oscars: Best Actress, Best Supporting Actress, Best Supporting Actor, and Best Art Direction /Set Decoration.
3. Premiered on September 19, 1998, at the San Francisco Opera( CA ) Staged in three acts. Renée Fleming, soprano, as Blanche; Elizabeth Futral, soprano, as Stella; Anthony Dean Griffey, tenor; and Rodney Gilfrey, baritone. <http://www.schirmer.com/composers/previn/streetcar.html>.
4. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, dir. Edward Hall, perf. John C. Reilly, Natasha Richardson, Amy Ryan, and Chris Bauer, design. Robert Brill, Roundabout Theatre Company, Studio 54, New York, 26 March 2005.
5. Harold Bloom, Introduction, *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom( New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988 ) p. 3.
6. Mary Ann Corrigan, "Realism and Theatricalism in *Streetcar Named Desire*" *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom ( New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988 ) p. 51.
7. Elia Kazan, "Notebook for *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Directors on Directing: A Source Book of the Modern Theatre*, ed., Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy( New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc., 1963 ) pp. 364-379.
8. C. W. Bigsby, "Tennessee Williams: Streetcar to Glory," *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom( New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1988 ) p. 44.
9. Ward Morehouse, rev. of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, dir. Elia Kazan, *New York Sun* 4 December 1947, ed., Robert A. Martin, *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*( New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997 ) pp. 25-26.
10. Louis Kronenberger, rev. of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, dir. Elia Kazan, *New York PM*, 5 December 1947, ed., Robert A. Martin, *Critical Essays on Tennessee Williams*( New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1997 ) pp. 29-30.
11. Elia Kazan, p. 365.
12. Mary Ann Corrigan, p. 49.
13. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*( New York: New American Library, 1951 ) Further references to this paper appear in parentheses in the text.
14. For example, Williams scholar Thomas P. Adler published his work on this play in 1990 entitled *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern*. He gives two main symbols to the title.
15. Judith J. Thompson, *Tennessee Williams Plays: Memory, Myth, and Symbol*, Revised Edition( New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2002 ) p. 5.
16. Elia Kazan describes her departure as "final dissolution" in his notebook. The final condition of Blanche is judged with similar notions, such as "expulsion," "madness," "final debasement," "living death," and so on by many critics.
17. Although *A Streetcar Named Desire* cannot be replaced by another title after having been given fame in many forms, Williams considered several possible titles including *The Moth*, *Blanche's Chair on the Moon*, and *The Poker Night*.
18. Judith J. Thompson, p. 28.
19. In scene two, Blanche says to Stanley, "...clothes are my passion!" ( 38 )
20. Thomas P. Adler, *A Streetcar Named Desire: The Moth and the Lantern*( Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990 ) p. 19.
21. In the introduction to his edited work on this play, Harold Bloom, quoting from Williams's *Memoirs*, connects Blanche's fate with this poem. Bloom, pp. 5-6.