Tennessee Williams
A Streetcar Named Desire

by

Peter Cash

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Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)
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INTRODUCTION

"We always need something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" says Estragon in Act II of Samuel Beckett's **Waiting for Godot** (1955). In **A Streetcar Named Desire**, Blanche DuBois is endeavouring to find something to give her the impression that she exists; she is seeking a permanently secure sense of personal identity. In this play, Williams attempts to dramatise Blanche's identity-crisis. What is it that gives a human individual a sense of identity? How does as an isolated individual give her life some meaning? Answer: she finds a focal point outside her own world which confirms her existence and gives her the sense that she exists. Blanche's existence is confirmed only when she is in intimate physical contact with a man; it is the sexual attention which he pays her that confers importance upon her. If there is a man in her bed, then she has evidence that the world outside herself recognises her existence; such sexual contact confirms her existence to the outside world of which the man is a physical embodiment.

In **A Streetcar Named Desire**, Tennessee Williams is interested in passion; his interest is Elizabethan in its intensity. Because Elizabethans died young, they lived in constant fear of death; in order to comfort themselves against this fear, they threw themselves into their lovers' arms. Williams' drama possesses an Elizabethan quality in that it seeks to explore this relationship between death and sex; he postulates that, since man is conscious of his inexorable movement through time towards death, his existence is intrinsically miserable; it is in this context of imminent/impending death that sexual relationship – as in the sonnets of Shakespeare and Donne – becomes his sole comfort. Sexual relationship, however, proves an unsatisfactory comfort in that it fails to offer a solution to the problem of human mortality; the reason is that the body (which

expresses sexual love) is susceptible to decay in the swift course of time. Man cannot therefore expect to achieve a secure sense of personal identity in terms of his sexual relationships, no matter how intense their temporary comforts may be.

In this play, Williams comes very close to endorsing the paradoxical idea that sexual enjoyment is ultimately psychological; it seems that what Blanche desires from her sexual relationships is the psychological comfort of knowing that she is approved of. Through the character of Blanche, Williams is examining the psychology of the promiscuous woman/the nymphomaniac; he is arguing that she enters her sexual relationships in order to be accepted and approved of. She is on a quest for personal acceptance and approval: in short, Blanche has become promiscuous in the search for a psychological sense of self.

Blanche's tragedy is an American tragedy in that it enacts the failure of the American Dream. In classic fashion, she mistakes the material satisfaction which she derives from sexual intercourse for the emotional/spiritual fulfilment of her personal aspiration, her beautiful dream (Belle Reve). Williams' vision is an essentially existentialist vision. In Scene V, Blanche's account of her sexual adventures –

> "People don't see you – *men* don't – don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone"

– explains that she relies for an identity not upon any spiritual form of fulfilment, but upon her physical contacts with men who – in making love to her – cannot help but admit her existence. From the start, she cannot bear being looked at; her ensuing panic ("And turn off that over-light. Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare") reveals her acute consciousness of the ageing process/her fading beauty – upon which she depends for 'one night's shelter'/for 'protection'. The means by which she can secure for herself 'someone's protection' are diminishing with the years; her chances of appearing 'soft *and attractive'* are being impaired by the onset of middle age: "men lose interest quickly … Especially when the girl is over – thirty."

It is to Blanche's seductive softness that Stanley Kowalski (her brother-in-law) is hostile. Stanley is not a rounded character: rather, he is an essentially visceral creature, an archetypal male of the species, interested in sex ('animal joy') for its own sake. As such, he is able to perceive that Blanche is sexually available; he can sniff her out because she is on heat. By contrast, Blanche likes to give the impression that she is a genteel lady who belongs in polite society: in fact, a Southern aristocrat. In this drama, the conflict is between the illusion of refinement (which Blanche creates around herself) and the reality (that she has had a rough ride on a streetcar named Desire). The tragedy for her is that she is promiscuous, not because she is unable to keep control of her physical desire, but because she is in constant need of the psychological reassurance that physical contact gives her.

The 'streetcar' is an apt metaphor for human desire: after all, it is a tram which runs on rails and cannot deviate from the track. If there is a pun in Williams' title, then it is because Blanche's desire is not an insatiable lust, but a craving for psycho-sexual security ('shelter'/'protection') by which she is impelled towards her destination (asylum/grave) with equal force.

The reasons why Blanche has sex with Stanley in Scene X are problematic. If he rapes her, then it is symbolic of the Yankees' despoliation of Dixie in 1865. If she succumbs to him because she – like the Deep South itself – is exhausted of resources, then their act of intercourse also makes symbolic sense. If Blanche consents because she needs from

somewhere a sexual contact to keep herself sane, then it is because – as she finally confesses in an ironic turn of phrase – she has 'always depended on the kindness of strangers': that is, depended upon the company of strange men for psychological survival. If she consents because Stanley is the first man older than a teenager to excite her desire, then that also makes psychological sense.

For the protagonists of Williams' plays, there are two possible fates: EITHER Death is used to finalise the impossible agonies of human existence OR – which is far worse and more pessimistic – the individual protagonist is obliged to live on/forced to endure. In Blanche's case, it is not entirely clear which of the two fates awaits her. Williams' *dramatis personae* include references to 'Strange Man' and 'Strange Woman'; by contrast, his stage-directions in Scene XI insist that 'Doctor' and 'Matron' exhibit the appearance of institutionalized care. In Newcastle-under-Lyme School's production of February 2004, Doctor and Nurse were black-clad figures who, by their costumes, permitted the possibility that they were not only realistic officials of an asylum, come to take Blanche into psychiatric care, but also symbolic embodiments of Death: Grim Reapers equipped not with scythes, but with syringes.

SCENE I

Not for nothing is the epigraph for **A Streetcar Named Desire** taken from **The Broken Tower**, a work by the homosexual poet Hart Crane (1899-1932) who committed suicide. For the play itself presents us with a homosexual writer's vision of a broken world. First, Blanche DuBois is effectively a dramatic embodiment of Williams' own fragile, homosexual self; second, the crisis-point of the action involves the revelation of a homosexual episode which altered Blanche's life.

Margaret Drabble (*The Oxford Companion to English Literature*, 1985) writes that **A Streetcar Named Desire** is "a study of sexual frustration, violence and mental aberration set in New Orleans in which Blanche DuBois has her fantasies of refinement and grandeur brutally destroyed by Stanley Kowalski, her brother-in-law, whose animal nature both fascinates and repels her." It can look from this superficial profile as if Williams is writing this play simply to work out his own fantasies and neuroses, but in fact his play is nothing less than a study of personal identity: in other words, Williams makes out of his own problems a play which dramatises one human individual's search for a sense of identity.

Blanche does not know who she is: consequently, she is constantly devising strategies in order to keep hold of her sanity. It slowly becomes apparent that, under pressure from a series of adverse circumstances, her identity has disintegrated and that she is suffering the pain of a broken identity: in Hart Crane's words, she is living in a 'broken world'. In effect, she is constantly asking, "Who am I?" She has reached the stage at which every relationship into which she enters represents an attempt at self-definition.

The setting for the play is the cosmopolitan city of New Orleans. It is immensely significant that Williams sets the action in a poor quarter of the city for which the ironic name is Elysian Fields. This being so, Blanche's literal statement –

> "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!"

– is equally a metaphorical statement. Blanche – having metaphorically ridden 'a streetcar named Desire' [= slept around in a search for personal identity] – has ended up not in any sort of paradise, but on the wrong side of the tracks. By this single sentence, we are already given to understand that Blanche – both literally and

metaphorically – has reached the end of the line. Tennessee Williams' moral is that, if one searches for one's beautiful dream in entirely materialistic/physical terms, then one's paradise (Elysian Fields) won't be half as nice as one expects it to be: in fact, it will look like a poor quarter of New Orleans.

In **A Streetcar Named Desire**, Williams makes a criticism of The American Dream. The American Dream – enshrined in the American Constitution of 1776 – is a dream of spiritual fulfilment; it argues that all men, equal under the law, should be free to engage in 'the pursuit of happiness'. Ironically, this search for spiritual fulfilment quickly and easily becomes compromised and confused with the hell-bent pursuit of material success/affluence which in turn brings only spiritual emptiness.

Blanche is a Southern Belle. Her beautiful dream (of emotional fulfilment/of 'happiness') is appropriately embodied in Belle Reve, 'a great big place with white columns': in other words, her dream takes the architectural form of an opulent cotton-plantation at the centre of which stands a huge mansion identical to Tara in Margaret Mitchell's novel **Gone With The Wind** (1936). Given her affluent background, Blanche is class-conscious: that is, she is quick to turn up her dainty nose at the squalid smells of 'bananas and coffee' of which New Orleans is redolent.

What is more, Williams' stage-directions ("A cat screeches") explain that Blanche exists in a state of high nervous tension; her neurotic body-language and her reaction to the cat-screech tell us that she is like a cat on a hot tin roof. What has caused this condition? Like Henrik Ibsen's, Tennessee Williams' dramatic technique is to peel off the skins of an onion: in other words, his method involves supplying an audience with a series of clues to a character's past which only gradually complete an entire picture. From her dialogue with Eunice, we learn that Blanche ("I didn't mean to be rude, but –-") tends to make statements of which the very opposites are true. While she waits for Stella, her conduct with the tumbler of whisky ("She .... tosses it down and washes out the tumbler at the sink") reveals that she is a hardened drinker who is practised at concealing her alcoholic condition: "I've got to keep hold of myself!" Blanche is both a lush and a liar. As soon as Stella arrives, her behaviour with her little sister –

> "... this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn't mean to say that"

– confirms this tendency to make critical remarks and then pretend not to mean them. It illustrates too that she is especially concerned to deceive her sister: "I know you must have some liquor on the place. Where could it be, I wonder?" and "Now don't get worried, your sister hasn't turned into a drunkard". Blanche is not so much in denial as embarked on a strategy to 'keep hold' of herself: that is, to preserve – in undignified circumstances – a dignified sense of herself.

From the start, Blanche ("And turn that over-light off!") expresses her acute sensitivity to the 'merciless glare' of light – whether it be the electric light of the apartment or broad daylight (which might 'expose so total a ruin'). At a literal level, she is reluctant to expose her thirty-year-old complexion to male scrutiny; at a symbolic level, she is struggling to withstand the psychological pressure of having to live outside the boundaries of the old world-order within which she was raised. This said, she will go to extreme lengths in order to give the opposite impression: namely, that she is a composed lady who maintains high standards of decorum. This pretence – that she is a refined and sober aristocrat – means that she can soon be heard making a number of hypocritical statements: "What are you doing in a place like this?"/"Stella, there's only two rooms"/"Oh, you do have a bathroom!" Throughout the play, she endeavours to keep up the appearance of a Southern lady to whom manners are morals; she is

pretentious in that she pretends to uphold standards of moral rectitude (which she has let lapse) and preaches the values of respectability (which she has lost). Although she pretends not to be 'a drunkard', she is 'shaking all over and panting for breath' not on account of her nervous disposition, but on account of her alcohol-dependency. Although she has been dismissed from her school-teaching job for gross moral turpitude, she tells Stella that her superintendent Mr Graves has noted her nervous exhaustion and suggested that she 'take a leave of absence'.

Blanche (played in the original stage version of 1947 by Jessica Tandy) is a complex character: at one moment, she is as flimsy and as vulnerable as 'a moth'; at the next, she is as manipulative and self-centred as a minx. Her treatment of her own sister illustrates precisely the difficulty which an audience has in forming a fair judgment of her. For instance, the invidious statements with which she fills the gaps in their conversation –

> "You're all I've got in the world and you're not glad to see me"
>
> "You haven't said a word about my appearance"

– reveal her insecurity (which we can pity) and her self-obsession (which we can't). What is much worse, Stella's reward for responding with saintly compassion to Blanche's implicit cries for help ("You look just fine") can be a graceless ingratitude. This exchange –

> BLANCHE: I weigh what I weighed the summer you left Belle Reve. The summer Dad died and you left us ...
> STELLA [*a little wearily*]: It's just incredible, Blanche, how well you're looking.
> BLANCHE: You see I still have that awful vanity about my looks even now that my looks are slipping [*She laughs nervously and glances at Stella for reassurance*]
> STELLA [*dutifully*]: They haven't slipped one particle

– exemplifies Blanche's temerity: beginning with a barbed criticism of Stella's self-respecting decision to leave Mississippi for Louisiana to make her own living, it ends with a plea 'for reassurance' from her. Envious of her sibling's relative good luck, Blanche wants to make her feel guilty for having enjoyed it; rather than retaliate against this emotional blackmail, Stella, mindful of Blanche's slipping looks, pardons it and responds 'dutifully'.

It counts against Blanche that her strategy with Stella is to go on cruelly reproaching her. Having established with Stella that she is 'not very well', Blanche feels entitled to express her resentment: that Stella has left their plantation home Belle Reve and found happiness with 'a Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps'. Characteristically, her tactic is to preface her recriminations with a denial that she means to recriminate:

> "Well, Stella – you're going to reproach me, I know that you're bound to reproach me – but before you do – take into consideration – you left! I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked out for yourself!"

Christopher Bigsby writes that Blanche is 'an actress' and that her 'character' consists of 'a series of performed roles, constructions'. In her melodramatic speeches to Stella, she engages in such an intense self-dramatisation ("I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body!") that it becomes typically impossible to gauge whether her account of events is accurate enough to inspire any sympathy for her:

"Yes, accuse me! Sit there and stare at me, thinking I let the place go!
I let the place go! Where were you? In bed with your – Polack!"

Blanche's speeches are punctuated by italicised emphases and exclamation-marks which seek to thrust upon Stella the blame for the loss of the DuBois estate, Belle Reve. Whilst she was being heroic, Stella was being selfish; whilst she was required to mortgage the property to pay off death duties, Stella could do nothing more responsible than have sex with a foreigner. That final sneer at Stanley's race – 'Polack' – is totally consistent with the attitude of the Confederate States and prepares us for Blanche's horror at the prospect of miscegenation: "How lovely to have a baby!" [Scene II]. In the School production of 2004, Blanche's trunk was duly draped with the Confederate flag.

Throughout **A Streetcar Named Desire**, the dramatic conflict is between Blanche (a white 'moth') and Stanley ('a red-stained package' of meat). When Stanley arrives, it is plain that he is of 'a different species'; the antithesis between them is vivid. Williams' description of Stanley Kowalski is that of a male stereotype; it embodies the attributes of the masculine hero ('a richly feathered male bird') so predictably that its clichés seem unlikely ever to have been assembled in one incredible hulk. Stanley is a Caliban-figure: that is, an essentially physical creature in whom the visceral element ('animal joy') predominates. Whereas Blanche (from Mississippi) represents an old idealism, Stanley (of Polish extraction) is her diametric opposite, intended by his manly strength to represent a new realism in American life; but because he lives his life purely in pursuit of material satisfaction ('pleasure with women', 'good drink and food', 'his car, his radio') the 'gaudy seed-bearer' remains emotionally un-enriched/spiritually impoverished and ultimately becomes a corruption of the American Dream (as J. T. Adams defines it).

Williams' stage-directions are deeply indebted to the method of acting pioneered by Lee Strasberg at the Actors' Studio in New York in the 1940s. According to Strasberg's method, an actor – such as Marlon Brando – took possession of his role by exploring the psychological hinterland of his character. Williams' stage-directions are deliberately designed to hint at the concealed area of a character's personality: that is, to help an actor imagine what it is like to possess that character's psychological make-up. David Thomson *(Marlon Brando*, 2003) pays tribute to Brando's 'unprecedented naturalism'. In portraying Stanley at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in 1947, Brando's primary mannerism is the rhythm of his breathing: "He mumbles ... he often refuses to be heard ... makes a cult of new, perilous, unclear forms of utterance in that they dramatize how far the play is something only in his head, of his doing and making" [rather than the pre-meditated work of a playwright]. In short, Brando – who cuts his white t-shirts to the biceps and wears nothing under his tight jeans – aims to present us with a mind in the act of thinking.

Williams writes that Stanley 'sizes women up at glance, with sexual classifications': that is, he looks at women, sees what they are like naked and 'determines' whether they will sleep with him. When he first sees Blanche, it is clear from his 'crude stare' that he has classified her sexually; at once, he tests her response to his masculine attractiveness: "He starts to remove his shirt". Blanche disguises her reaction to his manly torso in guarded, refined language: "if it's not inconvenient for you all." Her use of litotes involves a five-syllable adjective which reminds Stanley that, by sharp contrast, he is 'the unrefined type'. His counter-attack is brutal: "You were married once, weren't you?" Instantly, Williams deploys his major stage-direction –

The music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance

– in order to signify that foremost among Blanche's formative experiences is an early marriage which (for reasons still to be disclosed) she cannot forget. The 'polka tune' which Blanche associates with this bad memory is in fact a waltz; what is more, the Varsouviana is one of the waltzes which in the 1940s were popular in the clubs frequented by homosexual men; in other words, Williams is encoding in his choice of tune a proleptic reference to the reason why Blanche's marriage to Allan Grey failed. Blanche's reply – "The boy – the boy died" – peels off a skin of the onion.

SCENE II

At the start of this scene, Stella is preparing to go out with Blanche because it is the night of the week on which Stanley plays poker in their apartment with his work-mates. So that Blanche does not encounter drunken men playing cards for money, Stella is taking her to Galatoire's Restaurant and then 'to one of the little places in the Quarter'.

Stanley's selfish request "How about my supper, huh?" is intended to remind us of his appetitive nature; it has distinct echoes of Caliban's "I must eat my dinner" and reinforces the point that Stanley is an animal hunk, a creature motivated entirely by his testosterone-fuelled appetites and desires. Furthermore, such a blunt question demonstrates the degree to which Stanley is a troglodyte, a male chauvinist pig, hanging back with the neanderthal brutes [Scene IV].

Blanche is obsessed with taking a bath: when Stanley asks where she is, Stella replies that she is 'soaking in a hot tub to quiet her nerves'. At a literal level, she is simply relaxing, treating herself to a form of stress-relief, of therapy; at a metaphorical level, she can be seen as attempting to wash off the moral dirt of her present identity and cleanse/purify herself. After all, 'blanche' (ironically here) is the French adjective for 'white' in its feminine form.

Stella's line – "She's been through such an ordeal" – opens up the direction of the action. The dramatic interest lies in discovering exactly what Blanche's 'ordeal' has been. Although we know already that her young husband died, how much of an ordeal remains difficult to assess because Blanche – as we heard from her narrative in Scene I – is inclined to self-dramatisation. Singing in the bath, she pictures herself as 'a captive maid': ironic in that she is no maid, but un-ironic in that she has become a captive of her decadent way of life, riding a streetcar named Desire from which she cannot disembark.

Stella's imperatives to Stanley – "Admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful" – recognise how important it is to bolster Blanche's fragile ego. Moreover, these imperatives remind us that Blanche's ego tends to define itself in terms of her outward appearance; 'her little weakness' (as Stella calls it) is her 'awful vanity' (as Blanche herself has confessed in Scene I). For female vanity, Stanley ("Yeah, I get the idea") has little time; he is more concerned to explore the circumstances under which Belle Reve has been 'lost': where, he wonders, is 'the bill of sale'? Given its origins, New Orleans is a city in which certain tenets of French law remain on the statute book:

> "In the state of Louisiana, we have the Napoleonic Code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband"

Stanley is a barrack-room lawyer who seems continually to be saying to himself, "I know my rights." His basic stance is, "Nobody gets the better of me!" It is entirely consistent with this crude stance that Stanley should confront the world at its most primitive level: "And when you're swindled under the Napoleonic code I'm swindled too. And I don't like to be swindled!" In such outbursts, Brando could again be heard 'muddying speech' [David Thomson] in order to convey Stanley's animosity.

Here, Stanley storms into Blanche's room, opens her trunk and 'jerks out an armful of dresses'. His rough handling of Blanche's wardrobe implies his contempt for her glamorous way of life and an angry suspicion that she has sold Belle Reve to pay for it:

> "Look at these feathers and furs that she comes here to preen herself in! What's this here? A solid gold dress, I believe! And this one! What is these here? Fox- pieces! [*He blows on them*] Genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long! Where are your fox-pieces, Stella?"

Stella replies that Stanley has misunderstood the Southern way of life: that such a wardrobe is not a grand acquisition, but a necessity for a girl from Mississippi if she is to receive any gentlemen callers and attend social gatherings. In this context, Stanley's use of language –

> "I got an acquaintance who deals in this sort of merchandise.
> I'll have him in here to appraise it"

– places him in both educational and social terms: in particular, those polysyllabic nouns ('acquaintance', 'merchandise') and that verb 'appraise' are daring ventures into the lexicon of a more professional and sophisticated world than that of the travelling salesman. When he discovers Blanche's tiara, he repeats himself – "I have an acquaintance that works in a jewelry store. I'll have him in here to make an appraisal of this" – as if he is proud not only to have so many acquaintances who can appraise things, but also to have such usages in his vocabulary.

One of Stanley's major dramatic functions is to be critical of Blanche's Southern sensibility: that is, ironic at the expense of her aristocratic pretensions, her old-worldliness. When he raids Blanche's trunk, both his exaggerations ('a solid gold dress', 'ropes of them') and his rhetorical metaphors ("What is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver who brings up sunken treasures?") are hostile to her imperial image of herself. Indeed, Stanley's line –

> "The Kowalskis and the DuBois have different notions"

– makes explicit the central conflict of the play: between Stanley's new materialism (which won't have any truck with the fine and fancy ways of the past) and Blanche's old romanticism (which belongs to a civilisation which has gone with the wind). The irony of the conflict is that both the Kowalskis (Capricorn goats) and the DuBois (Virgoan maids) mistake physical desire for spiritual fulfillment. To survive in post-War America, it seems necessary to ride a streetcar named Desire.

Williams' costume-direction ('a red satin robe') is deliberately designed to indicate that Blanche DuBois – if not Scarlett O'Hara – is a scarlet woman.[1] After she has soaked in a hot tub, Blanche tends to feel that she has assumed a fresh identity; she emerges 'feeling like a brand new human being'. Her remark – "Excuse me while I slip on my pretty new dress" – is wickedly provocative: that is, it draws Stanley's attention to her sexual attractiveness in a way which he cannot ignore. Even more provocative is Blanche's invitation to Stanley to button up her dress; her first instruction ("Some buttons in back") assumes a familiarity with her brother-in-law which her second instruction ("You may enter") then pretends by its courtly formality to deny. Blanche's mock-propriety, her coy insistence on decency, fails to disguise from Stanley the fact that she is flirting with him.

1. In Revelation Chapter 17, the 'Whore of Babylon' (actually, a metaphor for the city) is described as a woman 'arrayed in purple and scarlet colour'.

Williams is carefully manipulating his audience's response to Blanche. Blanche's explanation of her fur-pieces ("Those were a tribute from an admirer of mine") is a classic example of her ostentatiousness and her pretentiousness. The speed at which she can invent a fictional admirer indicates her congenital readiness to assume airs and graces; her attention-seeking riles Stanley ("I don't go in for that stuff") and leaves him impatient to deflate her grand 'notion' of herself. Ultimately, this reaction explains why Stanley (who dislikes Blanche) has sex with her in Scene X. She is not to be merely another conquest; rather, she is to be punished for her false air of superiority, for her pretence that she is a higher form of animal than he is.

Stanley (who is some kind of travelling salesman) is not unkempt, but uncouth. As Blanche puts it, he is 'simple, straightforward and honest' and – recalling his earlier description of himself as an 'unrefined type' – 'a little bit on the primitive side'. In an effort to engage him, Blanche remarks that 'life is too full of evasions and ambiguities' and adds that she likes 'an artist who paints in strong, bold colours, primary colours': in literal terms, she means that she likes men who are men. For reasons which will emerge, she is stating that she likes men whose sexual orientations are not ambiguous, but 'straightforward':

> BLANCHE: That was why, when you walked in here last night, I said to myself – "My sister has married a man!" Of course, that was all I could tell about you.
> STANLEY [*booming*]: Now let's cut the re-bop!

Despite her literary training, Blanche has not espoused the Renaissance view of 'a man': although he is a man of action (he goes bowling) and a man of passion, Stanley is not a man of education, even embodying Alexander Pope's adage that 'a little learning is a dangerous thing'. In fact, Stanley is a human animal: "animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes". He exists in only two dimensions, each defined by an appetite. Even though he is Polish, he is conspicuous by an Italian machismo: that is, his pride in his manhood, his capacities to provide meat and to supply seed. Being so 'primitive', he is very territorial: "There is such a thing in this State of Louisiana as the Napoleonic code". Blanche's response to his attempt to talk business is frivolous:

> BLANCHE: My, but you have an impressive judicial air!
> *She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it.*

In fact, Blanche (who hates 'evasions') makes this condescending comment because she is trying to evade the issue of Belle Reve; by means of her playful action, she is attempting to distract his attention from the fact that she has forfeited the DuBois estate because – for a reason as yet undisclosed – she could not keep up the mortgage payments. At this point, Blanche alienates the sympathies of an audience which – like Stanley – knows no better than to suspect her of 'some kind of treachery'. Not twenty lines later, an audience's response to her may alter if it senses that the background to her loss of Belle Reve may be more complicated than a simple case of embezzlement. When Stanley starts roughly to open up compartments of her trunk, he discovers correspondence far more sensitive than solicitors' letters:

> BLANCHE: These are love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy.
> [*He snatches them up. She speaks fiercely.*] Give those back to me!

As soon as Stanley treats her 'love-letters' with contempt, we begin again to feel sympathy for her; as soon as he shows scant respect for the 'poems a dead boy wrote', we are alert once more to Blanche's 'hurt' and able to take her side. In manhandling these poems, Stanley has touched a raw nerve in Blanche. At this point, another skin

peels off the onion: evidently, her feelings for the 'dead boy' are still live; whatever wound her young husband's death inflicted on her, it still – some thirteen unlucky years later – has not healed.

When Blanche agrees to 'endow' him with the papers, Stanley (predictably!) announces that he has 'a lawyer acquaintance who will study these out'; in addition, he blurts out that Stella is 'going to have a baby'. To this sudden revelation, Blanche's attitude must be seen in historical and social context:

> "The Northern ideals of progress, material advancement, the mingling of diverse cultures, freedom and mobility – these were held suspect in a [Southern] way of life that invested considerable energy and talent in sustaining the values of a cherished and gentler era."
>
> Donald Spoto: *The Life of Tennessee Williams*

At first, she is not so certain that it is 'lovely' for Stella to bear Stanley's baby: that is, to participate so directly in 'the mingling of diverse cultures'. Her true feelings about this turn of events (which are less of unconfined joy for her sister, more of concern for the 'cherished' way of life in Dixie) do not become explicit until she articulates this possibility for the future development of the American nation: "But maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve." She proposes nothing less than a new vision of American society. As she and Stella head into the cosmopolitan streets of New Orleans, her stuttered line – "Which way do we – go now – Stella?" – is both literal and metaphorical: it asks for both geographical and spiritual directions.

SCENE III
The Poker Night

Williams' stage-direction refers to 'a picture of Vincent Van Gogh's of a billiard-parlour at night'. In the School production of 2004, a print of Paul Cezanne's **The Card Players** hung on the set wall.

For this scene, Blanche's allusion in Scene II to 'strong, bold colours, primary colours' sets the tone. The 'primary colours' in which Williams paints both costumes and lights in this scene are designed to illustrate that the four poker players – Stanley, Steve, Pablo and Mitch – are 'at the peak of their physical manhood'. In their multi-coloured bowling-shirts, they are uncomplicated men whose vision of life involves an uncompromising attitude to their appetites: 'watermelon', 'whisky' and women. To show that he is at only one remove from a caveman, Stanley 'tosses some watermelon rinds on the floor'. Only Harold Mitchell feels uncomfortable in this unruly atmosphere. Mitch ("I gotta sick mother") is a mummy's boy who is more 'sensitive' than the other three. As a result, he becomes the butt of their 'coarse' jokes: when he retreats to the bathroom, Stanley sneers at his weak constitution: "Hurry back and we'll fix you a sugar-tit". In his eyes, Mitch is a wimp; he is baby who needs a dummy, not a man who wants a whisky bottle.

When Blanche and Stella return from the Quarter, it is 2.30 am. Formally, Stella introduces Blanche to Steve ('Mr Hubbel') and to Pablo ('Mr Gonzales'). Lest his friends pander to her ladylike sense of superiority, Stanley ("Nobody's going to get up") makes sure that they stay seated at the card table. Furthermore, he reacts grossly to Stella's reasonable suggestion that they 'call it quits after one more hand': he 'gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh'. To show his dominance, he is prepared to embarrass his wife, smacking her on the bottom 'in front of people'.

At this point, Williams engineers the meeting between Blanche and Mitch. Although Mitch is unprepossessing, Blanche suddenly espies a chance of escape from her destitution and 'looks after him with a certain interest'. Stella explains:

> "He's on the precision bench in the spare parts department.
> At the plant Stanley travels for."

Williams is never specific about the kind of work which Stanley and Mitch do: from this description, it seems that they are employed in some form of light engineering. The point is that they get their hands dirty; as manual workers, they can be seen as contributing to the American economy in the post-War period, being materially useful to an extent likely to offend Southern sensibilities.

While the sisters talk, Blanche begins to undress: "She takes off her blouse and stands in her pink silk brassiere". Through the portières, her outline is visible to the men at the kitchen table: although she affects surprise, Blanche ("Oh, am I?") knows that they can see her in her underwear and, as soon as Stella goes into the bathroom, turns on the radio and 'moves back into the streak of light'. Instantly, Blanche gains the attention that she seeks: "Who turned that on in there?" First, Stanley 'jumps up and, crossing to the radio, turns it off'; the look which he exchanges with Blanche – seated, but still in her bra and with her arms stretched behind her head – has a proleptic effect, preparing us (as it does) for the sex between them in Scene X. This is the second time that Blanche (who originally worried whether the apartment would be 'decent') has let him see her half-dressed. Then, Stanley goes back and 'jerks roughly at the curtains to close them' as if he, as much as his card partners, is now struggling to stop 'looking through them drapes' at her.

When Mitch heads once more for the bathroom, he has to pass through Blanche's room. In front of Stanley, who makes no secret of his sex 'drive', Blanche flaunts herself; in front of Mitch, who apologises even for 'drinking beer', she affects a maidenly modesty: "She has slipped on the dark red satin wrapper", finally covering herself up. In her dealings with Mitch, Blanche's complex character is immediately in evidence. When Mitch produces a cigarette-case from a girl who is dead, Blanche responds 'in a tone of deep sympathy' for which her own past is responsible; from her experience, she is able to volunteer the sombre conclusion that 'a person who hasn't known any sorrow' is a 'shuperficial' person. Although she is speaking in a slurred voice, she is speaking here from the heart, telling the truth; unfortunately, four sentences later, she is lying again: "I'm not accustomed to having more than one drink." Throughout the play, the level at which an audience feels sympathy for her never stops fluctuating.

Mitch is Blanche's ideal man in that he is naive enough to pander to her aristocratic sense of herself: "Miss DuBois". So inexperienced is he with women that he cannot see that Blanche is lying not only about her drinking habits, but also about her age. There is no wonder that Blanche, having told him that the 25-year-old Stella is 'somewhat older' than herself, asks him to cover the naked light-bulb. Her declaration –

> "I can't stand a naked light-bulb, any more than I can a rude remark
> or a vulgar action"

– is both affectedly false and absolutely true: it is false that she cannot stand vulgar actions and true that she cannot bear to be viewed in a clear light, both literally and metaphorically. At one moment, Blanche is psychologically insecure, fragile as that moth; at the next, she is calculating, carving for Mitch an image of herself which will appeal to his old-fashioned sense of decency. Blanche's presentation of herself as 'an old maid schoolteacher' is ironic in two senses: first, that she is not a maid; second, that

she is unmarried, but not for any of the reasons why old maids are unmarried. Dutifully, Mitch ("You're certainly not an old maid") responds to her cunning challenge; predictably, Blanche, casting him in the unlikely role of a chivalrous knight, expresses an appreciation of his gallantry: "Thank you, sir!"

Stanley's physical relationship with Stella is an emblem of the idea that he is a bestial reincarnation of Shakespeare's Caliban. It is significant that he 'stalks fiercely' after his wife and that her epithet for him – "Drunk – animal thing, you!" – should remind us of Prospero's conclusion that Caliban is a 'thing of darkness'. The laconic stage-direction –

There is the sound of a blow

– points to an incident of domestic violence, of wife-beating. Here, Stanley (a 'whelp of a Polack') is seen as behaving like a neanderthal man who beats his woman into submission and then drags her back to his cave by the hair. His instant remorse on hearing that his 'baby doll' has left him simply signifies that he experiences emotion at a rudimentary level; in the iconic moment of the play, Stanley ("STELL – LAHHHHHH!") is depicted as 'a baying hound', howling after his lost mate, uttering 'the moan of the lonesome beast' (as David Thomson puts it). It is therefore wholly appropriate that Stanley and Stella will be re-united 'with low, animal moans'.

When Blanche re-appears, she is totally confused by the realisation that her petite sister has forgotten the blow and forgiven the bestial husband who struck it. Suddenly, her So uthern primness ("I'm not properly dressed") seems less affected and more pitiful; in the vulgar world of the Quarter, her sense of values cannot find a home, even in her own sister's apartment. Her final line to Mitch –

"Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now"

– insists on the need for compassion in a changing world and anticipates Blanche's final line in the play [Scene XI]. As she has feared and predicted, there is a new order: if a Southern damsel-in-distress cannot count on the charity of her own family, then she will need to depend instead 'on the kindness of strangers'.

SCENE IV

Scene IV ("It is early the following morning") takes place on the morning after the night before and is a scene of characteristic complexity. Throughout the play, Blanche reveals her capacity for simultaneously holding in her head two attitudes which contradict each other. In this scene, Williams dramatises the conflict between two such contradictory attitudes.

Consistently, Williams' explicit stage-directions are pointers to the precise conflict. Here, his direction to the sound technician – "There is a confusion of street cries like a choral chant" – suggests that Elysian Fields is an urban jungle where ignoble savages roam in search of mates. It is in this context that Williams' description of Stella – "Her face is serene in the early morning sunlight" – can make sense. On the one hand, it is clear that Stella is a victim of domestic abuse, a battered wife; on the other, it is equally clear that she is blissfully happy to be pregnant by her abuser: "One hand rests on her belly ..." On returning to the apartment, Blanche makes a 'hysterical' show of concern for her sister's welfare:

BLANCHE: When I found out you'd been insane enough to come back in here after what happened – I started to rush in after you!
STELLA: I'm glad you didn't.

Deaf to Stella's humour, she takes a "How could you?" approach to her married sister's sex-life: "Why, you must have slept with him!" To begin with, Blanche *sounds* as if this primitive state of affairs is quite beyond her understanding. During Stella's justification of Stanley's violent behaviour, there are indeed moments when **A Streetcar Named Desire** shows its age: "He didn't know what he was doing." At first, Stella remains sanguine, arguing in effect that her husband's ugly lapse of self-control ("Stanley's always smashed things") is simply something which a little wife must indulge. She is ready to excuse him on the grounds that such displays of physical exuberance are only to be expected of a he-man.

Then, Stella goes so far as to say that Stanley's wild behaviour entertains, impresses and – yes – arouses her. Whenever he shows off his manly prowess, she feels a *frisson* of desire: "I was – sort of – thrilled by it." To begin with, Blanche ("You're married to a madman!") seems to know nothing of the sado-masochistic element of some man-woman relationships and can't imagine why her well-bred sister would want to stay in such a liaison. Of course, her assumption ("You can get out") is disingenuous: with such passion, sado-masochistic and otherwise, she herself is only too familiar. As becomes clear, she is disapproving of Stella's taste in men at the same time as she is able fully to appreciate it; at the same time as she frowns sternly on Stella's sexual inclinations, she can see what appeals to her. In short, her original horror was a mock-horror.

As Scene IV progresses, it becomes apparent that Blanche *is* acquainted with Stanley's type: "What such a man has to offer is animal force. But the only way to live with such a man is to – go to bed with him!" As Stella continues to romanticise Stanley's exhibitions of brute force, so Blanche forgets to be horrified. Here, Williams organises a stretch of dialogue which, while it accounts for his memorable title, reveals the genuine extent to which Blanche is a woman of the world:

> STELLA: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant.
> [*Pause*]
> BLANCHE: What you are talking about is brutal desire – just – Desire! – the name of that 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.

To these exchanges, Blanche's contribution is remarkable for her self-knowledge: now, she admits candidly to knowing what can happen 'when the devil is in you'. Instantly, the tram on which she has arrived destitute at Stella's door becomes a metaphor for her own sexual adventurism/her promiscuity. According to this image, it is a series of rough rides on the streetcar of Desire which has 'brought' her to her state of complete destitution. Significantly, Blanche is 'ashamed' of her sex-addiction: in Scene V, she will explain that, although her lust was *not* for her next adrenalin-rush of rough sex, but for a lee in the emotional 'storm', it has done her no good/ruined her. It is therefore out of shame and in the voice of experience that she expresses her disgust with Stella's marriage and essays an anthropological analysis of her husband, an archetype of the post-War American. In Stanley Kowalski, the male of this species appears un-evolved. In Blanche's estimation, he is of Eastern European descent and accordingly coarse and 'common': "There's something downright – *bestial* – about him!" She depicts her brother-in-law as a cave-man, not least because this incarnation gives point to the meat-package which he carried in Scene I and the poker party which he organised in Scene III. Dramatic irony occurs when Stanley finds himself eavesdropping upon this dissection of his character. 'Holding some packages' and dressed 'in grease-stained seersucker pants', he overhears what Blanche is saying about him:

> "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. 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!"

'Licking his lips' and moving 'stealthily', Stanley conforms completely to Blanche's view that he is a throw-back in the evolutionary process: because he is so far removed from a Southern gentleman, he does not represent 'progress' in the 'dark march' of human civilisation and is therefore no match for a young lady of Western European extraction: namely, Stella DuBois. The language in which Blanche exhorts her sister to leave him – "*Don't – don't hang back with the brutes*" – implores her not only to separate herself from an individual man, but also to advance the development of the American race.

Ominously for Blanche, Stanley is both a proud man and a proud American (Scene VIII). From this point onwards, Williams shuffles multiple layers of awareness: henceforward, Stanley knows (although Blanche does not know that he knows) that Blanche regards him as both a lower form of human life and an inferior breed of American. Immediately, then, there is a tense and complicated moment: "Another train passes outside." When Stanley finally announces his presence to the two women, we are still awaiting Stella's response to Blanche's italicised plea: "Stella has embraced him with both arms, fiercely, and full in the view of Blanche." Not by words, but by her actions, Stella gives her answer, but without realising that she is now humiliating her sister at the same time. The stage-direction – "Over her head he grins through the curtains at Blanche" – signals a smug triumph for Stanley's values over hers. Because it shares his advantage over her, the audience winces: not for the last time, he proves her nemesis – an outcome at which the 'blue piano' hints with an increasing intensity.

SCENE V

Blanche is a representative of a decadent society, of a 'broken world'. Her frailty, however, is not only that of the Belle Reve civilisation, but also that of a personality who here describes herself ironically as a bird/a butterfly 'on the wing'. In this scene, Williams emphasises the conflict at the heart of this drama in astrological terms: encoded, it is a conflict between Stanley the Goat (Capricorn) and Blanche the Virgin (Virgo); decoded, it is a conflict between his new/Northern European realism and her old/Southern idealism – at the end of which her virginal idealism is violated. It is by no means inappropriate that such a 'flighty' female as Blanche should be discovered at the Hotel Flamingo.

Williams' stage-directions prepare us for Blanche's use of diction. At this crisis-point, Blanche is almost 'faint' at the thought that Stella will discover the truth about her flightiness. In order to suppress her panic, Blanche embarks upon an aria in which she makes the case for female promiscuity or even prostitution: namely, that fragile/frail/flimsy/flighty things – significantly, wearing the 'colours of butterfly wings' – have to be 'seductive': that is, seduce men in order to find shelter beneath a roof that does not leak.

Blanche sees herself at the epi-centre of an emotional storm: 'storm, all storm'. Her argument is existentialist in character: namely, that we always need someone else to give us the impression that we exist. For Blanche, 'making love' is the only way in which she can receive physical confirmation of her identity; out of the bed, her identity disintegrates with the result that she enters a 'broken world'. Blanche's butterfly-wings (soft, idealistic colours) are in stark contrast with Stanley's bowling-shirts (harsh, realistic colours). Blanche's aria involves an euphemistic confession of her true nature:

in her vocabulary, a brief sexual encounter becomes 'temporary magic'; each one-night-stand becomes 'one night's shelter'. Blanche, then, has ceased to exist spiritually; she comes alive only in the material/physical world.

Blanche is a volatile character: for example, she changes from morbidity to gaiety at the sight of a coke bottle. Her physical clutching at the bottle illustrates her dire need for material contact in order to give herself a sense of reality, an identity. Mitch's dramatic function is to provide Blanche with a suitor in whose eyes she can regain her lost 'respect' and appear 'prim and proper'. If she can earn Mitch's respect, then she will regain her self-respect/her sense of identity. For this reformation of her character to take place, it is necessary that Mitch should be denied the access to her body which other men have been freely granted; ironically, she has refused to 'put out' for Mitch because she 'wants' him. Blanche – in answer to Stella's question – wants Mitch, not because she desires him, but because she wants a rest ("I want to rest!") from riding the streetcar named Desire.

The episode in which Blanche confronts the Young Man from *The Evening Star* sheds further light on her character. From this episode, it becomes clear that she has a predilection for young men, not because she has an over-active sexual appetite, but essentially because they recreate her feelings for Allan Grey. In order to overcome her fear of being 30-something, Blanche looks for reassurance in two directions: both into the hand-mirror and into the eyes of a toy boy who resembles her late husband. Blanche tries to dignify her sexual thirst ("You make my mouth water") by fantasising that this very ordinary young man is 'like a prince out of the Arabian Nights'; her idealisation of him hints strongly at a state of arrested development.

Blanche's epithet for Mitch 'My Rosenkavalier' is ironic at Mitch's expense because Mitch – who is an anti-romantic figure – is the complete antithesis of the tall, dark, handsome man to whom the name applies. She christens Mitch in this unlikely fashion, not in order to aggrandise him, but in order to re-create her romantic idea of herself.

SCENE VI

Williams' stage-direction states categorically that Blanche has a 'neurasthenic personality': that is, she has been shell-shocked/traumatised by her formative experiences in early adulthood.

It is often important to see one scene through the window of another: in this case, it is ironic that Mitch – Blanche's 'Rosenkavalier' – should have taken her out to an amusement park and won for her a 'plaster statuette of Mae West', [1] for this statuette symbolises the tackiness of their relationship. Mitch is an archetypal figure of stolidity; he is important, not for his romantic charm, but for his 'stolid' dependability. Consequently, Blanche's grim line – "Is that streetcar named Desire still grinding along the tracks at this hour?" – is ironic at his expense: in other words, he is a romantic lead for whom she has no desire. It is with Mitch that Blanche tries to regain the aristocratic/romantic sense of identity which she 'lost' with Belle Reve. Ironically, Mitch comes to represent her beautiful dream of a cavalier figure who will sweep her off her feet and with whom she will live happily ever after.

[2] Mae West (1893-1980) is a Hollywood legend, a blonde comedienne renowned for her statuesque figure and her raunchy one-liners.

With Mitch, she endeavours to re-invent the romantic idea of herself which she lost ten years ago. Recalling her interlude with the Young Man, her notion that 'the lady must entertain the gentleman' sounds not quaint, but bitterly ironic. Blanche knows – whereas Mitch doesn't – that, if the lady does not 'entertain'/'put out', then – in the parlance of seedy hotel rooms – there will be 'no dice'.

Mitch's clumsy request – "Can I – uh – kiss you – goodnight?" – illustrates how sharply his personality is at variance with that of a dashing cavalier. It turns out that his romantic clumsiness has been exacerbated by Blanche's tactical need to 'discourage' any physical 'familiarity' further than a kiss: in other words, she asks him to unhand her, not simply because she dislikes him, but because – in order to get off the streetcar named Desire – she must preserve her precious image as 'a girl alone in the world'. Blanche's use of the future tense ("or she'll be lost") is disingenuous. She is of course speaking from past experience when she reflects that a girl who cannot control her sexual nature is likely to endure the pain of a lost identity.

Blanche's decision to light a candle ("I'm lighting a candle") is symbolic of the personality that she will describe to us by the end of this scene: that is, a vulnerable personality in need of 'protection'/'shelter' to prevent herself from being blown out.

Her attempt to trap Mitch is a blatant attempt to free herself from her sleazy existence and to find such 'shelter'. How desperate this remedy is can be judged by the conflict between Blanche's self-dramatisation ("Je suis la Dame aux Camellias") and Mitch's considerable capacity to discourse upon the properties of an alpaca overcoat; he is not much of an Armand! Mitch – who sweats profusely and is extremely interested in uninteresting things – is nevertheless cast in the role of Blanche's Mr Right. Her flattering references to his 'bone-structure' and 'physique' are euphemistic descriptions of an obesity; she humours him ("It's awe-inspiring") in order to flatter him and to retain his interest.

When Mitch picks her up, Blanche affects 'demureness' in order to stop his hands wandering; once more, she flatters him ("You're a natural gentleman") in a disingenuous endeavour to avoid physical contact. But Blanche's comment – "I guess it is just that I have old-fashioned ideals" – is not ultimately disingenuous; she has retained her old-fashioned ideals, but has failed to live up to them in reality. Blanche resists Mitch's suggestion that they should make up a foursome with Stanley and Stella **a]** because Stanley, knowing that Blanche is no lady, will treat her commonly and **b]** because Stanley, who knows somebody called Shaw, is aware of her shady past. At this point, Blanche judges it timely to launch a pre-emptive strike against the threat that Stanley poses to her relationship with Mitch: first, she claims that he is 'insufferably rude' and 'goes out of his way' to malign her; second, she espies a 'sort of commonness' that renders him incapable of appreciating Blanche's refinement; third, he is hostile towards her because 'in some perverse kind of way' he has sexual designs on her.

Blanche steers Mitch's question about her age away from a direct answer towards an even more delicate question. Blanche's sympathy for Mitch's imminent loneliness appears genuinely to overwhelm her and to provoke the full and detailed explanation of her own loneliness. Blanche's speech – interrupted though it is by atmospheric sound-effects – is an aria in which she reveals her dramatic past history and suddenly supplies us with powerful reasons for sympathising entirely with her flawed personality:

- Aged sixteen, she married Allan Grey;
- she came 'suddenly into a room' and found him in a homosexual embrace;
- on that same night, she tells him that he 'disgusts her'
- whereupon he goes out to the lakeside and shoots himself.

Delivered by candlelight, Blanche's aria has the dramatic impact of a revelation after which an audience is unable to view her so harshly again. After this central epiphany, the final skin has been peeled off the onion; in Ibsenesque fashion, Blanche stands before us for the first time in a true light and invites our judgment. Blanche's subsequent career has been attributable to this central cause; her melodramatic clutching at Mitch ("Sometimes – there's God – so quickly!") is a final attempt to step free of the quick-sands.

SCENE VII

The function of Scene VII is to raise the consciousness of both characters and audience-members to the same level. While Blanche is 'soaking in a hot tub', Stanley is responsible for two revelations. First, he reveals to Stella *and the audience* that Blanche is 'no lily' and that, after moving to the Hotel Flamingo, she had become 'a town character', a Babylonian whore; it is at this point that Blanche's level of awareness and ours are finally equal.

Until this point, Stella has been prepared to give Blanche the benefit of the doubt on the grounds that she is 'sensitive'; from this point, Stella – if she wishes to take Blanche's part – will have to do so in face of the overwhelming evidence that Blanche is 'famous in Laurel' for her 'private social life'. Now that the 'cat is out of the bag', now that the trouble with Dame Blanche is public knowledge, Stella's defence of her sister will need to be more resourceful than a blanket refusal to believe Shaw's accusations.

It is significant that throughout Stanley's report upon Blanche's career at the Hotel Flamingo ("Your sister was one of the places called 'Out-of-Bounds'") Blanche is to be heard singing **Paper Moon**, for the lyric – "But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me" – is central to our understanding of Blanche's personality. In the end, there is nothing ironic about this hypothesis, for it outlines the basis on which Blanche would be able to gain a secure sense of identity: that is, if Mitch were to believe in her, then she might live in a world in which her paper-thin ideals could be reinforced and realised. The song exactly states her position.

The second of Stanley's revelations is that Blanche was kicked out of her High School teaching job for forming a liaison with a seventeen-year-old boy. Stella is faced with the fact that the High School Superintendent, Mr Graves, sacked Dame Blanche for gross moral turpitude. At the same time, the audience is faced with a fact that enables it to understand Blanche's pass at the seventeen-year-old newspaper boy. For Stella – in leaping to mitigate the charge that Blanche is flighty – reminds us that, 'when she was young, very young, she had an experience that – killed her illusions!' In running after seventeen-year-olds, Blanche is clearly trying to mend the 'broken world' of her past.

Stella reminds us that Blanche 'married a boy who wrote poetry', her euphemistic way of saying that Allan was a 'degenerate' [= code of the 1940s for 'homosexual']. Stella's question "Didn't your supply-man give you that information?" consequently indicates to the audience itself how it might henceforth judge Blanche's character.

From this point to the end of the scene, there is a painful irony at Blanche's expense. Stanley – for whom male camaraderie is of is of supreme importance – explains that he has divulged to Mitch the facts of Blanche's recent career so that his best friend will not 'get caught'. It is against this declaration that Blanche's singing voice is 'lifted again, serenely as a bell'. In short, Stanley has seen to it that Mitch's faith in Blanche will be destroyed: once more, she will be required to 'make-believe' that her Rosenkavalier will come at some later stage.

Paper Moon (written by Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg in 1933) is therefore an ironic signature tune for Blanche in that her experience of romance must forever remain illusory. Stanley is important for his uncompromising candour: that is, for his candid refusals to accept any of Blanche's excuses for her current predicament. In buying Blanche a bus ticket, Stanley ("She'll go on a bus and like it. She'll go Tuesday") forces the pace of the plot and brings it to its crisis-point: in so doing, he simultaneously forces the pace of Blanche's psychological deterioration.

When Blanche stops singing and emerges from the bathroom 'with a gay peal of laughter', she runs into the hard reality that awaits her outside. Not for the first time, Blanche has relied upon 'a hot bath' to make her feel 'like a brand new human being'; here, her optimistic declaration that she has a 'brand new outlook on life' falters with the pessimistic realisation that 'something has happened': that is, Stanley has told Stella the truth about her.

The 'distant piano' which 'goes into a hectic breakdown' represents her state of panic as her 'brand new' identity goes into its own equally hectic breakdown.

SCENE VIII

Scene VIII takes place no more than three-quarters of an hour later. During this time, Mitch has failed to arrive for Blanche's birthday supper. Faced by the vacant place at the table, Blanche endeavours to put on a brave face. She attempts by her diction ("Is it because I've been stood up by my beau?") to polish her respectable veneer.

Stanley – who doesn't know any stories 'refined enough' for Blanche's taste – refuses bluntly to concede that Blanche is a decent woman; he is having none of it. Throughout the scene, Stanley – who 'spears his fork into the remaining chop which he eats with his fingers' – adopts a totally uncompromising stance towards Blanche's preciousness. Even though Stella takes Blanche's side, Stanley – 'busy making a pig of himself'/his fingers 'disgustingly greasy' – insists brutally on his own integrity: an integrity which – though 'vulgar' – is something of which Blanche cannot boast at all. For all his greasy vulgarity, Stanley ("Every man is a king") is ironically able to take and retain the moral high ground. The strength of his position entitles him ("But what I am is a one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it") to dispense altogether with magnanimity and to buy for Blanche a 31st Birthday present that represents her nemesis. In Scene V, Blanche had hinted that Stanley might like to buy her a birthday present; now, he does so – not an expensive perfume, but a bus ticket back to Laurel. Nothing – in Stanley's view – could be more poetically appropriate than this 'little birthday remembrance'. Stanley's sarcasm ("Yes, I hope you like it") punches a further hole in Blanche's inflated idea of herself.

After Blanche's exit, Stella tells her husband that he should not have been so cruel to 'someone alone as she is'. Rather than pity Blanche for a second, Stanley ('delicate piece she is') refuses to countenance the extenuating circumstances that 'forced her to change'. Tender to Stella as she enters labour, he nevertheless remains merciless towards Blanche for whose 'hoity-toity' manner he has nothing but contempt. It could be noted that his contempt is that of an honest man who cannot forgive Blanche's failure to be honest with herself; he condemns Blanche ultimately for her inability to be 'proud as hell' of herself.

SCENE IX

Blanche 'has on a scarlet satin robe': once more, her costume signifies that she is a scarlet woman. At the same time, 'the rapid, feverish polka tune, the Varsouviana, is heard': once more, this sound-effect is used to convey the state of Blanche's mind:

> *The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her, and she seems to whisper the words of the song. An electric fan is turning back and forth across her.*

Both the music off-stage and the fan on-stage are used to heighten the tension: increasingly, this is caused by Blanche's lost sense of direction. On Mitch's arrival, Blanche steps into a role [of offended gentlewoman] which she can ill afford to adopt; his failure to attend her birthday party was 'so utterly uncavalier'. Noticing that he is wearing his 'work clothes', is dressed in 'blue denim shirt and pants', she reproaches him in archaic language: "And such uncouth apparel!" Noticing then that he 'is unshaven', she exaggerates with an even courtlier formality: "The unforgivable insult to a lady!" Making no headway, Blanche's next ploy is to condescend to 'forgive' him which, after the way in which she has tried to entrap him, is supremely hypocritical of her; standing on such low moral ground, she is in no position to sound superior. An audience is about to lose all sympathy with her when Williams' stage- directions take control of the scene:

> BLANCHE: I'll just – [*She touches her forehead vaguely. The polka tune starts up again*] That – music again ...
> MITCH: What music?
> BLANCHE: The Varsouviana? The polka tune they were playing when Allan – Wait!
> *A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.*
> There now, the shot! It always stops after that.
> *The polka music dies out again.*

It becomes evident that Blanche has continued to re-live the horrific circumstances of Allan's suicide: in particular, to re-experience her guilt. It is of these potent feelings – horror, guilt – that 'the polka tune' (actually, a jolly waltz in 3/4 time) is an intimidating mnemonic. Consequently, Mitch's rhetorical question – "Are you boxed out of your mind?" – is unsympathetic, but entirely appropriate. For the stage-directions here are calculated to convey her psychotic condition [= her 'neurasthenic personality'].

It is grimly ironic that Blanche – the Southern Belle – should rely upon 'Southern Comfort' ("What is that, I wonder?") to preserve her sanity. At this late stage, it is especially pitiful to note that she is still affecting to know nothing about alcohol: "Why, it's a liqueur, I believe!" Wise to her drink-problem, Mitch wants also to check her age, but finds as usual that the over-light (covered by Blanche's paper lantern) is off. Blanche's explanation – "The dark is comforting to me" – renews her resolve to avoid the 'merciless glare' of 'a naked light-bulb' [Scene I + Scene III] for fear that it will expose her fading beauty to male scrutiny. When Mitch 'tears the paper lantern off the light bulb', Blanche gasps: "I don't want realism." Her euphemistic defence of this position –

> "I'll tell you what I want. Magic! [*Mitch laughs*] Yes, yes, 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 the truth"

– reinforces her antagonism towards 'realism' and re-states her high-minded commitment to idealism, to her 'notion' of the American Dream. Put another way, she is interested not in what America post-War has become, but in what it 'ought to be': namely, a land still wedded to the 'old-fashioned ideals' of the South ('your ideals being so old-fashioned').

Mitch cannot forgive her for not being 'straight' [= honest with him] and confronts her with the sordid evidence of her previous life: after losing both her teaching post and her home, she had taken up residence as a prostitute at The Flamingo in Laurel, Mississippi. Blanche's lies to Mitch have cost her audience-sympathy. Once again, her confession –

> "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed to be able to fill my empty heart with I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection"

– is rhythmical and goes some way towards reclaiming this sympathy. Couched though it still is in euphemistic terms, Blanche's account of her search for a sense of identity – in the wake of Allan's suicide – conveys a genuine desperation for which we can feel pity; it gains its integrity not from its vulnerable tone, but – ironically – from its emotional candour. As she did in Scene V, Blanche admits to 'intimacies with strangers' in an existentialist endeavour to restore to her existence the meaning that it lost in the series of events following her discovery of Allan's homosexuality; she has run 'from under one leaky roof to another leaky roof' in the search for 'some protection' from the 'storm' that broke over her head. 'Panic and emptiness', wrote E. M. Forster in **Howards End** (1910). In the existentialist void, Blanche could not help but 'panic'; in the end, the stranger to whom she turned (to have her 'existence admitted') was 'a seventeen-year-old boy' who – like the Young Man in Scene V – resembled her husband.

If not before, Blanche boards the streetcar named Desire (which brings her to Elysian Fields) as soon as Mr Graves (the High School Superintendent) dismisses her for being 'morally unfit for her position'. Blanche's unfitness is a central theme of the play: scene by scene, the evidence grows that she is not so much morally unfit as mentally unfit, suffering the pain of an identity-crisis.

It was to Mitch [in Scene VI] that Blanche related the tragic episode which set in train the series of events which have brought her to Elysian Fields. Her epithet for him – 'a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in' – explains graphically that her career since Allan's death has been an arduous search for both certainty and sanity: 'a little peace'. Ever since her speech in Scene I, it has been apparent that Death ('the Grim Reaper') has directed the course of Blanche's life: because 'the opposite is desire', she has been promiscuous in order to feel more alive and less vulnerable. Her candid recollection of the frequency with which she 'slipped outside' to answer the calls of 'young soldiers' constitutes a clear understanding of her own motivation; her frank admission that she became a camp-follower [or, rather, that the camp followed her on to the lawn of Belle Reve] needs to be understood in the shaded light of her adolescent history. For this reason, an audience might expect Mitch now to be 'kind' and sympathetic. On the contrary, Mitch ("You lied to me, Blanche") cannot forgive her for her mendacity: "Lies, lies, inside and out, all lies." This brutal reaction to her moth-like frailty represents a rejection of Blanche's predicament; his blunt refusal to marry her, his clumsy attempt to have sex with her, imply a complete refusal to empathise with her plight: in particular, to allow that her ghastly circumstances can to any degree mitigate her moral unfitness. It is at this point that Blanche's identity goes into a 'hectic breakdown' (of which the music of the blue piano is an emblem). Her scream – "Fire! Fire! Fire!" – expresses her final disintegration.

SCENE X

Williams devotes an important paragraph to Blanche's costume. Her 'soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers' are symbolic of her stained reputation and her costume jewelry ('rhinestone tiara') is all trash. Dressed in this frippery, Blanche looks rather like Miss Havisham and behaves almost as insanely. She murmurs excitedly about 'a moonlight swim at the old rock-quarry' where Allan met his death; it is as if she is talking in her nightmare-ridden sleep.

Another symbolic action is Blanche's violent cracking of the mirror. It reflects her 'broken world' and heralds in another seven years' bad luck. It is instructive that Stanley should at this moment appear in his 'vivid silk bowling shirt'. Faced with this threat, Blanche's defence- mechanism is to disinter her Shep Huntleigh fantasy. Decked out in her 'fine feathers', Blanche pretends that Shep ('an old admirer of mine') has invited her on a Caribbean cruise.

During their initial exchanges, Stanley ("Well, well. What do you know?") remains so sceptical that he leaves us in no doubt that she is lying again; indeed, his refusal to be deceived ("Uh-huh") is so intransigent that we wonder why Blanche still bothers. Nobody in her right mind would ...

Stanley 'starts removing his shirt'. At this stage-direction, Blanche affects an ironic modesty: "Close the curtains before you undress any further". Her expressed longing for 'privacy' from such vulgarity makes no impression upon Stanley who is quick to point out that her millionaire from Dallas will expect to 'interfere with [her] privacy'.

It is in her doomed effort to defend her reputation that Blanche delivers the first of two set speeches in which her downright lies give way almost imperceptibly to statements of truth about the human condition. First, she insists that, as a 'cultivated woman', she can enrich a man's life spiritually; her recognition that 'physical beauty is passing … a transitory possession' is ironic in view of the fact that Blanche has always ridden a streetcar named Desire. Ultimately, it is Blanche's failure to come to terms with human transitoriness that destroys her mental stability; she becomes permanently unstable because she cannot solve the puzzle of being a moth-like creature who fades and dies.

Blanche's argument that, with her 'beauty of mind', 'richness of spirit' and 'tenderness of heart', she cannot 'be called a destitute woman' is expressed in her most aristocratic, idealistic voice. Hers is a heroic definition of richness that entirely rejects the material world where moths perish in naked lantern-light. Her second monologue – in which her lies ("He implored my forgiveness") give way to universal truths – is equally powerful. Her declarative statements –

> "But some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable.
> It is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty"

– are of dramatic importance in that they pass Blanche's judgment upon her own past conduct: at this poignant moment, we are meant to understand that her fatal remark to Allan was not an act of 'deliberate cruelty', but an impulsive reaction for which a young bride ought to have been forgiven.

Once the dialogue resumes, Stanley refuses to have any truck with Blanche's version of events. Remorselessly, he dismantles her story about Mitch's roses and confronts Blanche with the unsympathetic picture of herself: telling lies in a 'worn out Mardi Gras outfit with a crazy crown on'. So high is Stanley's self-esteem that he becomes intent on dethroning 'the Queen of the Nile' there and then.

Blanche's wild attempt once more 'to get in touch with Mr Shep Huntleigh of Dallas' takes place against the realistic background that Williams' stage-directions paint in: "the night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle". This stage-direction boldly announces that the law of the jungle is about to operate; materially, if not also spiritually bankrupt, Blanche is 'in desperate, desperate circumstances'; sickened by her unflagging hypocrisy, Stanley ("come to think of it – maybe you wouldn't be so bad to interfere with") is in no mood to show mercy to his prey; as 'the inhuman jungle voices rise up', he moves in for the kill. Despite Blanche's protest – "Don't, I'm in danger" – he refuses to respect her word and pounces brutally.

It is important that Stanley's 'rape' of Blanche should be viewed not merely in terms of psychological realism: after all, it is not only a literal act of intercourse, but also a metaphorical one – either of violation or of coming together.

Stanley has prepared us for this outcome earlier in the scene when he takes the top off a quart beer-bottle. Williams' stage-directions – if we have read them carefully – are proleptic: that is, they warn us that the scene is proceeding towards a sexual climax. Williams' language ('the bottle cap pops off and geyser of foam shoots up') implies that the scene is likely to end in another literal ejaculation. At this stage, it is necessary to decide whether or not Blanche excites/inspires pathos. If – as Stanley picks up Blanche's 'inert figure and carries her to the bed' – we fail to feel pity for her, then this response may well be because we are inclined to agree whole-heartedly with Stanley's assertion that they have 'had this date with each other from the beginning'. If we agree that Blanche is a 'tiger', then we may well feel that she deserves to suffer the law of the jungle. It is because she deserves her fate that we struggle to feel pity for her; in this case, Stanley is her nemesis.

But it is probably more instructive to consider this scene of crisis in symbolic terms: in other words, to conclude that Stanley's seizure of Blanche's body represents Northern Realism's conquest of Southern Idealism. In short, this scene is an emblem of Williams' central idea that the American Dream (of aristocratic aspirations/spiritual ideals) has been destroyed in 20th Century America by 'brute'/materialistic force.

SCENE XI

Scene XI, the final scene of the play, is set 'some weeks later'. By his stage-directions, Williams demonstrates immediately that the status quo in Stanley's apartment has remained unaffected by the tumultuous events that took place some weeks earlier. For the second time in the play, a poker game is in progress. As Eunice passes by the kitchen table, Stanley is being unkind to Mitch; over-hearing his insensitive remark, Eunice – "I always did say that men are callous things with no feelings" – passes a comment upon Stanley's unreconstructed personality and prepares us for his equally insensitive and unreconstructed behaviour throughout the scene.

The stage-directions continue to imply the bleak direction of events. As Eunice enters the bedroom, Stella is folding 'flowery dresses' and packing them into Blanche's trunk. The exchange between them –

> EUNICE: What did you tell her?
> STELLA: I – just told her – that we'd made arrangements for her to rest in the country

– indicates that a significant development is afoot, set in train by Blanche's report that Stanley took a ruthless advantage of Stella's stay in the maternity ward and instead slept

with her. Because she has told so many lies, Blanche is a tragic figure whose fate is not to be believed when she is telling the truth. Conveniently, Stella concludes that Blanche must be not only deluded, but also deranged, occupying only the world of her own Southern Gothic fantasies. Consequently, she arranges for her sister to be committed to an asylum; 'arrangements for her to rest in the country' is one euphemistic way of putting it. When Stella asks herself if she has done 'the right thing', Eunice evidently reminds her of their off-stage discussions which have led to this conclusion:

> EUNICE: What else could you do?
> STELLA: I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley.

Eunice – "Life has got to go on" – strengthens her friend in her expedient and pragmatic course of action: after all, the alternative – to 'believe her story' – would end Stella's marriage to her child's father. Although the audience does not yet know exactly what Stella has done, it knows enough to fear for Blanche: at increasing speed, 'the sense of disaster' is 'closing in on her'.

Meanwhile, Blanche, not for the first time, is soaking in the bath. Both in Scene II and in Scene VII, she was also bathing herself – an act symbolic, both there and here, of her quest for absolution of her sin (as she recalls it) in sending her young husband Allan Grey to his death. Before she dies, Blanche seeks purification of this sin. In this context, it is worth considering her pre-occupation with the minutiae of fashion. At such a time of foreboding, Blanche's fastidious attention to the detail of her costume jewelry ('that silver and turquoise pin in the shape of a sea-horse') inspires pathos; at the same time, it too is of symbolic significance ...

When Blanche emerges from the bathroom, she selects 'a pretty blue jacket'. She explains that the precise colour of the jacket is 'Della Robbia blue'; significantly, this is the colour used for the Virgin Mary's robe in the majolica reliefs of Luca Della Robbia (1400-1482) whose bronze gates for Florence Cathedral were said at the time (1469) to resemble the Gates of Heaven. In addition, Blanche expresses a wish to die and be buried at sea – 'dropped overboard ... into an ocean as blue as my first lover's eyes.' Scene XI is very heavily freighted with Williams' symbols. Counterpointing Blanche's utterances are the sound-effects. When she emerges, 'the Varsouviana rises audibly' and will continue to play throughout the scene, effectively haunting her with the memory of her first lover's suicide; when she examines Eunice's grapes, those traditional emblems of perishable flesh, "the Cathedral bells chime". Although Blanche does not die, all effects conspire to create an air of impending doom, of funereal finality.

Instead, Williams chooses to end Blanche's misery in a mental hospital: by some reckonings, this fate is a fate worse than death. In 1937, Tennessee Williams' younger sister Rose, then aged 34, was admitted to the Missouri State Hospital in Farmington and diagnosed with a form of paranoid schizophrenia. Although Blanche's disorder is not of this kind, Rose's example [= her psychiatric decline] proves useful; it suggests to Williams that he can bring Blanche's career to a simplistic conclusion. Does Blanche suffer a mental breakdown or a nervous breakdown? For the play, it does not matter what the pathology of her psychosis is; she can go mad just as Ophelia went mad. For theatrical purposes, Blanche need appear on stage only a little more confused than she was before Stanley assaulted her.

Stella informs Blanche that she is 'going on vacation' – which, up to a point, she is. Under this pretext, Eunice admits the Doctor and the Matron to the Kowalskis' apartment: although their sober-suited visitors exude 'the aura of the state institution', she plays along with the idea that a 'gentleman' has called for Blanche – which, up to a point, he has. In Blanche's fantasy-world, this gentleman caller will materialise in the

person of Mr Shep Huntleigh from Dallas. When she encounters the Doctor instead, Blanche ("That man isn't Shep Huntleigh") retreats into the apartment in dismay and in distraction.

Ever alert for his prey, Stanley is not so engrossed in his poker game as to have missed this turn of events: "Did you forget something?" Blanche continues to exude 'a tragic radiance': whereas Steve, Pablo and Mitch are stunned by her altered condition, Stanley, who is directly responsible for it, talks to her as if nothing has changed:

> "You left nothing here but spilt talcum and empty perfume bottles – unless it's the paper lantern you want to take with you."

To reinforce his point, he tears the paper lantern off the light-bulb and thrusts it at her; at once, the stage-direction – "She cries out as if the lantern was herself" – amplifies the working of the symbolism, reminding us that he sees not her luminous fragility, but her vain triviality. Even though he alone knows full well that she is not delusional, Stanley is remorseless. To the end, he is a thing without compassion or empathy or any finer feeling. At the very end, he kneels beside Stella, not so that he can comfort her in her deep distress at Blanche's plight, but so that he can fondle her breasts: "his fingers find the opening of her blouse."

At first, Blanche reacts fiercely to the Matron's robust efforts to escort her from the Kowalskis' premises: "Blanche turns wildly and scratches at the Matron." Before Blanche collapses, it looks as if Doctor and Matron will need to sedate her with an injection or fit a strait-jacket. It is when the Doctor 'takes off his hat', 'becomes personalised' (presumably in the form of a Southern gentleman) and talks to Blanche in a 'gentle and reassuring' voice that the situation is resolved. Because the Doctor – "Miss DuBois" – seems suddenly to personify the polite Southerner of her dreams, Blanche consents to go with him: indeed, she takes his arm as if to walk out with him on a Sunday afternoon in Mississippi. Spoken 'holding tight to his arm', Blanche's final line –

> "Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers"

– is dignified and eye-wateringly moving: bravely, she faces up to the facts of her failed life. Over the years, this line has made its impact/spread its influence far beyond the world of the play; this, of course, is because of its universal application. On the one hand, it inspires pity for any isolated individual who (like Blanche DuBois) finds herself living her life without the support of a family; on the other hand, it serves warning that any individual who lives long enough will end up depending 'on the kindness of strangers' in a clinical institution. In **A Streetcar Named Desire**, Williams' ultimate vision of man is of an isolated and vulnerable creature: to this extent, the play emphasises the supreme importance of compassion in human affairs.

Peter Cash was Head of English Studies at Newcastle-under-Lyme School in Staffordshire 1985-2009. He is a Fellow of The English Association.