Blanche InBois: The Superior Creature

An Honors Thesis
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by

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Accompanying this thesis is a detailed script analysis of the play

A Streetcar Named Desire written by Tennessee Williams. In addition
to this thesis and the script analysis, Joyce O'Connor performed the
character Blanche DuBois at the Ball State University Theatre in
Blanche DuBois: The Superior Creature

Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a creature destined to extinction. She clings to the ideals of the dying Old South and consequently perishes along with it. Blanche's downfall is her failure to adapt to a new niche. Her superior airs have no place outside of Belle Reve, her family's plantation. Despite this fact, she remains condescending and proud. She will not humble herself to what she considers to be a lower environment—New Orleans. In an attempt to feel superior, she searches for complete protection, she lies, and she rejects others and herself. Blanche developed this need to be superior in the traditional Old South, where, according to Florence King, women learned to be "aloof, aristocratic, naughty, and frosty."\(^1\)

Blanche's need to be superior generates her search for protection. Her upbringing taught her that a woman could only find identity through a man. At first this man is her father and then her husband. She enters New Orleans homeless, fatherless, and, above all, husbandless. It is her need for superiority that causes her desperate search for

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a sanctuary where she will find protection and camaraderie as she
did at Belle Reve. Since she is too spoiled to take care of herself,
she needs someone to care for her. Blanche is telling the truth as
she addresses the doctor in the final scene of the play: "I have
always depended upon the kindness of strangers." Her sexual escapades
in Laurel were futile attempts to find this "kindness." After her
banishment from Laurel, she comes to New Orleans hoping to find someone
who will save her, heal her, accept her, and above all, adore her.
She nearly obtains all this in Mitch. At once, Blanche detects a
certain sensitivity in him, which she hopes will protect her, give
her an identity, and put her back upon the pedestal where, according
to the tradition of the Old South, women belong. Blanche cannot
survive without someone to worship her. She possesses what Arthur Ganz
calls the "delicate, almost transparent quality of glass." This
exceptional frailness is a result of her protective upbringing and
is the ideal quality of a southern belle, but such breakability
cannot survive unprotected. The traditional Old South is a dying
culture, and it leaves no shelf capable of preserving the "almost
transparent" Blanche DuBois. She is shattered by the tempestuous
Stanley Kowalski. He tells Mitch of her past in Laurel, and Mitch

2 Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Best American Plays
1952), p. 93.

3 Arthur Ganz, "A Desperate Morality," Tennessee Williams: A
Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Stephen Stanton (Englewood Cliffs,
subsequently rejects her. When Blanche is dispirited by this rejection, Stanley debases her further in the only manner available to him. By railing Blanche, Stanley brings her down to his vulgar level, a descent that the haughty southern belle's ego cannot handle. In order to escape this degradation, Blanche flees reality. She sacrifices her sanity for her pride. If Blanche could have ceased her superior airs long enough to accommodate Stanley's temperament, perhaps she could have convinced him to keep her past a secret. And if she had stifled her great urge to be desired and adored while in Laurel, maybe she would not have had any secrets to keep. But her Old South tradition had taught her to be constantly alluring, and she knew nothing but tradition. She was destined for extinction.

Besides seeking protection, Blanche's need for superiority provokes her to develop what Stenhen Stanton calls "a configuration of masks." Since she cannot live up her own ultra ideals, Blanche disguises herself in "multiple levels of identity." According to Elia Kazan, director of the original Broadway production of *Streetcar*, Blanche is playing a different Pre-Bellum South character in every scene. Pursuing this premise, one may be more specific. In the first scene, Blanche is Miss Polly, The Damsel in Distress, because she is running from her past and is seeking a refuge. She is at the mercy of Stanley and Stella. In the next scene, she is Miss Dixie. She puts on her girlish mask and plays her flirting game with Stanley.


in an attempt to claim what she considers her rightful position as the woman-being-adored. In the next scene Blanche becomes Miss Velvet, The Beautiful Seductress. She has too much to drink, meets Mitch and senses that he is her escape. Therefore, she commences the flirting game again. At last she sees a gleam of desire in a man's eye. This is her last chance to find protection. After the fight between Stella and Stanley in which Stanley hits Stella, Blanche becomes Miss Prudence Pill, The Savior. Spurred for the most part by jealousy but also by a desire to preserve her dying culture, Blanche pleads with Stella:

"Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but, Stella--my sister--there has been some progress since then! Such things as art--as poetry and music--such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching ... Don't--don't hang back with the brutes!"

During this scene Blanche begins to realize that Stella is not on her side; she is alone, except for Mitch. In the fifth scene Blanche learns that Stanley is suspicious of her. He confronts her with proof that she has been lying about the events prior to her Laurel departure. This induces Blanche's Lucinda the Frail character as she searches for understanding and consolation from Stella. Blanche is now on the run and she makes a deliberate pitch for marriage in

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6Tennessee Williams, p. 70.
the next scene. She becomes "Miss Lilly, The Sweet Rejuvenated Virgin, in an attempt to attract her date and convince him that she is incapable of living such a wretched past. After her intimate talk with Mitch, Blanche feels that she is once again desired. "You need somebody," says Mitch, "And I need somebody, too. Could it be you and me, Blanche?" The unvoiced answer is yes, of course, and Blanche is in ecstasy. In the following scene she bounces out of the bathroom in laughter. She is Miss Rose Festival Queen, as she awaits her escort, Mitch. He never comes, however, and Blanche suspects the reason. She lashes out at Stanley in the manner of Miss Sapphire, The Thoroughbred. But Stanley responds by presenting Blanche with a bus ticket back to Laurel, leaving her with nowhere to go and, above all, no source of protection. This produces her next character, Miss Withering Violet, The Frantic Old Maid. Blanche now wages her last campaign for Mitch and for sanity. She pretends that the inevitable did not happen—that Stanley has not told Mitch her horrible secrets. Realizing that Mitch knows of her past, Blanche finally tells the truth; however, it is too late and Mitch leaves her. Alone once again, Blanche escapes into the past as she becomes Miss Debutante, The Belle of the Bell. During this scene Blanche departs from reality, as Stanley, symbolizing a new, crude culture, triumphs in rape. In the final scene Blanche becomes Miss Grace, The Movie Star. She does so because she needs someone to become, someone whose

7Ibid., p. 78.
superiority cannot be questioned, someone whose beauty and desirability are guaranteed. She sacrifices her sense of reality in order to retain her superiority. She falsely convinces herself that Shen Huntleigh, a former suitor, is once again courting her. She also insists that the doctor, who finally comes to escort her to the hospital, is a beau who perhaps comes to take her to a picnic or a dance. Blanche deceives herself in this manner. She also lies to Mitch about her age and her past. Believing that beauty is youth, Blanche is desperate to be young. "I'm fading now," she confides to Stella, "I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick." 8 Later in the play, as Blanche is rejected by Mitch, she attempts to justify her worth:

A cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding, can enrich a man's life immeasurably! I have those things to offer, and time doesn't take them away. Physical beauty is a passing, a transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—and I have all those things!—aren't taken away, but grow! Increase with the years! 9

Although making this statement, Blanche is unable to convince herself of its validity, and she continues to pretend she is younger. Blanche also misleads Mitch about her past, pretending to be the "Rejuvenated Virgin." This pretention only serves to anger Mitch when he finally learns the truth. By the time Blanche admits her past, Mitch has already rejected her. Blanche's

8 Ibid., p. 72.

9 Ibid., p. 88.
reasons for concealing her adventures in Laurel are simple. In order to be worshiped by Mitch, she felt she had to be the ideal woman—the young virgin so important to the Old South. If she would have dropped her airs and admitted her mistakes earlier, she might have found understanding and protection in Mitch. But she insisted upon being superior.\textsuperscript{10}

This attitude of superiority also caused Blanche to reject Allan and eventually herself. Her repulsion to her husband's homosexual acts led him to commit suicide. His death then causes Blanche's guilt and self-rejection. In an attempt to find acceptance, she sought consolation in sexual relationships, which she substituted for love. She also searches unavailingly for forgiveness and consolation in the tenderness of Mitch. He is adamant in anger and abandons her. The rejector becomes the rejected.\textsuperscript{11} Another source of guilt for Blanche is the loss of her loved ones and of Belle Reve. She experiences a typical guilt associated with death—that is, the survivor feels guilty for living, since the deceased is deprived of life. Blanche feels guilty for her helplessness at the death beds during her final stay at Belle Reve. "Funerals are quiet," she tells Stella, "but deaths—not always... Even the old ones sometimes

\textsuperscript{10} Some of the titles used in this paragraph to describe Blanche are taken from Florence King's account of the southern belle.

say, Don't let me go! As if you were able to stop them!" Part of Blanche's attraction to Stanley lies in his ability to relieve her of this two-fold guilt. If he punishes her, the guilt would transfer to his shoulders and Blanche could rise above him and feel better about herself. But until she is punished, Blanche is unable to manage her guilt. She is tortured by her own mind. She senses that she is doomed as she arrives in New Orleans. When Blanche, the neighbor, asks if she is lost, Blanche replies: "They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemetery, ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields." Blanche's streetcar journey parallels her demise: She finds "Desire" in Laurel with her sexual affairs, "Cemetery" in the deaths of her husband and her family, and now she descends the wrought iron steps to the underworld, "Elysian Fields."

She senses her fate; she carries with her the southern belle airs that sent her looking for the attention of the boys in Laurel and caused her to reject Allan. These same airs of superiority will set Stanley against her and cause her breakdown. It is interesting to note that Blanche insists upon ascendance up to her final exit. "Don't get up," she tells Stanley and his companions, "I'm just passing through." She continues her

12Tennessee Williams, n. 56.
13Ibid., n. 52.
14Ibid., n. 92.
arrogance even as she deserts for an asylum. She ascends the stairs, happy to leave Stanley below her. Blanche represents the last of a dying culture, the Old South. Her type cannot survive because they have no niches anymore and will not adapt to new ones. She is the southern belle. She will hold to her superior ideals even in the face of extinction.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


