
Shifting Shapes in Play and Performance: Blanche DuBois, from Witchy Female to Marginalized Other

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Introduction: Blanche, An Artistic Intensification of all Women

A journey into unknown territory begins for Blanche DuBois when, arriving in The French Quarter “daintily dressed” in a manner “incongruous with the setting” (Williams 471), she affirms, with shocked disbelief at her surroundings: “they told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six-blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!” (471). This statement has secured Blanche’s place in Tennessee Williams’s gallery of complex and powerful female characters because it encompasses everything that she stands for: her past, defined by Death; her present, mapped out by Desire; and her future, bringing her to The Elysian Fields.

Williams infused Blanche with an important quality: the ability to seduce her audience into perceiving the multifaceted layers of her feminine character all at once. Bearing a slip of paper in her hand and uttering those famous first lines “with faintly hysterical humor” (471), Blanche marks her appearance in Tennessee Williams’s theatre of excess. This trait of excess becomes his strategy for liberating possibilities, for releasing conflicts, and for disengaging powers (Saddik 151). Blanche literally pours herself out with each page of the play so that every aspect of her shifting identity is presented to the audience. Both celebrated and demonized, her complex female persona shifts from victim to agent, controlling and controlled, freeing all aspects of Blanche’s multiple nature. This duality confers strength, flexibility, and power upon Blanche to renegotiate her feminine role in the immediate community, yet the very same nature compromises her social position in this patriarchal community where she operates. Hence, Blanche’s theatrical persona shifts from witchy female to marginalized other, rearranging the existing social order, reimagining all possibilities of existence, and releasing all conflicts among characters. The ambiguity of the adjective “hysterical,” which characterizes Blanche’s initial shock

at her surroundings, foreshadows the many roles that she assumes in intentionally changing her persona throughout the play.

Perhaps the most intense interpretation of Blanche's ability to shift shapes comes from movie director Elia Kazan. In his *Notebook on A Streetcar Named Desire*, he refers to this impressive female character as "a heightened version, an artistic intensification of all women" (qtd. in Donahue 32). As representative of her category, Blanche stands ready for readers and audience to unpack her bag of multiple meanings. With each adopted role, Blanche embodies excess and lives it successfully, marching to her own tune; however, to live excessively also means to live dangerously. The perceived failures lived by this remarkable female character empower her to bounce back in the game of life. By the end of the play, Blanche holds the power. She is a winner in this game, as she steps into the unknown, smiling, hand in hand with the doctor, walking on without turning to face the current reality any longer, ready for journey, a reassuring sky veiling above her, in an open wide future to embrace.

In full celebration of her excesses and immediate lived pleasures, Blanche heightens the decadent spirit that drinks up her lifestyle. For Blanche, excess is a deliberate aesthetic chosen to heighten her sensual side and her displeasure with certain aspects of her lived reality. "Yes, yes, magic!" she fully affirms. "I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! — Don't turn the light on!" (545). Mitch is left dumbstruck by her intense remark.

Blanche's refusal to be contained and silenced by her community weighs more on her than any fear of transgression of established gendered norms of behavior. Consequences matter less to this female character. The immediate and intense passion of the moment propels her excessive engine to recreate herself in different roles and to tune in to the power of her own feminine magic. Her male spectators—Mitch, Allan, the young soldiers, and Mr. Graves, the town mayor of Laurel—cannot keep up with such sensuous feminine engagement.

Perceived feminine excesses breed fear in Blanche's community as her witchy persona liberates all possibilities of reenactment. Moreover, Blanche clearly becomes a disruptor of the established order as she assumes the image of a marginalized feminine other. Consequently, Stanley wants to destroy Blanche. Mitch cannot handle her intense image alongside his mother's. Allan commits suicide at the

intensity of her remarks about his sexual conduct. After getting their own hopes up, the young soldiers who Blanche was dating leave her one by one because of rumors they have heard. Mr. Graves, the school superintendent where Blanche teaches English, kicks her out before the term ends because of her sexual reputation. Ultimately, a “town ordinance [was] passed against her” (532) since she was told by the mayor of Laurel to get out of town. Her excessive outbursts in terms of consumption and spectatorship fight against any social control attempted at an ideal of feminine behavior.

The patriarchal system, which aims at containing this marginalized other figure in a delineated, borderline space, is thus shaken. Blanche destabilizes it to a fierce extent by giving voice to her intense, momentary desires. With Mitch, she turns herself into an exemplar of a Southern Belle to obtain social benefits. She tells Stella, “I want to deceive him enough to make him—want me” (517). Yet, desire drives her life. Her “Voulez-vous couchez avec moi ce soir” (523) remark whispered in Mitch’s ear reveals Blanche’s raw sexual nature. Her open, flirting games with Stanley further compromise her already fragile social position .

In his *Memoirs*, Tennessee Williams speaks of Blanche as an “imperishable creature of the stage,” her truths echoing in the hearts of “so many known and unknown ladies” (231). Blanche’s part in the play opens all doors to experimentation in performance. Through all the lies and pretense, the actor playing Blanche must make her spectators perceive her truth (Donahue 36). Faced with her own reality by Mitch, Blanche exclaims, “what a fantastic statement! Fantastic of him to say it, fantastic of you to repeat it!” (544). Blanche’s pretense is as real to her as the reality lived by the characters around her. Her intense attachment to magic and illusion elicits visceral reactions in her immediate community; these same instinctive reactions are experienced by the audiences who shape the various cultural contexts celebrating the staging of Blanche’s shape-shifting persona.

Williams himself experienced struggle in painting a clear image of Blanche’s character. His unpublished early manuscripts, which have shaped the final version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, testify to the playwright’s experiments with a multifaceted Blanche DuBois, a feminine character with potent sexuality and intense predisposition to radical change. These early drafts underline the playwright’s struggle in understanding who Blanche truly was, “the sexual predator or the spiritual victim” (Bak 127), or perhaps the everything-in-between these

two connotations. This dual nature contained in Blanche's powerful female character rests in between the lines of a play that has shaped twentieth-century popular culture, namely, *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Blanche's Theatricality

Because of her powerful feminine nature, Blanche must constantly ask herself: "how can I be"? This complex question allows her to investigate deeply into a nature that, once released, erupts excessively in all directions, exceeding all delineations meant to contain it. Blanche's ambiguous figure celebrates shape shifting as she assumes a complex persona, reenacting both the witchy female and the marginalized feminine other. Through various images (the mother, the prostitute, the femme fatale, the grotesque female, the Sphinx, the strange attractor), Blanche embodies agent and victim alike. She thus exhibits the strength conferred by her witchy behavior as well as the weakness brought on by her reenactment of the marginalized other.

Blanche, as a marginalized feminine other, must be understood within the context of her power struggle with Stan. What the reader witnesses here is the dynamics of Foucault's repressive hypothesis at work in Williams's play. William Kleb's "Marginalia: Streetcar, Williams, and Foucault" offers a critical perspective of the play that rests upon Foucault's ideology. Blanche's feminine other and Stanley's the same are central concepts in understanding this theoretical framework (29). The feminine other seeks to redefine and even to control the same. As soon as she arrives in Stan's home, Blanche rearranges furniture and redecorates to please her own taste. She devises plans to escape with Stella and offends Stan multiple times, attempting to draw her sister away from him. "But I'll think of something, I've got to think of—something! Don't laugh at me Stella!" (508), Blanche keeps repeating while making definite plans for them to run away from Stan, who confesses to Stella, "Wasn't we happy together? Wasn't it all okay? Till she showed here. Hoity-toity, describing me as an ape" (541).

Blanche, the feminine other, is the intruder, the marginal figure, the unannounced guest who seeks to control the same, Kowalski's household: "Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!" (511), she orders. Since Blanche is perceived as a "sign for sexual maladjustment" (Kleb 30), her illegitimate sexuality must be confined, either to the brothel or the mental hospital. The exclusion and confinement of the feminine other into one of three modern institutions (clinic, prison, or asylum) represents the essence of Foucault's repressive hypothesis.

This marginalized other reveals a Blanche who is dangerous

and threatening to established order, a Blanche “in its most threatening and entrancing (to the male) aspects: enchantress, witch, and faery queen” (Kleb 36). Williams offers subtle hints that further frame her within this primordial feminine other. Blanche’s astrological planet is the moon. She is to be seen only at night: “You never want to go out till after six and then it’s always some place that’s not lighted” (544), affirms Mitch. She is “light as a feather” (524), refers to herself as a “witch of a woman” who is “casting a spell” (488), and admits to Stella that she might “swoop down on Dallas” (512) to unexpectedly visit Shep Huntleigh, her former beau. Stan wonders at times: “what is this sister of yours, a deep-sea diver who brings up sunken treasures?” (485). Meanwhile, Stan is the same, the “absolute monarch” (Kleb 37). He brings up the Napoleonic Code in the discussion about Belle Reve’s loss at the hands of Blanche. And he reminds the sisters that he is “the king around here, so don’t forget it” (537).

The immediate punishment inflicted on Blanche in her role as the marginalized other comes in the form of confinement to a mental institution. But this feminine other has changed Stan’s world of sameness. The possibility of her truth being real—her rape confession to Stella—represents the “relocation of the Other in man’s own nature, within the same” (Kleb 41). Stella now sees Stan differently, through her sister’s eyes. Blanche has planted her seed of truth in Kowalski’s household and moves on, embracing the calling of her last desires.

Blanche constructs a female identity for herself that refuses to be read as a victim of the dominant social order, even when this order has stamped her as victim. Blanche, celebrated and demonized at once, embraces a feminine complexity that shifts from witchy female to marginalized feminine other. Her statement, “a woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion” (488) could not be more truthful in the context of her own attempted metamorphoses. This female plays with her roles intensely, surpassing what her community deems acceptable.

The Mother

Blanche is celebrated as the Mother-Woman of the play. “She is the Phallic Mother” (46), Calvin Bedient boldly affirms in “There Are Lives that Desire Does Not Sustain: *A Streetcar Named Desire*.” He gradually builds her image as the Phallic Mother, uncovering the subtle tensions that surface between Blanche, in her role of mother, and Stanley, her male antagonist. Stan experiences the pull of the archaic mother (Bedient 55) with Blanche’s entry into his household. He sees her as the feminizing abjection he fears in himself and so “she must be

put down” (Bedient 56). The term “abjection” is borrowed by Bedient from Julia Kristeva’s exposition of the theory of the abject presented in “Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection.”

The abject is “that which disturbs identity, system, order” (Kristeva 4). Blanche does not respect borders, positions, rules. She refers to the males playing poker in the kitchen as “little boys” and calls upon them in such terms throughout the play: “Hello! The Little Boys’ Room is busy right now” (497). She confronts and provokes Stanley whenever given the opportunity, “What’s in the back of that little boy’s mind of yours?” (489). In Kristeva’s view, the other sex, the feminine, becomes synonymous with a radical evil that is to be suppressed (70), a feared feminine that threatens Stanley’s established order. Stan’s confrontation with the feminine abjection, that is, Blanche as the Mother-Woman, is inevitable in the Kowalski’s household when Blanche becomes the uninvited guest at the dinner table.

For Mitch, Blanche becomes one with his own mother. She offers him an alternative image of a sick and dying mother, one that is attractive, vibrant: “she won’t live long. Maybe just a few months. . . . She wants me to be settled before she—” (527). Mitch needs a mother figure before he needs a wife figure in his life: “I gotta a sick mother. She doesn’t go to sleep until I come in at night” (493). He further confesses to Blanche, “I’ll be alone when she goes” (493). The fleeting summer that Mitch spent in Blanche’s company offered him a getaway from the sickness that took over his household. The intense filial attachment that Mitch harbors for his dying mother is acknowledged by the poker buddies. “Hurry back and we’ll fix you a sugar-tit” (493), Stan hollers at Mitch whenever the latter turns sensitive. The reader can only imagine the emotional depth of Mitch’s remark after learning about Blanche’s promiscuous past: “You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother” (547). In his eyes, Blanche was slowly replacing his dying mother, even more reason for Mitch not to accept living with such a perverse image of his own mother.

The Prostitute

Blanche is one of the first female characters in drama to be so overt about her sexual needs. Always acting on her impulses, embracing all her fleeting desires, Blanche becomes the excessive woman. Her immediate concerns with sensual pleasures have gained her a licentious reputation. Thus, Blanche becomes the prostitute in the play.

A Freudian perspective on female prostitution sheds new light on Blanche’s underlying reasons for her actions. Happiness,

which is the whole purpose of human life in Freud's view, aims at eliminating pain and discomfort and at experiencing intense pleasures (15). Consequently, Blanche is embracing a personal task: to avoid pain at all costs. Her many intimacies with strangers are indicative of her immediate desires for happiness. "Civilization is built up on renunciation of instinctual gratifications (37), Freud continues, and Blanche refuses to comply. She defends her "claim to individual freedom against the will of the multitude" (35), that is, her community. However, she does try to repress her prostitute role in the scene with the attractive paper boy: "Now, run along, now, quickly! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good—and keep my hands off children" (520).

The only uncensored outlet for liberty of instinct, according to Freud, is heterosexual love, but this is further circumscribed by the barriers of legitimacy and monogamy (45). Blanche's desire to become prim and proper for Mitch's sake underlines a basic understanding of the restrictions put in place for individual liberty by culture. Marriage will ensure legitimacy of her physical desires within the community where she operates. Yet, her role as a prostitute makes her unable to break with the past. Mitch calls off their engagement after Stan exposes her past.

To Stanley Kowalski, this woman, whose promiscuous past was revealed to him from multiple sources, who gave free sexual favors to soldiers and even seduced one of her high school students, has truly earned the treatment he shows her at the end. June Schlueter believes that the rape provides the reader with an aesthetic whole. "However repugnant, it affirms Blanche's reality of Stan as 'grunting and hulking'" (76). Furthermore, the act of rape validates Stan's perception of Blanche as prostitute. At that moment, "she sees herself through his eyes" (Harris 95). She then embraced her past deeds from only one viewpoint: the one she presented to Stella. Now, the prostitute role becomes real for Blanche, witnessed from Stan's perspective. It seems that Blanche cannot escape her primal instincts. The fulfillment of her immediate desires has always made up the essence of her womanly character.

The Femme Fatale

In a letter about the play's conception, Williams addresses Elia Kazan, film director of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, confessing that Stanley sees Blanche as a "calculating bitch with round heels" and not as a desperate creature backed into a corner of last resort (95-96). Blanche thus becomes the embodiment of the femme fatale.

Blanche arrives in the French Quarter “daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat” (471). Throughout the play, Blanche’s shows a preference for “feathers and furs,” for “fox-pieces,” and “solid-gold dresses” (485), for red or white evening gowns. She wears shiny jewelry, “bracelets of solid gold” and “ropes of pearls” (486), “silver slippers with brilliant sets in their heels” (548), “artificial violets” (556) pinned to her attire.

In her *femme fatale* role, Blanche uses her sexuality successfully. She laughs at Stanley, calls him a “little boy,” playfully sprays him with her atomizer (489), invites him to button her dress, asks for a drag on his cigarette (487), and belittles him by calling him a “Polack” (539). She even confesses to Stella, “I laughed and treated it all as a joke, called him a little boy and laughed—and flirted! Yes—I was flirting with your husband, Stella!” (491). Blanche’s only weapon is her sexuality, meant to be used “to save her from being held responsible for the loss of Belle Reve” (Griffin 57). The minute that she realizes that Mitch could offer her social position and stability through marriage, she begins using her sexuality further: “she takes off the blouse and stands in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt in the light thru the portieres” (496). When Stan realizes that Mitch’s gaze has switched from the cards on the table to her alluring image in the shadow of the portieres, he “jumps up and jerks roughly at curtains to close them” (497), as if jealous of Mitch’s gazing. Blanche announces airily that “The Little Boys’ Room is busy right now” (497). In her role as *femme fatale*, she has placed herself in a strategic position in Stan’s home. Her flirting and provocative behavior has secured her a potential husband, Mitch, but also Stan’s understanding of the financial considerations behind the loss of Belle Reve plantation—until Stan overhears her remarks to Stella, calling him “common, “an animal,” “sub-human,” “ape,” “a brute” (510-11). From now on, she becomes a dangerous enemy for Stan.

What makes Stanley right in Elia Kazan’s view is precisely his perception of Blanche in her *femme fatale* role, “he’s got things the way he wants them . . . and does not want them upset by a phony, corrupt, sick . . . woman” (qtd. in Kolin 11). Blanche is destructive and dangerous and strikes fear in Stanley’s subconscious. She could potentially ruin his marriage and he is sharply aware of this threat, “not once did you pull any wool over this boy’s eyes!” (552). Her intention to wreck his homelife is made clear to Stella when Blanche openly plans

an escape for herself and her sister with Shep Huntleigh, Blanche's high school beau. Hence, Stanley cannot be blamed for protecting his marriage against this femme fatale who seeks to undermine his position.

Blanche's sexual encounters with strangers at the Flamingo Hotel and her countless dates with the soldiers from the camp close to Belle Reve show that she can use her sexuality as a tool, with no attachment involved. These male strangers and soldiers are "sex objects for her . . . she uses them every bit as much as they, presumably, use her" (Morrow 64). When Mitch confronts Blanche with her promiscuous past at the Flamingo Hotel, she declares that "that's where I brought my victims. Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers" (545-46). About her sexual encounters with soldiers, Blanche also speaks freely. She even compares them with "daisies" being "picked by the paddy-wagon" (547). Excess becomes an important trait for Blanche in her femme fatale role. She becomes a bad woman who defies her Southern community's moral code of feminine behavior.

Blanche's acts of excess—sex, alcohol, fashion, lies and pretense—have turned her into "one of the most mesmerizing of sexual personae" (Paglia 13). Camille Paglia proclaims the femme fatale as the primary image of a "daemonic archetype of woman" (13). At times, Blanche's face brightens up at the news of violence. When Steve strikes Eunice and the sounds of a man's angry roar and furniture being overturned are heard, Blanche asks, "(brightly): Did he kill her?" (512). Her mistreatment of her husband Allan drives him to suicide. Blanche becomes the "villain" by destroying the homosexual poet with her cruelty (Shackelford 198). "I saw! I know! You disgust me . . ." (528) are the last words she whispered in the poet's ear before he fired his revolver into his mouth.

Blanche, as femme fatale, exits the play triumphantly. Her rape does not represent the tragic fall of a feminine character. In the struggle for power between the two sexes, Stan may seem to have won since evil Blanche is removed from his home. But Stanley must go on with his life, involved in lies and resentment now, while Blanche abandons the toxic place to live her last desires and dreams in quietude. Blanche brought the ruin of a great friendship shared with Mitch, who shouts after Stan: "I'll kill you" (563); she got her sister, Stella, to see Stan in a new light by the end of the play. She calls him "drunk" and "animal thing" (500) and feels that she cannot trust him completely, ever again. Blanche walks out with the Doctor, holding his hand, smiling, "without

turning” (564) to face Stan, Mitch, or Stella.

The Grotesque Female

A central aspect of the grotesque in relation to the feminine is the exaggeration of the female into a “fantastically consuming monster” (Saddik 13). William’s focus on excess and transformation with the character of Blanche DuBois has turned her into a feminine character who is “sicker than necessary” (Saddik 12). The consuming Blanche, who cannot quench her appetite, becomes sick with excessive consumption: lemon cokes, alcohol, sex, sparkling jewelry and glamorous dresses. Her excessive appetite turns Blanche into a grotesque figure; the grotesque woman in Western culture is linked with social and sexual deviances (Skelly 57). Pouring herself another drink, Blanche further adds to this Western paradigm: “The Tarantula Arms. . . . Yes, a big spider! That’s where I brought my victims. Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers.” (545-46). The monstrous feminine embodies everything about woman that is “shocking, terrifying, horrific, abject” (Skelly 38). Blanche’s self-comparison with a spider turns her male counterparts into victims of her deviant and devouring physical appetite.

The spider symbol assumes shape-shifting qualities as it evokes “images of the non-linear, of the many directions in which something can go, the many sources for it” (Skelly 63). Blanche, in her grotesque female role, destabilizes the linear order, creates alternative centers, “bulging and bursting through the seams of the rational and the stable” (Saddik 10-11). Margin and center coexist while contradictions flow freely with the full support of Blanche’s theatrical persona. The grotesque body, indulgent and excessive, celebrates the physical pleasures of sexuality. Although Blanche keeps her promiscuous past hidden, once it is revealed, she celebrates Desire as triumphant over Death. When Mitch confronts her with the many sexual encounters of her past, Blanche calls death into question, affirming that “The opposite is desire. So do you wonder? How could you possibly wonder? (547).”

The grotesque is only recognizable in relation to a norm (Skelly 38); exceeding that norm involves serious risk. Blanche risked and lost a stable social position at the side of Mitch. When confronted with the norm (i.e., Blanche’s community), she belittles its power of confining individual liberties and of making cheap accusations of such intimate nature: Mitch tells her, “three people, Kiefaber, Stanley, and Shaw, swore to them!” To this accusation, Blanche responds, “Rub-a-

dub-dub, three men in a tub! And such a filthy tub!” (545). Her play with language brings about a certain comic nuance in the face of these severe accusations.

Blanche, in her role as the grotesque female, saves herself with laughter. She exits with the Doctor, hand in hand, again depending on the kindness of a stranger to live her last dreamy wishes. Saddik affirms that “the comic element in the grotesque is that saving element, a creative vision in face of destructive forces” (136). In this spirit of “going on,” for which he is famous, Williams explores the regenerative power of the grotesque through Blanche’s character. This marginalized female spirit that is “playing in the world” (Tannen 174), employs humor not only to enhance her appetite for pleasure, but also to transgress her marginalized social condition thus judged by the dominant cultural context in which she operates.

The Sphinx

In her literary scholarship surrounding Decadent aesthetics, discussed in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*, Paglia introduces the image of the sphinxlike creature, which rests at the base of “Egypt’s invention of femininity” (65), highlighting the first encounters with the feminine attempted through use of cat symbolism. With the cat symbol, Egypt defined and refined its complex aesthetic. The nocturnal cat goddess is shown in all her material opulence (gold earrings, slinky gowns). . The cat has regained “its sphinxlike prestige and magnitude” (Paglia 65) in today’s culture of beauty. Blanche DuBois, the delicate creature of the night, unmatched in elegance (satin evening gowns and brilliant heels), with a heightened sense of self and a theatrical composition, represents the embodiment of the Sphinx.

Paglia describes the physical attributes of the Sphinx: it has “a woman’s head and bosom, a griffin’s wings, and lion’s claws” (50). This is a fitting image for Blanche: she possesses a “delicate” female beauty; there is something about her . . . that suggests a moth” (471), and she is described by Stanley as possessing tiger claws (555). Blanche’s feminine character is governed by her feline nature. Throughout the play, Williams makes numerous references to the image of a cat reflecting in Blanche, further enhancing the shape-shifting attributes of this witchy female.

Blanche’s time of the day is after sunset for she always avoids “strong lights” (471) and only goes out at nighttime. From the stage directions, the audience notices that Blanche displays startled gestures;

whenever “a cat screeches” at the window, “she springs up” and “runs with a wild cry” (473; 482). She often “springs from the table” (540) in the middle of conversations and is overtaken by fear at the sound of new noises.

A cat is “both amoral and immoral, consciously breaking rules . . . it is a narcissist, always adjusting its appearance” (Paglia 64). Blanche is aware that she fibs frequently and confesses to Stella that she possesses “that awful vanity” about her looks (476) that reinforces her need to readjust them before seeing anyone. Cats are creatures of the hidden, mysterious environment. In explaining the etymology of her name to Mitch, Blanche insists on the “white woods” metaphor (499). Woods connote a hidden, mysterious place, and the idea of white woods that she conjures further suggests deceit. The cat follows a code of ritual purity, always cleaning itself with proper care. Throughout the play, Blanche’s ritualistic hot baths set her apart from any attempted mechanistic behavior displayed by other characters.

Stage directions connect Blanche with catlike imagery, and other characters in the play describe her likewise. . Whenever Blanche feels trapped by fear, the stage directions mention “lurid reflections” on the walls, “inhuman jungle voices,” “cries and noises of the jungle” (553-54). In the rape scene, Stan addresses “Blanche the cat” (Bak 145): “Tiger—tiger! Drop the bottle-top! Drop it!” (555). The “awful thing” (554) that she mentions before the rape takes place is “the cat in her, lashing out, with symbolic claws” (Bak 145). Mitch warns Blanche to quit drinking Stan’s alcohol, since she has been “lapping it up all summer like a wild-cat” (544). Blanche’s feminine nature embodies the Sphinx in the way she asserts herself and how other characters perceive her.

The Strange Attractor

When Blanche arrives in the Kowalski’s apartment, she “erupts into this claustrophobic setting like a wild atom from another molecular structure” (Hulley 116). The fact that Blanche’s “appearance is incongruous to this setting” (471) sets the play in motion. With her initial “shocked disbelief” (471) and through her obsessive attempts to change everything about Stan’s apartment, Blanche brings chaos to an otherwise stable system of operation. Stan himself acknowledges that it was “all okay till she showed here” (541). Blanche thereby becomes the disturbing element in Stanley’s household, the strange attractor who gradually implements small changes at the start, changes that result in larger transformations over time.

Chaos Theory proposes that even the smallest changes in any given dynamic system result in complex differences in the behavior of that system. The word “chaos” carries with it an image of order amidst disorder. Stability within any chaos system arises from “attractors” (Marrow 63). Blanche is the attractor who triggers change. Chaos represents the context, the medium in which Blanche, Stan, and Stella live in and function daily. These three characters form the most significant of the complex systems that operate through the play, and the network connecting them is Desire (Marrow 61). Blanche’s lies, her pretense and deceit, and her make-believes disrupt the initial stability of these three characters’ system of operation.

In her role as attractor within the complex system, Blanche disrupts Stan and Stella’s marriage stability conferred by the pillars of a patriarchal society in which Stan is seen as the king of the household. In the pre-Blanche era, submissive Stella would cry on Stan’s lap like a baby and go wild when he returned from work. Now, with Blanche in the household, Stella begins to rethink the rules of the game, addressing herself to Stan in a commanding attitude, “Go and wash up and then help me clear the table” (537). His position in the system undermined, Stan furiously reminds the two sisters, “And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it! (*He hurls a cup and saucer to the floor*). My place is cleared!” (537).

Strange attractors are unpredictable and operate in an irregular pattern. Blanche, in her strange attractor role, is unpredictable. She tells Stella that perhaps Stan is what they need to mix their blood with now that Belle Reve is gone (492), but then devises schemes to break up Stella’s marriage and run away with her to Miami. Blanche’s patterns of operation are characterized by illusion and seduction. They emanate from her words, poetic expressions, voiced dreams, and the magic she idolatrizes.

The play quickly degenerates into chaos. The power struggle between Stan and Blanche highlights her attempts to displace Stanley as master of the household, to influence his language and friends, and to compromise his marriage. Although Stan’s triumph may be attributed to the rape he carried out successfully, Blanche, the strange attractor, leaves a part of herself behind, permanently woven into the fabric of Stan’s life.

“The Ontological Potentialities of Antichaos and Adaptation in *A Streetcar Named Desire*” further advances the idea that if any given perturbation “pushes the network into a different basin of attraction,

the trajectory of the network will change: it will flow into a new state cycle and a new recurrent pattern of network behavior” (Marrow 69). Blanche’s final departure for the asylum leaves the household in a new state. Stan remains behind, having to deal with a tainted marriage and a destroyed friendship. Mitch collapses at the table sobbing, calling Stan a “brag” and a “bull” (556), and Stella doubts whether Blanche’s version of what transpired is the truthful one. Ultimately, Blanche has triumphed. Her pursuit to fulfill her dreams continues in a new, wanted direction, “The rest of my time I am going to spend on the sea . . . I will die—with my hand in the hand of some nice-looking ship’s doctor.” 559).

Blanche has caused irreparable damage to Kowalski’s household: as a powerful insider, she has brought social instability to her immediate community. Not only did Blanche transform herself, but she also transformed her sister’s marriage to such an extent that Stella and Stan’s relationship will remain forever altered. Her magic and illusions have permanently altered the reality of the other characters.

Blanche, an Imperishable Creature of the Stage

Williams’s strategy to bring absolute freedom to the stage is realized in this play, thanks to the excess that Blanche fully absorbs in reinventing her complex persona. The kind of liberation that Blanche’s theatrical persona seeks aims at exaggeration and ambiguity. These two traits open the path for actors to experiment while playing the role of a strong and intense Blanche DuBois. Given the social context and the cultural needs of her time, Blanche’s shape-shifting persona allows greater depth and dimension to an already ambiguous reality.

On the American stage, Jessica Tandy was the first actor to enact Blanche’s role at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York, on December 3, 1947, directed by Elia Kazan. This stage-witch and marginalized feminine other encapsulated the dual nature of Blanche’s character: fragility and power, seduction and mental collapse. A strong trait of Jessica Tandy’s acting was that of “turning madness into nobility” (Kolin 21), as witnessed in Blanche’s final exit, hand in hand with the doctor. Under Kazan’s direction, Tandy left audiences feeling that “a madwoman had entered an alien world” (Kolin 22) and shook the ground she stood on. Tandy’s stage hysteria blurred the play’s reality and fantasy, bringing both celebration and demonization.

On the world stage, the French comedienne Arletty was chosen for the lead role as Blanche DuBois at the Théâtre Édouard VII in Paris, on October 17, 1949. Raymond Rouleau directed the

play, a French adaptation of Williams's script by Jean Cocteau, titled *Un Tramway Nommé Désir*. Arletty's stage-witch appearance was dark, projecting an aura of "désir noir" (Kolin 72). The mixture of black and white in her attire projected a tone of desire and mystery. Black belly dancers, "well endowed Negresses" (Kolin 72), naked from the waist up, gyrated in the background during the rape scene.

Cocteau adds new stage directions and rearranges the original syntax: "(Puis, comme dans un rêve) Cela veut dire: Forêt blanche. La dame de la forêt. La dame blanche" (Cocteau 81). Blanche continues, "then, as in a dream," to explain to Mitch the origin of her French name. This "lady of the forest," "lady in white" transcends considerations of place: Belle Reve is exchanged for a legendary setting, one where the decayed Southern Belle is replaced by the borderlands of her operating community, without the restrictions found in dominant cultural zones. Blanche's dual nature, illustrated by her shape-shifting abilities (witchy female to marginalized other) dissolves into a feminine intensity inhabiting a legendary, mythical setting, where Blanche's essence—her being a lady in white, a lady of the forest—can dwell freely.

Asked what happens to Blanche after the final curtain, Williams declares: "She will enjoy her time in the bin. She will seduce one or two of the more young doctors. Then she will be let free to run an attractive boutique in the French Quarter . . . Blanche wins" (Isaac 154). This suggestion is subtly embedded in the play itself. When Blanche devises escape schemes for her and Stella, she tells her sister, "Do you remember Shep Huntleigh? . . . he could do it, he could certainly do it . . . set us up in a—shop!" (507). Blanche is a resourceful woman, a trait she is well aware of, "I'm very adaptable—to circumstances!" (499) Blanche tells Mitch. Thus, any actor portraying her must come to terms with the astonishing flexibility that Blanche exhibits throughout the play. Just as Williams's theatre of excess seeks liberation from any perceived constraints, Blanche's theatrical persona seeks a continual recreation of itself.

Blanche in the Early Manuscripts

With the first drafts of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams embarked on an ambitious journey of creation: the shaping of a female character whose reflection in the mirror reveals a look of perplexity "as though all human experience shows on her face" (557) and who would become emblematic for the playwright's ability to fascinate his audience, literary critics, and stage producers alike. In a letter addressed to his critic and agent, Audrey Wood, Williams confesses: "I felt *Streetcar*

so intensely that it terrified me . . . I couldn't work for several months I was so terrified" ("Selected Letters" 559). Blanche made immense demands on Williams's craft skills and his confidence as playwright.

Williams further confessed to a feeling of weakness upon engaging himself with the idea of Blanche. It took the playwright months to pull himself together and to go back to "Blanche's Chair in the Moon," the first imagined scene of Blanche sitting on a chair, looking at the moonlight coming through her window. Blanche's powerful connection to nighttime and the moon are emblematic of the witchy role that she would enact in the play and its performance. Subsequent drafts remain that tell the story of her shape-shifting character.

The first fragment of this manuscript compiled in Chicago, "A Street-car Named Desire," explores Blanche's relationship with Desire. The doctor advises Blanche's to "go away somewhere" (Bak 127), an action that would stop her emotional disturbances. Her dual position within her communal culture (high school teacher and neurasthenic woman) is pushed to the margins of existence—the borderland where she could freely operate without encumbering the dominant institutional voices. While riding the streetcar, Blanche reads Winsor's *Forever Amber*, a scandalous novel that tells the story of Amber's promiscuous and manipulative ways to become Charles II's mistress. Blanche's image in the streetcar, eyes on the novel, is emblematic of her incipient relationship with Desire, which will mark her entire character in *Streetcar*.

A second fragment, "Electric Avenue," examines Blanche's relationship with the institution of marriage. Blanche is in Stan's apartment, with him and Stella. Stan's best friend, Eddie [Mitch], ignoring Stan's advice, decides to marry Blanche. Although she is guilty of sexual indiscretion, Blanche tells Eddie that, with marriage and social acceptance, she is looking for "God's face in the moon" (Bak 128). Blanche's marginalized position and her connection with the agent of the night (the moon) are explored in depth with this draft.

This manuscript's third fragment ("Go, Said the Bird!") experiments with Blanche's developing sexuality. The reference to cats is direct in this early fragment. Mitch refers to Blanche as a tiger and lusts for her. Their dialogues are centered on sex. Blanche openly tells him that she had affairs with some of her Blue Mountain High School students. It is in this fragment that readers first become aware of Blanche's cat nature, so overt in *Streetcar*. The closing scene juxtaposes

Blanche and the cat. The stage directions read, “on a fence nearby a cat screeches. Blanche leans suddenly forward and imitates the screech” (Bak 129). She is much more truthful in this early manuscript because she displays her true nature to Mitch. She tells him, “what people do with their bodies is not really what makes good or bad people of them!” (Bak 129). Laid end to end, her lovers could “stretch all the way from here to Frenchmen’s Bayou” (Bak 129), she confesses to Mitch.

The Atlanta manuscript changes the setting of the play from Chicago to Atlanta and comprises thirty-two pages of writing. The fragment entitled “The Primary Colors” is of significance as it clearly emphasizes Blanche’s overt sexuality, her marginalized position within her community as well as her powerful connection to felines. Blanche openly sexualizes her relationship with Stan and uses Mitch as a tool to obtain a husband after her many sexual affairs for which she was condemned in her small town. Blanche’s overconsumption of alcohol is emphasized in this draft as well. After a night of drinking, she ends up in bed with Mitch. Stage directions emphasize Blanche’s shape-shifting inclination, further enhancing her sexuality, “Right outside an alley-cat raises a long nocturnal howl. Blanche leans slowly forward, her whole figure taut like a cat about to spring. Then she twists her mouth down and imitates the cry of the cat” (Bak 132). Stan affirms that Blanche makes his apartment smell like a “cat-house” (Bak 132) every time she gets ready for her dates with Mitch.

“The Poker Night” represents the penultimate version of *Streetcar*. Williams started writing this draft in New Orleans in his apartment at the corner of Saint Peter and Royal streets, where he lived with his grandfather, but succeeded in its final form once he settled in Key West. “The Poker Night” emphasizes rape as the effect of a mutual desire that Blanche and Stan share throughout the play.

Blanche decides to leave and tells Ralph [Stan], “I am really surprised the walls are still standing. There was one moment when I thought we were lying out-doors halfway between this crazy world and the moon! (They both laugh a little). I guess that was the moment when I—scratched you. . . .” (“The Poker Night” verso 1). The moon and cats remain Blanche’s powerful weapons for shifting shapes.. Blanche’s response to the rape is something Williams grappled with throughout the revised drafts of “The Poker Night.”

“The Passion of a Moth” is the last revised draft for “The Poker Night.” Suggestive of the title, Williams highlights Blanche’s shape-shifting characteristics, along with her sexual tendencies. Blanche’s

distorted perceptions, her inclination to magic and fantasy, and her sharp awareness of her own borderline position in the community are explored in this draft. After Stan hands Blanche a bus ticket so she can leave his apartment, she admits to him, with direct reference to their sexual encounter:

This unholy union of ours may not have been fruitless. I may bear you a son. That strikes me as being in the realm of probability. (Laughs). I'll bear you a son. I'll creep in some lightless corner or drop in a ditch somewhere and bear you a child that will be more beast than human . . . this angelic monster coming to be, will rise out of smoke, and confusion . . . we'll call him *Le Fils de Soleil*—the Sun's child! (Bak 139).

Much as her dual nature exposes a Blanche who reenacts everything in between the witchy woman and the marginalized feminine other, her diction brings together images of light and darkness. The possible baby is referred to as the child of the Sun, while his birth will take place in a dark corner or a ditch where Blanche will creep. Her marginalized position at the outskirts of the dominant culture is further emphasized by Blanche's creeping into some "lightless corner" or "ditch somewhere" to give birth to her "angelic monster." Her baby will further carry the shape-shifting traits reflected in Blanche in the play and its performance, rising "out of smoke and confusion," thus becoming just like his mother. Blanche confesses all this to Stan with ease, even laughing, further reclaiming her power over situations filled with ambiguity and danger.

The image of Blanche as cat retains its significance and power in this unpublished manuscript. When Blanche mentions the scratches that she left on Stan's back, he answers, "scratches all over like a tiger clawed me!" (Bak 142). Williams himself connects Blanche's character to that of a tigress when, in a 1963 essay written for *The New York Times*, he affirms, "I don't suppose anyone reads Streetcar anymore, but if they did, they would discover that Blanche is a delicate tigress with her back to the wall" ("New Selected Essays" 137). Her feline nature provides her with the necessary tools to bounce back from any desperate, seemingly closed situation.

Blanche is the resourceful type and she is aware of possessing rich mechanisms to cope with any circumstance. Her remark to Mitch, "I'm very adaptable—to circumstances" (499), holds its truth when applied to any of the earlier drafts of the play. Blanche's shape-shifting traits through which she defines herself and reenacts her persona, her

flexibility to bounce back in the game of life, and her use of humor as a transgressive act in the face of her dominant culture—allow her to penetrate established behavioral traditions and to challenge their prescribed patterns of action.

Conclusion: A Most Graceful Exit

A Williams's journal entry dated July 12, 1942, five years before the publication of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, reads Blanche in terms of her character's magnitude: "I'd like to live a simple life—with epic fornications" ("The Selected Letters of Tennessee Williams" 388). In choosing to live a life filled with "epic fornications," yet deeming it simple, Blanche opens herself up to contradictions and ambiguity. Her complex female role is such that her character cannot be contained. *Streetcar* embraces a need for reenactment, opening all desire for interpretation.

In his Memoirs, Williams ponders over the seemingly little people of his world of drama (234). Further asking himself if Blanche was a little person, the playwright continues, "certainly not. She was a demonic creature, the size of her feeling was too great for her to contain without the escape of madness" (235). Hence, her feeling spills over, birthing Blanche's fascinating ability to recreate her shape-shifting female traits within the play.

The multiple roles she embraces emphasize her play with *Desire*. She thus becomes a disruptive character for those with whom she comes in contact. When she enters people's lives, she inevitably brings social instability. She arouses desire and rebellion in others. For the first time, she makes Stanley apprehensive about her presence in his own household. She makes Stella observe Stanley from a new, unpleasant perspective and desire more from him. She offers Mitch, for the first time, a vibrant alternative to a sick and dying mother.

The ultimate impersonator of Blanche DuBois becomes Williams himself; he is known for having said on numerous occasions "I am Blanche" (Steindler 16). Williams's last death wish, stipulated in the playwright's will, was that he be buried at sea off Key West, as near as possible to the place where his favorite poet, Hart Crane, drowned himself ("Letters of Tennessee Williams to Maria St. Just" 76). It brings him face to face with Blanche's final vision of death at the hands of an unwashed grape and her soul's integration into the Elysian Fields of her dreams.

The play's last scene offers glimpses of Blanche's fascinating power of regeneration despite her apparent defeat by her confinement

to an asylum. Blanche's Della Robbia blue jacket with a turquoise seahorse pinned to it become connected with the blue blanket wrapped around her newborn nephew, keeping him warm. Together, they stand as a symbol for regeneration, a new life, and another possibility of recreation. A reborn figure in the fragile body of a blue-eyed newborn baby emerges at play's end, one through which Blanche reinforces the hidden powers of her shape-shifting abilities to rearrange new patterns in any existing culture and to challenge any status quo with creative energies that operate through humor and play, adaptability, and transformation.

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