

The Image of Women in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the image of women in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* which has not been tackled or given special attention by researchers. It concentrates on Williams as a feminist writer and his presentation of women as victims especially in this play. It presents an analysis of the female characters in this play and their negative relationships with men. It also shows the playwright's sympathy with women and their problems as they live in a materialistic male-dominated society.

I. Tennessee Williams: A Biographical Note.

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983) is one of the outstanding modern American playwrights. He together with Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller are often described as the three leading American dramatists of the 20th century. He was a prolific dramatist, poet, short story and essay writer. He wrote many plays in which he tackled the problems of his society during his time. His masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* (premiered in 1947 at the Barrymore Theater in New York City) captured the Critics' Circle Award and also won the Pulitzer Prize.

Most of Williams's writings are reflections of his own experience in life and are autobiographical. He derived the stories of his plays from his own life and from the problems of his family. As

he wrote, he remembered his past life making the places in which he lived the setting of his plays, his family members as characters in his plays, and their problems his main concern. The difference in social position between his father and mother was reflected in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. His father was a salesman in a shoe factory, while his mother, Edwina, came from an aristocratic family from the south of America. His mother valued refinement and the good manners of southern gentry and wanted her son and daughter, Rose, to be educated and have these qualities of gentility. In contrast to his father, his mother seemed to be rather quiet and possessive, demonstrating a tremendous attachment to her children. His father, on the other hand, was a traveling salesman, who had little time for his children. He was a loud, vulgar, hard-drinking, boisterous man. He fought with his wife, mocked Rose, and sometimes beat Tennessee. Eventually, he deserted the family altogether. His bad relation with his wife and his treatment of his children had a negative effect on them. Rose developed symptoms of insanity and was diagnosed as a schizophrenic. Consequently, she was put in a mental institution¹. These biographical details are important in forming Williams's view towards women and his constant portrayal of women as victims in his plays. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* the main female characters, Blanche DuBois and Stella Kowalski, as critics agree, mirror his mother and his sister, while Stanley Kowalski reflects his father. His parents' stormy relationship is similar to Stanley's relationship with his wife and sister-in-law.

Williams showed a particular interest in the life of southern American women. What attracted his attention in these women was their attempt to keep themselves beautiful and attractive, on the one hand, and their sense of pride and superiority because they came

from respectable aristocratic families. This is very obvious in *A Streetcar Named Desire* throughout the character of Blanche².

II. *A Streetcar Named Desire*: A Plot Summary.

A Streetcar Named Desire is divided into eleven scenes. The action of the play takes place in the 1940s shortly after the Second World War in an old apartment building in a working class district in New Orleans. Blanche, a schoolteacher from Laurel, Mississippi, arrives at the New Orleans apartment of her sister, Stella Kowalski. She intends to stay at Stella's apartment for an unspecified but likely lengthy period of time. Blanche tells Stella that, after the death of all their remaining relatives, she lost Belle Reve, their ancestral home. She also mentions that she has been given a leave of absence from her teaching position because of her bad nerves. Stella tells Blanche that she can stay with her, at least for a while, but she warns Blanche that she must avoid and endure her husband, Stanley, a working class person from a Polish origin, who is rough and is unlike the refined men that Blanche used to see and deal with in Laurel.

 Though Blanche seems to have no money and is homeless, she is disdainful of the overcrowded quarters of the Kowalskis' two-room apartment and of the apartment's location in a noisy working-class neighborhood. Blanche, from the beginning, dislikes Stanley who also immediately distrusts her to the extent that he suspects her of having cheated Stella out of her share of the family inheritance by selling the family plantation to buy furs and jewels. She tries to defend herself to Stanley, and she reveals that Belle Reve was lost due to a family debt. Stanley does not believe her and tries to seek in her belongings for a bill of sale.

Stella takes her sister to the cinema that night because she does not want her to see Stanley and his friends playing poker and drinking. When they return, Blanche is introduced to Mitch, a lonesome man in search of a wife, whose refined behaviors and courteous manners set him apart from Stanley's other friends. She easily attracts his attention and he quits the game in order to speak to her. Upset that the poker game has been interrupted, Stanley throws a radio out of the window and strikes Stella. Stella and Blanche escape upstairs to a friend's apartment while Stanley's friends try to calm him down.

When Stella and Stanley are reconciled, Blanche, disgusted by Stanley's barbarity, intends to leave. Seeing that she has nowhere else to go, she invents a story about a rich friend named Shep Huntleigh who might give her refuge. She tries to persuade Stella to leave with her. However, Stella refuses saying that she loves Stanley regardless of his brutality.

Seeing that Mitch is interested in Blanche, Stanley tries to destroy the relationship between the two in order to revenge from Blanche who urges her sister to leave him and insults him in front of his wife. He gets some information against her that she was an infamous woman back in Laurel. Stanley, meanwhile, learns that Blanche hasn't taken a leave from her teaching job. Rather, she has been fired because she seduced one of her students. In addition, she was forced to leave Laurel because of her extra sexual habits.

Stanley tells Mitch about Blanche's past. As Stella prepares a birthday party for her sister, Stanley also tells her about her sister's bad reputation in Laurel. Shocked, Stella pleads to Stanley to be gentle with Blanche. But Stanley gives Blanche a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel as a birthday present. Stella rebukes Stanley

for his heartlessness and suddenly she feels labor pains and is taken by Stanley to the hospital.

Mitch, highly agitated for being deceived, visits Blanche and tells her about Stanley's story. She pleads for understanding by confessing that she had been intimate with men in order to fill her emptiness after the death of her young husband. Mitch tries to assault her sexually, but she repels him by shouting fire out the window.

Late that night Stanley returns and finds Blanche dressed in fine traveling clothes. She informs Stanley that Shep Huntleigh has invited her on a cruise and that Mitch has apologized for not coming to her birthday party. Stanley does not believe her and he tries to show her that she cannot deceive him with her lies. Helpless and unable to defend herself, she is raped by Stanley.

Weeks later Stella packs Blanche's belongings to send her to a mental asylum. Blanche believes that she is going on a vacation in the country with Shep. A doctor and nurse arrive at the door to take her. She screams and tries to resist but seeing that the doctor is kind to her, she yields and lets him guide her away while Stella, who doesn't know if she is doing the right thing, cries out of remorse and pity.

III. Williams's Portrayal of Female Characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Williams's presentation of women in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a traditional one. The image of women in this play is not different from that presented in traditional literary works in which women are presented as submissive characters who are dependent upon male's authority and control and men are portrayed as leaders of the house. The play has only one difference because Blanche tries to defy a

man whom she believes to be inferior to her in class position and education. It shows the consequences of this upon the life of this woman as she sets herself against this cruel man. This idea is emphasized by Calvin Bedient who says that the conflict in the play and its tragic consequences “arises from the collision ... between a masculine and a feminine assertion of strength”³. In this sense, an analysis of the female characters presented in the play and their conflict with the male characters especially Stanley, the dominant male character in the play, is very important in showing the playwright's presentation of women.

In this play Williams presents women as powerless, weak, and passive characters who are tightly linked to their persecutors due to economic, social, and physical needs. The society in which these women live imposes many restrictions upon their lives. Women's only alternative in such a male-dominated society is to find a suitable partner, get married and settled. Both Blanche and Stella are able to get married, but their choices are not suitable. Blanche had married a man whom she dearly loved, but later discovered that he was a homosexual man and by expressing her disgust for his behavior she led him to suicide. Stella, on the other hand, has married a man who is inferior to her socially and who is arrogant and aggressive, abusing her physically and leaving her without a voice. In this play, as Rachael Van Duyvenbode puts it, it is not love but animal desire that “binds men and women together”⁴. Even the title of the play refers to the physical desires of the main characters and especially its heroine Blanche⁵. When she first arrives at the Kowalski apartment, she says that she rode a streetcar named desire which becomes throughout the play a symbol of the desire that lurks hidden underneath the heart of this southern American woman and suggests her lifelong pursuit of her sexual desire before her arrival

at New Orleans. Her tragic flaw is her inability to manipulate or repress her desire. It is her desire that led her to be driven out of her job.

III.i. Blanche.

Throughout the play, the audience discovers Blanche's story before she arrives at New Orleans at which the play begins. When the play begins Blanche is a lonely destitute who has no place to go to except her sister's apartment. She is a wanderer traveling from a place to place moving downwards in her fortunes reaching to the mental asylum, which is the only place left to her, at the end of the play and her life⁶.

Blanche appears in the first scene dressed in white, the symbol of purity and innocence. She is seen as a moth-like creature. She is delicate, refined, sensitive, and intelligent. She cannot stand a vulgar remark or a vulgar action. With her elegant manner, white gown, gloves, and pearl earrings she seems a stranger and an outsider in this poor working class place, though she will be an intruder on the life of her sister⁷. She is rootless and out of place in this society "like a fish out of water"⁸.

Throughout the play the audience is informed that she has lost her family, her young husband who was her first love, her fortune, the genteel society of her ancestors, her job, and consequently her reputation and honor in her society. After the departure of Stella and the death of her husband and all the members of her family, Blanche became a victim to loneliness. She was lost between her desire, which has been her driving motivation, and her loneliness. She failed to manage the family estate and it was seized by creditors. She has lived a life that would make the most degenerate person seem timid. In fact, she is already a fallen woman when the play

begins. Although she has fallen in the eyes of her society, she still wants to believe that she is Blanche Dubois the respectable lady she has been once upon a time. She pretends to be a woman of dignity in front of her sister, her brother-in-law and their acquaintances. That is why she dresses herself in fine clothes and behaves like an aristocrat. Her reliance upon outward appearance is an attempt to make herself attractive to male suitors. She is conscious of her miserable condition as a poor and destitute woman, and by marrying she hopes to settle and escape poverty and loneliness. She is also aware of her fading beauty and “is obsessed with her appearance, always seeking reassurance about it”⁹.

Williams uses many symbols to reinforce the image of Blanche as a fallen woman. Blanche often wears white clothes because she wants the people to think that she is pure, innocent, and honest¹⁰. The fact that her white dress is stained in Scene Five symbolizes her dishonesty and false purity. She has also become hysterical due to her excessive sexual relations. She keeps bathing in hot water throughout the play, though it is in summer, and says that these bathes calm her nerves. So, bathing becomes a symbol of her intention “to wash away the feeling of guilt and also the stains of her promiscuous life,”¹¹ and to start a new decent life in the society of New Orleans despite her sense of superiority over this society. In addition, Blanche drinks excessively throughout the course of action. Drunkenness helps her to escape the harsh world of reality and withdraw into her own imaginative world¹².

Blanche feels herself superior to other people, especially the working class people to which Stanley and his neighbors and friends belong. Since she was brought up in the old American south and is used to its aristocratic traditions, she cannot realize that the romantic and chivalry world of the south had diminished. Thus, she tries to

lead the life of an elegant lady. She is a romantic and delicate woman from the past who cannot live in a modern world inhabited by people like Stanley. Her romantic and imaginative nature becomes clear when she quotes poetry making references to many literary works. Her language is that of the educated people and sometimes she speaks French. This deepens the chasm between the imaginary world of Blanche and the realistic world of Stanley and his friends and neighbors. The society in which she lives is changing, but she is unable to realize this fact. Annette J. Saddik indicates that Blanche's "aristocratic principles will no longer assure her survival in an increasingly pragmatic urbanized world ... [and it] is useless in the rapidly changing capitalist system restructuring American society during the years just before the Second World War and beyond"¹³. She adds that Blanche "is not self-sufficient enough in a capitalistic society to be able to survive"¹⁴. She longs for love, respect, and protection, and seeks a refuge in which she can find peace. Instead of finding this place, she finds a world dominated by men like Stanley. Unlike the materialistic Stanley, she represents the old and romantic in America and the struggle between them can be viewed as the struggle between the old and the new in America. Stanley, who is a Polish immigrant, represents the new life in America that the old-fashioned Blanche does not belong to. In other words, this play deals with the social and cultural differences between the aristocratic Blanche and the working class Stanley. He does not like her superiority or snobbish way in making him and his companions think that she is better than them since his direct interest is to emphasize his superiority as a male. In this play "the materialist triumphs over the romantic"¹⁵.

Blanche is fragile and vulnerable though she is elegant and attractive. She is "afraid of being deserted, afraid of the future,

afraid of the past, afraid of love, afraid of crowds, afraid of light, afraid of death”¹⁶. She is very interested in her outside appearance. She fears aging and losing beauty. She nervously tells Stella when she arrives in her apartment to “turn that over-light off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!”¹⁷ That is why she covers the light bulb in the Kowalski apartment with a paper lantern. She avoids being seen in direct bright light that will reveal her fading beauty especially in front of Mitch whom she tries to tempt into marrying her. In addition, she refuses to go to any place with Mitch during daylight since this will reveal her real age and fading beauty¹⁸. She also tries to conceal her real age believing that a woman in her age has few opportunities to get married. Therefore, she prefers dim light and shadows. In Scene Six Blanche relates her avoidance of light to her relationship with her dead husband, Allan Grey, when she tells Mitch that her life with Allan was like living in bright vivid light. She says that since the death of her husband her life has become dim and the bright light has gone forever in her life. So, the suicide of her husband marked the decline in her life¹⁹.

Blanche has always thought she disappointed her young lover when he most needed her. She felt also that she was cruel to him in a way that Stanley would like to be cruel to her. Blanche's entire life has been affected by this early tragic event. After the death of her husband, the streetcar named desire continued to move in her life as she moved in her physical relationships from a man into another without being able to fill the gap caused by the death of her lover. She even admits her immoral relations trying to justify them to Mitch when he confronts her with her reality:

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 thing

it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection. (*Streetcar*, p.205)

She is imprisoned in her memories. Despite her disappointment in her dead husband, she still cannot forgive herself for being the reason for his suicide²⁰. Her sense of guilt, loyalty, and love for her dead husband is clear when she tries to show Stanley the papers that prove her innocence of the loss of Belle Reve which represents to Stanley the inheritance of his wife. As she is searching in her wardrobe for the papers, Stanley holds a pile of old papers that he finds in her bags. She screams hysterically and declares that she is going to burn them because he touches them. When he asks her about the reason, she says that these papers are “poems a dead boy wrote. I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I am not young and vulnerable any more. But my young husband was and I – never mind about that!” (*Streetcar*, p.139) The fact that she still keeps these papers manifests her love and loyalty to her dead husband.

In her sexual relations Blanche was particularly drawn to very young men who would remind her of her young husband. This reflects her nostalgia to the past when she was young, especially her happy days with her beloved husband before his suicide. It also makes her feel that she is still young. That is why in a scene in the play Blanche detains a young collector of a newspaper, who comes to her sister's apartment while the latter is away with her husband, long enough to kiss him because he reminds her of her young husband. After kissing the young man, she urges him to leave saying “I've got to be good and keep my hands off children,” (*Streetcar*, p.174) a speech which shows her desire to change her life into a better one. Similarly she was fired from her job as a teacher because of having an affair with a young student. Still,

during these years of promiscuity, Blanche has never been able to find anyone to fill the emptiness in her life.

On arriving into the Kowalski household, she tries to rebuild her life together with her sister's believing that she is going to save Stella from a miserable life with Stanley. Like any other woman in her time, Blanche is dependent upon men. Although she encourages her sister to abandon her abusive husband (believing that she can be happier without him), she says that she is going to contact a rich man, Shep Huntleigh, for financial support. This suggests her dependence upon men and her inability to escape or defy the norms of this male-dominating society.

When Blanche sees Stanley for the first time, she is immediately frightened by his rough behavior. Stanley's violent nature reveals itself when his close friends gather at the apartment on their daily poker nights. Stanley is infuriated because Blanche tries to win the affection of Mitch, and she operates the radio to listen to music. He, very drunk and angry, throws the radio out of the window. Stella, trying to defend Blanche and very offended by her husband's behavior, yells at him and tries to end the poker game by ordering Stanley's friends out of her house. Stanley, in turn, hits her violently despite the fact that she is pregnant with his baby. The men try to rescue Stella who escapes with Blanche to her upstairs neighbor's, Eunice's, apartment. Shortly after that, Stanley, feeling that he is going to lose his woman, cries up to Stella to forgive him. To Blanche's surprise, Stella returns to Stanley and embraces him passionately. Blanche tries to explain to her younger sister, why she shouldn't stay married to her husband. She tries to remind her of her past life as an aristocrat and that she should not forget her delicate past life by living with such a vulgar person. In her speech she depicts Stanley as an animal-like primitive man:

May I – speak – plainly? ... Well – if you'll forgive me – he's *common*! ... You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just *suppose* that any part of a gentleman's in his nature! *Not one particle, no!* Oh, if he was just – *ordinary*! Just plain – but good and wholesome, but – *no*. There's something downright – *bestial* 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, like one of those pictures I've seen in – anthropological studies! 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! And you – *you* here – *waiting* for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night – you call it – this party of apes! Somebody growls – some creature snatches at something – the fight is on! ... *Don't – don't hang back with the brutes!* (*Streetcar*, pp.163-4)

As Blanche is criticizing Stanley's behavior and his bestial nature, he overhears her conversation with her sister. This upsets him leading to a conflict between him and his sister-in-law and his wife as well. This antagonist relationship between Blanche and Stanley represents the conflict between illusion and reality. It is the starting point of the animosity between Stanley and Blanche and is

one of the reasons that creates tension and leads to the climax in the play. They “engage in a power struggle that draws out the worst in Stanley's personality”²¹.

Stanley can understand no relationship between a man and a woman except a sexual one, where he sees the man's role as giving and taking pleasure from this relationship. In the first scene Tennessee Williams describes Stanley as follows:

Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women ... not with weak indulgence, dependently, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. (*Streetcar*, p.128)

This description, as Susan Koprince comments, is to show Stanley as “the perfect embodiment of male sexual power”²². Koprince adds:

Like male batterers, Stanley believes in male superiority. He views women as sexual objects – 'hens' who have been placed on earth solely for the male bird's pleasure. ... [He] especially believes in male dominance within the institution of marriage. He is completely in charge of the Kowalski household, calling all the shots and expecting his wife's acquiescence. If Stella ever tries to stand up to him, Stanley growls, 'Since when do you give me orders?'²³

With the appearance of Blanche, Stanley feels an uncomfortable threat to those things that are his. Blanche becomes a threat to his way of life; she is a foreign element and a superior being whom he cannot understand. According to Stanley, Blanche represents not

only a threat and a challenge to his authority as a male but also an intrusion on his happy life with Stella and “she must be expelled”²⁴. Stanley takes his male superiority for granted and does not accept this challenge to his authority. He demands subservience from Stella. He is continually trying to convince Stella that they had a better life together before her sister's arrival. He tells her that it will be all right once again between them as soon as Blanche leaves.

Meanwhile, Stanley, who is very realistic, does not believe Blanche's stories and the fake mask of honesty that she tries to wear. He does his best to reveal Blanche's fabrications and pretence. He tries to find a way by which he can defeat Blanche. His first victory over her occurs when he tells her that a work companion named Shaw, who used to travel through Laurel, claims to be acquainted with her meeting her at an infamous hotel called the Flamingo. She denies being acquainted with this man arguing that this place is not suitable for a woman in her social position and that the man must have mistaken her for another woman. But the nervous way in which she defends herself makes her suspicious to Stanley and the audience as well. So Stanley insists that he will check up once again in order to clear up this mistake. Her speech to Stella after the departure of Stanley shows that Stanley's suspicion is justified. She asks Stella whether or not people are exchanging rumors about her. She even admits to Stella that her life after the loss of Belle Reve was not a decent one.

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft – soft people have got to court the favour of hard ones, Stella. Have got to be seductive – put on soft colours of butterfly wings, and glow – make a little – temporary magic just in order to pay for – one night's shelter! That's why I've been – not so awf'ly good lately.

I've run for protection, Stella, from under one leaky roof to another leaky roof – because it was storm – all storm, and I was caught in the centre. ... 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, if you're going to have someone's protection. ... But I'm scared now – awf'ly scared. I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. (*Streetcar*, p.169)

Later Stanley gets information against Blanche concerning her disreputable past life in her hometown. He is told that Blanche had affairs with many men while living at the Flamingo and that she was dismissed because of her promiscuous behavior and uncontrollable desire since the Mayor of the town found her a bad influence on the townspeople. He tells Stella about these facts. He also tells her that Blanche is not on a leave from the school at which she works, as she claims, but that she was kicked out of the school for having a sexual affair with a seventeen years old student.

The birthday party that Stella prepares for Blanche is very dramatic. Mitch, who is invited for Blanche's sake, does not come because Stanley has told him about Blanche's sordid past. Stanley justifies his behavior saying that Mitch is his close friend, and he will not let him “jump in a tank with a school of sharks” (*Streetcar*, p.191). But his motivation behind disgracing Blanche in front of Mitch, as Gulshan Rai Kataria argues, is to revenge from Blanche for her attempt “to ruin his marriage by prompting Stella to get away and that he must pay back, eye for an eye, by destroying the chances of her marriage with Mitch”²⁵. Then Stanley indicates to Blanche that he is aware of her infamous past life, and he gives Blanche a one-way bus ticket back to her hometown, Laurel, as a

birthday present, a thing that is behind endurance and that she can only react to by running into the next room with tears. Stella reprimands him for his cruelty saying that Blanche is a straight and trustworthy woman. Stanley becomes angry and in order to regain control, he sweeps the table's contents to the floor, declaring that he is the master of the house. Stella tells him that if Blanche has changed it was because of the abuse of cruel men like him. She is very upset and is about to confront her husband but she is hindered by the pain of her labor and is taken to the hospital.

Another important thing that affects the life of Blanche and leads to her final tragic end is her relation with Mitch. When she arrives at New Orleans, Blanche tries to make Mitch as well as other people believe that she is innocent, virtuous and pure. According to Blanche telling lies to herself and to others helps her escape reality and enjoy a better way of life. She tells Mitch that she is younger than Stella despite the fact that she is five years older than her sister and that the reason behind her visit to New Orleans is to take care of her sister who "hasn't been so well lately" (*Streetcar*, p.150), but the fact is that she is there because she is homeless and destitute. She even tells him that she is not married though she is actually a widow. Unlike Stanley, Mitch is deceived by Blanche's attempt to feign youth, fortune, honesty, and sexual modesty.

The relationship between Mitch and Blanche is not based on love but on a mutual need of companionship and support on both sides. What attract them together is that both of them have lost loved ones, since Mitch lost his beloved woman years before meeting Blanche, and both of them are lonely:

Mitch: You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be – you and me, Blanche?

Blanche: (... in long, grateful sobs) Sometimes – there's God – so quickly (*Streetcar*, p.184).

Mitch tells Blanche that his dying mother wants him to marry and settle before she dies. He fears loneliness after the death of his mother, and he hopes that by marrying Blanche this “might end his loneliness”²⁶. Blanche, on the other hand, seeks security and protection. When she meets Mitch, she realizes that here is a strong harbor where she can find rest, peace, and protection from the cruel world. Being a helpless destitute, “she scrabbles frantically for a hold, something with which to lift herself from the depths”²⁷. When Stella asks her about the reason behind her interest in Mitch, she tells her that she wants Mitch because she is so tired of struggling against the world: “I want to *rest!* I want to breathe quietly again! Yes – I *want* Mitch ... *very badly!* Just think! If it happens! I can leave here and not be anyone's problem” (*Streetcar*, p.171).

Ultimately Mitch realizes that Blanche is not the woman to be trusted and is no longer deceived by her lies. He confronts Blanche with the reality of her past as it was delivered to him by Stanley forcing her to stand under the light and telling her that he does not mind her age just her bad reputation which is the only obstacle in their marriage. She tells him that she has been telling lies because what is important to her is not life as it really is but as it ought to be and that it is magic, rather than reality that represents life as it ought to be: “I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth” (*Streetcar*, p.204). Being aware now that Blanche is not the chaste lady she pretends to be and trying to revenge from her for fooling him, he tries to abuse her sexually, but she forces him to leave.

After losing her opportunity to marry Mitch, Blanche tries to resort to her imagination. When Stanley returns from the hospital where his wife is giving birth to his first baby, he finds Blanche drunk, and she tells him that she is going to leave with the millionaire, Shep Huntleigh, who was her former suitor. He finds in her lonely, drunken, helpless status an opportunity to put an end to her lies and to avenge himself on her. When she tries to avoid him, he stands in her way. Understanding his intention, Blanche is terrified and tries to defend herself. She smashes a bottle on the table and threatens to use it against Stanley. Stanley grasps her arm and when she resists him, he uses his physical strength to overcome her. He carries her into the bed room, and the audience realizes through the pulsing music that they can hear that he is going to abuse her sexually²⁸.

Brenda A. Murphy indicates that *A Streetcar Named Desire* “is meant to lead the audience into identification with Blanche's perception of this world, and of the danger that it poses for her, in the person of Stanley”²⁹. The rape is Blanche's destruction as an individual. In all previous sexual encounters, Blanche had freely given of herself. But to be taken so cruelly and so brutally by a man who represents all qualities which Blanche found vile caused her entire world to collapse. Losing her way altogether at the end of the play, Blanche can no longer distinguish illusion from reality. So she goes to an asylum. At the end the doctor approaches Blanche in a gentle manner and convinces her to leave with him. This submissive behavior, allowing the doctor to lead her away, represents her total dependence upon men. Her final speech to the doctor as he helps her “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” (*Streetcar*, p.225) is an admission from her of her weak and dependent nature, that she is helpless in this harsh world of reality. No wonder

Blanche rejects reality in favor of illusion since reality has treated her unkindly. Her attempt to escape into her own fantasies, especially at the end of the play, enables her to shield herself from the harsh blows of reality. Thus fantasy has become her primary means of self-defense. But in her final struggle against Stanley, as she retreats completely into her own world, she becomes completely insane. She is not the stoic who can face all these troubles and dilemmas patiently. She is already ruined and defeated when the play opens, and the last blow from Stanley is enough to bring her final destruction. Yet she feigns to be happy at the end despite the ultimate triumph of reality. She exits without looking back or saying goodbye as she goes.

III.ii. Stella.

Another female character in the play who is worthy of evaluation is Stella. Stella is torn between her homage to her sister and her loyalty to her husband. She is trapped “in the middle of a war between gentrified society, represented by Blanche, and the rugged, practical world of the working class personified by Stanley”³⁰. Stanley treats his wife with no respect. According to him, the duty of a woman is to obey her husband and endure his abusive behaviors. If the woman shows any kind of objection or disobedience, she is subdued and beaten. So, domestic violence is something common in the Kowalski household. When he physically abuses his wife, he is ready to apologize for his violent behavior, though insincerely, if he feels that his physical desires need to be satisfied. Stella, after an attack followed by an apology, tells her sister that Stanley “was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself” (*Streetcar*, p.157). She justifies her husband's abuse as a result of his drunkenness which

took hold of him to the point that he could not control his behavior. She believes that “men and women have to get used to each other's ways of life”³¹. She is very satisfied with her simple life with Stanley and forgets the prestigious life that she was living in the past. She is very adaptable to circumstances. She, unlike her sister, does not oppose or struggle against the new in America but is able to mix up and indulge with the modern³². When Blanche insists that Stella should leave Stanley because he is a violent and abusive man, Stella tells her, “You're making much too much fuss about this. ... it wasn't anything as serious as you seem to take it” (*Streetcar*, p.157). She cannot find anything wrong with her marriage.

When Blanche arrives, Stella advises her that Stanley is vulgar and is not similar to the southern gentlemen they knew at Mississippi. But despite her husband's vulgarity, Stella is madly in love with him and refuses to let anything come between her and him. She endures her husband's violent nature as something that attracted her from the beginning of their relationship, a thing which is difficult for Blanche to understand. Stella tells Blanche: “Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night—soon as we came in here—he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it” (*Streetcar*, p.157). She also tells her sister who is frightened by this act that “I was—sort of—thrilled by it” (*Ibid.*). Therefore, despite his crude nature and violent temper, which sometimes makes her angry with him, she “admires it because it shows his masculinity”³³. The relationship between Stella and Stanley is based on powerful “physical attraction”³⁴. Sometimes she defends him and justifies his violent behavior due to her sexual satisfaction with him: “But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark —

that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant” (*Streetcar*, p.162).

Stella is a passive woman. She depends completely upon her husband leaving everything for him to control and arrange. She is aware of her husband's importance for her and she says that he knows what the best is for her and that he can take care of her. Stella's passive nature manifests itself when she allows not only her husband but also her sister, Blanche, to control her, treating her like a maid or servant. From the very beginning of the play, Blanche, as she arrives at her sister's apartment, greets her with orders like “Stand up!” and “You hear I said stand up!” (*Streetcar*, p.122). Stella obeys these orders passively. She even tries to give her some instructions in an imperative way concerning her dress and hair style: “You messy child, you, you've spilt something on that pretty white lace collar! About your hair – You ought to have it cut in a feather bob with your dainty feathers” (*Ibid.*). Stella complies and does her sister's orders without any objection. She even expresses her delight and contentment in being Blanche's inferior saying “I like to wait on you, Blanche. It makes it seem more like home [Belle Reve, Mississippi]” (*Streetcar*, p.170). This reflects that she enjoyed playing this submissive role even before meeting Stanley.

Stella, who is more realistic than her sister, chooses to remain with her husband at the end of the play. This, in fact, emphasizes her realistic and practical view towards life. She is satisfied with her life as the wife of a factory worker. She is not discontented to leave her previous prestigious life and social pretence behind her in exchange of her life with her husband. She is convinced that she has a secure life and future with Stanley in spite of his brutality. She argues that her husband's violent nature does not matter and that her husband is gentle and passionate in essence. She trusts and defends

her sister throughout the play but cannot believe her when she accuses Stanley of sexual attack on her so that she can go on living with him: “I couldn't believe [Blanche's] story and go on living with Stanley” (*Streetcar*, p.217). Susan Koprince predicts that Stella's life with Stanley in the future will not be a happy and settled one:

Stanley's violence against her will continue – and escalate – and there will be no way out for her. Trapped in a cycle of domestic abuse, Stella Kowalski will be alone and at risk, unable to leave the husband who abuses her, unable to count on social remedies – unable to depend, perhaps, even on 'the kindness of strangers'³⁵.

Another female character in the play who can serve as a foil to both Blanche and Stella is Eunice Hubbell. She stands between the two extremes of the submissive Stella and the defiant Blanche, though her marital relationship is not different from Stella's. She lives with her husband, Steve Hubbell, in an apartment above the Kowalski's. Although her husband does not treat her well, she “is a forthright woman who knows how to stand up for herself”³⁶. She knows how to deal with her husband when she sees that he is doing something wrong. Steve spends much of his time playing poker with Stanley and other companions. Sometimes when he is too late, Eunice tries to remind him to come back home by knocking on the ceiling of the Kowalski's which is the floor of her apartment. If he does not respond, she pours hot water down the cracks in the ceiling, a thing that Stella does not even dare to think of. When her husband abuses her physically, she knows what to do. In one of these domestic violent occasions, she threatens her husband to go to the police saying that he has hit her, but she does not do that since her husband follows her and they return home reconciled.

Eunice plays a great role in the life of her neighbor Stella, since she provides her with advice and shelter when Stanley abuses her. At the end of the play she tries to help Stella to overcome the psychological pressures imposed upon her since she is obliged to accept her husband's plans of sending her sister to a mental asylum. In addition, she tells Stella never to mind Blanche's story concerning Stanley's sexual attack against her saying "Life has got to go on," and "no matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (*Streetcar*, p.217).

One can conclude that in *A Streetcar Named Desire* Williams presents three examples of women: the defiant Blanche, the passive Stella, and the practical Eunice. These women are presented as victims in their attempt to survive in a male-dominated society since the male characters in the play are portrayed as strong and dominant in contrast to the female characters. They have either to endure physical abuse and bad treatment and take to such violent life or face a fate similar to that of Blanche. In this play Williams speaks for women and tries to embody the difficulties and problems in which they lived during his time. He portrays the life and suffering of his own mother and sister at the hands of his abusive father. He, meanwhile, is successful in showing the men – women negative relationships in his materialistic society which were not based on love but on physical attraction and desire. The play, in final evaluation, shows Williams as one of the greatest feminine writers during his time.

Notes

1. Greta Heintzelman and Alycia Smith Howard, *Critical Companion to Tennessee Williams* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 2005), p.6.
2. For a fascinating account of William's interest in the life of the south of the United States of America see *ibid.*, p.5.
3. Calvin Bedient, "There Are Lives That Desire Does not sustain: *A Streetcar Named Desire*," in *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.45.
4. Rachael Van Duyvenbode, "Darkness Made Visible: Miscegenation, Masquerade and the Signified Racial Other in Tennessee Williams's *Baby Doll* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Journal of American Studies*, Vol.35, No.2, Part2: Warring in America: Encounters of Gender and Race (Aug., 2001), p.212.
5. John J. Mood, "The Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Ball State University Forum* Vol.14, No.3 (Summer, 1973), p.9-10.
6. See Gorgon Rogoff, "The Restless Intelligence of Tennessee Williams," *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol.10, No.4 (Summer, 1966), p.87.
7. See Anca Vlasopolos, "Authorizing History: Victimization in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," *Theatre Journal*, Vol.38, No.3 (Oct., 1986), pp.334-35.
8. Bryan Aubrey, "Critical Essay on *A Streetcar Named Desire*," in *Drama for Students* Vol.27, ed., Sara Constantakis (Maine: Gale, Cengage Learning, 2010), p.216.
9. *Ibid.*, p.218.

10. See Heintzelman and Howard, p.277.
11. Gulshan Rai Kataria, "The Hetairas (Maggie, Myrtle, Blanche)," in *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.30.
12. See Aubrey, P.215.
13. Annette J. Saddik, *Contemporary American Drama* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 2007), p.33.
14. Ibid., p.44.
15. Foster Hirsch, *A Portrait of the Artist: The Plays of Tennessee Williams* (New York: Kennikat Press, 1979), p.34.
16. Bedient, p.45.
17. Tennessee Williams, *Penguin Plays*, ed., Martin Browne (Middlesex: Penguin Books Ltd., 1965), p.120. All quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are from this edition and will be followed parenthetically by page numbers within the text.
18. See Henry Popkin, "The Plays of Tennessee Williams," *The Tulane Drama Review*, Vol.4, No.3 (Mar., 1960), p.55.
19. See Harold Bloom, "Introduction," in *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.4.
20. See Heintzelman and Howard, p.271.
21. Ibid., p.278.
22. Susan Koprince, "Domestic Violence in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," in *Tennessee Williams's A Streetcar Named Desire*, ed., Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2009), p.51.
23. Ibid., p.52.

24. Hirsch, p.30.
25. Kataria , p.29.
26. Aubrey, p.216.
27. Desmond Reid, "Tennessee Williams," *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, Vol.46, No.184 (Winter, 1957), p.432.
28. Brenda A. Murphy, "Tennessee Williams," in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, ed., David Krasner (Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2005), p.405.
29. Ibid. (p.180)
30. Heintzelman and Howard, p.273.
31. Kataria, p.31.
32. See Duyvenbode, p.212.
33. Aubrey, p.216.
34. Heintzelman and Howard, p.278.
35. Koprince, p.59.
36. Aubrey, P.215.

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