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THE WAYS OF DESIRE: THE PERFORMANCE OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN A  
*STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE* (1947)

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## Introduction

In 1947, Tennessee Williams published the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, celebrated as one of the most outstanding pieces of American drama. The play centres around the character of Blanche DuBois, a southern belle who leaves Mississippi to visit her sister Stella in the French Quarter of New Orleans. What seems to be a harmless stay develops into a tale of lies, secrets, and violence. Blanche is trying to escape from her tormented past and seeks refuge in the arms of the men she encounters. During her time in the French Quarter, the conflict with Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski, will cause damaging effects in Blanche's mental state.

Williams' work offers an examination of gender in the American of the mid-century, questioning the limits of sexuality in an environment where the norm is reinforced in detriment of sexual freedom. To exemplify these notions, I will analyse the approach that the male and female characters have to their own gender and place in society: the different images of femininity Blanche and Stella represent, as well as Stanley's relationship with his manhood. This essay will specifically focus on the way both the female and male characters of *A Streetcar Named Desire* perform their gender and sexuality in order to adapt or resist the societal constructs imposed upon them by the environment they are in.

In the first chapter I briefly examine two of the playwright's most famous pieces *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), which offer a panoramic view of Williams' personal and literary journey before and after writing *A Streetcar*. Providing a look into the author's life helps to contextualise his work. His upper-class Southern origins were of great importance in his development as a writer, influencing him to write about the decadence of this territory, as well as the corruption of its people. As an homosexual man, he was subject to discrimination and marginalisation by society, an issue many of his characters also experience. In *The Glass Menagerie* I will focus on the characters of Tom, Laura, and Amanda to exemplify the different responses they have to the moral codes of society that restrict them. As to *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the analysis will be devoted to Brick and Maggie, their dynamic as individuals and as a couple.

Seeing how Williams tackles the struggles of the female and male experience in these two plays helps to comprehend the way they are also dealt with in *A Streetcar*. The second chapter explores the depiction of femininity in said play. Through the characters of Blanche

and Stella, we are able to see how women need to perform an act so they can be seen as feminine. If they chose not to, they would be regarded as outcasts and thus marginalised. Stella and Blanche are two opposite examples of the same issue.

The third chapter deals with the notion of masculinity at the time *A Streetcar* was written. The backdrop of the Cold War had an impact on the way men thought of themselves and the world around them. They had to reaffirm their maleness not to be considered emasculated. I will exemplify this with the character of Stanley Kowalski by analysing the way he perceives his gender, whether he embraces it or not. Moreover, the representation of manhood through the screen acquires significance thanks to the influence of Marlon Brando and his rebellious persona who did not conform to what was expected of him.

The prior contextualisation helps us see how Williams deals with all these topics at different points in time, as well as how the discussions differ from one play to another. The second and third chapter are dedicated to a deep analysis of the female and male characters of the play respectively. This allows us to see how the issues they face differ according to their gender. This research will be done by establishing a dialogue between the critics and scholars who were contemporaries of the author as well as more recent ones, thus providing a broad picture of the issue throughout the 20th century onto the current times and allowing us to see how the messages of the plays have experienced a change with the way society has evolved in terms of the perception of gender and sexuality.

## **Chapter 1. Tennessee Williams' Work in Retrospective: *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)**

### **1.1 The Author and his Plays**

Considered one of the most prolific American writers, Tennessee Williams marked a shift in American drama. His work focused on representing the decaying South of the United States, an environment which had long been romanticised by other previous authors, such as Margaret Mitchell with *Gone with the Wind* (1936) (King 1995). The playwright is critical of the place he comes from. Most of his plays are set in Southern locations; however, although he cannot help but still feel the attachment and longing for that idealised notion of the South, he was aware of the reality of Southern society and could not ignore the social and racial injustices committed there. Ultimately, he simultaneously loves and despises the culture that he was born into and what it makes of the people (King 1995). Through his plays, Williams carried a character study of the different strata of society. He came from a quite accommodated Southern family. However, as Palmer et al. (2014) discuss, during the start of his career, his political beliefs were of a socialist indole, advocating for collective and financial equality. Once he found success, first with *American Blues* (1939) and more prominently with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), he started to find a troubling contradiction between his left-wing ideals and the reality he was living in. He became an extremely wealthy man, and his pre-war social politics changed (Palmer et al. 2014). His plays also experienced a transition: his initial social preoccupations gave room to questions about the darkness of the human condition, corrupted morals, madness, promiscuity, or sexual violence. His characters were not completely good or completely evil: they were grey, full of nuances that made their classification into the two ends of the spectrum complicated. According to Barksdale, Williams' intention in making his characters morally ambiguous relied on his conception of life as corrupt, which gradually destroys the human being "who has to claw and scratch in order to find a good life" (1963, 167). Williams stated that "for him if a character is not written as ambiguous then it is a false character, not a true one" (1963, 167).

To grasp the many motifs and themes behind Williams' work, and in particular, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), it is necessary to analyse his work from a wider perspective.

Two of his best-known plays are *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), preceding and following, respectively, *A Streetcar*. The former is Williams' most autobiographical play, in which he draws a mural of his life story and his struggles as a man in the South. He depicts a dysfunctional household, whose members hold much resemblance with his own family. Tom Wingfield, the narrator and the author's alter ego, is a young aspiring poet who finds himself trapped in a small town of St. Louis. Working in a shoe warehouse he does not like, Tom is stuck in a life that has been imposed upon him. He has to debate between seeking his personal freedom, away from that claustrophobic and repressive place, or stay and to satisfy the needs of his controlling mother Amanda and his introverted sister Laura. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), on the other hand, highlights the dynamics of a new rich family in Mississippi, led by the patriarch, Big Daddy. The fight for the inheritance of the plantation divides the clan, showing that the greed of the characters is more powerful than blood. Moreover, married couple Brick and Maggie struggle to reconcile their conflicting desires while trying to fit into the roles expected of them. It is a family full of secrets that fakes normalcy, love, and affection in the efforts to preserve their status and wealth. It is an illusion of prosperity and harmony which hides a reality of exploitation and transgression (King 1995).

### **1.2 Toxic Masculinity and the Repression of Homosexuality**

Both works have male characters, Tom and Brick, at its centre. Their relationships with their masculinity and their ambiguous sexuality condition the way they view themselves and their surroundings. Although married, Brick does not express any love or desire towards Maggie, to the extent that he refuses to have sexual relationships with her, even affectionate gestures. He was once the ideal of an American man: rich, attractive, successful athlete. However, this is all a mask by which he tries to hide his alleged homosocial relationship with his close friend Skipper. After his companion's death and his retirement from sports, Brick breaks all ties with reality. He drowns himself in bottles of liquor in the failed attempt to forget the past, the death of his lover and the death of his career. Being an athlete was what kept his identity as a man intact and reaffirmed his virility. Without Skipper and without football he has to conform to the expected life that a man at the time was supposed to live: to marry and have descendants to extend his legacy. The first act of the play shows Brick injuring himself

after jumping hurdles in a high school field. This is him attempting to reclaim his lost identity, his lost manliness. He is punishing himself for his homosexuality and “undergoing a self-imposed penance on sterility, perhaps even self-castration” (Barksdale 1963, 168). Williams criticises Brick’s actions in the play by stating that “silence about a thing just magnifies it. It grows and festers in silence, becomes malignant” (1955/1990, 27). Brick needs to reconcile his notions about manhood and his real feelings about Skipper so he can re-establish his relationship with his family and with himself.

Tom’s homosexuality is made less apparent than Brick’s. The only allusion to the matter is his constantly going to the movies by himself until late hours in the night. The use of cinemas is not strange to Williams’ work: he shows them as dark arenas where the impulses that are kept under control during the daylight are finally released (Debusscher 2000). Therefore, Tom’s homosocial tendencies can be implied from this use of the space. Meanwhile, the warehouse where he works represents the unhappy future that awaits him, living a life he has not chosen with the dreams of being a poet having been crushed by a cruel reality. It is a sort of prison he is condemned to, unless he abandons his family and seeks freedom. The cinema, on the contrary, is the place where reality is temporarily suspended and can go beyond the boundaries of his own repressed existence. The division established between these two environments shows how polarising the outside world is for Tom. He has realised this and is aware of why he goes to the pictures constantly; he confesses to Jim that “People go to the movies instead of moving! Hollywood characters are supposed to have all the adventures for everybody in America, while everybody in America sits in a dark room and watches them have them!” (1944/2000, 282). He uses the movies to experience for a moment what he is not able to anywhere else.

Using external elements to escape reality is not restricted to only him but all three characters of the play: Amanda’s recurring mentions of her youth and Laura’s glass collection are all mechanisms to cope and distract them from the unhappiness and discontent they are subjected to. Moreover, apart from being a form of escapism, the cinema could also be the place where Tom goes to meet other men. That would explain why he does not come home until after midnight, and why he takes special care of his appearance before leaving the house, even though he, supposedly, does not meet anyone. Debusscher (2000) discusses how in the movie adaptation of 1987, John Malkovich, who plays Tom, makes this allusion

to Tom's encounters with other men more explicit by washing his teeth right before going to the movies. That small gesture might implicate the type of interactions he has at the place. Debusscher further argues that Tom's restlessness, anger outbursts, and drinking habits are attributed to the emotions and frustrations he needs to repress in front of his family. He needs to hide his homosexuality from the environment he is in. Amanda's strictness and high expectations of his son make it impossible for him to express himself. Laura's crippled condition is already a taboo subject in the household, and Tom's break with the considered appropriate sexual and emotional expectations for a man at the time would be a disaster for his mother.

### **1.3 Female Characters against the Canons of Femininity**

The patriarchal society of the time dehumanises the male characters, making them release their frustration with the women in their lives, particularly in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). Brick is trapped in his own perceptions of what is demanded of him as a man, so he projects his anger onto his wife Maggie. He fails to realise that she, as a woman, is also constrained by her role as the breeder. In order to reclaim control and respect, Maggie usurps Brick's power by making him the breeder, by forcing him to have a child with her (Nicolay 2011). Maggie breaks with the expectations that society had on married women during that period. She is expected to birth a child for the sole purpose of continuing the family line and providing an heir to Big Daddy's wealth. She is repeatedly blamed for being childless, and looked down upon by the other women of the family, instead of showing sympathy towards her. She even acknowledges what it means to have no children at that point: "You and I have not produced any children, we are totally childless and therefore totally useless!" (1955/1990, 18). The whole identity of a woman is related to motherhood: without children she is not complete, she has not performed her role in society.

She is also supposed to please her husband without having no one to care about her pleasure. When the family knows about their sexual problems, the blame is put on Maggie; she is asked by Big Mamma if she is making Brick happy in bed. It puts the entire responsibility of a happy marriage and a satisfactory sexual life on her rather than that being shared by both. Another aspect in which Maggie is questioned as a woman is her ability to stay in shape and look beautiful, as ageing is a sign of someone's decaying worth. By



contrast, Brick is praised for not having lost any of his looks and still holding onto his physical appeal. That puts more pressure on her, who needs to be desirable to value her womanhood, a characteristic shared by Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar*.

*The Glass Menagerie* (1944) presents two female individuals who have not come to terms with their femininity. Firstly, the character of Laura is clearly inspired by Williams' own sister Rose. She suffered from schizophrenia and paranoia, which led to a lobotomy authorised by their mother Edwina. The latter is blamed by Williams for enforcing a strict, Victorian upbringing onto them, which caused, according to him, Rose's mental instability (Viagas 1996). His sister's ill fate is recurrently referred to in his plays. In *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), the matriarch of the family plans on getting a young woman lobotomised to prevent her from revealing her son's hidden sexual preferences (*Playbill* 2023). In *A Streetcar Named Desire* Blanche is institutionalised in a mental hospital against her will; even Williams was once committed to an institution in 1866 by his brother Dankin due to self-destructive behaviour (Tischler 1998). Both plays capture Williams' guilt and sorrows regarding his sister's circumstances. In the play, Laura is a terribly shy girl, who does not want to interact with the real world, secluding herself at home with the company of a collection of small creatures made of glass. This may be a response to the dysfunctional family environment she is exposed to. Her father has neglected them and left them at the expense of a controlling mother who is stuck in her nostalgia of youth and beauty. Contrarily to Maggie the Cat or to Blanche, Laura rejects her sexuality, she resists her mother's expectations of her and refuses to interact with the other sex. She is content with herself and does not seek to complete a void in her life by getting married. Jim kissing Laura might have meant the step for her to break from her shell, but his being committed with another woman is Williams' way of declaring that Laura's reclusive condition is not caused by suitors rejecting her, but by the dysfunction in her family (Single 1999).

As Single states, "the cornerstone of the family's dysfunction is represented by the mother Amanda" (1999, 76). She is a rejected wife and parent, who, seeking to find a gentleman and guided by the external appearance of her husband, falls into an abusive marriage with an absent husband and father who preferred the company of alcohol to his family. Mr. Wingfield's rejection has damaged her ego, making her need to have her own desirability constantly reaffirmed, thus evoking Blanche DuBois. Her obsession with her

past beauty affects Laura directly. The persistent reminder of the seventeen gentlemen callers of her mom has made Laura lose her self-esteem (Single 1999, 78). Amanda, unable to return to those moments where she had control of her life, now seeks to relive those memories vicariously through her daughter. However, Amanda expresses certain jealousy of Laura's youthful beauty. Although she encourages her to interact with the gentleman callers, she was competing for Jim's attention when he came to dine with them. She wore the same clothes she wore to her own meetings with the gentleman callers (Single 1999, 78). She still wants to be the most beautiful and desired. In regards to sexuality, she views sex as dangerous and should be suppressed or exploited if that leads to marriage. She represses Tom's manhood, and so she does with Laura's, unless it is used to get her married.

Williams showcases the two ends of the feminine spectrum: on one side there are women blamed for claiming the right to embrace their sexuality, who are seen as promiscuous, such as Maggie or Blanche. Meanwhile, others, like Laura, neglect their femininity and are therefore blamed for not following the societal constructs of how a woman should find a man and get married. Many of the critics during Williams' time found in him a target for their prejudiced beliefs about gender and homosexuality. Taubman described Williams' women as "unpleasant females", a "species exaggerated into a fantastically consuming monster or an incredibly pathetic drab" (qtd. in Palmer et al. 2014, 115). The playwright's depiction of women is far away from their own social standards of femininity, which involved modesty and submission. Taubman's suppressive conception of how women should behave makes him react negatively to these so-called promiscuous and immoral female characters. From a contemporary perspective, these women are rebelling against the abuses and discriminating impositions they are subjected to. They choose to use their womanhood for their own purposes and needs. Some suggest that the author's sexual preferences were the catalyst of these responses from the critics. Savran (1992) argues how at the beginning of the 1950s there was an increasing public suspicion of Williams' homosexuality, to the point where some reviewers attempted to decode Williams' language and affirm that his female characters were actually homosexual men in drag. The cold war era silenced homosexuality, attacking gay authors through affirming they were ruining American culture by depicting women and marriage. Thus, the authors were further transmitting their deviant tendencies to their work (Palmer et al. 2014). In a sense, women

and queer characters are being rejected and treated as abject. They are labelled as unnatural and threatening to the considered normal order of post-war society. Taubman (1966) also contributes to this notion by affirming how untruthful female representations in the works of homosexual dramatists were. He affirms that they were distorting marriage and femininity “since the heterosexual pairs they portrayed were actually pairs of homosexual men with female characters essentially in drag”. This belief is quite problematic in itself, as Taubman is not only negating the existence of femininity outside the canons of the period, but also implying that the homosexual authors have a desire to be women and are envious of them for getting to freely have relationships with the other sex. Furthermore, he is also suggesting the inability of these writers to properly create a well-constructed female character who exists on its own as a woman. They feel threatened to see females showcase masculine attributes which, according to them, can only be reserved to other men.

Williams ultimately sought to depict his own experiences as a homosexual man in the South, reflecting the marginalisation and discrimination that individuals who escape the gender binaries, such as Tom, Laura or Brick, experience,. He questions the crumbling structures of the Old South: its paternalistic order, the repression of women, how wealth corrupts the individual and the obsession with status. The point of choosing these plays to introduce the author is to represent his journey, both personal and literary, beginning with a much softer approach to the subject matter with *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), written early in his career, and introducing more cruel and grotesque elements in his later plays, as can be seen in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). In *The Glass Menagerie*, Tom sees himself trapped, unable to gather the courage to be honest with his family about his homosexuality and choose the life he wants to live, instead of the one imposed on him by his mother. Meanwhile, Laura does have the bravery to actually reject what her mother tells her that she ought to do in order to fit in. Their mother Amanda faces the opposite struggle to her children, in the way that she has no problem in embracing who society wants her to be, but has realised that her old age has made her disposable and is no longer object of desire.

In *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Brick has a conflict trying to reconcile his possible homosexual relationship with his deceased friend Skipper, while his wife Maggie sees how the responsibility of having a happy marriage and family is borne solely on her. Her identity as a woman is limited to her ability to bear children and make her husband happy. *A Streetcar*

also deals with these topics, and similarly to Maggie, Laura or Amanda, Stella and Blanche are faced with related issues. They see their identity being reduced to their gender and how they should behave according to it.

## **Chapter 2. The Performance of Femininity in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947)**

### **2.1 The Virgin/Whore Dichotomy**

Women in Tennessee Williams' works reflect the psychological effects of the economic and sociological problems of the New South. In particular, the playwright explores how these women are affected by the established social roles, especially regarding sexuality and family (Clemens 2009, 73). His female characters' sexuality is both a source of strength and weakness for them, especially in relation to themselves and to the men around them (2009, 75). They are defined by how they behave around men and how these men view them. Womanhood becomes a performance in which women wear a mask and perform their femininity according to the standards of others. This gender performativity was a theory developed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). She argued how gender is not intrinsic to the human being but rather a societal construct created through the performance of certain actions. These behaviours reaffirm the individual's belonging to their assigned gender. The repetition of social norms makes the individual have a designated role in society and be accepted by the others (Butler 1990/2006). The struggle of Williams' characters to reconcile their needs with their preconceived ideas of how they should behave leads to their rebellion against a reality they do not understand. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* this conflict can be seen through the characters of Stella and Blanche, two antagonistic depictions of women that arise from the same patriarchal society.

Women are often classified into two ends of a spectrum: the pure and virginal Madonna and the sexually promiscuous whore. Literary works present this dichotomy often to depict what proper female behaviour should be and what it should not. Freud (1912) theorised this phenomenon by stating that for men, love and desire cannot intersect. They love women they feel no desire for, and they desire women they do not love. A woman that arouses sexual desire in them is not seen as a suitable wife. The virgin is an idealised concept of female conduct: men are set to love a pure and chaste woman. By contrast, the whore is portrayed as sexually transgressive, using her sexuality as a means to achieve her objectives. The whore is supposed to be a threatening figure to the male characters. She awakens sexual impulses on them, but she is only an object of carnal desire rather than love, as she is said to be impure and immoral. The society of the period was very set on categorising women and

restricting their behaviour to the rules of modesty and properness. Women were taught to be attractive for men, but not expose themselves as having sexual needs because that would make them not suitable wives.

This division is made explicit in many literary and filmic works. During the 1930s and 1940s, in this type of works, there was the stereotype of the emancipated woman, an independent woman who enjoyed life without marriage and children. However, as Rosen (1975) mentions, in the 1950s this image of female autonomy that was previously viewed in a positive way shifted. The Cold War conception of marriage and the nuclear family as the standard for American life affected negatively to the perception of single women. They were now seen as a threat to the moral order: the pure woman is now portrayed as promiscuous. Consequently, Blanche, as many other women, is raised on the belief that in order to marry she must have the right quantity of seductiveness but stay modest, be attractive but not sexual. This can be seen in what she tells Stella: “He [Mitch] thinks I’m sort of – prim and proper, you know! [...] I want to deceive him enough to make him – want me” (1947/2000, 171). The whole character of Blanche is constructed to evoke the idea of a virginal woman. Her name Blanche, means “white” in French, alluding to her purity. She also tells Stanley how, coincidentally, her astrological sign is Virgo: “Oh, my birthday’s next month, the fifteenth of September, that’s under Virgo [...] Virgo is the Virgin” (1947/2000, 167).

Blanche is aware of the necessity of being perceived in a certain manner to be respected and suitable for men. After her date with Mitch, she tells Stella that “he hasn’t gotten a thing but a good-night kiss, that’s all I have given him, Stella. I want his respect. And men don’t want anything they get too easy” (1947/2000, 171). She simultaneously accepts and promotes societal restrictive codes on women but also rejects them and opposes her expected position in society by not remarrying or having children. Blanche does not restrict to either side of the virgin/whore dichotomy. She endorses the stereotypes of a feminine woman, a Southern belle with genteel and lady-like attributes although she adopts masculine traits by actively pursuing sexual partners, something that at the time was considered a male attitude. According to Stanley Gontarski (2020, 9), the portrayal of Blanche as a sexual woman is further perpetuated outside the text: the play’s cover in the Penguin edition of 2000 features the painting *The Poker Night* (1948) by Thomas Hart Benton. The painting has Blanche appearing in a suggestive undergarment that accentuates

her figure, while Stella covers herself. Moreover, her promiscuity is also shared by her ancestors. She mentions how they had been enraged in “epic fornications” (1947/2000, 140), causing the family to lose their wealth and their status. She will also be a victim of such fate.

On the other side, Stella represents the traditional woman and wife who allows her husband to dictate her class position (Byars 1991). She acknowledges and accepts what is expected of her as a woman and realises those expectations by marrying and having a child with Stanley. By bearing his descendants, she is continuing his lineage, symbolising how the new America will prevail and the past traditions are disappearing. However, at the end, Stella comes closer to Blanche by also choosing to ignore reality and believing that Stanley did not rape her sister. This denial is essential to continue living with him and their child (Bigsby 2006). What connects her with Blanche is that she is, too, driven by desire, carnal desire, and for it she is willing to sacrifice herself and the remnants of the past. However, she still holds agency towards her situation: she has chosen to be with Stanley, and although she is aware of his nature, she has still actively chosen to remain with him (Roudané 1997, 56). This is shown when after the poker night confrontation, Stella tells Blanche: “There are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark that sort of make everything else seem unimportant” (1947/2000, 162). She does not hold onto the past as her sister does; she has lost her sense of identity to a man and accepts her subordination to him in exchange of sexual desire.

## **2.2 Delusion and Fantasy to Cope with Reality**

Simultaneously, the conflict between Stanley and Blanche is an externalisation of Blanche’s inner fight between her fantasies and reality (Maiman 2004, 9). Blanche chooses to displace herself completely from reality. She chooses to take refuge in memory and nostalgia as a last resort (Clemens 2009). However, her memories also negatively affect her and stop her from seeing reality and act upon it to solve her problems. She creates an imaginary life story, like a myth; she also seeks to piece back together the pieces of a past life, whether invented or recollected. In this aspect, Williams’ play has metatheatrical elements: Blanche turns her life into a play where she performs a series of roles in the desperate mission to obtain control over her life (Bigsby 2006, 32). She carries a trunk full of clothes and chooses a persona she wants to represent. Her imagination is the only tool she has left to possess control over the

narrative others are creating about her. Williams uses the metatheatrical element in his work by having some of his characters be, literally or symbolically, writers or actors, such as Tom Wingfield being an aspiring poet in *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Theatre is what protects them from the passage of time and from the rest of society; they overcome the plots that aim to torment them by creating their own (Bigsby 2006, 42). By fictionalising her life, it achieves a significance that otherwise it would not have. Nonetheless, they are not able to make others believe their inventions, so they eventually become isolated (Bigsby 2006, 42). Blanche's losing the family plantation, called Belle Reve or "Beautiful Dream", also foreshadows the world of fantasy that she will immerse herself in as the play progresses (Maiman 2004).

Her condition as an abject is noticed upon her arrival at Elysian Fields when she is regarded as a mad woman by Stanley. Arguably, the characterization of Blanche as a madwoman is caused by misogynistic values (Ussher 1992). She argues that madness as a concept functions as a way to preserve the dominant patriarchal order; it distances women from the centre and places them at the periphery, thus becoming outsiders. This is proven by Stanley's attitude towards Blanche, as he rejects her stay at their home from the beginning, seeing it as a threat to his control of the environment and over Stella. In order to expel her, he injects the idea to Stella that Blanche is mentally ill, manipulating her into believing her sister is a danger to them and their future child. Whether or not Blanche has actual mental problems, Stanley takes this as an opportunity to reclaim his power. Her gradual detachment from reality culminates with her being physically removed from working society.

Her promiscuity becomes known by everyone, she becomes marginalised and is regarded as transgressive. Foucault (1986) considered this kind of individual as the "Other", an outsider who defies social and moral norms and threatens the established status quo. Stanley successfully manages to isolate her and make her publicly regarded as the "Other" to the few people that still showed sympathy towards her: Stella and Mitch. When Stanley rapes her, Blanche reaches the final straw. Her struggle to reconcile her genteel facade and her sexual desires clashes. Her dependence on strangers has once again failed her. Now she is alone. Stanley tears the paper lantern that is covering the light bulb and she is forced to face the light, signalling that she will not be able to cope with the cruel events that await her. Reality has won over fantasy. This event drives her into uncontrollable madness. Once the



“Other” is gone, the disruption ends, and the status quo is restored. The men resume the poker game: “This game is a seven card stud” (1947/2000, 226). This epitomises how Stanley’s ways have prevailed and how society will continue to reject those who do not adapt to its rules.

### **2.3 Fading Beauty and Decay**

Blanche’s purpose as a woman seems to be being desired and attractive to men. It is a notion imposed on women since growing up. They are made to attach their value as a person to whether men regard them as beautiful and deserving of their love. As Blanche ages, she finds herself no longer desirable. Therefore, her existence “becomes a division between two principles, desire and decorum, falling victim to society’s attempt to reconcile the two in a morality” (Maiman 2004, 9). She wants to satisfy the male gaze, but fails to do so with a beauty that is fading, causing a desperation in her that leads her to seek that validation in all the men she encounters: from young students, through the newspaper boy to her sister’s husband. That yearning for being perceived and desired by men is what drives her to the Hotel Flamingo and to seek affairs with various men. She details her days of youth and beauty, where she was desired by the suitors around her and was loved by her husband. But the alluded sexual preferences of the latter, considered to be deviant, led to his demise. Now, Blanche sees herself unable to retain her beauty and desirability: “I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft and attractive. And I – I’m fading now! (1947/2000, 169). She creates a romanticised portrait of her own persona and studies it through them (Maiman 2004, 11).

Blanche’s obsession with her physical appearance is fostered by using mirrors. After being confronted by Mitch, she starts to disassociate and have a discussion with her imaginary admirers. When she faces herself in the mirror, she faces her true self, alone in the room with no admirers. The illusion breaks and she “slams the mirror face down with such violence that the glass cracks” (1947/2000, 208). The shattered mirror also works as a representation of her own being: broken into little fragments of what once was (Thomson 1987, 45). Blanche fears the mirror because she does not want to see her real self beyond her imagination. Her obsession with retaining her youthful beauty reaches a point where she

does not want to be seen in the light, so as not to let others see the signs of ageing. When Mitch asks to see her under a better lighting, she states: “I don’t want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell 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!” (1947/2000, 204).

From the beginning, Blanche wants to keep the space dim. She buys a Chinese lantern to lower the brightness of the lightbulb. She does not want anyone, not even herself, to see her face clearly. Her fear of bright lights is used to showcase her deteriorating mental state (Maiman 2004). There are two dimensions to this: first the dim lighting makes it harder to discern Blanche’s physical appearance and the signs of ageing. Secondly, the darkness of the ambience reflects her internal turmoil. During the scene where she is raped by Stanley, he threatens her with the naked bulb because he knows that she is terrified of others being able to see the signs of aging in her face. It symbolises how Blanche has been stripped down of all the elements she used to disguise her persona, such as her fancy robes and her jewellery. Now there is nothing that can hide the true Blanche. The motif of light is also connected with the figure of Allan. He represented the light in the life of Blanche that turned off with his death: “It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow” (1947/2000, 182). After his death Blanche recalls that “the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this – kitchen – candle” (1947/2000, 184). Maiman (2004, 13) argues that Allan’s death has left Blanche’s into a darkness fuelled by her sexual affairs, which are pictured by the dim and flickering kitchen candle.

Throughout the play Blanche is associated with the image of the moth. Williams introduces her presence as “her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her certain manner, as well as her whiter clothes, that suggest a moth” (1947/2000, 117). As Alnamer suggests (2020), Blanche and the moth are similar both in their appearance and their nature, as well as their experience. Blanche is described as delicate, soft, and sensitive: “Nobody, nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you [referring to Stanley] abused her, and forced her to change” (1947/2000, 198). Moreover, moths are attracted to light, yet its heat will damage them in the same way as Blanche hides

from the lights not to get hurt by seeing the signs of ageing. In Williams, light and darkness are used as opposing terms. The moth goes to the light in order to escape from the darkness but ends up destroyed by the shelter where they seek protection (Almaner 2020, 1412). Blanche experiences the same fate: she tries to find refuge in the company of several men, seeking to fill the void of Allan's death with random sexual encounters. As she states in Scene 9: "Death [...] the opposite is desire" (1947/2005, 206). She uses her sexuality to cope with the death of her husband, as well as the loss of her job and Belle Reve, perhaps thinking that she would be able to escape death by behaving in that manner. At the end of the play, when she is being taken to a mental institution, Blanche tells the doctor: "Whoever you are – I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (1947/2000, 225). The line highlights her need to find consolation in others, even though, like the moth being destroyed by what they seek, Blanche is repeatedly broken by those same strangers she depends on (Almaner 2020, 1412).

Clemens (2009) suggests how the themes of decay throughout the play result in an examination of death, in which ageing is the death of their younger selves. When Stella is at the hospital giving birth, Blanche is left alone at the flat. It is then when she encounters the flower seller. She speaks in Spanish: "Flores para los muertos" (1947/2000, 206). The woman is shown as a terrifying figure to Blanche, reminding her of her deceased husband, as well as her decaying old self. The flower seller could also be interpreted as a Mexican symbol of death, indicating a bad omen upon Blanche's awaiting future once the new life is born. She will have no place at their home and will be repudiated by Stanley and her sister. The melody of the Varsouviana also plays during the scenes leading up to Blanche's breakdown. Music is used to emphasise Blanche's paranoia and descent into madness, especially those moments that foreshadow the closeness of a tragedy. The polka song was playing the moment Allan killed himself. It is a reminder of the feeling of guilt she has, and how she blames herself for his death. There are connections here with *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) when Blanche recollects the tragic scene and mentions how she needs to hear the shot of the bullet to stop the anguish: "There now, the shot! It always stops after that" (1947/2000, 202). Similarly, Brick drinks liquor until he gets drunk enough to hear the click in his head: "This click that I get in my head that makes me peaceful. I got to drink till I get it" (1955/1990, 66).

## **2.4 Inner Turmoil Signified through Spaces**

In addition, Williams uses space to signify the mental state of his characters. The bathroom is a key part of the play's plot. Blanche takes multiple long baths throughout the day. This could be seen as a way for her to canalise her remorse, to purify herself. Much as Lady Macbeth did continuously washing her hands to clean the symbolic blood and the guilt, so does Blanche (Zhong and Liljenquist 2006). She blames herself for the suicide of Allan after incriminating him his homosexuality: "[...] on the dance floor – unable to stop myself – I'd suddenly said – 'I know! I know! You disgust me'" (1947/2000, 184). The bathroom is also a place of refuge for her to escape from the questioning and the brutality of Stanley (Roudané 1997, 47). Similarly, the flat does not have any door separating the bedroom from the living room; Roudané suggests that this lack of a separation signals a question of modesty and decency. The bedroom was the space designed for the women to have some intimacy far from Stanley and his friends. The men were not to see her change her clothes or wear her robe after a bath. Meanwhile, the living room was the place where she should appear proper and decent. However, Blanche is often seen breaking the boundaries between both rooms by dancing suggestively through the curtains into the living room trying to be seen by the men playing poker. She seeks to catch their attention and flirt with them, as if it were a game. This movement from space to space symbolises how her facade of propriety is just another fabricated illusion.

The play ends with Blanche being institutionalised in a mental asylum. In "Of Other Spaces" (Foucault and Miskowiec 1984), the concepts of utopias and heterotopias are introduced to describe spaces as more than a locus of human interaction, but as a social construct. He distinguishes between heterotopias of crisis, and of deviation. The former are transition spaces where not everybody is allowed to enter. They function as a temporary place for people who are in crisis with their relation to society. Meanwhile, heterotopias of deviation serve to hold the individuals that are considered deviant from an ideal human behaviour. These marginalised people are isolated from the rest, so as to keep society as a utopic space. Prisons and psychiatric institutions are examples of these spaces. Therefore, Blanche's internalisation acquires more significance.

Ultimately, with his female characters, Tennessee Williams draws a realistic depiction of the struggle women faced at the time. It is not a positive nor a negative image of them; they are a product of the men in their lives and they are defined only in relation to them. Blanche constantly subverts the roles imposed upon her: she dresses feminine, lady-like, but when actively pursuing multiple men, she contradicts that genteel behaviour expected of her. She even contradicts her own predicaments about women's behaviour, showcasing conducts somewhat masculine. Williams identifies with Blanche; he was also promiscuous and that is probably why he cannot depict her completely as an evil character. Williams highlights how the moralist society condemns her behaviour; he shows a realistic course of events that would have happened at the time, and therefore criticises it. Williams' women are misled by the double standards that discriminate against them and cause them to hate themselves for having the same sexual urges that are rendered as healthy in their male counterparts (King 1995). Blanche's womanhood is not intrinsic to her, she has been taught to mould herself according to what others want her to be and what she thinks others will like for her to be respected and desired. Ultimately, it is this desire that is the main drive of her actions.

Women are ultimately the victims of society, especially of men. Much of their behaviour is adopted to satisfy the needs and desires of the men they are with, whether they be their fathers, husbands, or simply men they encounter. It is the whole existence of men in the patriarchal system that promotes that dependence on them. Neither Blanche nor Stella conceive their existence without a man by their side. This is what drives Stella to stay with Stanley despite the emotional and physical abuse he subjects her to. In a similar way, Blanche continuously seeks the company of men to reaffirm her position in society as a proper woman. At the same time, the mid-century period was a time of change for women, who were able to achieve more economic independence from their partners. This same phenomenon affected men negatively, as they saw how their control over women was decreasing. Williams reflected this shift in the balance of power with the characters of *A Streetcar*. Stanley Kowalski is a clear portrait of the crumbling sense of manhood they were experiencing. He resorts to violence and verbal abuse to retain some of the dominance he is losing.

## **Chapter 3. New America, New Masculinities: Stanley Kowalski**

### **3.1 The Historical Context**

The introduction of the character of Stanley Kowalski was a ground-breaking event in literary history and history as a whole. It meant a shift in the representation of masculinity in a post-war era, a period where the notion of manhood was destabilised due to the increasing presence of women in the workplace, and the accommodation of men to live in the suburbs. Cohan uses the term “masculinity crisis” to describe the social panorama of the 1950s reflected, particularly, in film. During this period marked by the Cold War, the male protagonists face uncertainty and instability due to the conflicting notions of masculinity presented to them (Cohan 1997). These media representations show how men need to perform a certain behaviour in order to have their manhood accepted and maintained. The struggle to reconcile the expectations imposed upon them resulted in angst against their surroundings. Masculinity is then portrayed as a socially constructed performance (Cohan 1997).

At the time, American men had transitioned from soldiers on the battlefield in World War II and the Korean War, to being back home to their married life. They saw that change as a loss of their strength as men, having now to be more docile. Therefore, to prove their virility, they must exercise control over women in a patronising environment (King 1995, 635). According to King, Tennessee Williams attributed many perversions and distortions of human behaviour to the rigid gender stereotypes that reigned in the South. The division between strong sexual needs and a chaste public image, which the female characters struggle with, is not shared by male figures, who are free to exalt their sexuality. There is a veneration of the man as “stud” and progenitor, and the codification of physical bravery and strength, leadership, decisiveness and aggressiveness are carried to extremes (1995, 635).

With the publication of the Kinsey reports on the sexual behaviour of Americans, the public anxieties about sexuality heightened. The findings showed that men were having homosexual relationships or, at least, sexual experiences with other men (Kinsey 1948). Consequently, there was a necessity during the Cold War period to enforce and exalt masculinity so as not to be seen as homosexual. As much as the female characters’ femininity depends on their relation to men, masculinity in the play is also related to the woman these male figures are surrounded by and how they use women to reaffirm their identity.

### 3.2 Stanley's Reaffirmation of Manhood through Abuse

As McDonough suggests (2006, 7), men are made to have their manhood threatened by the same women that society socially and psychologically discriminates against. In order to preserve their identity as men, they are encouraged to conquer the female body and to exercise control over it. Women become the enemy (McDonough 2006, 7). Stanley dominates the environment he is in: his wife, his friends, his home. When Blanche arrives, that control is put into question. She intrudes into his space and threatens to alter its functioning. The scene where all the men are gathered at the flat to play poker is one of the crucial moments of the play. It is an assertion of Stanley's power over the house and, by extension, over Blanche and Stella. With his friends backing him up, he sees his virility as invigorating, he is empowered by them.

He also sees the necessity of being perceived as the man of the house who has control over the women. They are not allowed to play at the game, they can only watch. When he sees his authority being questioned by the women dancing and joking around, his manhood is threatened. When Blanche and Stella do not listen to his orders of turning the radio off, he loses his tempers and throws it off the window: "He crosses to the small white radio and snatches it off the table. With a shouted oath, he tosses the instrument out the window" (1947/2000, 151). He then beats Stella up when she confronts him. He must reassert his position of power by inflicting violence upon the disruptors. The reader and the audience get to see the true nature of Stanley. Even when he is apologising for his actions he is inadvertently exercising his dominance over his wife. Stella, led by her passion and physical longing for him, forgives his violent actions. His reconciliation with her signifies the play's main motif: desire ruling over everyone.

Many Williams' characters showcase their dissatisfaction with the gender roles imposed upon them. However, Stanley, unlike Brick (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, 1955) or Tom (*The Glass Menagerie*, 1994), seems to be satisfied with the position he has in society. He does not seek to hide his status as a man, but rather exalts his identity as a husband, father and breadwinner of the family, as that is to him the natural order of things. In contrast, Brick and Tom do not see themselves as privileged; they are not proud of how society pushes them to be. They find themselves confined within the limits imposed on them. Yet, they do not criticise the system; instead, they use their resentment against the female characters

(McDonough 2006, 9). Even if Stanley does not overtly express his dissatisfaction with the gender stereotyping of the period, the abuse he inflicts on Stella and Blanche shows otherwise. The physical and verbal violence he uses to attack them indicates a level of insecurity and fear within himself: he needs to prove to himself how he is the man that he is supposed to be. However, Williams does not villainise Stanley completely perhaps because he was also attracted to those kinds of men. Williams had a father who was an alcoholic and abusive to him (Debusscher 2000). He wants to criticise this type of behaviour but does not fully make him into a detestable character probably because he still holds affection for him. Through the character of Stanley, he attempts to understand what made his father act like he did.

McDonough discusses the way in which theatrical productions often show a pattern of manhood in which the male protagonist, depicted in a heroic way, is faced with trouble. If he overcomes it, or at least meets the challenge, he will prove his masculinity (2006, 15). In the play, this archetype is met by having Stanley face the challenge of Blanche's appearance to disrupt him. If he lets her intrude in his home and consequently, his marital life, he loses the control he has been exercising over it. This could be perceived by other men as emasculating: letting a woman speak over his decisions. Therefore, he must prove his manliness to himself and the others.

In contraposition to Stanley's representation of manhood, there is the figure of Mitch. He is a sensitive and caring man who, similarly to Blanche, has more traditional ideals regarding romance and love. He disapproves of Stanley's actions, as can be seen after the poker night fight when he states, "Poker shouldn't be played in a house with women" (1947/2000, 152). However, he does not express his discontent directly to him. He fears him. Mitch is also mocked by the other men for being so attached to his sick mother. This raises Oedipal themes to the play, and Mitch is accused of being effeminized for taking care of his mother and being not yet married. His virility and manhood are put into question. A man who does not ascribe to the societal codes of conduct is quickly accused of being less of a man and consequently effeminate. Thus, both representations of manhood in the play are the two different extremes. However, none of them is presented as the ideal, or the preferred one by society.



### **3.3 Class, Status and American Identity: Stanley as a Foreigner**

The main cause of turmoil between Stanley and Blanche is their differences in upbringing and in status. This is acknowledged by Stanley when he says, “The Kowalskis and the DuBois have different notions” (1947/2000, 135). He rejects the way of living of the upper classes, although he still wants to benefit from the wealth Stella was supposed to inherit from the plantation. Stanley and Blanche represent the changing panorama of the United States at the time of the play: he represents the industrial north of the country, a new set of ideals more democratic and progressive that focus on the growth of the nation. It is a new era that has ended with the previous splendour of the past and has left the territory stripped down of its mythic pretensions. Contrariwise, Blanche symbolises the old values of the traditional South, more centred around agriculture (Zurawski 2013, 10). She encapsulates a crumbling past that has been lost along with the loss of the wealth and prestige of the plantations.

The rape of Blanche is a pivotal part of the play, symbolising the conquest of power by the modern society that Stanley represents. The mythical Old South is long gone; it is a new period for America. Their differences in upbringing are also shown by their contrasting education. Blanche continuously tries to downplay Stanley with the use of clever words and expressions that he does not understand. His intellectual inferiority contributes to his need to reassert his control over them. In the play Williams represents the crumbling upper classes as a fading part of society, relics of the past. They are depicted as victims of their own excesses: “Our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications — to put it plainly!” (1947/2000, 140). By having Stanley institutionalise Blanche and remove her from society, Williams metaphorically shows how the new American working-class will prevail over the immoral and greedy bourgeoisie.

To Stanley’s working-class status, his condition as a foreigner adds to his inferiority as an American to Blanche’s eyes. Her xenophobic prejudices against Stanley also highlight the culture of racism and discrimination she comes from and she herself promotes. Stanley’s defensive attitude towards her comments go on to show that this is not the first time that he has been met with this type of discrimination. He has Polish ancestry, and his lineage can be traced back to immigration to America. The figure of the foreigner is a common motif in the plays of Tennessee Williams, such as the character of Silva Vacarro in *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1946). Golab (1980), in fact, suggests that it was Williams who introduced the

stereotype of the working-class Polish Americans. They come into the space and alter the established order. And for Blanche that is what Stanley does: break the order of things with his representation of the new America. He also breaks the status quo of her notion of how the state of things should be, as much as she breaks with his order.

Although Stanley tries to establish himself as a part of America's society, his Polish origins make him not entirely fit in. Blanche is a constant reminder of his condition as an outcast. She refers to him with disdain as a "Polack", subtly reminding him that he does not come from the same prestigious background as them. Her presence is a constant reminder that America does not entirely accept him as one of their own. However, he continually reaffirms his condition as American: "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack" (1947/2000, 197). Stanley has internalised those racist values. He reproaches Blanche for her microaggressions and comments with xenophobic connotations of referring to him as a Polack. However, he also rejects the idea of being Polish, thus denying his origins. America brainwashes its citizens into thinking that they are the greatest nation and that being American is the best attribute they can have, believing it makes them superior to others. Therefore, for Stanley, being of Polish descent is a weakness that robs him of his feeling of being superior and having that sense of shared identity with the rest of Americans. He exalts his pride in being American by wearing nationalistic symbols, such as the U.S Army uniform and the medals he was condecorated with (Zurawski 2013, 10).

It is significant to see a veteran on the stage and in the film who, even though his lineage does not come from the country, is so eager to demonstrate his pride in being American. He had served the nation from the foreign threat. The reaffirmation of the American sentiment in the times of the communist threat was predominant in the artistic productions of the period. The exaltation of American values acquires magnitude when considering who directed the film adaptation. Elia Kazan is famously known for having testified against his industry colleagues at the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HCUA) in 1952, a year after the movie premiered. Although in his twenties he had been a member of the American Communist Party, he was now considered a traitor. He later went on to explain that after immigrating from Greece, he became fond of the American ideals,

and sought with his testimony to protect his country (Weinraub 1997). This is an argument that reminds of Stanley's similar view on his journey and identity. It can be therefore argued that through the film, Kazan wanted to emphasise those sentiments of Americanism.

### **3.4 Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski: Sex-appeal and the Importance of Clothing**

Marlon Brando was the actor chosen to portray Stanley Kowalski on the Broadway stage, as well as in the film adaptation of 1951. Brando was the trailblazer for the new wave of acting in which less conventionally attractive men were chosen to play complex and morally grey characters. It was a break from the classical Hollywood canon of beauty, which promoted the good looks of actors such as Clark Gable or Cary Grant (Pomerance 2006). They did not show the ugliness of their characters. But Brando was not scared to commit himself to the darkest side of his roles. Stanley's visceral passion and power was something that also characterised the actor's persona, which contributed to the realism and rawness of the character. Arguably, the critical and commercial success of the movie contributed to the widespread adoption of this new style of acting, referred to as The Method.

Brando embodied the rebel hero that chose not to conform to the standards of the entertainment industry. Rather than being rejected, this rebellion benefitted his rise to fame. His stardom was the result of a destabilisation of masculinity and of the traditional family structure (Pomerance 2006, 46). His appeal resided in his opposition to middle-class masculinity. The rejection of the establishment was reflected in the character of Stanley, and meant the start of a new period in film marked by the appearance of psychologically troubled characters that mirrored the American individual. Brando's style of acting focused on naturalism and the taking of the actor's own psychology to understand the role.

The film also focuses on Brando's body and sex appeal to further showcase the sensuality of both the character and the actor. Brando's sexuality also had a lot to do with his casting. In the words of its director, Elia Kazan, Brando converged feminine and masculine energy; "he sees things both as a man and a woman" (Biggsby 2006, 46). The critic Eric Bentley noted that the actor was interpreting a masculine role with a nuanced femininity (2006, 46). The brutality of Stanley is often downplayed by his sexual magnetism. Some scholars state that Brando's muscular physique oftentimes overshadowed the crude narrative of the play (Pomerance 2006, 57). Here, the gaze of the spectator is laid on the male

character. According to Mulvey (1975), this was a shift in the way classical Hollywood established women as the primary objects of the male gaze. There is an aspect of voyeurism: the spectator is closely following Stanley's actions and how his body looks while doing them. Something that is promoted by Williams' depiction of him and Elia Kazan's film adaptation. He wears sweaty shirts, greasy work clothes and is often shown bare-chested. His first encounter with Blanche has him change his wet shirt into dry clothes. Blanche's desire to stare at him is emphasised to the viewer. After the poker night fight, his friends put Stanley under the shower to cool him, his shirt is wet and torn showing his chest. This image has become one of the most famous stills from the movie. It encapsulates how desire will be always linked to him, and would be the cause of all the play's tragedies. The convergence of male and female gaze in the way Stanley is presented to the public is used to create a feeling in the audience: men want to be and look like him, women want to be with him.

Moreover, the figure of Stanley has also become remarkable for his use of clothing. His masculinity is performed through the clothes that he wears. In Williams, theatre clothes became an emblem of their characters. In the style denominated as Southern Gothic, which was "emblemized by the working-man's depression-era uniform, riveted overalls, or 'waist overalls' the white under-shirt also became a symbol of the working class man (Gonstarski 2020, 1). As Gontarski suggests, the white t-shirt represents a "deeper, conflicted, if not closeted desire" (2020, 3). His most characteristic piece of clothing is the white tank top; commonly known as "wife beater" (Bradley 2021). This may not have been a coincidental choice of style, but rather an implicit symbol of his nature as an abuser to his wife.

The image of Stanley as a muscular stud gave an early notion of the hard body that was predominant in the late 1970s and 1980s during Reaganism. The male body has always been affected by politics, thus becoming a national emblem. The influence of the character's clothing resulted in the "conscious eroticization of the blue-collar workclothes" and the "fetishization of symbols of masculinity" (Snaith 2003, 82). Nowadays, it has become difficult to separate both figures of Stanley and Brando from each other. Brando challenged the gender norms associated with the 1950s. He introduced a new model of masculinity that was not as restricted by toxic ideals of virility, but rather chose to embrace its feminine aspects, blurring the lines that separate the gender binaries. His shared characteristics with

Stanley made him be associated with this character for the entirety of his career. He was an icon of working-class maleness.

## Conclusion

This project has examined the representation of gender and sexuality in the works of Tennessee Williams, particularly focusing on *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). The main objective was to analyse how the characters in his work adapt to or resist societal standards by executing a performance of their gender. Firstly, it was necessary to contextualise his work and see the influence his life had in the way he constructed his characters. The focus was centred around *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955). The male characters of these two plays; Tom and Brick, respectively, struggle to come to terms with their homosexuality. Tom's mother expectations of having her son married stops him from embracing his true self. He has to repress his desires to content others, which leads him to never being able to choose his own happiness over others. Brick, faces his homosocial relationship with Skipper quite differently, as he has not admitted to himself the reality of his feelings. Tom is more accepting of his homosexuality, but Brick's internalized homophobia makes him loath himself, and by extension his wife Maggie. The female characters face a similar conflict: they have to accept the fate imposed upon them by their families and by society. They must marry well and have children, otherwise their existence would be wasted. Laura completely rejects this idea and is happy living detached from reality. Maggie and Amanda do embrace more of these ideas, however they see how detrimental this can be for them. Maggie does want to fulfil her duty as a wife, but sees her sole identity reduced to being a breeder of an heir. Amanda, Tom and Laura's mother, sees how her older age has left her almost invisible to the eyes of others, especially men. Women are only regarded as valuable if society can get benefits from them, once they become old and undesirable they are disposable.

In chapter two, I showed how with his female characters, Tennessee Williams criticises society's conception of women as either suitable wives or tramps. This division forces them to constantly aspire to satisfy the image men have of them. They must be the right amount of attractive and desirable without being too sexual. Moreover, they need to maintain their beauty for as long as they can; once they start to age they are no longer perceived. Blanche is a clear example of this, as she is no longer considered suitable to be a wife due to her sexual transgressions and her older age. She builds a fantasy to convince herself and others that she is exactly how she ought to be. Eventually, all the delusions and

lies she has created lead to her destruction. The strong desire to be wanted and loved, to have someone by her side motivates her to act in ways not considered morally correct. Similarly, Stella falls victim to the same beliefs by staying next to a man that is verbally and physically abusive to her, because the passionate desire she feels for him overpowers her.

Chapter three's examination of manhood showcases that Stanley's depiction of masculinity directly reflects the social panorama of post-World War II America, when men were a representation of their nation. There was also a shift happening in regard to the way men were perceived by the public, and artistic works reflected that change. During the time when American men were afraid of being emasculated, Stanley meant a reaffirmation of those traditional values lost after the war. But he was also a caricature of the misogynistic male that Williams wanted to expose as a prejudicial side of society that was affecting the women and other men around them. It is a cycle in which the constant abuse and contradicting notions enforced lead to the abuse of those individuals regarded as inferior, whether it be because of their socio-economic situation, or because of their gender. Therefore, the oppression and control exercised over men leads them into exerting that same cruelty against what they think are their inferiors: women. Simultaneously, women also react in the same way by policing how other women should behave, thus continuing that chain of abuse.

After analysing the representation of gender in this play it can be concluded that men and women are victims of the expectations that society places on them. In order to satisfy what is expected of them, they choose to adopt a facade and perform what they think they are supposed to do. Ultimately, gender is not something intrinsic of the human being, but rather what the individual chooses to embrace; it is a construct. Although the issues narrated in this essay are characteristic of the era in which Williams lived, they are undoubtedly still present in today's culture to a certain degree. Many women and men still have to perform a set of behaviours and ideals in order to fit into the gender they have supposedly born into, and should behave accordingly.

Williams dared to discuss themes that were not previously dealt with in literary works. His plays enable the study of gender and sexuality in a way that allows for a reconsideration of the feminine and masculine roles imposed by society, as well as the way men and women react to them. The relevance of his plays is still notable, making them

subject to further research on gender perspective, race, class, and different manifestations of sexuality.



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