

CHAPTER III

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

The loneliness of Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire results from her separation from the society she was born into. Reared on a Mississippi plantation called "Belle Reve," Blanche began life in a position of refined Southern respectability. Used to being attended to, to being the center of the society she belonged to, Blanche cannot help being frustrated when she becomes poor, with no one to wait on her. She tries working as a high school teacher at a small salary. It is certain that she has to lose the plantation, as she cannot afford the maintenance of it. She has to stand alone, fighting desperately for the property she loves and is attached to. Everyone else has escaped the responsibility of looking after it; some relatives have died; others have gone away, like her sister Stella, who has married a man very different in background and nature from the DuBois sisters. Stella is the only relative left to Blanche, but Stella has adjusted herself to a new way of life which Blanche does not comprehend. Blanche prefers being dragged to a lunatic asylum to tolerating the sordid conditions of the new life her sister belongs to. After the plantation has gone to seed and finally been lost through mortgages, Blanche comes to the Vieux Carré section

of New Orleans to stay with her sister, whose husband, Stanley Kowalski, is a man who has the pleasure an animal enjoys with his body, an aggressive, indulgent, powerful and proud expression of sex. Blanche feels she has to turn to Stella for support. The young poet Blanche had loved and married had committed suicide after she had revealed to him that she knew he was a homosexual. She still blames herself for his death, knowing that when her husband had come to her for help, she had despised him and had not helped him as she might have. She is too delicate to stand the two great losses of her life, her husband and her plantation. She says to her sister, "You're all I've got in the world, and you're not glad to see me!"³¹ Out of loneliness, Blanche flirts with every man she meets, including her own high school students. She flirts with a young newsboy who delivers the paper at Stella's. She yields to nymphomania, for to make love, even with a stranger, is a way to be with someone, and not alone, for awhile.

Stella is a normal, happy, average woman, while Blanche is a refined, sensitive and decadent aristocrat. The clash between Blanche and Stanley is inevitable, for they represent two opposing views of life. Elia Kazan, one of the great directors of Williams' plays wrote in his note-book on aspects of the characters as he interpreted them. He described Blanche as

. . . an emblem of a dying civilization, making its last curlicued and romantic exit. . . . her behaviour is social. . . . Likewise, Stanley's

behaviour is social too. It is the basic animal cynicism of today. Get what's coming to you! Don't waste a day! Eat, drink, get yours. . . . Blanche's spine or leitmotif is 'find protection'; the tradition of the Old South says that it must be through another person. . . . her problem has to do with her tradition. . . . the thing about the tradition in the 19th century was that it worked then. It made a woman feel important, with her own secure positions and functions, her own special worth. It also made a woman at that time one with her society. But today it does not work. . . . it makes Blanche feel alone, outside of her society. Left out, insecure, shaky. The airs the Tradition demands isolate her further. An every once in a while, her resistance weakened by drink, she breaks down and seeks human warmth wherever she could find it, on their terms: the merchant, the traveling salesman, and the others She is a refugee, . . . a misfit, a liar, her 'airs' alienate people, she must act superior to them, which alienates people. She doesn't know how to work. . . . She needs someone to help her. Protection. . . . She is caught in a fatal inner contradiction, but in another society, she would work. In Stanley's society, no! . . .

Blanche is an outdated creature, approaching extinction. . . . She is about to be pushed off the edge of the earth. On the other hand, she is a heightened version, an artistic intensification of all women. That is what makes the play universal. Blanche's special relation to all women is that she is at that critical point where the one thing above all else that she is dependent upon: her attraction for men, is beginning to go. Blanche is like all women, dependent on a man, looking for one to hang onto, only more so!³²

As Williams describes the entrance of Blanche, she is dressed in fluffy white, looking as if she were about to take cocktails or tea in the best drawing-room or garden. "Her expression is one of shocked disbelief. Her appearance

is incongruous to this setting. . . . She is about five years older than Stella. Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth."³³

The first clash between Blanche and Stanley arises over the loss of the plantation, which he has dreamed of owning. He suspects that she has squandered the property, because of her showy clothing and costume jewelry, which he thinks are expensive. The next clash occurs when Stella and Blanche return about two-thirty in the morning to interrupt the men's poker game. When Blanche persuades Mitch, Stanley's wartime friend, respectable and still single, to dance to the radio, Stanley in a drunken fury seizes the radio and hurls it out the window. He brutally strikes his wife when she tries to send the men home. Very soon Stanley and Stella have made up and Stella explains to Blanche that the row was not serious, and she assures her sister that she is not in anything that she wants to get out of. Blanche, living in her delusions, babbles on about telephoning an old beau, Shep Huntleigh, now a rich oilman in Florida and married, to plead for an escape. Blanche tries to impress upon Stella the depths to which Stella has sunk in her marriage, and unaware that Stanley overhears her, she makes a contemptuous assessment of a man who eats, moves, and talks like an animal, which is contrasted to the playwright's description of Stanley. Williams describes him as a glorious male "with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens."³⁴ Blanche calls him a sub-human, an ape, a survivor of the stone age

bearing raw meat home to his mate, a throwback after thousands of years of civilization; but the pleading is wasted upon Stella, who is bound to Stanley by love, sexuality, and economic necessity.

Little by little Stanley begins to take his revenge by continually mentioning a man named Shaw, the Hotel Flamingo, and the town of Laurel. Blanche, seeing that her welcome is wearing thin, explains herself to her sister in half-truths:

I wasn't so good the last two years or so, after Belle Reve had started to slip through my fingers. . . . 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, the 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. And so the soft people have got to - shimmer and glow - put a - paper lantern over the light. . . . But I'm scared now - awf'ly scared. 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!³⁵

Blanche also admits to Mitch that she has done many improper things out of loneliness.

Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan - intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with. . . . I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection - here and there, in the most - unlikely places - even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but - somebody wrote the superintendent about it - 'This woman is morally unfit for her position!' . . . True? Yes, I suppose - unfit somehow - anyway. . . . So I came here. There was nowhere else I could go. I was played out. You know what played out is? My youth was suddenly gone up the water-spout, and - I met you. You said you needed somebody. Well, I needed somebody, too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle - a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in! The poor man's Paradise - is a little peace. . . . But I guess I was asking, hoping - too much! Kiefaber, Stanley, and Shaw have tied an old tin can to the tail of the kite. 36

Blanche has many kinds of vices. She has a make-believe love - a kind of poetic longing for her young husband who has died. She is a victim of nymphomania and alcoholism. She often steals Stanley's brandy and whisky, yet she will not admit to anyone that she is used to drinking. She is not honest; she tells Mitch that Stella is older, in spite of the fact that Blanche is about five years older than Stella. She will not face the fact of being old: she avoids a glaring light and does not go out in the daytime. She deceives Mitch and everyone at Stella's place, claiming to be a decent, refined gentlewoman when she has been absolutely the opposite in her real life in the past. All of these faults lead to her degradation, but loneliness is an important part of Blanche's frustration.

Blanche's loneliness arouses sympathy. She was cast out of the society she thought she should belong to. She lost the husband whom she adored. She needs a man to cling to. She describes her need of Mitch to her sister and the reason why she did not tell her real age.

Blanche: . . . - he thinks I'm sort of - prim and proper, you know! . . . I want to deceive him enough to make him - want me. . . .

Stella: Blanche, do you want him?

Blanche: 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. . . .³⁷

As a kind of revenge for her scorn of him, Stanley rapes Blanche during the night his wife is delivering their baby. Blanche knows that in fact Stanley does not care for her at all, but she yields to him out of her loneliness and lack of strength to resist, though she does make some effort to resist him. Stanley knows her nature, so he takes advantage of her, saying, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!"³⁸ After this terrible shock, Blanche is taken to an institution, as Stanley and Stella cannot have her in their house any longer. Stella refuses to believe her sister's accusation of her husband.

In the end, Blanche is entirely separated - from her past life, her plantation, her husband, her sister, and now even from society itself. She enters an asylum instead of adjusting to a way of life that does not suit her idea of what life should be. She says, "I'm anxious to get out of

here - this place is a trap!"³⁹ Eunice, the Kowalskis' neighbour, tells them: "You done the right thing, the only thing you could do. She couldn't stay here; there wasn't no other place for her to go."⁴⁰ And Blanche accepts her fate peacefully; when the doctor treats her politely, she goes along with him, saying, "Whoever you are - I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."⁴¹