CHAPTER FOUR

FLIGHT FROM "REALITY"

> The style – the real deep style – consists of one thing: to find behaviour that's truly social, significantly typical, at each moment. It's not so much what Blanche has done – it is how she does it – with such style, grace, manners, old-world trappings and effects, props, tricks, swirls, etc., that they seem anything but vulgar...Because this image of herself cannot be accomplished in reality, certainly not in the South of our day and time, it is the effort and practice to accomplish it in fantasy. Everything that she does in reality too is colored by this necessity, this compulsion to be special. So, in fact, reality becomes fantasy too. She makes it so! (Murphy 25)
>
> Elia Kazan on the "society that produced Blanche" in his *Director's Notes.*

In this chapter, I wish to explore the culmination of "veiled autobiography" in Williams' early works and propose to achieve this through a queer reading of the playwright's most successful play *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Chapters Two and Three of this study, focused on the flight motif, reveal that the fugitive's flight from his family (*Menagerie*), and from the self (*Summer*) are interconnected. The protagonist, in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a fugitive with a divided sense of self who returns to the family matrix for protection against a "world that is lit by lightning". In the home of her sister, Blanche Du Bois tries to erase her "deviant"

past and establish a respectable future with her brother-in-law's colleague, Mitch. As Kazan explains in his *Director's Notes*, "there is a kind of style" that Blanche brings to everything she says or does. Blanche's need to feel "special" reveals her insecurity and displacement in her sister's home. In order to feel less alien, Blanche transforms the Kowalski home into a stage where she performs the role of a Southern belle. The mask that Blanche wears is not unlike the one adorned by gay men. Like Blanche, we have been driven to masking our true selves because society curtails our self-expression. Like other "sexual deviants", homosexuals discover each other in the ghetto we are assigned to. Blanche Du Bois' campiness, her preoccupation with her looks and her ambivalent history, may be signatures of a gay man but it also reminds us that the homosexual does not belong in *Streetcar's* heterosexual stage. Like Blanche, we are fugitives from "reality".

To explore this theme, I will first examine "Something About Him", a short story written in 1946, that shares similar themes with the play. This will be followed by a consideration of *Streetcar's* evolution in order to trace the progression of ideas leading to the conception of the play and elucidate the play's link with *Menagerie* and *Summer*. Williams' critics have claimed that the play also represents a culmination of "personal lyricism" in his early works. This, I believe, is inextricably embedded in the play's queer subtext. Kazan's original Broadway production of 1947 and his Hollywood version of 1951 provide invaluable insight into the play's many moments of queer identification that render the queer subtext visible. Each of these moments, this chapter aims to demonstrate, are evoked by the

fugitive's flight from "reality". Thus unlike *Menagerie* and *Summer*, plays in which Williams explored the family matrix and experimented with his "personal microcosm", *Streetcar's* action revolves around the homosexual and his relation with the world without.

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Benjamin Nelson is of the opinion that Williams' early works culminate in *Streetcar* because Blanche is the distilled version of many characters in the early works (Nelson 121). She is a composite of Williams' early heroines, ranging from Queen Nitocris, Williams' earliest outsider-protagonist, to Alma Winemiller, Williams' problematic secret sexual deviant. I tend to agree with Nelson but would like to add that the queer subtext in Williams' works, which the playwright calls "personal lyricism" and centred on the character of Blanche, becomes most apparent in *Streetcar*. I shall attempt to trace this matter by first examining Williams' little known short story "Something About Him" (1946) before showing the play's queer connections with *Menagerie* and *Summer*.

Unlike *Menagerie* and *Summer* there is no corresponding short story that preceded *Streetcar*. However there is one short story that shares a corresponding theme. In "Something About Him" (1946), Williams wrote about society's discrimination against a closeted homosexual. Haskell, as the narrator says, is "just a dime a dozen clerk" but there is "something about him [that] they didn't like"

(224). Thus begins a slow probing analysis of why Haskell is disliked. Miss Jamison, the town's librarian, complains that she does not like "the way he rubs his glasses and blows on 'em and puts cotton under the bridge so it won't chafe his nose" (225). Jamison also complaints that Haskell's choice of reading material is "very queer" (226). Her assistant, Rose, is however unconvinced. She decides to help Haskell find cheap accommodation in her apartment building but her efforts to befriend him only serve to highlight his queerness:

> One morning she stood just on the inside of her door till she heard him descending the stairs from the third floor. Then she caught the creamy lace about her throat and stepped out of her bedroom. She stood there in his full gaze for three ecstatic moments before she scurried into the bathroom with a slight hysterical giggle and locked the door – while Haskell proceeded unsteadily down the rest of the stairs. (227-28)

Haskell's queerness is reinforced when he infuses his conversations with references to the poetry of Robert Browning. Rose, attracted to Haskell's sensitive nature, is "[released] from all effect of gravity" like a "thin tissue kite that was suddenly caught in a rising wind" (228). Nothing however comes of this relationship as Haskell is soon fired from his job. His boss, Mr. Owen fires the young man despite him being "...neat and courteous and very reliable." Haskell has to go because "...nobody seemed to like him" (229).

A queer reading reveals that Haskell like the men in Alma Winemiller's reading club or even Tom Wingfield of *Menagerie*, exhibits the telltale signs of

homosexuality. His neatness, his love of poetry, his sensitive nature and his preoccupation with the way he looks make him queer in the eyes of his society. More importantly, people like Haskell will never be accepted because they are different. The inability to accept difference forms a barrier inhibiting communication between the characters in the story and this is equally effective in *Streetcar*. Williams was probably working on both "Something" and *Streetcar* simultaneously, thus both Blanche and Haskell are ostracised because of that "something about [them]". Haskell's relationship with Rose foreshadows Blanche's relationship with her gay husband Allan Grey.

Among the other early works that Benjamin Nelson suggests preceded *Streetcar* are "The Lady of Lakspur Lotion", "Portrait of a Madonna", *Menagerie* and *Summer* (121). While the first two are one-act plays that depict the destitution and death of a Blanche-like character, it is *Menagerie* and *Summer* that are truly thresholds in the development of the queer *Streetcar*. The evolution of *Streetcar's* published script supports this connection with the earlier plays. Williams began working on *Streetcar* during the rehearsals of *Menagerie* in 1944 (Murphy 20) and completed it while working simultaneously on *Summer*. In March 1945, Williams managed to send Audrey Wood, his agent in New York, three possible titles for his "story". He suggested that it either be called "The Moth", "The Poker Night" or "The Primary Colors" (20). The present title, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, first emerged in January 1946.

Streetcar's connection with *Menagerie* lies in the family matrix. Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* alluded to this connection in his review of *Streetcar* saying "that both Blanche and Laura belong to the same family". While working on a one-act play entitled "Blanche's Chair in the Moon", a first step towards the conception of *Streetcar*, the playwright, Brenda Murphy explains, stopped developing the play because "[he] became mysteriously depressed and debilitated" (Murphy 20). The reason for this sudden inability to continue to write was because the story was based on the playwright's sister Rose. In *Streetcar*, a weak older sibling relies on a stronger younger one for survival. Blanche and Stella, seen in this light, remind the reader of Rose and Tennessee. However, unlike *Menagerie*, the focus is not centred on the mother. The mother in this play has died but she haunts the older sibling in memory and dreams. The younger sister, having escaped the "Old World trappings" of Belle Reve, is more resilient than her sister who seems to have become "their mother" in manners, style and values. If in *Menagerie*, the influence of the mother has to be resisted and repelled by flight, in *Streetcar*, Stella struggles against the motherly restrictions of Blanche and like Tom in *Menagerie*, she will have to be "remorseless to survive". The queer connection between these two plays lies in the closetedness of Tom which corresponds with the mask that Blanche wears in the Kowalski home. While in *Menagerie*, Tom could not come-out and preferred to encapsulate his narration in memory, Williams goes one step further in *Streetcar* by having Blanche exposed as a degenerate. A queer reading reveals a natural development of ideas from an earlier more autobiographical play to a more socially aware masterpiece.

The evolution of the published script also traces the divided self in Blanche, linking the play with *Summer*. Blanche Du Bois, critics have suggested, is an older version of the "divided" Alma. Unlike *Summer* that focused on the self-division of the homosexual through expressionism, Williams adopts a more social perspective in his treatment of homosexuality in *Streetcar*. This is reflected in Williams' use of colours to personify the divided condition not only within but also between his characters in *Streetcar*. In the first version dubbed the "Italian version", Williams' experimental use of colours in *Streetcar* to represent the inner qualities of his characters also portends the eventual clash between the "lily white" world of Belle Reve and the strong "primary colours" of life in Stanley's New Orleans. Bianca, the template for Blanche in this version, first appears in a "vivid silk robe" before changing into "a white linen suit" (21). Like Blanche, Bianca camouflages her true nature with the colour white. Similarly, Pablo's bright red "bowling shirt" and "silk bathrobe" foreshadow Stanley's affinity for primary colours. While the Bianca-Rosa relationship obviously resembles the Blanche-Stella matrix, Lucio who is "nearly effeminate" (21), might be a prototype for the Allen Grey character in *Streetcar*.

In "The Primary Colors" version, set in Atlanta, the characters as Murphy explains are "closer to their final transformation" (21). Lucio is replaced with Ralph Stanley, "a healthy Irish peasant type" who has a keen sense that "he is the man of the house" (21). Blanche, in this version, is not only more jovial because she

"engages in a great deal of banter" (21) but is visibly attracted to Ralph Stanley from the beginning of the play. In the next draft entitled "The Passion of a Moth", "Blanche and Stanley seem to have made love with mutual attraction" (21). Underlying both these versions is the sexual battle that will figure prominently in the plot of *Streetcar*. Murphy states that Blanche in this version bears great similarities with Alma of *Summer*. They are both conditioned to conform while harbouring desires to transgress. This dividedness becomes the main focus of Kazan's depiction of Blanche as a fugitive. Both Blanche and Alma, at the end of their stage performance, will have to learn to "depend on the kindness of strangers" (22).

Unlike *Summer* where the play's focus is on the battle between the body and the soul, *Streetcar* provides a social dimension reflecting Williams' empathy for the plight of homosexuals. In "The Poker Night" version Williams, being more sympathetic to his fugitive-protagonist, makes her seem more helpless. Blanche is now representative of "a way of life" considered deviant by society. The playwright began this process by developing the character of Mitch to give credence to Blanche's dependence on others. From the character of "Howdy" in the "Primary Colours" version, the Mitch character is revised from "that of a wolf to the mama's boy of the published version" (22). This, gay audiences will understand, is why Blanche gravitates towards Mitch. Another aspect of *Streetcar* that is developed from "The Poker Night" version is the issue of maternity. Instead of having Blanche think of having Stanley's baby as in "The Passion of a Moth", Williams makes

Stella pregnant instead and this, Murphy explains, reinforces Stella's dependence on Stanley (22). Furthermore, a pregnant Blanche would have unsettled the queer motif in the play. The Shep Huntleigh story is also given more credibility. Lying for Blanche, as for the homosexual, is a form of self-defence.

While in *Menagerie*, the queer subtext remains subaltern and in *Summer*, it was over emphasised and resulted in abstracted characters, in *Streetcar*, Williams achieved a balance between his personal struggle with homosexuality and art. By this I mean the queer subtext is interwoven into the fabric of the main plot resulting in, to borrow a term from John Clum, a "canonical closet play". The queer subtext in the early works thus culminates in *Streetcar*.

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While acknowledging that *Streetcar* is a culmination of the early works, it is Elia Kazan's direction of the play in 1947 and his 1951 Hollywood film version that reveals the play's potential for a queer production. It is thus important to consider this original production and its depiction of sexual ambivalence, before reviewing the play's reception by reviewers and critics.

When Elia Kazan started working on the script in October of 1947, the director refined Blanche's dialogue, added the music and Blanche's scene with the paperboy and developed the Stanley-Mitch relationship (Murphy 22). Faithful to

"Method Acting" procedures, the tension between Mitch and Stanley and between Stella and Stanley's way of life, Murphy adds, developed naturally (23). These alterations, I believe, reinforce the queer reading of the play, a reading that sees Blanche (the homosexual) as a fugitive. Kazan intended for the audience to see:

> how desperate she [Blanche] is, how warm and tender and loving she can be...[until] they begin to realise that they are sitting in at the death of something extraordinary...colourful, varied, passionate, lost, witty, imaginative, of her own integrity... (Murphy 35-36)

In *Streetcar*, Williams and Kazan created a situation that gay people identified with instantly because it is a situation that revolves around the exposure and eventual destruction of a lonely "sexual degenerate".

The set itself prepares the audience for this "situation". Mielziner's set design betrays the "double-meaning" inherent in the play. Williams' original plan was to use a scrim or transparent drop made of gauze, as Mielziner had used in *Menagerie*, to allow the audience to see the action inside the apartment. In the published script Williams explains this process:

> The surrounding areas dim out as the interior is lighted. Two rooms can be seen, not too clearly defined. (*Streetcar* 118)

By employing the complex use of lights, Kazan did away with the use of a scrim while still retaining Williams' idea of merging the subtext with the main plot.

Mielziner, who wanted to adapt Williams' idea of providing the audience with a glimpse into the private lives of these characters, incidentally "lighted-up" the queer subtext of the play.

The purpose of lighting and music was to project Blanche's disassociation from reality and this created a "stage within a stage" situation. Murphy explains that Kazan used the polka tune, the Varsouviana, at the end of the play to indicate "a progressive disassociation from reality" (23). Kazan also removed a line from the original script that portrayed Blanche as a victim of blackmail by a seventeen year old boy and made it clear that she was responsible for her actions and "degeneracy". Contrary to popular interpretation, Blanche is not purely a victim of her society and neither is Stanley merely a rapist. In fact Williams' objective when writing this play is that none of his characters should be seen as evil or good:

> I think [*Streetcar's*] best quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no "good" or "bad" people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts...It is a thing [Homophobia] not a person [Stanley/the homophobe] that destroys her [Blanche/the homosexual] in the end. In the end you feel - "if only they all had known each other". (quoted in Murphy 24)

By stating that this is a play based on "misunderstanding" and that conflict could have been avoided "if only they all had known each other", Williams and Kazan's "situation" is keenly queer. Like *Menagerie* and *Summer*, *Streetcar* celebrates the plurality of human behaviour through its portrayal of sexual

ambivalence. By celebrating "difference", Williams is appealing for understanding and empathy from his audience for the fugitive. In the second half of this chapter, I would like to examine the reviews and criticism of the play before embarking on an examination of the text from a queer perspective.

Kazan's production of *Streetcar*, both in Broadway and Hollywood was very well received. Ward Morehouse of the *New York Sun*, commented on the 1947 production: "Played with uncommon skill," the play has been "carefully and expertly staged by Elia Kazan" (Morehouse 1). William Hawkins of the *New York World-Telegram* wrote: "Where Laurette Taylor brought magnetic quickness to *Glass Menagerie*, Elia Kazan has done the same here with his brilliant direction" (Hawkins 2). *Streetcar's* success was monumental. It played to packed auditoriums in the Barrymore theatre for 855 productions from December 3 1947 to December 17 1949. The play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize, the Anderson Prize and the Drama Circle's Critic Award. The subject of the play however remains controversial. Morehouse in the same review praising the production warns the audience that "*A Streetcar Named Desire* is not a play for the squeamish. It is often coarse and harrowing" (Morehouse 1). Louis Kronenberger from the *New York PM*, highlighted problems to do with its structure and its heroine:

> ...*Streetcar* is not always a good play. It falls down in places; it goes wrong in places. But what is right about it is also, in today's theatre, rare...And there is a willingness to be adventurous in the pursuit of truth.
>
> The problem with truth isn't any simpler because Mr. Williams' heroine happens to be the most demonically

> driven kind of liar – the one who lies to the world because she must lie to herself. His Blanche Du Bois, whose gradual disintegration is the subject of his drama, is Southern-genteel and empty of purse; highly sexed and husbandless; full of fine-lady airs, and the town's most notorious tramp. (Kronenberger 1)

Central to any review of the play is Williams' protagonist Blanche Du Bois. Like Amanda Wingfield in *Menagerie*, Blanche is the "dramatic centre" of the text. But unlike *Menagerie's*, *Streetcar's* success does not lie solely with the actor who plays the female lead, as the male lead is equally important. John Clum comments that "directors will tell you that...finding a convincing Stanley is extremely difficult" (Clum, 1994, 151). Almost every production of the play suffers if the male lead does not measure up to Marlon Brando's Stanley in the Kazan production. The erotic centre of the play is not Blanche. Despite the latter's femme-fatale personality it is Stanley who Clum says, provides a physical language for gay audiences in which "his physical body is as important as his words and actions" (151).

Early reviewers downplayed the play's powerful sexual connotations. They did not want to see *Streetcar* as a play about a sexually ambivalent protagonist. However the play's sexual overtones, especially the rape scene, were controversial enough to earn Williams the label of "sensationalist". Not all reviewers were judgmental. R.D. Smith of the *New Statesman*, reacting to the 1949 London production that featured Vivien Leigh as Blanche and Bonar Colleano as Stanley, commented that:

> by comparison (with *Menagerie*) ...this horror, the violent incidents of plot - the drunken brawling, the lovemaking, the bad language - are seen (or should be seen) as subsidiary evils committed by people who are themselves not evil, who, indeed, in some important qualities, positively good. (Arnott 26)

Brooks Atkinson of the *New York Times* added that this production, "reveals Mr. Williams as a genuinely poetic playwright, whose knowledge of people is honest and thorough and whose sympathy is profoundly human" (quoted in Arnott 26). *Streetcar's* impact in both Broadway and London was impressive by any theatrical standards. But more importantly, the play's controversial subject forced its audiences to address the taboo subject of sexuality and sexual ambivalence in postwar Western society.

Early literary critics, like the reviewers, aligned themselves to "safe" themes. Most found *Streetcar* a continuation from *Menagerie*. Few discussed the play in terms of sexual politics. Early criticism of the play usually focused on the play as either being a critique of Southern society or a testament to that dying American culture. Walcott Gibbs of *The New Yorker*, after watching the Kazan production, explains that the play is "about the disintegration of a woman or if you like, of a society" (quoted in Nelson 121). This is in line with many reviews that highlighted the myth of the Southern belle and her devastating encounter with a brute in the slums of New Orleans. Critics jumped on Blanche's similarity to Alma Winemiller of *Summer* and Amanda Wingfield of *Menagerie* and began to compare

them and "classify" them as evidence of Williams' social and historical matrix - the South. If sexuality is discussed it is usually in critique of Williams' alleged need to sensationalise. Signi L. Falk for example has said that the sexual connotations in *Streetcar* popularised the play thus making it commercially successful (Falk, 1958, 172-180). Critics following this line of thought were horrified that Williams would make a Hollywood version of the play and give in to commercialism, the very thing the play was supposed to criticise.

The shift in focus, from a cultural to a sexual perspective, gained momentum with the sexual liberation movement in America of the 1960s. However reviewers and critics alike were hostile to gay playwrights. Williams, Clum says, was one of the casualties of this diatribe against homosexual inferences on stage. Among the most vociferous was Howard Taubman of the *New York Times*. Taubman's "outing" of gay playwrights, based on "tell-tale signs" and gay codes, lists *Streetcar* as among one of the many plays by Williams, that corrupts the audience (Clum, 1994, 347). People watching the play are never the same again, he claims, lamenting, "if only we could recover our loss of innocence and could believe that people on stage are what they are supposed to be" (quoted in Clum, 1994, 176). Clum argues that such claims lead to another more insidious paradigm, the insistence that we should all "support a myth of universal heterosexual happiness and harmony - the myth of normality" (176).

By 1977 the playwright published his *Memoirs* and openly admitted to being gay. Thus there began another shift in perspective, from the heterosexual-centred criticism of hostile reviewers like Taubman to the more sympathetic essays of Robert E. Jones. In "Sexual Roles in the Works of Tennessee Williams", he asserts:

> Perhaps the best examples of sexual ambivalence in Williams' works are to be found in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Summer and Smoke*. In both plays the portrayal of the leading female characters is ambivalent. Blanche...turns into a creature crazed by desire, the desire to belong, the desire to be held by men. The men to whom she had given herself are serviceman, truckers, travelling salesman, and finally a schoolboy; she has become the whore of the town...Williams because he is a great dramatist, makes Blanche and Alma not only convincing as women, but, in fact, great theatrical personae. But in a more recent time, he might also have made them homosexual men. (553-554)

In highlighting the sexual ambivalence of Williams' characters, Jones brings to light that "many of them could have been portrayed as frustrated homosexuals" (550). In the late 1970s up till this decade, the focus of queer analysis is devoted to deconstructing the myth of "normality". Post-stonewall critics like Mark Lily and John Clum contribute further to a queer reading of *Streetcar* via a semiotic analysis that reveals the workings of "gay" codes in the play. Their ideas make queer performances a viable alternative to replace the conventional interpretation of the play.

In this chapter I have chosen to examine the aesthetic matrix of Kazan and Williams' collaboration of the play because the 1947 production is ripe for a queer reading. Kazan's objective, to create a situation where audiences will be influenced to see the world from the perspective of the fugitive and thus sympathise with her, crystallises the playwright's attempt to "communicate his gayness" to his "gay" audience.

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Williams resisted "reductive" interpretations of *Streetcar* especially the sort that Taubman promoted. He insisted that Blanche is not a "drag queen". However, the playwright, I believe, would not be necessarily resistant to a queer reading of his play. A queer reading is not monolithic in its interpretation. Its celebration of fluidity makes it inclusive rather than exclusive. This distinguishes a queer reading from hostile interpretations like Taubman's that wish to reduce the play to its "homosexual codes" and diminish the value of the play. Throughout this queer reading of *Streetcar*, I will depend on Kazan's notes, Williams' comments, the play's production notes and character sketches, to illustrate this point. As the queer subtext is interwoven into the main plot of the play, the potential for a queer performance reinforces this interpretation. Instead of being subaltern, as it was in *Menagerie*, it is a part of the play. Thus unlike Alma in *Summer*, who can easily be a template of a gay man, Blanche Du Bois is not an abstracted character. She is first

and foremost a fugitive. It is this fugitive quality, one that eludes definition, that makes the play a "quintessential closeted gay play" (Clum, 1994, 150).

Williams' description of New Orleans in the first scene is crucial to any reading of the play as it conveys to the audience that Blanche has entered the city as a fugitive. As in *Summer*, the sky is "tender blue almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay" (115). But unlike Glorious Hill, New Orleans is "a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races" (115). When Blanche enters the scene, she looks out of place, and wears "an expression of shocked disbelief" (117). To further reinforce the point that she is "different" the playwright adds that, "her appearance is incongruous to this setting" (117). The fugitive from Glorious Hill has arrived in an alien environment and when she asks her sister about the people who inhabit this world, the younger sibling tells her that she will not like the people here because "they are a mixed lot...hetero**sexual** types" (emphasis mine, 124).

Stanley, gay audiences will agree, is the epitome of the heterosexual type. Williams deliberately describes him in brutish terms. He bellows to Stella and heaves a package of red meat at her in the opening scene where he first appears. He is not intimidated by Southern-gentility and as he tells Blanche, "be comfortable is my motto" (128). Williams indicates in his stage directions:

> branching from this complete and satisfying centre are all the auxiliary channels of his life, such as his heartiness with

> men, his appreciation of rough humour, his love for good drink and food and games...everything that is his, that bears his emblem of gaudy seed-bearer. He sizes women up in a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them. (128)

He establishes himself as the erotic centre of the play the moment he undresses in public. This lack of concern, almost exhibitionist quality about him, reverses the traditional male-centred gaze in the very first scene of the play. For gay audiences, this not only foreshadows the eventual clash between these two characters, it establishes, powerfully, the erotic queer subtext interwoven into the main plot of the play.

In the second scene, the audience's suspicion about Blanche begins to concretise. In scene one, Blanche's alcoholism and her "need to get a hold of herself" (119), betrays the secret life that she is running from. In Kazan's notes, the director wants to impress on the audience that Blanche has something to hide (Murphy 36). Her lily-white and cultured appearance is in actuality a mask. The air of superiority that she has also betrays her insecurity. But Kazan does not allow the audience to sympathise with her. The director insisted that Blanche's disregard for Stella's property (in the 1947 production she empties her glass onto the carpet) makes her divided personality more engaging and real. When Stanley cruelly confronts her about the loss of Belle Reve, she becomes coy and camp, hoping to avoid explaining her shame-filled past. Later when she realises that Stanley is not

susceptible to her charms, she speaks frankly, confessing to him how Belle Reve was lost:

BLANCHE: ...All right; now Mr. Kowalski, let us proceed without anymore double-talk. I'm ready to answer all questions. I've nothing to hide. What is it?

STANLEY: There is such a thing in this State of Louisiana as the Napoleonic code, according to which whatever belongs to my wife is also mine - and vice versa.

BLANCHE: My, but you have an impressive judicial air!

[She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser. She throws her head and laughs.]

STANLEY: If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!

The sensitive, fragile yet extremely "camp" Blanche du Bois is as John Clum explains: "the quintessential gay character" (Clum, 1994, 150). Kazan had Blanche fiddle with her make-up kit each time she was in fear, epitomising at the same time, her insecurity and need to look attractive for men. This obsession with her appearance, gay audiences will agree, is not unlike the gay obsession with youth and beauty.

In scene three, the audience begins to notice that Blanche is a fugitive from her past and is a compulsive liar. At first she lies about her age to Mitch and then about her past to Stanley. We also get the impression that Stanley's world, dominated by

"primary colours", is a place that is hostile to the "different". When the sisters come home and disturb the poker party, Stanley reacts violently, breaking the radio and hitting the pregnant Stella. This violent outburst differentiates New Orleans from Belle Reve. It also distinguishes Mitch from the men at the poker table. Mitch is a romantic Mama's boy, the sensitive type that Blanche is drawn to. At the end of scene three, Blanche has found in Mitch the "[kindness] I need now" (155).

At no point is the contrast between the fugitive's world and the "reality" envisioned by Williams more emphasised than in scene four, when Blanche sees that Stella has given up Belle Reve completely. As early as scene two, Blanche must have been disturbed by Stella's practicality when the latter advised Eunice, who had just discovered her husband's infidelity, to go to the bar and have a drink instead of going to the police. Stella's toleration of Stanley's violent behaviour and ill treatment of herself must have been as shocking for the audience as it was for Blanche. *Streetcar's* sexual overtones reach a boiling point in scene four, where Stella explains to her sister the reason she goes back to Stanley:

STELLA: But there are things that happen between a man and a wo**man** in the dark - that sort of make everything else seem - unimportant. [Pause.]

BLANCE: What you are talking about is brutal desire - just - Desire! - the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another...

STELLA: Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?

BLANCE: It brought me here. - Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be...

STELLA: Then don't you think your superior attitude is a bit out of place?

BLANCHE: I am not being or feeling at all superior, Stella. Believe me I'm not!

(Emphasis mine, 162)

Audiences usually have mixed reactions about this scene. In the 1998 release of Kazan's unedited Hollywood version, Stella's sensual response to her bellowing husband, earlier censored, establishes the sexual nature of their relationship. A queer reading however reveals that this scene is crucial to the play's queer subtext for it implies that "gaudy seed bearers" dominate the world of the play. The double meaning of the passage above elucidates this point. While Stella might not realise that Blanche is talking about herself when she refers to sitting in a street-car fuelled by brutal desire, gay audiences will recognise the double-entendre in Blanche's response. On one hand Blanche, like the homosexual, has experienced the "panic" that drives her to search for intimacy with strangers but at the same time she realises that such relationships only serve to aggravate loneliness. Thus when Stella is not receptive to her "advice", telling her that she has no right to act superior, Blanche is immediately apologetic. Here the mask of the fugitive cracks to reveal an extremely insecure person who has to act "superior" to distance herself from Stanley and perhaps to win her sister to her side:

BLANCHE: 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...Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is - Stanley Kowalski - survivor of the Stone Age!...Night falls and all the 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...but Stella - my sister - there has been some progress since then! Such things as art - as poetry and music - such kinds of new light has come to the world since then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have got to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag! In this dark march to whatever it is we are approaching...Don't - don't hang back with the brutes! (163-64)

If Stanley is the heterosexual brute, an insensitive man who "bangs things around", Blanche intends to be the opposite. She tells her sister, "we weak people need to dazzle" and assume the refined posture of delicateness akin to "butterfly wings". Thus the fugitive creates an alternative reality through the illusion of art. She dresses a naked light bulb with a paper lantern and virtually transforms the Kowalski home into a stage. In this make believe world, she sings songs about "paper moons" to rekindle the "old world trappings" of an era where gentleness and delicacy are valued. In everything she does, Kazan explains, there is a sense of style. In this flight from reality, Blanche is the lead actress and in the realm of the theatre, John Clum adds, "lies are acceptable" and an actor never lies "on the inside".

The fugitive's disassociation from reality becomes apparent as the play moves into scene five. Blanche begins to lie to herself by writing to Shep Huntleigh, an old beau. Even in the letter to the fictional character, she lies about her present situation. She tells Shep of the rich lifestyle of her sister and her new found friends. Unknown to Blanche, Stanley who overheard her trying to convince Stella to leave him, begins to investigate her past in Laurel. By scene five, the animosity between Blanche and Stanley is obvious to the audience. If at first like Blanche, we are attracted to Stanley, now that attraction is mingled with fear and contempt. The fugitive has a reason to fear Stanley because as she tries to move further into her fantasy world, he systematically tears down all her defences. This is brutally evident in their conversation about astrological signs:

BLANCHE: ... I bet you were born under Aries. Aries people are forceful and dynamic. They dote on noise! They love to bang things around! You must have lots of banging around in the army, and now that you're out, you make up for it by treating inanimate objects with such a fury!

[Stella has been going in and out of the closet during this scene. Now she pops her head out of the closet.]

STELLA: Stanley was born just five minutes after Christmas.

BLANCHE: Capricorn - the Goat

STANLEY: What sign were you born under?

BLANCHE: Oh, my birthday's next month, the fifteenth of September, that's under Virgo.

STANLEY: What's Virgo?

BLANCHE: Virgo is the Virgin.

STANLEY [contemptuously]: Hah!...
(167)

The passage above is riddled with sexual innuendo. The Blanche-Stanley relationship is not purely based on animosity but is also propelled by an underlying sexual attraction for each other. Their astrological signs betray their positions in this sexual game. While Stanley is the pansexual goat, whose motto in life is to be comfortable, Blanche's "modus operandi" is to assume the role of the virgin, always clean and pure. But when Stanley questions Blanche about her past, the latter "expresses faint shock" and is rattled from her previous "superior" position.

As her mask cracks, the audience or the reader will begin to see her as a sexual deviant. By the end of scene five the queer subtext in the play begins to dominate the main plot. This becomes clear when Blanche, with her fascination for beauty, her fear of old age and her affinity for art, begins to exemplify the characteristics of a homosexual in her conversation with the paperboy:

BLANCHE: You make my mouth water.

YOUNG MAN: Well, I'd better be -

BLANCHE: Young man! Young, young, young, young – man! Has anyone ever told you that you look like a young prince out of the Arabian Nights?

YOUNG MAN: No, ma'am.

[The YOUNG MAN laughs uncomfortably and stands like a bashful kid. Blanche speaks softly to him.]

BLANCHE: Well, you do, honey lamb. Come here! Come on over here like I told you! I want to kiss you - just once – softly and sweetly on your mouth. [Without waiting for him to accept, she crosses quickly to him and presses her lips to his.] Run along now! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good and keep my hands off children. Adios!

YOUNG MAN: Huh?

[He stares at her a moment. She opens the door for him and blows a kiss to him as he goes down the steps with a dazed look. She stands there a little dreamily after he has disappeared. Then Mitch appears around the corner with a bunch of roses.]

BLANCHE: Look who's coming! My Rosenkavalier! Bow to me first! Now present them....Ahhh! Merciii ! (174)

Blanche, from the exchange above, is a nymphomaniac. Her sexual habit akin to pederasty associates her with her gay audience. Her campiness, throughout the last five scenes, betrays her attempt to cope with the reality of her situation. But instead of "hiding" her true nature, camp brings unwanted attention instead.

By scene six, it has become apparent that the play is not merely about Blanche imposing on Stanley and Stella nor is it merely about the decay of Southern culture. The play now revolves around the exposure of the fugitive as a

sexual degenerate. Blanche, the playwright explains, is exhausted. She has "tried so hard to be gay" for Mitch (175) but has failed miserably. "The neurasthenic", Williams says, "will be able to see her exhaustion in her voice and manner" (175). It is here that Williams introduces his first homosexual character - Blanche's poet husband, Allan Grey. To heighten the idea that the play revolves around this episode from Blanche's past, Kazan inserted the polka tune in the middle of Blanche's confession about her one act of "deliberate cruelty":

BLANCHE: He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery - love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate-looking - still - that thing was there...He came to me for help. I didn't know that. I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give him the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me - but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him!...Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty - which wasn't empty, but had two people in it...

[A locomotive is heard approaching outside. She claps her hands to her ears and crouches over. The headlight of the locomotive glares into the room as it thunders past. As the noise recedes she straightens slowly and continues speaking.]

> Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered. Yes, the three of us drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way.
>
> [Polka music sounds, in a minor key faint with distance.]
>
> We danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy I had married broke away from me and ran out of the casino. A few moments later - a shot!
>
> [The polka stops abruptly. Blanche rises stiffly. Then the polka resumes in a major key.]
>
> I ran out - all did - all ran and gathered about the terrible thing at the edge of the lake! I couldn't get near for the crowding. Then somebody caught my arm. 'Don't go any closer! Come back! You don't want to see!' See? See what! Then I heard voices say - Allan! Allan! The Grey boy! He'd stuck the revolver into his mouth, and fired - so that the back of his head had been - blown away!
>
> [She sways and covers her face.]
>
> It was because - on the dance-floor - unable to stop myself - I'd suddenly said 'I know! I know! You disgust me...' And then 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. (182-84)

Upon discovering Allan's homosexuality, Blanche, John Clum argues, cannot see Allan as anything other than as a homosexual (Clum, 1994, 150). In the world of Tennessee Williams, once homosexuals are discovered, they cease to exist on stage. Williams' stage in the early plays is strictly the domain of heterosexuals. If homosexuals are to exist at all, they have to resort to disguising their gayness. Thus the threat of public exposure in this play is what makes the homosexual a fugitive from reality. In *Streetcar*, Blanche's fear of being exposed adds an extra dimension for us to identify her as a homosexual.

Scene seven, the birthday scene, signals the beginning of the unmasking process. If in *Menagerie* and *Summer*, the fugitives do not have to resort to disguise, in *Streetcar*, John Clum succinctly explains that, "those who aren't straight must act straight to survive" (Clum, 1994, 154). Stanley destroys Blanche's hope to start afresh with Mitch by telling the latter about Blanche's past in Laurel. As Stanley explains to Stella:

> STANLEY: ...And as time went by she became a town character. Regarded as **not just different** but downright loco - nuts. And for the last year or two she has been washed up like poison. That's why she's here this summer, **visiting royalty, putting on all this act** - because she's practically told by the mayor to get out of town! Yes, did you know there was an army camp near Laurel and your sister's was one of the places called **'Out-of-Bounds'**? (Emphasis mine) (187-88)

The audience also learns about Blanche's affair with a seventeen-year-old boy, an act of pederasty that society associates with homosexuals. This further emboldens the Blanche/homosexual matrix.

While the accusations that Stanley makes about Blanche and his aggressive manner in dealing with his sister in-law betray an insecurity that is closely associated with homophobia, Stella's reaction to the exposure of her sister is more sympathetic as she tries to reason with Stanley:

STELLA: But when she was young, very young, she had an experience that - killed her illusions!

STANLEY: What experience is that?

STELLA: I mean her marriage, when she was - almost a child! She married a boy who wrote poetry...He was extremely good-looking. I think Blanche didn't just love him but worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too fine to be human! But then she found out –

STANLEY: What?

STELLA: This beautiful and talented young man was a degenerate. Didn't your supply-man give you that information? (189-90)

However Stanley is not convinced that a brutal marriage should excuse Blanche from her present behaviour. When Mitch does not turn up for the party, in scene eight, Stanley does to Blanche what she has done to her husband - he exposes her in public. He yells at both Blanche and Stella accusing them of being a "pair of queens" (194) and reminding them that "Every man is a king! And I'm king around here!" (195). In scene eight, pretence no longer keeps out reality as Blanche is deliberately made to feel awkward and unwanted. Despite Stella's plea about Blanche being "someone so alone" (198), Stanley sends Blanche packing by giving her a bus ticket back to Laurel. This act of "deliberate cruelty" shocks Stella into labour. Unable to deal with the reality of her situation Blanche begins to drink openly, signalling the collapse of the mask that she wears.

It is in scene nine that the process of exposure is completed. The disappointed Mitch, who was a wolf in the "Passion of a Moth" version, returns to "get what I've been missing all summer" (207). Once exposed, Mitch no longer sees Blanche as a lily-white maiden instead she is, to him, a whore. Blanche is now "not clean enough to take home" (207). As the lies she tells all summer begin to unfold, her inquisition reaches a climax when Mitch accuses her of not being straight:

BLANCHE: What are you leading up to?

MITCH: Let's turn the light on here.

BLANCHE [fearfully]: Light? Which light? What for?

MITCH: This one with the paper thing on it.

[He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb. She utters a frightened gasp.]

BLANCHE: What did you do that for?

MITCH: So I can take a look good and plain!

BLANCHE: Of course you don't really mean to be insulting!

MITCH: No, just realistic.

BLANCE: I don't want realism.

MITCH: Naw, I guess not.

BLANCHE: I'll tell you what I want. Magic! [Mitch laughs.] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be the truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! - Don't turn the light on!

[MITCH crosses to the switch. He turns the light on

and stares at her. She cries out and covers her face. He turns the light off again.]

MITCH [slowly and bitterly]: I don't mind you being older than I thought. But all the rest of it - God! That pitch about your ideals being so old-fashioned and all the malarkey that you've dished out all summer. Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was **STRAIGHT**.

BLANCHE: Who told you I wasn't '**STRAIGHT**' ? (Emphasis mine) (203-04)

By using the word "straight" as a pun, Williams recreates the ultimate queer moment of identification - the moment of exposure. Blanche finally confesses the truth of her past:

BLANCHE: Yes, a big spider! That's where I brought my victims. [She pours herself another drink.] 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...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...

MITCH: You lied to me, Blanche.

BLANCHE: Don't say I lied to you.

MITCH: Lies, lies, inside and out, all lies.

BLANCHE: Never inside, I didn't lie in my heart... (204-205)

When Mitch tries to rape her, we realise that, like Allan Grey, Blanche too has been reduced to her "sexuality". She has been erased as a person in Mitch's eyes. He sees her only as a sexual degenerate.

In scene ten, dubbed the "drag queen scene" by critics, Blanche appears to have sunk deeper into unreality. When Stanley returns from the hospital, Blanche, who is inebriated, "has decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed sliver slippers with brilliants set in their heels" (208). As the stage is illuminated, we see her inspecting herself with a hand mirror, before placing a tiara on her head (208). She talks to herself, literally bringing the audience back to that fateful night at Moon Lake Casino. She talks to her imaginary companions: "How about taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock-quarry?" (208). Just before Stanley comes in, she "lifts the mirror for a closer inspection...and slams it down with such violence that the glass cracks" (208). The drunk Stanley then proceeds to deconstruct the illusion that she has created to protect herself from the reality of her situation. This happens when Stanley notices an inconsistency in the lie that she is spinning:

STANLEY: Was this before or after the telegram came from the Texas millionaire?

BLANCHE: What telegram? No! No, after! As a matter of fact, the wire came just as

STANLEY: As a matter of fact there wasn't no wire at all!

BLANCHE: Oh, oh!

STANLEY: There isn't no Texas millionaire! And Mitch didn't come back with roses cause I know where he is -

BLANCHE: Oh!

STANLEY: There isn't a goddam thing but imagination!

BLANCHE: Oh!

STANLEY: And lies and conceit and tricks!

BLANCHE: Oh!

STANLEY: And look at yourself. Take a good look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from the rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! **What QUEEN do you think you are**?

BLANCHE: Oh - God...

STANLEY: I've been on to you from the start. Not once did you pull the wool over this boy's eyes! You come in here and **sprinkle the place with powder** and **spray perfume** and **cover the light bulb with a paper lantern**, and lo and behold the **place has turned into Egypt** and you are the **Queen of the Nile**! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor! I say - Ha - Ha! Do you hear me? Ha - ha -ha! [He walks into the bedroom.] (212-13)

Scene ten is also controversial because it keeps us guessing where Williams' sympathy lies. On one hand we have Blanche, who is as much a victim as she is a manipulator. There is also Stanley, who has to put up with an ungrateful houseguest and problematic sister-in-law. A queer reading offers another dimension of

meaning. If Blanche resembles a drag queen in scene ten, Stanley's reaction resembles that of the insecure homophobe. On one hand, Stanley is disgusted with Blanche's campiness and on the other, he feels threatened because he finds her physically attractive. Thus in scene ten, he takes the easy way out - he rapes her and later pretends that nothing has happened. The act of rape, however, robs the fugitive of the little self-worth that she is hopelessly clinging to. Thus in the heterosexist world of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, there is no place for the fugitive. Even "the little cleft in the rock of the world" cannot protect her.

*

This queer reading of *Streetcar* reveals that the homosexual is not a fugitive by choice. Blanche, in a particularly touching scene, resists the matron who is taking her to the asylum and shouts, "I want to be left alone - please!" (223), echoing the homosexual's plea to be allowed to exist. Perhaps here Williams' sympathy lies with the fugitive. As his audience recognises the "deliberate cruelty" that the gay person has to face from "misunderstanding", we, like Blanche, feel a need to reject this heterosexist "reality" of "gaudy seed bearers". The irony of the play, however, lies in the final scene. On the one occasion when Blanche is telling the truth - that Stanley raped her - the world "couldn't believe her story and go on living" (217), indicating Stanley's pyrrhic victory. This final twist, where the world has to lie to itself to go on, evokes pity for those who still misunderstand. The cost of freedom from a heterosexist reality is however painful. Like Tom Wingfield, the

homosexual has to abandon the people he loves. On the other hand, like Alma, he has to depend on the kindness of strangers once outside the family matrix. Although he attempts to find his way back into the protective folds of the family, he is persecuted for "that something about him". At the end of his flight on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, he is institutionalised and categorised as "mad". In the culmination of Williams' early works, the homosexual a fugitive from "reality".