

GENDER-BASED BEHAVIOR IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Jordan Davis

1994

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts



Author

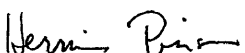
Approved, December 1994



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writer wishes to express her appreciation to Professor Louis Lappin. His patience, guidance, insight, and sense of humor were integral to the completion of the project. The author is also indebted to Professors Christopher MacGowan and Hermine Pinson for their careful reading and criticism of the manuscript.

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this essay is to explore the impact of longheld notions of gender-based behavior upon the characters in Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire. Throughout the play, the characters struggle with the desire to establish their own identities and the pressure to accept and conform to the role that society determines for them. While they may derive some benefits from a society-enforced persona, the characters are also limited by such roles. Williams suggests that those who challenge societal norms risk punishment and expulsion from society.

Williams' male figures adhere to a masculine code that stresses power, dominance, and responsibility for providing for the family. In addition, men are expected to be sexually and physically aggressive and are allowed to dictate and enforce the behavior code.

In contrast, such codes require that females be subservient, passive and provide a comfortable home environment. They should also be willing to accept male aggression, while at the same time remaining impervious to their own desires.

In this essay, Allan Grey, Blanche DuBois, Stella and Stanley Kowalski, Mitch, and Eunice are all examined in the framework of gender-enforced and gender-prescribed behavior. The ways in which each character seeks to deviate from acceptable behavior and yet also forces other characters to adhere to prescribed roles are explored.

Blanche DuBois presents the primary challenge to male authority, and Stanley Kowalski serves as the main enforcer of the behavior code.

Yet Stanley is able to overcome Blanche's challenge in part because as a male his words and activities are imbued with greater authority than Blanche's. Blanche's defeat is an indication that it is less demanding to accept the familiar and comfortable roles of the past than to embrace new options.

GENDER-BASED BEHAVIOR IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

When Blanche DuBois exclaims near the end of Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire that she is "caught in a trap" (400), she could be speaking for all of the play's major characters. The trap that Blanche alludes to is more than just the circumstances that have led to her final violent confrontation with Stanley. Indeed, the confrontation between Blanche and Stanley is only a small but climactic expression of a larger conflict that Williams explores within the play. The traps that ensnare Williams' figures are their longheld notions of appropriate gender-based behavior that both limit and dictate the characters' actions.

Williams' male characters are bound by a masculine code that stresses power and dominance, which at the same time promotes the male's responsibility as both financial provider and physical protector of the women they view as the weaker sex. Men should be hard, brash, gluttonous, aggressive, and predatory. In addition, they are the initiators of physical contact and are allowed a greater degree of sexual expressiveness than their female counterparts.

In contrast, Williams' female characters reside in a world in which they are expected to uphold an ideal of grateful subservience while providing a comfortable

environment and serving as the physical outlet for their husband's desires. Women should be ascetic, restrained, passive, vulnerable and impervious to sexual desire.

At the same time that the characters struggle against having their own roles predetermined, they seek to enforce upon others elements of those sexual roles that serve to gratify their own needs. As a result, Williams' characters find themselves struggling against the desires that drive them to behave in ways that contradict acceptable behavior and against those in society who seek to enforce a code of behavior upon them. It is this tension between individual desire and societal expectation that generates the dilemmas that the major characters encounter.

Blanche's young husband Allan Grey can hardly be considered a major character, since he only appears in Blanche's recollections of their brief marriage. However, in terms of his impact on the conflict of enforced gender roles, he is a figure whose influence is felt throughout the play not only by Blanche but also by the men whose behavior she seeks to influence.

Blanche's description of Allan indicates that he does not fit the male stereotype. Blanche remarks that "there was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's" (Williams 354). In fact, Allan's differences from men are what make him so attractive. Allan's gentility and love of literature make him an ideal mate for the sensitive, artistic Blanche.

Unfortunately, the union of two apparently kindred souls proves to be disastrous when Blanche discovers that her husband is homosexual.

Although critics like Mark Royden Winchell are quick to blame Allan for the horrific effect that his homosexuality has on Blanche, and for taking "the coward's way out by killing himself" (140), most critics choose to blame Blanche for a lack of compassion and for "her judgmental condemnation of his homosexuality" (Adler 67). However, as Laurilyn J. Harris points out:

Such criticisms view the past from the context of the present. What would a sixteen-year-old girl living in the second quarter of the twentieth century know of the psychological intricacies of the then-taboo subject of homosexuality? What would be her reaction when confronted with the graphic physical evidence of her idolized husband's sexual preference for a male companion rather than herself? (92)

Blanche is horrified by her husband's homosexuality. However, she does not intend to expose her husband with the cruelty and malice with which she will later be exposed, but reacts instead with the shock and disgust of a confused young girl. She does not plot to destroy him. In fact, she is as much a victim of his sexuality as he is.

The marriage that for Blanche represented the fulfillment of a girlhood fantasy represented something

less idyllic to Allan. Although Allan's reason for marrying Blanche is never explored in the play, he might have married Blanche in the mistaken belief that such an act could somehow mediate his homosexuality or at least help him to hide his sexuality from the public. By marrying Blanche, he entered into a relationship that, unlike a homosexual union, would be sanctioned by society, and therefore grant him a sense of social and sexual legitimacy. When he loses the support of Blanche, whose worship of her husband must have bolstered his shaky sense of self, he is unable to go on. Without an ally or a figure to help him present to the public an image of normalcy, Allan chooses to kill himself. Blanche naively assumes that the suicide is her fault and never stops believing that she could have saved Allan from his sexuality. Blanche continues to persecute herself for her inability to be a loving, supportive wife. In fact, Blanche's references to Allan as a "boy" tend to imply that she views his homosexuality as an act of a misguided youth who would have someday outgrown the problem had she not destroyed him with her carelessness. If she had been perhaps prettier or sexually adventurous then Allan would have wanted her instead of another man. In the mind of a naive young woman, Allan's failure as a husband becomes her own failure.

As much as Blanche blames herself for Allan's demise, she also recognizes that men have played a significant role in destroying the boy she found "almost too fine to

be human" (Williams 364). After all, it is not Allan's rejection of her on their wedding night that drives her to condemn him but the sight of him in the arms of another man. The touch and influence of a man corrupt her ideal lover. When Stanley touches the poems that are all Blanche has left of Allan, she reacts as if Allan is once again being soiled by the hands of a man, and Blanche threatens to burn the poems in retaliation.

Throughout the play, Blanche draws a strong distinction between men and boys. Boys are capable of love and tender sentiments, while men are driven by lust. When Blanche discusses her love for Allan, she describes the sensation as if someone "turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow" (Williams 354). However, after Allan's death, Blanche never experiences this intense light again and, in fact, shields herself from all strong light not only to conceal the effects of time upon her physical appearance but also symbolically to avoid the vulnerability that she associates with love and light. Blanche senses a trace of the illumination that accompanies young love when she observes her young students, whom she refers to as "drug-store Romeos," as they make "their first discovery of love" (Williams 302). For Blanche, love is an emotion limited to the young and to those who have not yet become hardened by the painful complexities that accompany emotional intimacy.

Blanche's association of her love for Allan with young

men is further suggested by her relationships following his death. Blanche turns to young men for physical relationships - the soldiers from the army camp, the seventeen-year-old student in her class, and the young man who comes to collect for the newspaper. Strangely, she is trying to help them as she could not help Allan, and she is clearly grateful that they do not reject her as he did. Blanche uses her sexuality to awaken in the boys what she and society deem normal desire - the feelings she could not awaken in her own husband. She seeks to ensure that the boys are properly initiated into normal sexuality, and at the same time enhance her own need to feel desired.

In contrast, Blanche's relationships with men lack the control that she has in her encounters with boys. Her experiences force her to classify men and boys as separate entities. Men destroy all that is fragile and beautiful. Her male ancestors have "exchanged the land for their epic fornications" and left her and Stella abandoned without the stability of the family home (Williams 284). Stanley will destroy her chance for a happy married life, and it is Stanley, whom she accurately labels when she remarks, 'My sister has married a man' (Williams 280), who will destroy her too. Blanche's experiences have shown her that men possess power in society, and they can utilize that power to help others or to abuse them. Men can offer protection and security, and because men are able to provide

what would be difficult, if not impossible, for women of that time to obtain on their own, the less desirable qualities that the men exhibit are either rationalized or ignored. Blanche realizes that she needs a man not only to satisfy society's expectations of her but also to satisfy her own emotional and financial needs. However, she has not resigned herself to accept just any man. She still looks for someone who possesses the gentle qualities that she loved in Allan, but she also wants a man with a mature, paternalistic nature. Therefore, it is to Mitch that Blanche turns in an effort to find "a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in" (Williams 387).

In many ways, Mitch is a combination of man and boy. Blanche notes that Mitch appears to be "superior to the others" in Stanley's group and possesses "a sort of sensitive look" (Williams 292). From her first glimpse, Blanche begins to associate him with the boyish characteristics of her late husband, and like Allan, Mitch and Blanche share similar experiences. Both care for sick and dying relatives, and both have lost a youthful lover in the past who is symbolized in the present by poetry - Blanche through the poems her late husband left her and Mitch through the poetic inscription on the cigarette case given to him by his lover. In addition, Mitch is much like the willing young boys who accept Blanche's favors. Just as Blanche directs the behavior of the boy collecting for the newspaper, and probably the behavior of all the

young men who have come before him, Mitch allows Blanche to cast him as her "Rosenkavalier" (Williams 339) and fellow Bohemian "sitting in a little artists' cafe on the Left Bank in Paris" (Williams 344). However, Mitch also possesses sufficient mature, male qualities to make him a more socially acceptable conquest for Blanche than her young admirers.

Mitch is a member of Stanley's society of men. He drinks, works, bowls, and plays cards with the other men of the French Quarter, and does not share Allan's youth or physical good looks. In Blanche's words, he is "not the delicate type" and has "a massive bone structure and a very imposing physique" (Williams 346). By settling on the more masculine looking Mitch, Blanche may believe that she will avoid the disaster that plagued her first marriage. Mitch supports himself and his mother, and she in turn keeps house for him. Mitch, like the other men, is entrenched in the traditional gender roles of men as providers and women as homemakers. As a result, Blanche sees in Mitch the possibility of a relationship that will allow her "to rest" and "not be anyone's problem" (Williams 335). In addition, her marriage to Mitch would grant her the social legitimacy that her promiscuity has denied her, in the same way that her marriage to Allan disguised his sexuality. Blanche craves the security that a marital relationship can provide, and she hopes to cast Mitch in the role of husband.

However, while Mitch is willing to enact the parts that Blanche constructs for him, he also expects her to play her part as the refined and innocent lover. Blanche is aware that Mitch expects her to conform to society's notion of proper behavior, and she tries desperately to live up to his expectations. Blanche knows all too well that in Mitch's presence she must make herself appear to be a suitable figure for marriage. As she aptly tells Stella, "I want his respect. And men don't want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand men lose interest quickly. Especially when the girl is over - thirty" (Williams 334). Blanche struggles to affect the nuances in her behavior that will seduce Mitch into marrying her without alerting him to her level of sexual sophistication. While critics like C. W. E. Bigsby and Mark Royden Winchell condemn Blanche's deception as "neurotic lies" (Bigsby "Critical" 62), the illusions she presents are forced upon her by the expectations of a male-dominated society. Blanche has been married, yet she is supposed to present the illusion of virginity and to have remained chaste during her years as a widow. Mitch condemns her for lying, yet he has helped to encourage her deception by expecting her to conform to a predefined ideal instead of accepting her as she is. Mitch wants Blanche to fill the role that his mother will soon vacate. He envisions his mother as the embodiment of passive, nurturing womanhood, and Blanche cannot sustain such a comparison.

Mitch holds Blanche to a standard that he does not apply to himself or to his friends. While Mitch interrogates Blanche about her past, his own past and his friends' pasts are never questioned. His story about his youthful love is never scrutinized and neither is his relationship with his mother. In fact, Mitch's past is never used to indicate his suitability as a mate in the way that Blanche's past is. If only women are judged by their pasts, then only men can control the narrative of that past. When Mitch is confronted with stories about Blanche's activities in Laurel, he does not trust his own favorable impressions of her or ask her about the rumors. Instead, like Stanley, he plays the prosecuting attorney determined to gather evidence against a criminal. When he hears accounts of Blanche's history, he quickly makes his decision. The opinions of the society of men are more important than his own sensibilities. Despite what his experiences with Blanche imply, he decides that she could never be anything but what other men say she is.

At first, Mitch is unable to confront Blanche with what he learns. He cowardly stays away from her birthday party either because he is ashamed of his inability to address her accusers, or because he is embarrassed at having considered marriage to such a notorious woman. Yet when Mitch finally gathers the courage to speak directly to Blanche, he is unprepared for the honesty with which she replies. Blanche confirms the rumors with the indignity

that she should feel, but that the male-dominated society implies she has no right to feel. She is direct about her indiscretions and about her pain and loneliness, but Mitch is unforgiving. In a final affront, he attempts to take what he assumes he has "been missing all summer" (Williams 389). Although he tells Blanche that he no longer considers her "clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (Williams 390), he apparently still finds her suitable enough to have sex with. He attempts to treat Blanche as the whore his friends have convinced him she is, but the indecisiveness that keeps him from confronting Blanche's accusers prevents him from raping Blanche.

The man with boy-like qualities that she had fantasized would rescue her from her present difficulties is frightened by her past and by a masculine ideal that allows men to freely pursue sexual conquests while insisting that the women they marry remain passive figures. However, Mitch is as equally injured by confining roles as Blanche is. Blanche represents Mitch's only chance for a fulfilling relationship. Mitch emphasizes that Blanche is quite different from the girls that he meets in the French Quarter when he tells her that he has "never known anyone like you" (Williams 343). Her beauty, education, and genteel style set her apart from the working-class world of his experience. However, to enjoy a life with Blanche, he must ignore the social pressures that negatively define Blanche and concentrate on the qualities that attracted

him to her. In the end, as Adler aptly argues, Mitch "cannot go beyond the ethical categories that society imposes and by which society judges, and thus forgive rather than condemn her" (45). Just as Blanche rejected Allan because of society's uncompromising views on acceptable sexual behavior, Blanche too is rejected for daring to be other than what society prescribes.

If society insists upon gender-prescribed behavior, then someone must enforce the code. In the play, Stanley functions to not only punish those who violate the code but also to decide which infractions are punishable. Whereas other characters recognize and generally adhere to the rules, they do little to enforce or change them. Stanley is the only character who benefits from the code, and as the benefactor of a gender-based code of conduct, finds it to his advantage to function, as Blanche aptly acknowledges, as the "executioner" of all who violate the rules that serve his view of the world (Williams 351). Of course, his own actions are never scrutinized as long as he remains in control, and staying in control is what motivates him throughout the play. His desire for power even overshadows his desire for Stella.

Stanley is not at all confused about his masculinity or about his role in Elysian Fields. As he says in scene eight, "'Every man is a King!' And I am the king around here, so don't forget it!" (Williams 371). Even the home, a traditional female domain, is ruled by Stanley. During

Stanley's poker parties, the women are silenced and confined to a bedroom, sent out to dinner and a show, or exiled to Eunice's apartment upstairs. Stanley insists upon complete control, and anyone who threatens his dominance is quickly reminded of his power.

The desire for dominance forms the basis for Stanley's conflict with Blanche. Her divergence from the conventions of acceptable sexual behavior is not the issue that upsets Stanley. A man who has served time in the army and lived in the French Quarter would doubtless have had many intimate encounters with women more promiscuous than Blanche. However, these women did little to threaten his masculinity, and, in fact, reaffirmed his own belief in a world in which women exist to serve men. Blanche, however, is an interloper whose presence challenges the loyalty of Stanley's society and threatens to turn his tightly controlled patriarchy into a matriarchy with Blanche on a "throne and swilling down my liquor!" (Williams 398). The thought of losing power and control in his corner of the French Quarter is unbearable to Stanley, and Blanche's sexuality becomes nothing more than the means by which he chooses to expel her from his world.

Anca Vlasopolos is especially insightful on the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley, and on why Stanley is able to defeat Blanche. She acknowledges that

In the quest for authority, Stanley profits from staying within the parameters set for him

by his sex and class, and Blanche loses because she fails to conform. . . . Except for his rape of Blanche, nothing Stanley does threatens the social fabric. (337)

Although nothing Stanley does threatens his society, he interprets every act by Blanche as a threat to his position. Her aristocratic presence serves to make those within Stanley's circle aware that the crude behavior that is a part of their lives is unacceptable to people in other levels of society. Stanley is aware that he strikes Blanche "as being the unrefined type," and this acknowledgement is tinged with feelings of inferiority that Stanley does not want to admit (Williams 268). Mitch speaks for the poker players when he remarks that the group must strike Blanche "as being a pretty rough bunch" (Williams 300). Blanche's mere presence seems to make the other residents uncomfortable about the acceptability of their behavior outside Elysian Fields. Mitch is especially willing to allow Blanche to assess the appropriateness of his behavior, and his partial defection to Blanche's genteel way of life is seen as an affront by Stanley.

However, the doubts that Blanche intentionally creates within Stella present the greatest threat to Stanley's way of life. Stanley knows that Stella's first impression of him varied little from Blanche's own opinion. He tells her, "you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the

place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it" (Williams 377). While Stanley's words may appear to reflect the triumph of his social class, he is all too aware that he had to bring Stella down to his level because he could not ascend to hers.

If Stanley is to be the king of his corner of the French Quarter, he must have a queen. However, as Adler points out, "since Stanley has been unable, except in bed, to make Stella his queen, even Blanche's cheap imitation furs and jewelry are indictments that only exacerbate his insecurity" (52). Stanley knows that Blanche reminds Stella of the life she led before she met him and that that life still holds some allure. Blanche's appeals to Stella that she still has "sufficient memory of Belle Reve to find this place and these poker players impossible to live with" are also assessed by Stanley, and he is concerned that Blanche may be able to lure Stella away from him with her illusions of a grand and elegant past (Williams 320). In addition, Blanche's allusions to Belle Reve only heighten Stanley's feelings of inferiority about his social class. Later in the play, he will complain that the two women are acting like "a pair of queens" who label him with the words "pig - Polack - disgusting - vulgar - greasy" (Williams 371). Blanche's influence begins to confirm itself, and Stanley feels a loss of control. Just as he is successful at stripping and discarding the colored lantern with which Blanche disguises her world, Blanche

is at least somewhat effective at temporarily turning off the "colored lights" that serve as Stanley's disguise (Williams 373). Stella begins to see Stanley through not only the perception of Blanche, but also through her own senses that are at least momentarily freed from the narcotized haze that her sensuality imposes. Blanche's influence causes the others to reevaluate Stanley's actions, and like most despots, Stanley's reign cannot stand up to much scrutiny.

Blanche and Stanley have been aware that they would be adversaries from the beginning. Blanche says of Stanley, "The first time I laid eyes on him I thought to myself, that man is my executioner!" (Williams 351), and Stanley relates to Blanche, "I've been on to you from the start!" (Williams 398). Both struggle to influence the opinions of others by controlling the narrative of the past and present. In fact, the difference in the authority afforded to male versus female narrative is at the center of Blanche's eventual destruction. Blanche relies upon voicing her own opinions and reminding Stella of the social attitudes of the society of their youth. She tries to avoid discussing her life in Laurel and attempts to create a persona who is free from the mistakes of the past. She speaks only for herself and is truthful when she is confronted. In contrast, Stanley seeks to control the narrative of Blanche's past by telling his hastily concocted version of her life to Mitch and Stella. He relies upon

the stories about Blanche that he hears from a travelling supply-man named Shaw who stays at the seedy hotel that Blanche has frequented. The truthfulness of the supply-man, who serves as one of Stanley's "most reliable sources," is not affected by Shaw's own activities at the hotel nor is his presence there considered a blight upon his character (Williams 359). Throughout the play, Blanche is faced with the accusations of a number of men. Mitch attempts to validate the reliability of the rumors that he has heard by stating that "three people, Kiefaber, Stanley, and Shaw, swore to them!" (Williams 386). Men control the narrative of Blanche's life, and never once is she confronted by accusations from other women, implying that only the words of men have significance. Blanche's explanation to Mitch about the circumstances of the past is no match for the persuasive words of his male acquaintances. In much the same way, Stella's pleas and explanations on behalf of Blanche do not deter Stanley from destroying her. The women are effectively denied a voice, and Blanche is denied even the right to her own past and memories. Her life is reduced to lurid stories a travelling salesman tells to his eager cohorts. Blanche becomes a character fashioned and constructed for the amusement of a male audience.

However, while men determine the narrative, it is a narrative that only has validity in a male world. Stanley finds that women are less accepting of his one-dimensional narratives, and even when he tells his stories to Stella,

he is met with skepticism. She dismisses his version of events and offers an alternative filled with the rationalizations that characterize female narrative within the play. Not one of the three men (most notably Stanley) that Mitch names as ready to swear to Blanche's sordid life ever confront her directly. Stanley has already discovered that Blanche can be a formidable verbal opponent. In their discussion about the loss of Belle Reve, Blanche manages not only to hold her own with Stanley verbally, but she also manages to reduce his claims to "a bunch of old papers" that an inadequate Stanley admits he will have to turn over to "a lawyer acquaintance who will study these out" (Williams 284).

If Stanley is limited in his verbal confrontations with Blanche, he eventually asserts himself physically in an arena where once again men control the action. He never misses an opportunity to prove his physical dominance, and the intervention of all of his poker companions is needed to keep him from seriously injuring his pregnant wife when she attempts to break up the poker party. Unfortunately, no one is around to protect Blanche when she becomes his next victim. Many critics, such as Roger Boxill, Bert Cardullo, and Mark Royden Winchell, abandon Blanche at the point of the assault, choosing to believe that the rape is the predictable collision of two highly charged individuals or the justifiable act of a man who "believes this is what she really wants and is in fact

accustomed to getting" (Cardullo, "Drama" 139). Such critics join in supporting Stanley's narrative of Blanche.

For example, instead of viewing the rape as an act of violence and domination, critics like Winchell and Cardullo tend to excuse Stanley's behavior by attributing it to a man who "is simply doing what Mitch was unable to do in the preceding scene: enjoy the favors of a notoriously promiscuous woman" (Winchell 139). Cardullo's excuse for Stanley even manages to place the blame for the rape upon both Stella and Blanche. He writes that the rape occurs because Stanley

has been physically attracted to her from the start and has been encouraged by her on at least one occasion, and is able to fuel his desires with knowledge of her checkered past in Laurel. Too, he has probably not been sexually gratified for some time due to his wife's growing pregnancy and the concurrent dearth of privacy created by his sister-in-law's visit to their already cramped quarters. ("Drama" 138)

The assumption is that by refusing to accommodate Stanley's lust the two women have caused his act of violence. Blanche is even blamed for increasing Stanley's lust by attempting to fight him off. When Stanley confronts a frightened Blanche who is armed with a broken beer bottle, he says "So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house!" (Williams 402). According to Winchell, this

reasonably leads Stanley to assume "that she enjoys violent foreplay" (139), and for Cardullo, Stanley "is reacting playfully to what he considers her momentary and obligatory, extravagantly affected resistance to his advances" ("Drama" 139). A woman brandishing a broken bottle is here considered provocative and sexually inflammatory.

Despite the assertions of such critics, there is little excuse for Stanley's assault. Rape cannot be justified, and no woman, even one labeled a whore by many critics, deserves to be treated in a violent manner. Stanley's assault lacks reason. He has already undermined her hopes by ending her chances for a marriage with Mitch and arranging for her return to Laurel. No one in the play asks for an explanation of Stanley's behavior because as the king of Elysian Fields his actions require no explanation. The rape is Stanley's way of asserting his dominance over the only person who refuses to accept his role as the central figure governing behavior in Elysian Fields.

In the end, however, Stanley's own desires prove to be even more destructive to his happiness with Stella than Blanche ever could be. While the knowledge of Stanley's attack upon Blanche will always haunt Stanley and Stella's relationship, Stanley himself has produced the greatest threat to the stability of his marriage and to his continued physical and sexual control over Stella. As Bert Cardullo acknowledges, "it is Stanley's lust after Stella - the

epitome of this domination and crux of their relationship - that frees her, finally and ironically, to direct her attentions away from him and toward the son born of his lust" ("Birth" 175). The son will ultimately compete with the father for the attentions of the mother. Stanley's infantile cries that summon Stella back following the violence will be supplanted by the baby's cries as his needs take precedence over his father's. In fact, the final scene suggests the competition between father and son as Stella, sobbing over the departure of her sister, stands holding her son while Stanley, instead of offering comfort, gropes for the opening of her blouse. }

While Blanche threatens Stanley's right to serve as a dominant figure, the other residents of Elysian Fields are content to allow Stanley to dictate or direct their behavior. He expects the others to serve as spectators to or participants in his revelry. Mitch and his other poker companions acquiesce to Stanley's superior physical power and even enjoy participating in the physical give-and-take that characterizes Stanley's brand of camaraderie. However, the female characters suffer the most under the male-dominated behavior that is infused throughout Elysian Fields. While the other men can return Stanley's punches and as a group subdue him, the female characters serve as passive figures who must absorb his physical, verbal, and sexual jabs.

Although Stella and Blanche are Stanley's central

victims, Eunice is also a victim in the context of gender-targeted abuse. The role that Eunice plays is complex. She is both a protector and advocate for a female sense of place, and one of the chief enablers of Stanley's reign of terror. She is a passive supporter of a matriarchy and a loyal subject of the patriarchy.

With the exception of Philip Kolin and to a lesser extent Robert Bray, most critics have trivialized Eunice, characterizing her as a primarily comic, supporting foil, but in the same way that Allan Grey can be examined as a character from the past who has an influence upon the present, Eunice is a character from the present who foreshadows the future. Eunice and her husband Steve suggest representations of Stella and Stanley at some not so distant point in the future. In this way, Eunice's life can be viewed as Stella's fate. Stella's life is already hardly different from Eunice's existence when one considers that the violence, accusations, and sexually charged reconciliations that occur between Stanley and Stella are similar to the incidents we witness between Eunice and Steve. The only difference is that the longevity of Steve and Eunice's union implies that each argument is just another episode in a recurrent cycle that has occurred throughout their years together. As a result, their disagreements have a pathetic, comic touch that makes the arguments less brutal than the encounters between Stanley and Stella. However, the fact that the cycle of

arguments and charged reunions continues years into their marriage indicates that such relationships never progress beyond simplistic emotional crises or develop into anything more substantial.

While Stella still possesses her youth and beauty, Eunice's physical appeal is fading. When Blanche and Stella discuss the rough appearances of Stanley's poker companions, Stella suggests that Blanche should "see their wives" (Williams 293). "I can imagine," Blanche replies. "Big, beefy things, I suppose" (Williams 294). The environment of Elysian Fields does not promote the fragile, genteel beauty of Belle Reve, nor does it preserve such beauty for long.

In addition to losing their physical appeal, the women of Elysian Fields also lose the attention of their husbands. Eunice confronts Steve about an affair with "that blonde" (Williams 326), and Stella too must deal with the reality of Stanley's sexual encounter with her own sister. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that Stella, like Eunice, will spend her life confronting her husband about his affairs, being beaten for asking, and then will welcome him back with open arms. After all, it is unlikely that a man who would rape his sister-in-law while his wife is giving birth would have any qualms about sexual encounters with other women, and Stella has already demonstrated her willingness ~~to~~ to forgive Stanley for his transgressions.

However, it is not just with other women that Eunice

must compete for the attention of her husband. Poker and rituals like bowling, drinking, carousing, and roughhousing with his friends take precedence over intimacy with her. In many ways, she functions as little more than an afterthought or a way to use up whatever energy remains unspent at the end of his evenings of drink and game playing. The women stay quietly and passively out of the way waiting for the moment when their men decide to turn their attention toward them. As Blanche aptly describes when she confronts Stella about the reality of her relationship with Stanley, the men come "bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you - you here - waiting for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you!" (Williams 323). The women are collectively resigned to being the recipients of whatever the men dish out, and they are grateful for whatever attention they get.

When not receiving the attentions of their husbands, the women, headed by Eunice, seek solace with each other. The friendships they form are vastly different from the camaraderie exhibited by Stanley and his pals. Philip Kolin points out that "although male friends act out their aggression to vent their egos, female friends, symbolized by Eunice, are nurturing, protective, and sustaining. Eunice's mutuality opposes the men's menacing individualism" (112). The female community that Eunice forges is based upon protection that the women can only provide in numbers.

However, such protection is temporary and dependent upon the unity of the group.

Indeed, Eunice does open her apartment as a place of refuge for Blanche and Stella when Stanley's temper threatens to injure both of them as well as Stella's unborn child. However, when Eunice is herself battered, she finds refuge in a bar, an act that Stella knows is "much more practical" than summoning the police (Williams 327).

Whatever avenue the women of Elysian Fields take to escape from the violence in their lives, their escape is only a temporary one. The effects of drinking will eventually wear off, they cannot remain in Eunice's apartment for long, and even calling the police does not deter the violence, because according to Eunice, the police have already had to haul Stanley "in and turn the fire hose on" him (Williams 306). While Eunice offers her apartment as a safe-haven in an effort to provide protection to other females in similar circumstances, her act is ultimately more harmful than helpful. Robert Bray rightly argues that "Eunice unwittingly contributes to Stanley's dominance by offering Stella shelter from Stanley's occasional temper storms and thus perpetuating the cyclical violence of the Kowalski household" (191). The shelter serves to keep the victim from facing the reality and consequences of her decisions. As long as she can hide until the violent outburst passes, she never confronts the perpetrator of the violent acts that terrorize her life. In this way,

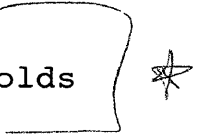
Eunice's apartment serves as a monument to feminine fear and frailty, when it should serve as a place of empowerment and strength. It is a place to which the women are dispatched to get them out of the way of Stanley's poker parties, and it is the place where they hide when they cannot endure the beatings.

If the women forged a genuine bond and resisted male aggressiveness, Eunice's apartment could have served as a gathering place for independent and collective action. Instead, the women are vulnerable to being divided and lured back into subjugation by promises of change that never come to pass. Blanche, Stella, and Eunice have barely united when Stanley calls Stella down with his male ranting. When a horrified Blanche tells Mitch that Stella returned to Stanley, Mitch replies, "Sure she did" (Williams 308). Mitch, like the other men, is all too aware that the women of his experience will always return. In fact, her return supports the notion that women desire and need male companionship, even a man who beats and terrorizes them, more than they value the company of other women or their own sense of self-respect.

While the options for women in Elysian Fields are confining, they are not so limited that the women are left with no choice but to endure the abuse. Prior to her marriage, Stella says she was able to "make my own living" (Williams 260), and Blanche too has been employed. In fact, Blanche offers Stella at least the possibility of

escape by proposing that she appeal to Shep Huntleigh to "set us up in a - shop" (Williams 317). Although the existence of Mr. Huntleigh is unproven, Blanche is aware that other avenues are available to women and that not all men treat women with the contempt of Stanley and his group. Blanche realizes that financial independence can lead to emotional freedom. As she tells Stella, "We've got to get hold of some money, that's the way out!"

(Williams 315). Of course, Stanley is aware of the power of money as well. He tightly controls the Kowalski finances and can use that power as a tool to manipulate Stella.

In fact, he gives Stella money "to smooth things over" following a beating (Williams 318) and presumably withholds it when she opposes him. 

Women have no monetary resources of their own in this play and so their value to each other is emotional rather than economic. However, while Eunice is indeed nurturing and motherly to Blanche and Stella, she actually encourages them to accept life in the male-dominated society rather than to expect anything better. When Stella is confronted with Blanche's allegations of rape, it is Eunice who tells the conflicted Stella, "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (Williams 406). Eunice's martyrlike words are more than a plea to Stella to consider what is best for her, they are also a plea from Eunice for Stella not to abandon her. If Stella believes Blanche and goes away

with her sister, Eunice will be left alone to focus on her own inability to break free from the oppression that surrounds her. Eunice physically restrains Stella from chasing after the banished Blanche, telling Stella, "Stay here....Stay with me and don't look....You done the right thing, the only thing you could do. She couldn't stay here" (Williams 416-417). Blanche clearly does not belong in Elysian Fields with Stella and Eunice. However, allowing Blanche to be banished is hardly the right choice for Blanche or Stella. Blanche's banishment serves only to benefit Stanley's patriarchy and allow Eunice to continue *disagree* as a hollow mother figure to a society of women who have * surrendered their sense of self for marginal financial security and fleeting sexual fulfillment. After all, the female community that Eunice oversees is based upon mutual suffering, subjugation, and powerlessness, and as long as there are others who share her predicament, Eunice can convince herself that her role is the natural one for women. However, by convincing Stella to deny the truth that Blanche represents, she is as much responsible for enforcing the values of Stanley's patriarchy as the men are.

Admittedly, Eunice is a realist. Stella has chosen Stanley as the father of her child and now must do whatever she can to survive. However, while Eunice and Stella may survive, they do not thrive. They will never possess independence and the only fulfillment they will find will be channeled through their husbands or children.

Stella's selection of life with Stanley comes at the expense of abandoning her sister and a past of which Blanche serves as a reminder. Throughout the play, Blanche voices her dismay at the lifestyle her sister has chosen. From her initial shock at the appearance of the Kowalski apartment, to her lecture to Stella not to "hang back with the brutes," Blanche tries to instill in her sister a sense of loss for the more genteel aspects of the life she has turned her back on (Williams 323).

Stella abandoned Belle Reve before death and deterioration had changed the place and its inhabitants, and her memories of the refinements of her youth are sufficient to cause her to feel "embarrassed" about her sister seeing the conditions in which she lives (Williams 255). Stella even confesses to Stanley that Blanche "wasn't expecting to find us in such a small place. You see I'd tried to gloss things over a little in my letters" (Williams 271). Stella's distortion of the reality of her life with Stanley is as much an attempt to salvage her own pride as it is to appease the exacting standards of her sister. Blanche's presence forces Stella to examine life with Stanley through eyes that have not yet become accustomed to the violence and crude behavior that are commonplace in Elysian Fields.

Stella's arguments defending Stanley and touting his virility are merely the words of an ingenue still heady from her first experience with desire. Leaving the confines

of Belle Reve, where a highly refined and restrictive code of behavior was most likely insisted upon publicly, Stella goes to New Orleans and meets Stanley Kowalski. She is beguiled by his offer of a lifestyle that publicly flaunts behavior that was unacceptable at home. Stanley, fresh from the army and wearing a uniform that grants him a sense of social legitimacy, seems like an intriguing prospect for the young Stella. He is dynamic, driven, charismatic, and he introduces her to physical pleasures that leave her in a state of "narcotized tranquility" (Williams 310). Stella finds herself enjoying a new found freedom, but as Thomas Adler acknowledges, her freedom comes at the price of her own identity. *

Accepting the physical as a necessary component of the spiritual and desire as normal has liberated her - though perhaps only for another kind of enslavement. For, when Blanche intrudes upon the Kowalski household, she finds a Stella in early pregnancy who defines herself almost totally in terms of Stanley....His world and friends define the parameters of her own. (61)

In her naivete, Stella fails to see past the temporary pleasures before she marries and starts a family with Stanley. She feels that Blanche's objections are based on jealousy and a sense of superiority, but Blanche, who has a greater awareness of the realities of the world of sexual pleasure than her sister knows or gives her credit

for, tries to explain to her sister her own understanding of men like Stanley. "A man like that is someone to go out with - once - twice - three times when the devil is in you. But live with? Have a child by?" (Williams 321). } ✱

Blanche recognizes what Stella does not - that desire alone cannot be the basis for an enduring relationship.

The man who thrilled her by breaking the light bulbs in the apartment on their wedding night is less appealing when his violence is directed at her. And Stanley's violent outbursts are not isolated incidents exacerbated by the presence of his sister-in-law. His abusive behavior has occurred long before Blanche's arrival. If Blanche is horrified by the violence, she is even more horrified by Stella's passive acceptance of Stanley's physical and verbal assaults. Stella was most likely surprised at first by the violence, and she tells Blanche, that "of course there were things to adjust myself to later on" (Williams 258). Yet Stella's words justify Blanche's horror. In Stella's view, the violence is not a condition that Stanley must stop or that she must escape, rather it is an inconvenience that she must learn to accommodate, so she trivializes the beatings and tells Blanche that she is "making much too much fuss about" them (Williams 312). She dismisses Stanley's behavior as the shenanigans of a high-spirited figure, weakly arguing that "when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's always a powder-keg. He didn't know what he was doing" (Williams

312). Stella has ratified the Stanley-enforced notion that only women can have their behavior dictated and curtailed, and that only women are held responsible for their actions. Men are permitted to act in any way they choose, and in Elysian Fields, their actions are excused and rationalized by women. Stella's defense of Stanley and his actions suggests her own cooperation in the subjugation of herself, and by assisting Stanley in his banishment of Blanche, in the subjugation of her own sister as well.

When confronted with Stanley's act of aggression against her sister, Stella's admission that she "couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley" is far from a denial of Stanley's guilt (Williams 405). It is simply an admission of truth. Facing the reality of her situation would make it impossible for a sensible human being to remain in such an environment, and since Blanche reminds her of the truth of life with Stanley, Stella must join Stanley and all the others who choose to stay under his control in casting Blanche out of their society.

Although many critics support Boxill's assessment of Blanche as half maddened and suffering from an "hysterical imbalance" that justifies her confinement to the asylum (84), she is the only character who realizes the genuine madness represented by Stanley and his way of life. Despite her ventures into a world of make-believe, Blanche is the play's true realist. When she witnesses

Stanley's brutality against her pregnant sister, Blanche accurately labels his behavior "lunacy, absolute lunacy!" (Williams 303), and she appropriately tells Stella that she is "insane" to return to Stanley after he brutalizes her (Williams 311). While everyone else in Elysian Fields seems willing to accept violence as a normal rhythm of life, Blanche recognizes the danger inherent in the situation and seeks to act to alter her life. However, in what is perhaps the play's most ironic moment, Blanche is labeled insane and carried off to the mental institution as the other characters stand passively by.

Blanche's own mental health is ambiguous throughout the play, and as a result has been the subject of much debate among critics. While Blanche is highly emotional, to suggest, as do Winchell, Boxill, and others, that she is crazy is to prescribe to the male-dominated social code that Stanley enforces and that seeks to classify Blanche as an "other," someone abnormal and aberrant. As long as Blanche can be classified as a figure outside the bounds of normalcy, her rhetoric and behavior can be dismissed as the raving of an unstable woman who depends for her sanity upon the fantasy of a genteel world that never really existed, and she therefore is rightly destroyed by a man who forces her to abandon the fantasy and confront reality. However, to accept such an argument is to wrongly accept that Stanley's way of life is the model for how society should be and will remain; it is to incorrectly align

oneself with critics like William Kleb and John M. Roderick who refer to Stanley and Stella's relationship as a "healthy" sexual relationship that is threatened by Blanche and her abnormal way of thinking (Kleb 32, Roderick 118). It is to follow Stanley in a direction toward what C. W. E. Bigsby refers to as a future of "power without charity, passion without tenderness" ("Modern" 33).

By focusing upon Blanche's mental health, most critics, with the notable exception of Vlasopolos, fail to address the issue of Stanley's state of mind, in much the same way that Blanche's promiscuity is debated while Stanley's sexual exploits are all but ignored. Both Stanley and Blanche are adept at manipulating the truth. However, most critics join Boxill and Bigsby in choosing to focus upon Blanche's harmless forays into fantasy while ignoring Stanley's dangerous and destructive use of lies. While Stanley doubtlessly embellishes the stories he hears about Blanche and presents them in the most unfavorable way possible to destroy the woman he sees as subversive to his way of life, Blanche uses her fantasies to protect herself from the unpleasantness of life. Stanley refuses to acknowledge his lies, and in his most destructive gesture, perpetuates the fantasy that he did not rape Blanche. Blanche, on the other hand, openly acknowledges her use of fantasy and lies throughout the play. In fact, her fondness for fantasy should not be viewed as an inability to recognize reality. Blanche is aware of the

painful nature of reality, and fantasy is simply her way of creating hope in an otherwise hopeless situation. As she tells Mitch, "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" (Williams 385), and she tells Stanley, "I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth" (Williams 281). Blanche never fails to tell the truth when confronted, and uses fantasy to imagine or present herself in a more positive way. Fantasizing about being in more pleasurable circumstances can hardly be deemed abnormal or insane.

Shep Huntleigh serves as an example of Blanche's use of fantasy. She suggests him as a model of civilized behavior in the hope that Stanley and his friends will understand that she is trying to hint about the proper way to treat her and the other women. Shep also serves as the means through which Blanche can maintain her dignity when she is rejected or abandoned. If Mitch and her family do not want her, Shep will offer her solace. After all, Blanche has "always depended on the kindness of strangers" because those close to her offer little comfort (Williams 418). Shep knows the rules of social conduct in Blanche's world, and he would never fail to rescue a woman in distress. Shep may not exist, but he is an abstraction of a male figure who Blanche hopes that she will find

someday. He can appreciate her for what she is and for what she has to offer, without haunting her about her past. Although she utilizes him as a fantasy companion in order to ease her own and her sister's discomfort over her inability to find a mate, she knows the difference between the fantasy Shep Huntleigh and the men she encounters. Eunice and Stella try to convince a distraught Blanche that the doctor from the mental facility is Shep Huntleigh, but Blanche, who is far more lucid in the last scene than critics like Bigsby will admit, clearly recognizes that the doctor is not Shep Huntleigh, even though he does represent a potential rescue by the stranger she has often looked to for help.

Blanche's only hope is to leave the destructive environment of Stanley's world. She is clearly out of place in such a raucous environment. Even her plans for a life with Mitch involve leaving Elysian Fields. Throughout the play, Blanche's delicate appearance is contrasted with the harshness of Elysian Fields and its inhabitants, and despite her attempts at redesigning the apartment, her efforts are no more successful than her attempts to disguise her past. Just as Mitch and Stanley strip the paper lantern from the light bulb and thrust it in her face, they also remove the protective illusions through which she has mediated her past. In supplanting her illusions, they create an image based on what they choose to believe and forcibly attempt to make her conform

to that image. However, the fact that their encounters with her near the end of the play are marked by violent aggression and are met with resistance from Blanche highlight how wrong they are in their assumptions.

Although Blanche certainly suffers from pressure to conform to a predetermined social role, and is punished for her inability to conform, she ultimately defies definition. Blanche resists everyone's standards of behavior, especially Stanley's. She finds conforming to a feminine code of behavior stagnating. While Stanley can be both a hardworking husband and a drunken wife-beater, and Mitch can be both a sensitive mother's boy and a carousing but reluctant poker player, Blanche is not permitted the same flexibility in her prescribed roles. The women in the play must choose between the socially respected roles of wife, mother, or spinster, or roles which would either make them outcasts or force them to exist on the fringe of society. When Blanche attempts to be both the respectable mate to Mitch and the beguiling seductress to the boy collecting for the newspaper, she is punished for refusing to deny one aspect of her personality in favor of another.

Blanche has charm, intelligence, culture, and wit, but she also possesses sexual curiosity and a libido. Her sexuality gives Stanley the opportunity to present her to the residents of Elysian Fields as an outsider who challenges the established order. If the other women are

allowed to behave as Blanche has in the past and freely initiate sexual encounters, the society based on sexual subjugation will be undermined.

Blanche has to be removed from Elysian Fields because she dares to present a model for independent behavior that suggests equality. Such a model threatens Stanley's way of life, which is based upon the unquestioning obligation to a male-generated code. When Blanche arrives and begins directing the behavior of those around her, Stanley's role as the instigator of action in Elysian Fields is challenged. However, Stanley can only see the destructiveness that Blanche brings to his way of life. He fails to recognize the consequences for both men and women already implicit in his society. Men ultimately lose interest in the one-dimensional female characters that they have had a hand in creating. They look elsewhere for female companionship, and women turn their attention away from their husbands and toward their children. As a result, both the men and women in the play suffer from a lack of mutual fulfillment.

Blanche is unique among the women for seeking in a characteristically male fashion to satisfy her desire for companionship that extends beyond the bounds of acceptability. She celebrates the variety of femaleness in a context of limited possibilities. She will defer to the demands of society only in so far as they provide avenues for obtaining what she desires. She will play

the refined and sensitive teacher to win the affection of the traditional-minded Mitch, but she will also indulge her need for provocative encounters with young men. By daring to behave as only men are allowed, and defying convention, Blanche threatens to destroy a society that is based upon the precarious notion of domination by the strongest. As a result, society, not just Stanley, must participate, if only through acquiescence, in Blanche's ouster. All of Williams' characters are present for Blanche's banishment to the mental institution which, like society, serves to both determine and punish unacceptable behavior.

Blanche is the victim of intolerance, but the residents of Elysian Fields are victims as well for failing to develop the potential within themselves. While Blanche's future promises physical confinement, those left behind are forced to confront the narrow roles that they have both created and accepted. They have found that preserving the status quo is less demanding than attempting to formulate change, and supporting Blanche would certainly imply such a reformulation.

Yet Blanche serves as a reminder of what can happen when individuals fail to conform to the code of behavior that society prescribes for them. She suggests an image of sexual aggressiveness and creativity to the males in the play, but while the novelty of her behavior is intriguing to them, it cannot overcome their need to

dominate. She presents the women of Elysian Fields with alternatives to the subjugation they endure, but ironically, her own confinement comes about by the cooperation of the women she seeks to empower. By the play's end, Eunice and Stella have decided that the minimal benefits they derive from their marriages outweigh the risks they might face by challenging male authority, and the men are not compelled to change an established order that permits them so much power and meets with so little opposition from those they dominate. As a result, the daily routine of the residents of Elysian Fields continues as it has before Blanche's appearance with little indication that much will change.

As an outsider, an eccentric, and an interloper, Blanche serves to momentarily interrupt the rhythm of everyday life and cause the other characters in the play to consider alternatives to the behavioral patterns which define and limit their conduct. But in the end, the overwhelming pressure and influence of the status quo prevails against any nontraditional notions that challenge the established order, particularly when a character attempts to step outside the boundaries of acceptable gender-based behavior.

In much the same way that Blanche is discarded by society for challenging its definition of female behavior, she is similarly dismissed by critics for seemingly failing to adhere to their own limited critical definitions.

Anti-feminist critics like Cardullo and Winchell predictably assail Blanche as a threat to male dominance and the family structure, but it is the halfhearted defense that Blanche receives from feminist critics like Vlasopolos and Harris that is most puzzling. While they applaud her open defiance of Stanley and the codes he enforces, they lament her dependence upon her sexuality and appearance and her quest for a man to provide for her.

However, such critics fail to recognize that Blanche is a woman who recognizes her own strengths and weaknesses and exploits them to obtain what she desires. Her charm and attractiveness should not be viewed as a dependence on female vanity instead of on more substantive qualities. Her use of her physical power is hardly different from Stanley's use of his own physical prowess and cunning. In addition, Blanche's search for a mate is the result of her own recognition that while she may flirt with the notion of discarding social values, she must adapt somewhat to societal demands in order to obtain satisfaction, and having a mate is Blanche's preeminent desire. Despite her eventual failure, she serves as a suitable feminist model. She is self-aware and unafraid of pursuing what she wants and of enjoying the benefits of her endeavors. She uses all of her personal resources and speaks and acts independently. She challenges authority and encourages others to do the same. She neither rejects the status quo nor accepts it. Instead, she acknowledges the social

code and employs the code's conventions like props that she picks up and discards at will. Blanche does not try to escape from the trap that is represented by prescribed gender-based behavior, but instead she tries to redefine the parameters of that trap and use them to her best advantage.

Blanche's eventual destruction should not be viewed as the defeat of any chance for gender-based social change in Elysian Fields. After all, if Blanche's challenge of the established code had not been at least partially successful, Stanley would have had little need to engineer her expulsion. And even with her departure from Elysian Fields, Blanche's influence will doubtlessly be felt by the residents and continue to inform their lives. While the other characters do not actively support Blanche's challenge of the conventions of society, she has forced them to question the validity of those conventions, and thereby introduced the prospect of change.

In this way, the outcome of the play suggests the possibility that Blanche's genteel version of life will not be completely obscured by Stanley's violent but pragmatic view of the world.

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