

# Blanche's flaws and her ultimate downfall

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In Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, despite Blanche Dubois' desire to start fresh in New Orleans, her condescending nature, inability to act appropriately on her desires, and denial of reality all lead to her downfall. Blanche believes that her upper class roots put her above the "commoners" she spends the summer with, which gives her a pretentious attitude that bothers other characters. Desire, a main theme of *Streetcar*, acts as a precursor to negative outcomes in Blanche's past and time spent at Elysian Fields. Blanche also lives in a fantasy world, finding herself entangled in lies she tells others and herself. These flaws in Blanche's character cause her eventual destruction.

The distaste Blanche has for "commonness" is present from the beginning, and is condescending and offensive to others. Blanche is surprised upon her arrival to Stella's home in Elysian Fields, which is described by Williams as "poor, but, unlike corresponding sections in the American cities, it has a raffish charm." (13) When she finds Stella, she demands to know why her sister lives where she does. "Why didn't you let me know ... That you had to live in these conditions?" (20) Blanche, coming from a very different lifestyle than those in this area of New Orleans, had expected more of her sister's married life. Stella argues that it is not that bad at all. Blanche also expresses her disapproval of Stanley, repeatedly calling him common and primitive. She again references their past, thinking Stella deserves better: "You can't have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella, that you just suppose that any part of a gentleman's in his nature!" (71). She begs Stella to reconsider her life in New Orleans with Stanley: "He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits!...Don't hang back with the brutes!" (72). Stanley's

hatred for Blanche increases heavily over the period of Blanche's stay. He is extremely offended by Blanche's incessant comments about his vulgarity, roughness, and commonness. Stanley: " She calls me common!" Stella: "... I grew up under very different circumstances than you did." Stanley: " So I've been told! And told and told and told!" (98). Stanley finally has enough of Blanche's frustrating behavior at the end of scene ten. " You come in here and sprinkle the place with power 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 you throne and swilling down my liquor!" (128). Stanley's anger towards Blanche quickly becomes uncontrolled, leading to him raping her. " The inhuman jungle voices rise up. He takes a step toward her, biting his tongue which protrudes between his lips. ' Come to think of it- maybe you wouldn't be bad to- interfere with..." (129). The " inhuman jungle voices" reference Stanley's animalistic behavior that Blanche had commented on many times before. The rape is also foreshadowed by Blanche earlier in the scene, when she says, " Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable. It is the one unforgiveable thing in my opinion and it is the one thing of which I have never, never been guilty." (126). This remark gives more depth to Blanche's seemingly shallow personality, and turns Stanley, who is " deliberately cruel," into the villain. Stanley believes that Blanche's obnoxious behavior justifies rape. Though this terrible outcome is not Blanche's fault, and she is a victim, it shows the effect her pretentious and insulting attitude has on others, especially Stanley.

When Blanche first arrives at Elysian Fields to visit her sister Stella, she talks to Eunice about taking a " streetcar named Desire", a representation the

downward spiral of Blanche's life, led by desire. " They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at- Elysian fields!" (15). The streetcar is later referenced again, and the metaphor becomes clearer: " 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 ... It brought me here.- Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be ..." (70). Desire has driven Blanche to a time in her life she is ashamed of. The readers are told that the negative consequences of Blanche's uncontrollable desires begin with her first love. " When I was sixteen, I made the discovery- love. All at once and much, much too completely." (95). Blanche is infatuated with her husband, and, as Stella tells Stanley, " worshipped the ground he walked on" (102). However, he kills himself after Stella tells him she finds his homosexuality and desire for an older man disgusting. This sends Blanche into severe emotional distress. " 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..." (96). She tells Mitch that death is the opposite of desire, as she has seen one result in the other: " Death- I used to sit here and she used to sit over there and death was as close as you are... We didn't dare even admit we had ever heard of it! The opposite is desire..." (120). Lonely, remorseful, and emotionally fragile, Blanche tries to fill the emptiness caused by death with desire. These actions lead to Blanche's descent from living a respectable life of wealth and upper class in Laurel, to being shunned even by whom she considers beneath her in Elysian Fields.

Blanche lives in her own fantasy world, lying about her age, her appearance, and her past in order to feel young again. She avoids harsh lighting to appear younger and soften her fading looks. She's constantly worried about what people say and think about her, so she tries to hide as many shameful things about her life as she can. She says to Mitch: " I don't want realism. I want magic! [Mitch laughs] Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! (117) When Blanche meets Mitch, she finds the tenderness and sweetness that she once admired in her dead husband. In a desperate attempt for Mitch's approval, she lies about her morals, which the readers know from Stanley's " research" are questionable. " I guess it's just that I have- old-fashioned ideals!" (91) When Stanley alerts Mitch that Blanche is not who she is pretending to be, Mitch feels deceived. He addresses Blanche's promiscuous behavior, and says she is unfit to bring home to his mother. " 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." (117) Blanche's fake propriety only backfires. In scene seven, Stanley reveals the truth to Stella regarding her sister. " The trouble with Dame Blanche was that she couldn't put on her act any more in Laurel! ... That's why she's here this summer, visiting royalty, putting on all this act- because she's been practically told by the mayor to get out of town!" (100) As Stanley is talking, Williams ironically uses Blanche's song in the tub about a fantasy world to affirm that Stanley is right about what he has heard. " It's a Barnum and Bailey world, just as phony as it can be-" (101) Blanche's

fantasies are finally shattered by Stanley in scene ten. “ There isn't a goddamn thing but imagination! And lies and conceit and tricks! And look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some ragpicker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are?” (127) Blanche lives in denial of her lonely and aging self, convinced she is better than she really is. Her need to be appear a certain way to others eventually drives her mad.

Blanche's hopes of starting over are impacted by her approach and her past. The death of Blanche's first love leaves a void that she fills with desire. This leads to the promiscuous and deceptive behavior that stirs negative reactions from other characters, like Mitch and Stanley. Stanley plays a main role in Blanche's downward spiral. Though her past aided her downfall, Stanley's confrontation of Blanche's delusions sends her over the edge.