“[Y]ou having an oil millionaire, and me having a baby”:
Analyzing the Dichotomous Character Relationship Between Blanche DuBois
and Stanley Kowalski in Elia Kazan’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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The smooth jazz music has faded in the background, while the sultry New Orleans humidity still lingers in the apartment. There stands Blanche DuBois, covered ostentatiously in a fine evening gown, layers of make-up, and piles of jewelry. She is engaged in a personal fantasy, pretending to be a congenial hostess at a dinner party, toasting her companions and charming them with her witty chatter. The front door opens, and Stanley Kowalski enters, invading Blanche’s imaginary gathering and intruding on her delusional world. Stanley’s wife, Stella, has just delivered her first child and is away at the hospital with her newborn. Blanche and Stanley will be the only occupants of the apartment that night. Blanche suddenly silences herself as Stanley walks further into the room, thus setting the scene for a climactic showdown of opposing characters finally forced to engage in face-to-face confrontation. This harrowing encounter in Elia Kazan’s 1951 film *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the culmination of tensions which have permeated throughout its sordid storyline. While the tale of this cherished cinematic masterpiece is seemingly basic in nature (that of a southern woman hoping to evade her tarnished past by visiting her sister and brother-in-law in Louisiana), the dramatic anxiety it produces is the result of the state of the characters themselves— in particular, the conflicts which ensue from their contrasting values systems, their personal perceptions of reality, and their interactions with one another. Kazan, who also directed *Streetcar’s* 1957 Broadway production based on the play by Tennessee Williams, was well aware of the significance of character development in this work; Kazan was inspired in his direction by an observation from Williams which claimed that each character is neither victim or villain, but rather possess a duality of being that must be reflected on the stage/screen (Leiter 155). This binary representation of good and evil qualities combined can best be observed
in *Streetcar*’s two pivotal, clashing roles: the troubled Blanche DuBois and the barbaric Stanley Kowalski.

In the case of Blanche DuBois (played by Vivien Leigh), Kazan has documented in his directorial notes that he was aiming to present Blanche as an “emblem of a dying civilization”; the “civilization” in question is that of the Old South (Kolin 34). From the moment Blanche steps off her train at the New Orleans station, a viewer is sure to comprehend the look of bewilderment and worry registering on her face. Blanche believes that she is a proper Southern lady who has entered a strange, seedy realm beyond her life of Southern etiquette and decorum. Arguably, Kazan’s insistence of his actors and actresses abiding by the Stanislavsky system of acting through role identification (Leiter 152) may have been a substantial contributing factor behind the initial apprehension Leigh is able to convey through Blanche. Of the cast of central performers, Leigh was the only one not to have participated in the Broadway show\(^1\) (“Trivia for *A Streetcar Named Desire*”- The Internet Movie Database). The fret of stepping in as an outsider in this already well-acquainted troupe of theater veterans may have provided Leigh with a more method approach to connecting with Blanche’s initial discomforts of being newly immersed in a foreign setting.

Despite these fleeting moments of timidity for Blanche, her spirits are raised whenever she finds the opportunity to discuss her obsession with fashion. She remarks that “clothes are my passion,” but Blanche is less infatuated with the clothing itself as she is with the attention it brings her on a regular basis. Stella, her sister, recognizes this motive, prompting her to continually tell others to compliment Blanche on her

\(^1\) The character of Blanche was originally immortalized on stage by actress Jessica Tandy (“Trivia for *A Streetcar Named Desire*”- The Internet Movie Database).
appearance whenever she emerges from changing in the bathroom. Her clothing also fulfills another important function: by bringing the focus on her looks and physical features, it detracts others from uncovering the deep secrets she has hidden within. The astute viewer might even notice Blanche projecting her fear onto an inanimate object in one scene, as she puts a lantern shade in place while commenting, “I can’t stand a naked light bulb.” In all actuality, the naked light bulb is she, and its guarded burning glow is indicative of the burning confessions she has yet to make. Still, Blanche’s apparel serves one more purpose: she uses it to attract members of the opposite sex. Believing that her choice of clothing helps to portray a more ideal, striking image of herself, Blanche candidly states that “a woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion,” and further explains to Stella that her plan to lure Mitch, one of Stanley’s poker buddies, is to “deceive him…just enough to make him like me.” Blanche views courting rituals as a calculating game of sorts, and she therefore opts for more subtle seductive habits in order to nab her mates (Kolin 155).

When Blanche declares, “I must be with people…I can’t be alone,” she clearly expresses her longing for human contact, a longing which Kazan correlated with Stanislawsky’s insistence on uncovering an ultimate “superobjective” to guide the actor/actress in his or her depictions (Leiter 165). Blanche’s only major romance ended in her partner’s suicide, but the film industry’s Production Code restrictions at the time did not permit Blanche to reveal (as she did in the play) that her lover had taken his life after being shamefully discovered in bed with another man. Dorwick classifies this tactic as the Production Code’s conservative “de-queering” of films, which greatly compromised
Williams’s original vision for *A Streetcar Named Desire*\(^2\) (Dorwick 81-82). However, even without this detail presented in the film, Blanche’s loneliness and yearning for affection (especially from Mitch) are still vividly exhibited. Sadly, her yearning has led this simple schoolteacher down dangerous paths of promiscuity, resulting in several sexual exchanges with men in hotel rooms and even with a young student. The idea of these random assortments of men groping at Blanche and using her as a sex object gives new contextual meaning to her professing that she has “always depended on the kindness of strangers.” Even more unfortunate, Blanche is exceedingly vulnerable to Stanley’s forced sexual conquest, chiefly because of her salaciousness in combination with her growing delusional mind, two factors which feminist film scholar Sarah Projansky asserts as characteristics which have traditionally placed film heroines in the greatest danger of being the target of rape attacks in early-to-mid twentieth century cinema (Projansky 34-35).

While Blanche’s life is shrouded in charades and lies which unravel incrementally throughout the film, Stanley (played by Marlon Brando) signifies a person who is fully open and without pretense. Modeled on Williams’s own father (Brooks 178), Stanley is described by Blanche as being “simple, straight forward, and honest,” and his unsophisticated, hedonistic disposition is affirmed when he states, “Be comfortable. That’s my motto.” At the outset, viewers may even align their identification with Stanley, for his disbelief and criticism (about Blanche’s intentions and her explanation for why she has lost possession of her and Stella’s childhood plantation) might be perceived as heroic discernment against an obviously suspicious Blanche.

\(^2\) Dorwick writes, “[Williams’s] depiction of gay men is informed by a long tradition of homosexual literature, especially in plays and films. To be gay is to be unhappy or dead; to be straight is to be both happy and married” (Dorwick 81).
Nevertheless, a good deal of Stanley’s pursuit of comfort is accomplished through his assertion of corrupt control over those around him. First, he manipulates Stella to return home to him, after a night of his drunken rage, by feigning pathetic innocence and remorse for his actions. The tenderness between Stella and Stanley in their reuniting was influenced to a degree by the then Legion of Decency’s demanding that the scene be reedited after deeming it “too carnal” for audiences (Kazan 435). As such, Stella more passionately displays how she feels perpetually obligated to tend to Stanley (almost maternally in response to Stanley’s infantile pleading) and how she must verify his sense of masculinity through implying future copulation after his vulnerable breakdown. Second, Stanley references Louisiana’s Napoleonic Code (with rights entailing ownership of the property of one’s spouse) in order to utilize legal procedures to justify his skepticism and condemnation toward Blanche for failing in her finances and losing the plantation. Third, in the aforementioned showdown between Blanche and Stanley, he refuses to let Blanche answer the apartment phone once it rings, and when he instead answers he barks orders about his next bowling match at his friend Mac on the other end. Kolin assesses, “This telephone call enables Stanley simultaneously to impose his will on Mac and on Blanche…[for the phone is a] prop of his domain…” (Kolin 36). Fourth and lastly, Stanley’s pastime of playing cards foreshadows his ability to strategically weaken the defenses of others, especially Blanche, when he introduces the ultimate “trump card” by informing Mitch of Blanche’s scandalous reputation and all the more facilitates her descent into distress and madness. Brooks elaborates on this metaphor, as he evaluates, “Stanley, of course, wins the hand [against Blanche] and, in the final scene…the action returns to the poker table to illustrate just how completely he has won” (Brooks 179).
The amount of tension generated by Stanley in the film was, according to Kazan, necessary in order to compensate for the decision to open the film to new locations outside of the Kowalski apartment. In describing the dynamic of the play, Kazan writes, “The force of the play had come from its compression, from the fact that Blanche was trapped [in that apartment], where she’d be constantly aware that she was dangerously irritating Stanley and couldn’t escape…” (Kazan 384). Broadening the locations throughout the New Orleans landscape meant that the characters had to now create that sense of boiling hostility in their interplay with each other. With Stanley, Kazan emphasizes more of Stanley’s contempt for repeatedly being termed a “Polak” by Stella and Blanche. Goska maintains that by the 1950s the clichéd depiction of the angry Polish immigrant had already become a reprehensible staple of cinema, that which led many audiences to have “contempt for poor and working class people” (Goska 408). Stanley is first shown in the film bowling and fighting, both stereotypical male Polish traits, and his allegedly oafish, Polish temperament is seen as being genetically transferred throughout his family lineage (Stanley says, for instance, that he had a cousin “who could open a bottle of beer with his teeth”) (Goska 411). Additionally, the “Polak” also becomes an outlet for perversity, when Goska claims that Stella’s insatiable sexual appetite is the product of her “enslavement to the Polak…[and] her use of him as a stud animal” (Goska 414). Blanche’s unstated, but clearly demonstrated lusting for the rugged Stanley is in some ways groundbreaking in that Streetcar attempts to reverse a standard convention of many films, by having the male be the glorified entity of desire over the female (Kolin 156-167). Inevitably, though, Stanley the “Polak” becomes an unhinged and ferocious icon of what being a Polish male immigrant is truly supposed to encompass. This
promotes a discriminatory attitude that disseminates a fabricated notion to the public that all males of such nationality are inclined to hold low moral outlooks, provoke violence, engage in crude behavior, and have a propensity toward sex crimes. The more incensed he becomes with this label from his wife and sister-in-law, the more Stanley chooses to allow his compulsive “Polak” self to surface. Nevertheless, despite its political incorrectness, the myth of the “Polak” still provides the basis for Williams’s and Kazan’s construction of a genuinely detestable monster for audiences to loath with ease.

The performances in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (indicative of an outstanding grasp of character development) were so widely hailed that many predicted they would make a clean sweep of all four acting categories at that year’s annual Academy Awards ceremony (Kazan 353). It would eventually nab three such Oscars in 1952, for Best Actress in a Leading Role (Leigh), Best Actress in a Supporting Role (Kim Hunter as Stella), and Best Actor in a Supporting Role (Karl Malden as Mitch)3 (“Academy Awards, USA: 1952” - The Internet Movie Database). Accolades aside, each frame of *A Streetcar Named Desire* which shows the unnerving relationship of Blanche and Stanley is not only a testament to the talents of Leigh and Brando, but also to Kazan’s understanding of the importance of these characters in exploring the film’s dark themes. A line delivered by Stanley, just minutes before his inevitable sexual violation of Blanche in their climactic face-off, might best differentiate between the two personalities. After Blanche concocts an elaborate, fictitious tale of how an oil tycoon is planning to wisk her away on a cruise ship for a romantic getaway, Stanley remarks smugly, “Well, it’s a red letter night for us both, you having an oil millionaire, and me having a baby.” Indeed,

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3 Although nominated by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences for Best Actor, Brando infamously lost to Humphrey Bogart for *The African Queen* (“Academy Awards, USA: 1952” - The Internet Movie Database).
Blanche is desperately seeking a lifestyle of refinement and luxury that is never fully attained, while Stanley is content with his unrefined, coarse demeanor and sees the “luxury” of successfully impregnating his wife and dominating her through his bloodline as gratifying enough. Blanche and Stanley are only linked by their sexual urges (to which Blanche acts in denial and Stanley acts with relish), but in all other aspects, they are polar opposites. Consequentially, it makes their every scene together a new prospect for a potentially explosive altercation and gives *A Streetcar Named Desire* the motor which compels its story throughout the entirety of the picture.
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