

ern Critical

INTERPRETATIONS

Edited and with an Introduction by HAROLD BLOOM

Tennessee Williams's
**A Streetcar
Named Desire**



Modern Critical Interpretations

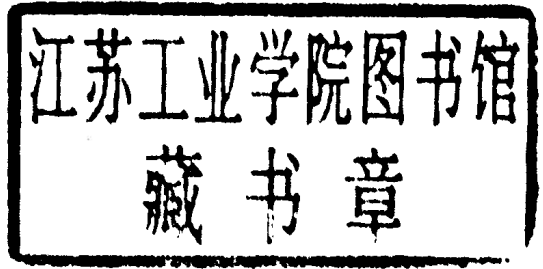
Tennessee Williams's
A Streetcar Named Desire

Edited and with an introduction by

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Editor's Note

This book brings together a representative selection of the best criticism available upon *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the major drama by Tennessee Williams. The critical essays are reprinted here in the chronological order of their original publication. I am grateful to Daniel Klotz for his work as a researcher on this volume.

My introduction considers Williams as a dramatic lyricist in the manner of Hart Crane, rather than as a lyrical dramatist in the wake of Chekhov, and then offers an exegesis of *Streetcar* in which Blanche is judged to be a not wholly adequate emblem of Williams's vision of himself as a continuator of Crane and Rimbaud.

Robert Brustein begins the chronological sequence with his shrewd account of *Streetcar*'s Stanley Kowalski (as played by the young Marlon Brando) as the archetype of a particular kind of popular culture hero in America, a figure of inarticulate pathos. In a brief but cogent study, Alvin B. Kernan contrasts the "realistic" (Stanley) and "romantic" (Blanche) visions in *Streetcar*. In Joseph N. Riddel's analysis of the play, we are offered a Nietzschean critique of Williams's failure to qualify his realism in the interests of a more Dionysian perspective upon Blanche.

Leonard Berkman views Blanche's downfall as an instance of tragic irony, a judgment somewhat at variance with that of C. W. E. Bigsby, for whom Blanche's fate illustrates the desperation of Williams's American Romanticism. Perhaps these conflicts of interpretation are partly resolved in Mary Ann Corrigan's reading, which praises *Streetcar* for reconciling those stage rivals, realism and theatricalism.

In an essay on the play's symbolism, Leonard Quirino centers upon two images: the cards of destiny and the voyage of experience. For Bert Cardullo, *Streetcar* is a domestic tragedy that dramatizes modes of intimacy that lack all comprehension. Tragicomedy, a rather different genre, is in-

voked by John M. Roderick as the proper context for judging Williams's achievement in the play.

Henry I. Schvey concentrates upon *Streetcar*'s visual effects, which convince him that the drama's design is one of purification through purgatorial suffering. In this book's final essay, Kathleen Hulley deconstructs *Streetcar* to show the role of our ambivalent social law in Williams's dark representation of the death of desire.

Contents

Editor's Note / vii

Introduction / 1

HAROLD BLOOM

America's New Culture Hero:

Feelings without Words / 7

ROBERT BRUSTEIN

Truth and Dramatic Mode in ✓

A Streetcar Named Desire / 17

ALVIN B. KERNAN

A Streetcar Named Desire—Nietzsche Descending / 21

JOSEPH N. RIDDEL

The Tragic Downfall of Blanche DuBois / 33

LEONARD BERKMAN

Tennessee Williams: Streetcar to Glory / 41

C. W. E. BIGSBY

Realism and Theatricalism in ✓

A Streetcar Named Desire / 49

MARY ANN CORRIGAN

The Cards Indicate a Voyage on

A Streetcar Named Desire / 61

LEONARD QUIRINO

Drama of Intimacy and Tragedy of Incomprehension: ✓

A Streetcar Named Desire Reconsidered / 79

BERT CARDULLO

From “Tarantula Arms” to “Della Robbia Blue”: The
Tennessee Williams Tragicomic Transit Authority / 93

JOHN M. RODERICK

✓ Madonna at the Poker Night: Pictorial Elements in
Tennessee Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire* / 103

HENRY I. SCHVEY

✓ The Fate of the Symbolic in *A Streetcar Named
Desire* / 111

KATHLEEN HULLEY

Chronology / 123

Contributors / 127

Bibliography / 129

Acknowledgments / 131

Index / 133

Introduction

I

It is a sad and inexplicable truth that the United States, a dramatic nation, continues to have so limited a literary achievement in the drama. American literature, from Emerson to the present moment, is a distinguished tradition. The poetry of Whitman, Dickinson, Frost, Stevens, Eliot, W. C. Williams, Hart Crane, R. P. Warren, Elizabeth Bishop down through the generation of my own contemporaries—John Ashbery, James Merrill, A. R. Ammons, and others—has an unquestionable eminence, and takes a vital place in Western literature. Prose fiction from Hawthorne and Melville on through Mark Twain and Henry James to Cather and Dreiser, Faulkner, Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Nathanael West, and Pynchon, has almost a parallel importance. The line of essayists and critics from Emerson and Thoreau to Kenneth Burke and beyond constitutes another crucial strand of our national letters. But where is the American drama in comparison to all this, and in relation to the long cavalcade of western drama from Aeschylus to Beckett?

The American theater, by the common estimate of its most eminent critics, touches an initial strength with Eugene O'Neill, and then proceeds to the more varied excellences of Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee, and Sam Shepard. That sequence is clearly problematical, and becomes even more worrisome when we move from playwrights to plays. Which are our dramatic works that matter most? *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, certainly; perhaps *The Iceman Cometh*; evidently *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Death of a Salesman*; perhaps again *The Skin of Our Teeth* and *The Zoo Story*—it is not God's plenty. And I will venture the speculation that our drama palpably is not yet literary enough. By this I do not just mean that O'Neill writes very badly, or Miller very baldly; they do, but so did Dreiser, and *Sister Carrie* and *An American Tragedy* prevail nevertheless. Nor do I wish to be an American Matthew Ar-

nold (whom I loathe above all other critics) and proclaim that our dramatists simply have not known enough. They know more than enough, and that is part of the trouble.

Literary tradition, as I have come to understand it, masks the agon between past and present as a benign relationship, whether personal or societal. The actual transferences between the force of the literary past and the potential of writing in the present tend to be darker, even if they do not always or altogether follow the defensive patterns of what Sigmund Freud called “family romances.” Whether or not an ambivalence, however repressed, towards the past’s force is felt by the new writer and is manifested in his work seems to depend entirely upon the ambition and power of the oncoming artist. If he aspires after strength, and can attain it, then he must struggle with both a positive and a negative transference, false connections because necessarily imagined ones, between a composite precursor and himself. His principal resource in that agon will be his own native gift for interpretation, or as I am inclined to call it, strong misreading. Revising his precursor, he will create himself, make himself into a kind of changeling, and so he will become, in an illusory but highly pragmatic way, his own father.

The most literary of our major dramatists, and clearly I mean “literary” in a precisely descriptive sense, neither pejorative nor eulogistic, was Tennessee Williams. Wilder, with his intimate connections to *Finnegans Wake* and Gertrude Stein, might seem to dispute this placement, and Wilder was certainly more literate than Williams. But Wilder had a benign relation to his crucial precursor, Joyce, and did not aspire after a destructive strength. Williams did, and suffered the fate he prophesied and desired; the strength destroyed his later work, and his later life, and thus joined itself to the American tradition of self-destructive genius. Williams truly had one precursor only: Hart Crane, the greatest of our lyrical poets, after Whitman and Dickinson, and the most self-destructive figure in our national literature, surpassing all others in this, as in so many regards.

Williams asserted he had other precursors also: D. H. Lawrence, and Chekhov in the drama. These were outward influences, and benefited Williams well enough, but they were essentially formal, and so not the personal and societal family romance of authentic poetic influence. Hart Crane made Williams into more of a dramatic lyricist, though writing in prose, than the lyrical dramatist that Williams is supposed to have been. Though this influence—perhaps more nearly an identification—helped form *The Glass Menagerie* and (less overtly) *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and in a lesser mode *Summer and Smoke* and *Suddenly Last Summer*, it also led to such di-

sasters of misplaced lyricism as the dreadful *Camino Real* and the dreary *The Night of the Iguana*. (*Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, one of Williams's best plays, does not seem to me to show any influence of Crane.) Williams's long aesthetic decline covered thirty years, from 1953 to 1983, and reflected the sorrows of a seer who, by his early forties, had outlived his own vision. Hart Crane, self-slain at thirty-two, had set for Williams a High Romantic paradigm that helped cause Williams, his heart as dry as summer dust, to burn to the socket.

II

The epigraph to *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a quatrain from Hart Crane's "The Broken Tower," the poet's elegy for his gift, his vocation, his life, and so Crane's precise equivalent of Shelley's *Triumph of Life*, Keat's *Fall of Hyperion*, and Whitman's "When Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloom'd." Tennessee Williams, in his long thirty years of decline after composing *A Streetcar Named Desire*, had no highly designed, powerfully executed elegy for his own poetic self. Unlike Crane, his American Romantic precursor and aesthetic paradigm, Williams had to live out the slow degradation of the waning of his potential, and so endured the triumph of life over his imagination.

Streetcar sustains a first rereading, after thirty years away from it, more strongly than I had expected. It is, inevitably, more remarkable on the stage than in the study, but the fusion of Williams's lyrical and dramatic talents in it has prevailed over time, at least so far. The play's flaws, in performance, ensue from its implicit tendency to sensationalize its characters, Blanche DuBois in particular. Directors and actresses have made such sensationalizing altogether explicit, with the sad result prophesied by Kenneth Tynan twenty-five years ago. The playgoer forgets that Blanche's only strengths are "nostalgia and hope," that she is "the desperate exceptional woman," and that her fall is a parable, rather than an isolated squalor:

When, finally, she is removed to the mental home, we should feel that a part of civilization is going with her. Where ancient drama teaches us to reach nobility by contemplation of what is noble, modern American drama conjures us to contemplate what might have been noble, but is now humiliated, ignoble in the sight of all but the compassionate.

Tynan, though accurate enough, still might have modified the image

of Blanche taking a part of civilization away with her into madness. Though Blanche yearns for the values of the aesthetic, she scarcely embodies them, being in this failure a masochistic self-parody on the part of Williams himself. His *Memoirs* portray Williams incessantly in the role of Blanche, studying the nostalgias, and inching along the wavering line between hope and paranoia. Williams, rather than Blanche, sustains Tynan's analysis of the lost nobility, now humiliated, that American drama conjures us to contemplate.

The fall of Blanche is a parable, not of American civilization's lost nobility, but of the failure of the American literary imagination to rise above its recent myths of recurrent defeat. Emerson admonished us, his descendants, to go beyond the Great Defeat of the Crucifixion and to demand Victory instead, a victory of the senses as well as of the soul. Walt Whitman, taking up Emerson's challenge directly, set the heroic pattern so desperately emulated by Hart Crane, and which is then repeated in a coarser tone in Williams's life and work.

It must seem curious, at first, to regard Blanche DuBois as a failed Whitmanian, but essentially that is her aesthetic identity. Confronted by the revelation of her young husband's preference for an older man over herself, Blanche falls downwards and outwards into nymphomania, phantasmagoric hopes, pseudo-imaginative collages of memory and desire. Her Orphic, psychic rending by the amiably brutal Stanley Kowalski, a rough but effective version of D. H. Lawrence's vitalistic vision of male force, is pathetic rather than tragic, not because Stanley necessarily is mindless, but because she unnecessarily has made herself mindless, by failing the pragmatic test of experience.

Williams's most effective blend of lyrical vision and dramatic irony in the play comes in the agony of Blanche's cry against Stanley to Stella, his wife and her sister:

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, like one of those pictures I've seen in—anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age! 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! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! Night falls and the other

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! Somebody growls—some creature snatches at something—the fight is on! *God!* Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella—my sister—there has been *some* progress since then! Such things as art—as poetry and music—such kinds of new light have come into 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 toward whatever it is we're approaching. . . . *Don't—don't hang back with the brutes!*

The lyricism here takes its strength from the ambivalence of what at once attracts and dismays both Blanche and Williams. Dramatic irony, terrible in its antithetical pathos, results here from Blanche's involuntary self-condemnation, since she herself has hung back with the brutes while merely blinking at the new light of the aesthetic. Stanley, being what he is, is clearly less to blame than Blanche, who was capable of more but failed in will.

Williams, in his *Memoirs*, haunted as always by Hart Crane, refers to his precursor as “a tremendous and yet fragile artist,” and then associates both himself and Blanche with the fate of Crane, a suicide by drowning in the Caribbean:

I am as much of an hysteric as . . . Blanche; a codicil to my will provides for the disposition of my body in this way. “Sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped over board, twelve hours north of Havana, so that my bones may rest not too far from those of Hart Crane . . .”

At the conclusion of *Memoirs*, Williams again associated Crane both with his own vocation and his own limitations, following Crane even in an identification with the young Rimbaud:

A poet such as the young Rimbaud is the only writer of whom I can think, at this moment, who could escape from words into the sensations of being, through his youth, turbulent with revolution, permitted articulation by nights of absinthe. And of course there is Hart Crane. Both of these poets touched fire that burned them alive. And perhaps it is only through self-immola-

tion of such a nature that we living beings can offer to you the entire truth of ourselves within the reasonable boundaries of a book.

It is the limitation of *Memoirs*, and in some sense even of *À Streetcar Named Desire*, that we cannot accept either Williams or poor Blanche as a Rimbaud or a Hart Crane. Blanche cannot be said to have touched fire that burned her alive. Yet Williams earns the relevance of the play's great epigraph to Blanche's terrible fate:

And so it was I entered the broken world
 To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
 An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
 But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

America's New Culture Hero: Feelings without Words

Robert Brustein

In the last eight or ten years Americans have been charmed by a new culture hero, with far-reaching effects upon the quality of our spoken arts. In a persistent effort to find a voice for America, to find a language, vocabulary, and intonation peculiarly our own, we have come temporarily to settle for no voice at all. The stage, motion pictures, television, and even popular music are now exalting an inarticulate hero, who—for all the dependence of these media on language—cannot talk.

Of medium height and usually of lower-class birth, his most familiar physical characteristic is his surly and discontented expression. His eyes peer out at the world from under beetling brows; his uncombed hair falls carelessly over his forehead; his right hand rests casually on his right hip. He is extremely muscular and walks with a slouching, shuffling gait. He scratches himself often, slumps in chairs, and almost never smiles. He is also identified by the sounds which issue from his mouth. He squeezes, he grunts, he passes his hand over his eyes and forehead, he stares steadily, he turns away, he scratches, then again faces his adversary, and finally speaks. What he says is rarely important but he has mesmerized his auditor by the effort he takes to say it. He has communicated not information but feeling; he has revealed an inner life of unspecified anguish and torment.

From this description it should be clear that I am talking about a character familiar not through any particular work of art but rather through association with the many actors who impersonate it—Marlon Brando, James Dean, Paul Newman, Ben Gazzara, John Cassevetes, Montgomery

Clift, and the countless others whose identification with sex, violence, and incoherency unites them as a school. What endears this peculiar creature to the general public? Where does he come from, what is his significance, and what has been his effect on present-day dramatic writing?

The inarticulate hero of today clearly finds his immediate origin in Tennessee Williams's Stanley Kowalski as interpreted by Marlon Brando. His tradition, however, goes further back than *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Ever since Eugene O'Neill created Yank in *The Hairy Ape* (1922), American playwrights have been trying to find dramatic expression for the man of lower birth—of northern urban or southern rural origin—who was denied the language and manners of his more cultured countrymen. Quite often, in spite of superior physical strength, this man was pictured as a victim. O'Neill's stoker Yank has the power to make the ship go, but once on land, in the clutch of the cold concrete city, he is overcome by pushing crowds, political complexity, and the ridicule of a high-born woman, and finally is crushed to death while trying to embrace an ape, the only animal with whom he finds intellectual communion. The sharecroppers, migrant workers, and tramps of John Steinbeck are victims too, but since his heroes are more unqualifiedly noble than Yank (for Steinbeck virtue and poverty are almost always equated) their defeat is political rather than personal and implies an indictment of society. In the early works of Clifford Odets, the political note is struck even harder. O'Neill's and Steinbeck's proletarian heroes are often characterized by their lack of verbal coherence, but Odets's heroes are singular for their extreme verbosity. Rather than being speechless in the face of their dilemma, they never stop talking about it.

The unspoken assumption of the Group Theatre, the repertory company that produced most of the proletarian dramas of the 1930s, was that sensitivity, fire, intensity, and sexual potency were primarily the properties of the underprivileged and the uneducated. Using the acting techniques of Stanislavsky in forms altered to suit American needs, the Group Theatre created a style with which to import the supercharged mood of these plays and an acting company to impersonate the underprivileged heroes. The most representative actors in this company, John Garfield and Luther Adler, rather than being stammerers, were highly articulate; rather than being enmeshed in a world too complex for their intelligence, they were extremely precise about the forces leading them to ruin.

The Group Theatre was dissolved in the early 1940s, but some of its functions were taken over by the Actors Studio, organized in the late 1940s by former members. Unlike the Group Theatre, the Actors Studio was designed not as a production unit but primarily as a workshop where

actors could perfect their craft. And yet, because of the widely publicized popular success of some of its members, the Actors Studio has managed to wield more influence on acting styles and playwrighting material than any other single organization, even those dedicated to the actual production of plays. It is in the Actors Studio that most of today's proletarian heroes are being spawned.

Although much (if not all) of the acting that emerges from the Actors Studio would seem to indicate that the proletarian is still considered more interesting, more electric, and capable of deeper feelings than the owner of a store or the manager of a bank, this assumption seems no longer accompanied by a political conviction. The proletarian hero of the 1950s has lost his political flavor and even more important, his power of speech. He combines the inarticulacy of the Hairy Ape with the dynamism (now adjusted from a boil to a simmer) of the Odets hero, and adds to these certain qualities which neither Odets nor O'Neill had endowed him with. Stanley Kowalski is the first character in American drama to unite most of the identifying characteristics of this hero, but it is difficult to determine how much actor Marlon Brando and director Elia Kazan, both Actors Studio associates at the time or soon after, contributed to his formation. All drama is a collaboration, and dramatists find their characters subtly changing coloration in the playing. Stanley Kowalski, as he became known to the general public in the original New York production and the excellent movie made from it, was probably the collaborative product of Williams, Brando, and Kazan. Stanley, as *written* by Williams, is a highly complex and ambiguous character, one who can be taken either as hero or as villain. As a social or cultural figure, Stanley is a villain, in mindless opposition to civilization and culture—the “new man” of the modern world whom Williams seems to find responsible for the present-day decline in art, language, decorum, and culture. As a psychological or sexual figure, however, Stanley exists on a somewhat more heroic moral plane. He is akin to those silent, sullen gamekeepers and grooms of D. H. Lawrence (an early influence on Williams) whose sexuality, though violent, is unmental, unspiritual, and, therefore, in some way free from taint. The conflict between Blanche and Stanley allegorizes the struggle between effeminate culture and masculine libido. It is no accident that Stanley, in the climax of the play, subdues Blanche by a brutal sexual assault. One assumption of the play is plain: culture and tradition are desirable, but breed effeteness and perversity (Blanche is a nymphomaniac) and make one an easy prey to the unenlightened.

It should be clear, even from this brief analysis, that with Stanley,

Williams wrought significant changes in the proletarian hero. If one sympathizes with Stanley it is not because he is underprivileged or exploited or victimized—Stanley is at all times an active character, one who manipulates each situation in which he appears. Rather than expressing dissatisfaction with the grubby conditions in which he lives, he exults in them, and he does not indicate any desire to better himself. More important, Stanley, as brute force incarnate, has no poetry or sensitivity or nobility in him—neither John Garfield nor Luther Adler could ever have played this role. His intelligence is mostly animal cunning and his power of speech limited to expressing basic desires.

And yet, if Williams created an ignoble rather than a noble savage, how do we explain the spectacular success of Brando and the extensive influence his playing of Stanley has had on acting ever since? The answer, I think, lies in the personal values Brando contributed to the role. As played by Brando, Stanley Kowalski somehow emerged as a more appealing, a more sympathetic, and (most important) a more sensitive character than Williams created, and the play became a conflict between two protagonists, one less noble but no less interesting than the other. When Anthony Quinn, taking over the part, played it more like the thick-headed antagonist Williams intended, the focus of the play shifted back to Blanche. There is irony in the fact that, although *Streetcar* is Blanche's tragedy, the villain of the piece became the prototype for a hero, the inarticulate hero of popular culture. After Stanley, the brutal proletarian was rarely to be seen again. As he emerged from the Actors Studio and the pens of the writers who began creating parts for these actors, he had once again acquired a helpless attitude in a hostile world. And although he inherited Stanley Kowalski's speechlessness, his animality, and his violent behavior, these qualities were now seen as marks of profundity of character.

Thus in a period of prosperity and political conformity, the proletarian hero has managed, paradoxically, to accomplish something he failed to do in a period of depression and political radicalism—he has made the audience take notice of him. At a time when America has the largest middle-class population in the world (when, in one sense, it sees itself as entirely middle class), one of its most conspicuous dramatic heroes is poor and uneducated. Although the Broadway audience is predominantly from the cultured, leisured classes, the typical Broadway product (not imported from England or Europe) is peopled with dock workers, drug addicts, juvenile delinquents, prostitutes, pimps, butchers, southern farmers, seamen, machine shop workers, and drifters. By finding “reality” and