

Explore how Tennessee Williams allows us to see different points of view. – Sophie YM

Tennessee Williams demonstrates various 'points of view' most pertinently through the juxtaposing outlooks of Stanley and Blanche. Post-war America prompted a dramatic reconsideration of its own image following, not only, the victory it claimed after World War 2, but also recovering from the deplorable actions of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This new America became concerned, very quickly, with rapid economic growth prompting the influx of many foreign nationals and a rising multiculturalism. The class system became almost irrelevant. This new establishment of America can be reflected very pertinently in Stanley: his fixation on the economic value of Belle Reve, a distaste for Blanche's superiority and duplicity. Meanwhile, Blanche herself purveys the cultured, educated and sensitive South, one also very close to Tennessee Williams. However, her own elevated and pampered upbringing is at odds with America's new values, leaving her unable to cope. These contrasting views of New America are explored through Blanche and Stanley, providing, additionally, an insight into Williams' own personal commentary.

Blanche's opening stage directions present her as 'incongruous to this setting' revealing how out-of-place and uncomfortable she is in this bustling new environment. Her pristine, white 'fluffy bodice' more suited to a 'tea or cocktail party in the garden district', connoting a certain preserved eloquence and prestige juxtaposes starkly to the 'atmosphere of decay', surrounded by symbols of industrialisation such as the 'L&N' tracks. Despite this juxtaposition, Blanche makes no attempt to adjust herself to her surroundings, only attempt to cope using the tools she has grown up with – her social stature and prestige. For example, one of her first actions when arriving in the Kowalski apartment is to "[pour] half tumbler of Whisky and [toss] it down." To an audience, her shock at her surroundings may somewhat justify a stiff drink. Yet by the end of the first scene, she denies any attachment to alcohol: "I rarely touch it." Thus, Williams creates a paradox where Blanche's "tendency to gild the lily and speak with a rather florid style", (Williams) deceiving her fellow characters of her true nature which lies in the stage directions. Appearance and reality exist at the same time. Blanche's criticism of New America's lack of refinement (emphasised by her distaste for "these conditions", meaning the apartment, and her imploring of "Don't hang back with the brutes" in Scene 3) causes her downfall. She cannot sustain the paradox of her appearance, her former self and idealisation of her current state, and reality. Thus, Blanche's contrasting point of view is presented as her destruction.

Stanley Kowalski is the epitome of the 'common man' pursuing the American Dream. He's a second generation American, a travelling salesman who is perceptive enough to not be 'swindled' by Blanche. One of the main causes for the decline in the South was the unjust fact that the aristocracy were profiting off of the labour of the past, through slavery, and later sharecropping, as one example. This view is represented strongly through his aversion to Blanche's self-adorned superiority: "I've been on to you from the start! ...You come in here...and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern...and you are the Queen of the Nile!" The exclamations denote his fury, with the metaphor 'Queen of the Nile' denoting his sarcasm towards Blanche's self-aggrandisement. However, whilst his fury at Blanche's duplicity is somewhat justified, he may have misunderstood Blanche's

intentions. Stanley is uncommon in that he wears his sexuality like a badge of honour, the 'gaudy seed-bearer'; whilst Blanche is ashamed of it and stifles her libidinal desires. He believes she was trying to 'pull [the] wool over this boy's eyes!' indicating his refusal to be deceived (the noun 'boy' could also be a euphemism for Blanche's past juvenile affairs). Blanche, however, implored to Mitch a counterargument in the previous scene: "Magic! ...I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them." The verb 'give' denotes a generosity that cannot possibly be malicious. Thus, Stanley's contrasting point of view to the intentions behind Blanche's façade coincides with the evolution of American society away from the aesthetic of the old south due to a lack of mutual understanding.

Debatably, the most important 'points of view' throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire* are the playwright's own. Williams makes several pertinent social commentaries through the presentation of themes. One of the most pertinent is the presentation of violence. William's own father, Cornelius, was extremely abusive to his wife Edwina. An incident in 1937 where Edwina hid in a bedroom from him which he burst through, breaking Edwina's nose, allegedly traumatised young Tennessee Williams. Thus, if Blanche's sensitive, aristocratic upbringing is auto biographical in nature, her disgust at the violence in the play can be explained. In Scene 4, after Stanley has hit Stella, Blanche is described as having an 'appearance entirely contrasting Stella's', with the adjective contrasting denoting how she looks deplorable compared with the 'tranquil' Stella. Blanche's zoomorphic criticism of Stanley is slightly comedic in its hyperbole, but also Williams criticism of violence denoting a devolution in society from the genteel, civilised South: "Stanley Kowalski – survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat have from the kill in the jungle." Her broken syntax and exclamation demonstrate her desperation to get Stella to understand. Yet, her reference to the 'raw meat' recalls Scene 1, with Stanley's monosyllabic first line, barking: 'Meat!' There is no way Blanche could have witnessed that interaction, so the reference must have been deliberate, as a way for Williams to 'prove' the devolution represented by Stanley. "My interest in social affairs is as great as my interest in the theatre" – Williams. Hence, Williams' own views in regard to contemporary society, one arguably the most important ones to be expressed in *Streetcar*.

Williams claimed that his original script was not meant to be demonstrating such a war between old and new America, but Elia Kazan's portrayal of Stanley vs. Blanche altered the interpretations significantly. Blanche and Stanley's contrasting viewpoints can be reflective of the evolving American society. Blanche's dramatic presentation of her juxtaposing appearance and reality represent a declining self whilst Stanley's virility and determination show a burgeoning new America. However, the alleged 'victory' of one culture over the other is left to the audience to decide. Blanche's character is not completely destroyed, whilst there is evidence (such as Mitch's physical retaliation of Stanley of Stella's emotional turmoil) that Blanche has affected Stanley's relationships and way of life. Hence, Williams predictions for the future of American society are not concluded despite his close analysis of both cultures.