

## SYMBOLIC DEVICES IN TENNESSEE WILLIAMS, A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

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"PROSEMINAR" ESSAY

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## **1. Introduction**

Written in 1947, *A Streetcar Named Desire* has always been considered one of Tennessee Williams's most successful plays. One reason for this may be found in the way Williams makes extensive use of symbols as a dramatic technique. This happens in all of his plays, but in this instance Williams integrates symbols very effectively with ideas and thematic content. He once explained that symbolism is a way to "say a thing more directly and simply and beautifully than it could be said in words ... sometimes it would take page after tedious page of exposition to put across an idea that can be said with an object or a gesture on the lighted page" (Jackson 26). Thus Williams emphasises the theatre dimension of the symbols he uses, as well as symbolic meanings in dramatic language.

In this essay, a selection of the symbolic devices used by Williams will be analysed. Owing to the pervasive use of symbolism in this play, only major symbols can be dealt with, but it should be added that the distinction between major or minor importance is open to interpretation and depends on the symbols' thematic importance. The order of the symbols discussed in this essay is not identical with their order of appearance in the play, but is governed by a systematic approach.

## **2. Symbolism**

In literature, symbols are widely used by authors as a means of emphasising certain atmospheres and characteristic features of people and places. A symbol is an object or image that stands for itself and also for something else. All language is symbolic considering that letters form words which indicate particular and objective realities. In a literary sense, a symbol combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect. A symbol can be thought of as an image that evokes an objective, concrete reality and prompts that reality to suggest another level of meaning.

Broadly speaking, there are two types of symbols: the first type includes symbols embodying universal suggestions of meaning, and the second acquires its suggestiveness not from qualities inherent in itself but from the way in which it is used in a given work. Symbols can therefore be regarded as visual complexes with two levels of meaning. The first level of meaning of an image is the *pictura*. The second level of meaning of an image is the *subscriptio*, which describes the reflection or transfer of the complex image of *pictura* onto another complex image (Link 168). These levels of symbol can be illustrated with an analysis of the names of dramatic characters.

### **3. The names' symbolic meaning**

#### **3.1 Blanche DuBois**

Blanche DuBois is the main character of the play and also the most thoroughly described one. The name Blanche is French and means white or fair. Her last name DuBois is of French origin as well and translates as made of wood.

Regarding the subscriptio of her first name a clear connection to her character becomes quite obvious. Since the colour white stands for purity, innocence and virtue, the subscriptio of Blanche's name reveals these qualities, which stand in contrast to her actual character traits. The name suggests that Blanche is a very innocent and pure person, but throughout the play it becomes obvious that Blanche cannot call any of these traits her own. Only the illusory image which she tries to create for herself suggests these traits, but her true nature is not like that at all. She constantly tries to hide her embarrassing past from all of her new acquaintances, because she fears that they might not accept her anymore. In order to maintain her apparent social status among her new neighbours and friends, she builds this intertwined net of lies which creates a false image of herself. She herself believes in this imaginary world, and as soon as there is the slightest sign of its destruction, she seems to be lost, and her nervous condition worsens. Therefore all she cares about is to keep that image alive. Her first name is therefore quite ironic since it means the exact opposite of Blanche's true nature and character.

Her last name, however, stands in contrast to her first name, regarding the meaning on the level of the subscriptio. Made of wood suggests something solid and hard, which is the exact opposite of her fragile nature and nervous condition

Wood can also be associated with forest or jungle, and regarding her past, the connection becomes clear. Blanche used to indulge in a rather excessive lifestyle. She had sex with random strangers and was known throughout her hometown Laurel for that. So her former life was more like a jungle or a forest, because it was hard to see through all this and detect the real Blanche. As in a jungle, Blanche could not find a way out of this on her own. The term jungle appears in the play as well. In scene ten, when Stanley is about to rape Blanche, "the inhuman jungle voices rise up" (Williams 215). The jungle can be associated with wildness, brutality and inhuman behaviour.

As already mentioned above, wood represents something hard, or hard-working. The Du in front of that, however, suggests something aristocratic and noble. There seems to be a contradiction in these two terms which can be explained with the nature of her character. The way Blanche tries to create an aristocratic and sophisticated image of herself, but is in fact the complete opposite, displays this ambiguity.

There is another way to explore her last name, and it leads to the pronunciation of it. If one pronounces DuBois with the correct French accent, there is nothing uncommon about it, but since the play was written by an American, who most likely knew about the way most Americans would pronounce it, a very obvious connection to Blanche's past appears. Being pronounced with an American accent, Dubois sounds more like "Do boys," which accompanies the fact that she had had an affair with a student while she was a teacher. Her kissing the paper-boy in scene five underlines the sexual symbolic meaning of that last name as well.

Combined with her first name, her entire name would translate as "white wood," which she explains to Mitch in scene three, "It's a French name. It means woods and Blanche means white, so the two together mean white woods" (Williams 150). Blanche DuBois cannot only be translated as white wood but also as white and made of wood, which makes it easier for the reader to detect that she seems pure and innocent on the outside, but is really quite tough and calculating when it comes down to her image and her future, especially concerning her search for a husband. If one considers that Blanche is a development of the type of the legendary Yseult of the White Hands, a further layer of symbolism could be traced.

Overall, Blanche's entire name is heavily symbolic because it reflects her true nature in a very clear way. Just as first and last name are being read out in an exact order, Blanche's character is revealed in the same way. At first she seems to be innocent and pure, but later her past and her true nature can be discovered.

### **3.2 Stella**

Stella is a Latin term which simply means star. Stars in general are considered to be the light which breaks through the darkness. Considering that light is the opposite of darkness, and darkness itself stands for not-knowing and intellectual dullness, the stars can be regarded as reality and knowledge shining through ignorance. Stars can also be a symbol for high ideals or goals set too high (Becker 289). Stella represents Blanche's ideal concerning the fact that she is leading a contented life.

The deeper significance of her name reveals her role in the play. The subscriptio of star is light, hope and stability. This is quite a good description of her role and her position in the play. Stella is the connection between Blanche and Stanley, the two major characters, because she contains character traits of both of them, and can therefore relate to them better than anyone else can. Therefore she can be considered to be the stabilising element of the play. She is the negotiator between the two so very different characters.

Stella and Blanche have the same rather wealthy and cultivated background, which is the connection between the two women. Stella also has several things in common with Stanley.

One of them is their love for wild sex (Ehrenhaft 72). During a conversation with Blanche, Stella tells her about her wedding night:

*Stella: Why, on our wedding night – soon as we came in here – he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light-bulbs with it.*

*Blanche: He did – what?*

*Stella: He smashed all the light-bulbs with the heel of my slipper!*

*Blanche: And you – you let him? Didn't run, didn't scream?*

*Stella: I was – sort of – thrilled by it. (Williams 157).*

### **3.3 Belle Reve**

Belle Reve is the name of the sisters' family's plantation in their hometown Laurel. The name is again of French origin and means beautiful dream, which again emphasises Blanche's tendency to cling to her illusions concerning the subscription of the term. The term suggests an illusion, which is not quite true, for the plantation really once existed.

On the other hand, beautiful dream suggests that something beautiful, which has once existed, faded away. Therefore, the name's symbolic meaning became true. But in contrast to Blanche's other illusions, this is the only one that ever truly existed, and it is the only one that Stella and Blanche are both connected to, because it is their heritage, and it was real.

However, looking more closely at the name, it reveals that there is a grammatical mistake. The adjective *belle* is feminine, but it should be masculine, for *reve* is masculine. Tennessee Williams probably did this on purpose and not by mistake, because it underlines the fact that Belle Reve was just a dream which crumbled. The grammatical mistake also implies a certain imperfection, which is also apparent and true for Blanche's beautiful dream, her net of lies and false illusions.

### **3.4 Desire, Cemeteries and Elysian Fields**

At the beginning of the play Williams introduces three terms which do not reveal their symbolic meaning right away, but the reader comes to realise their sense and importance later in the play. In scene one, Blanche describes to Eunice her journey to her sister's place: "They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields" (Williams 117).

Blanche's journey on New Orleans' streetcars represents the journey of her own life.

Desire is her first step, just as it was the first step of her life after her husband Allan had died. Still struggling with this loss, she was desperately longing for love and companionship, but ended up

leading a life which was filled with sex with random men, who never cared about her: "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan – intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with..." (Williams 205). At this time she was hence obsessed by desire.

The next step of her journey is Cemeteries, which is an obvious symbol for death. Her promiscuous lifestyle had got her into trouble. She lost her job because she had had an affair with one of her students, and was banned from Laurel: "The opposite (of death) is desire" (Williams 206). This underlines that her life turned into the exact opposite of what it had been.

Elysian Fields is the name of the street where Stella and Stanley live, and it is a mythical allusion to Book VI of Virgil's Aeneid. According to Roman mythology, Elysium (or Elysian Fields) was a part of the underworld and a place of reward for the virtuous dead. Elysian Fields, though, was just a temporary place of the souls' journey back to life:

*The verdant fields with those of heav'n may vie,*

*With ether vested, and a purple sky;*

*The blissful seats of happy souls below (Virgil l. 869-71).*

The following passage connects The Aeneid to A Streetcar named Desire, for desire and fear are also key motifs in the play. Blanche's emotions often change from desire to fear and back:

*Desire and fear by turns possess their hearts,*

*And grief, and joy; nor can the groveling mind,*

*In the dark dungeon of the limbs confin'd*

*Assert the native skies, or own its heav'nly kind:*

*Nor death itself can wholly wash their stains;*

*But long-contracted filth ev'n in the soul remains.*

*The relics of inveterate vice they wear,*

*And spots of sin obscene in ev'ry face appear.*

*For this are various penances enjoin'd;*

*And some are hung to bleach upon the wind,*

*Some plung'd in waters, others purg'd in fires,*

*Till all the dregs are drain'd, and all the rust expires.*

*All have their manes, and those manes bear:*

*The few, so cleans'd, to these abodes repair,*

*And breathe, in ample fields, the soft Elysian air.*

*Then are they happy, when by length of time*

*The scurf is worn away of each committed crime;*

*No speck is left of their habitual stains,*

*But the pure ether of the soul remains (Virgil l. 994-1012)*

According to Virgil, Elysian Fields seems to be a remarkably active place. The New Orleans quarter shows this feature as well. It is a very lively area where sounds of the streets, the locomotive and the street vendors are constantly present (Thompson 32). The "plunging" of souls in waters resembles Blanche's obsessive bathing in Williams's play—her "cleansing" too is psychic, and she hopes to wear away her "habitual stains." Since Elysian Fields is the place where the souls reside before they come back to earth, it symbolises the third step of the journey of Blanche's soul. After the rape, she is being taken away to the mental institution, which symbolises that her journey has started over again. Desire has once again sent her off to Cemeteries.

#### **4 The light as a symbol for truth and reality**

The light plays an important symbolic role throughout the play because it clearly reflects Blanche's and Stanley's characters. The light is considered to be the basis for sight and recognition, and, as already mentioned above, it is the opposite of darkness which symbolises intellectual dullness and ignorance (Becker 171). Blanche and Stanley stand in contrast concerning their attitudes towards light, which again underlines their different characters.

##### **4.1 Blanche's aversion to light**

Blanche's relation to light is quite obvious because she tries to avoid bright light of any kind as well as she can. Her reaction to light can be regarded as an attempt to hide her true nature as well as her vanishing beauty and youth. By hiding from the light she tries to escape reality, for light clearly represents reality in this play. The first time that Blanche's aversion to light becomes obvious is in scene one: "And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare" (Williams 120).

In scene three, she covers the naked light bulb with a Chinese paper lantern: " I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action" (Williams 150). This remark shows that Blanche would rather hide behind polite phrases than accept truth and reality. The paper lantern is not very stable, though, and it can easily be destroyed, just like Blanche's illusions.

In scene six, she takes Mitch home with her and says, " Let's leave the lights off" (Williams 177). Blanche thinks of Mitch as a future husband, and therefore she does not want him to know her past or her true age, and the best way to hide her age is to stay out of bright light where he could possibly see her wrinkles and fading youth in her face. Later in that scene, Blanche tells Mitch about her husband Allan:

*When I was sixteen, I made the discovery – love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me (Williams 182).*

Therefore, in her past, light used to represent love, but now it represents something destructive for her. Allan's suicide erased the light or love, and thus she now does not believe in it any longer and tries to escape from the light and therefore escapes reality: "...electric light bulbs go on and you see too plainly" (Williams 196). This again shows her fear of light since for her it represents reality, and in scene nine this becomes even more obvious. When Mitch tears off the paper lantern in order to take a closer look at her in the bright light, "she utters a frightened gasp" (Williams 203). Then she tells him,

*I don't want realism...I'll tell you what I want. Magic! Yes, yes, magic! I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned for it! – Don't turn the light on (Williams 204).*

This is Blanche's first statement concerning her true intention and nature, and it is probably the only time where she ever confesses that she builds up an illusory image of herself.

#### **4.2 Stanley's affection for light**

Stanley has a different attitude concerning light and reality. He is very down to earth and realistic and displays this with his brutal honesty. For Stanley, the bright light exposes everything for what it is. He can only accept a literal truth, which can be experienced by his fanatic investigation of Blanche's past: "You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them and how you loved it, having them coloured lights going" (Williams 199).

In this passage, Stanley tries to remind Stella of the fact that when they met she was just like Blanche, but that he made her face reality again. As already mentioned above, light is the opposite of darkness and therefore the opposite of ignorance. Stanley considers himself to be knowing and constantly tries to increase his knowledge, especially the one concerning Blanche's past.

#### **5 The use of colour symbolism**

The use of colours plays a very important role in A streetcar named Desire. Throughout the play, Williams makes explicit use of colour as a means of emphasising the characters and the atmosphere of the setting. Colours in general are means which are used to express emotional moods, human qualities and hierarchical positions (Becker 81).

The two major characters, Blanche and Stanley, are each dressed in certain coloured clothes to underline their nature.

### **5.1 Blanche's symbolic colours**

The first apparent use of colour in the play is the symbolic meaning of Blanche's name, which, as already mentioned above, is French and means white. When she appears in scene one, "she is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and ear-rings of pearl, white gloves and a hat..." (Williams 117).

As already mentioned above, the colour white stands for purity and innocence, but it is also the colour of light and represents perfection and virginity (Becker, 330). This association stands in complete contrast to her actual behaviour and actions. Blanche is a seductive and promiscuous woman, who lies in order to maintain her image, and therefore Williams's use of this colour for her name and her outer appearance is quite ironic. A part of the irony is Blanche's association with the white hands of Yseult, which actually belong to a character who kills her lover.

In scene two Blanche talks to Stanley about honesty:

*Yes – yes – cards on the table....Well, life is too full of evasions and ambiguities, I think. I like an artist who paints in strong, bold colours, primary colours. I don't like pinks and creams and I never cared for wishy-washy people (Williams 137).*

This paragraph clearly shows the irony in her words, because she herself is the one who is embodying a distinct difference between her actions and her statements. She is the one who is neither straight-forward nor honest, but pretends to expect this from other people to a certain extent.

In scene nine, she changes her clothes from soft colours to strong bold ones for the first time: "She has on her scarlet satin robe" (Williams 200). The colour red symbolises love, passion and fertility on the positive side, but also fire and blood on the negative one, so this is the first time that her outer appearance actually matches her intentions (Becker 244). She is meeting Mitch in this scene, and her dress certainly shows the seductress in her. Mitch refuses to marry her because of her past, and after that, in scene ten, she wears a white satin evening gown, which implies that she returned to her habit of soft colours in order to underline her pureness and virtuous nature.

### **5.2 Stanley and his friends**

Stanley's tendency concerning colours is the exact opposite of Blanche's. He and his friends usually dress in rather solid materials, like cotton, or denim, and their clothes are mainly coloured in blue, and sometimes green. The first time their clothes' colours are mentioned is in scene one: "Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes" (Williams 116).

The colour blue is considered to be a symbol for the divine or heavenly, but also for the truth (Becker 44). Once again, Williams uses a certain colour to express a person's human qualities, although, in this case, the association is not ironic, but matches the person's behaviour. Stanley is an honest person with no sympathy for lies and superficiality. The colour blue also represents strength, masculinity, calm and authority, which clearly underlines Stanley's character. Stanley however is not the only character displayed in this way. His friends' colours, especially Mitch's are being described as well. Williams points out the aspect of masculinity in the following excerpt and underlines it by mentioning the men's clothing colours:

*The poker players – Stanely, Steve, Mitch, and Pablo – wear coloured shirts, solid blues, a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green, and they are men at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colours (Williams 143).*

Later, in scene nine, Mitch "comes around the corner in work clothes: blue denim shirt and pants. He is unshaven" (Williams 200). In this scene he meets Blanche, who is wearing her red satin robe. The confrontation of the colours red and blue, symbolises the confrontation between femininity and masculinity.

## **6 Music as a symbol for emotions**

Music plays an important role in A Streetcar named Desire because it appears in almost every scene and stresses the atmosphere in a very distinct way. There are two main types of music used in the stage directions: the blue piano and the Varsouviana Polka. Each one appears in scenes which are occupied by a certain emotional state of the main character Blanche.

### **6.1 The blue piano**

The blue piano is first mentioned in the introductory stage directions of the first scene: "This 'blue piano' expresses the spirit of the life which goes on there" (Williams 115). Throughout the play, the blue piano always appears when Blanche is talking about the loss of her family and Belle Reve, but it is also present during her meeting and kissing the young newspaper man. The blue piano thus stands for depression, loneliness and her longing for love, which the adjective blue already suggests. This quality is not identical with the colour symbolism of blue. It describes Blanche's emotions and represents her need for companionship and love, but also her hope, as the scene with the paper-boy shows. Mitch tells her in scene nine that he will not marry her due to her promiscuous past, "the distant piano is slow and blue" (Williams 207). Later, in scene ten, it grows louder when she is on the phone trying to get in touch with Shep Huntleigh. In this situation, her hopes are rising, and so does the piano. In the last scene, Blanche is being taken away to a mental institution, and Stanley and his friends play poker again: "The luxurious sobbing, the sensual murmur fade away under the swelling

music of the 'blue piano' and the muted trumpet" (Williams 226). The blue piano, accompanying the card game, symbolises Stanley's victory over Blanche.

## **6.2 The Varsouviana Polka**

The Varsouviana Polka on the other hand appears when Blanche is being confronted with her past and the truth, or when she talks about Allan. The reason for this seems obvious, for exactly this polka had been played when her husband Allan committed suicide. The polka represents death and immanent disaster. Blanche tells Mitch in scene six about Allan, and how she caught him cheating on her: "Polka music sounds, in a minor key faint with distance" (Williams 183). When Stanley gives her a ticket back to Laurel for a birthday presents, the situation means disaster for Blanche. She realises that she is not wanted anymore, and that she has nowhere to go, for Laurel is an unacceptable place to go to after all the incidents there:

"The Varsouviana music steals in softly and continues playing" (Williams 198). Again, the polka represents disaster. In scene eleven, the connection between the polka and Blanche's state of mind and emotion becomes even more obvious. She gets totally lost in her illusions about Shep Huntleigh and runs into her room when the doctor arrives: "The Varsouviana is filtered into weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle" (Williams 222). Therefore the polka's weird distortion matches the confusion in her mind, and gives a further dimension to the "Bois" element of Blanche's name as discussed earlier.

## **7 Animalistic images**

Throughout the play, Williams often describes certain characters as being animal-like. In literature in general, animals are often used as a means to underline a person's characteristic traits by comparing that person to a certain animal. Animals frequently represent the power of the subconscious (Becker 303).

### **7.1 Blanche's connection to the moth**

In the first scene, Blanche is compared to an animal: "There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth" (Williams 117). Since all dictionaries of symbols taken as reference guides only refer to butterfly, the butterfly will be taken into consideration and used as a comparison to the moth.

The moth and the butterfly have several things in common. They are both born as a caterpillar, then create a cocoon around themselves, in which they stay for a certain period of time, transform into a moth/butterfly and finally come out in their complete appearance. In medieval times, the butterfly was the most well-known symbol for the Resurrection (Lipffert 41). The butterfly leaves the unsightly cocoon and then lives in the light. For antiquity, the butterfly was a representative for the soul

(Thompson 32). Therefore her journey can be regarded as the journey of her soul. Modern interpretations of the butterfly as a symbol refer to the evocation of the echoing phrase flutter by (Ferber 37). This clearly underlines the statement saying that the butterfly can be associated with something fickle and wandering. It is also said to have a connection to Eros, the god of love (Becker 261).

All these attributes can be linked to Blanche's character. Due to her promiscuous past, she can be considered to be wandering and fickle, and her connection to Eros is quite obvious, too.

In contrast to the butterfly, who lives during daytime, the moth mainly lives during the night, which makes it a creature of the darkness, and the butterfly one of the light. As already mentioned above, the butterfly leaves the dark cocoon to live in the light, but the moth stays in darkness for that is the time when it is feeding. This can be adapted to Blanche as well. It seems as though—contrasting with her name—it is her fate to live in the darkness, which symbolises ignorance and the "dark dungeon of the limbs" in Virgil. Blanche does not find a way out of it: at the end of the play she is being taken away to the mental institution, which means that she finally does not conquer her fate.

## **7.2 Stanley and his wild image**

In contrast to Blanche, Stanley displays brutal and wild behaviour—from her perspective:

*He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's something – sub-human – something not quite the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something – ape-like about him, like one of those pictures...*  
(Williams 163).

Stanley is at this point compared to an ape. Characteristic traits of apes are mobility, intelligence, deceit, but also lasciviousness, the drive to imitate and quarrelsome stinginess (Becker 11). Especially the lasciviousness matches Stanley's character, for it can be detected in his love for wild sex, and his raping Blanche. With Stanley's connection to the ape, Williams again builds up a link to the jungle. Apes often live in the jungle, for it is their habitat. Therefore Stanley's habitat, the Elysian Fields, can be considered to be a jungle. It appears to be an appropriate place for Blanche to visit, when the "white woods" actually camouflage the "noises of the jungle" dominating her mind.

## **8 Conclusion**

This essay has tried to point out several of many symbols used in A Streetcar named Desire. It should have become clear that symbols are elaborate means of emphasis in order to intensify atmospheres and people. Williams introduces most of the symbols in the first scene, obviously to create a certain atmosphere and to give the reader already a deeper insight into the characters from the beginning. The use of colour symbolism, as well as the music occur in almost every scene in order to underline

the emotions and the clash between Blanche and Stanley. It should have become clear in this essay that certain symbols affect each other by emphasising contrary aspects or related qualities.

The symbols discussed in this essay are only a selection, for Williams makes excessive use of symbols in this play. Blanche's constant bathing and the poker game are just a few other symbols dealt with in the play, but due to the length and the extent of this essay they could not be discussed. The ones which were discussed can surely be explored more thoroughly, for example, a further exploration of the symbolic allusions used in this book might have been possible but that would have likewise exceeded the dimensions of this essay.

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