

## Blanche Dubois: The Modern Humpty Dumpty

The past. What came into your mind? Similar to a fingerprint, every past is different. A person is not human without a past. People connect because of and in spite of their pasts. Yet we also detach from one another and ourselves because of it. When I think of the past, I think of the recent past. At the end of sophomore year, I felt good about theatre. I received the third largest role in the spring musical, beating out a senior for the role of Mrs. Paroo in *The Music Man*. With only three open spots for the Honors Advanced Drama class, I had to be a shoe-in, right? Wrong. That class list destroyed me. I was shocked. Shaking intensely, I was incapable of typing an email to my teacher. I remember that I screamed so loud for such a long time, that on Monday, four days later, my voice was still gone. I am not saying that my not making Advanced Drama fits in perfectly with the loss of Blanche's loved ones, but being only eighteen, that moment defined me and continues to change my outlook on situations. I do not go through my life thinking of that moment and mourning what came because of it, but there are reminders that send me right back to the day it happened and the emotions I felt. Certain sights and sounds trigger people's memories. For me, seeing an Advanced show junior year made me feel sick, as I still tried to make sense of what happened. While I have forgiven, I have not forgotten how the class list shattered me. At some point, everyone is broken, but it is completely up to Humpty Dumpty to put himself together again. In his tragic play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Tennessee Williams interweaves the patterns of music and impurity in order to illustrate the effect of holding onto the past, which if not let go of, can lead to insanity.

Williams uses memories to highlight the impurity of Blanche Dubois' past in order to reveal her initial move toward insanity. Williams gives the audience very little of Blanche's past, however, he does provide as the play progresses further detail to her husband's suicide and her actions that follow. Williams uses the suicide of Blanche's homosexual husband to hint at the reasons for Blanche's actions. Blanche falls in love at a young age. Her light was her husband, Allan. Suddenly and unexpectedly, her light extinguishes and becomes dark. Just like there is no good way to find out your spouse is cheating on you, there is no good way of finding out your husband is gay, although there are better ways than others. Blanche remembers how she found out in the "worst of all possible ways" that her husband was homosexual (Williams 354). She remembers walking into a room that she thought was empty "which wasn't empty, but had two

people in it... the boy [she] had married and an older man who had been his friend for years” (354). She tries to suppress the thought that the man she loved never really loved her. After the “discovery,” Blanche, along with the two men “pretended that nothing had been discovered” and they “drove out to Moon Lake Casino, very drunk and laughing all the way” (354-355). However Blanche, sickened and torn by what she witnessed, cannot hold in what she is feeling forever. Forever is not long for Blanche because later that night “on the dance-floor--unable to stop [herself]—[she’d] suddenly said—‘I saw! I know! You disgust me’” with which Allan runs outside and shoots himself “so that the back of his head had been-blown away” (355). After marrying Allan, Blanche realized that Allan “came to [her] for help” (354). Unaware of what help Allan needed, Blanche continued to love him, hoping that her love would be enough. Even if she wanted to leave, she could not. Similar to wives like Stella, who return to their abusive husbands, Blanche is so comfortable with her husband’s quirks, that even though he seems to be driving her away, she only draws closer. After his suicide, Allan’s “searchlight” that had turned on Blanche’s world “turned off again” and now there is no light brighter in her life than the candle in the Kowalski’s kitchen (355). Because so little is known about Blanche’s past, Kenneth Elliott points out that “traumatic incidents from her past, especially her husband’s suicide, shed light on her behavior but never fully explain it” (Elliott 50). Williams artfully adds in more of Blanche’s past throughout the play, but because it is connected to Allan’s death in some way, all that can be inferred is that Blanche is a “victim of a sickness that came from her husband killing himself after she told him his homosexuality disgusted her” (Adler 255). Kenneth Elliot also perfectly notes that Allan’s suicide “haunted Blanche, and she compensated for it by losing herself in anonymous sexual liaisons” (Elliott 47). Lost without Allan, Blanche takes it upon herself to go any extreme to relieve the pain of losing her husband so tragically and suddenly.

Williams uses Allan’s suicide as the starting point of Blanche’s downfall, as she unsuccessfully tries to find and feel the same love that she felt with Allan. Blanche recalls to Mitch that she “stayed at a hotel called the Tarantula Arms,” however, Stanley is told that after she lost Belle Reve, Blanche moved to the Flamingo, a “second class hotel which has the advantage of not interfering in the private social life of the personalities there” (Williams 386, 360). With Blanche being a Romanticist liar and Stanley getting his information from a second hand source, the audience must struggle to find the truth amid the lies. However, because Williams is a symbolism junkie, one may conclude that the hotel is called the Flamingo and

Blanche exaggerates the name to the “Tarantula Arms,” romanticizing the idea of her many intimacies as “victims,” just as she, herself was a victim of Allan (386). Even though she calls her lovers victims, Blanche represents the ultimate victim. Blanche’s tragic flaw is a combination of not realizing reality and distorting the truth of the past. Stella Adler points out that Blanche “doesn’t face the truth that she could be called a whore. It’s not in her understanding anymore to realize that if you go around having sex with boys, you can be called a whore” (Adler 255). For most, hindsight is 20/20 but not for Blanche. While she realizes that “intimacies with strangers was all [she] seemed able to fill [her] empty heart with,” she does not realize the damning effects of living that lifestyle and chooses to ignore the unavoidable consequences (Williams 386). Sex is a drug to Blanche, providing temporary satisfaction and with every sexual encounter she becomes more immune to the satisfaction. Panic from the realization that she constantly needs more sex drives her “from one to another, hunting for some protection” (386). Most people do not search for protection amongst intimacies with strangers. But what does Blanche really want to be protected from? She wants protection from heartache. Terrified of finding another Allan, Blanche turns “wholly to that kind of fleeting “intimate” affair with strangers in which no deeply personal demands can be placed upon her” (Berkman 36). However, Blanche becomes so numb to one night stands that she searches for another “real” relationship. But even this decision is affected by past memories of Allan. Blanche always refers to Allan as a boy and so it is only necessary that she ends up in a relationship with one of her students, “a seventeen-year-old boy” (Williams 386). While Blanche never mentions Allan’s age, she does say that she fell in love at the age of sixteen, which infers that Allan was around sixteen or seventeen. After realizing her need for more than fleeting affairs, Blanche looks for another boy so she can start where Allan left her. But, yet again, she experiences destruction because of her relationship with a boy. Fired from her job at the high school in Laurel “before the spring term ended” Blanche is told to “move on to some fresh territory” (362, 363). Leonard Berkman writes that “Blanche’s struggle to achieve intimacy [is] central to the tensions of the play” (Berkman 35). Until Blanche achieves mutual love and devotion at the same extreme with which she loved Allan, she will continue down the destructive path of the past.

Williams uses the presence of music to demonstrate Blanche Dubois' emotions. Music carries Blanche and the audience throughout the entire show, building suspense and tension, similar to the *Jaws* theme song. Williams introduces music early on in the play signifying the

importance and the connections between characters and music. It is common for a play to begin with music or for music to play as the curtain opens, but very rarely does the audience hear the opening music throughout the entire show. The first thing the audience hears is the “blue piano.” In the stage directions, a beautiful description is given with the “blue piano.” In *“this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This ‘blue piano’ expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here”* (Williams 243). Keep in mind that the audience does not receive this information, so it is up to the actors to lead the audience to the realization of the importance of music and sound. This description suggests that the “blue piano” is simply part of the environment. This is not the case. Some incorrectly connect this music to Stanley because he “is the way of life in the Quarter--vibrant, vulgar, blues-esque” (Bak 5). Conversely, the “blue piano” is actually associated with Blanche because “it first plays when she enters and continues throughout *Streetcar* when she is onstage, either in person or as the topic of discussion” (Bak 5). *“Blanche rises and crosses leisurely to a small white radio and turns it on”* to drown out the Varsouviana that is playing in her head (294). The color of the radio signifies Blanche’s connection to music. In modern works, white does not represent purity, but the exact opposite! Blanche is either wearing white or red in every scene, both representing impurity. White symbolizes the fact that Blanche tries to cover up her past. Red represents the guilt she feels in connection with her husband’s suicide. Although Allan only appears in memories, Williams gives him music as well. In fact, because “the music and aural accents provide an underlying structure to *Streetcar* which melds all the elements of the play together,” only three characters associate with music: Blanche, Allan, and Stanley (Bak 2). At the mention of Allan’s name, *“Polka music sounds”* (Williams 355). Before Allan is mentioned by name, a story is inferred by music and Blanche’s reaction. When Stanley asks Blanche if she was married once, *“the music of the polka rises up, faint in the distance”* (268). This polka music, the Varsouviana, we later learn, is the music playing when Allan kills himself. Stanley has both music and noise. His music is the honky-tonk with trumpets and drums and his noise is one of a locomotive and of *“inhuman voices like cries in a jungle”* (399). For example, *“under cover of the train’s noise Stanley enters from outside”* when Blanche is insulting him (322). It is not until Blanche becomes increasingly aware of Stanley’s potential threat, that the audience is introduced to the inhuman cries. It is essential for the audience to pick up on the fact that the music and noise

throughout the play is purposefully placed if they truly want to understand the undertones and foreshadowing artfully written in by Williams.

Williams mixes and distorts music and noise to help display the emotions and mental state of Blanche, who is incapable of vocalizing her inward torture. Music carries Blanche throughout the entire show. When she gets into arguments or talks about the past, stage directions indicate that music starts to rise with the action. As Blanche describes the night of Allan's suicide, "*a locomotive is heard approaching outside. She claps her hands to her ears and crouches over. The headlight of the locomotive glares into the room as it thunders past. As the noise recedes she straightens slowly and continues speaking*" (354). Because neither Allan nor Blanche associate with the sound of a locomotive, it can only be assumed that foreshadowing has come into play. Allan did not ruin the relationship between him and Blanche. The older man who was in bed with him did. The locomotive foreshadows that Stanley will ruin Blanche. A locomotive can be frightening. In the crowded New York subway, one push from a stranger can throw someone directly in front of an oncoming train. A locomotive is powerful and will not stop once at full speed. When Blanche and Stanley have their confrontation at the end, Blanche's music, the "*barely audible 'blue piano' begins to drum up louder*" and inhuman jungle cries are heard along with the sight of "*grotesque and menacing*" shadows (Williams 399, 400). Earlier, Blanche describes Stanley as "*bestial*," comparing him to an ape (322). This increase in volume coincides with Blanche's increasing fear of Stanley. Confused and overwhelmed by her situation, Blanche finds herself trapped between the past and the present. "*She turns confusedly and makes a faint gesture*" similar to the "*indefinite gesture*" Blanche makes when she first meets Stanley and tries to conclude that to interest Stanley, "a woman would have to," with which Stanley finishes her thought by stating, "lay... her cards on the table" (401, 279). Blanche realizes that she has no more cards left to play and sinks to her knees, recognizing defeat. Unable to reveal the horror she feels by herself, "Blanche's terror is reflected by these grotesque sights and sounds" (Elliott 53). Williams infers that Stanley takes control of the situation when the sound of the "blue piano" "*turns into the roar of an approaching locomotive*," pushing Blanche closer to the edge of the train platform of her mind (Williams 400). Williams announces Stanley's victory over Blanche as the honky-tonk music "*from the Four Deuces sound[s] loudly*" (402).

Williams combines music, memories, and impurity to physically and mentally shatter the fragile Blanche Dubois. A wise person once said that a broken person is easily shattered. Broken

by the past because of sexual impurity which she remembers through music, it is only appropriate that Blanche is shattered by a combination of what broke her. Williams makes Blanche incapable of forgetting the past, which is the cause for not only a bitterness towards the world, but also a weakened and still weakening spirit. After losing Belle Reve and being kicked out of Laurel, Blanche has nowhere else to go but to her sister in New Orleans. But for Blanche, New Orleans is no perfect setting! The perfect setting for Blanche would be at Belle Reve, with her family (if only they hadn't died!) When Blanche leaves Belle Reve, she also leaves her sanity. Not all at once. Think of it as instead of leaving a bread trail to find her way back, she leaves a, for lack of a better term, "sanity trail," so her thoughts always return to the "good" life at Belle Reve. However, the memories of Allan's suicide and her family's deaths sweep away the good memories she leaves behind leaving her with the burden of the past. New Orleans is not the *worst* place for Blanche. She could still be lodging at the Flamingo. Blanche may not see this and acts like she doesn't, but she needs to get away from her hometown. She needs love. Blanche is told to "take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields" (246). Ironically, in Blanche's case, Elysian means "of, relating to, or characteristic of heaven or paradise." She even scoffs at the name! The streetcar brought her where she's "not wanted and where [she's] ashamed to be" (321). Because Blanche fixates on the past, she becomes incapable of growth and begins to deteriorate. Blanche walks around with two traumatic events on her shoulders and is unwilling and unable to forget her broken past. "Blanche's memory is largely restricted to two traumatic events: the suicide of her young homosexual husband... and in later years her concern and care for surviving kinfolk..." (Isaac 167). Before reaching New Orleans, Blanche figuratively takes a street-car named Desire, which takes her to her husband, Allan. After discovering Allan's homosexuality, Blanche unknowingly transfers to a street-car called Cemeteries. She and Allan "danced the Varsouviana! Suddenly in the middle of the dance the boy [Blanche] had married broke away from [her] and ran out of the casino. A few moments later--a shot!" (Williams 355) Blanche spends the rest of her life trying to block out death, but the "Grim Reaper had put up his tent on [her] doorstep" (261). After Stella leaves Belle Reve, all of Blanche's family starts dying. Blanche's ride in a street-car named Cemeteries is a long, lonely, and painful trip. In Blanche's famous monologue, she complains that Stella "just came home in time for the funerals," which are "pretty compared to deaths" because "funerals are quiet, but deaths--not always" (261). The death of her family

haunts Blanche so much so that she remembers that “sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, ‘Don't let me go!’” (261) Blanche wishes that all she saw were the “gorgeous boxes” her family was packed away in (261). While Blanche no longer suffers from physical death, it follows her wherever she goes. When Blanche has an affair with one of her 17 year old students, she is fired from her job by Mr. Graves. This is the final stop of the figurative street-car named Cemeteries. Weighed down by the guilt of her husband’s suicide, the death of her family, and the shame of being kicked out of town, Dame Blanche finally breaks.

Williams dooms Blanche with her sexual past and shatters her with a taste of her own medicine. Although Williams “sympathetically depicts [Blanche’s] many sexual encounters as an escape from the death and illness with which she was confronted in her home life,” he knows that he has to destroy her by what she takes refuge in (Elliott 45). Blanche tells Mitch that “the first time [she] laid eyes on [Stanley] [she] thought to [herself], that man is my executioner! That man will destroy me” (Williams 351). Sadly, she is right. After hearing that Blanche loses Belle Reve, the only thing Stanley focuses on is getting Blanche out of his house and out of his life, and he will do anything to make that happen. As time goes by in Laurel, Blanche becomes a “town character. Regarded as not just different but downright loco—nuts” (361). New Orleans is Blanche’s last hope; “there [was] nowhere else [she] could go” (387). After Allan’s death, “intimacies with strangers was all [Blanche] seemed able to fill [her] empty heart with” (386). Panic drives Blanche to seek refuge, but in a small town, it is impossible to keep big secrets. Even an army camp close to Laurel labels Blanche’s place as “Out-of-Bounds” (361). The very thing Blanche seeks refuge in brings justice. As Stanley closes in on Blanche, he reminds her that they’ve “had this date with each other from the beginning” (402). Although there is no verbal confirmation of the rape, Stella does say that she “couldn’t believe [Blanche’s] story and go on living with Stanley” and chooses a man who beats her over her sister (405). A broken Blanche is finally shattered by the one thing she takes refuge in.

Williams makes Blanche incapable of forgetting the past by having her constantly, yet unwillingly torture herself by replaying the Varsouviana in her head. Blanche may physically be in New Orleans, but mentally, she relives the night her husband, Allan, kills himself. “*The [‘Varsouviana’] is in her mind*” (379). She constantly struggles trying to forget everything that leads to and including Allan’s death. Blanche obsesses over the white radio in the Kowalski’s

kitchen as she tries to drown out the music in her head. Before Williams outright states that the music is in her head, Mitch hints at it by asking “What music?” to which Blanche replies, “the ‘Varsouviana’! The polka tune they were playing when Allan – Wait! [*A distant revolver shot is heard. Blanche seems relieved.*] There now, the shot! It always stops after that. [*The polka music dies out again.*] Yes, now it’s stopped” (381). It is not the Varsouviana that drives Blanche insane, it is the memory that comes with it. The fact that Blanche cannot stop the music in her head until she hears a shot proves that she is incapable of letting go of the past. Music contradicts itself in *Streetcar*. It causes insanity, and yet it is the only thing that drowns itself out. *This* is why Blanche obsesses over music. Music carries Blanche throughout the entire show. Music brings Blanche her last drops of sanity all the while driving her away from it. After reading through the play a second and third time, every stage direction brought significance to Blanche’s relationship with music. “*Blanche rises and crosses leisurely to a small white radio and turns it on*” to drown out the Varsouviana that is playing in her head (294). Williams uses music to connect scenes together. Although Mitch, the love interest, does not have a musical motive, he does provide relief to Blanche by taking her mind off the music in her head. Even after he does not show up to celebrate Blanche’s birthday, “*the polka tune stops*” when Mitch rings the doorbell (379). Blanche tells Mitch that she forgives him for standing her up because “it’s such a relief to see [him]. [He has] stopped that polka tune [she] had caught in [her] head” (380). However, this peace is short lived. As soon as Mitch tells Blanche he does not want to marry her anymore, Blanche demands that he leaves taking with him Blanche’s last hope of happiness. “She hears the music of the past and says, ‘I think I’m going to faint’...Blanche lives with memories and recreates them a lot. Tennessee says it is memory of the heart. Those memories are unbearable, but if she gives them up, she will be lost” (Adler 255-256). After the rape scene, “*the ‘Varsouviana’ is filtered into a weird distortion, accompanied by the cries and noises of the jungle*” which first appear during the confrontation, connecting the reality of Blanche’s nightmares and bringing to light the fact that Blanche finally loses her grip on the one thing keeping her going: memories (Williams 414). Shattered, Blanche “can no longer distinguish time” and “the result is a combination” of Allan and Stanley’s musical motifs (Bak 6). When Studs Terkel interviewed Williams, Williams said, “I have no idea what happens to Blanche after the play ends, I know she is shattered,” which proves that Blanche is shattered by the very thing that holds her together (Isaac 180).



This is where Blanche's story is different from my story. I realized that I cannot change the past and find no use living in it. Yes, I will hold on to the painful memories for the rest of my life but I will also hold onto epiphanies made in the midst of trials and in hindsight. It is one thing to remember the past, it is another to live in it. Thinking that being a Presidential Scholar, having received a short-list letter, and staying in my audition fifteen minutes over, I had to be a shoe-in for ACU's theatre program, right? Wrong. After reading the rejection letter, I said "this feels just like sophomore year." However, there is one big difference. I know that better things are coming. Because I remember the past, I am broken but not shattered by a reoccurrence of unsuspected disappointment. Blanche, however, is shattered because she cannot differentiate the past from the present. Unable to let go of the tragedies filling her past, Blanche is incapable of moving on. Just like me, the past defines Blanche. Conversely, Blanche challenges the past and tries to rewrite it, only making her situation worse. Surrounded by music and impurity, Blanche is unable to escape the past, bringing her to her demise. And all the king's horses and all the king's men couldn't put Humpty together again.

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