

STREETCAR AND THE OLD PLANTATION

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In 1961 I was living in Chapel Hill and attending the University of North Carolina. It was my habit to watch late night television on the Raleigh channel, which in those days signed off at midnight with a collage of visuals. The first frame pictured a large plantation house with white columns through a veil of swaying willows, with the Norman Luboff chorus doing their sostenuto version of "Dixie" for musical background. "Oh, I wish I was in the land of cot-tón (n-huun)" The mansion was flanked by shots of antique cannons on the Statehouse lawn, and, on the town square, the Confederate rifleman facing North. The romanticism of the imagery and the music held me, Yankee though I am, till fade out and the appearance of the test pattern.

This nightly celebration, and others like it in song and story, has kept the icon of the old plantation and its myth fresh in audience imaginations. So when Blanche DuBois disembarks from the streetcar and enters an older section of New Orleans, the sphere of the Kowlaskis, she brings with her memories of the same plantation that regularly graced that North Carolina sign-off.

Though there is no lengthy description of it, the image of the DuBois estate has substance for personae in the play. Eunice, the next door neighbor, has seen a picture of "your home place, the plantation ... a great big place with white columns." Stanley, who is patently no Southerner, calls it "the country place," the "plantation," "the place with the columns."¹ The large mansion with capitals like a Greek temple, majestic trees on rolling acres contrasts vividly with the crowded Kowalski flat on a city streetcar line. The portable feature of the plantation image is conveyed in its name: Belle Reve.

In the mythology of the South the mansion and the plantation stand for all the glories of life there "before the war". A gracious, carefree society of close-knit families, surrounded by congenial, like-minded neighbors, enjoyed a round of entertainments: teas, luncheons, dinner parties, and dances. Blanche's wardrobe reflects her erstwhile status in this society. She dresses daintily "in a white suit and fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district." (*Streetcar* 15.) She plays the part she looks, the refined lady and

the flirtatious adventurer, in a state of electrically nervous tension. Blanche dresses and acts the role of the traditional Southern belle, young flower of the plantation. All of her finery is shockingly out of place in this shabby and crowded neighborhood.

A century and more after the North-South hostilities, these images on the TV screen and in Williams' play attest to a regional identity still distinct from the national standard. Some contemporary Southerners still explicitly reject incorporation into main-stream American culture. In a 1992 book John Shelton Reed insists: I don't want to impose Southern ways on the world; I just want to hang onto them in the South."² What can a battered and embattled culture do to preserve its identity and escape "the disintegrating effect of nationalism and the pressures of conformity?" A celebrated historian, C. Van Woodward, proposed that the South has resisted this loss of regional characteristics and absorption in an "American" identity because its past differs sharply from that of the mainstream culture. Unlike the collective experience of the majority, the experience of the Southerner includes large components of frustration, failure and defeat.³

American culture has generally focused on the freedom from the Old World evils of tyranny, monarchism, aristocracy and privilege and on the sense of moral superiority it engendered. Southerners, on the other hand, tried to find virtue in the great social evil of their region, but over two centuries their persistent attempts at justification finally and permanently failed. Whereas, through the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century, the rest of the nation was preoccupied with its myth of innocence and its dream of perfection, the states of the Confederacy had to bear their loss of sovereignty and the guilty burden of their slaveholding past.

So the myths that supported the Southern culture gradually suffered erosion at the hands of critics and historians; among them were not a few Southerners. The plantation myth had celebrated an ante-bellum life of leisure and abundance, grace and elegance for the owners while happy black workers benefited from the civilizing tutelage of master and mistress. This utopian picture gradually yielded to sober facts. Only a relatively few estates below the Mason-Dixon line were large estates with the accompanying life style, and the slave system and its aftermath hardly fostered family life, education or advancement for blacks. A Southern Agrarian critic, Allen Tate, makes the point:

The evil of slavery was twofold, for the 'peculiar Institution' not only used human being for a purpose for which God had not intended them; it made it possible for the white man to misuse and exploit nature for his own power and glory.⁴

This exploitation tended to undermine the moral fibre of the society. Though, significantly enough, neither slavery nor blacks are ever mentioned, the brief history of Belle Reve which Blanche narrates to Stella, Stanley, and Mitch emphasizes the improvidence and moral laxity of the family's males that led to the loss of the property. She stayed behind after their father's death and dealt with the funerals of other relatives while Stella went off to the city with her "Polack." To an accusing Stanley who wants to know about the money from the sale of the mansion, Blanche puts her cards on the table—there is no money. Belle Reve was not sold, but "lost; lost, lost"; now it is only a bundle of legal papers in a tin box. (*Streetcar* 43) Of the family only Stella and Blanche are left, and Blanche has nowhere else to go.

The omission of any mention of black servants at Belle Reve, is exceptional in fiction that deals with a plantation setting. Eunice, noting the size of the plantation in Stella's picture, remarks to Blanche that such a place "must be awful hard to keep up." (*Streetcar* 17.) Blanche is not interested in picking up on that point. Generally the myth includes in the cast of characters the faithful "mammy" whose devotion outlasts prosperity, the butler or foreman whose attachment to the family and/or the land is self-sacrificing. A black cadre who must have served Belle Reve play a ghostly role in the plantation's history, providing the leisure and the arrogance for the "epic fornications" Blanche attributes to her forbears (*Streetcar* 43).

Her narrative certainly testifies to "large components of frustration, failure and defeat" and ultimate isolation which is the mark of Southern identity. Playing the Southern belle requires a great deal of energy from one in Blanche's state of nervous exhaustion. She tries desperately to attract one of the poker party, Mitch, who shows traces of Southern gentility. Stanley makes fun of him because he lives at home and is devoted to his mother. On their first date he brings roses, and he "cannot imagine anyone being rude" to Blanche. Mitch has some inkling about the rules of the game. The belle will flutter her eyelashes and admire her caller's masculinity while the fascinated gentleman maintains a respectful distance. Because she is concerned about retaining her appearance and composure under pressure, Blanche resorts to long

baths and frequent nips of Stanley's liquor. She shows her frustration at Stella's passive acceptance of Stanley's domination and Mitch's gaucherie, but she battles to keep control. She holds on to her ideal, the "beautiful dream," as long as she can.

Her defeat, however, is inevitable. The plantation is long lost, and Blanche is left to shift for herself on the salary of a high school English teacher. Her recent past is spotted with attempts to keep her youth and demonstrate her allure—both necessary for the image of the Southern belle—by affairs with soldiers from the nearby Army camp, and, most lamentably, with her students. The small town she lives and works in does not offer anonymity or privacy; she is dismissed from her job in disgrace and must leave. So she has arrived on the Kowalski doorstep.

Stanley is the agent of her destruction. He makes it very clear that he has no

truck with Southern romanticism and no sympathy for mythic ideals. The plantation means property and money to him, and he wants his share of it. That it was "lost," not sold makes no sense to him. He takes the papers from Blanche; he will sort them out for business purposes. He sees her as an intruder in the household: monopolizing the single bathroom, disturbing the poker games, and alienating his wife with reminders of past gentility. And he will strip her of her pretensions and her prospects.

Blanche is not forthcoming about her immediate past and Stanley uses his contacts to investigate it. "Our supply man down at the plant has been going through Laurel for years and he knows all about her and everybody else in the town of Laurel knows all about her" (*Streetcar* 99). Stanley goes on to reveal that her time there was peppered with scandals, the management of the hotel where she was living turned her out and the principal of the school where she taught fired her for her involvement with a student. He warns Mitch, her prospective suitor, about her past. So with this discovery this Southern gentleman *manque* finds Blanche "not clean enough to bring in the house with [his] mother" (*Streetcar* 121). Though Stanley knows that Blanche cannot return to Laurel, he presents her with a bus ticket back, making it quite clear that she can no longer stay with the Kowalskis.

From her arrival Blanche has viewed Stanley as a "foreigner," a man who has no manners, knows no tradition. When Stella remarks that Stanley is Polish, Blanche replies: "They're something like Irish, aren't they? ... Only not so—highbrow?" (*Streetcar* 23). To her Stanley is a "Polack, without a

nerve in [his] body." Stanley, who has her ticket back to Laurel in his pocket, can now put her in her place: "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles. But what I am is one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack" (*Streetcar* 110). The phone rings, and Blanche has no opportunity to reply to this manifesto which drips with the arrogance of second-generation immigrants who pride themselves on their separation from Old World traditions. Answering the phone, Stanley exercises his authority as captain of the bowling team by rejecting Mac's proposal to play at Riley's. Despite his ancestral predilection for bowling and beer, Stanley's doctrinaire Americanism has characteristics described by the myth-making author of *Our Town*: "Americans are abstract. They are disconnected. They have a relation, but it is to everywhere, to everybody, and to always." According to Mr. Wilder, what captures the imagination of the generic American and fashions his identity is not attachment to a past or a place, but the projects and ideas that unite him with others and propel him into the future.⁵ Stanley's projects and ideas are simple and

practical; they do not include housing a high-strung, intrusive visitor like Blanche for any notable length of time.

Blanche has no feasible defense against Stanley's accusations and Mitch's recriminations. The playwright has piled up details from the past to stir sympathy for Blanche: her homosexual husband, his suicide, deaths in the family, the loss of Belle Reve, her solitary life in Laurel. Her lies and evasions are embedded in a desperate attempt to sustain the myth and her role in it. When Mitch accuses her of lying, she pleads with him: "Don't say I lied to you... Never inside, I didn't lie in my heart." (*Streetcar* 119.) In her heart she is still the Southern belle; she cannot imagine an alternative life. So to deny that image is to lose her identity; she would become a nonentity in a desolate wasteland, "the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" (*Streetcar* 20).

The director of the Broadway production, Elia Kazan, saw the dilemma that the play proposed and was disturbed by it:

He's [Stanley has] got things the way he wants them around there and he does *not* want them upset by a phony, corrupt, sick, destructive woman.

This makes Stanley right. Are we going into the era of Stanley? He may be practical and right ... but where the hell does it leave us?⁶

We too may be uncomfortable with any response to Kazan's question. Blanche offers Stella a description of Stanley that suffers from rhetorical overstatement, but it contains more than a kernel of truth. Stanley acts like an animal, has an animal's habits. "Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! ... He is a survivor of the stone age!" (*Streetcar* 72). Southern code of manners aside, his actions often violate generally accepted norms of civility. He rummages through Blanche's belongings, battles her for the bathroom, and carries her to his bed while his wife is in labor with their child. Stanley has his 100% American virility and practicality to offer; Blanche has the tatters of a genteel past and ruinous present. Fortunately, in this case the play does not force us to opt for the values of either persona.

In the closing scene of *Streetcar* with Blanche on the understanding and sympathetic doctor's arm, we are left with a strong reminder of the plantation myth. From an analytic perspective, when we designate a narrative "mythical," we affirm its fictive nature, at once false and true. As Lillian Feder observes, myths express our deepest self-deceptions as well as our most admirable aspirations.⁷ Blanche represents the durability of the myth's traditional values, while Stanley shines a pitiless light on her attached self-deceptions. So as Blanche is committed to the custody of the state hospital, her dream is institutionalized by defenders of Southern identity in the media, the chamber of commerce, and the statehouse. Belle Reve and the traditional values it embodies persists for the audience as a permanent gloss on the struggle between Blanche and Stanley. Today the acceptance of this Southern tradition, as Blanche exemplifies, depends mostly on "the kindness of strangers."

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NOTES

- ¹ Tennessee Williams, *Streetcar Named Desire* (New American Library, 1947) 17, 33, 36, 112. Subsequent references in the text.
- ² John Shelton Reed, *Whistling Dixie* (U of Missouri Press, 1990) 61.
- ³ C. Van Woodward, *The Burden of Southern History* (LSU Press, 1960) 15, 19.
- ⁴ Allen Tate, "Faulkner, *Sanctuary* and the Southern Myth," *Memoirs and Opinions, 1926-1974* (Shallow Press, 1975) 144-154.
- ⁵ Thornton Wilder, *American Characteristics and other Essays*, ed. Donald Gallup (Harper & Row, 1979) 15-17.
- ⁶ Quoted in Toby Cole and Helen Krich Chinoy, *Directing the Play* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1953) 307
- ⁷ Lillian Feder, *Ancient Myth and Modern Poetry* (Princeton University Press, 1971) 26.