

# *The Psychosocial Effects of Beauty in A Streetcar Named Desire*

By Paul Adams, English 428

Throughout history, civilizations across the globe have prioritized physical attractiveness and moral character as critical aspects of feminine beauty. During the Modernist period, society valued, as evident by the advertisements published in periodicals, women with youth and cleanliness in both body and spirit. These standards were especially important for those considering the prospect of marriage. As a consequence, many Modernist works focus on the extent to which female characters embody these qualities or attempt to do so. As with the case of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), Blanche DuBois is unable to possess these indispensable characteristics in full due to her promiscuous past and cynical perspective on age, yet she nevertheless attempts to create a fantasy within the minds of others and in her own to a degree, suggesting she remains the chaste, naïve, and youthful girl she once was, maintaining herself in a state in which society would gladly accept her as an eligible bachelorette. Even as the Modernist media advertised products for helping women attain or to at least give the appearance of having these desirable qualities, selections of Modernist literature give insight into the extent to which women during this period would sacrifice themselves and their identity to acquire habitual cleanliness, health, and youth.

Many modernist periodicals include advertisements for soaps and other cleaning products with zealous claims. For example, *The American*

*Magazine* in 1910 contained an advertisement for a bathing regimen that effectively “removes superfluous fat and gives a slender, firm stylish figure. Merely use a little twice a week in warm water when taking a bath. No need of taking drugs or starving yourself” (Landshut 110). In building credibility, the ad mentions how the saline solution has been “patronized by royalty [and has become] famous for centuries. Endorsed by the Medical Pro-

fession. Praised by those who have used it” (Landshut 110). Regardless whether one should be persuaded by its claims, the advertisement nevertheless reveals to readers the extent to which bathing had become an important ritual in Modernist society particularly among women with the idea of purging themselves of impurities.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, bathing and the use of perfume are

Blanche’s central activities throughout much of the play, resulting in a borderline obsession. Just as she arrives at the home of the Kowalskis, upon meeting her sister Stella in Scene One, Blanche insists “now, then, let me look at you. But don’t you look at me, Stella, no, no, no, not till later, not till I’ve bathed and rested” (Williams 11). During the beginning of the play, the viewer is introduced to the entirety of Blanche’s predicament as she begins living with Stella and Stanley, namely adapting to working class conditions in a different culture and geographic location, satiating her alcoholism, and escaping her notoriety from working at a hotel known for its special accommodations. She is ashamed of herself.



Figure 3 Cropped screen shot of Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois from the trailer for the film *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951). Image available at Wikimedia Commons.

She wishes to take an initial bath after having met her sister to figuratively wash and rid herself of her past so that she may have a new start. In Scene Two, as she leaves the bathroom and seeks to attract Stanley's undivided attention, she shouts to him, "hello, Stanley! Here I am, all freshly bathed and scented, and feeling like a brand new human being" (Williams 36). Blanche finds an inexplicable sense of comfort in the bathing ritual and additionally in the scent she wears.

Perfume historically has served a dual purpose, offering its wearer and those around a pleasant aroma and, in a more pragmatic sense, masking odors. Just as the baths physically and, in Blanche's mind, symbolically cleanse her of the past, her love for perfume is representative of her desire to conceal her true identity and outlook on life under the pretense of Southern gentility and the values she had adopted as a young girl. Her use of perfume later in Scene Two demonstrates it has a power of its own, having an ability to influence even the behavior and temperament of Stanley, the embodiment of unyielding, ruthless authoritarianism.

As Stanley begins elaborating upon the tenets of the Napoleonic code as they apply to the roles of men and women in Louisiana, the stage direction calls for Blanche to spritz "herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the atomizer and slams it down on the dresser. She throws back her head and laughs" (Williams 41). Stanley, with his hyper-masculine temperament, decidedly rejects the perfume because of its feminine scent; he finds wearing it would additionally compromise a fundamental aspect of his character. Unlike Blanche, Stanley is sincere, genuine, and forthright, however merciless and severe he may come across to others. He rejects the effort to mask his character behind the sweet smell of cleanliness and perfume. Stanley truthfully is what Blanche calls the "survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill of the jungle" (83), yet he never deviates from the essence of his character. Blanche, however, symbolically needs the jasmine perfume because she wishes to preserve the façade of a Southern belle, an identity she can no longer sustain due to the tragic circumstances and demise of her former husband. By spraying Stanley with the perfume, she not only exercises dominance over Stanley by attempting to change his naturally sweaty, masculine stench, but she also demonstrates to Stanley that his

dissatisfaction in her wardrobe reveals his lack of taste, something she and Stella both possess as a result of their upbringing. As Blanche converses with her sister upon hearing the news of Stella's pregnancy, she realizes Stanley, unlike men of her former social circle, is "just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume, but maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve" (Williams 45). Blanche begins to understand how her heritage and the lifestyle of her childhood are incompatible with the way in which Modernist life operates, requiring one to adopt a sense of "autonomy, novelty, speed, success, and uniqueness" (Dolfsma 351) underlying any kind of façade one may present to the world. Nevertheless, she continues to showcase herself as the ideal of feminine beauty, outdated though she may be.

Another characteristic valued of women during the Modernist period was the appearance of health and vitality. *The Atlantic Monthly* of 1910 included an advertisement for a coffee additive called Postum. The ad attracted readers by elaborating upon the positive effects of abstaining from excessive eating and drinking in order to avoid the ill effects these activities may result in. It begins, "Some are fair because they happen so. Others attain the clear, rosy complexion, smooth velvety skin, bright eyes, easy, graceful poise, as a result of carefully selected food and drink that properly nourishes the body"; the ad acknowledges that whatever the cause, "a fair complexion is the outward token of health within" ("Two Classes of Fair Women" 97). In an example from another Modernist text, the narrator of *The Professor's House* (1925) by Willa Cather describes the sheer magnetism of St. Peter's daughter Rosamund as the embodiment of what the Modernists considered healthy, vibrant, and exuding with life. Standing apart from her family members, she is recognizable for having a "colouring [that] was altogether different; dusky black hair, deep dark eyes, a soft white skin with rich brunette red in her cheeks and lips. Nearly everyone considered Rosamond brilliantly beautiful" (Cather 26). Her appearance is not only a spectacle in its own right, but a representation of a modern women living life with vivacity and exuberance as manifested by her appearance. Throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*, in contrast, Blanche must contend with her unattractive state of being as an unhealthy alcoholic while attempting to fulfill the obligation to appear to be a vivacious, social drinker.

It is one of the Blanche's greatest concerns that she should exhibit in public poor restraint with regard to alcohol consumption because it is an activity that notoriously leads to physical and psychological distress and irresponsibility, markers of poor health habits and a lack of femininity that could diminish her chances with potential romantic partners, like Stanley's old-fashioned friend, Mitch. Regardless, after meeting with her sister, Blanche "rushes to the closet and removes the bottle; she is shaking all over and panting for breath as she tries to laugh. The bottle nearly slips from her grasp" (Williams 11). Given the involuntary movement of her hands and the clumsiness she exhibits during this scene, the play reveals early on her obsession with a probable addiction to alcohol. Even as she reassures Stella that "your sister hasn't turned into a drunkard, she's just all shaken up and hot and tired and dirty" (12), her very acknowledgement of the label she uses reveals to the audience and to Stella that she truly is in denial of her negative health habits. Even as she indulges herself secretly in the absence of guests, she must carry on each day with as healthy an image as possible, an image she creates through bathing, perfume, and low levels of light.

As Mitch rings the door and waits for Blanche during their last significant encounter in Scene Nine, Blanche, having had "on the table beside [the] chair, a bottle of liquor and a glass" (139), is startled and "rushes about frantically, hiding the bottle in a closet, crouching at the mirror and dabbing her face with cologne and powder" (139). Just as the cologne may be used to cover the stench of the alcohol she consumed, the powder additionally serves to cover and mask her unwholesome appearance for that specific moment in time with Mitch. Even as Mitch's attitude towards Blanche has changed from one of admiration to one of disdain for her constant lies about her true identity and past associations with other men, Blanche insists on continuing the façade of an innocuous Southern belle with little knowledge of the world. Just as Mitch admits he was to end his courtship with her, Blanche remembers, "oh, yes—liquor! We've had so much excitement around here this evening that I am boxed out of my mind! . . . Here's something, Southern Comfort! What is that, I wonder" (142). Although she has been drinking the same liquor prior to Mitch's visit, she hides it as a result of being consciously aware of the social implications of a single woman of marrying age drinking alone. This would suggest that as a woman

engaging in this activity, she thoroughly enjoys the act of drinking itself, suggesting she could possibly be drinking in excess, which, the advertisements warn, "is often the cause of various aches and ills" ("Two Classes of Women" 97). Additionally, it violates the gender norms ascribed to by a significant number of Americans, particularly males, of this time period, and, more importantly, compromises the integrity of the character she has sustained in front of Mitch up until this point as a healthy lady of high social standing and traditional values.

These traditional values—although false—further set Blanche at odds with the modernist emphasis on women's youthful health. For the cosmetics industry during the Modernist period in the United States, one of more popular products advertised and sold due to popular demand by women of all ethnicities was skin creams aimed at leaving its user with a youthful appearance. *The Crisis*, as a publication with African-American culture as its foundation, often would include advertisements for these products such as those made by Kashmir Productions. The company claims that its "preparations produce new skin as well as whiten, soften and cleanse the skin. Wrinkles, blackheads, and liver spots disappear immediately. The complexion takes on the charm of color and youth" ("The Kashmir Girl" 44). While Kashmir Preparations mentions that their products produce a whitening effect, its emphasis is primarily on how the user may conceal her signs of aging while simultaneously developing a more radiant, youthful glow to the skin. In comparison, a later issue of *The Crisis* includes an advertisement by Yvonne Laboratories stressing the benefits women will experience from the habitual use of their exclusive and easy-to-use "Lemon Massage Cream [that] will work wonders with your skin. A wonderful bleaching cream for sunburns. Keeps the skin smooth, firm and youthful looking. Clears up muddy and sallow skins. Removes lines and wrinkles. Guaranteed harmless" ("A Beautiful Complexion" 142). Women of the Modernist period were hyperaware of the value society placed on youth and its preservation as women make the transition into middle age.

While Blanche makes it a priority to practice good hygiene and at minimum maintain the appearance of health, no other concern dominates her being and essence more than her obsession with youth. Just as *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)

accounts a man's selling of his soul for the gift of forever being young, Blanche will do anything in her power, because her youth is evanescent, to give the illusion of possessing it in abundance through crafty, convoluted ways of manipulating light and darkness. For example, as Mitch spends time with Blanche throughout the course of the play, he begins to recognize she only spends time with him during the night and in scenarios where "it's always some place that's not lighted much" (Williams 144). Blanche favors the darkness as a crutch to conceal her age, but given her approach to the use of bathing, perfume, and makeup, her affinity for darkness mirrors her life of secrecy. While Blanche remains preoccupied with her negative attitude towards aging, Mitch, on the contrary, explains, "I don't mind you being older than what I thought. But all the rest of it—Christ! ...Oh, I knew you weren't sixteen any more. But I was a fool enough to believe you was straight" (145). In this moment, Blanche realizes that youth, in Mitch's eyes, is less of a priority in his desire to begin a serious relationship with her than is her integrity that she seems to boast of so confidently, but so falsely. Because of his newly acquired knowledge of her scandalous past at the Tarantula Arms, he finds Blanche "not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother" (150). Even if Blanche were to regain her youth, her lack of morals with regard to chastity and subsequent succession of boldfaced lies on the topic would discourage any man of this period who would otherwise pursue her for marriage. Trust and honesty, Blanche begins to learn, are vital in any relationship, whether it is between family members, close friends, or significant others. Her cleansing rituals have not managed to preserve her innocence and youth.

Though Blanche DuBois in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is delusional and devotes her life and the choices she makes to a self-constructed fantasy, her character is consistent with and adherent to the tenets of Modernism, though in unexpected ways. Many works during this time period would focus on a "loss of the real" (Dolfsma 352) and a perspective of how "the world outside is contrasted with the representation that the individual has of it in his own mind" (353). During her most honest moment of the play in Scene Nine, however, Blanche confesses, "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth. And if that is sinful, then let me be damned

for it" (Williams 145). Despite her desire to achieve the modern feminine ideal, Blanche proves to be maladjusted for the modern world. While Stella was able to see a future outside of Belle Reve and as a consequence is able to live a meaningful life with an intrepid, masculine, and dedicated, if brutal, husband, Blanche, because of her inability to recognize the decline of her family's prominence in Mississippi and the finality of her husband's death, finds it continually challenging to adapt to the rapidly changing world she finds herself in. With her upper class background and demeanor juxtaposed with her uncanny ability to survive by whatever means necessary, she is simultaneously an anachronism and an example of a modern, independent minded woman that lives life according to her own philosophy.

Because neither side of her identity fits the culture in which she finds herself with Stanley and Stella, the community eventually expels her at the play's conclusion. This is due to the fact that "socio-cultural values denote strong underlying convictions many people in a group or in society hold, consciously as well as unconsciously, most of which would be considered of an ethical or philosophical nature" (Dolfsma 355). Throughout the play, Blanche verbally taunts or talks negatively about Stanley with Stella, calling him names in mockery of his Polish heritage, working class background, table manners, and authoritarian personality. Because Blanche speaks of Stanley as an inferior with bestial tendencies, she is unwilling to "offer a way of communicating messages to the relevant 'audience' and enable individuals to make and maintain social relations" (356). Blanche fully understands modern society's highest regard for youth, cleanliness, and health in women of marrying age, but what she fails to realize is that the retaining or procuring of these qualities should not compromise her sense of honor, community belonging, and adherence to moral principles.

The soap she uses and the perfume she wears cleanse and mask her body, yet neither can wash away nor conceal her past with other men as she continues to insist on her purity to Mitch. While Mitch is initially attracted to Blanche and clarifies his disregard for her age, her pathological lying makes him view her as entirely immoral and unfit for becoming a proper wife. The Modernists respected and prized truly clean, youthful, and healthy women not only as an ideal of feminine

beauty but also as evidence for a woman with an inherent value system.

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