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The Returning Vet's Experience in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Stanley as the Decommissioned Warrior under Stress

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Thousands of our men will soon be returning to you. They have been gone a long time and they have seen and done and felt things you cannot know. They will be changed. They will have to learn how to adjust themselves to peace. Last night we had a violent electrical storm around our countryside. The storm was half over before we realized that the flashings and the crashings around us were not artillery but plain old-fashioned thunder and lightning. It will be odd to hear only thunder again. You must remember that such little things as that are in our souls, and will take time.

— Ernie Pyle, *Brave Men*

The prologue to Fred Zinnemann's film *The Men* (1950) notes that soldiers have two battles to fight—one with weapons and another, when they return from war, without weapons. Judging from Zinnemann's film, the one without weapons is by far the more dangerous of the two. *The Men* deals with the problems encountered by paraplegics and those who love them, but the principle of the two battles seems to hold true even for those soldiers who, like Stanley Kowalski, return from war physically unscathed.

¶12 Examining Stanley's experiences during the war and considering how these experiences determine his postwar behavior adds an intriguing new dimension to an interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Stanley's rank as a master sergeant in the Engineers' Corps, his experiences at Salerno, and his return to a confusing and changed civilian world are all important factors in the play. Williams, a consummate researcher and craftsman, appears to have gathered a good deal of accurate information about the military and about the stresses placed upon returning vets and to have used this information in such a way that each reference to Stanley's life in the military bears an organic relationship to the script. It is also productive to examine some of the differences between Williams's treatment of the returning vet and the treatments in Hollywood films of the period. Such an examination reveals that *Streetcar* took a much bleaker, less "Hollywood" view of the reintegration of the returning vet than did films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946) and *Till the End of Time* (1946). That Williams would have a darker view of American society than most Hollywood filmmakers is hardly surprising. After all, the Williams world is almost always a broken one where unambiguous reconciliation is impossible (Jackson), while the typical Hollywood narrative structure demands clear causality and an acceptable "feel good" closure.

¶13 War's end traditionally requires the reintegration of the male warrior back into a world of civilities, a feat often accomplished through the careful nurturance of women. Like all culturally significant behaviors, this phenomenon finds expression in popular media. (It will be interesting to note how this pattern is modified in American popular culture as more American women go to war.) Out of the Trojan War, for example, came a wealth of epic and tragic materials dealing with Agamemnon, whose homecoming and re-civilization were abruptly terminated by a woman who behaved in a culturally "unnatural" manner, and with Odysseus, whose homecoming and re-civilization were accomplished through the guidance of Athena, Penelope, and Calypso.

Works as diverse as *Henry V*, *Othello*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Sayonara*, and *Coming Home* are only a few other examples of artistic productions dramatizing postwar adjustments and revealing a great deal about both the personality of the warrior and the culture emerging as a result of the war.

¶4

The years immediately following the end of World War II produced a variety of American films chronicling the warrior's return and describing the world that awaited him, and it seems logical to place *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), with its pointed references to Stanley's war record, within the conventions of this genre. That Williams often structured his plays around the conventions found in popular film is hardly new information. The slides in *The Glass Menagerie*, for example, are clearly drawn from the use of subtitles in silent film, and one could make a good case for Williams having been influenced by Billy Wilder's *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) in his creation of *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959). The aging Alexandra Del Lago and the doomed gigolo Chance Wayne bear many similarities to the equally tragic Norma Desmond and Joe Gillis from Wilder's film. These are only a few of the many instances of Williams echoing elements from popular film. There are countless others. As long ago as 1977, Maurice Yacowar noted that films "were an important source of fantasy for Tennessee Williams" and that "his writing style was influenced by film" (1). In *Streetcar*, Williams seems to have consciously inverted the conventional plot pattern found in Hollywood films of the period. Instead of the familiar pattern in which the confused and bitter vet finds meaning in commitment to community, we are given a plot in which an aggressive and brutal vet finds meaning in a violent assertion of his individual self and his antisocial urges.

¶5

Unlike Stanley (and, to a lesser extent, Mitch), the central male characters in returning-warrior films such as *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Till the End of Time*, and *All My Sons* (produced as a play 1947; filmed 1948) move toward building a feeling of community and developing a strong sense of responsibility for others. Certainly they share, early in their films, a portion of Stanley's self-indulgent anger and frustration. After all, some of them have been physically maimed for life, and others are tormented by both their inability to fit into civilian life and their recognition that the world refuses to stand at what Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* refers to as "a sort of moral attention forever" (Fitzgerald 2). But they are generally willing to be influenced by the women in their lives—and their own feminine tendencies perhaps—toward harmonious membership in a social unit whose members help each other work toward the American Dream. By film's end, they have created—at least on the surface—a model of successful reintegration into society and renewed commitment to a community that relies upon consensus rather than the patriarchal system of authority and in which each member feels a sense of responsibility for others. (The popularity of *cinema noir* during this same period may suggest a somewhat less positive attitude toward the postwar world with its Cold War, witch-hunts, and nuclear power.)

¶6

Even the most cursory glance over the plots of the World War II returning-warrior films reveals the formulaic plot pattern that would dominate Hollywood for some years. The extreme acceptability of this pattern is confirmed by the awarding of Best Picture Oscars to *The Best Years of Our Lives* and *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), two films of the period chronicling the moral growth of veterans returning to America and channeling their wartime experiences into a new spiritual and social awareness. In a sense, many of these films work almost as instruction manuals for social reintegration and probably exerted a powerful influence upon confused men returning to a civilian world that had changed remarkably while they were away.

¶7

In *Till the End of Time*, Cliff Harper (Guy Madison) comes back to his middle-class home and encounters parents who don't want him to talk about what he went through during the war and would prefer that he put the

war behind him and marry the young girl next door. But Cliff has trouble adjusting to civilian life: he doesn't like taking directions at work, and he feels restless and out of place. Under the careful guidance of Pat (Dorothy McGuire), a young war widow, he uses the past to build a future, bringing along with him two disabled veterans (Robert Mitchum and Bill Williams) who learn how to adjust to their disabilities. Salvation comes through membership in a community with a shared sense of values and a shared knowledge of what was suffered and what was lost in the war.

¶8 Similar events occur in *The Best Years of Our Lives*. Three veterans—representing the army, navy, and air force—return home together, flying across America in a B-17 slated for decommissioning. In a memorable and highly iconographic sequence, they look down from the nose of the plane at the country waiting for them and wonder what life will be like. One of them, the sailor, has lost both of his hands and his arms up to his elbows. Adjustment is difficult for all three. Al, the army sergeant (Frederick March), drinks too much, feels awkward with his wife and children, who have learned to manage quite well without him, and finds little spiritual compensation in his job as a banker. Fred (Dana Andrews), the air force bombardier, revered in the service for his precision and skill, returns to a job as a soda jerk and tries to set up housekeeping with his wife, a floozy who works in a nightclub and who wants him to keep wearing his uniform because it makes him look more like the glamorous fly-boy she married. And Homer, the disabled sailor (Harold Russell), suffers from the extreme awkwardness and helplessness he feels around his overly solicitous family and the sense of shame he feels with his fiancée, Wilma, the girl next door.

¶9 Like the characters in *Till the End of Time*, each veteran learns to make productive use of the past in constructing a meaningful future. Al weaves himself back into the fiber of his family—his wife seems to abandon her new sense of self in order to patiently chide him about his drinking and irritability—at the same time that he becomes a banker with a heart who makes risky loans to deserving vets. Fred goes to work for a contractor who transforms decommissioned B-17s into prefab houses. His swords-into-ploughshares job typifies the arc of the film as a whole as each man learns to make the transition from wartime self to civilian (and civilized) self. The film ends with a ringing epithalamion suitable for comedy as the three men are reunited at the wedding of Homer and Wilma, who has managed to bring Homer over to her wise position that, while the war has forever altered their relationship, they can find Wordsworth's "strength in what remains behind" and meaning in the "soothing thoughts that spring/Out of human suffering" (213). To complete the sense of new life beginning, Fred and Al's daughter come together at the wedding, free to marry now that Fred's unfaithful wife is out of the picture. Problems such as class differences, Al's drinking, Homer's future work life, and the modifications in the structure of the American family are glossed over as the film concludes with an emotionally charged image of an America united and of men capable of cooperating with each other and listening to their families.

¶10 The essentially regenerative elements of these two films can be found in a number of other popular films dealing with the soldier's return. In *Gentleman's Agreement*, a writer comes back from the war and poses as a Jew in order to compose a series of revolutionary articles about anti-Semitism in America. A businessman in *All My Sons* sells defective airplane parts to the government and then executes himself when forced by his son into the epiphany that the pilots who died as a result were "all [his] sons." In *The Men*, a vet paralyzed from the waist down sees that he and others like him can still have emotional lives with women who love them. And in

The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit (1956), a married couple accepts responsibility for an illegitimate child fathered while the man was fighting in Italy during World War II.

¶11

It is into this postwar cinematic tradition that *A Streetcar Named Desire* was born in 1947. Stanley's war record is mentioned a number of times in *Streetcar*—frequently enough, in fact, to suggest that Williams might well be inviting his audience to see his play within the conventions of other works focusing on the soldier's return to civilian society. Whenever the war record is introduced, it serves a vital function in the establishment of character and is clearly treated as a highly functional element in *Streetcar*. This referencing begins early in the play (scene 1) when Stella describes her husband to her already shocked and disapproving sister:

BLANCHE: Will Stanley like me, or will I be just a visiting in-law, Stella? I couldn't stand that.

STELLA: You'll get along fine together, if you'll just try not to—well—compare him with men we went out with at home.

BLANCHE: Is he so—different?

STELLA: Yes. A different species.

BLANCHE: In what way; what's he like?

STELLA: Oh, you can't describe someone you're in love with! Here's a picture of him! (*She hands a photograph to Blanche.*)

BLANCHE: An officer?

STELLA: A Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps. Those are decorations!

BLANCHE: He had those on when you met him?

STELLA: I assure you I wasn't just blinded by all the brass. (477–78)

Despite Stella's assurances to the contrary, Blanche resorts again, the morning after the disastrous poker night, to her explanation that Stella was initially attracted to Stanley because of his uniform and rank: "I understand how it happened—a little. You saw him in uniform, an officer, not here but—" (509).

¶12

A woman who can sometimes—but not always—evade and modify unpleasant truths and who often fails really to listen to her sister's words, Blanche ignores the significant fact that Stanley was never a commissioned officer. Stella makes this clear when she explains that Stanley was a "Master Sergeant in the Engineers' Corps" and that what Blanche interprets as the designations of an officer rank are actually "decorations." For the class-conscious Blanche, it probably makes Stella's marriage more acceptable to see it as the result of an attraction to the glamour of "an officer" rather than as the sexually charged and Dionysian relationship it actually is.

¶13

The passage establishes other important points as well, many of them essential for an understanding of the play. As a member of the Engineers' Corps, Stanley would have belonged to a unit tracing its history back to the Revolutionary War and shaped by the insights of a Polish engineer, Thaddeus Kosciuszko, a man so enamored of the revolutionary ideas in the Declaration of Independence that he consulted extensively with Thomas Jefferson, whom he much admired, and became a major force in the War of Independence. Unlike Stanley Kowalski, who seems intent upon enslaving those around him, Kosciuszko espoused ideals of equality and democracy and even requested in his will that funds from his estate be used to purchase slaves and educate them to become good citizens of the new country (polishamericancenter.org). That Williams intends an ironic contrast between his own Polish engineer and the enlightened founder of the Army Corps of Engineers seems probable.

¶14

Examining the job description of a typical engineer seems almost crucial to an understanding of the Stanley who comes home from World War II. An extensive list of the responsibilities of the engineers during a campaign can be found in Ernie Pyle's *Brave Men* (1964). In his account of the Sicilian campaign, Pyle notes that the engineers "found one mine field, covering six acres, containing eight hundred mines" and were expected to locate and deactivate all of them. Not surprisingly, they had "a terrible time finding the mines" and "the losses...were fairly heavy." The engineers were also called upon to "open the highways" and "bypass the blown bridges" since the retreating Germans had destroyed Sicily's infrastructures as thoroughly as possible. It also "fell to the engineers to provide water for the Army" and to "handle the maps for each division." Pyle writes that "every foot of [the Allied] advance upon the gradually withdrawing enemy was measured by the [engineers'] speed" with bulldozers and mine detectors. The work required painstaking calculations, infinite patience, and the ability to maneuver heavy machinery, and it often had to be accomplished under heavy shellfire. Pyle emphasizes the incredible degree of pressure put on the engineers virtually to recreate wrecked transportation systems overnight (60–65). As a master sergeant in the corps during the Italian campaign, Stanley would have been expected to take on extensive—and highly stressful—leadership responsibilities in seeing that these tasks were performed.

¶15 This background comes into play in scene 5, when Blanche explains Stanley's slamming of drawers and generally noisy and violent behaviors as results of first his astrological sign and then his experience in the military. Their conversation takes place within the context of a violent encounter that has just occurred between Eunice and Steve, who has referred to his wife as a "rutting hunk":

BLANCHE: I must jot that down in my notebook. Ha-ha! I'm compiling a notebook of quaint little words and phrases I've picked up here.

STANLEY: You won't pick up nothing here you ain't heard before.

BLANCHE: Can I count on that?

STANLEY: You can count on it up to five hundred.

BLANCHE: That's a mighty high number. (*He jerks open the bureau drawer, slams it shut and throws shoes in a corner. At each noise Blanche winces slightly. Finally she speaks.*) What sign were you born under?

STANLEY (*while he is dressing*): Sign?

BLANCHE: Astrological sign. I bet you were born under Aries. Aries people are forceful and dynamic. They dote on noise! They love to bang things around! You must have had lots of banging around in the army and now that you're out, you make up for it by treating inanimate objects with such a fury!" (513)

As it turns out, Blanche is wrong about the astrological sign; Stanley was born "just five minutes after Christmas" and is thus a Capricorn. But she may well be correct in her second assessment and may be describing, without having a name for it, a classic case of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

¶16 According to the National Center for PTSD, the syndrome occurs after life-threatening events such as military combat and may affect, to various degrees, up to approximately half of the men and women who have spent time in war zones. PTSD victims tend to have abnormal levels of key hormones involved with the body's response to stress and react strongly when stress and/or the presence of a hostile force trigger conscious or unconscious memories of a traumatic event. They relive, in a sense, their responses to the original events that traumatized them. Many of the symptoms sound like entries on Stanley in a director's or actor's notebook:

alcohol abuse or dependence, problems in family and other interpersonal relationships, involvement with the criminal justice system, feeling detached and estranged, and impaired psychosocial functioning (National Center for PTSD). Looked at as a single unit, scene 3 alone reveals a Stanley exhibiting almost all of these symptoms: massive dependence upon alcohol; antisocial behaviors toward Blanche, Stella, and the other poker players; and even a past involvement with the criminal justice system, with Eunice's threats to have Stanley arrested "same as the last time." Feelings of detachment and estrangement may well underlie Stanley's histrionic and overwrought reaction to Stella's escape from the apartment, and it is almost as though, to use the words of Othello, another possible victim of PTSD, "chaos is come again" (83) when she is gone.

¶17 While she may well be correct in her diagnosis, Blanche either doesn't have the information she needs to protect herself or chooses, in her drive toward self-destruction, to ignore important cues explaining Stanley's treating "inanimate objects with such a fury." Blanche has already shown herself to be Stanley's enemy in the "don't hang back with the brutes" speech (overheard by Stanley) in the previous scene. If Blanche has her way, Stella, who seems central to Stanley's world and sense of self, will leave him. As a soldier, he was accustomed to combating enemies by organizing campaigns to restore blown-up infrastructures. When Blanche threatens the "infrastructure" of his home on Elysian Fields and the apparently fragile stability of his life with Stella, he reacts in the way he has been trained to react: by planning a rebuilding campaign. In this case, that rebuilding involves the vengeful destruction of his sister-in-law. He is already armed with the background information about "somebody named Shaw" and the Hotel Flamingo and now decides to confront Blanche with it, an act of aggression she might well have avoided had she not made the tactless, pretentious, and needling remarks earlier in the scene about jotting down "quaint little words and phrases" she has heard since she arrived in Stanley's home. This confrontation is the first step in a painstakingly crafted campaign that will end with Blanche's removal to the mental institution in the last scene of the play and Stanley's reclaiming of his home and family.

¶18 The next two references to the war record are also relevant to an interpretation of Stanley as a victim of PTSD. When asked by Blanche in scene 6 if he is an old friend of Stanley's, Mitch responds, "We was together in the Two-forty-first," as though that fact automatically answers the question (525). And in scene 7, Stanley himself explains (or perhaps rationalizes) his telling Mitch about Blanche's past by invoking their shared military experience as well as other traditional male-bonding activities:

STANLEY: Mitch is a buddy of mine. We were in the same outfit together—Two-forty-first Engineers. We work in the same plant and now on the same bowling team. You think I could face him if— (534)

The National Center lists a number of incidents that are likely to cause increases in PTSD symptoms, one of which is a reunion with individuals who were present at the original traumatic incident. Reunions of war buddies, therefore, can be especially difficult for veterans suffering from PTSD. The presence of Mitch both at work and in Stanley's personal life could serve as a constant trigger to episodes of PTSD, and seeing Mitch "threatened" by being cast into marriage with Blanche—or, as Stanley describes such a marriage, falling into "a tank with a school full of sharks"—might easily tap into Stanley's memories as a master sergeant responsible for the safety of his men.

¶19 What is probably the most significant reference to Stanley's war record occurs in scene 11 during the second poker party. It is here that Stanley truly declares his independence from the socially conscious protagonists of

Till the End of Time, The Best Years of Our Lives, and All My Sons. His determination to "hold front position in this rat-race" goes directly counter to their more generous philosophy of inclusion and responsibility for others.

STANLEY: Drew to an inside straight and made it, by God.

PABLO: *Maldita sea tu suerte!*

STANLEY: Put it in English, greaseball.

PABLO: I am cursing your rutting luck.

STANLEY (*prodigiously elated*): You know what luck is? Luck is believing you're lucky. Take at Salerno. I believed I was lucky. I figured that 4 out of 5 would not come through but I would...and I did. I put that down as a rule. To hold front position in this rat-race you've got to believe you are lucky. (555)

The Battle of Salerno was, in the popular imagination (and in reality as well), particularly fierce. James Jones refers to it as one of "the great amphibious invasions of the Europe war" (179), and Francis Trevelyan Miller's 1946 *History of World War II* describes it in D-Day terms:

As the ships neared the coast they encountered dense mine fields, where the enemy had sown the water with plastic-skinned explosives to prevent their detection by the ships' equipment. More than one vessel was crippled and lost before the beach was reached.... The landing craft were racing inshore when the night was split with fire and thunder as American and British battleships, cruisers, and destroyers poured the full strength of their fire power into the shore defenses. It was a holocaust of steel that was to last for days while the troops were consolidating their bitterly contested beachhead.... The Britons and Americans crouched in the damp sand as flares glowed above them and bombs rained down. Close behind the infantrymen had come the barrage-balloon squads. The sausagelike bags were already floating above the troops to protect them from the German planes that swooped down in ever-increasing numbers. (686–87)

The battle reached its climax on September 14, 1943, when the Germans "made their strongest and last attempt to smash the Fifth Army's invasion," but the next day, a victory was declared as "American Army nurses went ashore on the beachhead" (689). Significantly, this would have been on September 15, Blanche's birthday, the date of another important "victory" for Stanley when he rapes Blanche and pushes her over the edge into insanity. Not surprisingly, combat veterans suffering from PTSD are more likely to exhibit symptoms on the anniversaries of war events (National Center for PTSD), a fact that might explain why Williams has Blanche so pointedly mention the exact date of her birthday in scene 5 and why the violence in Stanley's nature reaches a crescendo on this date.

^{¶20} Stanley's explanation of why he survived this grisly battle emphasizes the power of his will and the importance of "positive thinking." For Stanley, the essential prerequisite for success is "believing you're lucky." His basic philosophy is clearly stated: "I put that down as a rule. To hold front position in this rat-race you've got to believe you are lucky" (555). This emphasis upon the power of the individual will in realizing a visualized goal evokes Hitler, whose "Triumph of the Will" Stanley helped to prevent by fighting at Salerno. That Stanley should have helped to defeat a man whose Darwinian principles he espouses after the war adds yet another layer of irony to a play already loaded with ironies.

^{¶21} The world awaiting Stanley upon his return from active duty had its minefields as well. In her highly influential and carefully documented *Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man*, Susan Faludi treats in detail the crisis faced by American males in the generations after World War II and continuing into the twenty-first

century. Faludi locates the genesis of this masculine confusion in the conflict between two opposing ideals of male conduct embedded in American culture:

[A] look at our history, long buried under a visual avalanche of Marlboro Men and Dirty Harrys and Rambos, suggests a...complicated dynamic, one in which from the nation's earliest frontier days the man in the community was valued as much as the loner in control, homely society as much as heroic detachment. Even in the most archetypal versions of the original American male myth, a tension prevailed between the vision of a man who stood apart from society and the man who was part of society; the loner was not the ideal. (Faludi 10)

This tension took various forms through the centuries, claims Faludi, with a watershed being reached "in industrializing nineteenth-century America" when the man who stood apart "would begin to gain a certain renown as an emblem of virility, his rapaciousness evidence of his ambitious, rags-to-riches drive...his killer instinct compensating for the loss of service to a community" (Faludi 11). In Faludi's psychosocial interpretation of history, the tension eventually took the form of two opposing concepts at the end of World War II, one espoused by Ernie Pyle, the other by Henry Luce.

¶22 Pyle, the highly influential World War II journalist who went to the front with the American enlisted man, gave high praise to what Faludi describes as "the man who proved his virility not by individual feats of showy heroism but by being quietly *useful* in conducting a war and supporting the welfare of his unit." These were, in Pyle's words, "routine men" and "little guys," and Faludi theorizes that "by lionizing the grunt, Ernie Pyle inadvertently became an architect of what many hoped postwar manhood would become." In her view, this ideal was, in many ways, a continuation of the New Deal social philosophy that posited the existence of the collective-conscious man who saw himself as a "selfless public servant" and whose individuality was subsumed into the public good (Faludi 16–21). It is from this complex of ideas that men such as Cliff in *Till the End of Time* and Al in *The Best Years of Our Lives* seem to draw their energy. They appear to be programmed to think in collective terms and are unhappy when acting as individuals; they are at their best when sharing themselves, nurturing others, and working with others toward a better world. Men who act solely as individuals and who espouse the Darwinian ideal—the father in *All My Sons*, for example—need to be eliminated before this better world can be born.

¶23 The opposing ideal is associated with Henry Luce, founder of *Time*, *Life*, and *Fortune* magazines. As Faludi argues,

[Luce] saw America as a masculine nation whose manifest destiny was to loom like a giant on the global stage. He proposed the average man acquire a grander sense of himself by association with a nation that would dominate the world through unapologetic force....Luce's [ideal] was all about taking control—and even more important, displaying it. (Faludi 22)

Luce demanded that America impose its will upon other nations toward whatever ends it deemed best and insisted, in the words of Faludi, that "the price for failing to flex the national muscle...would be a terrifying loss of virility." In an influential 1941 *Life* essay entitled "The American Century," Luce argued that the reluctance to act forcefully could conclude with America falling victim to "the virus of isolationist sterility" and being forced to "confess a pitiful impotence" (Faludi 22).

¶24 It requires no real stretch of the imagination to place Stanley in Luce's camp. Calling himself, in scene 8, "a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it," and

proclaiming, "I am the king around here," Stanley subscribes to a creed that has nothing to do with cooperation, consensus, or nurturance. Instead, his proclamations reveal a man who sees his dominance as beyond question, a man who sees his own belief as supreme and as determining reality. Rape, which has long been recognized as an act springing from a need to control rather than from sexual desire, is natural for such a man. So, unfortunately, is political and military aggression.

¶125 While placing *A Streetcar Named Desire* within the context of Stanley's military experience offers many insights that would be helpful in production, doing so does not, of course, fully explain the play. Like all great works, the play transcends the facile explanation. *Oedipus Rex* will never be completely analyzed by applying the principles from Aristotle's *Poetics* to it, and *Mourning Becomes Electra* will never yield up all of its secrets to the critic armed with volumes of Freud. From the beginning, critics, theorists, and directors have argued about which "side" Williams is on: that of Blanche or that of Stanley. And they have also argued about what each character "represents" in the play. Is Blanche "culture"? Is Stanley "the ape"? A reading that makes extensive use of the military history raises a variety of similar questions. Does Williams prefer the image of American men in popular films from the postwar period, or does he buy into Stanley's more Darwinian philosophy?

¶126 As is often the case, the answers to these questions are ambiguous. On one hand, Williams is known to have said that the theme of *Streetcar* is that "if you don't watch out the apes will take over" (qtd. in Krutch 129), suggesting that the takeover by Stanley and his kind is an unfortunate event. On the other hand, his essay "On a Streetcar Named Success" suggests that Stanley's philosophy is acceptable:

The sort of life which I had had previous to this popular success [the production of *The Glass Menagerie*] was one that required endurance, a life of clawing and scratching along a sheer surface and holding on tight with raw fingers to every inch of rock higher than the one caught hold of before, but it was a good life because it was the sort of life for which the human organism is created.... But once you apprehend the vacuity of a life without struggle you are equipped with the basic means of salvation. Once you know this is true, that the heart of man, his body and his brain, are forged in a white-hot furnace for the purpose of conflict (the struggle of creation), and that with the conflict removed, the man is a sword cutting daisies, that not privation but luxury is the wolf at the door and that the fangs of this wolf are all the little vanities and conceits and laxities that success is heir to—why, then with this knowledge you are at least in a position of knowing where danger lies. (Williams, "A Streetcar Named Success," 7, 9–10)

Is Oedipus fated or does he have free will? Is Hamlet motivated by incestuous love for his mother or the need to avenge his father? Is Isabel Archer right or wrong in returning to her abusive husband in Rome? To presume to fully answer such questions as these about an artistic touchstone of the magnitude of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is to engage in the most absurd form of reductionism. Like all great touchstones, it transcends the easy explanation. At the same time, considering the relevance of Stanley's military history in combination with the multitude of other factors at work in the script yields valuable conclusions that make the play highly relevant to the contemporary world and reveal Williams's keen psychological insight. Stanley's military experiences and his subsequent return to a confusing and conflicted civilian world are every bit as important to his development as Blanche's upbringing, encounters with dying relatives, and abortive marriage are to hers. Both characters have suffered devastating pain and trauma and are thus vulnerable to the intrusion of destructive experiences from the past. The feelings associated with the landing at Salerno should be seen as no less painful than the feelings

associated with the discovery that one's husband is a homosexual. Like Blanche, Stanley may have only a tenuous hold on reality. This more fragile, victimized Stanley can speak volumes to audiences that have lived through the horrendous effects of two Gulf Wars and have come to recognize that no one returns home from a war unscathed.

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