



## An exploration of the tension between illusion and reality in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*, utilising speech act theory and conversational implicature to examine its manifestation in the conflict between 'Blanche Dubois' and 'Stanley Kowalski'.

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*'I don't want realism [...] I'll tell you what I want. Magic!'*<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Bigsby (1984: 53) asserts that the 'distinguishing character' of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is its 'essential conflict between illusion and reality', a theme that manifests itself in the confrontational relationship between the characters of Blanche Dubois and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski. Through a series of sexually charged, hostile encounters, Stanley's directness and brutal attempts to awaken Blanche to reality cause her to combat him 'with the only resources she has — illusions' (Abbott 1989: 143). To investigate the dynamics of these confrontations, the dialogue of the characters will be analysed according to the linguistic model of 'pragmatics', broadly defined by Thomas (1996: 23) as encompassing 'meaning in interaction'. Within this model, the specific linguistic frameworks of speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and conversational implicature (Grice, 1975) will be explored. Elements from Elia Kazan's film *Streetcar* (1951) will also be investigated, raising issues regarding the influence of censorship at the time of the play's origin and how this issue emphasises further the importance of William's manipulation of language.<sup>2</sup>

### Overview of Literary Criticism and Linguistic Frameworks

Much of the literary criticism surrounding *Streetcar* focuses on Tennessee Williams utilising the character of Blanche as a symbol through which to channel his disillusionment regarding the condition of his contemporary American culture, deploring what he termed 'the destructive impact of society on the sensitive, non-conformist individual' (Williams, 1939). Blanche represents this non-conformist individual, desiring to escape the reality of her unfulfilled existence by resorting to imagination, attempting to 'project another [...] fictive world, and sustain it by an act of will' (Bigsby, 1984: 61). Therefore, Blanche appears to harness evasive tactics in conversation to shield her from the 'harshness of reality' (Roderick, 1977: 5) embodied within Stanley, whose aggressive interactions systematically thwart her attempts to forsake reality in favour of illusion. The antagonism that emerges between the two characters culminates in the suggestion of rape at the play's conclusion, the impact of which is enhanced by the building tension in the characters' discourse. This factor is highlighted by Elam (1994: 159), who claims that 'dramatic dialogue is a mode of *praxis*

<sup>1</sup> Spoken by Blanche Dubois in Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2009), p. 86.

<sup>2</sup> *A Streetcar Named Desire* will be abbreviated to *Streetcar*.

which sets in opposition the different personal, social and ethical forces of the dramatic world', suggesting that language presents a crucial device for the exposure of character dynamics operating within the fictional world.

The significance of language as an interactive force, separate from its semantic meaning, was first conceived by Austin (1962), who developed the concept of 'speech acts' as 'performative utterances', the stating of which he defines as 'the leading incident in the performance of [an] act' (1962: 6). Austin divides the 'performative' construction of an utterance into a tripartite formation composed of three elements, its 'locution', 'illocution' and 'perlocution'. He suggests that the statement's '*locution*' or what is 'strictly said' (Garner, 1975: 323) can only be properly decoded through a consideration of 'circumstances, conventions [...] and whatever else add implicatures, forces or *illocutions*; and how these [...] secure *perlocutionary* effects' (Wiggins, 1971: 21). However, the principal element of Austin's 'speech act' is the 'illocution' or intention behind what is uttered and how it is conveyed, resulting in 'speech acts' often being referred to as 'illocutionary acts'. Searle (1969) develops Austin's 'illocutionary act' claiming that 'uttering words in sentences in certain contexts, under certain conditions and with certain intentions' can produce many different illocutionary 'forces'. Coulthard (1985: 22) highlights the difference between the theories by stating that while Austin focuses on the 'successful realization of the speaker's intention', Searle emphasises the importance of 'the listener's interpretation' in uncovering these 'intentions'.

Searle relates this relationship between meaning and intention to Grice's (1975) 'conversational implicature', a theory corresponding the work of Garfinkel (1967) regarding the hearer's necessity to 'work' to obtain a message from received utterances. Grice established a 'the cooperative principle' of which all speakers are aware when conversing: 'make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged' (45). When this principle is broken through the breaching of specific 'maxims', the recipient must interpret the 'implicature' (Grice, 1975: 50), enabling information to be conveyed without being explicitly stated. Both of these linguistic theories will be utilised to interpret the relationship between Blanche and Stanley, which must be understood not only through what is literally said but also through the implicit meanings of what is unspoken.

## Analysis

The extracts explored in this essay, taken from near the opening and close of the play, depict moments of conflict when Blanche and Stanley are left alone without the mitigating presence of Stella. Extract One, occurring soon after their introduction, demonstrates Blanche's flirtation with Stanley before he aggressively interrogates her about the loss of 'Belle Reve', directly combatting what Boxhill (1987: 37) terms her indirect 'gushiness of speech'. Later in the scene, the audience discover that Blanche's flirtatious speech was harnessed as a defence mechanism against Stanley's onslaught of questioning, revealed through Blanche's comment to Stella: 'we thrashed it out [...] but I think I handled it nicely [...] I laughed and treated it all as a joke [...] and flirted' (p. 25).<sup>3</sup> Evidently, a retrospective analysis of the extract reveals how Blanche utilises language to disguise a hidden stimulus, attempting to assert herself over Stanley by indulging in an illusion of superiority.

Blanche commences their conversation in Extract One by addressing Stanley with the interrogative 'How do I look?' (2), presenting the 'locution' of a question regarding his opinion of her 'pretty, new dress' (p. 20). However, this question can also be interpreted as concealing the 'illocutionary' force of a request for Stanley to pay her a compliment. In

<sup>3</sup> All quotations are cited in the appendix according to line number, unless accompanied by a page number.

response, Stanley's minimal remark 'you look alright' (3) suggests that Blanche's initiated 'speech act' has partially 'misfired' (Levinson, 1983: 230), caused by Stanley's lack of enthusiasm in flattering her appearance. This concept of 'misfiring' is based upon the inability of an attempted 'speech act' to fulfil a set of 'felicity conditions' established by Austin (1962), which he claims must be maintained for the act to be achieved. In this instance, Blanche's request for a compliment does not fulfil the condition that 'the procedure must be executed by all participants correctly [and] completely' (36) due to Stanley's unwillingness to participate; consequently the 'speech act' appears incomplete.

However, despite Stanley's indifference Blanche still appears to accept his reply as a fulfilment of her request through her expression of gratitude: 'many thanks' (4). Blanche's self-delusion is reinforced in Kazan's film through the genuine way in which Vivien Leigh delivers this appreciation, which if said with falling intonation, would have been interpreted as sarcasm. Blanche's desire to manipulate Stanley through speech can be identified through the fact that she initiates the 'speech act', presenting a negation of Levinson's norms regarding structures of 'preferred sequencing' during 'compliment' exchanges (1983: 339). Levinson claims that when receiving a compliment in conversation, the recipient usually counters it with 'the avoidance of self-praise', but not only does Blanche negate this 'avoidance', she seems to actively seek praise through her initial interrogative. Blanche's violation of Levinson's model demonstrates her eagerness to verbally and sexually assert herself over Stanley, who throughout the play is denounced as her inferior, attempting to manipulate his speech whilst engaging in playful seduction.

When Blanche later admits the intention of her question, 'I was fishing for a compliment', Stanley replies 'I don't go in for that stuff' (20-21), presenting a significant link to Extract Two when he bombards Blanche with imperatives intended to degrade her: 'look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit!' (73). Stanley is unwilling to support the superior self-image Blanche has constructed, which is as Murphy (1992: 35) suggests the pivot of the play, resting upon 'the conflict between the aristocratic role that Blanche invented for herself and the reality she confront[s]'.

Jucker and Taavitsainen (2008: 9) claim 'insults [...] are some of the most important "speech acts" of the expressive category' and are determined upon the interpretation of the listener as well as the intention of the speaker, supporting Searle's (1969) ideas regarding the importance of listener interpretation. This dynamic is reinforced in Kazan's film through the way in which Stanley's imperatives have the 'perlocution' of visibly distressing Blanche, who attempts to hide behind her hands while Stanley forces them apart, her reaction clearly contributes to the audience's detection of the 'insult' as a 'speech act'.

Tension builds towards this encounter through the frustration of the characters' conversation in Extract One, communicating antagonistically but indirectly due to Stella's close proximity to the house. This indirect language is demonstrated through Blanche's statement 'It looks like my trunk has exploded' (8), deliberately flouting Grice's 'maxim of quality' ('Do not say that which is you believe to be false' 1975: 45), in order to deliver the 'conversational implicature' that someone has been through her belongings. Grice claims that when a maxim is 'flouted', 'that is to say [the speaker] blatantly fail[s] to fulfil it' (1975: 49), the recipient of the statement must attempt to discover what is being 'implicated'. This linguistic system enables Blanche to question Stanley without extinguishing her guise of innocence or directly stirring him to conflict. After this statement, both characters engage in what Blanche refers to as 'double-talk' (32), an exchange that involves both parties flouting the 'maxim of quality' consistently from lines 8 to 11. Grice (1975: 53) suggests that metaphors include 'categorical falsit[ies]' which lead to the supposition that 'the speaker is

attributing to his audience some feature [that] resembles the mentioned substance'. Therefore, Stanley's metaphorical reference to a woman having to 'lay her cards on the table' (25) to interest him, could be read as a reference to Blanche herself, carrying the implicature that she is withholding information regarding 'Belle Reve'.

However, Stanley's approach becomes more direct after Blanche fails to acknowledge his 'implicature', continuing with her verbose speech: 'yes — yes — Cards on the table... Well, life is too full of evasions and ambiguities [...]' (26-30). Her long, disjointed speech, which involves vague references to 'artists' and 'colours', appears to 'flout' the 'maxim of manner' ('avoid ambiguity', Grice 1975: 46), causing Stanley to become frustrated and aggressively declare: 'now let's cut the re-bop!' (31). Elam (1980: 172-73) claims that a 'speaker may exploit the maxims in order to mean more than he says [...] on such expectations the audience bases [...] the "reading between the lines" which makes up a considerable part of its decoding'. Therefore, the reasons for which Blanche frequently does not comply with the 'maxims', particularly those of 'manner' and 'quality', is crucial to an understanding of her character, and is open to interpretation. If the actress presents this speech in a provocative manner, then Blanche could be perceived as deliberately 'flouting' the maxim, agonising Stanley through the implicature that she is unwilling to discuss 'Belle Reve'. However, Bigsby (1984: 49) comments 'Belle Reve, [...] the family plantation and [Blanche's] own system of illusions, is indestructible and unchanging so long as it can be preserved from assault by the real', sanctioning the interpretation that Blanche may be so lost in her own fantasy world that she 'violates' the maxim in an unostentatious manner, trying to mislead Stanley in order to avoid addressing reality.

Stanley embodies this threat from the 'real', as demonstrated when he asks Blanche directly for the papers regarding the loss of 'Belle Reve' (41). In response, Blanche attempts to avoid his questioning through 'flouting' Grice's 'maxim of quantity' ('make contribution as informative as required', 1975: 45), claiming 'there were some papers' (46), which carries the implicature that either she cannot remember their location or she is unwilling to show Stanley. This whole sequence of dialogue is cut from Kazan's film, and instead a line is inserted through which Blanche claims: 'I know I fib a good deal [...] but when a thing is important I tell the truth'. This insertion destroys the mystery created by Williams' dialogue, through which the audience must frequently question whether Blanche's speech purposefully 'flouts' the maxims in an antagonistic manner or whether she is simply trying to defend her constructed fantasy. In Extract Two, this ambiguity becomes increasingly more suggestive of the fact that Blanche has lost the ability to distinguish between illusion and reality, continually violating the 'maxim of quality' to delude herself and mislead those around her. This is demonstrated through Blanche's description of her imagined encounter with Mitch whilst speaking with Stanley, an account the audience know to be untrue after witnessing their altercation in the previous scene: 'he returned with a box of roses to beg my forgiveness! He implored my forgiveness [...]' (55-61). Evidently, Blanche becomes so invested in her own reality that her conversation is constructed upon attempts to deceive and delude.

The conclusion of Extract Two presents Stanley's ultimate domination of Blanche who, as Murphy (1992) suggests, is 'levell[ed] by [his] sex' after he fails to overcome her illusion of superiority with his language. Stanley's sexual advances cause her to finally engage with the reality of the situation, declaring 'I warn you...' (76), a statement that would be described by Austin (1962) as an 'explicit performative' and categorised by Searle (1976: 12) as an 'expressive speech act', with the 'illocution' of 'expressing the psychological state' of the speaker. However, it is uncharacteristically direct of Blanche, alerting the audience to the fact that Stanley's physical, sexual advances have forced her to abandon her indirectness in a desperate attempt to defend herself, demonstrated by her '*smash[ing] a bottle*' (77).

However, Kazan's film portrays Blanche's 'warning' as a feeble 'speech act', which is not supported by Austin's 'felicity conditions' due to Stanley's superior physical strength to overcome her, she is not in the position to 'warn' him. The ridiculousness of her 'warning' is enhanced by Marlon Brando's choice to smile sinisterly throughout the confrontation, making Blanche's declaration appear pathetic.

Extract Two concludes with Stanley's implied intention to sexually assault Blanche through his statement 'Oh so you want some rough-house!' (83). Through this statement he appears to play on Blanche's inability to engage with reality, 'flouting' the 'maxim of quality' to echo her frequent distortion of truth. However, this interpretation is based upon the assumption that Blanche does not wish to engage sexually with Stanley, which is problematic due to her earlier ambiguous flirtations, highlighted in the scene through Stanley's claim: 'we've had this date from the beginning' (86-87). It is significant to note that the censors of Kazan's film would only allow Stanley's rape of Blanche to remain if Stella punished Stanley by leaving him (Royden & Winchell, 2006: 173-74), displaying a creative decision that dramatically alters how the audience perceives both characters. The notion of Stanley's 'punishment' annuls Williams' ambiguity that is cultivated through his language. Blanche is reduced to a 'victim', which denies the uncertainty of whether her evasiveness implies genuine delusion or whether she uses her speech as a weapon to antagonise Stanley, asserting herself over him whilst attempting to disrupt his marriage.

## Conclusion

Through this analysis of *Streetcar*, Brecht's assertion that 'proper plays can only be understood when performed' (Brecht, 1964: 15) is made clear, with the ambiguity of Williams' language forcing the actor to make fundamental decisions regarding characterisation. Elam (1980: 170) claims that in dramatic performance, 'illocutions' within speech 'can often be oblique and call for an interpretive 'reading between the lines'. It is the reading of these 'illocutions' that enables a critical analysis of the conflict between Blanche and Stanley, enabling the audience to establish reasons why Blanche tries to evade directness in her interaction with Stanley who constantly attempts to force her back into reality. Due to the censorship of crucial elements of William's work, demonstrated by the rape of Blanche, many of his ideas are revealed to the audience through what is 'unsaid', as Harold Pinter (1976: 14) suggests: 'the speech we hear is an indication of the speech we don't'. The underlying tension of this 'unspoken' interaction is used to highlight a major theme of Williams' play depicting 'brutal reality destroying [...] feeble creativity' (Boxhill, 1987:85). It is possible to identify this theme through Stanley's frustration at Blanche's 'uncooperativeness' in language, frequently violating Grice's 'co-operative principle', which appears to enable her to escape into evasiveness. Evidently, the linguistic interaction between Williams' protagonists could be perceived as conveying his disillusionment with the American culture, in which he felt the coercion of reality infringing upon his desire for the triumph of imagination.

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**Appendix**

*Taken from:* Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2009).

**Extract One: Scene 2****Pages 20-23**

- 1 [*He crosses through drapes with a smouldering look*]  
 2 Blanche: How do I look?  
 3 Stanley: You look alright.  
 4 Blanche: Many thanks! Now the buttons!  
 5 Stanley: I can't do nothing with them.  
 6 Blanche: You men with your big clumsy fingers. May I have a drag on your cig?  
 7 Stanley: Have one for yourself.  
 8 Blanche: Why, thanks! ...It looks like my trunk has exploded.  
 9 Stanley: Me an' Stella were helping you unpack.  
 10 Blanche: Well you certainly did a fast and thorough job of it.  
 11 Stanley: It looks like you raided some stylish shops in Paris.  
 12 Blanche: Ha-ha! Yes – clothes are my passion!  
 13 Stanley: What does it cost for a string of fur-pieces like that?  
 14 Blanche: Why those were a tribute from an admirer of mine!  
 15 Stanley: He must have had a lot of – admiration!  
 16 Blanche: Oh, in my youth I excited some admiration. But look at me now! [*She smiles*  
 17 *at him radiantly*] Would you think it possible that I was once considered to be —  
 18 attractive?  
 19 Stanley: Your looks are okay.  
 20 Blanche: I was fishing for a compliment, Stanley.  
 21 Stanley: I don't go in for that stuff.
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- 22 Blanche: You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I  
 23 should think. To interest you a women would have to —  
 24 [*She pauses with indefinite gesture*]  
 25 Stanley: [*Slowly*] Lay...her cards on the table  
 26 Blanche: Yes — yes — Cards on the table... Well, life is too full of evasions and ambiguities,  
 27 I think. I like an artist who paints in strong bold colours, primary colours. I don't like  
 28 pinks and creams and I never cared for wishy-washy people. That's why, when you  
 29 walked in here last night, I said to myself — 'My sister has married a man!' — Of  
 30 course that was all I could tell about you.  
 31 Stanley: [*Booming*]: Now let's cut the re-bop!
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- 32 Blanche: Now Mr Kowalski, let us proceeds without any more double-talk. I'm ready to  
 33 answer all questions. I've nothing to hide. What is it?  
 34 Stanley: There is such a thing in this State of Louisiana as the Napoleonic code,  
 35 according to which whatever belongs to my wife is also mine — and vice versa.  
 36 Blanche: My, but you have an impressive judicial air!  
 37 [*She sprays herself with her atomizer; then playfully sprays him with it. He seizes the*  
 38 *atomizer and slams it down on the dresser. She throws her head back and laughs*]  
 39 Stanley: If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you!  
 40 Blanche: Such as what?  
 41 Stanley: Don't play so dumb. You know what! — Where's the papers?  
 42 Blanche: Papers?  
 43 Stanley: Papers! That stuff people write on!  
 44 Blanche: Oh papers, papers! Ha-ha! The first anniversary gift, all kinds of papers!  
 45 Stanley: I'm talking of legal papers. Connected with the plantation.



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46 Blanche: There were some papers.  
47 Stanley: You mean they're no longer existing?  
48 Blanche: They probably are, somewhere.  
49 Stanley: But not in the trunk.  
50 Blanche: Everything I own is in that trunk.  
51 Stanley: Then why don't we have a look for them?  
52 [*He crosses to the trunk, shoves it roughly open, and begins to open compartments*]  
53 Blanche: What in the name of heaven are you thinking of! What's in the back of that  
54 little boy's mind of yours?

### Extract Two: Scene 10 Pages 93-97

55 Blanche: He returned with a box of roses to beg my forgiveness! He implored my  
56 forgiveness. But some things are not forgivable. Deliberate cruelty is not forgivable.  
57 It is the one unforgivable thing in my opinion and it is the one thing for which I have  
58 never been guilty. And so I told him, I said to him, Thank you, but it was foolish of  
59 me to think that we could ever adapt ourselves to each other. Our ways of life are  
60 too different. Our attitudes and our backgrounds are incompatible. We have to be  
61 realistic about such things. So farewell, my friend! And let there be no hard feelings...  
62 Stanley: Was this before or after the telegram came from the oil millionaire?  
63 Blanche: What telegram? No! No, after! As a matter of fact the wire came just as...  
64 Stanley: As a matter of fact there was no wire at all!  
65 Blanche: Oh, oh!  
66 Stanley: There isn't no millionaire! And Mitch didn't come back with roses 'cause I know  
67 where he is —  
68 Blanche: Oh!  
69 Stanley: There isn't a goddam thing but imagination!  
70 Blanche: Oh!  
71 Stanley: And lies and conceit and tricks!  
72 Blanche: Oh!  
73 Stanley: And look at yourself! Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit,  
74 rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen  
75 do you think you are!

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76 Blanche: I warn you, don't, I'm in danger!  
77 [*He takes another step. She smashes a bottle on the table and faces him, clutching the*  
78 *broken top*]  
79 Stanley: What did you do that for?  
80 Blanche: So I could twist the broken end in your face!  
81 Stanley: I bet you would do that!  
82 Blanche: I would: I will if you —  
83 Stanley: Oh so you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house!  
84 [*He springs towards her, overturning the table. She cries out and strikes at him with the*  
85 *bottle top but he catches her wrist*]  
86 Stanley: Tiger — tiger! Drop the bottle-top! Drop it! We've had this date from the  
87 beginning.