A Streetcar Named Desire: A Study of Determinism in Modern Drama

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A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE:
A STUDY OF DETERMINISM
IN MODERN DRAMA

by

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts

June

1959
LIFE

John Skelly Kundtz, S.J. was born in Cleveland, Ohio, November 22, 1934. He received his elementary school education at St. Augustine Academy, Lakewood, Ohio, from 1940 to 1944, and from 1944 to 1948 at St. Luke Parochial School, Lakewood. In 1948 he enrolled at St. Ignatius High School, Cleveland, and was graduated from there in June, 1952.

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CHAPTER I

STATE OF THE QUESTION

On December 3, 1947, Broadway saw the opening of Tennessee Williams' play, A Streetcar Named Desire. The following morning, New York newspapers displayed reviews which showed that the critics proclaimed the new drama an immediate success. In the New York Times Brooks Atkinson spoke of Streetcar as "the finest new play on the boards."¹ Howard Barnes of the Herald Tribune claimed that "a great new talent is at work in the theater to make one hope that the lean years are over."²

At the same time, however, the critics took particular note of the predominance of fate and determinism in A Streetcar Named Desire. Richard Watts, Jr. contended that the "doomed heroines are so helplessly enmeshed in their fate they cannot put up a properly dramatic battle against it."³ Mr. Watts then goes on to


point out that as a result of this entrapment by fate, the play has a painful and pitiful quality about it. The noted theater critic, John Gassner, expands this criticism by showing that 
Streetcar is a play split by ambiguities. The fine attempts at realism, Mr. Gassner notes, often degenerate into decadence; normal causation is weakened by pure accident; and the elements of true tragedy become tinged with melodrama. A critic can even go so far as to find little merit in the play, as did Mr. Kevin Sullivan when he wrote: "What is stimulated in the audience at the Streetcar is a gentle, soul-satisfying feeling of superiority. People are made to feel better than they are by looking at and listening for three hours to other people who, the author is at pains to assure them, are worse than they are."5

Against the background of these few and varied, but somewhat representative, opinions about Streetcar, Mr. Williams' own theories about determinism may be considered. To begin with, the playwright does not believe in free will. During press and TV interviews on March 3, 1957, he was quoted as saying: "I don't believe in 'original sin.' I don't believe in 'guilt.' I don't believe in villains and heroes—only right and wrong ways that in-


Individuals have taken, not by choice, but by necessity or by still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances and their antecedents." Mr. Williams also states that his belief in determinism is not just theory, but that it is a part of a basic premise that prevades his whole life, a premise which provides the impulse to all that he creates. He declares that the dominating principle in all his writing has been "the need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance." A further confirmation of Mr. Williams' interest in determinism, especially environmental determinism, was brought out in a recent interview with Mike Wallace. During this interview Mr. Williams stated that the primary cause of juvenile delinquency was the raising of children under circumstances which would not give them a fair chance in the world.

Therefore, from these few statements, it can definitely be seen that Tennessee Williams not only believes in determinism with its psychological, hereditary, and environmental aspects, but that he also makes a conscious effort to incorporate this determinism into his plays.

6 Quoted in an anonymous article "T. Williams Descending," America, XCVII (April 6, 1957), 4.


8 Information from an interview of Mike Wallace with Tennessee Williams on "The Mike Wallace Show," March 2, 1958, at 10:00 P.M. E.S.T., over ABC Television Network.
From this brief general survey of the criticism of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and from an awareness of Mr. Williams' intention to include determinism in his plays, certain questions immediately arise. It might first be asked that, even though Tennessee Williams believes in determinism and intends to include it in his plays, is this determinism actually found in *Streetcar*, and if so, to what degree? Furthermore, how does this determinism affect the play as a work of art, judging it in the light of the great masterpieces of the theater? This last question obviously leads one to consider precisely what elements constitute a drama as "great," as a lasting work of art. This inquiry, in turn, can only be answered by a thorough analysis of the purpose of drama and the peculiar means it takes to achieve its purpose.

The attempt to answer these questions will be the matter of this thesis. The procedure will be first of all to decide what elements constitute great drama in three specific areas: action, character, and emotional effect. These areas have been chosen because of their close alliance with the problem of determinism in the drama. The next step will be to show precisely how determinism influences the drama in these three same areas. Then these norms will be applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire* to see where they are present or absent according to the text of the play itself and the opinions of competent critics.

Here it must be noted that the question which this thesis treats is not a philosophical one. The question is not: Can a
man theoretically be convinced of determinism? or even more practically: Are men really determined? Rather the question here is: What is the dramatic significance of determinism in one particular play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*?

After completing the investigation outlined above, it is hoped that a general but accurate evaluation of *Streetcar* can be made.
CHAPTER II

NORMS OF THE DRAMA

As was indicated in the preceding chapter, the first step in answering the problem of this thesis is to set up commonly accepted norms of drama against which Streetcar can later be compared and evaluated. The present writer knows the difficulty of this task, and it would be presumptuous to hope for completely definitive results concerning a question with which so many great minds have wrestled with such dubious success.¹ But it is obvious that at least an attempt must be made at establishing such norms, if any sort of an adequate answer to the question proposed is to be had.

Before beginning this investigation, it must be noted that the term tragedy will seldom be used in this treatment. Mr. Joseph Wood Krutch points out that one must take great care with the use of this term in connection with the present-day theater.² The word tragedy today is seldom taken in its strict Aristotelian sense, but has come to connote any type of drama which portrays

a serious misfortune. Because of this vagueness, the term will seldom be used; but, unless otherwise noted, when the term is employed in this thesis, it will be employed in the strict Aristotelian sense.

For convenience sake, the term great will be used here as applied to those dramas which, among other things, have stood the test of time, and have been generally accepted as the finer works of the theater. It can also be noted that, because of the serious nature of the play being treated, these chapters on the norms of the drama will be limited to those principles which constitute serious drama as opposed to comedy or light drama. Furthermore, all those elements which are not directly influenced by determinism, such as language, dramatic divisions, and technical devices, will not be considered here.

At the start, Aristotle's definition of tragedy will be used as a foundation for the analysis. Certainly Aristotle's treatise on dramatic art is considered the first comprehensive treatment from which almost all other theories have subsequently stemmed, or of which they are modifications. Because of the challenge to moral and philosophical values in the present day, Aristotle's thoughts on art may seem somewhat remote to the modern reader.³

But his theories can still be considered a solid foundation on which to build further evaluations and modifications. Mr. Gassner notes: "I am convinced, in fact, that Aristotle's thinking is still a useful corrective to whatever views we maintain on the subject of narrative and dramatic art, since he is free from our habits of excessive romanticization of ideas and ideals, including those we promulgate in his name." 4

On the other hand, one must be careful not to take Aristotle's ideas as gospel truth which can be applied to all types of drama. As Mr. Butcher remarks, even Aristotle himself would probably be surprised to be thought to have laid down a binding rule for all types of drama. 5 It must be remembered that Aristotle formulated his theories on an a posteriori basis for one type of drama that had proved successful within one particular culture. To say, then, that all other works of drama, in any age or culture, are great only in so far as they conform to Aristotle's principles—this would be to take an extremely narrow and inaccurate view of the end dramatic literature is trying to achieve. 6

It will now be helpful to recall Aristotle's definition of tragedy. "Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is

4 Ibid., xlix.
6 Ibid., 329-332.
serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." In accord with the purpose of the present investigation, this definition will now be analyzed with particular emphasis on the three specific areas which apply directly to determinism, namely, action, character, and emotional effect.

Aristotle first states that tragedy "is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude." This idea of imitation is the same as that expressed by Hamlet when he said, "The purpose of playing, whose end, both first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature." Imitation, however, is commonly interpreted as not being just a literal transcription of the world of reality, but rather a representation of nature either as it is or was, as it ought to be, or as it is said or thought to be. In this connection it is important to note two things: first, that all three of these types of imitation are possible material for the drama, not just the

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7 Ibid., 23.
9 Butcher, p. 122.
10 Ibid., 97.
second, as nature "ought to be"; and second, that this "ought to be" is not to be taken in the moral, but in the aesthetic sense; the artist attempts to give an idealized representation of nature according to her more ideal artistic lines.\textsuperscript{11}

In giving this latitude to the interpretation of the term imitation, one can easily see the all-inclusiveness, the universality, that has proved such an essential part of great drama. Aristotle emphasizes this note of universality when he says: "Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history; for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability and necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages."\textsuperscript{12} Mr. Butcher explains this statement: "If we may expand Aristotle's idea in the light of his own system, fine art eliminates what is transient and particular and reveals the permanent and essential features of the original. It discovers the 'form' towards which an object tends, the result which nature strives to attain. Beneath the individual it finds the universal."\textsuperscript{13}

The history of the theater has confirmed the importance of

\textsuperscript{11}\textit{Ibid.}, 151-152.

\textsuperscript{12}\textit{Ibid.}, 35.

\textsuperscript{13}\textit{Ibid.}, 150.
this universality in dramatic art. Mr. Francis Fergusson notes that Shakespeare was the last great dramatist to use this all-inclusiveness to the full, for after his time, dramatists became more and more limited in their imitation of nature.\textsuperscript{14} Racine with his emphasis on reason, and Wagner with his emphasis on passion, are examples of an increasingly confined outlook which has tended to cut down the life-span of a dramatic work of art.\textsuperscript{15}

After considering this idea of imitation in the drama, it is necessary to understand what is meant by the term \textit{action}. Action is basically anything that is brought about by personal agents, and includes both the internal and external phases of human life. This action is the matter for imitation; for Aristotle its causes are character and thought.\textsuperscript{16} Mr. Butcher divides this action into "the characteristic moral qualities, the permanent dispositions of the mind, which reveal a certain condition of the will; . . . the more transient emotions, the passing moods of feeling; . . . actions in their proper sense."\textsuperscript{17} So this action can include not only outward deeds and incidents, but also the mental processes

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{14}{Francis Fergusson, \textit{The Idea of a Theater: The Study of Ten Plays, the Art of Drama in Changing Perspective} (Princeton, 1949), p. 142.}
\footnote{15}{\textit{Ibid.}, 96.}
\footnote{16}{Butcher, p. 25.}
\footnote{17}{\textit{Ibid.}, 123.}
\end{footnotes}
and the motives which underlie or result from events. Fergusson is more in keeping with the modern stress on psychology, when he emphasizes the inner life out of which actions flow, and calls the action itself "the focus or aim of psychic life from which the events, in that situation, result." Thus action primarily connotes the inner life of man, and secondarily the effects of this inner life, external events. This action is the soul of the drama, not only according to Aristotle, but also according to most dramatists up to the present day.

Only in the particular phase of action upon which the dramatist chooses to concentrate do differences arise among playwrights. Thus, as Mr. Fergusson points out, Shakespeare was interested in "being, real people in a real world, related to each other in a vast and intricate web of analogies." For Racine, plot was considered as the "demonstration of an essence," while Wagner in his Tristan und Isolde, has passion become the clue to human life—the beginnings of Freudian psychopathology can be noticed. With

18 Ibid., 337.
19 Fergusson, p. 36.
20 Butcher, p. 27.
21 Fergusson, p. 233.
22 Ibid., 140.
23 Ibid., 65.
24 Ibid., 74.
the advent of the so-called modern age, one can watch the even more intense narrowing of the material of dramatic action. Ibsen is interested in the "desperate quest for reasons and for ultimate, intelligible moral values"; whereas "the pathetic is the very mode of action and awareness which seems to Chekhov closest to the reality of the human situation, and by means of his plot he shows, even in characters who are not in themselves usually passive, the suffering and the perception of change." Yet, for all his concentration, Chekhov appears to be one of the few modern playwrights who have been able to transcend the limitation of realism by showing his characters when they are most detached from the literal facts of daily life. Even today, a writer like Arthur Miller seems to confine himself to a certain narrowness when he says that his plays are "my response to what was 'in the air.'" As a consequence of this outlook, critics have pointed out that much of Miller's work is obscured by social questions, which in a few years may be of little importance to man.

Hence, from this brief analysis and historical survey, it may be noted that the finest drama is that which is not a literal transcription of reality, but rather a representation of what is

\[25\text{Ibid., 165.}\]
\[26\text{Ibid.}\]
universal in nature, by showing man in all his activities, both
in his inner nature and in his outward actions. It is this type
of "an imitation of an action" which has made certain dramas "not
of an age, but for all time."

Character is the second area for consideration in this analy-
sis of the basic norms of drama. To begin with, it is commonly
accepted that the main character must be great in some respects,
even though the application of this notion to particular cases may
be disputed. For Aristotle, this greatness takes the form of an
epic hero who has the foundation for greatness in a certain moral
goodness. Mr. Butcher comments: "According to Aristotle, the
characters portrayed by epic and tragic poetry have their basis in
moral goodness; but the goodness is of the heroic order. . . .
Whatever be the moral imperfections in the characters, they are
such as impress our imagination, and arouse the sense of grandeur:
we are lifted above the reality of daily life."28 This last note
of being "lifted above the reality of daily life" is an important
one in the concept of great drama; more will be said about it
later.

In more recent drama, the concept of greatness of character
has undergone some modification. Many modern dramatists treat of
characters from a low station in life, but nevertheless they must
show at least some inner greatness and dignity. Maxwell Anderson

28 Butcher, p. 233.
believes that a dramatist must try to show to his audience "that men pass through suffering purified, that, animal though we are, despicable though we are in many ways, there is in us all some divine, incalculable fire that urges us to be better than we are."\(^{29}\) John Gassner confirms this opinion, and in so doing he criticizes Mr. Krutch's\(^{30}\) denunciation of the "low-brow" hero. Mr. Gassner says, "I fail to comprehend why a character's failure to measure up to the 'stature' of Hamlet or Lear must be a deterrent to 'pity and tear.'"\(^{31}\) But Gassner immediately goes on to add: "We cannot have truly tragic enlightenment when the character's mental and spiritual endowment is so low that he cannot give us a proper cue for vision, or cannot set us an example of how high humanity can vault."\(^{32}\) From these opinions it can be seen that what is important in drama is not so much how great a man is in mere accidentals, such as social station or intellectual ability, but rather what is important is that the essential greatness of man is made to shine through any particular interior or exterior limitations.

To understand more fully the meaning of such interior limitation, it is necessary to have a correct idea of what is called the

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\(^{30}\) Krutch, p. 134.

\(^{31}\) Gassner, *The Theatre in Our Times*, p. 64.

\(^{32}\) Ibid., 65.
tragic flaw or fault in the main character of a drama. Here the principal difficulty arises in determining whether or not this fault in the main character need be voluntary to achieve the correct emotional effect of drama. Mr. Butcher points out that, according to Aristotle, the error need not be morally culpable, although it can be;33 and Professor Bywater states that in Aristotle's Ethics a fault, or hamartia, does not originate in vice or depravity but in ignorance of some material fact or circumstance. This ignorance, Bywater notes, "takes the deed out of the class of voluntary acts, and enables one to forgive or even pity the doer."34 Despite this consideration, Butcher seems to think that Aristotle, in writing the Poetics, principally had in mind those plays in which the fault was voluntary.35 It will suffice here to note only that there is a strong case of accepting involuntary flaws as well as voluntary ones in the main dramatic character.

Since this question treats directly of the will, it can be handled more properly in the following chapter.

Yet the notion of a flaw in the main character is important for another reason—in order that the audience might identify itself with a person who is imperfect like itself. This identifica-

33Butcher, p. 321.
35Butcher, p. 324.
tion enables one to sympathize with another's misfortunes. Principally then for this reason, the inclusion of some sort of flaw in the main character is necessary and considered an essential part of the character not only by Aristotle, but also by almost all dramatic theorists.

Another important factor to be considered in connection with the character of a drama is the conflict in which he is involved. Elizabeth Woodbridge describes this conflict as follows: "What the drama primarily presents, is the critical moment of conflict, with the spiritual changes therein involved. It is this inner crisis, as worked out in the outer clash, the outer crisis resulting from and reacting on the inner life, that is the dramatist's function to portray." Further, it is this very conflict which brings forth and accentuates the greatness of man which was treated earlier in this chapter. Mr. Krutch notes that this accentuation by conflict is especially brought about in an age when "a people fully aware of the calamities of life is nevertheless serenely confident of the greatness of man, whose mighty passions and supreme fortitude are revealed when one of these calamities overtakes him."

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36 Bywater, p. 211.


39 Krutch, p. 122.
Necessarily connected with the conflict of the main character is the outcome or resolution of the conflict. Mr. Gassner describes the ways in which this resolution can take place:

To be ground down is the most universal—the only true universal destiny. Even Macbeth, who falls like a tower, is most profoundly tragic in the gradual deterioration of his character... The only difference between his end and that of such modern characters as "the three sisters" and the "cherry orchard" family is that he rallies his spirits to wage a final battle in which he is slain whereas they rally their spirits to endure the continuance of their misfortunes; and we may wonder which is the more trying experience requiring the greater fortitude.40

This resolution of "living," as Mr. Gassner says, is more likely to be found in the drama of today, and it is that of which Mr. O'Hara speaks as "the newer finality which closes all doors and then compels the defeated to live on."41

The final norm to be noted in connection with the character of a play is that, out of this conflict and its subsequent resolution, there arises in the main character some type of recognition through which he comes to a greater knowledge of himself and his fate. Aristotle defines this recognition as "a change from ignorance to knowledge, producing love or hate between the persons destined by the poet for good or bad fortune."42 As with other

42 Butcher, p. 41.
dramatic norms previously treated in this chapter, this one of recognition often takes on a different interpretation in modern drama. Maxwell Anderson, for example, claims that "the mainspring in the mechanism of a modern play is almost invariably a discovery by the hero of some element in his environment or in his own soul of which he has not been aware—or which he has not taken sufficiently into account."\(^{43}\) Mr. Anderson continues to point out that this discovery must be made by the hero himself, it must leave an indelible effect on his thought and emotion,\(^{44}\) and most important, the main character becomes "a nobler person because of his recognition of his fault and the consequent alteration of his course of action."\(^{45}\) But on this point of recognition, Mr. Gassner stresses the fact that this discovery, or "enlightenment," as he calls it, is often limited to psychology or a social situation, and hence the resulting drama lacks the world-view and so is lessened as a great work of art.\(^{46}\) Furthermore, the character himself can be somewhat lessened in greatness because of a lack of this recognition, as a Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, who fails to grow in nobility because he never comes to a knowledge of his place in the

\(^{43}\) Anderson, pp. 58-59.

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 59.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{46}\) Gassner, *The Theatre in Our Times*, p. 70.
circumstances around him.

Therefore, the main character of a great drama must measure up to several norms. The person must possess a certain greatness, which reveals his dignity as a man. Yet, at the same time, he possesses some fault or short-coming which better enables the audience to identify itself with the hero's misfortune, and which effects a conflict within the hero himself and with outside forces. This conflict resolves either in death or in a painful living on, which in turn produces an enlightenment or recognition in the main character, and hence increases his nobility and alters his way of action.

The third and final area of analysis is that of the emotional experience which the drama produces in the audience. Aristotle makes this experience the end or purpose of the drama; yet Mr. Butcher points out that this does not mean that all drama depends on the individual and subjective emotion, because this subjective experience is grounded in human nature and so acquires an objective reality.47

Aristotle further singles out pity and fear as the principal emotions aroused by a good drama. Since these two emotions and their consequent modifications are often misinterpreted, it would be helpful to investigate them accurately and somewhat thoroughly.

Aristotle defines fear as "a species of pain or disturbance

47 Butcher, pp. 210-211.
arising from an impression of impending evil which is destructive or painful in its nature."\(^{48}\) This fear is something near, not remote, and the persons threatened by it are definitely ourselves.\(^{49}\) The definition of pity according to Aristotle is "a sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive or painful kind in the case of somebody who does not deserve it, the evil being one which we might expect to happen to ourselves or to some of our friends, and this at a time when it is seen to be near at hand."\(^{50}\) Aristotle goes on to point out that this pity can turn into fear where the object is so nearly related to us that the suffering seems to be our own.\(^{51}\) Here is precisely where the element of identification with a person like to the audience fits in and becomes an essential part of the effect of drama. The members of the audience feel pity at the suffering of unmerited misfortune; they experience fear because this misfortune has happened to a man so much like themselves, one who is not entirely good, but whose misfortune has been brought about by some error or frailty.\(^{52}\) But this pity and fear of which Aristotle speaks is not soft sentiment

\(^{48}\)Quoted from Rhetoric, ii, 5 by Butcher, p. 256.
\(^{49}\)Butcher, p. 256.
\(^{50}\)Quoted from Rhetoric, ii, 8 by Butcher, p. 256.
\(^{51}\)Ibid.
\(^{52}\)Butcher, p. 45; see also pp. 257-258.
or even the pure instinct of compassion of which many modern writers treat. Rather, as described above, it is a pity which is simultaneously strengthened by the emotion of strong fear.\textsuperscript{53}

Certainly today these emotions of pity and fear are interpreted widely, and Mr. Gassner thinks that they were so intended by Aristotle himself: "In the tragic experience we temporarily expel troublesome inner complications. We expel 'pity' and 'fear,' to use Aristotle's terms, and the terms are broad enough to cover the most pathological or near-pathological elements—namely, anxieties, fears, morbid grief or self-pity, sadistic or masochistic desires, and the sense of guilt that these engender."\textsuperscript{54}

But this emotional experience is not something that is completely irrational; it is founded on knowledge just as the main character himself grows in knowledge of himself and his situation. Arthur Miller considers this knowledge extremely necessary: "The prime business of a play is to arouse the passions of its audience so that by the route of passion may be opened up new relationships between a man and men, and between men and Man. Drama is akin to the other inventions of man in that it ought to help us to know more, and not merely to spend our feelings."\textsuperscript{55}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{53}Gassner, "Aristotelian Literary Criticism," pp. xlii-xlili. \\
\textsuperscript{54}Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, p. 52. \\
\textsuperscript{55}Miller, p. 53.
\end{flushright}
enlightenment" of which Mr. Gassner often speaks, and which he thinks is frequently the deciding factor between great drama and mere empty passion and sentiment. His explanation of this tragic enlightenment is worth quoting in full:

We have been able to give vent to them [our emotions, passions, etc.]; to 'externalize troublesome inner drives, so to speak. They have been distanced, too, so that it is possible to weigh and judge—that is, to understand—them. And in this way we have achieved tragic enlightenment.

... Tragic enlightenment, then, forms a triad with the Aristotelian 'pity' and 'fear'—the third necessary element, not noted by Aristotle, in the dynamics of tragedy. It is, moreover, not merely the third element in the process of catharsis but the decisive one, because the only factor that masters the expelled tensions is human understanding. 56

Having understood what emotions are involved in the effect of a good drama on the audience, it is next necessary to investigate the process through which these emotions are expelled. This is the process that Aristotle terms the "purification" or "purification," and it is a term whose interpretation has caused commentators great trouble. Professor Bywater gives an excellent summary of the scholarship done on this question, 57 and his conclusion is that Aristotle intended the term to be understood as a physiological metaphor. 58 The drama has a therapeutic effect on the audience rather than a directly moral effect, which cleans away cer-

56 Gassner, The Theatre in Our Times, pp. 53, 55.
57 Bywater, pp. 152-161.
58 Ibid., 152.
tain emotions, and relieves the soul of the disquietude they would cause if they did not have the satisfaction due to them. 59

This theory of purgation may seem a bit strange to the casual spectator; but if one were to analyze more closely just what actually does take place within himself when he experiences an emotion at a dramatic performance, he will find this experience closely resembles that described by Aristotle and numerous theorists after him. Even Goethe includes this notion of purgation in his definition of tragedy, but modifies it somewhat by speaking of an "adjustment" of certain passions. 60 Mr. Hamm also summarizes what the spectator experiences: "Tragedy takes us out of ourselves, provides a tonic relief for introverted feelings. It does more: it gives us not only an object, but a higher one. . . . Since we imaginatively identify ourselves with the hero, his fate touches us. And since he is a noble sufferer our feelings are purged of their petty selfish elements." 61 But Mr. Fergusson points out that this purgation certainly differs from mere diversion which is often the aim of the purely commercial theater. 62

The final norm to be considered in connection with emotional

59 Ibid., 159.
61 Hamm, p. 270.
62 Fergusson, p. 231.
effects of the drama is the pleasure which the audience derives from the purgation of its emotions. This pleasure is, as it were, the final step in the dramatic experience, and so can be considered the ultimate object of poetry, drama, or any of the fine arts. Butcher also mentions that according to Aristotle this pleasure can be used as the criterion for the artistic merit of a dramatic work.

What causes this pleasure? From what has been said earlier, two causes can be singled out as principally entering into the production of the dramatic pleasure. The first cause is the release of the morbid and disturbing elements within the emotions, which causes a distinctive aesthetic satisfaction. This satisfaction is metaphorically like that experienced when one is cleansed of physical elements which impair his health. Bywater further notes that this pleasure is not necessarily a demoralizing one, as Plato considered it. But Butcher adds: "Not that Aristotle would set aside as a matter of indifference the moral content of a poem or the moral character of the author. Nay, they are all-important factors in producing the total impression which

63Butcher, p. 221.
64Ibid., 214.
65Ibid., 253-254.
66Ibid., 255.
67Bywater, p. 155.
has to be made upon the hearer."\(^{68}\) Here a difficulty immediately arises because morality enters into the question. Due to the tremendous divergence of opinions on moral matters, thousands of pages have been written on this relation between morality and art. It would be foolish to try to resolve such a difficulty within this thesis, so what appears to the present author to be a decent and commonly accepted norm will be proposed. This norm is enunciated by Mr. Butcher when he treats of Aristotle's view of this same question: "The aesthetic pleasure produced by any ideal imitation must be a sane and wholesome pleasure, which would approve itself to the better portion of the community. The pleasure he contemplates could not conceivably be derived from a poem which offers low ideals of life and conduct and misinterprets human destiny.\(^{69}\) Let this statement suffice for now; its application will be treated at greater length in the following chapters.

The second cause of aesthetic pleasure springs from a recognition of a sense of justice between the forces of good and evil. Mr. Henry Alonzo Myers in his brilliant treatise on tragedy, believes that the idea of justice is central to the complete emotional effect that Aristotle and others are trying to describe; and that without considering this sense of justice, the emotional pleasure experienced at a drama is often impossible to understand.

\(^{68}\)Butcher, p. 225.

\(^{69}\)Ibid., 226.
stand. For this reason, numerous modern works of drama fail to produce this pleasure but rather leave the spectator with a feeling of morbid depression. Mr. Krutch refers to such works when he states that they "describe human misery and end more sadly even than they begin," and they "produce in the reader a sense of depression which is the exact opposite of that elation generated when the spirit of a Shakespeare rises joyously superior to the outward calamities which he recounts and celebrates the greatness of the human spirit whose travails he describes." Thus, in reality, these two causes of the emotional pleasure, i.e., the release of the disturbing elements of the emotions and the revelation of a just relation between good and evil, are closely bound together and often cannot be separated except in a rational analysis of one's experience.

By way of summary, then, the norms analyzed above comprise at least a description of what constitutes great drama in those areas which will enter into the question of determinism in A Streetcar Named Desire:

A drama is an imitation—but not a copy—of life as it is, ought to be, or is thought to be. This life, or action, includes the inward and outward activity of personal agents, who are at

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71 Krutch, p. 118.
least great enough as men that the audience can identify itself with them. Yet the main character in particular possesses some fault, which is not necessarily of a moral nature, but which causes him to be in conflict with himself and the forces outside himself. The outcome of this conflict is death or a painful living on for the hero; but through his suffering he grows in recognition of his fault, changes his course of action, and so adds to his nobility as a man. Witnessing the action, the members of the audience are able to sense an identification with the characters who are people like themselves, and so they experience a pleasurable emotion because justice is done and the selfish elements of their emotions are released.

Here it is helpful to notice three main characteristics which weave themselves through the above-analyzed norms. First, there is the characteristic of universality, both in the character and in the conflict in which he is engaged. This element gives greatness to the drama and enables the audience to identify itself with what is portrayed, to experience an emotion, and to grow in valuable knowledge. The second important characteristic in these norms is nobility—principally the nobility and dignity of man which is brought out by a person, imperfect though he is, who somehow rises above the circumstances around himself and who will not be crushed by his own misfortune. The third characteristic is knowledge, a knowledge which begins in the main character and is transferred to the audience through its identification with him.
Further, this knowledge acts as a solid ground for the emotional experience which is the ultimate end of the dramatic performance.

Finally, it is important to note that these norms have been set down by dramatic theorists as ideals, and therefore it would be practically impossible to discover any one dramatic work which fulfills all of them perfectly. Rather, since they are ideal norms, a drama can be called good if it participates to a fair extent in most of them. Also, if a drama lacked many of these elements, it could not be considered a great work of dramatic art.
CHAPTER III

DETERMINISM IN THE DRAMA

Now that a working theory of the drama has been established, the next step in answering the question of this thesis is to show how these norms are influenced and modified by determinism.

Before this investigation is made, however, it will be helpful to make a brief historical survey of the doctrine of determinism and its general effect on the drama. The reason for this survey is that it will aid in seeing the close relation between the thought, and ultimately the entire culture, of certain periods of history and the dramatic art which they produced. A grasp of this relation will be of great help in making the final evaluation of A Streetcar Named Desire.

In general, as determinism was proposed philosophically in any given period, so it can be found reflected in the theater of that time. Beginning with Aristotle, Mr. Howard Patch shows that in his Nicomachean Ethics the Philosopher definitely professes a belief in free will and moral responsibility.¹ Mr. Patch goes on to say that "deterministic tragedies will represent a sort of art

¹Howard R. Patch, "Troilus on Determinism," Speculum, VI (April 1931), 227.
left to us when the pseudo-scientist and certain psychological
faddists have done their worst with human nature, and they will
really embody determinism. Such, however, is not the tragedy of
the Greeks, where irony springs from the reality of the human will
striving in conflict with fate."2 Certainly fate plays a large
role in Greek drama, but the basis for the dramatic conflict is
always the struggle of man's will against this fate.

Belief in free will continued through the time of St. Augus-
tine and Boethius3 up to the Middle Ages, where it was found in
the writings of St. Bernard and many others.4 Even in Chaucerian
tragedy, the element of free will continues. Mr. D. W. Robertson
points out: "We cannot say, then, that the victim or 'hero' of a
Chaucerian tragedy is either the victim of chance or the victim
of an inevitable destiny. Like the speaker in the De Consolati-
one, he is the victim of his own failure."5

Later, in the middle of the seventeenth century, Thomas
Hobbes proposed the doctrine that was the first seriously to
shake man's belief in free will. Hobbes attempted to prove that
man was no different from an animal, while around the same time

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2Ibid., 229.
3Ibid.
4Jean Mouroux, The Meaning of Man, trans. A. H. G. Downes
(New York, 1948), pp. 174-175.
5D. W. Robertson, Jr., "Chaucerian Tragedy," ELH, XIX (March
1952), 4.
Descartes was proposing that an animal is only a machine. From this it was easy for men to eliminate the middle term of these two equations and come up with a belief in the equation: man is a machine. Yet it was just before this time that a dramatist like Shakespeare could have his Hamlet talk of "the native hue of resolution,"—probably the last time that such a statement would go uncontested in the history of the drama.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the doctrine of determinism received a tremendous impetus through the teachings of Darwin, Marx, and Freud. Mr. Krutch gives a fine summary of the impact of these doctrines:

Thus to accept the hypotheses of Darwin, of Marx and of Freud, to accept any one of them as even a partial account of the how and why of man's past development and future destiny, meant to emphasize strongly if not exclusively the extent to which he has played a passive role and to encourage him to see himself as essentially not merely a 'product' but also a victim. To that extent all three encouraged what may be called 'philosophies of exculpation.' If Darwin seemed to deprive man of all credit for the upward evolution of himself as an organism, Marx and Freud seemed to relieve him of all blame for his sins and his crimes as well as for his follies.

All these theories of determinism had their influence in many spheres of human endeavor. In the scientific laboratory it was shown that the soul itself was just an illusion, for no one

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7 Ibid., pp. 38-39.
could see it in a test tube or under a microscope. After all, such scientists could conclude, man's actions can be explained by impulses and morality can be reduced to mere custom. 8 So men could make living simply a physiological process,9 and a writer like Zola could quip that "a like determinism will govern the stones of a highway and the brain of a man," or a Taine would say that "vice and virtue are products like sugar and vitrol."10 Still other people, like the character Frazier in Skinner's Walden Two, merely took determinism as an assumption, because it was convenient.11

Soon after the turn of the century, Edwin J. Lukas, Executive Director of the Society for the Prevention of Crime, was quoted as saying: "In today's thinking anti-social behavior is considered to be the product of unique economic, sociological and psychological factors in each offender's past history."12 Thus, the term morality lost all its spiritual connotation, and people came to believe, for example, that the sexual act "is a simple biological one which sends no reverberations through a spiritual

8 Krutch, The Modern Temper, p. 66.
9 Ibid., 235.
12 Ibid., p. 49.
universe, and so it no longer has any transcendental implications."\textsuperscript{13}

Contemporaneously with the new scientific theories denying free will, the impact of determinism was felt in the theater. Some dramatists incorporated this belief directly into their plays, but the vast majority, having felt the influence of the scientific attitude of the times, registered this influence in their works by a growing concern with psychology, heredity, and instinct. With the advent of realism, such dramatists treated deterministic matters in an open way with the air of playing the role of the detached observer.\textsuperscript{14} An element such as environment moved out of the background of the dramatic conflict into a prominent place in the foreground. Often society itself became the main character and took on an interest and importance of its own. Dramatic theorists began putting new interpretations on the classical formulas of drama. A contemporary theorist like Mr.' Frank O'Hara speaks entirely in terms of "unresolvable maladjustment" and "the defeat of the individual by some great external force beyond his control," but he makes no mention of the hero having any part in bringing on his own misfortune.\textsuperscript{15}

Yet at the same time, some critics did oppose these deter-

\textsuperscript{14}Gassner, A Treasury of the Theatre, p. 3
\textsuperscript{15}O'Hara, p. 52.
ministic theories. The French critic, Ferdinand Brunetière, obviously had the influence of determinism in mind when he began his well-known definition of drama with the words: "drama is a representation of the will of man in conflict with the mysterious powers of natural forces which limit and belittle us."\(^{16}\) Arthur Miller has also taken up the banner against determinism, and his words are especially worth quoting because he writes with reference to the same theater as that in which Tennessee Williams is working:

The idea of realism has become wedded to the idea that man is at best the sum of forces working upon him and of psychological forces within him. Yet an innate value, an innate will, does in fact posit itself as real not alone because it is devoutly to be wished, but because, however closely he is measured and systematically accounted for, he is more than the sum of his stimuli and is unpredictable beyond a certain point. A drama, like a history, which stops at this point, the point of conditioning, is not reflecting reality. What is wanted, therefore, is not a poetry of escape from the process of determinism, like the mood play which stops where feeling ends or that inverted romanticism which would mirror all the world in the sado-masochistic relationship. Nor will the heightening of the intensity of language alone yield the prize. A new poem will appear because a new balance has been struck which embraces both determinism and the paradox of the will.\(^{17}\)

Now that a brief historical survey of the problem of determinism and its general influence on the theater has been presented it will be helpful before proceeding to set down here a precise

\(^{16}\)Quoted by Hamm, p. 257.

\(^{17}\)Miller, pp. 54-55.
definition of the term determinism as it will subsequently be used in this thesis. Determinism is that doctrine which denies man the dominion over his actions, and thus makes him necessitated by forces either within or outside himself to perform a specific act, leaving him no freedom either to act or not, or to act in this way or that. The term determinism will be used in this sense throughout the remainder of this thesis.

The present author does not profess any belief in determinism as above defined. But since it is not the purpose of this paper to disprove the theory of determinism, the reader is merely referred to the arguments from modern experiments, consciousness, the moral order, and the nature of man, all of which are used in philosophically positing man's freedom of will. It is also worthwhile to note that Joseph Wood Krutch, who appeared to be decidedly in favor of determinism in one of his earlier books, The Modern Temper (1929), has written these words in his more recent work, The Measure of Man (1954): "It seems quite obvious that the complete rejection of the concept of human responsibility and of all belief in the human being's ability to do anything for himself is pragmatically impossible."19

18 For an excellent treatment of these arguments, see Hubert Gruender, S.J., Free Will: The Greatest of the Seven World-Riddles (St. Louis, 1916), and Dom Thomas Verner Moore, The Driving Forces of Human Nature (New York, 1948), pp. 321-349.

19 Krutch, The Measure of Man, p. 53.
But as was pointed out earlier, the principal question of this chapter is not: Does man have free will? but rather: How does determinism influence the drama in the three specific areas of action, character, and emotional experience?

Determinism has a definite influence on the action of a drama. For Aristotle the actions of a play flow directly from the motive force of the wills of the characters.\(^{20}\) He also frequently speaks of the chain of cause and effect which must remain unbroken in the drama, each of whose links "is formed by the contact of the human will with outward surroundings."\(^{21}\) If a character in a drama does not act for motives which he has deliberately set up for himself, the chain of cause and effect is broken. Such motiveless action Aristotle considers irrational and not worthy of imitation.\(^{22}\)

Another point worth considering in this connection is that a will in conflict is the principal subject matter of a drama and that which most distinguishes it from other forms of art.\(^{23}\) Mr. Hamm also notes this when he says that the action of the drama is human action and that "the specific character of human action is

\(^{20}\)Butcher, pp. 348-349.

\(^{21}\)Ibid., p. 180.

\(^{22}\)Ibid., pp. 177-178.

\(^{23}\)Woodbridge, p. xiii.
that it is conscious and that it is willed."\textsuperscript{24}

For the very essence of drama is "a struggle in which the hero knows what he wants, and wants it with all his might, and does his best to get it."\textsuperscript{25}

The final effect of determinism on the action of the drama, is that the resulting imitation does not seem adequately to reflect reality. Arthur Miller feels strongly on this point when he treats of dramatic realism: "It is not more 'real,' however, for drama to 'liberate' itself from this vise by the route of romance and the spectacle of free will and a new heroic formula than it is 'real' now to represent man's defeat as the ultimate implication of an overwhelming determinism."\textsuperscript{26} A demonstration of those precise areas in which a deterministic outlook fails to reflect reality will better be shown in the following section which treats the characters from which the dramatic action springs.

Thus it can be seen that determinism influences the action of drama, first, by weakening the cause-effect relationship which is necessary to a well-constructed play; second, by diminishing the meaning of dramatic conflict, which is basically a will contesting with other forces; and third, by failing adequately to reflect the reality which it is supposed to imitate.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24}Hamm, p. 256.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25}Brander Matthews, \textit{The Development of the Drama} (New York, 1930), p. 20.}
\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{26}Miller, p. 53.}
Since the will is an intrinsic part of man, it is obvious that determinism effects the characters of a drama in a more direct and fundamental way than it influences the action. Aristotle defines character as "that which reveals moral purpose, showing what kind of things a man chooses or avoids." This shows that the whole notion of character is based on the way a man uses his free will, not only in the drama, but even in everyday life.

The influence of determinism on the dramatic conflict, which was only touched upon in the previous section of this chapter, can now be more fully analyzed. Mr. Butcher explains Aristotle's view on this question by commenting on the struggle of the hero: "Outside him is a necessity which restricts his freedom, a superior power with which his will frequently collides. Again, there is the inward discord of his own divided will; and, further, the struggle with other human wills which obstruct his own." This statement appears to cover all the possibilities of dramatic conflict within the framework of free agents.

In this connection a definite difficulty arises, which was only mentioned in passing in the previous chapter. Since the Greeks, and Aristotle in particular, put so much emphasis on the workings of fate in their dramas, did they actually believe the

27 Butcher, p. 29.
28 Ibid., 350.
characters to possess any freedom of will? As an example, Aristotle's favorite play, the *Oedipus Rex*, is always cited. On this question three considerations are important. The first point can best be brought out by a quotation from Mr. Patch: "The fact that Aristotle puts the cause of real tragedy in a flaw, moral or otherwise, in the leading character, rather than in the crushing power of more purely external circumstances, suggests that his own preference was typically humanistic—that he held that character, rather than forces outside the individual, is destiny." 29

The second point to consider is that, for the Greeks, ignorance was also judged as a flaw suitable for dramatic presentation. Usually the ignorance was at least in some degree culpable, but this need not necessarily be so, as may have been the case with Oedipus. 30

The third consideration is that Oedipus actually did take an active part in his downfall through his impetuous action. Mr. Gassner points out: "But Sophocles could not have woven a great tragedy around a passive victim. Oedipus is a superbly active personality, as if the Attic dramatist tried to tell us that fate works through the character of the victim." 31

All three of these considerations point to the fact that, ac-

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29 Patch, p. 228.
30 Butcher, p. 318.
According to the mind of Aristotle, the hero definitely cooperates in his downfall, taking an active part in the conflict portrayed, which action can only spring from strong will power. Even from the standpoint of interest and dramatic energy in a play, a lack of free will in the characters can often make the drama just a pitiable display of passive suffering; there is not that active force pushing forward in a definite direction and clashing with forces it meets on its way.\textsuperscript{32}

Free will, besides giving meaning to the dramatic struggle, also plays an important part in establishing the greatness or dignity of the characters. Miss Woodbridge points out that a drama differs from an epic in that the human life it portrays emphasizes the emotional and spiritual state of man as issuing from or developing into volition.\textsuperscript{33}

Examples of volitional emphasis in drama from the Greek and Elizabethan tragedies are numerous and obvious. But even in many of the modern "social" dramas, elements of active will power are in evidence. Mr. Gassner points out: "Both ideas, 'tragic conflict' and the 'will of man in conflict,' have found a specifically active realization in social, especially 'class struggle,' drama in our century; and this, in spite of theories of social determinism in human behavior."\textsuperscript{34}

\textsuperscript{32} See Butcher, p. 310.
\textsuperscript{33} Woodbridge, p. xiii.
\textsuperscript{34} Gassner, "Aristotelian Literary Criticism," p. liv.
the close relation between free will and character, Fergusson has this to say of Mrs. Alving in Ibsen's *Ghosts*: "She is tragically seeking; she suffers a series of pathoses and new insights in the course of the play; and this rhythm of will, feeling, and insight underneath the machinery of the plot is the form of the life of the play, the soul of the tragedy."³⁵ The *Cherry Orchard*, like most of Chekhov's works, is principally passive, but still it retains some of the active element in its characters. Such spasmodic motion of the characters causes Fergusson to compare it with *Hamlet.*³⁶

Much of the greatness of a character like Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman* is effected by the amount of freedom of will attributed to him. Thus Gassner writes: "Concerning Miller's Willy Loman, I have been inclined to say that Willy as the victim of economics or victim of his own fatuous view of life lacks tragic stature, but that Willy the impassioned man, who is loyal to an ideal of himself and of his son Biff, possesses it. The question is simply whether we find in this second Willy an instance of tragic will or an example of merely pathetic self-delusion."³⁷ Arthur Miller himself must think that Willy has this greatness; but whether or not Willy actually does, Miller at least theoreti-

³⁵ Fergusson, p. 151.
³⁶ Ibid., 134.
³⁷ Gassner, *The Theatre In Our Times*, p. 66.
cally explains the more prominent actions of life in these terms: "The history of man is a ceaseless process of overthrowing one determinism to make way for another more faithful to life's changing relationships. And it is a process inconceivable without the existence of the will of man. . . . Any determinism, even the most scientific, is only that stasis, that seemingly endless pause, before the application of man's will administering a new insight into causation." 38

Mr. Myers also agrees on this point by stating that both in real life and in drama the mark of the heroic is an uncompromising will, 39 and that the secret of the interest which the hero engenders in the audience is his intensity manifested in his unyielding purpose. 40 But an admission of determinism, as W. Macneile Dixon notes, "must so undervalue as irretrievably to ruin human dignity, and make life a very negligible and sorry trifle." 41

Yet there are men who believe that great drama can be had with determinism. One need only to witness the theories of Mr. Frank O'Hara: "Perhaps the flaw—and hence the Fate—was planted into our glands by heredity and nourished in the growing conviction, via science laboratory and the psychological interview, un-

38Miller, p. 54.
39Myers, p. 138.
40Ibid., 137.
til now we are inclined to say that character isn’t ‘what we’re born with’ so much as ‘whom we’re born from’ and ‘what we’re born to.’ Such is the conclusion one must logically come to if he is going to agree with the so-called latest scientific discoveries. But apart from science and in the realm of drama, the reader is asked to weigh Mr. O’Hara’s statement with those quoted before him, and to compare the tradition of the great dynamic dramas with many of the deterministic dramas of the modern day.

Thus the conclusion appears to be that the lessening or complete omission of free will may not rule a character out of great drama, but it does definitely weaken his personality, and consequently the conflict in which he is involved. It also diminishes his dignity as a man, and is contrary to the general tradition of great drama.

Finally, the emotional experience of the audience can definitely be altered when they witness a play incorporating determinism. Just what emotion does the audience experience? Mr. Patch claims that instead of a strong uplifting emotion, fatalism gives man nothing to do but weep. This is the emotional experience many critics term "wet sympathy," and it is obviously a far cry from anything the Greeks or Shakespeare had in mind.

Another reason for the emotion being weakened is that fatal-

\[42\] O’Hara, pp. 244-245.

\[43\] Patch, p. 227.
ism kills interest, as in Cocteau's *Infernal Machine* which is over before it even begins. In such a play, the audience often experiences only a weak sympathy; and Gassner believes that this may be the case with *Death of a Salesman*: "If he [Willy] made large claims upon their sympathy, it was because, along with Arthur Miller, they attributed his failure, as well as their own, to entrapment in social delusions and circumstances."\(^{45}\)

Furthermore, because of unmerited suffering which the hero undergoes in a deterministic drama, Butcher notes that the audience will experience a sense of repulsion rather than genuine pity and fear, or even the other emotions which the wider interpretation of pity and fear includes.\(^{46}\) Krutch points out that this is one of the differences between a Shakespeare and an Ibsen: "Shakespeare justifies the ways of God to man, but in Ibsen there is no such happy end and with him tragedy, so called, has become merely an expression of our despair at finding that such justification is no longer possible."\(^{47}\) Mr. Krutch also speaks of many of the modern dramas in these terms: "Instead, mean misery piles on mean misery, petty misfortune follows petty misfortune, and despair becomes intolerable because it is no longer even sig-

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\(^{44}\)Fergusson, p. 201.  
\(^{46}\)Butcher, p. 308.  
nificant or important. 48

In conclusion, the effects of determinism on the action, character, and emotional experience of a drama can be summarized as follows: A deterministic play is not a sufficient imitation of the way men act, and determinism itself denies the drama its characteristic element of a logical cause-effect relationship, thus making irrational actions and chance hold a predominant place in the plot structure. A pre-determined character is lessened in greatness and dignity, and his struggle becomes meaningless. The audience, in turn, experiences only weak sympathy or compassion, often coupled with despair, and the characteristic dramatic pleasure is vitiating by the apparent injustice of unmerited punishment.

Finally, it is important to note that, although none of the above arguments may be conclusive when taken separately, certainly if they be considered all together, it is difficult to see how a deterministic play which has all these shortcomings could be a great and enduring work of dramatic art.

48Ibid., p. 129.
CHAPTER IV

DETERMINISM IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Now that the basic norms of drama have been analyzed, and the effect of determinism on these norms has been pointed out, the preparation has been made for the application of these norms to the play being considered, A Streetcar Named Desire.

First, however, before beginning the actual direct analysis of the play itself, it will be helpful to understand a few of Tennessee Williams' purposes and ideas on dramatic writing. When it is realized what Williams is attempting to communicate to his audiences, it will be easier to recognize these same elements in the analysis of his work.

In his introduction to Cat On a Hot Tin Roof, Williams states his desire to communicate ideas on the important phases of life:

I think of writing as something more organic than words, something closer to being and action. . . . I have never for one moment doubted that there are people—millions!—to say things to. We come to each other, gradually, but with love. . . . I still don't want to talk to people only about the surface aspects of their lives, the sort of things that acquaintances laugh and chatter about on ordinary social occasions. . . . I want to go on talking to you as freely and intimately about what we live and die for as if I knew you better than anyone else whom you know.1

1Tennessee Williams, Cat On a Hot Tin Roof (New York, 1955), pp. viii-x passim.
This desire to communicate results from Williams' belief that the great moments of life are when men impart to each other their intimate thoughts. These are the moments, he says, "we must wait for—the moments when we escape from the prison of our skins." Mr. R. C. Lewis has this quality in mind when he points out that Williams is concerned with plays "whose interest does not depend on incident or situation but holds the audience through the revelation of quiet and ordinary truths."  

Williams' desire to communicate to others the intimate truths of life is based on his strong interest in human nature and its noble qualities. He states that "the one dominant theme in most of my writing, the most magnificent thing in all human nature, is valor—and endurance." People hold a strong interest for him, as they must for any dramatist: "I'm trying to catch the true quality of experience in a group of people, that cloudy, flickering, evanescent—fiercely charged!—interplay of live human beings caught in the thundercloud of a common crisis."

Since this communication and interplay between human beings

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2 Information from an interview of Mike Wallace with Tennessee Williams, March 2, 1958.
4 Quoted in Current Biography (January 1946), 646.
5 Williams, Cat On a Hot Tin Roof, p. 42.
is so important to Williams, he considers those moments in life most tragic in which people are unable to understand one another. This is one of the points in which Williams is quite similar to Anton Chekhov, a similarity which Williams himself will admit. Mr. Lincoln Barnett mention this in his Life article: "In mood the plays of both Chekhov and Williams are warm but unsentimental. In content both deal with the isolation of human beings and their tragic inability to understand one another."  

Another basic element of Williams' writing results from his strong concern with violence and hatred, which can be seen in every one of his plays except The Glass Menagerie. Several reasons can be given for this seemingly sadistic interest. It can partly be explained by Williams' childhood, certain incidents of which impressed him very deeply. He says: "I remember gangs of kids following me home yelling 'Sissy!'—and home was not a very pleasant refuge. It was a perpetually dim little apartment in a wilderness of identical brick and concrete structures. . . . If I had been born to this situation I might not have resented it deeply. But it was forced upon my consciousness at the most sensitive age of childhood. It produced a shock and rebellion that have grown into an inherent part of my work."  

A second reason for so much violence and hatred in Williams'  

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7 Quoted by Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, pp. 1087-1088.
works may be attributed to his belief that he is a victim of psychiatric "child omnipotence." A child, Williams explains, has only to cry out to receive the attention and care he wants. As he grows older, he increasingly finds that people do not respond as readily to him; and so he builds up an inferior feeling and a hatred for a world which denies him what he wants. Later in life, this person vents his hatred in various forms—for Williams it is through his writing, by including the more violent and hate-filled moments of human existence. The validity of such a reason can be taken for what one wishes, remembering that it comes from a man who is so intensely concerned with his psychic states that he will pay fifty dollars an hour, five days a week, to a psychiatrist who will tell him such things. But at least such information can help one to understand Williams' statement: "I may write about troubled people, but I write from my own tensions. For me, this is a form of therapy. It may be that audiences release their own tensions as a result. I certainly hope so." Here the author of this thesis wishes to point out that in quoting the above statements he is not implying that Williams is a fraud, rather he believes that the playwright is sincere in his

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8 From interview with Mike Wallace.
9 Ibid.
10 Quoted in an anonymous article "The Playwright: Man Named Tennessee," Newsweek, XLIX (April 1, 1957), 81.
views. Whether or not Williams is deluded and mixed up in his analysis of himself is another question which certainly cannot be answered here.

The final reason for Williams' interest in hatred and violence comes from his conception of the role of a dramatist. First, he mentions that he is not interested in writing about routine situations, as was shown above, and he further explains this statement by saying: "A play must concentrate the events of a lifetime in the short span of a three-act play. Of necessity, these events must be more violent than life." He has also been quoted as saying: "I always write wanting to say what I have to say, as truly and forcefully and movingly as I can. That is what my aim is."

Yet within the confines of all the hatred and violence that Williams portrays is found a deep sympathy for men. This sympathy is certainly one of the more redeeming qualities of his work, a quality which can cover over a good bit of the horror and repulsion that is simultaneously experienced. Mr. Desmond Reid points out this often-overlooked quality in Williams' work, and precisely because it is overlooked, Mr. Reid's words are worth quoting in full:

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11 See p. 47.

12 Newsweek, XLIX (April 1, 1957), 81.

13 From interview with Mike Wallace.
There is about all this a terrible singleness of purpose. Always it is the waifs and strays and outcasts and misfits that claim Tennessee Williams's attention. In bringing their distress before us he serves them well. His writing is clear-sighted and remorseless. He is sincere in his belief that what he depicts is representative of the world about us, and, as he himself tells us, he is trying to drive home the screaming need of a world-wide human effort to know ourselves and each other a great deal better. To Williams his hapless characters are not merely the misfits of the world: they are typical human beings. They typify others similarly if not identically cudgelled by misfortune. The little world of a Williams play is a miniature of the great cruel world in which we, all of us, live. 14

It is apparent that one of Williams' main reasons for depicting this human sympathy is precisely his belief in both psychological and environmental determinism. As already mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, Williams thinks that there is a tremendous "need for understanding and tenderness and fortitude among individuals trapped by circumstance," and this, he claims, is the basic premise of his writing. 15 Therefore, it follows that Williams conceives man as fighting a losing battle with himself and with the circumstances around him: "As far as we know, as far as there exists any kind of empiric evidence, there is no way to beat the game of being against non-being, in which non-being is the predestined victor on realistic levels." 16 The dramatist be-

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15 Quoted by Kunitz, Twentieth Century Authors, p. 1089.

lieves that this is the real tragedy of life, the matter for dramatic presentation—the fact that people "suffer so much for so little." Therefore, although Tennessee Williams is a man concerned with hatred and violence, he softens these stronger elements with definite touches of human sympathy and concern.

In summary, then, Williams' belief in the difficulty yet the importance of communication between individuals, the tragic violence and hatred which results from this lack of communication, and the sympathy which man deserves because of his fated existence—all these elements are important keys to understanding Williams' choice of dramatic material, the personalities of his characters, and the effect he wishes to produce in his audience. Most of all, these are the convictions with which he composed A Streetcar Named Desire.

To begin the analysis of the play itself, a brief summary of the argument of the drama will help to recall the story to the reader's mind and will be useful as a framework of reference throughout the analysis. The play opens as Blanche du Bois, a woman of about thirty, arrives in New Orleans from Mississippi to visit her younger sister, Stella, and brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche immediately registers her disgust, not only at the surroundings in which her sister has consented to live, but also at the husband her sister has married. Stanley immedi-

17 From interview with Mike Wallace.
ately notices Blanche's superior attitude, and, irritated by it, he begins to investigate her past life. Stanley discovers that Blanche had been the town prostitute in Laurel, Mississippi, and that she had lost her job as a school teacher for attempting to seduce a seventeen-year-old student. Since Stanley believes that Blanche is actually trying to break up his marriage, he confronts her with what he has discovered and orders her to leave.

Throughout the story, Blanche tries to entice into marriage one of Stanley's "nicer" friends, Mitch; but when he too discovers the truth of her past, he will have nothing to do with her. All hope lost, Blanche loses her mind and retreats into a world of phantasy. In the final dramatic scene, she is led away to an asylum.

To single out any one idea as the theme of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not only difficult, but may also be inaccurate. Several critics have made some attempts to do so, and listing their thoughts here may help to give a deeper insight into Mr. Williams' intentions in writing this work. Mr. Walter Kerr, now drama critic for the *New York Herald Tribune*, has this to say: "A Streetcar Named Desire has a theme. It is, let's say self deception... The Tennessee Williams play is, in any case, about a girl who deceives herself, or tries to deceive herself, in order to evade a reality which threatens to crush her."18 Another writer speaks

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of this self-deception in the form of a retreat from reality when he designates the play as "the story of a girl who retreats from reality to find consolation and final sorrow in sex and alcohol." John Chapman of the *New York Daily News* summed up the play as a woman's fight between death and desire as symbolized in the two streetcars, one named Cemetery, the other named Desire, which Williams brings into the opening scenes of the play. Finally, Blanche's downfall can also be thought to portray the break-up of the old social order of the South and its effect on the Southern women. No doubt all of these ideas can be accepted as legitimate summaries or partial summaries of the theme of *Streetcar*, and most probably Mr. Williams had all of them in mind, at least indirectly, when he constructed the play.

The next step in this analysis is to discover exactly how much determinism is actually found in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. As was pointed out previously, it is not sufficient to know that Tennessee Williams theoretically believes in determinism, or even that he intends to incorporate this belief into his work, but the play itself, the actual text, must be inspected closely. The

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actions of the characters must be studied; but this alone is not sufficient, for anyone knows that numerous types of action can be equally well explained by a stimulus-response theory, as by a doctrine of free will. Therefore special concentration must be placed on those actions which most seem to indicate either free will or a definite determinism. It is also important to note what the characters say about themselves and about each other, for what they speak has a definite bearing on their greatness and on the emotional effect which the audience experiences.

As an aid to this examination of the text of the play, will be added the observations of competent persons who have either worked with the play or have studied it closely. When all these elements are added together, it is hoped that the conclusions reached will be as accurate as possible in a study of this size.

Since the theory of determinism has customarily been divided into psychological and environmental, this division will be used in the analysis. Furthermore, since "Williams gives primacy to the psychologically rather than socially relevant facts of each situation," the psychological determinism will be given a much more complete treatment than the environmental aspects of the play. It also appears that the most convenient way to divide the analysis of the psychological determinism, would be by treating each of the four principal characters of the play—Blanche, Stan-

\[22\text{Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times, p. 349.}\]
ley, Stella, Mitch—in their order of importance.

Blanche can be considered the main character in Streetcar; therefore, any determinism found in her personality will have the greatest effect on the play as a whole. In the very first scene of the play, fate seems to hover close by, and the audience receives a hint of Blanche's predestination through her symbolic words:

Blanche. They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemetery, and ride six blocks and get off at Elysian Fields!\(^{23}\)

Mr. Williams puts great emphasis on symbolism in all his works, for he believes that a symbol can impress an important idea more directly and forcefully. \(^{24}\) Here the symbolism is not difficult to understand—it prefigures the journey that Blanche is taking, a journey from pleasure and desire to ruin and death. Already a certain predetermined fate is at least hinted at in the very beginning of the play, a fate which will be seen to work itself out inexorably throughout the remainder of the action. Mr. Gilder confirms this: "In this section gigantic, tragic forces are implied not stated: the furies hover in the wings and have not yet gained admittance."\(^{25}\)

\(^{23}\)Tennessee Williams, A Streetcar Named Desire, Revised ed. (New York, 1953), p. 7. This play will henceforth be referred to in the footnotes as Streetcar.

\(^{24}\)From interview with Mike Wallace.

\(^{25}\)Gilder, p. 10.
From the very beginning of the play, there can also be noticed the constant deception Blanche utilizes—a deception of others as well as of herself. Blanche continually lies to Stella, Stanley, and Mitch about such things as her age, how her husband died, why she was fired from her job as a school teacher, and why she had to come to visit her sister. Besides this, one watches her live through a constant retreat from reality. She insists on covering the light bulbs with shades so that the rapidly vanishing vestiges of what little beauty she had might not be discovered. Blanche steals a drink of liquor whenever she can, and then turns right around and lies about ever having done so. About the middle of the play, she invents the escape of going away with a millionaire friend for a cruise on his yacht in the Caribbean. All of these deceptions and escapes, along with the intensity with which they are constantly executed, can only give the spectator the impression of one who is hunted and violently trying to flee from a trap. At the same time the very shallowness and absurdity of these deceptions carry with them a portrayal of the uselessness of it all. One can so easily see through Blanche, that one becomes convinced she does not have a chance to save herself.

Even Blanche herself is aware of her deceiving tactics when she says:

Blanche. Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I do misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be the truth. And if
that's a sin, then let me be damned for it! Don't turn the light on! 25

With such a passage in mind, Mr. Paul Engle could say that Blanche is even trapped in her own self-deception. 26 This type of conscious deception seems to be something to which Blanche is driven, and over which she has no power.

Another element which lessens free will in the mind of the spectator is the excuses given by Blanche herself and the other characters. These explanations tend to diminish or even take away completely any responsibility and culpability which should properly be attributed to Blanche.

In the first scene, Blanche tells Stella:

Blanche. I stayed and struggled! You came to New Orleans and looked after yourself! I stayed at Belle Reve and tried to hold it together! I'm not meaning this in any reproachful way, but all the burden descended on my shoulders.

How in the hell did you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? ... Yes, accuse me! Stand there thinking I let the place go! I let the place go! Where were you? In bed with your Pollack! 27

Later in the play Blanche excuses her sexual excesses when she tells Mitch:

Blanche. Yes, I had intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all

25 Streetcar, p. 84.


27 Streetcar, pp. 15-16. The italics are Mr. Williams'.
I seemed able to fill my empty heart with. I think it was panic—just panic that drove me from one to another, searching for some protection—in the most unlikely places! Even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy.

Elia Kazan, director of the original production of *Streetcar*, has this to say in his production notes about Blanche's excusing her own behavior: "Even this Allan Gray incident as she now tells it and believes it to have been, is a necessary piece of romanticism. ... This way it serves as an excuse for a great deal of her behavior."

Not only does Blanche excuse herself, but Stella also tries to convince others that Blanche is not responsible for her actions. Stella tells Stanley:

Stella. Lately you been doing all you can think of to rub her the wrong way, Stanley. Blanche is sensitive. You've got to realize that Blanche and I grew up under very different circumstances than you did.

And again, later in the play:

Stanley. Delicate piece she is.

Stella. She is. She was. You didn't know Blanche as a girl. Nobody, nobody was tender and trusting as she was. But people like you abused her, and forced her to change.

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30 *Streetcar*, p. 70.

The words "forced her to change" are particularly worth noting.

In all this deception and escape from the harshness of reality, Blanche appears to be driven on by some inner force. But what is this driving force? Does it seem to be her free will? To the normal spectator who has never questioned the freedom of will, the answer to this question may appear to be in the affirmative. It is conceivable that a person could watch the entire play and never once consciously advert to whether or not Blanche is pre-determined to her actions. In such a case, then, the deterministic elements would have to be discovered indirectly through the emotional effects they produce in the spectator, and this will be taken up later in the thesis.

But the violent and seemingly irrational actions on the part of Blanche, along with the excuses which she and Stella make for her conduct—all these seem to point to some other force apart from a free will, which drives Blanche to act the way she does. Mr. Gassner gives a hint of what this force might be: "Her seduction of young students became a compensatory and compulsive measure; and her masquerade of fastidiousness was a necessary defense against the gross reality of her desires, as well as against the sordid world into which she had been thrown."32 Gassner further pinpoints the source of this "desire": "If Williams has evinced

one paramount conviction it is a belief in the power of the libido to both animate and destroy a human being." Dr. W. David Sievers in his book, *Freud On Broadway*, gives a more complete analysis of what he thinks is Williams' explanation of Blanche's actions. First, Dr. Sievers points out that Williams absorbed the Freudian concept that sex is "the primal life urge" from David Lawrence, and that the repression of this urge is a distortion for the individual or society. This theory of Williams' absorption of the Freudian concepts from Lawrence appears probable when one examines the intimate association with and high admiration Williams had for Lawrence. Dr. Sievers then goes on to show that Blanche reveals the agonized sexual anxiety of a girl caught between the id and ego-ideal. The portrayal of her character thus exemplifies the origin and growth of schizophrenia, for Williams "has shown Blanche struggling to master the conflicting drives of sex and super-ego, to live up to an inner image of a belle of the old South while living in circumstances in which it is an anachronism." Sievers finally points out that Blanche is engaged in a sexual battle, between herself and Stanley, but

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33 Gassner, *The Theatre In Our Times*, p. 349.
35 See *Current Biography*, p. 645.
36 Sievers, p. 377.
the principal battlefield is within herself. 37

This theory that Williams intended to employ Freudian psychology in Streetcar is not given as a conclusive proof that the play definitely embodies determinism, since the point at issue is not Williams' subjective theories but the objective evidence of the play itself. Rather, the Freudian theory is proposed only as a possible explanation for Blanche's actions—as a help to understanding her character. The conclusion, however, does seem to be that definite deterministic elements can be observed in the words and actions of Blanche du Bois, and that this determinism appears to receive greater stress than does the concept of free will.

All through the play Stanley gives one the impression of being more like an animal than a man. He yells, wears loud clothes, walks, talks, and eats in an atmosphere of sensuality. His motto is simple:

Stanley. Be comfortable. That's my motto up where I come from. 38

His concept of marriage also has a completely sensual interpretation:

Stanley. Stell, it's going to be all right after she goes and after you've had the baby. It's gonna be all right again between you and me the way it was. You remember the way that it was? Them nights we had together? God, honey, it's gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way that we used to and get the colored

37 Ibid., p. 379.

38 Streetcar, p. 18.
lights going with nobody's sister behind the curtains to hear us. 39

Stanley further displays the high point of his animality when he rapes Blanche on the very night his wife, Stella, is in the hospital having her baby. 40 But even before this incident, Blanche herself points out to Stella Stanley's true nature:

Blanche. What such a man has to offer is animal force and he gave a wonderful exhibition of that!—But the only way to live with such a man is to—go to bed with him! And that's your job—not mine! 41

Some hint of Stanley's motivation for his actions is given in this passage in which he tells Stella that he desires to pull others down to his own level:

Stanley. When we first met, me an'you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby! I was common as dirt! You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it, having them colored lights going! And wasn't we happy together, wasn't it all okay until she showed here? 42

This desire to reduce others to his own level also gives a clue to why Stanley raped Blanche—it was the only way he thought he could conquer her apparent superiority.

Through all this brutality, Stella can still make excuses for Stanley's conduct, as if she was asking not only Blanche but also

39 Ibid., pp. 77-78.
40 Ibid., p. 94.
41 Ibid., 49.
42 Ibid., 80.
the audience not to hold Stanley responsible:

Stella. He didn't know what he was doing. . . . He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself.43

Elia Kazan confirms this interpretation of Stanley's character when he writes: "Stanley is supremely indifferent to everything except his own pleasure and comfort. He is marvelously selfish, a miracle of sensuous self-centeredness. He builds a hedonist life, and fights to the death to defend it."44 Kazan also points out that Stanley's only way to conquer is through his sex powers; then he adds: "He wants to knock no one down. He only doesn't want to be taken advantage of. His code is simple and simple-minded. He is adjusted now . . . later, as his sexual powers die, so will he; the trouble will come later, the 'problems.'"45

All these facts lead one to conclude that Stanley is a man driven principally by passion and instinct, not by reason and will. Of course, all these observations on the four characters under discussion are not intended to prove that they have no free will, but rather that they do not impress the spectator as people acting with free will—and this is the main concern here.

As regards Stella, at first glance she appears to be more ra-

43Ibid., 44.
44Kazan, p. 308.
tional, and hence somewhat above the other characters. But this impression is shattered when Stella tells Blanche:

Stella. But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of makes everything else seem—unimportant.

Blanche. What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattletrap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another.

Stella. Haven't you ever ridden on the streetcar?

Blanche. It brought me here—where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be.\textsuperscript{46}

Dr. Sievers confirms this sensual aspect of Stella's character,\textsuperscript{47} and Kazan further points out that for Stella sensual pleasure is the reward which makes her bear with Stanley's unpleasantness:

"She is waiting for night. She's waiting for the dark where Stanley makes her feel only him and she has no reminder of the price she is paying. She wants no intrusion from the other world. She is drugged and trapped. She's in a sensual stupor."\textsuperscript{48}

The fourth and last character to be considered, Stanley's friend, Mitch, is, in general, more "normal" than the others, and his so-called sensual motivation is not as noticeable. However, he says in his final scene with Blanche:

Blanche. What do you want?

\textsuperscript{46}\textit{Streetcar}, pp. 49-50.

\textsuperscript{47}\textit{Sievers}, pp. 377-378.

\textsuperscript{48}\textit{Kazan}, p. 304.
Mitch. (Fumbling to embrace her.) What I been missing all summer.

Blanche. Then marry me, Mitch!

Mitch. No! You're not clean enough to bring into the house with my mother.49

This last reference to his mother is a typical statement for Mitch, because from his earliest lines in the play, up until this last scene, he is always referring to her and judging everything in the light of her judgments. Here, of course, a Freudian explanation of the Oedipus complex fits in easily. Sievers points it out,50 and Kazan has this to say: "Mitch is the end product of a matriarchy . . . his mother had robbed him of all daring, initiative, self-reliance. He does not face his own needs."51 Kazan also adds this rather Freudian explanation of Mitch's actions towards Blanche: "Violence—he's full of sperm, energy, strength; the reason he's so clumsy with women is that he's so damn full of violent desire for them."52

Thus the force which Mitch's mother exerts over him, along with his apparent clumsiness, might not make him a completely determined character, but they do tend to diminish his strength of personality.

49Streetcar, p. 87.
50Sievers, p. 378.
51Kazan, p. 309.
52Ibid., 310.
In summary, the definite deterministic elements can be found in the principal characters of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The constant deceptions and flights from reality, along with the excuses for her conduct, give the impression that Blanche is a fated, trapped person who cannot be held responsible for her actions. Stanley's violent outbursts and sensual way of living point him out as a man driven on by mere passion rather than reason and will. Then Stella's pleasure-seeking and Mitch's weakness also lessen their nobility and strength of character.

Those beliefs of Tennessee Williams which were pointed out at the beginning of this chapter can now be briefly applied to what has been discovered in the text of *Streetcar*. There is the lack of communication between the characters, particularly between Blanche and Stanley—she does not understand nor like his way of life and he does not like hers—and this leads to the tragic violence and hatred embodied in the clash between them. There is the clear depiction of Blanche's fated existence; she is trapped and doomed to a losing battle. From this entrapment, the author explicitly tries to draw feelings of sympathy, so that he has Stella herself begging for the pity and understanding that Blanche needs.

These are the characteristics which Tennessee Williams has intended to put into his writing. One can now see that these intentions have actually been verified in the text of the play.
CHAPTER V

THE DRAMATIC EFFECTS OF DETERMINISM IN A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

The next step in answering the question of this thesis is to show how the determinism in A Streetcar Named Desire, which was discovered in the previous chapter, affects this play as a drama. This will be done by applying the dramatic norms governing the action, character, and emotional experience, which were laid down in Chapters II and III. Since character and action are so closely bound together, they will be considered simultaneously in this chapter, while the emotional effect will occupy the second part of the consideration.

Many persons believe that the characters and action of Streetcar possess dramatic greatness and nobility. Mr. Williams himself, in answer to an article by Mr. Arthur B. Waters, who described Blanche as being weak and pitiful,\(^1\) has this to say: "I would never be so unfaithful to the greatest lady of my life, Blanche du Bois, to describe her as 'weak,' and 'pitiful,' almost a mental case. This, I know, I did not! In some respects Blanche, who went to the madhouse, was the most rational of all the charac-

\(^1\)Arthur B. Waters, "Tennessee Williams: Ten Years Later," Theatre Arts, XXXIX (July 1955), 72 and 96.
ters I've created, and in almost all ways the strongest." In an interview Williams also said: "I have yet to write a play in which some virtuous quality in the human being does not prevail at the end of the play. Even Blanche in Streetcar Named Desire—we see her walking off with gallantry and courage on the arm of the Doctor leading her to the sanitarium."3

Others believe that in his characters Williams has been able to transcend the purely material elements of life. Mr. Henry Hewes writes: "While many of his plots seem concerned with short-range sexual activity, and many of his characters seem motivated by purely sexual drives, Williams' concern is usually with larger issues: the destruction of beauty, the crushing of the sensitive and romantic by the insensitive and un-romantic, the sense of honor in a dishonorable world. It is this greatness of outlook that gives Williams a sense of honor in a world which he sees as more debased than we like to admit."4 Mr. Kappo Phelan agrees with this opinion by stating that Blanche is more than just a Freudian case-history, because Mr. Williams has somehow managed

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3From an interview with Mike Wallace.

to add a further dimension to her nobility. Mr. Reid points out that the reason for the added dimension is the gentle compassion and understanding with which the playwright treats all his characters. This compassion, Mr. Reid says, "strikes me as the most noteworthy characteristic of Tennessee Williams." Kazan even considers Blanche a character of tragic dimensions according to the classical norms. He believes that the audience is shown the dissolution of a person of worth, and that Blanche's tragic flaw is her need to be superior and special, a flaw which inevitably destroys her. She is pursued, like the ancient characters of the drama, and is prevented from attaining the one thing she needs, a safe harbor—protection. This appears to be a good explanation of Blanche's tragic flaw; for, as with all tragic flaws, it sets up a duplicity within the person which inevitably destroys him. John Mason Brown claims that this duplicity springs from Blanche's own nature: "From her pathetic pretensions to gentility, even when she is known as a prostitute in the town in which she was brought up. From her love of the refined, when her life is devoted to coarseness. From the fastidiousness of her de-

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5Kappo Phelan, "The Stage and Screen," Commonweal, XLVII (December 19, 1947), 254.
6Desmond Reid, Studies, XLVI, 436
7Kazan, pp. 296-297.
8Ibid., 300-301.
sires. From her incapacity to live up to her dreams. Most particularly, from her selfishness and her vanity, which are insatiable." Mr. Walter Kerr also believes this duplicity in Blanche to be one of Williams' finer touches in the work, because it shows the irony of Blanche tying a noose around her own neck.¹⁰

But in this connection it must be noted that the irony of such a duplicity receives much of its force from the fact that the person involved has been responsible for bringing about his own ruin. Yet, as was pointed out in the preceding chapter, this very element of responsibility is almost totally lacking in the forced actions which Blanche performs and in the direct excuses given for her conduct. However, it does not seem that all the force of the irony is taken away by these deterministic elements; but only that it is somewhat weakened by them.

In addition to the duplicity of character, Mr. Gassner notes another duplicity which is embodied in the action of the play: "The objective line of action (Kowalski has a right to resent Blanche, but is brutish, and Blanche is both annoying and pathetic) betrays the author's ambivalence. It produces a provocative, but also damaging, ambiguity in the play; damaging to the point of preventing Streetcar from attaining tragic magnificence."¹¹ Mr.

¹¹Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times, p. 350.
Gassner also notes the lack of the cause-effect relationship which is so important to an effective drama: "But Williams, unsatisfied with normal motivations, adds the causative factor of marriage to a homosexual which has not been established as inevitable. Nor is it convincing that the young husband's death should have led her to seduce schoolchildren and take up with soldiers in a neighboring camp." Wolcott Gibbs confirms this opinion when he states that Blanche's fall "is a good deal more picturesque than probable." Thus the rationality of the cause and effect structure in the play is diminished by the motiveless actions presented.

The norm of greatness and nobility of character should also be considered here. Mr. John Mason Brown makes the following observation about the characters in Streetcar: "His men and women are not large-spirited and noble, or basically good. They are small and mean; above all frustrated." Such a statement certainly contradicts many of those quoted above, and it appears that Mr. Brown's opinion is a bit too absolute and unqualified to be given complete agreement. The problem needs further investigation.

First, it must be remembered that the intrinsic nobility of

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12 Ibid., 357.
13 Wolcott Gibbs, "Lower Depths, Southern Style," New Yorker, XXIII (December 13, 1947), 52.
14 Brown, p. 22.
the characters as men, who are somehow able to rise above the difficulties of the circumstances into which they are thrown, must be shown in a great drama. This element was pointed out in Chapter II; and it should be noted, as Maxwell Anderson mentions, that such a nobility cannot be had without "a belief in man's destiny and his ultimate hope." Yet there appears to be little hope or belief in destiny on the part of Blanche as she is led off to the asylum. Mr. Williams stated that at this point Blanche shows courage and gallantry, but what does she have to be courageous and gallant about? There is no ultimate direction to her actions. As Mr. Krutch points out, this lack of meaning in life is a common note running through much of modern drama, resulting from the fact that men have diminished the value of the human soul. If there is any greatness in a Blanche or a Stanley, as men like Kazan, Hewes, and Phelan seem to think, then it is a greatness that appears to be without solid foundation as regards either its origin or its destiny.

This lack of greatness in character can also be partially explained by the absence of recognition or illumination. Mr. Alan S. Downer writes as follows about Williams' works: "Thus, though his themes are in possibility tragic, his plays are in actuality pathetic. Each of his characters passionately resists the moment

15 Maxwell Anderson, Off Broadway, p. 66.
16 Krutch, The Modern Temper, pp. 119-120.
of illumination, rejects the self-knowledge which might give tragic dignity to her failure."17 Illumination is an important element in all literature, as Mr. Grant C. Knight remarks; for it is based on the fact that the human struggle for self-realization has a real meaning that can be discovered, and the literature which includes this realization has the best chance to be remembered.18

The final question to be considered in connection with the dramatic effects of determinism on the character and action of *Streetcar* is that of universality. It appears that here too the play falls short of dramatic greatness. Mr. Gassner writes: "If Williams' play is to be judged by its argument, is Blanche a proper test for the quality of mercy, and is Stan Kowalski a proper test of humanity's ability to give or withhold it? Is Blanche, besides, a proper subject for tragic exposition rather than for clinical ministrations?"19 In another place, Mr. Gassner writes: "It could also be noted that the play, so tragical in tone and mood, fell short of tragic elevation; that Blanche's story was a singular clinical case rather than a fundamentally representative

17 Alan S. Downer, *Fifty Years of American Drama* (Chicago, 1951), p. 103.


19 Gassner, *The Theatre In Our Times*, p. 461.
and 'universal' drama."20 Mr. Gassner may be a bit harsh here, for it appears that Blanche is more than "a singular clinical case"; nevertheless she does seem to lack that degree of universality which would give her true dramatic greatness, which would stand the test of time. Francis Fergusson speaks often of this limited outlook, this lack of universality, among more modern dramas which concentrate on only a few aspects of human life: "These sharp perspectives may seem to their own times to reveal the essence of life but to the next generation they may appear partial or even depraved. But Hamlet like Oedipus and the Purgatorio, can take myth and ritual as still alive. Its limitation of human action 'undercuts' or precedes all theory."21 A comment of Mr. Butcher is also in place here: "In general, the modern introspective habit, the psychological interest felt in character, has produced many dramatic lyrics, but few dramas."22

Therefore, although the characters of A Streetcar Named Desire, along with their actions, show some spiritual qualities, and do possess certain elements which constitute dramatic heroes, they definitely fall short of real greatness for five reasons. First, since the characters are constantly excused for their con-

22 Butcher, p. 362.
duct and appear to lack responsibility, the meaning and force of irony is taken out, or at least diminished, from the conflict in which they are engaged. Second, the lack of sufficient probable motivation in the characters, particularly Blanche, hinders the cause-effect relationship that is necessary for a well-constructed play. Third, the absence of any foundation for hope in any ultimate destiny, gives a shallowness and futility to the strivings of the characters. Fourth, the greatness of character is lessened by the omission of the recognition or self-knowledge. Fifth, the characters and their problems are limited only to certain aspects of life, and therefore fail to possess the element of universality which would make "not for an age, but for all time."

Now that the dramatic effects of determinism on the characters and action of Streetcar have been established, the influence of this same determinism on the emotional experience of the audience can be investigated.

Whatever might be the differences of opinion among spectators regarding the type of emotion experienced in watching A Streetcar Named Desire, all of them agree that they did experience some emotions, and those very strong ones. One may like or dislike a Tennessee Williams play, but he cannot remain indifferent to it. Gassner comments that the play's "sordid matter of sexual depravity and madness . . . was transfigured by poetic dramaturgy and
overwhelming compassion."\(^{23}\) Dr. Sievers is quite favorable when he claims that *Streetcar* "affords a clear perception into the pressures that degrade, both the social forces which make for an environment of brutality and the individual's unconscious forces which make him a psychic cripple helpless to deal with his environment. . . . It is a tragic experience in the theatre to participate in the disintegration of a personality."\(^{24}\) Then Sievers goes on to show that the audience can truly be purged of pity and fear through watching *Streetcar*; for each person will say, "There but for the grace of whatever mental health I have been able to achieve, go I."\(^{25}\) It appears that Dr. Sievers is allowing his love of psychiatry to flow over into his love of the theater, yet he does claim that this is what he experiences at viewing *Streetcar*. Other men, like Kazan\(^{26}\) and Irwin Shaw\(^{27}\) also consider the emotions produced by *Streetcar* to be truly tragic ones.

Still other critics would not treat the play so favorably. In speaking of the works of Williams in general, Mr. Frederick Lumley observes that there is "a feeling in these plays of debased


\(^{25}\) Ibid.

\(^{26}\) Kazan, p. 299.

\(^{27}\) Irwin Shaw, "Theatre: Masterpiece," *New Republic*, CXVII (December 22, 1947), 34.
tragedy, which does not inspire our highest emotions and which merely makes us weep on each other's shoulders."\(^{28}\) Mr. Kevin Sullivan's comment, which was quoted at the beginning of this thesis, might be recalled here. Mr. Sullivan stated that all one feels in witnessing Streetcar is a sense of superiority over people who are worse than himself.\(^{29}\) Maria Mannes says that she doubts "whether the emotional exhaustion that is the residual effect of seeing a play by Tennessee Williams—the feeling of having been stretched on the rack for two hours—is either illumination or catharsis. It is shock treatment, administered by an artist of great talent and painful sensibility who illumines fragments but never the whole."\(^{30}\)

This brings up the question of whether or not Streetcar elicits true pity and fear as Aristotle defined these emotions. Mr. Sullivan claims that there is no explanation for the effect this play produces in any classical formula.\(^{31}\) "Pity is," Mr. Sullivan says, "—except in the most exaggerated soap-operish sense of the word—psychologically inhibited."\(^{32}\) It must first


\(^{29}\) Kevin Sullivan, America, LXXIX, p. 271. See above, p. 2.


\(^{31}\) Sullivan, p. 271.

\(^{32}\) Ibid.
be pointed out that the whole tone of Mr. Sullivan's article is unobjective, *ad hominem*, and often made up of general, absolute, and unqualified statements. Secondly, if one takes Aristotle's definitions of pity and fear and considers them abstractly, a very good case can be made for saying that *Streetcar* elicits these emotions. For that "sort of pain at an evident evil of a destructive kind in the case of someone who does not deserve it," certainly seems to be in evidence in *Streetcar*. Also Aristotle's fear—"a species of pain or disturbance arising from an impression of impending evil which is destructive or painful in its nature"—appears also to be a part of the play.33 Gassner says that pity predominates in the play,34 and Reid adds that Williams communicates to the viewers his own sense of immense pity.35 But Williams does depart from the classical norms when he allows the pity and fear that the spectator experiences to be mixed with the element of despair. That is probably why Maria Mannes thinks the play is a "shock treatment" and John Mason Brown considers it "sadistic."36 With hope taken away, one can hardly experience that peculiar dramatic pleasure and uplift of spirit, which comes from seeing the nobility of man transcend his limitations, and

33 See above, pp. 21-22.
34 Gassner, *Forum*, CIX, 86.
35 Reid, *Studies*, XLVI, 437.
from the sense of justice which arises from the knowledge that the suffering undergone was at least partially merited.

In connection with this matter of responsibility, a few words must be said about the morality of *Streetcar*; for what a person thinks to be morally good or bad enters into his emotional experience, whether or not he is conscious of it. It is true that one must not judge artistic endeavors solely on the basis of a moral evaluation; but it is hard to conceive that morality has no influence on the enjoyment of the viewer.

First, it has been previously pointed out that Williams wants the audience to excuse Blanche's conduct, and this is where the moral danger can arise. Mr. Reid does an excellent job of pointing out this danger: "It should be said that he [Williams] does not expressly approve in the plays of immoral conduct. But I do not, I think, read him incorrectly in saying that his 'necessity' doctrine and his avowed disbelief in 'guilt' must imply condonation of the offences his plays reveal. In addition, he is at such pains to pile agony on agony, cornering his tortured little people, that our sympathy tends to flower into the judgment, 'I don't blame them for what they did.'"37 Mr. Reid further points out that Blanche is shown in a plight which is the result of earlier excesses to which she was driven by circumstances, and therefore she is now to be pitied. Certainly circumstances, en-

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37 Reid, pp. 437-438.
vironment, and antecedents may weaken one's defences and lessen culpability, and habit may take acts out of the realm of being morally culpable, but one must remember that the earlier excesses, which led to forming the habit, may have been imputable and should not be made little of.38

Second, a play which takes no moral stand whatever, and in that sense can be called amoral, does not appear to give an adequate reflection of reality. The present author is not trying to wave a flag for any one particular standard of morality, for that is not within the scope of this paper; he merely thinks that at least some spiritual explanation of the facts of reality is necessary. Arthur Miller has this to say: "The longer I dwelt on the whole spectacle, the more clear became the failure of the present age to find a universal moral sanction, and the power of realism's hold on our theater was an aspect of this vacuum. For it began to appear that our inability to break more than the surfaces of realism reflected our inability—playwrights and audiences—to agree upon the pantheon of forces and values which must lie behind the realistic surfaces of life. In this light, realism, as a style, could seem to be a defense against the assertion of meaning."39 It also appears that Tennessee Williams, in trying to be realistic, has so narrowed his moral outlook as to cut off one of

38Ibid., 438-439.
39Miller, Collected Plays, p. 46.
the most important parts of reality—man's moral life. Mr. Kerr points out this lack of realism: "There is some assumption behind these plays that the psychological aberrations of the universe can be quickly settled on one big bed; it is one of the few failures of honest observation in Williams' work." 40

To sum up this chapter, it has been shown that the actions and the characters of A Streetcar Named Desire do possess some greatness, and that the audience is able to identify itself with them. However, this greatness and identification are lessened by the improbability of insufficiently motivated actions and the lack of meaning in the conflict portrayed. Also, because of an absence of hope in any ultimate destiny, these characters become shallow, and they fail to have a true understanding of their misfortune. Consequently the characters lack that universality which is a necessary part of great drama.

The audience, in turn, experiences a great deal of pity, or at least compassion, and fear, when they view Streetcar, but because of the depressing despair and sense of injustice portrayed, the pity and fear fail to unite in producing the dramatic pleasure. Besides, a sense of repulsion can be experienced when one is urged to condone immoral actions; and such immorality does not appear to give an adequate representation of reality.

40 Kerr, Pieces At Eight, p. 127.
CHAPTER VI

SUMMARY AND EVALUATION

In this chapter an attempt will be made to draw together the ideas enunciated in the preceding chapters, and from this summary a general dramatic evaluation of *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be made.

The adage, "Bonum ex integra causa, malum ex quocumque defec-tu," is often taken too literally by those who attempt to give a dramatic criticism of Tennessee Williams. It is hoped that the investigations set down in this thesis have avoided such unobjective and unqualified condemnations. Mr. Williams is an important modern playwright and it would be absurd, as Mr. Kevin Sullivan does,¹ to say that Williams does not care about the state of the modern theater, and even more absurd to exclude Mr. Williams' work from all consideration as drama.

In fact, the author of this thesis regrets that he could not give more attention to many of the praiseworthy elements of *Streetcar*. Listening to the interview with Mike Wallace, one could not but be impressed by Mr. Williams' sincerity and his humble opinion of himself and his work. Also, his stage technique

¹Sullivan, *America*, LXXIX, 270.
is commonly admitted to be unequaled in the American theater, and his fresh dialogue makes his characters come alive on the stage—a rare phenomenon in the modern theater of ideas. Williams has carried out Mr. Kerr's point that "it is better to make a man than to make a point." Mr. Krutch has complained that the American drama "has seldom if ever been intense enough"; this cannot be said of A Streetcar Named Desire.

In general, Streetcar causes the spectator to understand man better in some respects, but at the same time he is made to doubt man's dignity. A man without free will and the power of self-determination is unable to lift himself above the purely material exigencies of everyday life. This element of free will has been an important factor in determining the prosperity of the theater in any given age. Mr. Brander Matthews comments: "If the drama demands a display of the human will, then we are justified in expecting to find the theater feeblest in the races of little energy and most flourishing among the more self-assertive peoples."

To produce great drama, the dramatist himself must have a tremendous faith in the dignity and nobility of man. Mr. Krutch

2See Kerr, How Not To Write a Play, pp. 114 et seq.
3Ibid., p. 58, pp. 80-81.
4Krutch, The American Drama Since 1918, p. 317.
points out: "The sturdy soul of the tragic author seizes upon suffering and uses it only as a means by which joy may be wrung out of existence, but it is not to be forgotten that he is enabled to do so only because, though he has lost the child's faith in life, he has not lost his far more important faith in human nature."\(^6\) It must be concluded that Mr. Williams lacks this complete faith in man, and this lack is reflected in the characters of Streetcar. This absence, in turn, deprives the play of some of its important universality. Mr. Gassner writes: "The most distinctive value of tragic art consists of the high valuation it places upon man as a species and upon the individual as its representative. Tragic art predicates the special universality of man's capacity for greatness of soul and mind in spite of the . . . flaw in his nature."\(^7\)

Because the audience is denied this insight into the real greatness of man, it cannot experience that emotional effect which is the ultimate end of great drama. Men cannot be pleased by unresolved despair and unexplained injustice. Anton Chekhov writes: "The best of them [dramatic writers] are realists and paint life as it is, but, through every line's being soaked in the consciousness of an object, you feel, besides life as it is,


\(^7\)Gassner, "Aristotelian Literary Criticism," p. lxvi.
the life which ought to be, and that captivates you."\(^8\) Williams does not seem to reach that representation of life as it "ought to be," which captivates the audience; for man cannot believe that despair is the ultimate answer to life. Then too, Williams, in failing to present a just relation between good and evil, has failed in an element in which Shakespeare showed true genius.\(^9\) What man truly looks for is not an escape from reality and its seeming injustices, but rather that peace which comes from taking life as it is, and in being able to face its harsh realities.\(^10\) This acceptance of reality is what makes man great and his life enjoyable, not only on the stage, but in everyday life.

Finally, Mr. Williams' work, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, fails to show life as it truly is, but rather twists reality. This work can certainly be put in the class of naturalistic writing as Mr. Vernon L. Parrington aptly defines it,\(^11\) and it is this naturalism, Father Gardiner points out, which ends in being quite divorced from reality.\(^12\) Father Gardiner then shows the reason for this distortion: "One who, on principle, rejects part of

\(^8\)Quoted by Gardiner, *Norms For the Novel*, p. 123.

\(^9\)See Myers, *Tragedy*, pp. 100, 156.


\(^11\)Quoted by Gardiner, p. 91.

\(^12\)Gardiner, p. 96.
reality might just as well reject the whole, and logically ought to do so. In philosophy, the positivist, who says that only what he can estimate by his senses has value, has passed a judgment whose truth is something that cannot be estimated by the senses. Therefore this very judgment is a thing of no value."\footnote{13}{Ibid.}

A further reason for Williams' distortion of reality is his lack of morality. If drama is to be a reflection of the complete culture of the times, then it must also include the morality of that culture. In the present day morality is unstable and disputed, and the consequence of this is that the dramatist has no solid point of reference from which to work. Mr. Williams not only follows this instability but even goes beyond it by denying the existence of any objective norms of morality. He has called such things as "guilt" and "right and wrong," beliefs which are "untrue,"\footnote{14}{Quoted in America, XCVII, 4.} and this is what Mr. Reid considers the dangerous element in Tennessee Williams.\footnote{15}{Reid, p. 437.} The task here is not to defend one particular norm of morality, but simply to state that the history of the drama has shown that some objective norm is needed to make great theater.

Tennessee Williams has openly avowed a belief in God, but this belief appears to be nebulous and without any direct influ-
ence on his work. This failure to incorporate a belief in God in a dramatic work is, according to Charles Glicksberg, the reason why so much of modern drama fails. Mr. Glicksberg writes: "When God is denied, then man becomes lost in the infinite. Or to put it in secular terms: when man loses his faith in life, then he forfeits his confident sense of selfhood. . . . That is the motif which is sounded so disturbingly in the modern drama as it seeks to grapple with ultimate issues. Here, in part, is the explanation why so few modern plays reach the difficult heights of tragedy, which affirms life in the face of death and disaster." Mr. Reid concludes on this point: "He [Tennessee Williams] is too informed a man to be unaware of that human desire for God. And he is, I judge, too sincere to ignore it should he recognize the place it occupies in men's lives. If or when that recognition comes, he may well write one of the great plays of the twentieth century."

In conclusion, then, A Streetcar Named Desire cannot, in this writer's opinion, be placed among the great dramas of all time. Its limited viewpoint has caused Mr. Gassner to call it

16 From interview with Mike Wallace.
18 Reid, p. 446.
a "tragic non-tragedy," and Mr. Lumley to say it "tends to present a partial view of our times which falls far short of the complete vision which is that of all great writers." Thus Maria Mannes remarks: "Once Tennessee Williams controls his flame and deepens and broadens his vision, the spell he now casts over his audiences while they are in the theater will linger long after in their minds and hearts. And there will be then no 'recoil of disbelief.'"

In a sense Tennessee Williams is a man of his times. But it is hard to believe that modern man has completely lost faith in himself, that faith which is so necessary for a flourishing theater. A greater reverence for the dignity of man by a conscious inclusion of free will in dramatic works, would not only make A Streetcar Named Desire a greater work of dramatic art; but it might also be one of the ways to steady the staggering feet of modern drama.

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19 Gassner, The Theatre In Our Times, p. 69.
21 Mannes, Reporter, XII, 43.
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APPROVAL SHEET

The thesis submitted by John Skelly Kundtz, S.J.,
has been read and approved by three members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the thesis and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated, and that the thesis is now given final approval with reference to content, form, and mechanical accuracy.

The thesis is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

January 12, 1957

Signature of Adviser