

“Go Out” and “Come Back”: Illusion of Return in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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Abstract

A Streetcar Named Desire exhibits dynamic spatial movement, featured by Stella's repetitive return of “going out” and “coming back.” The movement reveals her desire to escape the undesirable parts of her marriage, e.g., vulgarity, poverty, and violence. Yet her inevitable “coming back” is because she depends on Stanley for survival. In terms of space, Stella and Stanley run out on the street, which privatizes the street and publicizes the home. Blanche's physical intrusion causes crises to the marriage, and she tries to point out the undesirable truth of it. So the Kowalskis respond with different actions, which ultimately bring Blanche to her destruction. This choice traps the Kowalskis in the eternal loop of “going out” and “coming back,” and they continue to live in an illusion of progression, as they are caught in the same state.

Keywords: Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, spatial movement, illusion

1. Introduction

For long, the masterpiece of Tennessee Williams *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) has been thought to present the severe conflict between the working-class man Stanley Kowalski, brutal and vulgar, and the displaced Southern lady Blanche DuBois, fragile and exiled, who is destroyed by the former and has to be institutionalized. Such compelling take is a dichotomous one, often overlooking the tripartite model formed by Stanley, Stella, and Blanche. Jacobs (2019) holds that “Stella's pregnancy can be seen as central to the events of the play” (p. 175) and that “scenes of unwanted intrusion” have the figurative meaning of “mother-child relationships” (p. 176). In the play, there are two bonds: one is the blood relation shared by Blanche and Stella and the other is the marriage of Stanley and Stella. Stella is crucial as she connects the two bonds. Regarding Blanche's institutionalization, “it is Stella's denial that sends Blanche to the asylum, not Stanley's rape” (Clum, 2007, p. 29). Stella's significance lies in that she, Stanley, and the coming (later-born) baby form a second triangle through marriage and childbirth (mother, father, and child), and thus she complicates the scene. However, both bonds in the play exhibit striking spatial movement: Stella's “going out” from the house and “coming back” to the home, and Blanche's intrusion as she enters and lives in the apartment. Therefore, space and spatial movement constitute the incisive point of the analysis, which leads to the theme of the illusion of progression.

1.1 Space in Drama

Issacharoff (1981) divides space in drama into three categories: theater space (architectural design), stage space (the stage and set design), and dramatic space (space as used by a dramatist). Dramatic space can be viewed as a “sign system.” It is synchronic because it considers a certain period excluding “the history or sociology of previous performances” (p. 214). It is also dynamic, since it studies the “mechanism of space, from one scene to the next” and the “relations linking space to other constituent elements” (ibid.). Based on whether it is auditory or not, space is classified into mimetic and diegetic. Mimetic space is “made visible to an audience and represented on stage” and diegetic space is “mediated through the discourse of characters” (p. 215).

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, various characters make multiple spatial movements. On the one hand, Blanche arrives at the Kowalskis' apartment after a long trip, whereas her story in *Belle Reve* is not directly presented. It is recounted by herself and exposed through Stanley's investigation. So the dramatic space is synchronic and diegetic. On the other hand, when engaged in conflict with her husband, Stella “goes out” on the street, but eventually “comes back” with the company of her partner. The respective spatial movements of Blanche and

Stella are not in isolation; instead, Blanche's physical intrusion intends to break the repetitive pattern of Stella's "going out" and "coming back." This is because spatial movement, rather than being purely physical, has social significance as well.

1.2 Social Space

Massey (1994) formulates space "in terms of social relations" (p. 2). Social space is "the vast complexity of the interlocking and articulating nets of social relations" (p. 168). Yet the "identity of a place" is "dynamic and changing," so it is "open to contestation" (p. 169). It is constructed both *in* and *across* space, "out of movement, communication, social relations which always stretched beyond it" (p. 171). Social relations are both "internally focused and externally connected" (*ibid.*), and identity derives from "the specificity of its interactions with 'the outside'" (p. 169).

Fleche (1997) analyzes the play from the perspective of "spatial violation." The desire is to see beyond surfaces into the truth, through space. The apartment "ends in a cul-de-sac" (p. 94), and the bathroom provides a temporary shelter for privacy. Space is relativized, as its boundaries are dissolved. In the rape scene, "the play loses all sense of boundary" (p. 96), rendering the front of the house "transparent," as a prostitute and a policeman are in sight. Stanley's cornering Blanche breaks down the last barrier and "visualizes the restless discourse of desire" (p. 99).

Space has implications for the characters in the play. Behind spatial movement there lies bigger meanings that pierce into the truth of their life. The following discussion examines the significance of Stella's "going out" and "coming back," as well as Blanche's intrusion.

2. Discussion

2.1 Return: "Go Out" and "Come Back"

Return is comprised of two processes: "going out" and "coming back." "Going out" is the escape from undesirable parts of marriage, such as vulgarity, infidelity, and violence; "coming back," on the other hand, is the inevitable consequence of the aforementioned runaway, attributable to sexual desire and dependence for survival.

"Going out" manifests in the form of spatial movement, featured by female characters and their retreat to the porch, streets, and upstairs. On the part of Stella, her "going out" is characterized by different escalation of events.

In Scene II, she "snatches up her white hat and gloves and crosses to the outside door" (Williams, 1947, p. 39) when she's unhappy with the way her husband goes through Blanche's things and considers them for appraisal. She listens attentively to their conversation and eventually comes back with Blanche's lemon coke. The row she has with Stanley is due to his vulgar way with Blanche. Because the argument is mild, Stella only goes out to the porch to calm down.

It is on poker night that things get most intense. Stella is already upset about Stanley whacking on her thigh in front of everyone (vulgarity), but his drunken, violent move of snatching the radio and tossing it out of the window is more than inappropriate, especially in front of all the guests. This explains Stella's running out on the street. Yet Stanley's mistreating her with violence deteriorates the situation and this is the reason why she flees upstairs to Eunice's as the ultimate shelter. When Stanley hollers "Stella" and begs her to forgive him, Stella comes back to their home, and the two sleep together.

Under multiple sources of pressure to "uphold traditional moral standards" (Palmer & Bray, 2009, p. 160) and "that Stanley be punished for his violation of Blanche" (Heintzleman & Smith-Howard, 2005, p. 277), the 1951 film adaptation changes the original reconciliation scene to one more "going out." At the very end of the film, with the baby in her arms, Stella murmurs: "We're never going back. Never, never back, never back again." Then she runs upstairs to Eunice's house. However, her refusal is "temporary (that she will soon come back to Stanley forgiving him)" (Tripković-Samardžić, 2016, p. 106). Stella cannot intrude upon and live with the Hubbells forever, probably not even one night. So her "going out" to escape her husband will eventually conclude with another "coming back."

"Coming back" for the three "going out" has to do with the Kowalskis' shared, blatant sexual desire, but is also attributable to Stella's dependence on Stanley for survival. Stella is incapable of self-reliance in society: she is financially dependent upon her husband and she lacks external assistance. Stanley handles financial affairs and does not give her a regular allowance. When listening to Blanche's plan to get them out of there, Stella mutters: "I guess that money is always nice to get hold of" (Williams, 1947, p. 76). So she knows she relies on her husband financially since she does not have a job. When examining Blanche's possessions and the legal papers

of Belle Reve, Stanley mentions his acquaintances in a jewelry store and the legal profession, while Stella's association is restricted to women in the same neighborhood, who, like herself, rely on their husbands for livelihood. Moreover, he talks about the daunting "Napoleonic code" that bluffs his wife, indicating Stella's silence in household affairs.

Stella, as a former Southern lady, seeks "a chance at a new life" (Rea, 2017, p. 193). Step by step, she walks into New Orleans, into the district, into that rented two-room flat, into Stanley Kowalski, and a well-fabricated trap. She gains security in their marriage, but when faced with all the repelling aspects of it, she repeatedly goes out and comes back, unable to break free. All the "going out" and "coming back" share one thing in common: they do not "resolve anything" (Fleche, 1997, p. 95). They happen and they are forgiven and forgotten. After the Hubbells' fight, the four go on a double-date: "Eunice shrieks with laughter and runs down the steps. Steve bounds after her with goat-like screeches and chases her around corner. Stanley and Stella twine arms as they follow, laughing" (Williams, p. 95). "Anxiety and conflict have become permanent and unresolvable, inconclusive" (Fleche, p. 95), so the attempt to escape and the eventual compromise are futile, due to the individuals' incapability to change.

Moreover, the repetitive pattern of "going out" and "coming back" is the norm of the characters' life. At the beginning of Scene V, Stella and Blanche hear Eunice accusing Steve of sexual affairs with "that blonde." Eunice yells: "You hit me! I'm gonna call the police" (Williams, 1947, p. 86). She runs out to the Four Deuces and Steve chases after her. They come back together, one comforting the other. What happens to the Hubbells testifies that it is not just the Kowalskis that are caught in the repetitive *return* of "going out" and "coming back." Rather, it is a universal phenomenon in the place setting.

Also, during the incident on poker night,² Eunice hollers to Stanley: "I hope they do haul you in and turn the fire hose on you, *same as the last time* [emphasis added]" (p. 68), indicating that such *return* is commonplace, something that also takes place offstage. To "go out" is to try to break free from vulgarity, infidelity, and violence, but to "come back" is to accept and be subdued. The processes combined are repressive of the rising desire to escape, bringing the individuals involved to the same state as before.

2.2 Poker Night: "The Sound of a Blow"

On poker night, Stanley is tyrannical as he bellows to Blanche, ordering her to turn the radio off. The second time Blanche turns on the music, he "crosses to the small white radio and snatches it off the table" and "tosses the instrument out the window" (p. 64). This move turns out to be the fuse, as verbal conflict turns physical: "Stanley charges after Stella... She backs *out of sight* [emphasis added]. He advances and *disappears* [emphasis added]" (p. 65). Based on the previous section, this is one of Stella's "going out," because she is ashamed of her husband's vulgarity and tries to escape. As Stanley and Stella back out of sight and disappear, the only two pieces of evidence to prove that the fight takes place are the *sound* of violence and the state of the victim: "There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out" (ibid.); "[h]er eyes glistening with tears and her hair loose about her throat and shoulders" (p. 68). The same is true for the Hubbells' fight upstairs—"A clatter of aluminum striking a wall is heard, followed by a man's angry roar, shouts and overturned furniture. There is a crash; then a relative hush. . . Eunice appears on the steps in daemonic disorder" (p. 86). Eunice "runs around the corner," and then Steve "turns with affected boldness and runs after her" (pp. 86–87).

The fact that only *sound* is available in the occurrence of events shows that the actual scenarios are *private*, since they are kept away from other characters and readers/the audience, and are only clear to the two couples themselves. This brings the issue of public-private distinction in terms of space.

The urban space is split into a "public-private distinction" (Madanipour, 2003, p. 119): The home "combines a number of traits of private sphere" and creates a "close, intimate relationship" for people living in it (p. 62); the street, on the other hand, is impersonal and intended for communal use (pp. 128–134). In this sense, the home is a private space and the street is a public space. Privacy of the home explains why Blanche overstays her welcome when she lives in the crowded flat, making it difficult for the Kowalskis to "make noise in the night" without Blanche "behind the curtains" (Williams, 1947, p. 128).

A dynamic perspective, on the contrary, leads to the "public" home and "private" street, i.e. an exchange of features in terms of public-private relation. "Running out" on the street, as the two couples do, turns the street into a place of "concealment" (Madanipour, p. 134). It is at home that interpersonal relations are present, as is the case on poker night. Since the street conceals the happenings from social relations (in the case of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the relative Blanche and close friends), only granting the *sound*, it is privatized as an intimate space. In the street, there is no decorum, thus no one cares what happens between a man and a woman. After the fight on poker night, Blanche chases down the stairs, only to find Stella's coming back home with Stanley. She

runs into Mitch and says “I’m not properly dressed,” to which Mitch responds with enlightenment: “That don’t make no difference in the Quarter” (Williams, 1947, p. 70). So the impersonal street enables private activity. The “public” home, where all the close relations are, is concerned with their public relation as husband and wife. This also proves that Blanche falls because of “personal disclosures” (Bloom, 2007, p. 147). Stanley exposes her in front of Stella at home, and Mitch confronts her at home, too. Home has become a place of social relations, where the exposure of her past jeopardizes her existing relations.

The spatial movement reflects people’s attitudes toward social relations. Regarding the “public” home and “private” street, “going out” represents the couples’ desire to escape from the public marital relation, to avoid being witnessed by other relations formed by blood, frequent association and so on. They, as individual beings, go out on the street, which serves as a temporary outlet, though with no veritable effect. Eventually, they “come back” as husband and wife, to all the social relations that define their identity, and conform to the social norm. In short, the spatial movement to “go out” and “come back” transforms space in the public-private division and shows individual escape from and compliance to social relations.

2.3 *Blanche DuBois: A Threat to the Repetitive Return of “Going Out” and “Coming Back”*

Blanche is a newcomer, “more or less an out-of-town guest” (Rea, 2017, p. 191), but most crucially, she’s a threat. She intrudes upon the Kowalskis who are “the lord and lady of the house” (Williams, 1947, p. 102). By sticking to that tiny, crowded apartment, she witnesses the conditions they live in, points out the truth and therefore, her spatial movement from Belle Reve to New Orleans causes crises to their marriage and life. The crises are coped in different ways: Stanley exposes and rapes Blanche; Stella defends their marriage and consents to Blanche’s institutionalization.

Stanley is the more acute of the two because Blanche, upon arrival, starts challenging his supremacy, as the two often engage in verbal conflict, even in the presence of Stella. In Scene IV, Stanley overhears the long speech in which Blanche pricks the bubble fact that he’s “common,” whereas he wants to remain king of the house. He worries that Blanche will eventually turn Stella against him, which is why he plots to unearth Blanche’s past, to make “his worthiness as a marriage partner” (Clum, 2007, p. 28) look negligible.

Stella, however, shows a more complicated response to Blanche’s questioning of their marriage. Upon reunion, Blanche is shocked to find Stella in a poor house, but Stella simply explains: “New Orleans isn’t like other cities” (Williams, 1947, p. 18). Blanche’s response is meaningful: “This has got nothing to do with New Orleans” (p. 19). Blanche sees that Stella offers a lousy justification, dodging the harsh reality that she lives in penury, so she tactfully drops the subject to avoid early embarrassment.

Stella’s “justification” technique is also applied the morning after the poker night. When Blanche expresses concern for her, though she acknowledges Stanley’s terrible behavior, she still provides multiple justifications to prove it is not intolerable: the men are prone to violence when drinking and playing poker; Stanley promises to quit poker, even though his promises never last long; the radio only has one tube smashed and he gets it fixed. Blanche criticizes her for being too “matter of fact about it” (p. 73) and points out blatantly that she has married a “madman.” As soon as the word “madman” comes out, Stella responds with an exclamation: “No!” Blanche wakes her up to see the true colors of Stanley and that the marriage is unfit. Stella fights it at first, but gradually, with Blanche’s preaching, she agrees that her husband is “common.”

Blanche wins Stella over, and Stella shows great compassion for her sister at the birthday party. Stanley’s maneuver to make Stella side with him fails, since she sympathizes with Blanche at her birthday party, demeaning him as “making a pig of himself” and “disgustingly greasy” (pp. 126–127). Though being revolted at the misdeeds of Blanche, she comes to see how people like Stanley “abused her, and forced her to change” (p. 132) and grasps him by the shirt. However, the sudden labor pain terminates her upcoming fightback once and for all.

In Act II, Stella’s pregnancy is disclosed prematurely by Stanley, against Stella’s wish to delay the announcement for the sake of Blanche’s nerves. But till the labor at the end of the penultimate scene, her pregnancy does not show its force, as the drunken husband strikes his pregnant wife and later they sleep together at night. The baby’s coming radically shifts the situation: Stella becomes a mother. Motherly love is made up with “the desire to dominate, a possession, an occupation” and pregnancy makes women “gentler, more timid, more pleased to submit” (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 75). Motherhood transforms marriage into family, which is more cohesive and defensive concerning crises.

Stella says to Eunice “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley” (Williams, 1947, p. 158). Notably, this is after her significant question of “How is my baby” (p. 157). Stella’s reference to Stanley is no

longer simply a husband, but also a father, and the inquiry about her baby's well-being reinforces the impression. At the very end of the play, Stella and Stanley embrace in "reconciliation" (O'Connor, 2007, p. 11). This is after Eunice places her baby into her arms and the baby in her bosom emphasizes her inability to rebel.

So she acquiesces in sending Blanche away. Blanche's accusation of Stanley's rape poses a threat to their family, while her infant needs a father, and she needs a husband. So she has to believe and defend Stanley, whatever the truth is. Between her blood relationship with Blanche and the one she has with her child, she chooses the latter.

There lies a change of defense technique from a justification to an excuse. To justify is to "accept responsibility but deny that it was bad," namely to admit X did do A but it was "in the special circumstances of the occasion" (Austin, 1957, p. 2). This is what Stella does in accusation of poverty, violence, madness, and commonness. To excuse is to "admit that it was bad but don't accept full, or even any, responsibility," in other words, "to argue that it is not quite fair or correct to say *baldly* [emphasis original] 'X did A'" (ibid.). This is what Stella adopts when faced with Blanche's accusation of Stanley's rape of her. It would be terrible if Stanley did that, but Stanley is not believed to have done it. Stella takes the excuse even further: she lets go of the truth whatsoever. So, from justification to excuse and ignoring the truth, Stella takes more severe measures, since her baby comes and the rape will destroy the marriage and life they have.

Blanche's retelling of the rape and the expected arguments among all three of them are not presented in the play—only the result is shown. This suggests that the process is unimportant because the outcome is already "mapped out for her" (Williams, p. 123). What Blanche essentially does is to challenge the repetitive return of "going out" and "coming back." She observes that the people in it are trapped. The people exhibit the desire to escape, but they still come back and repress that desire. Against the Kowalskis' defense, Blanche's efforts to speak out loud about the truth of their life backfire, rendering herself the sole victim. She loses her sister, is raped by Stanley, gets her hope denied by Mitch, and becomes institutionalized. The mainstream city life, with its destructive aspect, shatters the life of marginalized individuals such as Blanche.

2.4 "Life Has Got to Go on": An Illusion

Blanche turns from the incomer into the outcast, whereas the Kowalskis, in Eunice's words, "go on." Indeed, to "go on" is the main excuse for their expelling Blanche. The choice is made to "allow men and women to go on—together" (Hanks, p. 122). With Blanche's institutionalization, they get caught in the repetitive return of "going out" and "coming back."

So to "go on" is a fallacy. Stella is stuck with Stanley, "a brutish, uneducated, and uncultured working man prone to violent rages and physical abuse" (Silvio, 2002, p. 138), and like Stella, Eunice is stuck with Steve. The couples are anticipated to continue their life as it is, without any practical advance. Hence their life has an *illusion* of progression, which is in terms of their existential state. In fact, "[t]he metalanguage of desire seems to preclude *development* [emphasis added], to deny *progress* [emphasis added]" (p. 93), which is manifest in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and the trap it weaves for the inhabitants, represented by the Kowalskis and Hubbells. Their marriages are riddled with undesirable parts, e.g., poverty, vulgarity, violence, and infidelity. Based on the previous discussion, any occurrence of "going out" and "coming back" is unable to fundamentally shift the situation. The people just make justifications and excuses for the problems.

The illusion of progression also refers to the stagnation of time. Williams weakens the advance of time by presenting repetitive events. Throughout the play, "going out" and "coming back" characterize the play: the return of female characters, tedious poker nights, and monotonous bowling tournaments. Moreover, the "Blue Piano" is "always just around the corner" (Williams, 1947, p. 9). The people in it fail to "go on," trapped by the eternally recurring elements, contradicting the linearity of time. Fleche (1997) points out that Williams' plays tend to have "a tentative, unfinished character," and they "continually reveal the desire for an ending" (p. 92).

In *The Timeless World of A Play*, Williams writes about the significance of time for and in drama: "A play may be violent, full of motion: yet it has that special kind of repose which allows contemplation and produces the climate in which tragic importance is a possible thing, provided that certain modern conditions are met" (Williams, 1978, p. 60). The audience, when watching a play, presses pause in the real world and gets immersed in the make-believe world of the drama. "[E]vents are made to remain *events* [emphasis original], rather than being reduced so quickly to mere *occurrences* [emphasis original]" (p. 61). So in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, apart from major events such as marriage, childbirth and rape that call our attention, all the "going out" and "coming back," poker parties and bowling tournaments also amplify and count as "events." The fact that they repeatedly happen shows they should not be dismissed as trivial. Rather, they make up the capital part of life or even define life. Repetition leads to inertness, the hallmark of life there. The rape scene is depicted this way: "He picks up her *inert* [emphasis added] figure and carries her to the bed" (Williams, 1947, p. 155). Blanche is

trapped, like all the others that live in the neighborhood. Her experiences there make her inert, but she escapes finally, although to madness or the Doctor (Bloom, p. 112). Before Blanche comes to New Orleans, she hopes to adapt “her ideals of the previous life to her new context of life” (Hooti & Salehi, 2014, p. 3), and Stella represents “an other,” the “state” of which Blanche desires (pp. 6–9). As she goes deeper into the Kowalskis’ life, she uncovers and magnifies the unflattering, private elements of their marriage, e.g., vulgarity, violence, and poverty.

In all, the excuse to “go on” fails, resulting in an illusion of progression, which is from the temporal perspective. It is the repetitive return of “going out” and “coming back” that characterizes life, hence the space-time dimension. The repetitive spatial movement dissolves, if not negates, temporal sequence. So *A Streetcar Named Desire* constructs a life in chaos, destructive of external forces that come to disintegrate the trap.

3. Conclusion

Reality and illusion can “exchange places,” and they stand as “complements” (Hanks, 1986, p. 116), thus “capable of inversion” (p. 121). The Kowalskis are in “the standard reality” (ibid.), conforming to “our shared concept of reality” (p. 117), with heterogeneous marriage and rearing the next generation. They overlook the twofold illusion of progression in their life, featured by “going out” and “coming back.” Instead, they keep the facade of public marriage and family expansion and remain stuck in the trap. It is with Blanche that comes reality, but reality threatens the bonds they keep, so they punish her with destruction.

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