**A Street car Named Desire – Tennessee Williams**

**Scene 1 - Summary**

The setting is the exterior of a corner building on a street called Elysian Fields, which runs between the river and the train tracks in a poor section of New Orleans that has “raffish [crude] charm.” Faded white stairs lead up to the entrances of the shabby building’s two flats. Steve and Eunice live upstairs, and Stanley and Stella live downstairs. The hum of voices in the street can be heard, as well as the bluesy notes of a cheap piano playing in a bar around the corner. (Williams notes that the music from this piano is to set the mood throughout the play.) It is an early May evening, and the sky at dusk is almost turquoise.

Eunice and a Negro woman are relaxing on the steps of the building when Stanley and his buddy Mitch show up. Stanley hollers for Stella, who comes out onto the first-floor landing and replies calmly to his tough, streetwise banter. He hurls a package of meat up to her and says that he and Mitch are going to meet Steve at the bowling alley. They depart, and Stella soon follows to watch them. Eunice and the Negro woman find something hilariously suggestive in the meat-hurling episode, and their cackles indicate sexual innuendo.

Soon after Stella leaves, her sister, Blanche, arrives, carrying a suitcase and looking with disbelief at a slip of paper in her hand and then at the building. Dressed in a fine white suit appropriate for an upper-crust social event, Blanche moves tentatively, looking and apparently feeling out of place in Stella’s neighbourhood. Eunice assures Blanche that the building is Stella’s residence. When Blanche declines to go to the bowling alley, the Negro woman goes instead to tell Stella of her sister’s arrival.

Eunice lets Blanche into the two-room flat, and Blanche investigates the interior of the Kowalskis’ apartment. Making small talk, Eunice mentions what she knows of Blanche from Stella—that Blanche is from Mississippi, that she is a teacher, and that her family estate is called Belle Reve. Tiring of Eunice’s questions, Blanche asks to be left alone. Eunice, somewhat offended, leaves to fetch Stella.

Alone, Blanche sits looking nervous and uncomfortable as she surveys the messy, dingy surroundings. Spying a bottle of whiskey in the closet, she suddenly breaks out of her dejected stupor. She pours a healthy shot, downs it immediately, replaces the bottle, cleans her tumbler, and returns to her original pose.

Stella returns with excitement, and she and Blanche embrace. Blanche talks feverishly and seems nearly hysterical. After initially expressing her thrill at seeing her younger sister, Blanche lets slip a critical comment on the physical and social setting in which Stella lives. She tries to check her criticism, but the reunion begins on a tense note. Blanche redirects the conversation by asking if Stella has any liquor in the flat. She claims she could use the drink to calm her nerves, but insists—without being asked—that she isn’t a drunk. After the drink is poured, Blanche asks how Stella has allowed herself to stoop to such poor living conditions. Stella makes a light effort to defend her present lifestyle, but she mostly lets Blanche do the talking.

Stella’s quietness unnerves Blanche, who suggests that Stella isn’t happy to see her. She then explains that she has come to New Orleans because her nerves have forced her to take a leave of absence from her job as a schoolteacher during the middle of the term. She asks Stella to tell her how she looks, fusses over Stella’s plumpness and dishevelled appearance, and is surprised to learn that Stella has no maid.

Blanche takes another drink, and then worries about the privacy and decency of her staying in the apartment with no door to separate her from Stella and Stanley in the next room. She worries that Stanley won’t like her, and she makes several disparaging comments about Stanley’s lower-class status, focusing on his Polish background. Stella warns Blanche that Stanley is very different from the men with whom Blanche is familiar back home. She is quite clearly deeply in love with him.

In an outburst that builds to a crescendo of hysteria, Blanche reveals that she has lost Belle Reve, the family’s ancestral home. She recounts how she suffered through the agonizingly slow deaths of their parents and relatives, and points the finger at Stella for running off to New Orleans and leaving all familial woes behind. Stella finally cuts her off and leaves the room, crying. Stanley’s return interrupts Blanche’s apology.

Outside the apartment, Stanley discusses plans for poker the following day with Steve and Mitch. Mitch discourages their discussion of borrowing money and refuses to host poker at his mother’s house. The men settle on playing poker at Stanley’s, and Steve and Mitch leave.

Meanwhile, Blanche has been nervously moving through the apartment in anticipation of meeting Stanley. He enters the apartment, sizes Blanche up, and makes small talk with her, treating her casually while she nervously tries to engage with him. Stanley pulls the whiskey bottle out of the closet and notices that it is running low. He offers Blanche a drink, but she declines, saying that she rarely drinks. Stanley proceeds to change his sweaty T-shirt in front of Blanche, offending her modesty. All the while, Stella still hasn’t emerged from the bathroom. When Stanley abruptly asks what happened to Blanche’s marriage, Blanche replies haltingly that the “boy” died, then plops down and declares that she feels ill.

**Analysis**

The play offers a romanticized vision of slum life that nevertheless reflects the atypical characteristics of New Orleans. The mix of characters and social elements around Elysian Fields demonstrates the way New Orleans has historically differed from other American cities in the South. It was originally a Catholic settlement (unlike most Southern cities, which were Protestant), and consequently typical Southern social distinctions were ignored. Hence, blacks mingle with whites, and members of different ethnic groups play poker and bowl together. Stanley, the son of Polish immigrants, represents the changing face of America. Williams’s romanticizing is more evident in his portrayal of New Orleans as a city where upper-class people marry members of the lower class, fights get ugly but are forgotten the next day, and the perpetual bluesy notes of an old piano take the sting out of poverty.

The play immediately establishes Stanley and Blanche as polar opposites, with Stella as the link between them. Stage directions describe Stanley as a virulent character whose chief pleasure is women. His dismissal of Blanche’s beauty is therefore significant, because it shows that she does not exude his same brand of carnal desire. On the other hand, Blanche’s delicate manners and sense of propriety are offended by Stanley’s brutish virility. Stanley’s qualities—variously described as vitality, heartiness, brutality, primitivism, lust for life, animality—lead him over the course of the play into an unrelenting, unthinking assault on the already crumbling facade of Blanche’s world.

Blanche comes across as a frivolous, hysterical, insensitive, and self-obsessed individual as she derides her sister’s lesser social status and doesn’t express joy at seeing Stella so in love. Blanche, who arrives in New Orleans having lost Belle Reve and having been forced to leave her job, exudes vulnerability and emotional frailty. Stanley’s cocky interactions with Blanche show him to be insensitive—he barely lets Blanche get a word in edgewise as he quickly assesses her beauty. Nevertheless, in this introduction, the audience is likely to sympathize with Stanley rather than Blanche, for Blanche behaves superficially and haughtily, while Stanley comes across as unpretentious, a social being with a zest for life.

Stanley’s entrance with a package of meat underscores his primitive qualities. It is as if he were bringing it back to his cave fresh from the kill. His entrance also underscores the intense sexual bond between him and Stella, which is apparent to the other characters as well. Stanley yells “Catch!” as he tosses the package, and a moment later the Negro woman yells “Catch *what!*” Eunice and the Negro woman see something sexual, and scandalously hilarious, in Stanley’s act of tossing the meat to a breathlessly delighted Stella.

The name of the Kowalskis’ street underscores the extreme, opposing archetypes that Stanley and Blanche represent. Elysian Fields is the name for the ancient Greek version of the afterlife. Stanley, the primitive, pagan reveller who is in touch with his vital core, is at home in the Elysian Fields, but the Kowalskis’ home and neighbourhood clearly are not Blanche’s idea of heaven. Blanche represents a society that has become too detached from its animal element. She is distinctly over civilized and has repressed her vitality and her sexuality. Blanche’s health and her sanity are waning as a result.