



**'A TRANSITORY POSSESSION':
ECONOMICS OF A *STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE***

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In memory of
MARGARET H. RIZOR
(1926-1996)

Vociferous Reader. Lifelong Educator. Grandmother.

*And I will show that there is no imperfection in the present—and can be none in the future;
And I will show that whatever happens to anybody, it may be turn'd to beautiful results—
and I will show that nothing can happen more beautiful than death;
And I will thread a thread through my poems that time and events are compact,
And that all the things of the universe are perfect miracles, each as profound as any.*

-Walt Whitman, "Starting from Paumanok."

Introduction

Why bring an economic angle to literary analysis?

I understand why people ask. Step into introductory classes of the two fields and the material could not seem more different. English seems the realm of creativity and exploration; Economics, the realm of detached quantification and analysis. Few undergraduates go beyond these introductions. Even fewer decide to study the fields in tandem. So I'm not surprised when an interviewer reads the first line of my resume and tilts her head:

“English *and* Economics?”

Probe further into the fields, however, and you'll discover their similarities. I was drawn to Economics and English by their shared heart: the desire to understand human behavior. English criticism takes human expression (literature and our reactions to it) and scrutinizes its formal qualities to explain its creation and impact. We often think of economics as impersonal networks, but they too emerge from a human epicenter. Economists do not seek to explain the behavior of markets, but the human decisions that give the market its life. That's why the science is *social*—laws of nature explain the rise and fall of the sun, but are less adequate for explaining the NASDAQ.

I've also come to appreciate English and Economics for their outlying differences: each stands to grow from elements of the other. Take for example the former, which has historically been a qualitative realm of analysis. This qualitative nature benefits critical discourse by allowing multiple interpretations of a work to coexist; however, it serves also as a point of criticism for those who would diminish its merits. People respect and crave the perceived objectivity of quantitative evidence. Recent cohorts of English scholars have recognized the

potential of quantitative methods in providing holistic analysis and expanded the field of digital humanities. It's one thing to note several instances of a motif that one has noted in a text, quite another to demonstrate the prominence of that motif across an entire text. Though quantitative methods are not likely to usurp the qualitative emphasis of literature, they offer a compelling frontier for English scholarship.¹

Economists face the inverse analytical quandary: problems arise when they over-rely on *quantitative* analysis. In one sense, the problem is one of perception: if listeners believe economists are too rigid in their analysis and removed from qualitative evidence, they may ignore their policy suggestions. In this case, economists can only acknowledge misconceptions about the field and emphasize the human face of their work. More serious problems arise when economists themselves forget the importance of qualitative evidence and rely too heavily on quantitative approaches. In 1996, economists Deirdre McCloskey and Stephen Ziliak completed a meta-analysis of published Economics textbooks and decades of articles from *The American Economic Review* one of the field's most prominent journals. They found since the 1970s, when regression analysis became exponentially easier, economists were increasingly likely to over rely on regressions' validity without giving their results due scrutiny.² It appeared researchers were gradually forgetting a crucial, qualitative step of economic analysis: recognizing that "statistical

1. A notable example of quantitative literary analysis is Franco Moretti's *Graphs, Maps, and Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History* (London; New York: Verso, 2007).

2. Deirdre N. McCloskey and Stephen T. Ziliak, "The Standard Error of Regressions," *Journal of Economic Literature* 34, no. 1 (1996): 97-114. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2729411>.

significance" does not necessarily imply practical significance. A computer models a regression quickly and accurately, but its results mean nothing if the researcher asked the wrong question. Economic analysis is not about taking the models from introductory courses at face value, but about recognizing their limitations (as one of my economics professors used to repeat frequently, *models are only useful insofar as they reflect reality*). The last few decades have seen marked changes in economic criticism as economists have re-centered their focus on human behavior. The field of behavioral economics, which studies decision-making with contributions from psychology, sociology, and neuroscience, has become particularly prominent. Qualitative analysis is crucial for returning economic criticism to the human core of markets.

I return to this question of the economics-English relationship throughout my research; for now, let it suffice to say that the fields are both more similar than we typically think and worth appreciating for their differences.

Literature Review

I'm not the first to bring economics into conversation with English—economic modes of literary analysis have existed in various forms for the last several decades of literary criticism. For example, economic criticism has a strong relationship to literary Marxism and other forms of cultural materialisms. However, the contemporary face of economic criticism emerged in 1990s under the growing realm of new historicism. The most current descriptor of the movement comes from the title of Mark Osteen and Martha Woodmansee's critical survey, *The New Economic Criticism: Stories at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*. Their collection brings together the work of various critics inclined to questions of economics and literature; more

importantly, it offers a historical overview of the field's emergence, distilling its recurrent themes into a clearly-articulated framework. Analyzing their nascent observations on the approach allows me to place my own writing within the context of the larger realm of new economic criticism.

Osteen and Woodmansee narrow their focus, outline common manners of engaging economic topics with literary texts:

1. *Production*: Questions of production investigate the “social, cultural, and economic contexts in which individual or related works have been produced”.³ The economic context of *Streetcar* is the rapidly shifting postwar American economy and its correlated sociocultural developments. As mentioned earlier, my analysis considers this evidence in two manners. First, I consider evidence from the play's author (Williams), first director (Elia Kazan), and their contemporaries. Their writing reveals how the postwar American economy helped inform the play's creation and reception. Next, I expand my scope and consider the play's authors and audiences, investigating how the postwar economic context informs the work's creation and interpretation.

2. *Internal Circulation*: Questions of internal circulation frame a work's action in terms of economic systems. Osteen and Woodmansee call these systems “the internal or

3. Martha Woodmansee and Mark Osteen, eds. *The New Economic Criticism: Studies at the Intersection of Literature and Economics*, Economics as Social Theory (New York: Routledge, 1999), 35

intratextual ‘economies’ of a text or texts”.⁴ My research employs a popular metaphor for internal circulation: the *libinal economy*, or market of desire.

3. *External Circulation and Consumption*: Questions of external circulation and consumption concern the manners in which works circulate the marketplace after publication. A notable strain of this criticism investigates the role of economic success in determining a work’s literary canonization. My research is focused primarily on the play’s textual aspects, but I make occasional note of early reviews and Williams’s reactions to his work’s success.

4. *Metatheoretical*

Metatheoretical writing on New Economic Criticism concerns in general the modes in which we may discuss economics and literature. Osteen and Woodmansee argue that all forms of New Economic Criticism should include metatheoretical criticism in order to assert the author’s understanding of literary and economic models and maintain the efficacy of the critical movement.⁵ This passage, as it happens, is a form of metatheoretical criticism.

I’ve glossed this terminology from Osteen and Woodmansee for two reasons: first, to demonstrate the variety of approaches within even a niche field like new economic criticism; second, to offer a framework against which I can explain my own analysis. My research on *Streetcar* concerns each of these four topics, albeit in a manner not strictly adhering to Osteen

4. Osteen and Woodmansee, 36.

5. Ibid., 38-39.

and Woodmansee's definitions. I open my analysis with *production* and make occasional reference to elements of *external circulation*, by my primary realm of interest is Streetcar's libinal economy, a matter of *internal circulation*. My *metatheoretical* contributions are concentrated within this paper's introduction and conclusion.

Streetcar has received no shortage of critical attention;⁶ however, it appears little has been done in the way of economic literary analysis of the play. Most new economic criticism is focused on work contemporary with the Victorian British economists. For example, Michael Tratner marks the correlation between British women's economic agency and literary depictions of their sexual independence.⁷ Peggy McCormak draws a similar connection between economic policy and the exploits of female characters in the novels of Henry James.⁸ *Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature: Eros and Ideology* by cultural critic Sam Girgus moves closer to the realm of *Streetcar* by focusing the conversation on a wide swath of American literature; however, despite its promising title, it makes no mention of the play or any of Williams's work.⁹ It's additionally worth noting that the field of Economic Criticism seems to

6 In his survey of criticism from 1947 to 2003, John S. Bak calls it "the most intriguing and the most frequently analyzed of Williams' plays." (3)

7. Michael Tratner, *Deficits and Desires: Economics and Sexuality in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2001).

8. Peggy McCormak, *The Rule of Money: Gender, Class, and Exchange Economics in the Fiction of Henry James* (1990).

9. Sam B. Girgus, *Desire and the Political Unconscious in American Literature: Eros and Ideology* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990).

have slowed since its formative moment in the 1990s, leaving an increasing vacancy in the literary landscape.

The critical work perhaps sharing perhaps the greatest overlap with this thesis is Steve Bruhm's 1991 essay, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire."¹⁰ Bruhm and I both interpret Williams through the lens of a libidinal economy; beyond that, our analysis is largely different. Though his title would suggest it, Bruhm gives little attention to *Streetcar*, focusing instead on the later and lesser-known *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958). Bruhm and I take similar approaches to characters' romantic interactions as movements of the sexual market; however, he is primarily concerned with the male-dominated market as a ground for vindicated homoeroticism. I share his intuition about the market's homosocial nature, but my analysis of *Streetcar* centers on its implications for alternate-sex partners. Nevertheless, his work offers valuable analysis of New Orleans' urban topography as Williams and his characters experienced it. I reference some of his findings in the "Production" section of Chapter 1.

My most specific goal with this research is to offer a new angle for analyzing one of America's greatest plays. I also have a more general goal: to introduce readers to the methodology and benefits of economic criticism. With this second goal in mind, I've organized this thesis' chapters in conceptual tiers. Chapter 1 focuses on one scene and serves as an introduction to the economic concepts most important for approaching the play. Chapter 2 brings these concepts to use, giving shape to the characters' libidinal economy. Chapter 3 reevaluates

10. Steven Bruhm, "Blackmailed by Sex: Tennessee Williams and the Economics of Desire." *Modern Drama* 34, no. 4 (December 1991): 528–37. <https://doi.org/10.3138/md.34.4.528>.

this analysis through the lens of dialectical criticism, which complicates, then clarifies my vision of the play's economic landscape.

In some of my metatheoretical reading on English and Economics, I discovered something interesting about my uncommon pair of majors: for a large part of their existence, the fields were seen as more similar than different. The modern notion of Economics as a cold, impersonal field stems largely from developments in the early 20th century. As Gagnier notes:

In one of the earliest but still one of the best critiques of neoclassical economics, *Economic Thought and Language* (1937), L. M. Fraser described the narrowing of economic thought that occurred from 1871 to the 1930s, which has only become narrower, more abstract, and more mathematical since he wrote: "Almost every essential characteristic of the older economics has disappeared. From being philosophical and humane, the theory of value has become scientific and abstract;...It has withdrawn from the problems of social welfare into the pure atmosphere of mathematic speculation."¹¹

The first economists were more focused on the Humanities than Mathematics—in fact, the field was originally called Political Economics. This finding vindicated my intuition about the fields' similarities and my desire to pursue this research on Streetcar. My work then is not a bastardization of two disparate academic fields, but an attempt to recenter them on their shared human understanding.

A good economist recognizes his model's limitations. I do not believe economic analysis of literature provides a singularly important framework for literary critics. Nor do I believe that every text deserves an economic reading. A good deal of my research concerns the necessarily

11. Regenia Gagnier, *The Insatiability of Human Wants: Economics and Aesthetics in Market Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 18.

messy realms of gender, class, and their relationships to economics. I approach these with the same understanding Kreisel offers in her work on Eliot and Hardy:

The task of this book is not so much to assume the ‘naturalness of these associations between gender and economic behavior as to locate them and inquire after their effects. I do not begin with the presumption that the connections between women, degradation, demand and consumption are transhistorical truths, but instead I will attempt to chart the tiny and beleaguered terrain where different historical strata intersect in the territory of the novel.¹²

Economic criticism of literature is unconventional; however, when the model works, the effects are illuminating. I hope you'll find as much through my work with *Streetcar*.

12. Deanna K. Kreisel, *Economic Woman: Demand, Gender, and Narrative Closure in Eliot and Hardy* (Toronto ; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2012), 79.

Chapter 1: A Case Study



"Open your eyes to this stuff! You think she got them out of a teacher's pay?" Stella (Kim Hunter) and Stanley (Marlon Brando) in the film adaptation of *Streetcar* (1951, dir. Elia Kazan)¹³

Introduction

Since economic literary analysis is an atypical mode of interpretation, it seems appropriate to begin with a focused case study that introduces the concepts and terms explored more broadly in later chapters. This chapter examines Scene 2, where Stella reveals to Stanley that Belle Reve has been foreclosed, Stanley questions Stella about Blanche's belongings, and Stanley

13. <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/arts/la-ca-cm-streetcar-timeline-20170512-htmlstory.html>

commences financial negotiations with Blanche. Because the scene's action is so heavily focused around the economic implications of Belle Reve, it offers an excellent introduction to the ways economic reasoning works explicitly and implicitly within the play's narrative arc. The first half of this chapter covers economic contexts relative to *Streetcar*'s production. The second half introduces *economic value*, an important concept for understanding the play's libidinal economy.

Production: *Streetcar*'s Economic Milieu

To approach the economies contained in *Streetcar*'s text, one should first recognize the economic context of the play's production. What could inspire Williams to frame his narrative economically or condition audiences to respond to an economic subtext? The answer has much to do with *Streetcar*'s postwar timeliness—the years following World War II are a critical point of American economic and cultural flux. As in the case of British modernists responding to World War I, the issue is of grand societal flux. World War II and its aftermath represented an unprecedented turning point for American society. As industry developed and international trade became more substantial, the American GDP grew at a rate unmatched by any in recorded history (Fig. 1). Duly, economic historians have dubbed the period “The Golden Age of Capitalism.”

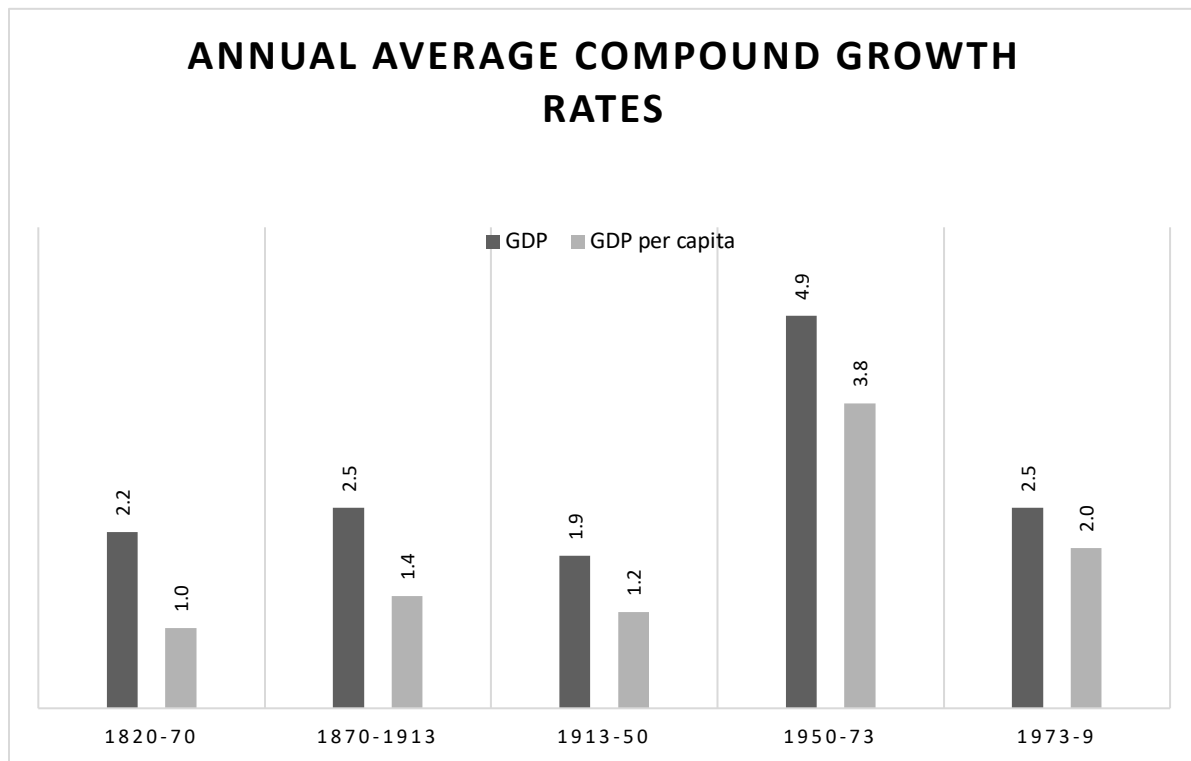


Figure 1: Growth Rates for Select Periods of American History, 1820-1979.¹⁴

The postwar economic boom was correlated with a number of social and cultural elements; among them, Tennessee Williams' rise to fame. Economic historians remain divided on the precise chain of causality between postwar economic and cultural developments. However, it appears evident that Williams, his contemporaries, and a litany of critics have continually related

14. Data from Andrew Glyn, Alan Hughes, Alain Lipietz, and Ajit Singh, "The Rise and Fall of the Golden Age," *The Golden Age of Capitalism: Reinterpreting the Postwar Experience* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), table 2.1.

his work to the atmosphere of postwar America, as in this account by Williams biographer and cultural critic John Lahr:

Within a Month of [The Glass Menagerie's] opening, V-E day brought an end to the war in Europe, and President Franklin Delano Roosevelt died. Fueled by longing and by loss, the republic, which had deferred its dreams through fifteen years of Depression and five years of war, assumed, seemingly overnight, a new momentum, a glorious and guilt-ridden race for its own survival. Recalling this time as "the greatest moment of collective inebriation in American history" in his novel *American Pastoral*, Phillip Roth wrote, "Sacrifice and constraint were over....The lid was off." In the next decade, American per-capita income would triple, the greatest growth of wealth in the history of Western civilization. Inevitably, given such enormous social and economic change, the American consciousness also underwent a sort of mutation.¹⁵

On the cusp of success, he believed the war fostered a culture unconcerned with his work's greater literary aspirations. As Williams wrote to a friend:

"The things that I have to sell in my work—what little I can give to the world in the way of poetic truth—**is going rapidly down on the wartime market**, and lies and manic laughter and nationalistic hoopla are soaring dizzily up!...Who can we speak to, who can we write for—what can we *say*—Nothing but GOD BLESS AMERICA!"¹⁶

Indeed, he believed it would take time—and the war's resolution—for his works to receive just recognition. He reasoned that the end of the War would shift the tides of literary opinion in his favor, confiding in a letter to editor Horton Foote, "We must remember that a new theatre is coming after the war with a completely new criticism, thank God."¹⁷ Williams first major

15. John Lahr, *Tennessee Williams: Mad Pilgrimage of the Flesh* (New York; London: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015), 64.

16. *Ibid.*, 30 (emphasis added).

17. *Ibid.*

success, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945), seemed to vindicate his intuition. He joined a school of playwrights attuned to society's sociocultural moment of reckoning and its relationship to the expanding economy. To engage this cultural moment, Williams pulled from his observations of others as well as personal experience. Another account from Lahr's masterful biography:

In [Williams'] mind, the title *The Glass Menagerie* summoned up the idea of the family's fragility in the face of a new urban brutality.... [He wrote], "The alley where the cats were torn to pieces was one thing—my sister's white curtains and tiny menageries were another. Somewhere between them was the world that we lived in."¹⁸

Williams found success with a play that set the family sympathetically against the impersonal face of urbanization; however, criticism of *Streetcar* has typically ignored this macroeconomic context. It may be helpful to consider *Streetcar* in light of a play similarly engaged with the period's economic landscape: Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*. Not only were Williams and Miller in communication as literary colleagues (Miller even wrote a forward to *Streetcar*), but the plays were back-to-back productions of the same director, Elia Kazan. Miller framed *Death of a Salesman* as the "Tragedy [of] the Common Man," a narrative of disillusionment with capitalist narratives of personal success and upward mobility.¹⁹ Williams takes a similar approach in *Streetcar*, using the tragedy of Blanche DuBois to illustrate the changing face of the postwar South; however, his economic subtext is subtler than Miller's. Nevertheless, they participate in the same school of American writers interested in the uncertain state of the

18. Lahr, 27-28.

19. Arthur Miller, "Tragedy and the Common Man," *The New York Times*, February 27, 1949.

American mythos. Williams believed he could concoct a narrative that shed some light on the period—in a 1942 letter to German director Erwin Priscator, he asked, “What are we doing, we people who put words together, who project our shadows on stages, but trying to create a new and solid myth—or *faith*—or *religion*—in place of the old and desiccated and *fruitless* one of ‘simple endurance’?”²⁰

Beyond the context of the American macroeconomy lies the more immediate context of the play’s setting: the city of New Orleans.²¹ Though born in Mississippi and residing in New York when he published *Streetcar*, New Orleans was the city of his youth and a locale he explored in several plays. *Streetcar*’s New Orleans is sometimes oneiric, but it is anything but imaginative—Williams’ familiarity with the city allowed him to accurately reflect and engage with the city’s economic landscape.

Surrounded by swampland, prone to severe flooding, and plagued by unrelenting summers, the strip of land straddling Lake Pontchartrain and the final turn of the Mississippi river is no place for a city. New Orleans emerged not because of its comforts, but in spite of its discomforts—18th-century French settlers questioned the location’s feasibility for colonization, but noted how the Bayou St. John would connect the larger network of French colonies to the

20. Lahr, 36.

21. I’ve adapted much of this research on New Orleans’ economic history from papers I completed in Urban Economics with Professor Shester.

mouth of the river. Claiming the strip would give them control over the nation's largest river network.²²

Mercantile dominance was worth a few mosquitos.

As a shipping ground for the bulk of the South's agricultural output, New Orleans grew into the South's preeminent metropolis. Its downtown held the mansions of those made wealthy by the sugar and cotton trades. By the 19th century it had become the largest city in the south and the third-largest in the nation. However, the city's process was not sustainable—the Civil War, which eliminated the northern demand for southern goods, and the Emancipation Proclamation, which eliminated the unpaid labor that had previously supported hefty agricultural profit margins, pushed New Orleans into economic collapse. It remained a shipping hub and maintained some manufacturing options through World War II, but it saw none of the rapid growth experienced by other large American cities at the beginning of the 20th century. This was due in part to the city's topography: unsteady sediment and proneness to natural disasters kept firms from investing in large-scale capital projects. It was also a problem of industrial adaptation—Shifting from agriculture to manufacturing was not a realistic solution because blue-collar industries extracted natural resources and placed an enormous pollutive toll on the Mississippi river.²³ As a result, most of the city's expenditures on 20th-century manufacturing and trade (important drivers of the U.S.'s postwar economic growth) were heavily subsidized by

22. Craig E. Colten, *An Unnatural Metropolis: Wrestling New Orleans from Nature* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), 1-3.

23. *Ibid.*, 108.

the federal government and unproductive assets for the local economy.²⁴ Economic growth required the city to move toward non-tradeable sectors. Today, most jobs in New Orleans's central business district are in professional services or retail/hospitality (Fig. 2)

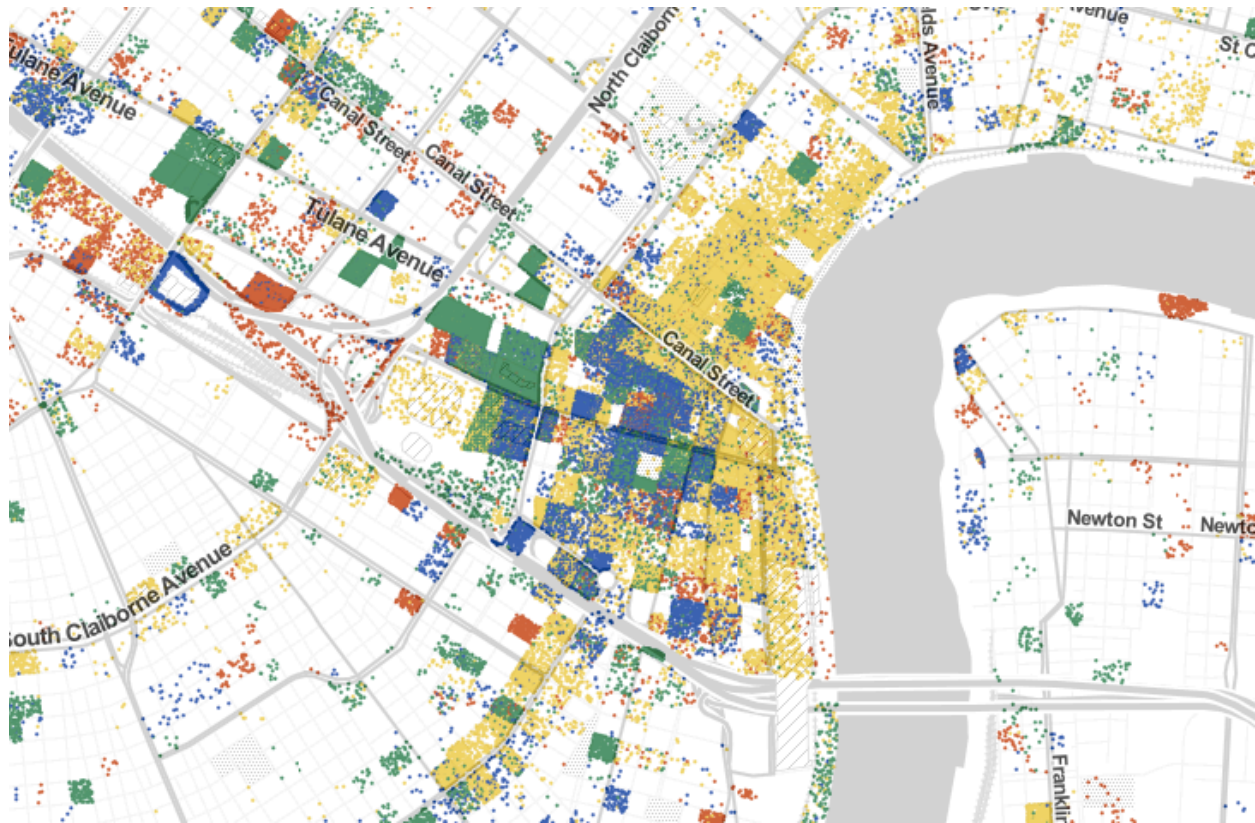


Figure 2: New Orleans Labor Demographics, 2014. Each dot represents one job in Manufacturing (Red), Professional Services (Blue), Healthcare/Education/ Government (Green), or Retail/Hospitality (Yellow).²⁵

24. Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 23.

25. "Where are the Jobs?": Employment in America, 2014 (<http://www.robertmanduca.com/projects/jobs.html>)

Streetcar shows New Orleans, like the nation around it, at a point of economic and cultural flux. On one hand, the city is moving on from its past: it has exited a period of economic depression and is enjoying the benefits of wartime industry. On the other hand, its success is meager: labor positions (like those inhabited by *Streetcar*'s men) are quickly becoming outdated as other cities begin to modernize. Most importantly, the city can never become what it once was: we see glimpses of it in a façade curated in the last thirty years to sell the city to tourists—in fact, tourism and hospitality is one of the city's most important industries, generating \$1 billion of revenue each year.²⁶

Perhaps the best way to understand the New Orleans that Williams knew and represented in *Streetcar* is as a city of extremes, a place operating in contrasts. For example, Bruhm's writing on *Suddenly Last Summer* offers an enlightening overview of the city's economic topography and its relationship to the play's libidinal economy:

[Literary critic] Thomas Richardson argues, then, that the city of New Orleans, particularly at night, represented an exotic, and erotic fantasy world which Williams exploited in his plays to contrast the realism of the city by day. That contrast between sexual freedom and political stability, with their apparent incompatibility, is exactly what Williams found in the geographical layout of New Orleans, the setting for *Suddenly Last Summer*. According to Richardson, Williams was particularly struck by "The sense of division between the business world dominated by the American spirit and the exotic world of the Vieux Carre....The time-honored dividing line between the French Quarter and the American commercial and residential sectors, including the famous Garden District, is Canal Street....Traditionally, Canal Street defines the contrasts of the American-French city, which include past vs. present, Protestant vs. Catholic, age vs. youth, wealth vs. poverty, inhibitions vs. *a joie de vivre*, and a clearly

²⁶. Arnold Hirsch, "New Orleans: Sunbelt in the Swamp," in *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth since World War II*, 100–137 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983) 113.

bilingual society. The sense of two cities, a divided world, was immediately available to the young Williams.”²⁷

Streetcar, too, presents a New Orleans at the intersection of various worlds. Blanche’s journey from Laurel carries her along a streetcar to Elysian Fields, Stella’s neighborhood that is symbolically named after the plot from the Greek underworld. It’s a night out on Bourbon Street that brings Blanche the Japanese paper lanterns she ascribes with massive emotional worth. And the voices of *Streetcar*’s vendors [“Red-hot!” (45), “*Flores para los muertos*” (147)] connect the play’s narrative to a city at the intersection of culture and economic growth.

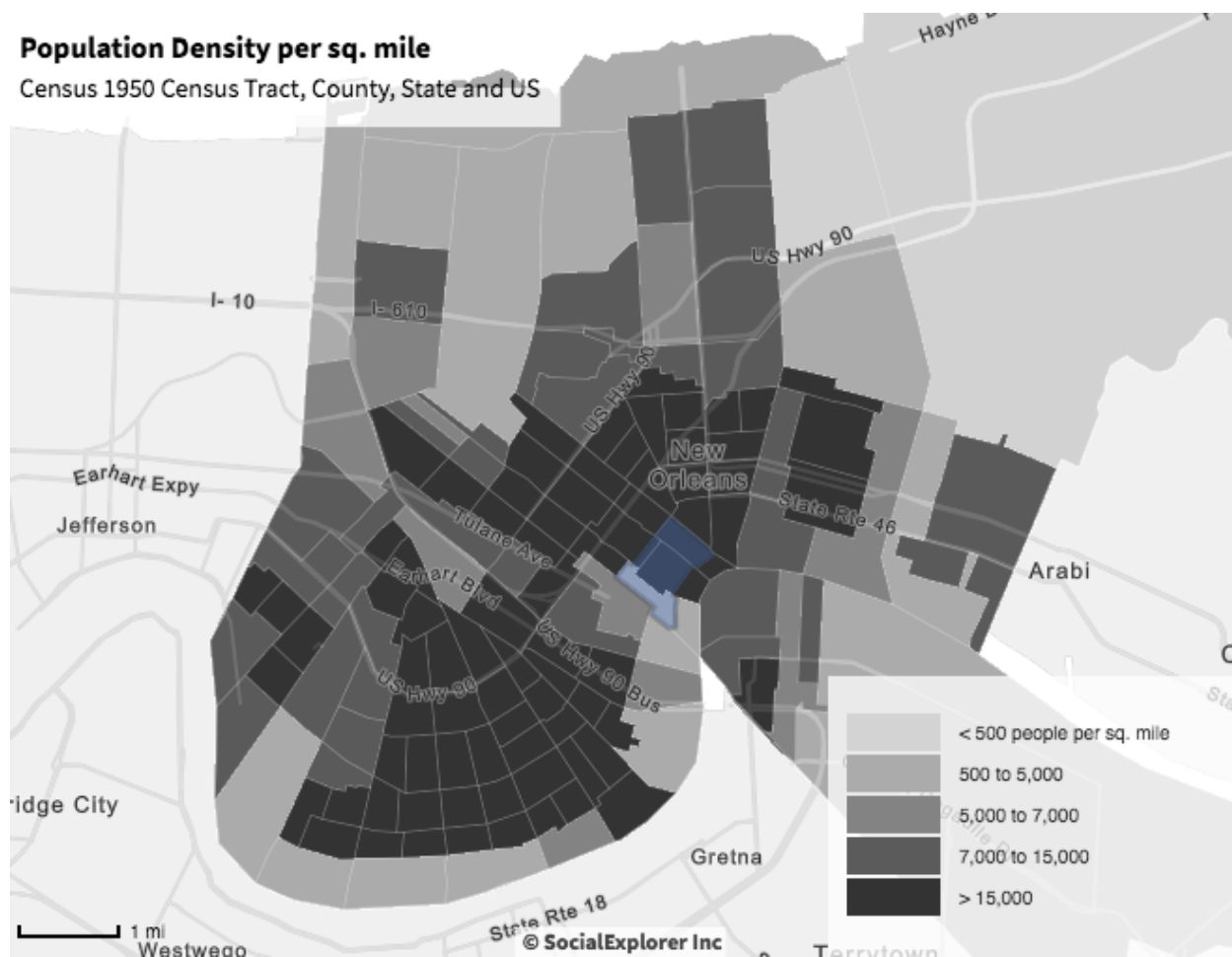
Bruhm’s connection to Richardson’s topography is also interesting in how it separates the scene of desire—and for Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer*, homoerotic desire—from that of responsible economic and commercial management. Put another way, it separates the workings of the *libidinal economy* from those of the *political economy*. This notion of separation and contrast may also be observed within the economic landscape itself. Figures 5-7 present some of New Orleans’ observable demographic divisions as they existed in 1950, the census year closest to the play’s creation. (The shaded blue box in each figure represents the French Quarter, the approximate setting of *Streetcar*’s action). I’ll cover each figure in turn and highlight the most important points for our analysis.

Figures 3 and 4 illustrates one of the most prominent and longstanding instances of division: ethnic segregation. The 1950 data show that although the population is for the most densely packed and evenly distributed near the river (Fig. 3), there exists sharp contrasts in white v. nonwhite representation within the range of crowded census tracts (Fig. 4) Most nonwhite

27. Bruhm, 529.

residents appear to live within a small, contained set of neighborhoods. This split emerges from a variety of factors, one of the most important being geography: areas with greater nonwhite representation tend to be lower and more prone to flooding than areas with largely white populations because white residents are, on average, wealthier than nonwhite residents and pay for the benefit of higher ground.²⁸

Figure 3: New Orleans Population Density by Census Tract, 1950.²⁹



²⁸ Colten, 104.

²⁹ Source: 1950 U.S. Census Data via Social Explorer (socialexplorer.com)

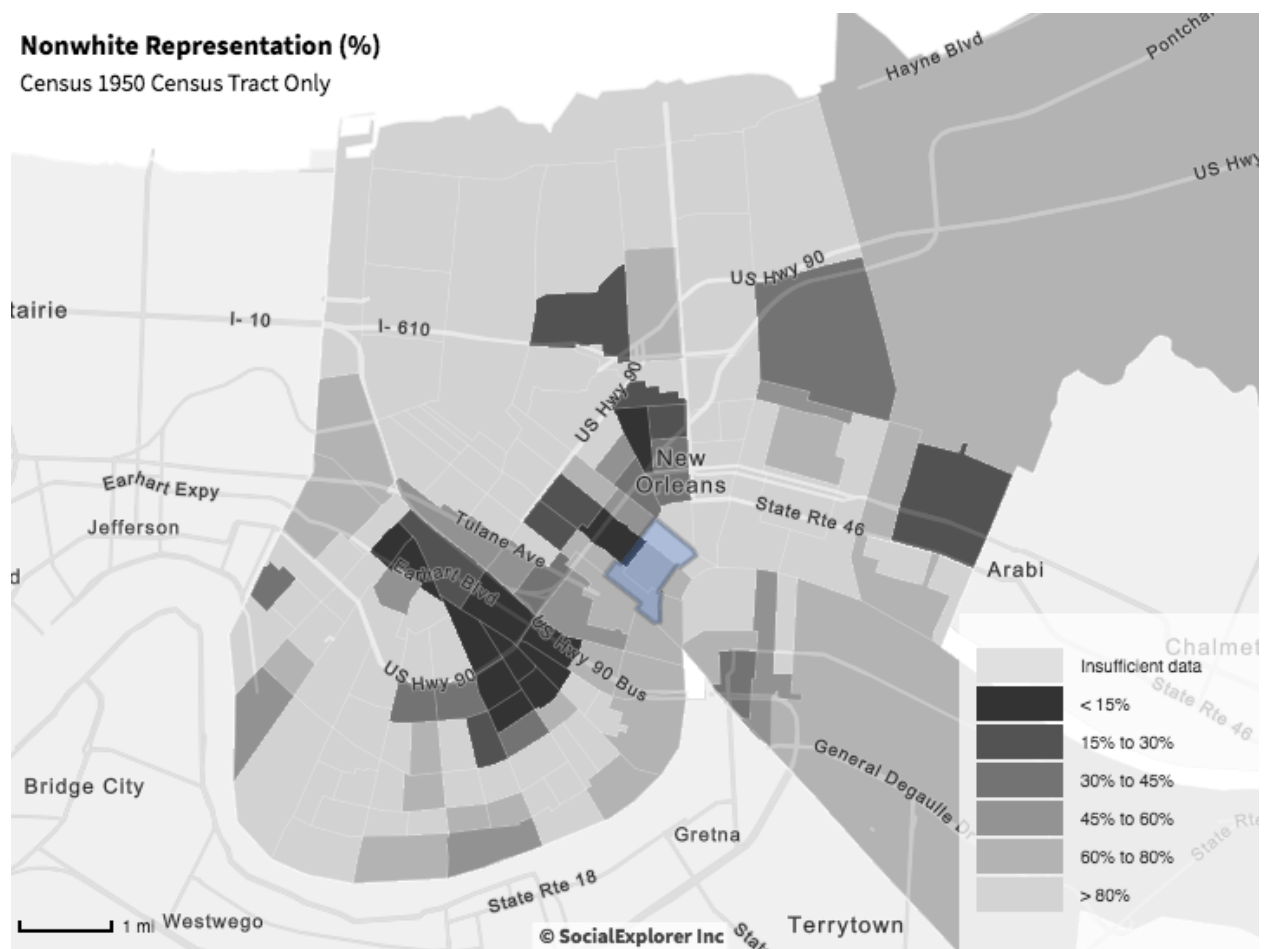


Figure 4: New Orleans Nonwhite Representation by Census Tract, 1950.

1950 New Orleans is also divided along lines of occupation. Figures 5-7 demonstrate these contrasts with representation maps—each dot represents a given number of census respondents within a tract indicating they worked in a particular occupation. Within the working population as a whole, we observe neighborhood divisions between white-collar and blue-collar workers (Fig. 5)—most white-collar workers live in the southwestern portion of the city (the beginnings of the city’s suburbanization) while blue-collar workers congregate within the area around the

French quarter and the innermost portion of the river bend (the same topographical “low point” where we observe the nonwhite clusters in Fig. 4).

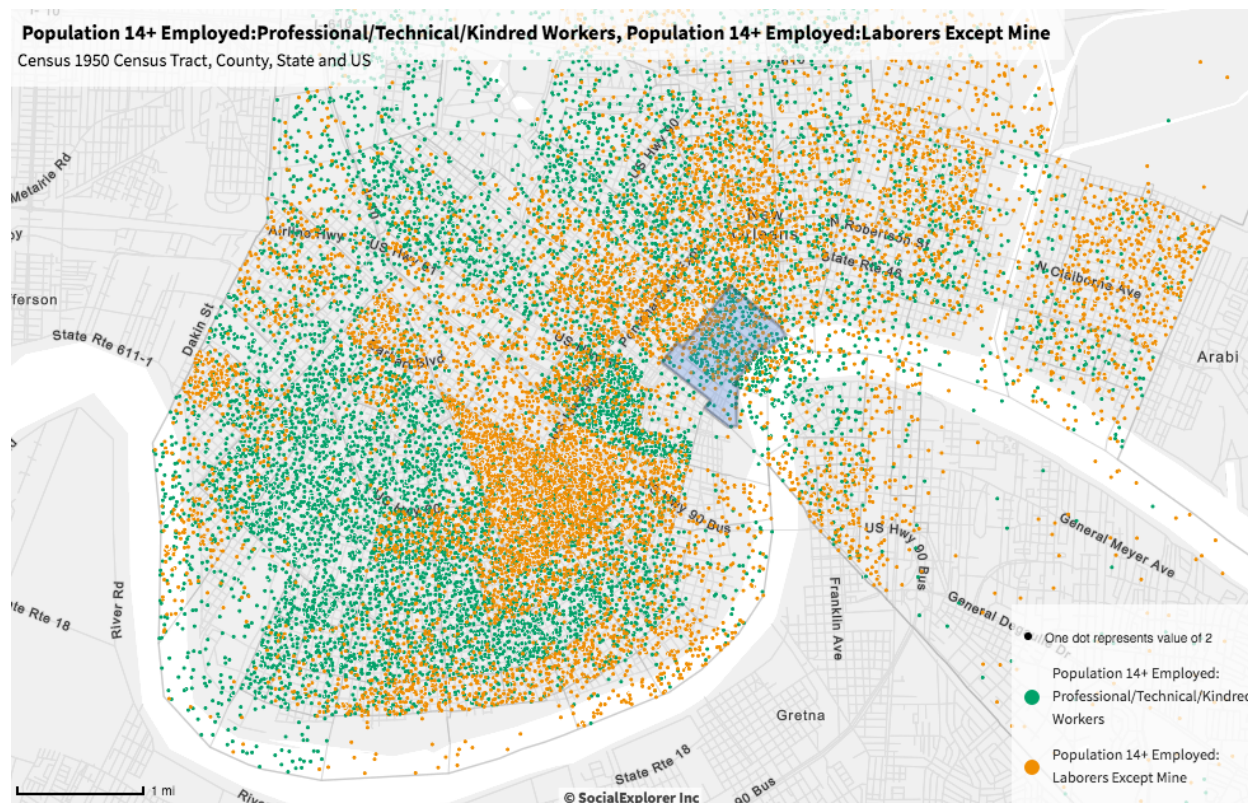


Figure 5: New Orleans Distribution of Professional Workers and Laborers, 1950.³⁰

Occupation differences also appear when we split the working population by gender and note individual occupation distributions for males (Fig. 6) and female (Fig. 7). Female employment in American cities began increasing around 1920 and hit another spurt during the postwar period, but female workers remained a minority in the workforce. As one might expect, the data reveals

30. Source: 1950 U.S. Census Data via Social Explorer (socialexplorer.com)

a greater population of male laborers than female laborers. However, note the difference in the occupations men and women tend to hold: both men and women can be found working in clerical and professional occupations, but one of the largest employment sectors for men, manual labor, has almost no female representation. Also, the places with greater populations of male laborers show fewer female participants in the labor force. This correlation suggests that economic division among gender lines is not necessarily the norm for 1950 New Orleans as a whole, but is highly pronounced in areas populated by blue-collar workers (i.e., the setting of *Streetcar*). These figures offer two indications relative to the *Streetcar*: first, that New Orleans is a city defined by unspoken, yet immediately apparent divisions (especially along lines of ethnicity and socioeconomic status); second, that gender contrasts (and their resulting conflicts) are reinforced along lines of economic participation. Both these conclusions support the notion that the play's economic landscape is immediately relevant to the actions of its characters.

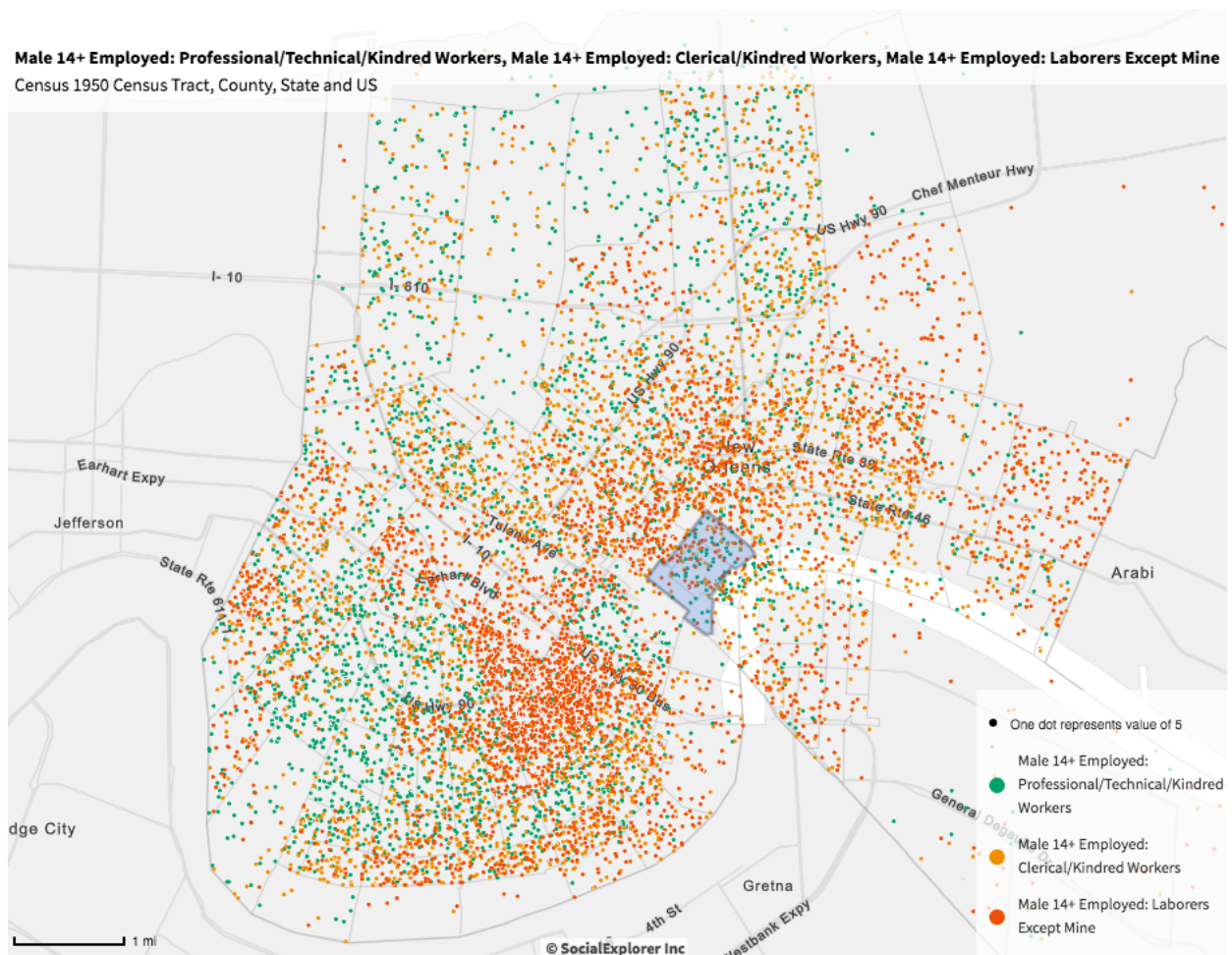


Figure 6: New Orleans Male Employment by Occupation, 1950.³¹

31. Source: 1950 U.S. Census Data via Social Explorer (socialexplorer.com)

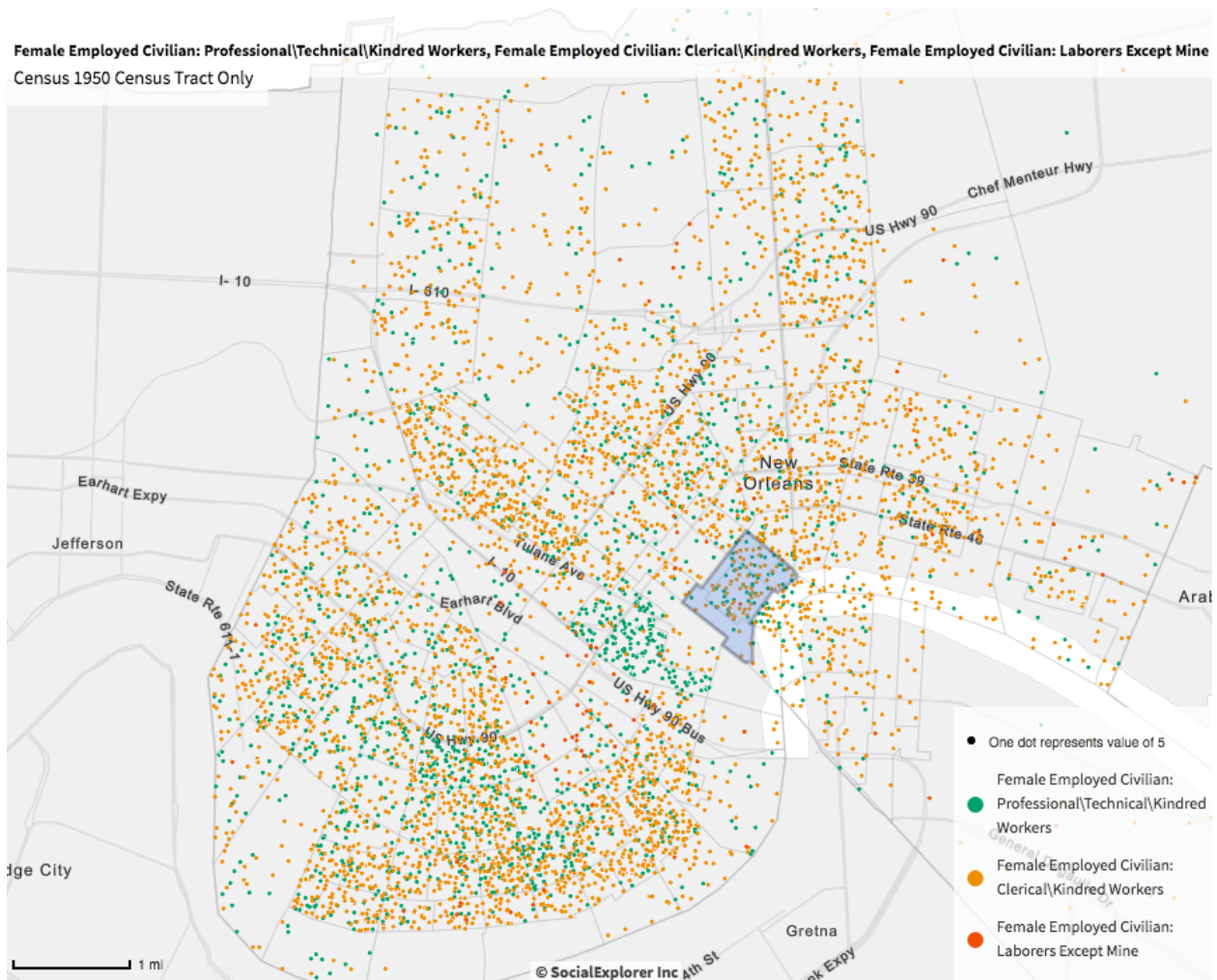


Figure 7: New Orleans Female Employment by Occupation, 1950³²

Internal Circulation: Questions of Value

Speaking about dating and marriage as a market with buyers and sellers is not unique to economists—in fact, it’s built directly into our language. Conversations about dating are

32. Source: 1950 U.S. Census Data via Social Explorer (socialexplorer.com)

peppered with economic conceptual metaphors; as when we say a newly single woman is *on the market* and that she needs to keep her standards high so as not to *sell herself short*. These conceptual metaphors from everyday speech demonstrate the extent to which we understand the exchange of vows just as we understand and exchange of goods. The notion of a libidinal economy is by no means a modern development—after all, for the greater part of human history, marriage *was* an economic decision—and as we’ll see, it’s as pervasive in *Streetcar* as anywhere else.

That isn’t to say that everyone supports an economic discussion of marriage. More than one philosopher has questioned the notion of economizing the marriage market.³³ Regardless of the answer to this normative question, it seems clear that the sexual market and particularly the marriage market are at least in some part influenced by the frameworks of economic decision making. If the idea of a libidinal economy still seems to fly in the face of romantic, altruistic love, it may be helpful to consider that the modern notions of “true love” and marrying for affection are relatively new constructions in human history. As soon as a century ago, the general consensus was that marrying for love came second to marrying for strategic benefit.³⁴ Even when left unsaid, economic sorting appears to continue today. Economist Enrico Moretti notes how recent cohorts of highly educated young men and women are more likely than their parents to marry someone with their same level of education.³⁵ Such patterns suggest that romantic

33. A notable example is Michael Sandel’s *What Money Can’t Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013).

34. Comey, Charles, “Against Honeymoons” in *The Best American Essays 2016*, ed. Robert Attwan (New York: Mariner Books, 2016), 33.

35. “The marriage market in the United States has become increasingly segregated along educational lines, with well-educated professionals increasingly marrying other well-educated

objections aside, economic factors invariably play a role in the realm of desire. The question is not whether or not the dating market is there, but who constitutes its suppliers and demanders and how they move through that process of price negotiation. *Who tells whom what they are worth?* Before we can answer that question in full, we must probe the most crucial element of economic reasoning explored within Scene 2: *economic value*.

When most consumers consider “value,” their minds go to “price.” This assumption is reasonable—after all, when we go to the store, we typically don’t think of ourselves as price takers—however, it does not capture the true nature of economic value. Here’s the full definition of economic value:

The economic value of a good is the added benefit of that good to the consumer as revealed by the consumer’s willingness to pay.

We typically assume the relationship between price and value is stable. If something costs \$100, it’s a \$100 item, right? Well, yes...and no. Value, in its strictest form, depends only on willingness to pay. This willingness to pay is often related to an item’s objective qualities, but an entire array of social factors can cause people to value the same good more or less. It’s a \$100 object *only as long as people are willing to pay for it*. Value is less objective than we typically

professionals. Economists have a decidedly unromantic term for this trend: *assortative mating*.” Enrico Moretti. 2013. *The New Geography of Jobs*. (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), 130.

recognize. It does not exist as an endemic property of goods, but as the product of social and psychological reasoning.³⁶

The notion that value may be constructed or affected by “irrational” psychological factors has been an important component of research in behavioral economists. Researchers in the field incorporate findings in fields such as sociology, psychology, and neuroscience to broaden the classical vision of how markets work. The more they investigate our behavior, the more they corroborate that finding about value: markets are not as perfect as we once thought; like the humans who comprise them, they are subject to fallibility, emotional pressure, and flights of whimsy.³⁷

At the heart of *Streetcar*’s economic conflicts (both financial and libidinal) is this question of value. If value is not a measure of objective physical qualities, what “abstract” qualities do we decide hold value? And if we can’t agree, whose opinion becomes economic truth?

Streetcar begins with an economic impetus: the foreclosure of Belle Reve sends Blanche Dubois away from her family estate and forces her to join her sister, Stella, in New Orleans’ tenements. The question of money and value lies at the forefront of Blanche’s mind—and for Blanche, value is inevitably contingent on a culture of like-minded, upper-crust southerners. Elia Kazan’s earliest directorial notes on the play noted this conflict of mission:

Blanche as doomed. She won’t adapt herself. She’s too fine on the one hand. She is too committed on the other. Unless she maintains her tradition, what else is

36. Aja Raden, *Stoned: Jewelry, Obsession, and How Desire Shapes the World*. (New York: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), 10-11.

there that she can hold to that makes her feel her special worth, that makes a place for her as a cultural light? For, wounded and crippled as she is, she remains yet the little point of pure light in a muddy and vulgar turmoil of the South today.³⁸

Blanche is caught in a last-ditch effort to preserve that “special worth.” Having lost tangible wealth, that constructed element of value is her chance at reasserting herself economically. However, constructing that value depends on a cooperative market. Blanche can’t simply say she is “valuable” [a la Stanley’s dates who proclaimed “I am the glamorous type”]³⁹ because constructed value depends on shared illusion. Whose shared illusion? Well, to borrow the words of cultural critic Hilton Als, “The success of a thing is best measured by the attention men pay it.”⁴⁰ This conflict of valuation is drawn along gender lines. She must convince the most powerful voices in her new market, the men (specifically, white men) around her that she is more valuable than they think. As such, she represents a threat. Faced with choice to accept her lower value in a new economy (“sell herself short” as Stella did) or construct value from the remnants of her privileged past, she chooses the latter—therein lies the narrative’s economic conflict between Blanche and the powers that be. And that conflict is drawn in relief in her early interactions with her brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski.

The opening action of Scene 2 asserts Stanley as a gatekeeper to the male-dominated economic realm. He arrives home to a wife ready to put a plate of leftovers on the table and put up with his outbursts; Stella deals with his demanding behavior, of course, because she needs

38. Kazan, 49.

39. Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947 repr., New York: New Directions Publishing Corporation, 2004), 38. (henceforth cited parenthetically)

40. Hilton Als, *White Girls* (San Francisco: McSweeney’s, 2013), 152.

Stanley to “give [her] some money” for a night in the quarter (29). The conversation then slips into the news Blanche has just given Stella on foreclosure of Belle Reve. For Stella, the loss is purely emotional. She focuses on Blanche’s “ordeal,” says the home was “sacrificed or something,” (30) and asks that Stanley take care with the subject around Blanche. Stanley ignores emotional considerations, cutting to the matter’s economic core: what does the foreclosure mean for Stella’s money, and, more importantly, what does that mean for him?

STANLEY. Have you ever heard of the Napoleonic code?

STELLA. No, Stanley, I haven’t heard of the Napoleonic code and if I have, I don’t see what it—

STANLEY. Let me enlighten you on a point or two, baby.

STELLA. Yes?

STANLEY. In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa. For instance if I had a piece of property, or you had a piece of property—

STELLA. My head is swimming! (32-33)

The Napoleonic Code (at that time, the state law of Louisiana) is not ostensibly male-serving, but extends property rights to both a man and his wife;⁴¹ however, we must take into account this citation’s conversational context and Stella’s immediate response. Stanley’s response takes the subject of the loss of Stella’s family home (for which she, like Blanche feels duly emotional) and reframes it as the product of Blanche’s financial conniving. In one fell swoop, he insists that:

(1) financial conniving should be assumed until presumed otherwise,

(2) Stella was too ignorant or too bound to female ties of kinship to refute this assumption, and

(3) an act of financial deceit would be against Stella, but, more importantly, him.

Stella's pithy objections and announcement that legal talk "leaves her head swimming" (33) by no means counter Stanley's vision of women as frivolous beings incapable of functioning within market discourse. This passage, then, demonstrates the economic power of Stanley and other men relative to women within the play's economy, the power structure Blanche's actions later threaten.

The scene's next development, Stanley unloading and appraising the contents of Blanche's trunk, demonstrates the fixity with which he regards value:

[He pulls open the wardrobe trunk standing in middle of room and jerks out an armful of dresses.]

STANLEY. Open your eyes to this stuff! You think she got them out of a teacher's pay?

STELLA. Hush!

STANLEY. Look at these feathers and furs that she come here to preen herself in! What's this here? A solid-gold dress, I believe! And this one! What is these here? Fox-pieces! [He blows on them] Genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long! Where are your fox-pieces, Stella? Bushy snow-white ones, no less! Where are your white fox-pieces? (33-34)

As I mentioned earlier, the constructed component of value is most prevalent in non-essential goods, specifically luxury items. Historian Aja Raden explores the topic at length in *Stoned*, her remarkable collection of essays on gemstones. Gemstones and other luxury items have incredibly low direct-use value, but cost a great deal. The price of a given gemstone depends almost entirely on its psychological value to the buyer. As Raden writes, "Diamonds aren't the strongest thing on

Earth. Perception is."⁴² In this case, the perception that matters most is Stanley's. Even when Stella has better insight into the items' nature, they retain their value in his eyes:

STANLEY. And diamonds! A crown for an empress!

STELLA. A rhinestone tiara she wore to a costume ball.

STANLEY. What's rhinestone?

STELLA. Next door to glass.

STANLEY. Are you kidding? I have an acquaintance that works in a jewelry store. I'll have him in here to make an appraisal of this. Here's your plantation, or what was left of it, here! (35)

The question of value, as it relates to Belle Reve and Blanche's possessions, is framed entirely around Stanley and other male voices.

If Stanley's conversation with Stella introduces the importance of gender in the play's conflict of valuation, his following conversation with Blanche begins to flesh out the components of that valuation. As one could expect from his moment with Blanche's furs and jewels, Stanley's evaluative process focuses heavily on physical particulars. Blanche, on the other hand, stresses the value of the abstract and constructed. Their conversation on Belle Reve's foreclosure is, as it were, a conflict of economic wits:

BLANCHE. I cannot imagine any witch of a woman casting a spell over you.

STANLEY. That's right.

BLANCHE. You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. To interest you a woman would have to— *[She pauses with an indefinite gesture.]*

STANLEY. *[slowly]*: Lay...her cards on the table. (39)

42. Raden, 60.

This passage exhibits several motifs of the play's language of valuation. First, we have the image of a woman seducing the man as an act of magic, illusion, and trickery. The image of woman as deceiver, either supernaturally or through the guise of a travelling salesman, returns throughout the play in men's condemnations of Blanche. Second, we have the distinction between "straightforward" and "honest" language typical of business and the more evasive, affected language expected in polite conversation (especially between women and men). Finally, the passage returns to that image of the poker game, here sexualized with the emphatic "Lay...her cards on the table."

Literary criticism of recent decades has increasingly recognized how narrative is not limited to literary texts, but an endemic component of the way we understand and speak of our world. More recently, behavioral economists have noted the role of narratives in creating the psychological experience of "value." This notion that narratives inform economic action is new to economics, but should seem strikingly obvious to anyone involved with marketing. For example, the consistent value of diamond engagement rings over several periods of economic recession is due not to any physical attribute of diamonds, but to the powerful narrative of a market campaign convincing the world that diamond rings were a necessary component of engagement. Even our common understanding of what we should spend on a diamond ring (look up how many month's paycheck) comes from a narrative created by a marketing campaign.⁴³ Narrative blurs the line between real and constructed value: it can be constructed, but at a certain point, that construction becomes undeniably real.

43. Raden, 33-64.

Chapter 2:

Blanche DuBois and the Economics of Desire

I will try to clarify my intentions in this play. I think its best quality is its authenticity or its fidelity to life. There are no "good" or "bad" people. Some are a little better or a little worse but all are activated more by misunderstanding than malice. A blindness to what is going on in each other's hearts... That is the way we see each other in life. Vanity, fear, desire, competition--all such distractions within our own egos—condition our vision of those in relation to us. Add to those distortions in our own egos, the corresponding distortions in the egos of the others—and you see how cloudy the glass has become through which we look at each other.

-Private letter from Tennessee Williams to Elia Kazan (April 19, 1947)⁴⁴

Introduction

The previous section illustrated differences in Blanche's and Stanley's modes of valuation and noted how they were drawn along lines of gender. This section brings the question into full focus, detailing the mechanisms of *Streetcar*'s sexual economy.

The Market of Desire

Streetcar's sexual economy is expressed plainly (if crudely) in its first lines. (perhaps rephrase:

To find the logic of *Streetcar*'s sexual economy, one need look only to its first lines):

[Two men come around the corner, Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. They are about twenty-eight or thirty years old, roughly dressed in blue denim work clothes. Stanley carries his bowling jacket and a red-stained package from a butcher's. They stop at the foot of the steps.]

44. Kazan, 62.

STANLEY. [*bellowing*]. Hey, there! Stella, Baby!

[*Stella comes out on the first floor landing, a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's.*]

STELLA. [*mildly*]. Don't holler at me like that. Hi, Mitch.

STANLEY. Catch!

STELLA. What?

STANLEY. Meat!

[*He heaves the package at her. She cries out in protest but manages to catch it: then she laughs breathlessly. Her husband and his companion have already started back around the corner.*]

Lest the subtext of the interaction be lost, Stella's exit comes with commentary:

COLORED WOMAN. What was that package he th'ew at 'er? [*She rises from steps, laughing louder.*]

EUNICE. You hush, now!

NEGRO WOMAN. Catch *what!* (5)

The scene offers more than a punch line—it introduces Stanley's and Stella's relationship, lays plain its emotional imbalances, and places them in an economic conversation. Stanley arriving home from work, food in hand, slates him as an archetypical breadwinner. Stella is outwardly needy—she puts up with his rudeness because at the end of the day, she depends on him bringing home the bread. Here, of course, it's *more* than bread. Stella's neediness is immediately framed as both economic and sexual. Williams further complicates the scene with the remark that Stella is “of a background obviously quite different from her husband's.” Stella is thus framed not only by her current economic dependence, but by her decision to lessen her economic well-being and

place herself in this place of dependence. Or, as Kazan's notes put it, "[Stella] has sold herself for a temporary solution."⁴⁵

Is the crude sexual and economic landscape of the first scene a deterioration of society? Blanche certainly believes so. Her entrance comes after the meat-throwing, but she offers a similar image when she berates Stella for marrying Stanley:

BLANCHE. He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something—sub human about him—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! Yes, something—ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I've seen in—anthropological studies! Thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and there he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age! Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle! And you—you here—*waiting* for him! Maybe he'll strike you or maybe grunt and kiss you! That is, if kisses have been discovered yet! (83)

Stella's decision to marry Stanley is not easy to evaluate. Taken at face value, the idea of marrying someone for love, regardless of wealth, seems romantic. However, Stella's feelings for Stanley are not presented romantically, but as a persistent carnal itch for which she will sacrifice her well-being—pressed by Blanche on why she stays with him, she says:

STELLA. But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant. [*Pause*]

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

STELLA. Have you ever ridden on that street-car?

BLANCHE. It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be... (81)

45. Kazan, 59.

Stella has been devalued by a market where man's basest instincts rule supreme. Blanche, forced away from her home and into the realm of "Desire," has no way to leave. She has two choices: accept her place where she's "not wanted" and will be devalued or persist until she finds someone to value her as she was at home. Her decision to do the latter forms the root of the play's conflict.

Streetcar's libidinal economy, where men hold an extortive grasp on affection, parallels the economic logic of price-gouging. In Neoclassical economics, the supply and demand model of markets is not cooperative; that is, those supplying and those demanding do not negotiate on a mutually beneficial price. Rather, one party is assumed to be price-giving; the other, price-taking. In most instance, the price-givers are the demanders (or consumers), because in a competitive market with many suppliers, they have the option to choose their most-preferred price. Importantly, this price-giving has a limit: because a group of consumers cannot collude among themselves to refuse buying a particular product until the price lowers, businesses retain some leeway in the amount they charge for their goods and services. Generally, then, the process of price-setting is determined by consumer's limited volition in price-setting. There are, however two examples of extreme, one-sided price-setting: *monopolies* and *monopsonies*. In a monopoly market (one seller), consumers have no substitutions for the given good and must accept the price demanded by the monopoly supplier—the supplier becomes the price-giver and the consumer the price-taker. A monopsony market (one buyer) is similar to the general model in that the consumer is the price-giver and the supplier is the price-taker, but because the consumer is no longer one of many, the consumer has unlimited power of price-giving. Monopolies and monopsonies, then, operate under the same mechanism: the party with singular access to a given

good holds complete control of its price. In essence, it tells the other party *how it will value that good*.⁴⁶

The dating economy Blanche enters, that of working-class postwar New Orleans, is indisputably under male control. The male realm is dominated by ties of economic activity and the economic realm is entirely male. The male dominance of the sexual economy is further reinforced through Stella's dependence upon Stanley's affection and resources. In some instances, her dependence seems strictly economic (for example, the many times she asks him for money). Other points, however, blur the line between romantic and economic transaction (as when Stella asks Stanley "don't I rate one kiss?"). In this instance, where an act of affection is framed as a symbol of Stella's value as a partner (that is, her *price*), we see that Stella's and Stanley's relationship operates through a decidedly unromantic transactional market—a market in which Stanley decides the going rate.

The play's division between the "male" realm of economic volition and their counterparts is also reinforced by the recurring image of Stanley's poker game. On the surface, it may appear non-economic; after all, isn't poker, like the bowling alley, what the men do on their time *off* from work? A closer look, however, reveals no such distinction. For one, the men's rigid homosociality is drawn not only upon ties of gender, but ties of occupation. Take Stanley's explanation to Stella of why he told Mitch the truth about Blanche's disgraceful dismissal:

46. "ECON 150: Microeconomics." n.d. Accessed April 6, 2018. https://courses.byui.edu/econ_150/econ_150_old_site/lesson_08.htm.

STANLEY. Mitch is a buddy of mine. We were in the same outfit together—
Two-forty-first Engineers. We work in the same plant and now on the same
bowling team. You think I could face him if— (125)

All the men who pass through the house work at the same mill, their friendships were born through the work at the mill, and their shared labor commitment entails a sense of obligation to the whole. The seemingly inconsequential act of playing poker plays a critical role in framing and advancing *Streetcar*'s narrative. Blanche arrives on poker night. Stanley's first violent outburst occurs when she interrupts it. In the play's final moments, Blanche's guided departure again interrupts the poker game:

EUNICE [*whispering*]. She's going to walk out before they get here.

STELLA. Wait, Blanche.

BLANCHE. I don't want to pass in front of those men.

EUNICE. Then wait'll the game breaks up. (170)

In fact, the play's final line is not Blanche's poignant and well-remembered "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (178) or Stella's pained calls to her fallen sister, but a pithy remark by one of Stanley's pals, Steve, who in the face of tragedy redirects the conversation to the card game:

[*The luxurious sobbing, the sensual murmur fade away under the swelling music of the "blue piano" and the muted trumpet.*]

STEVE. This game is seven-card stud.

CURTAIN (179)

The narrative's structure around the game was no mistake—Williams' first draft of the play came to the desk of his editor, Audrey Wood with the title *The Poker Night*.⁴⁷

47. Lahr, 124.

When the play's first poker night ends in disaster, Mitch utters twice the unsatisfactory maxim, "Poker should not be played in a house with women" (63, 65)—Indeed, the poker game emblemizes the rigid divide of the play's aligned binaries: male and economic, female and non-economic. No party is deluded about this divide [Blanche to STANLEY. "I understand there's to be a little card party to which we ladies are cordially *not* invited!" (36)]. and characters seem to accept that breaching the divide entails natural consequences [Stella to BLANCHE. "In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker, anything can happen. It's always a powder keg" (72)]. When the poker game proceeds on stage it shows the economic core of male bonding. Dialogue is peppered with staccato bursts of numbers and calls to pay out ["How many for you?" "Two." "Three." (166)]. Success in the game is a form of economic dominance; naturally, it becomes conflated with masculinity. Thus the pain of the play's resolution, where Stanley leaves his gruesome assault on his sister-in-law untouched by the law, vindicated in his masculinity, and on an apparent lucky streak of gambling:

STANLEY. Drew and inside straight and made it, by God.

PABLO. *Maldita sea tu suerte!*

STANLEY. Put it in English, greaseball.

PABLO. I am cursing your rutting luck.

STANLEY [*prodigiously elated*]. You know what luck is? Luck is believing you're lucky. Take at Salerno. I believed I was lucky. I figured that 4 out of 5 would not come through but I would...and I did. I put that down as a rule. To hold front position in this rat-race you've got to believe you are lucky. (163)

Williams presents a brutal vision: in a world increasingly dominated by a money-primed mindset, we become increasingly comfortable with the cutthroat mentality of markets. It's possible, then, that we are complicit in the play's lack of justice, that we've constructed a society

that vindicates (maybe even rewards) Stanley's action. *Streetcar* itself offers no resolution—as Blanche is carried away and Steve calls a new game, the rat-race scurries along.

Added to the implicit ties of economic activity and homosociality is the poker game's more obvious connection to economic activity: perhaps more so than any other pastime, it foregrounds quantification and exchange. When the men play cards onstage, numbers punch through the air in staccato bursts. Some are related directly to the game (citation, example); others involve economic action outside of the game (Stanley's lottery ticket). When the play's men are left alone, their conversations and actions go toward money and exchange.

This fascination with quantification is unique to the play's male characters. Blanche (the play's most traditionally “feminine” character) voices early on in her stay her strong distaste for math:

MITCH. I bet you teach art or music? [*BLANCHE laughs delicately*] Of course I could be wrong. You might teach arithmetic.

BLANCHE. Never arithmetic, sir; never arithmetic! [*with a laugh*] I don't even know my multiplication tables! No, I have the misfortune of being an English instructor. I attempt to instill a bunch of bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos with reverence for Hawthorne and Whitman and Poe!

.....

MITCH. I guess that some of them are more interested in other things.

BLANCHE. How very right you are! Their literary heritage is not what most of them treasure above all else! (61-62)

I'll turn again to this contrast when I discuss Blanche's navigation of the dating market. In the meantime, it seems necessary to explore exactly how that market becomes apparent on stage.

While Blanche first speaks about romantic interactions, she doesn't appear to conflate romance with resources in the same way Stella does. She states that ideally, she wouldn't have to care about money at all (76) beyond what it takes for her to get by. It's only when she's thrown

into financial uncertainty that she begins to mix business with pleasure, so to speak. Her “investment” trip to meet suitors, her desperate appeals to her distant Texas millionaire, are not genuine acts of affection—that is, they don’t speak to Blanche’s character in the way Stella’s interactions with Stanley do hers. To gain a better sense of Blanche’s process through the dating market economy, we must look to her interactions with Mitch.

Mitch does not enact the commoditization fetish in terms as lewd or obvious as Stanley’s meat-throwing; rather, we witness the commoditization fetish through his continual appeal to numbers and obsession on quantifiable metrics. Numbers are, to him, reliable and emboldening. Look how Mitch proceeds when he begins to falter in a date-time conversation with BLANCHE.

MITCH. Guess how much I weigh, Blanche?

BLANCHE. Oh, I’d say in the vicinity of—one hundred and eighty?

MITCH. Guess again.

(...)

MITCH. I weigh two hundred and seven pounds and I’m six feet one and one half inches tall in my bare feet—without shoes on. And that is what I weigh stripped. (106-107)

Though Blanche is clearly smaller than him in stature, he further reinforces his point by asking exactly how much she weighs herself. The topic of size, bare and non-debatable, gives him immediate sway over his petite counterpart. She maintains the upper hand in conversation, but he holds objective dominance through mass.

Mitch’s obsession on numbers returns in his final conversation with Blanche, where he probes her on her age. This conversation on age, like the one on weight, gives us some idea of how out-of-place Blanche is within this sexual economy. It is conventionally impolite to ask a woman (no less an aristocratic, southern woman) for these figures. We could imagine, then,

Blanche's discomfort when these objective (that is, unchangeable) metrics become fair play for determining her desirability.

The previous chapter introduced valuation and the conflicting manners in which Stanley and Blanche spoke of her jewelry and papers. I'll now expand this discussion to the play at large, investigating contrasts in the way Blanche and those around her speak of their surroundings. In general, the differences may be understood under that *social* component of valuation Raden highlighted with regard to jewels. Blanche is heavily attuned to the notion that value may be constructed and recognizes that in her state of economic uncertainty, such sources of "illusiv" value may be her escape.

Blanche's passion for literature that inspired her career as an English teacher expresses itself not only in her constant allusions, but in her highly-narrative mode of construing events. For Blanche to protect herself and escape her economic predicament, she must hold steadfast to the narrative of her worth—she only needs the society around her (or just the right suitor) to believe it. As Kazan ruminates in his notes:

Because [Blanche's traditional, romantic] image of herself **cannot be made actual, given a real form**, certainly not in the South of our day and time, it is her effort and practice to **actualize it in fantasy**. Blanche has constant daytime fantasies. Only in these does life turn out the way it should. Only in these can she live as she must. Everything that she does is colored by this necessity, this compulsion to be made special.... So, in fact *Reality becomes fantasy, too. She makes it so!* (46, **bold** emphasis added, *italic* emphasis original)

The notion that reality may become fantasy and vice versa reveals the logic of Blanche's economic action: she dabbles in fantasy and narrative not because she cannot face reality, but because she knows that a compelling-enough illusion creates its own reality. Blanche holds on to narrative and abstraction because in her desperate circumstances, they're all she has. If she plays

her hand well enough, she knows she can create worth. This awareness passes under a guise of delicacy; no one in the Kowalski household recognizes the potency of Blanche's fantasy, paying her no mind when she lays it clear in song,

BLANCHE [*singing*].

“Without your love,
It's a honky-tonk parade!
Without your love,
It's a melody played in a penny arcade...”

.....

“It's only a paper moon, Just as phony as it can be—
But it wouldn't be make-believe if you believed in me!” (121)

The song embodies Blanche's perception of value (something “belie[f]” can make real) and desire for emotional validation (the “love” without which she is nothing). Her penchant for narrative and passion for aesthetic value in the face of an increasingly uninterested culture maps well onto theory of modern tragedy. Many a critic has noted Williams' creative brand of lyricism found in most of his work; in *Streetcar*, however, this lyricism is less of an all-pervading neutral aspect than a critical component of Blanche's character. Other characters shirk lofty, affected speech, contouring the contrast between the heroine and those around her. Thus the play presents the tension between poetic language and beauty and a less aspirational modern colloquy. Adrian Poole notes that such internal tensions of modern tragedy can be traced to the 19th-century. He holds Ibsen as an exemplary figure in the movement. As Poole writes, Ibsen was interested in a “repressed” mode of lyricism, where characters are not outwardly remarkable in the style of classic tragedians, but evoke lyric grandeur from an array of symbols, “symptoms of neurotic

disturbance and desire.”⁴⁸ This symbolic awareness is a critical component of Blanche’s presentation. It gives us a way to interpret her tenacity for everyday emblems of beauty and her tendency to exaggerate their presence.

“Value” as we know it often depends on narrative and emotional elements of goods—a good story or evocative description actually has the power to make a good more valuable. No one in *Streetcar* seems better-attuned to this concept than Blanche. She has lost her family estate and financial security, but she has the charm and sensitivity to imbibe what little she possesses with great value. Her early description to Stella of Belle Reve’s downfall suggests this awareness of possessions may be a recent development spurned by financial woe:

BLANCHE. How in the hell do you think all that sickness and dying was paid for? Death is expensive, Miss Stella! And old Cousin Jessie’s right after Margaret’s, hers! Why, the Grim Reaper had put up his tent on our doorstep!...Stella. Belle Reve was his headquarters! Honey—that’s how it slipped through my fingers! Which of them left us a fortune? Which of them left a cent of insurance even? Only poor Jessie—one hundred to pay for her coffin. That was all, Stella! And I with my pitiful salary at the school. (22)

Note the pervasive economic language: *paid, expensive, fortune, cent, salary*. Shortly thereafter, Blanche’s description waxes romantic—she seems preoccupied with the mementos of the occasion:

BLANCHE. Even the old sometimes, say, “Don’t let me go.” As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, “Hold me!” you’d never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. (22, emphasis added)

48. Poole, Adrian, *Tragedy: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31.

Blanche's fixation on these objects is not only an attempt to build herself up, but a holdover from a tradition of courtship where affection could be measured by its price tag, the amount of "tributes" she received from "admirer[s]" (38)— "Admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful," Stella begs Stanley. "That's important with Blanche. Her little weakness!" (31). An early moment of courtship between Blanche and Mitch comes when she realizes he shares her sensitivity:

BLANCHE. Have you got any cigs? [*She has slipped on the dark red satin wrapper*]

MITCH. Sure.

BLANCHE. What kind are they?

MITCH. Luckies.

BLANCHE. Oh, good. What a pretty case. Silver?

MITCH. Yes. Yes; read the inscription.

BLANCHE. Oh, is there an inscription? I can't make it out. [*He strikes a match and moves closer*] Oh! [*reading with feigned difficulty*]:

"And if God choose,

I shall but love thee better—after—death!"

Why, that's from my favorite sonnet by Mrs. Browning! (57)

Blanche first finds value in physical qualities that might go unnoticed by a simpler eye: the brand of cigarettes and the construction of the case. The case becomes even more precious to her (one could say more *valuable*) when she recognizes the inscription. The stage direction about the "dark satin wrapper" suggests Williams himself sees beauty in specific descriptions of minutiae. He uses such descriptions throughout the script, as in this instance from the opening of Scene 10, which sees Blanche alone in the Kowalski home, lost in fantasy:

As the drinking and packing went on, a mood of hysterical exhilaration came into her and she has decked herself out in a somewhat soiled and crumpled white

satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers with brilliants set in their heels.

*Now she is placing **the rhinestone tiara** on her head before the mirror of the dressing-table and murmuring excitedly as if to a group of spectral admirers. (151, emphasis added)*

In Blanche's breakdown, she seems to have completely placed herself in the emblems of her past life. The buildup to the play's climax sees her and Stanley revise their conversation from Scene 2:

BLANCHE. I received a telegram from an old admirer of mine.

STANLEY. Anything good?

BLANCHE. I think so. An invitation.

STANLEY. What to? A fireman's ball?

BLANCHE. *[throwing back her head]*: A **cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht!**

[...]

STANLEY. Who did you say it was from?

BLANCHE. An old beau of mine.

STANLEY. The one that give you the **white fox-pieces?**

BLANCHE. Mr. Shep Hunteligh. I wore **his ATO pin my last year at college.**

STANLEY. And come up with **that—gorgeous—diamond—tiara?**

BLANCHE. **That old relic?** Ha-ha! **It's only rhinestones.**

STANLEY. Gosh. **I thought it was Tiffany diamonds.** *[he unbuttons his shirt]*
(153-154, emphasis added)

Blanche's fascination with the intangible, the culturally elite, and the aesthetically pleasing leads back to the questions raised by Stanley's interaction with her jewelry: can value be socially constructed? And at what point does constructed value become *real*? A deeper look into economics provides as many questions as it does answers.

Part of the difficulty of assessing Blanche's economic worldview is that she stands at the flux point of two schools of economics, each with starkly different approaches to the question of value. Victorian economists did not scrutinize the notion of "social value;" rather, they believed that goods existed within an objective hierarchy with "cultural" goods at the top. At the base of this hierarchy were the goods essential to life. Victorian economists theorized that as society progressed, it would begin to produce goods of a higher order. By this logic, goods that are aesthetically beautiful, but serve no practical purpose, represent the most valuable products of society.⁴⁹ Under this view, one can grasp the economic urgency when Blanche pleads to

STELLA.

BLANCHE.[Stanley's] poker night!—you call it—this party of apes!
 Somebody growls—some creature snatches at something—the fight is on!
God! Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella—
 my sister—there has been *some* progress since then! Such things as art—as
 poetry and music—such kinds of new light have come into the world since
 then! In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little
 beginning! that we have to make *grow!* And *cling* to, and hold as our flag! In
 this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching....*Don't—don't hang
 back with the brutes!* (83)

Devaluing empathy, the "tenderer feelings" that lead to creative expression, is framed as developmental regression. The earliest commentators on *Streetcar* seem to share this notion of value. Kazan framed Blanche's tragedy as the disintegration of a "person of value" in the face of the "modern, rough, coarse South" that failed to value products of aesthetic worth:

It is important symbolically that Blanche is an English teacher. She is the last repository of culture, abandoned, not prized, deformed, destroyed, gone begging for protection. At the end, the grandeur and the nobility belong to Blanche, and the "victors," Stella and Stanley, are left with each other, a relationship of vulgar

49. Gagnier, 114.

crudity and, for Stella, of growing emptiness and terror...[Blanche is] a dying relic of the last century now adrift in our unfriendly day.⁵⁰

Of course, the Victorian notion of value stands in opposition to the school of economic thought of economic thought gaining traction around the time of *Streetcar*'s creation. The modern school scrutinized the concept of aesthetic value and noted that the markets for such goods invariably depended on subjective (typically bourgeois) opinions of such things as "high" and "low" culture. Rather than dealing with cultural value in its complexity, economists elected to ignore it altogether, pushing the field further from its base in the humanities.⁵¹ By this modern understanding (perhaps the one tacitly supported by Stanley Kowalski et al.), Blanche's appeals to "culture" and other great remnants of the old days are little more than the cries from a displaced relic of the bourgeois failing to adapt to a society that has progressed beyond the aristocratic world of her upbringing.

These notions of economic value are evidently contradictory; however, I don't believe they are necessarily irreconcilable. As I've mentioned before, economists of recent decades have shown greater openness to modifying the rigid definition of value. For example, a sizeable portion of literature in Environmental Economics deals with the necessity and difficulty of determining a dollar value for things like natural beauty and the long-term availability of natural resources. And economists aren't the only ones concerned with the question of value. In fact the theory that might reconcile the apparent contradiction between the schools of Victorian and

50. Kazan, 48-49.

modern economics (or at least give further support for Blanche's line of reasoning) comes from sociologist Norbert Elias and his work with the "Civilizing Process."

Norbert Elias' theory of the "Civilizing Process" was first published in 1939 in Germany; however, it gained little recognition until 1969, when it was first published in English⁵². At a time when Marxist critics were increasingly adamant about the cultural fallbacks of capitalism, Elias took a more positive view of markets—he argued that economic developments of Europe's Middle Ages hinged upon society's civil and moral development, or "civilization." Put simply, Elias believed modern economies grew from (and in turn fostered) systems of interconnectedness and accountability. The result is what 18th-century economists called *doux commerce* (gentle commerce). As Steven Pinker explains it, "Though many intellectuals...hold businesspeople in contempt for their selfishness and greed, in fact a free market puts a premium on empathy"⁵³.

Take for example the development of banks. Banks are ubiquitous today—economists concur that a healthy system of credit is an important component of any economy—but upon their first introduction to Europe, they faced a great deal of resistance. One set of objections was moralistic—charging interest was seen as a form of usury. Another set of objections had to do with trust—who was to believe a lender could be trusted to invest their money and keep enough to pay them back on demand? Lender faced the same dilemma: why grant a loan if you can't ensure it will be repaid? A healthy system of credit brings positive societal gains, but the system

52. Pinker, Steven, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Penguin Books, 2012), 60.

53. *Ibid.*, 76-77.

depends upon each party's cooperation. Without shared confidence, they will elect to keep their money to themselves. Elias framed this decision to the methodology of *game theory*, the formal study of decision-making between two or more participants. The banking decision described above is analogous to the Prisoner's dilemma, a famous game demonstrating how a set of rational decision makers could arrive at the least optimal decision for themselves. The "dilemma" stems lack of trust and the inability to communicate; however, take these barriers away and both parties may arrive at the optimal decision. Elias was speaking of societies, not prisoners, but the logic is the same: with a greater expectation of trust and cooperation, economic actors will move from selfish, "zero-sum" outcomes to "positive-sum" outcomes.⁵⁴ Banks are only one example of "positive-sum" systems. Others include trade, regulated currency, and the state monopolization of violence.⁵⁵ Thus, economic progress is inextricably linked to ties of civility and a certain level of altruism.

Elias' theory of the Civilizing Process allows for an interpretation of *Blanche* where the "hierarchy of goods" notion of Victorian economists is supported by the "rational" models of modern economists. It also gives us a way to parse out the play's portrayal of relationships. Elias indicates that economic decision making is inextricably linked to social factors—those with the upper hand will inevitably gain control over the rules and twist them in their favor. The greater the deficit of power between actors A and B, the more control the powerful actor has over the

54. Nobert Elias, "Game Models," in *On Civilization, Power, and Knowledge* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 113-138.

55. Pinker, 75-77.

rules of the game.⁵⁶ In *Streetcar*, the most prominent power divide is between male and female actors. Think back to the Napoleonic code Stanley mentions in Scene 2—*the greater the power divide, the more control the powerful party has over the rules of the game*. Blanche enters a regressive, exploitive sexual economy. Her subsequent actions may be understood as an attempt to subvert that system and find a relationship with positive-sum gains.

How can marriage form an opportunity for positive-sum gains? Here's an instance where economic models are surprisingly appropriate. Economic factors are by no means the only variables at work in dating and family dynamics; nonetheless, the neoclassical model of households has proved useful in explaining and predicting some aspects of family behavior⁵⁷. Within relationships, economic factors appear significant. Under the neoclassical view of marriage, members of a household are simplified to a small community of rational economic actors. The positive-sum benefits of marriage emerge from the same process as those from trade of goods and services: a *division of labor* where each actor does the job they are best equipped to complete, otherwise known as those where they hold *comparative advantage*. The model of comparative advantage may be used to explain why households have historically exhibited an imbalanced allocation of market and domestic labor (i.e. men holding careers while their wives work as homemakers)⁵⁸. Even today, when American households are more likely to resist a strict division of market and domestic labor, the logic of comparative advantage still plays a

56. Elias, 122-123.

57. Francine D. Blau and Anne E. Winkler, *The Economics of Women, Men, and Work*. (Eighth edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018) 42.

58. Blau and Winkler, 42.

significant role in family decisions. For example, a household where both spouses work full-time, but the spouse with a lower salary (i.e., lower *opportunity cost* of unused labor hours) takes the responsibility of driving children to and from school is acting under the logic of comparative advantage.

Again, economic variables are only one factor at work in married households; nevertheless, the logic of comparative advantage and positive-sum games seems applicable to much of the coupling decision. Isn't the "ideal" marriage characterized by partners who believe they are better off together than they would be individually, greater than the sum of their parts? The logic of this statement points to a more abstract comparative advantage—perhaps "emotional compatibility" is evaluated with the same logic as financial compatibility. I probe this notion of comparative advantage and its applications because it seems critically important to the way Blanche navigates the market of desire. It illuminates what she's searching for in a partner—and what seems to fail in the relationships around her. In a particularly tender moment with Mitch, Blanche discovers that one of his most initially unattractive qualities, his status as a *momma's boy*, could in fact signal the adorations she craves so deeply:

BLANCHE. You love her very much, don't you?

MITCH. Yes.

BLANCHE. I think you have a great capacity for devotion. You will be lonely when she passes on, won't you? [Mitch clears his throat and nods.] I understand what that is. (113)

Blanche's thoughts go the specter of past love. She her relationship with her late husband as an imbalanced scale of desire. Complimentary to him in some regards, she failed him in others:

BLANCHE. I loved someone, too, and the person I loved I lost.

.....

BLANCHE. He was a boy, just a boy, when I was a very young girl. When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me. But I was unlucky. Deluded. There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking—still—that thing was there....**He came to me for help. I didn't know that.** I didn't find out anything till after our marriage when we'd run away and come back **and all I knew was I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of!** He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn't holding out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. **I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or myself...** (114, emphasis added)

The tragedy of Blanche's relationship with Allan comes from the fact that what first seems a positive-sum gain reveals itself to be irrevocably flawed. Blanche is sexually attracted to men, but she desires something more than sex—the emotional sensitivity and support not found in most men she's encountered. Allan, who has “the softness and tenderness” of a woman without being “the least bit effeminate looking” seems to offer a perfect opportunity for a positive-sum gain. Allan, too, sees a benefit in the relationship: marrying Blanche disguises his sexuality. Remember, positive-sum gains occur when each party can benefit—in the case of Blanche and Allan, their sexual incompatibility negates Blanches benefit. The marriage offers a zero-sum gain. On the surface, Blanche's discussion of Allan seems less economic than her discussions of other men—we see as much in the lack of economic metaphors (no “market talk”) as well as the indirect, evasive treatment of objects at hand (the subsequent, “a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it” is perhaps the most indirect, convoluted line of the entire play). Nonetheless, the relationship dynamic floats back to the logic of comparative advantage. Speaking economically, the tragedy is one of *imperfect information*. Speaking literarily, it is one of a discovery revealing a foul center to a previously-harmonious dynamic, what Aristotle called

anagnorisis. Both readings speak to Blanche's ideal marriage: one with a husband interested not in shirking her for his own gain, but open to the opportunity for mutual benefit. Mitch seems to understand and accept:

MITCH [*drawing her slowly into his arms*]. You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche? (116)

Blanche's most promising prospect (and given her position, her *last* prospect), a marriage with Mitch, is grounded in her desire for a positive-sum game and his willingness to concede. She desires the financial and emotional security of marriage. He desires to escape his overbearing mother. Each appreciates what the other has to offer. However, with Stanley's revelation of Blanche's disgraced departure from Laurel, Mitch decides he is no longer interested. The tragedy of another promising match usurped by a belated realization draws Blanche to the end of her line. Her final, desperate plea to Mitch clings to the promises of their positive-gain match:

BLANCHE. . . .So I came here. There was nowhere else I could go. I was played out. You know what played out is? My youth was suddenly gone up the water-spout, and—I met you. **You said you needed somebody. Well, I needed somebody too. I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle—a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in! But I guess I was asking, hoping—too much!** Kiefaber, Stanley, and Shaw have tied an old tin can to the tail of a kite. (147, emphasis added)

Later, perhaps in delusion, Blanche offers Stanley an alternative history of the encounter where she emerges from the breakup unscathed, saying, “it was foolish of me to think that we could ever adapt ourselves to each other” (157). Entering the sexual economy of New Orleans, which threatens to debase her worth and violate her promise of an ideal relationship, presents her with a choice: *adapt herself* or work against the cultural grain to find a suitor who will *adapt for her*. The latter option offers positive-sum gains, threatening the exploitive winner-take-all system favored by the likes of Stanley. He reacts on her with vengeance [“Come to think of it—maybe

you wouldn't be so bad to—interfere with..." (161)]. This tragedy of the sexual economy is neither entirely economic nor entirely emotional—it seems to resonate with the intuition of both.

Chapter 3: Dialectical Criticism

"I begin with a character in a situation--a vague one. If I have a problem, I invent people in parallel circumstances, create parallel tensions. It is my way of working out problems."

-Tennessee Williams⁵⁹

Introduction

My introduction to this thesis mentioned one of the most important maxims of my economic education: models are only valuable insofar as they reflect reality. No framework can reflect the economic landscape in its full complexity—if one did, it would likely become so complex that it would lose its value as an instructive tool. That's why we simplify. Each model operates under a set of underlying assumptions that allows us to forget about the underlying noise and focus on the variable most relevant to the question at hand (some assumptions of classical economics include perfect information, instant transactions, and zero transaction costs). Of course, the fact that the *model* forgets these variables doesn't allow an economist to ignore them in their analysis; rather, they must keep them in mind and address them at the appropriate points of their work (typically in the discussion or conclusion). Otherwise, their audience loses a necessary layer of the truth. This rationale from economics is somewhat analogous to the English critic's mandate to introduce counterarguments so that they may defend their claims robustly.

I illustrate this analytical imperative to avoid over-simplification, to present a nuanced truth, because it underlies my need to complicate what has until now been a straightforward assessment of *Streetcar*'s economic milieu. This chapter introduces useful economic theory from

59. Lahr, 33.

Marxist criticism and nuances our economic interpretation of *Streetcar*. My goal here is threefold: first, to introduce the merits of Marxism as a form of economic criticism; second, to give necessary complexity to the economic analyses introduced earlier in this thesis; finally, to explain how the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions within the text are not a lapse in William's authorial competence, but inherent elements of the play's literary maturity.

In my time researching and writing this chapter, I recognized that Marxist criticism is often met with trepidation. I believe this results from an implicit association of Marxist theory with its construal with totalitarian common regimes. However, as in the case with Economics and English, I realized that Marxism and new economic criticism shared a fundamental core and that they benefit from their differences. So before I delve into Marxist criticism, allow me to give it an adequate introduction.

Literary Marxism (which, interestingly came to popularity during Williams' career) is the oldest member in the family of critical "materialisms," which includes social Darwinism, new historicism, and (of course) new economic criticism.), Marxist literary criticism does not necessarily entail a Marxist political ideology (though many literary Marxists have also been political socialists); rather, it involves taking useful concepts Marx's philosophy and using them as an interpretive tool for literature. In this respect, Marxist literary criticism is analogous to fields like feminist criticism, which foregrounds conflicts of sex, and queer studies, which foregrounds conflicts of sexual expression. Karl Marx is often called the father of Communism; however this title is a bit of a misnomer. Marx was not a militaristic despot or revolutionary. In fact, he wasn't even a politician. He was just a philosopher. Marx was more interested in *ideas* than in actual *revolution*—it's the people who interpreted him that created

communism as we know it.⁶⁰ So, at least for our interest here, one can think of Marx as a philosopher interested in the relationship between economics and culture—the same questions we’ve been exploring up to this point.

An integral piece of Marx’s cultural theory is the idea of *dialectic*, a perpetual, yet unspoken or the class conflict between the rich, powerful minority (bourgeoisie) and their less wealthy, less powerful counterparts (proletariat). The notion of class conflict is not unique to Marx; the “meat” of his theory was how he framed its underlying motivations. Marx looked to historical instances of class conflict not as isolated instances of violence (i.e., hungry and desperate citizens sacking a wealthy despot’s home), but as physical manifestations of a subtler tension engrained in capitalist economies. The earliest political economists believed market economies grew from their constituents’ desires. Marx doubted economic systems were this neutral. He argued that economic systems formed a *social superstructure* by which market could influence people’s outlooks and actions. And because economic systems are designed not by majority opinion, but from those with political (read: monetary) power, it makes sense that they would be designed in the powerful group’s best interests. A capitalist system holds only the façade of a free market; in fact, there’s always a powerful group looking to keep themselves in power and keep the less powerful majority as an economic support.⁶¹

60. Raden, 246-247.

61. Wilfred L. Guerin, ed., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (6th ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 125-167.

This chapter explores instances of interpretive dialectics within *Streetcar*, complicating (and, more importantly, bringing back into focus) our vision of the play's economic landscape.

Dialectics in *Streetcar*

Early literary Marxists interpreted texts as literal manifestations of class struggle. Modern discussion of *dialectics* extends to realms beyond class conflict: the term lends itself to any situation of perpetual, yet unresolvable conflict of two forces. *Streetcar* has received both forms of dialectical criticism. Bak notes how several early reviewers identified *Streetcar* as a narrative of Stanley's ascension within the economy of the New South.⁶² More recently, psychologists Fred Ribkoff and Paul Tyndall present the trials of Williams' characters as "dialectics of trauma" where the desire to recount and overcome a traumatic event (and thus overcome it) is met with the equally intense desire to avoid thinking about the trauma altogether.⁶³ (concluding sentence emphasizing dialectic as pervasive conflict within society). The dialectical interpretation I offer of *Streetcar* aligns with another school of critics: those who believe the play's ambiguous narrative and moral landscape forces us to oscillate between tides of sympathy, creating a *dialectic of interpretation*.⁶⁴

62. Bak, 5.

63. Fred Ribkoff and Paul Tyndall, "On the Dialectics of Trauma in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*." *Journal of Medical Humanities* 32, no. 4 (December 1, 2011): 325–37. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10912-011-9154-4>.

64. A notable example of this criticism is Jacob H. Adler's "Tennessee Williams and the South: The Culture and the Power."

Streetcar's dialectic of interpretation emerges from the same place as interpretations favoring Stanley: the play's oppositional binaries line up in a way that leaves moral ambiguity. "Binaries" are categorical dichotomies (e.g. good/evil or white/black,) frequently employed in literature used as an interpretive heuristic. In the most straightforward narratives, binaries work in a way that promotes straightforward interpretation. For example, it seems reasonable that a story would have a *good* wizard in *white* and a *bad* wizard in *black*.⁶⁵ However, the world around us doesn't operate in perfect binaries: it suffers from ambiguity. Ambiguity arises in *Streetcar* because while Blanche and Stanley are drawn into fierce contrast with each other in many respects, the tide of sympathy can change depending on which binary the viewer gives credence to. For example, in the question of gender, Blanche would appear the disadvantaged and sympathetic character within the conflict; however, in the question of ethnicity, one could argue that Stanley is more sympathetic than Blanche because despite his objections, she continually denigrates him for his Polish ancestry. Other binaries seem impossible to resolve in the first place; for example, as much as Blanche and Stanley argue over space and providence, who is really the situation's outsider? Is it Blanche, since she's out of her element and in Stanley's home, or Stanley, since he comes from a family of immigrants and can never access the culture Blanche safeguards? By provoking these lines of reasoning, the play engages the audience in the dialectic of interpretation.

65. I realized while writing this example that it blurred the dichotomy between children's literature and one of the most respected series in the English language.

Because Marxist criticism interprets “culture” as a bourgeois construct, it opens an interpretative dialect within our view of Blanche and her sources of value. Blanche’s emphasis on things with social value, things with legacies, narratives, and aesthetic beauty opens itself to two opposing interpretations. It could be that Blanche values what’s best about society. Alternatively, she could represent an outdated system in which bourgeois used culture as a form of protected social capital. Cultural theorist Andrew Milner frames this conflict in terms of literature:

Empirical sociological research has repeatedly confirmed that literature tends to be valued by the more educated, more affluent, and more powerful groups, "fiction" by the less well educated, less affluent and less powerful. Such evidence can be read as meaning either that the dominant groups tend to have the better taste in "art" or merely that they have the power to define as "art" whatever it is they tend to prefer.⁶⁶

This question has no easy solution; however, it does seem clear which opinion is more relevant to *Streetcar*: the one in which art and expression hold objective value. Such was the assumption of Victorian economists, who believed in a hierarchy of goods with the most essential at the base and the most aesthetic at the top. Over time, they believed society would advance to appreciate the highest order of goods. Those closest to the play share this sympathetic view of Blanche. Kazan's notes frame Blanche's tragedy as the "dissolution of a person of worth" and upholds her as a "repository of culture."⁶⁷ Williams too, seems sympathetic to the notion of nonmarket goods—four days before the premier of *Streetcar*, he published an essay in the *New Yorker*

66. Milner, Andrew, *Literature, Culture, and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 17.

⁶⁷ Kazan, 44, 48.

ruminating on his life since the acclaim of *The Glass Menagerie*. Titled "On A Streetcar Named Success," it concludes:

Then what is good? The obsessive interest in human affairs, plus a certain amount of compassion and moral conviction, that first made the experience of living something that must be translated into pigment or music or bodily movement or poetry or prose or anything that's dynamic and expressive-- that's what's good for you if you're at all serious in your aims. William Saroyan wrote a great one on this theme, that purity of heart is the one success worth having. "In the time of your life--live!" That time is short and it doesn't return again. It is slipping away while I write this and while you read it, and the monosyllable of the clock is Loss, Loss, Loss unless you devote your heart to its opposition.⁶⁸

Here, Williams here bears striking resemblance to his heroine who begs Stella to appreciate advances in culture and shouts "Don't hang back with the brutes!" (83)—his impassioned plea to the value of aesthetic goods would imply that despite some ambiguity, his sympathies ultimately lied with Blanche.

Why engage the audience in this dialectic of interpretation? One answer comes from the most famous American Marxist critic, Frederic Jameson. Jameson argues that to inspire social change (that is, encourage real-world dialectics), literature must go beyond simply represent dialects—it must foreground its artifice, its unreality, by creating dialectics that blur the lines between the bourgeois and the marginalized. In doing so, the work engages its audience in a dialectical discourse; that is, audiences come to understand societal (real) dialectics by contemplating the messy dialectics at hand. Another possibility is that modern audiences enjoy a degree of moral ambiguity. This hypothesis is supported by trends in criticism of *Streetcar*: while early critics

68. Tennessee Williams, "On A Streetcar Named Success" (*New York Times*, November 30, 1947).

tended to portray its ambiguity as a flaw, later cohorts became more likely to treat ambiguity as a successful element of the play.⁶⁹ I find both approaches useful in yielding a useful interpretation of the play's dialectics—for my conclusion, I'll appeal to both.

Blanche presents a difficult case for dialectical analysis. On one hand, she voices an admiration for the romantic, the ideals outside the economy, and resists the 'sexual economy' metaphor. On the other hand, she appears to fluently express a transactional vision of love; in this case, her resistance is not to the sexual economy itself, but her inability to corner the market and demand the 'value' she believes she deserves. What can we make of these competing interpretations? One could imagine these critical arguments cancelling each other out, discrediting Blanche as a source of economic commentary. Here is where Jameson's argument on meta commentary becomes useful: Blanche's ideological frustration is significant because it foregrounds for the audience the play's central ideological debate; viz., because Blanche is surrounded by characters moving through the perverted sexual economy without question, it is significant that she questions the system *at all*.

In many instances, this ideological conflict finds expression in Blanche's speech. Her romantic professions become economic and her economic expressions wax romantic. Take for instance her climactic address to Stanley, where a romantic argument depends on a host of economic metaphors:

BLANCHE. When I think of how divine it is going to be to have such a thing as privacy once more—I could weep with joy!

69. Bak, 16.

STANLEY. This millionaire from Dallas is not going to interfere with your privacy any?

BLANCHE. It won't be the sort of thing you have in mind. This man is a gentleman and he respects me. [*Improvising feverishly*] What he wants is my companionship. Having great wealth sometimes makes people lonely! A cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding, can enrich a man's life—immeasurably! I have those things to offer, and this doesn't take them away. Physical beauty is passing. A transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart—and I have all those things—aren't taken away, but grow! Increase with the years! How strange that I should be called a destitute woman! When I have all of these treasures locked in my heart. [*A choked sob comes from her*] I think of myself as a very, very rich woman! But I have been foolish—casting my pearls before swine! (156)

At the core of Blanche's speech is a laudation of romantic ideals— she praises things which are “divine,” “beaut[iful],” and “tender,” and hastily refutes Stanley's accusation that her relationship with her millionaire would be anything but. However, prying deeper into the passage, we see a pervasive economic subtext. In the claim that “physical beauty” is a “transitory possession,” this language makes sense; this metaphor positions tangible and traceable (i.e. economic) as the lesser counterpart to intangible elements of one's personality. However, this economic language is traceable even through Blanche's counterpoints, as in Blanche's romantic argument that “intelligence” and “cultivat[ion]” are desirable qualities, which utilizes a transactional metaphor where these qualities are “things” presented to a suitor that may “enrich” his life. These romantic qualities are nominally opposed to economic forces, yet are construed as “treasures” constituting Blanche's spiritual wealth.

Now consider a counter-instance of this language-content mismatch, an earlier conversation between Blanche and Stella about the same millionaire:

BLANCHE. Well, I did. I took the trip as an investment, thinking I'd meet someone with a million dollars.

STELLA. Did you?

BLANCHE. Yes. I ran into Shep Huntleigh—I ran into him on Biscayne boulevard, on Christmas Eve, about dusk...getting into his car—Cadillac convertible; must have been a block long!

STELLA. I should think it would have been—inconvenient in traffic!

BLANCHE. You've heard of oil-wells?

STELLA. Yes—remotely

BLANCHE. He has them, all over Texas. Texas is literally spouting gold in his pockets.

STELLA. My, my.

BLANCHE. Y'know how indifferent I am to money. I think of money in terms of what it does for you. But he could do it, he could certainly do it!

STELLA. Do what, Blanche?

BLANCHE. Why—set us up in a—shop!

STELLA. What kind of a shop?

BLANCHE. Oh, a—shop of some kind! He could do it with half what his wife throws away at the races. (76-77)

On the surface, Blanche's intentions seem economic and calculating: she talks about romancing a rich man as an economic exploit that can leverage material benefits. But is the passage an instance of *realistic* plotting? Blanche describes Shep's possessions not with pragmatic realism, but with whimsical hyperbola: his convertible stretches "a block long" and oil wells "literally spout gold in his pockets." And is her intent really devious? The only time she speaks of using Shep's money is to open a store for herself and Stella, and only with his excess cash. She's "indifferent" to money itself, but enticed by the possibility of a comfortable existence with her sister. Certainly Blanche's girlish whimsy belies the most devious interpretation of her intent. We have an instance of a conversation topically centered on money, but imbued with romantic language.

We see then how Blanche's speech oscillates between romantic and economic ideologies. Next, we should consider the extent to which her character favors one or the other. Is she an economic thinker speaking romantically, or a romantic thinker speaking economically? I tend toward the latter: while her economic language is characteristic of her interactions with men onstage, it is missing entirely from the narrative of her first love that she relates to MITCH.

BLANCHE. [...] There was something different about the boy, a nervousness, a softness and tenderness which wasn't like a man's, although he wasn't the least bit effeminate looking—still, that thing was there. [...] I knew I'd failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of! He was in the quicksands and clutching at me—but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! [...] Then I found out. In the worst of all possible ways. By coming suddenly into a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it...the boy I had married and an older man who had been his friend for years... [...] (114)

From the passage's onset, Blanche sets Allan apart from every one of the play's other men. Remember that under the monopsony model, where men are the exclusive buyers within the sexual market, the process of valuation is inextricably male. Stanley's first stage directions note how he sizes women up (25). Mitch spends a date with Blanche detailing the measurements of his build; later, he pries obsessively about Blanche's exact age. Allan's sensitivity that "wasn't like a man's" translates to an appreciation for Blanche beyond gross sexual valuation. More plainly, his homosexuality makes him a non-consumer within Blanche's sexual market—the only manner in which he could appreciate Blanche is by her more romantic qualities. Her description of the scene appears devoid of economic speech. We see as much in the lack of economic metaphors (no "market talk") as well as the indirect, evasive treatment of objects at hand ("a room that I thought was empty—which wasn't empty, but had two people in it" is perhaps the most indirect, convoluted line of the entire play). Again, Blanche's perspective contrasts that of

Stanley and Mitch, who speak directly to a fault. In fact, “perspective” lies at the center of Blanche’s tragedy; her moment of tragic discovery, what Aristotle terms *agagnorisis*, is related through visual metaphors. Allan’s suicide stems directly from Blanche’s saying, “I saw! I know!” and she concludes that losing him meant losing her life’s “searchlight”

Conclusion

The research I’ve presented here, like that of many scholars before me, has called heavily upon the journals of Elia Kazan, who provided the earliest known critical commentary on *Streetcar* and whose directorial stylings continue to shape modern interpretations of Williams’ work. What I’ve come to admire most about Kazan is his recognition that *Streetcar* depends on ambiguity and determination to avoid melodrama. Kazan did not speak in terms of dialectics (he *did* speak in somewhat analogous terms of “spines” and “masks”); nevertheless, my framework leads me to his conclusion:

I kept puzzling over the play--which must be a measure of its size--and about the author. The more I thought about the play, the more mysterious the play appeared." He continued, "It was certainly not what it seemed to be, a moral fable of the brutalization of a sensitive soul by a sadistic bully. Then what was it? Something far more personal.⁷⁰

Not a moral fable, but something more personal. Lose sight of this and a director robs the play of its impact. Harold Clurman, a mentor and competitor of Kazan’s, once criticized the original vision of *Streetcar*, calling it “incomplete.” In response, Kazan asked Clurman to try a

70. Lahr 120.

production for himself. Kazan's subsequent journal entry reminds me why I must complicate my economic interpretation of the play:

Tennessee in this version became the poet of frustration and his play said that "aspiration, sensitivity, departure from the norm are battered, bruised and disgraced in our world today." What I saw recalled our wishful thinking in the thirties, the belief that the good and the true in our time were inevitably taken advantage of by the villains of capitalism and money corruption—an idea I now believe to be sentimental malarkey. The play, with Harold, had become a moral fable, presenting people we believed ourselves to be, with ethical values so clear and so simple that the audience could not doubt where the sympathies and allegiances should be placed.... /Was my conception of Streetcar what Harold declared it to be—"unresolved"? The answer is yes. Life is a puzzle, unresolved, and as we enter it, no one is there to hand us a book of instructions, the kind you get when you buy a new car. And "thematically disruptive"? Yes to that too, Harold. I wanted to thwart an audience, not flatter them by too quickly and too easily admitting them to the company of "angels." That elevation they should have to struggle to reach.⁷¹

The modern tragedy of Streetcar, with its network of unresolved dialectics, reveals a moral understanding rooted in the Enlightenment: misfortune may be no one's fault (Pinker 24).⁷² The play activates our desire to find order and reason—to blame one party or another—by clueing us in to dialectic hermeneutics (bourgeoisie v. proletariat, male v. female, "tradition" v. "progress"). But as in the optical illusion where we can see either an urn or two faces, committing to one interpretation diminishes the complete picture. A director can, of course, foreground one of these conflicts and tell their audiences what to believe and make the play conventionally "satisfying." I believe such simplification insults the vision of its creators, who embraced complexity, and the intelligence of its viewers, who should recognize their lives are not ordered as archaic

71. Kazan, 67-68.

72. Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Viking, 2018), 24.

pantomimes. Without its ambiguity, Streetcar would be as critically stimulating as a TV Drama (an early critic jokingly called its plot “The Struggle for the Bathroom.”)⁷³ We return to the text, in part, because Williams keeps us guessing.

73. Bak, 3.

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On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unauthorized aid on this thesis.

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