

“A Streetcar Named Desire Under the Elms:
A Study of Dramatic Space in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Desire Under the Elms*” by
Alan Ehrlich

(This article originally appeared in *Tennessee Williams: A Tribute*, edited by Jac Tharpe, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1977)

A Streetcar Named Desire and *Desire Under the Elms* have a much tighter bond than the word “desire.” The plays have identical subjects: the threat of the destruction of a family unit by the presence of “desire.” The destruction of a family is not a new theme; it has been used in the drama since the Greeks. The house of Atreus, the house of Laius, the house of Lear—the house of Kowalski, the house of Cabot. The disintegration of a family is serious stuff, the stuff of which tragedy is often made. There is no simple answer for a 2500 year popularity of the dramatist’s concern for the family unit; but as Gaston Bachelard asserts, the house does assume universal significance. For Bachelard, the house is the center of stability and intimacy—the corner of the world. Everyone yearns for the concentrated, intimate space of a home—the embodiment of one’s dreams (*Poetics of Space*, I-II). To be without a home can be traumatic. Both Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Abbie in *Desire Under the Elms* are homeless; both are unstable, zealous of inhabiting an intimate space.

In this desire to inhabit an intimate space nests the conflict for both plays. Using a traditional literary technique, each playwright sets up an established environment or family unit into which a potentially destructive agent, the catalyst, enters to disrupt the norm. The conflict of the heroine with her environment is the heart of both dramas. O’Neill creates a stronger destructive agent to combat a weaker established environment than Williams does, resulting in Abbie’s more successful alteration of her environment.

Both plays adhere to unity of place: they are compact, with the entire action taking place within the confines of one setting. To grasp the potential conflict, an audience must first apprehend the environment established prior to the arrival of the destructive agent. It is crucial that the audience register the set at the initial curtain.

O’Neill’s set is distinctive. As the curtain rises we see a New England farmhouse surrounded by stone walls “with a wooden gate at center opening on a country road.” In addition to this lateral restriction, the two enormous elms on each side of the house “bend their trailing branches down over the roof” (*Nine Plays*). The vertical restriction complements the lateral restriction. But of course to the audience this limitation might not at first appear threatening. To insure that it does, O’Neill begins scene one with carefully placed dialogue. Eben, Simeon, and Peter all comment on the stone walls built by their father to fence them in. The walls function like a prison to entrap their victims; the restriction becomes a confinement. This prison-house is the established environment for the remaining action of the play. As with any prison, the inmates want out. Near the end of part one, when Simeon and Peter finally gain enough courage and finances to escape, they carry the front gate with them, symbolically opening the door for the possibility of the future escape of their younger brother. Although represented by stone walls, the established environment is initially weakened through Simeon’s and Peter’s escape.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire* the confinement inherent in the set is more subtle. With no drooping elms or stones to wall the characters in, the entrapment is less evident. Rather than blatant imprisonment, the play's confinement is the claustrophobia resulting from the loss of privacy once Blanche arrives. Jo Mielziner, the designer for Elia Kazan's original 1947 New York production, devised a perfect set to depict this loss of privacy; a transparent back wall looking into the courtyard. This transparent wall can function in a manner similar to O'Neill's stone wall and elms. To Cabot, happy on the farm, the wall and the elms remain merely a wall and elms; to his sons, unhappy on the farm, wall and elms are a visual sign of their psychological imprisonment. To Stanley and Stella, happy in their home prior to Blanche's arrival, the transparent wall remains a normal wall; to Stanley, Stella, and Blanche, unhappy in their overcrowded home after Blanche's arrival, the transparent wall becomes a visual sign of their lack of privacy. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the characters are confined to a space that permits escape only after constant effort. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the characters are confined to a cramped space that prevents escape altogether.

Both playwrights take great pains to establish their respective environments prior to the arrival of the destructive agent. In addition to their physical settings, both O'Neill and Williams establish a tone for their established environments. A status quo is set up early in both plays as an obstacle against which each destructive agent must combat. In *Desire Under the Elms*, a totally masculine environment has been established. In his stage directions, O'Neill states, "Everything is neat and in order but the atmosphere is of a men's camp kitchen rather than that of a home: (p. 140). Every family unit is governed by its own principles. For the Cabots, with no woman present for years, home is a particular, masculine, established environment. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the established environment is simply a happy marriage—the couple lives in "Elysian Fields." Williams establishes this status quo economically in the initial action. Stanley bellows hello to Stella and tosses her a package of meat which she catches, breathlessly laughing—an action that can be interpreted as a symbol of the sex on which their relationship is based. One gives, the other receives; their alliance is established. Stella's whole life is Stanley. She later tells her sister she cannot bear being away from her husband for even one night; in the opening sequence it is only for a few hours, but she must follow him to the bowling alley to watch him bowl.

The order is firmly entrenched; the action impatiently awaits the arrival of the destructive agent. Perhaps, if either Abbie Putnam or Blanche DuBois had entered passively into her respective established environment, there would have been no ensuing tragedy. However, both Abbie and Blanche are powerful individuals accustomed to dominating their surroundings and getting things on their own terms.

The intrusion of any female into a "men's camp kitchen" should be conflict enough, but O'Neill takes no chances. Abbie Putnam, Cabot's new wife, covers all the female archetypes. She is voluptuous and maternal, seductive and matronly, a Helen and a Demeter combined. As soon as she arrives at the farm, she infringes on Eben's territory—the kitchen. When she first sees Eben, "Her eyes take him in penetratingly with a calculating appraisal of his strength as against hers" (p. 159). At first she begins the scene in a playful, seductive manner. "Be you—Eben? I'm Abbie—(she laughs) I mean, I'm yer new Maw" (p. 159). However, the playful seduction turns more and more bitter. After she realizes Eben will be a difficult conquest, she hardens her attack. "This

be my farm—this be my hum—this be my kitchen! . . . An’ upstairs—that be my bedroom—an’ my bed! . . . I hain’t bad nor mean—‘ceptin’ fur an enemy—but I got to fight fur what’s due me out o’ life, if I ever ‘spect t’ git it” (p. 161). Within five minutes Abbie has taken over; she has altered the established order previously weakened by the escape of Simeon and Peter. Eben furiously flings off her arm, calls her a witch, and yells out that he hates her. But the damage is done; Abbie’s foot is more than in the door. Part one ends with Abbie washing *her* dishes.

Blanche takes a streetcar named Desire, transfers to one called Cemeteries, and arrives at Elysian Fields—the heart of the New Orleans French Quarter. Like Abbie, she is at first completely out of place. Williams’ stage directions read: “Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed . . . as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party . . .” (I, 245). Like Abbie, Blanche immediately tries to alter her surroundings. She covers a naked light bulb with a paper lantern (p. 300); she re-covers a bedroom chair (p. 379). Blanche’s arrival mostly affects Stella, who feels compelled to wait on her older sister. In part, Blanche too alters the established environment. She tells Mitch, “I’ve done so much with this place since I’ve been here” (p. 382).

Both Abbie and Blanche attempt to revamp the old order and establish a new one. But the situation gets increasingly more difficult for both, as Eben and Stanley wish to maintain the status quo. Both at first resent the women, but strong love/hate attractions and repulsions later occur. The incest incipient in each plot is eventually consummated. Between the action and the setting is a cyclical pattern. The claustrophobic setting limits all alternatives and invites sin, which in turn is a product of the cramped quarters crowding its occupants to the point of desperation. Constraint converges from all sides sealing off all possible modes of escape. The confining environment creates tension for any character that is out of step with it. In *Desire Under the Elms*, Eben feels entrapped. He is the vulnerable character and he gets seduced by the stronger. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche feels entrapped. She is the vulnerable character and she gets raped by the stronger. When a character feels entrapped within his environment, extreme desperation and confusion await him.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, Eben feels imprisoned from the beginning. “His defiant, dark eyes remind one of a wild animal’s in captivity. Each day is a cage in which he finds himself trapped but inwardly unsubdued. There is a fierce repressed vitality about him” (p. 137). Later, when the brothers talk of their father’s strength in comparison to theirs, only Eben is optimistic. “I’m gittin’ stronger. I kin feel it growin’ in me—growin’ in me—growin’ an’ growin’—till it’ll bust out—!” (p. 144). And “bust out” it does, but only after it is indirectly displaced toward Abbie. Abbie too feels the restraint; and as the hot New England sun bakes the suppressed desire, the audience waits impatiently for the explosion. It comes in scene three of part two—the climax of the play as well as of their relationship. Abbie: “ ‘I’ll kiss ye pure, Eben—same ‘s if I was a Maw t’ ye—an’ ye kin kiss me back ‘s if yew was my son—my boy—sayin’ good-night t’ me! Kiss me, Eben.’ (They kiss in restrained fashion. Then suddenly wild passion overcomes her. She kisses him lustfully again and again” (p. 178). He backs off here and can overcome the presence of Maw’s spirit he feels in the room only after he thinks of her vengeance on his father. He kisses Abbie, “releasing all his pent-up passions” (p. 179) and confesses his suppressed love for her. With this kiss comes a total release of the

thing he felt “growin’ and growin’ ” within him that was seen earlier in the play and felt since his mother’s death.

The location of this climactic scene is crucial. Abbie intends to control the entire house, and her final conquest must happen “in the one room hain’t hers yet.” She waits for Eben in the parlor where his mother died and was laid out. This “repressed room like a tomb” with all its “preserved ugliness” (p. 176) has been sealed off to the family for years. The claustrophobic room in which time has been frozen with its stagnant air is about to be given new life. Abbie’s attempt at seduction eventually succeeds. With it, Maw’s mysterious spiritual presence leaves the farm for good. Abbie: “She went back t’ her grave that night we fust done it, remember? I hain’t felt her about since” (p. 197). Maw leaves; the old environment is completely altered. Abbie has established a new environment, and her original opponent, Eben, is now a crucial component of the new order.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the weaker character, the one who feels most out of place in the established environment, is Blanche. Like Abbie, she tries to revamp the environment; but unlike Abbie, she is unable to conquer her antagonist. Stella is willing to wait on Blanche, but Stanley is not. Blanche tries to adjust the established environment, but Stanley is not taken in by his sister-in-law’s airs. “You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light bulb with a paper lantern, and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile! Sitting on your throne and swilling down my liquor!” (p. 398). Blanche tries to alter the environment but it is too firm. Because her arrival shrinks the two-room apartment in half and prevents privacy, Stanley must defend his home against the enemy. All he wants is to return to the lifestyle he enjoyed before Blanche arrived. “It’s gonna be all right again between you [Stella] and me the way that it was. . . . God, honey, it’s gonna be sweet when we can make noise in the night the way we used to and get the colored lights going with nobody’s sister behind the curtains to hear us! . . . And wasn’t we happy together, wasn’t it all okay till she showed here?” (pp. 373, 377). Stanley evaluates the problem and pursues the solution. Three into two won’t go; Blanche must leave.

After Stanley reveals Blanche’s sordid history and gives her the bus ticket back to Laurel, the heroine is clearly awaiting her fate. Scene nine opens with Blanche’s tragic theme, the “Varsouviana,” playing in the background. “The music is in her mind; she is drinking to escape it and the sense of disaster closing in on her . . .” (p. 379). The air in her small cubicle is hot and stagnant. She artificially attempts refreshing it with her electric fan “turning back and forth across her,” but it can only recirculate the stale air, not replenish it. Mitch enters, turns off the fan, turns on the lights, tears the paper lantern off the light bulb, and seals her inevitable doom. In scene ten the fall is continued. This time the agent is Stanley, the “executioner” she had recognized from the beginning. She sits in the claustrophobic room, and confusion, desperation, and destruction await her.

At first the confusion is seen by the workings of her imagination, telling Stanley about Shep Huntleigh’s nonexistent phone call. Stanley believes her for a while, but when she is momentarily dazed by his demands for details about the telegram, he finally realizes the truth. “There isn’t a goddamn thing but imagination!” (p. 398). He follows her into the bedroom. She begins to feel cramped in the congested space. Stanley and the environment close in around her. “Lurid reflections appear on the walls around

Blanche. The shadows are of a grotesque and menacing form” (pp. 398-99). Stanley goes into the bathroom and she tries to phone Shep for help. No time. She hangs up and desperately runs to the kitchen for escape, but the house is too small and menacing. “The night is filled with inhuman voices like cries in a jungle. The shadows and lurid reflections move sinuously as flames along the wall spaces: (p. 399). There is no privacy, no escape. The transparent wall now performs its theatrical function and allows the street scenes outside (prostitution, alcohol, looting) to become a part of the calamitous scene inside. All avenues of escape are blocked—her last hope, a desperation telegram to Shep. “In desperate, desperate circumstances! Help me! Caught in a trap” (p. 400). Stanley enters in his “brilliant silk pajamas,” deliberately sets the phone back on the hook, as the “blue piano” turns into “the roar of an approaching locomotive,” and settles his account once and for all: “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!” (p. 402). And all this while Stella is at the hospital in labor.

Confinement pervades both plays. The claustrophobic environment entraps its victims and eventually leads to their respective tragedies. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the environment is not as escape-proof. Simeon and Peter escape the farm at the play’s beginning. Because the environment is weakened at the outset and because Abbie Putnam is extremely strong, the established order can be altered. Because Eben wants no part of the old order and every part of the new, he is assimilated by it, and a new established order is constructed. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the established environment (the happy marriage) is indestructible. Blanche is more delicate than Abbie; Stanley, more inflexible than Eben. As a result, unlike Abbie, Blanche cannot alter the environment. Left with no alternative, she must find ways to escape it.

Williams utilizes two devices to demonstrate Blanche’s need for escape—her drinking and her baths. Blanche is a heavy drinker and Williams makes her drink to escape her problems. Besides drinking, her only escape is into the bathroom for a “hot tub.” As the tension heats, so does the water. Finally, in the tense birthday party scene when Blanche has been stood up, forty-five minutes after her bath, Stanley remarks, “it’s hot in here with the steam from the bathroom” (p. 374). But her “hot tubs” are inadequate escape. She remains entrapped and is ultimately crushed by her environment.

In addition to Williams’ use of alcohol and baths, both playwrights utilize yet another device of attempted escape for the characters that feel threatened by their environment. These characters are often described as caged animals that long for their freedom. This longing is subdued in every outward direction—the only alternative is upward. In both *Desire Under the Elms* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the captive characters constantly cry out to the sky.

Simeon and Peter despise their captivity by their father and his farm and want to escape to California at the play’s very opening. They discuss their prospects excitedly. Simeon: “Fortunes layin’ just atop o’ the ground waitin’ t’ be picked! Solomon’s mines, they says!” (For a moment they continue looking up at the sky . . .)” (p. 138). But their longing for freedom (symbolically shown by their gazing to the sky) is ironically juxtaposed with the cruel reality of their situation. Their eyes drop immediately back down to the earth. Peter: “Here—it’s stones atop o’ the ground—stones atop of stones—makin’ stone walls— . . . to fence us in!” (p. 138). Eben, too, feels his captivity and begins the play with a defiant apostrophe to the sky, “God! Purty!” (p. 137). After being teased by his two older brothers about going to Min’s, Eben escapes the unpleasant

situation by running out and standing by the gate, “staring up at the sky.” A moment later, “Eben stretches his arms up to the sky—rebelliously” (p. 145). These acts of defiance can only be directed upward. The boundless sky is a perfect device to mock the characters’ frustration.

A Streetcar Named Desire has no equivalent to the blatant stone walls. The claustrophobia is the result of an overcrowded house. Blanche’s arrival shrinks the house in half. She looks to the sky for her salvation. In scene three when she chats with Mitch, “she looks up at the sky” and says, “There’s so much—so much confusion in the world . . .” (p. 309). There’s “confusion” in the cramped apartment, but there is plenty of room above her head. Later in scene six, Mitch fumbles around for her key. When he finally finds it, Blanche exclaims, “Eureka! Honey, you open the door while I take a last look at the sky” (p. 342). Already the ensuing desperation is sensed. Here “last look” recalls that of a prisoner just prior to his return to the cell.

Rather than for her freedom, Blanche longs for her privacy: “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!” (p. 396). In fact, freedom is one of the last things Blanche wants; to the contrary, she needs security. Whether it comes in the form of Stanley’s best friend, Mitch, or the strange doctor from the state institution who escorts her out, Blanche remains in need of support, always depending “on the kindness of strangers” (p. 418). It is peculiar that Williams chooses such a dependent woman to overcrowd the household. One would suppose such a claustrophobic environment would be ideal for an insecure person. But Williams loves irony, and it is for that he chooses such a heroine. It is the same irony that names the streetcar that carried her to her downfall *Desire*—a “rattle-trap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another . . .” “until it finally arrives at its destination—“Elysian Fields” (p. 321). The streetcar took her there, and more importantly it can take her away. Just as Williams ironically has the streetcar as a possible vehicle of escape clanging in the background to punctuate the frustration, O’Neill has a big poster of a “ship in full sail and the word ‘California’ in big letters” right in the middle of the rear wall of the kitchen (p. 140). Both playwrights effectively mock their characters’ tragic situations.

If my theory holds true—that the claustrophobic environment is a crucial determinant of the tragedies—then it is reasonable to assume that the more crowded with people, the more confusing the situation. Conveniently, both plays contain group-party scenes.

Stanley has his friends over to the house to play poker. There being no room, the sisters wisely choose to go out for the evening. When they return, the two-room apartment is at its most crowded point in the play, and the result is utter chaos. Stanley is drunk and uncontrollable. When Blanche and Mitch dance to the music of his radio, Stanley vehemently tosses it out the window. The fiasco ends with Stanley’s cold shower and warm, tender reconciliation with Stella. This reconciliation occurs, significantly, outside the apartment. It is the one time since Blanche arrived that Stanley and Stella are close to each other. Blanche is inside, still trying to alter the environment, while outside, the happy couple briefly re-establish their old ways.

In *Desire Under the Elms*, Cabot invites the townspeople over to celebrate the birth of his alleged son (part three, scene one). Everyone guesses the true father except Cabot, and a strong element of vicious ridicule prevails. While Cabot dances merrily

inside, the young lovers exchange vows outside. Next, Cabot goes outside and informs his son of Abbie's old plan of calculated seduction, which Eben misinterprets. O'Neill's result, like Williams', is also chaotic, with all the simultaneous action going on. Eben "chokes with rage" and threatens to kill his stepmother. Cabot stops him and they grapple for a brief moment. The total misunderstanding directly leads to Abbie's murdering her child—the major problem with the play.

O'Neill's ending is melodramatic. The heroine is forced to kill her son as the only means left her to prove her love for Eben. The manner in which Abbie murders her son is revealing. In a play perfused with stone walls, dead rooms, and frustrated desires, Abbie symbolically chooses to murder her son in a most appropriate manner—suffocation. However consistent the manner of murder may be, the action itself borders on the incredible. In *Desire Under the Elms*, the outside agent, Abbie Putnam, entered an already established environment and completely altered it to her own standards. The result is a totally new, stronger, established environment comprised primarily of her and Eben. The old environment is initially weakened by the escape of Simeon and Peter. Next, Abbie enters to change it even more. Her arrival shakes the household: Cabot is driven from the house to sleep with the animals in the barn; Maw's mysterious spirit finally abandons the farm for good; a new, illegitimate child briefly appears on the scene. Abbie Putnam obviously leaves her mark. O'Neill's final stage direction for the couple reads: "They both stand for a moment looking up raptly in attitudes strangely aloof and devout" (p. 206). Their gazing to the sky has run full circle. Eben utters an identical "Purty" as he did at the play's opening; but because he no longer feels entrapped by his environment, the tone of the line is *devout* rather than *defiant*. Eben and Abbie form a new bond to rise above Cabot and his farm. For Eben to believe his father at the end of the party scene about Abbie's old plan of calculated seduction rather than Abbie seems unlikely, and that Abbie would find it necessary for such a melodramatic murder to convince Eben is highly improbable. Because Abbie takes over, she is the dominating character in the newly established environment that supplanted the old. Actions should conform to the new order, and she should not, therefore, have to resort to such theatrics. The murder is unbelievable because the action is not consistent with the newly established dramatic space that O'Neill created. The inconsistency is a major obstacle for a successful production.

In comparison, *A Streetcar Named Desire* also has a newborn baby appearing at the end. For the finale, Blanche is escorted out by the doctor. Precisely *after* this action is completed, the child appears. The household was too crowded for a sister-in-law, as she is an outsider to the established order, the marriage; but for a son there is plenty of room. Blanche has overstayed her welcome but Baby Kowalski is accepted with open arms. . . . Stella accepts the child . . ." (p. 418). The displacement is successful; the family is unified once more. In contrast to O'Neill's final action, Williams has found the perfect gesture to reinforce the dramatic space and environment he created. The established environment, the happy marriage, could not be shaken by a sister-in-law; only a child could be incorporated into it.