



Joseph Conrad upon his arrival in New York, 1923. Reprinted with permission. Courtesy of *The Conradian* (UK).

Colonialism in the French Quarter: Tennessee Williams and Joseph Conrad

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In *Where I Live*, a collection of essays about literature and creativity, Tennessee Williams identifies the literary influences that shaped his thinking about life and art. Typically, he mentions something that has interested or impressed him about a work by a specific author, for example: “I am inclined to value [Hart] Crane...because of his organic purity and sheer breathtaking power” (6); or “Paul Bowles is preoccupied with spiritual isolation of individual beings” (36). With regards to Joseph Conrad, Williams mentions him in passing in the opening essay: “I remember Joe Turner who wrote sea stories, often as vivid and beautiful as Conrad’s” (5). While the qualifiers “vivid” and “beautiful” are impressive, the remark obviously does not reveal much about Conrad’s influence. But Williams also references Conrad in “Some Memoirs of a Con-Man.” Following the description of his “healthiest and happiest, the most golden summer” of 1939, during which he “kept falling in love,” Williams observes that his “southern blood always magnified a flirtation to an important romance” and concludes that “Conrad would say ‘Youth’” (240). A direct allusion to Conrad’s novella “Youth,” written in 1898, which tackles the narrator’s seafaring and ensuing encounter with the Far East, Williams’s reference to the story in the context of his romantic remembrances is puzzling. Romance is absent from Conrad’s narrative, though the idea of youth is a recurring motif. Finally, Conrad’s name surfaces again in Williams’s *Clothes For a Summer Hotel* (1980), where F. Scott Fitzgerald expresses sorrow at the news of Joseph Conrad’s death.

Williams's brief references to Conrad do attest to his knowledge of the author of *Heart of Darkness*, not surprisingly, since Conrad made a significant intellectual impact upon the U.S. reading audience during the 1920s and 1930s—Williams's formative years. For example, David Harlan observes that together with T. S. Eliot and Henry Adams, Conrad left a "deep impression" on American youth, who were under the spell of the "sense of estrangement and existential *angst* that these writers expressed" (959). According to Bromwich, prior to 1950s an average American student entering college possessed "familiar knowledge of some authors, mostly modern: Conrad, Faulkner, Hemingway, Camus, Hesse, Mann, Melville" (qt. in Bender 13). Considering Conrad's popularity in America—especially after the publication of his novel *Chance* in 1914, when he became a "celebrity in the public eye" (Najder, *The Chronicle* 476)—Williams most likely studied his works at the Universities of Missouri, Washington, and Iowa.

However, Conrad's possible influence on Williams has not attracted critical attention. Judith J. Thompson appears to be the only one who has pointed to a connection between the two writers. Thompson argues that "as in Conrad's tale of the 'impenetrable darkness' at the heart of the human psyche," Williams in *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958) "presented the simultaneous revelations by two individuals of 'the horror' of their own inherent capacity for savagery" (129). Thompson further compares Sebastian Venable and Dr. Cukrowicz to, respectively, Conrad's Kurtz and Marlow, maintaining that the characters "make the descent into their own subterranean regions—the one self-propelled, the other as vicarious witness—and both discover there primitive impulses which link man with nature" (129). The possible parallels between *Suddenly Last Summer* and Conrad's novella open a potentially productive line of critical investigation. Although Conrad pops up in Williams's early and more mature creative life, no study of the two writers has been done. In this essay, I will first discuss possible Conradian echoes in Williams's works up to 1947 and then demonstrate that *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) bears several revealing similarities to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899). Identifying those similarities will, I hope, refocus some important issues in the critical discourse on *Streetcar*, especially the perplexing problems of race, gender, and history.

In his "Preface to my poems," where he explicitly mentions Conrad, Williams declares, "Wherever there is a truthful intensity of feeling [in poetry], I like it" (6). In another essay, while articulating a sort of creative creed, he commends an "obsessive interest in human affairs,



Tennessee Williams, 1947. Photo used by permission of New Directions Publishing Corp.

plus a certain amount of human 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” (22). These excerpts seem to echo Conrad’s Preface to *The Nigger of the “Narcissus”* (1897)—one of those “vivid and beautiful sea stories” which Williams mentions in *Where I Live*. In his famous artistic manifesto, Conrad argued that art “must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music” (146). A writer’s task is, according to Conrad, to “snatch a passing phase of life” and “hold it before all eyes in the light of a sincere mood,” in order to show “its vibration, its colour, its form” (147); adding that “there is not a place of splendour or a dark corner of the earth that does not deserve, if only a passing glance of wonder and pity” (146). These statements resonate in Williams’s “obsessive interest in human affairs” and “human compassion.” Whereas Williams demands “truthfulness of feeling,” Conrad claims that a writer must reveal the “stress and passion within the core of each convincing moment,” in other words, “its truth” (147).

Some more than incidental similarities between Conrad’s work and Williams’s strengthen the claims of influence. For example, one of

Williams's most symbolic characters, Alma from *Summer and Smoke* (1948) points to the heroine of Conrad's novel *Victory* (1915), also named Alma. As Knowles and Moore point out, the word "Alma" is "Spanish and Italian noun for 'soul' [and] Latin adjective meaning 'kind or nourishing'" (201). No wonder Williams's Alma declares that her name "is Spanish for soul" (19). According to John Batchelor, "Alma" also means "an Egyptian dancing-girl who performs for men's pleasure" (417). Not surprisingly, both Conrad's and Williams's heroines are performers. Alma from *Summer and Smoke* plays piano and sings in "The Glorious Hill Orchestra" whereas Conrad's heroine is a violinist and singer in Mr. Zangiaco's "Ladies Orchestra." A daughter of a clergyman, Williams's Alma sings for pleasure; Conrad's Alma has been forced to her occupation by unlucky life circumstances. The director of the "Ladies Orchestra," Mr. Zangiaco, represents "anything but musicians by profession" (26); in other words, he is a pimp. After eloping with Alma, Conrad's protagonist Heyst renames her into "Lena," an abbreviated form of Magdalene and obvious allusion to the Biblical harlot. Initially, both Almas have their "true nature... still hidden even from [themselves]" (*Summer and Smoke* 24). Conrad's heroine belongs to the "Victorian dramatic tradition of the 'fallen woman'" (Batchelor 417) but her "intensely emotional and intuitive" love for Heyst (Knowles 201) ennobles her. Ultimately, her devotion leads her to sacrificing her life for Heyst's sake. In contrast to Williams's Alma, Conrad's Alma-Lena does not repress her sexual desires. In fact, she is the more sensual partner in her relationship with Heyst.

While inspired by *Victory*, Williams has travestied Conrad's Alma by making his own heroine follow a reverse path. Alma Winemiller is torn between her sexual attraction towards John Buchanan and her denial of that attraction—a denial that in some measure is socially conditioned. Compassionate during her childhood, Alma Winemiller becomes increasingly prudish and inconsiderate. Sarcastic about John's love affairs, she is unable to be honest about her own sexuality. Only after losing John to another woman does she act on her own desires. Now, however, those desires are devoid of love, which makes her a "saint" turned "sinner"—a trajectory reverse to that of Conrad's Alma-Lena.

Echoes of Conrad also reverberate in Williams's *The Purification* (1940). While the setting for this short play is "associated mainly with the country around Taos, New Mexico" (29), Williams nevertheless emphasizes its fictional location: "it is the clear, breathtaking sort of country that I like to imagine as the background for the play. Actually,

I don't know whether or not people of this type ever lived there and I don't believe it matters." This points to Costaguana, an imaginary South American country in Conrad's novel *Nostramo* (1904). Williams's set is a plain between two mountain ranges; also Conrad's Sulaco—a town in Costaguana and the main place of action—is located between two mountain ranges on the peninsulas of Azuera and Punta Mala (39). Moreover, the names of houses in *The Purification* and *Nostramo* are similar. Williams's racially marked Casa Blanca ("white house") and Casa Rojo ("red house") allude to *Nostramo*'s ethnically-marked Casa Gould (British), Casa Viola (Italian), and Casa Avellano (Creole).

The leading theme in *The Purification* is honor. In the opening scene, the Judge declares that honor is "more than a word amongst us" (31) and elaborates this in the final scene: "If men keep honor, the rest can be arranged" (62). The title *Purification* foreshadows the play's action: those who trespass the code of honor must perform acts of cleansing so that honor can be restored. However, Williams complicates this traditional dialectics by showing that racially-based exclusions subvert the very idea of honor; thus indicating that honor carries a "paradoxical rider" (Najder, *Conrad in Perspective* 157). The ideal of honor can turn, as Najder argues, into a "weapon against inequality grounded in differences of birth and class" (157); and, we may add, of gender and race. Najder concludes, "Why should good men of humble birth or profession be considered 'lower' and unworthy of honour?" (157). In *Purification*, Williams explores this paradox as well. The inhabitants of Casa Blanca embrace the idea of racial purity, as symbolically expressed by the Mother: "We should have put up more fences. / The Conquistadors must not neglect their fences" (43). This causes tragedy, first the incest between the Moreno offspring, Rosalio and Elena, then the murder of Elena by her rejected suitor, the mix-blood Rancher, and finally the "purification"—the suicides of Rosalio and the Rancher.

Williams could have derived his ideas about *The Purification* as a "tragedy of honor" from Conrad's *Nostramo*. Because honor "stands at the heart of ethical problems" raised by Conrad (Najder, *Conrad in Perspective* 153), fittingly it is one of the novel's leading motifs. For example, the administrator of St. Tomé mine, Don Pépé, defines honor as carrying out one's duty to the very end: "I have given my word of honour to Don Carlos not to let the mine fall into the hands of these thieves" (339); another character, Dr. Monygham, contemplates honor as "an eminently loyal nature... fit and proper for an officer and a gentleman"

(319). Perhaps the closest to Williams's rendition of the drama of honor in *The Purification* is Conrad's Giorgio Viola. A patriarchal figure, Viola undertakes the task of "guarding the honour of his house" (455) and thus shoots his daughter's suitor Nostromo, whom he mistakes for a vagabond.

Characteristically, in *Nostromo* the representatives of separate ethnicities perceive the idea of honor differently. Don P  p   is a Creole, Dr. Monyghan an Englishman, Giorgio Viola an Italian. In fact, both *Nostromo* and *The Purification* reveal a complex amalgam of historically shaped ethnicities, races, and classes. Most of the characters in *The Purification* are descendants of Spanish conquistadors. The Judge is "an aristocratic rancher of middle age," the Mother is a "pure blood Castilian with iron-gray hair," while the Rancher carries in his veins "blood... coarser than the people from Casa Blanca" (30). Another group represented in the play are the Indians: Luisa—a woman with "some Spanish blood" and the Indian Youth. Likewise, in *Nostromo* native Indians exist alongside the families of Spanish ancestry. Aided by the English and American businessmen, the Creoles constitute Costaguana's elite. Importantly, in both Williams's play and Conrad's novel the European presence in America is depicted as involving, in historical terms, acts of aggression and conquest. In *The Purification*, the Mother articulates the claims of the conquering race: "Our people—were Indian fighters... / The Indians are now subdued... / can we do but contend with our own queer shadows?" (40). Her spouse simply states the historical fact: "Invaders! / We are invaders ourselves!" (44). As Conrad before him, Williams explored mutual relations between natives and Europeans. His identifying the Spaniards as "invaders" as early as 1940 in *The Purification* may point to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899): at the time when England held fast to the Kiplingesque "White Man's Burden," Conrad depicted the European encroachment into Africa as a "fantastic invasion" (535). In his novel, Marlow confesses, "The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing" (495). In *The Purification*, Senior Moreno admits, "We used the land—gave nothing!" (44).

The ways in which Williams and Conrad portray indigenous people further highlight similarities. In *The Purification*, Native Americans are presented as "mute"—that is, having a limited or no political influence on the events. In *Nostromo*, the subjugated natives are poignantly described

as “suffering and mute, waiting for the future in a pathetic immobility of patience” (87-8), while the history of their exploitation is best expressed in the depiction of St. Tomé mine: “Worked in the early days mostly by means of lashes on the backs of slaves, its yield had been paid for in its own weight of human bones. Whole tribes of Indians had perished in the exploitation” (75). With a few exceptions, the “Indians” in both *Nostramo* and *The Purification* are not allowed to enter the physical areas in which political or judicial decisions are made. Instead, they remain outside. One of the exceptions is Williams’s Indian Youth. Silent throughout most of the play, at the climax he bursts into the courtroom, symbolically pours water out of his sombrero, and yells “The rain! The rain!” (61). This event demands comparison with *Heart of Darkness*, where a native boy appears suddenly at the end of the novella, puts his “insolent black head in the doorway” and pronounces his single utterance, “Mistah Kurtz—he dead” (591). The rain in *The Purification* contrasts with the recurring motif of blood. In Scene One, Father says, “In our blood / was the force that carved this country! / *Sangre mala*, you call it?” (43). The native Luisa cries, “Hear how the blood-lust in them cries out loud!” (44). In this context, the Chorus’s refrain “*Sangre mala!*” and “*Rojo de sangre es el sol!*” alludes not only to the murder of Rosalio’s sister Elena but also to the blood spilt during the Spanish conquest of America, as well as to incest-implicated idea of blood purity vs. blood-mixing as represented by Luiza and the Rancher. While the different races in *Nostramo* do not interact sexually, the “mixed-blood” characters from *The Purification* challenge the idea of racial purity.

Undeniably, racial and ethnic conflicts fuel the sexual battles in *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Whether homo- or hetero-erotic, sexuality took central stage in Williams’s life and works. In fact, because of his overtly sexualized plays, Williams was for thirty years “regularly denounced as a sick, immoral, vicious fag” (Vidal xxiii). Hence, he was both celebrated and ostracized in American culture of the 1940s and 1950s. Vidal connects this polarity with deep political structures that organized American society: “a ruling class—any ruling class—can stay in power and get people to do work that they don’t want to do is to invent taboos, and then punish those who break them while, best of all, creating an ongoing highly exploitable sense of guilt in just about everyone” (xxii). Seen in light of his complex family history and his sexual orientation, Williams’s exploration of the dialectics of difference helped him create Blanche DuBois. Critics pinpointed Blanche as the tragic example of

the disfranchised individual because of her sexual urges warring against social norms (Bauer-Briski) and, paradoxically, as the representative of a politically dominant race (Van Duybenvode). But, rather than delving into Blanche's gender, race, or class, I would like to turn to her language—the official discourse that has informed her identity. In such a context, Williams's relationship to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* can be seen more clearly.

If discourse/language shapes a person's worldview and moral convictions, then it seems apt to state that the whole South contributed to the making of Blanche—paraphrasing the description of Conrad's anti-hero, “the whole Europe contributed to the making of Kurtz” (560). Applied to Blanche, this attribution is not merely a rhetorical device. In fact, I would argue that Blanche has in some way been shaped by Williams's reading of Conrad's Kurtz, the European entrepreneur who traveled deep into the Congo in search of ivory. Kurtz's story is narrated by Marlow, who stresses his own and other Europeans' estrangement in a world that has made their presence a “fantastic invasion” (535). A number of central metaphors from *Heart of Darkness* surface in *Streetcar*, particularly those relating to the river, jungle, and drums. The Congo river obviously holds enormous symbolic significance in Conrad's novel. Resembling an “immense snake uncoiled, with its head in the sea, its body at rest curving afar over a vast country, and its tail lost in the depths of the land” (497), it is “fascinating” and “deadly” (500). The Mississippi river is consistently present in *Streetcar*, beginning with the opening stage directions: “*You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee*” (243).

Both Conrad and Williams select symbolic music to heighten their landscapes. In *Heart of Darkness*, Marlow repeatedly hears drums during his African journey: “At night sometimes the roll of drums behind the curtain of trees would run up the river and remain sustained faintly, as if hovering in the air high over our heads, till the first break of day” (539). The sound of drums becomes more conspicuous during the moments of tension: “a big drum filled the air with muffled shocks and a lingering vibration...I was completely unnerved by a sheer blank fright, pure abstract terror, unconnected with any distinct shape of physical danger” (583). In *Streetcar*, the effect of Conrad's drums is created by the “blue piano” and the “music of Negro entertainers” (243). Their music grows more intense when Blanche and Stella face each other “*across the*

yellow-checked linoleum of the table... The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder" (261); or when Stanley confronts Blanche with Stella's property rights: "You see, under the Napoleonic code—a man has to take an interest in his wife's affairs—especially now that she is going to have a baby. [*Blanche opens her eyes. The "blue piano" sounds louder*]" (285).

Non-verbal sounds highlight critical moments through both Williams and Conrad. The parallels between *Streetcar* and *Heart of Darkness* become even more palpable after the "blue piano" in the play, and the drums in the novella, are joined by voices. Stanley's famous lament "Stella!" is followed by an "indistinguishable shrill voice" (305); Marlow hears "many men chanting ... some weird incantation" after Kurtz disappears into the night (582). The drums join the blue piano in Williams, thus evoking *Heart of Darkness*. At the end of the Scene Four, after the lights go off, "*the music of the 'blue piano' and trumpet and drums is heard*" (324). Interestingly, the drums replace the piano—but continue to carry the same sensuality—after Blanche delivers to Stella her speech equating Stanley and his companions with animals:

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—something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! ...Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking. (323)

Certainly drums are a vital part of New Orleans jazz, but even more of Blanche's speech seems to allude to Marlow's description of the natives as he moves towards the inner station, where he expects to meet Kurtz:

...the men were—No, they were not inhuman. Well, you know, that was the worst of it—this suspicion of their not being inhuman....They howled and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces. (540)

By concluding that the African Others are *not* inhuman, Marlow ultimately acknowledges their humanity. However, as Chinua Achebe has argued, the very fact that Marlow deliberates the matter reflects his racial and Eurocentric bias. Blanche's racism is even more extreme. She describes Stanley Kowalski—a descendant of Polish immigrants—as

“sub-human” and “animalistic.” Several critics have pointed out how Williams has racialized Stanley (e.g., Philip C. Kolin, and others). More to the point here, Williams’s Blanche resembles Conrad’s Europeans in that she, too, uses science to justify her bias: “Yes, something—ape-like about him, like one of those pictures I’ve seen in—anthropological studies!” (323). While observing, “thousands and thousands of years have passed him right by, and here he is—Stanley Kowalski—survivor of the stone age!” (323), Blanche echoes Marlow’s belief that the African natives belong to “the beginnings of time” (547). Marlow and Blanche evoke quasi-Darwinian theories of “arrested development” of certain races such as, for example, that of Spenser for whom “social and cultural differences simply represented various stages of evolution” (Hunter 85). As Hunter emphasizes, such theories were extremely useful “for a race that wishes to subdue others,” in that “it asserts an ethnocentric superiority implicitly” (85).

We might ask how can the theories espoused by nineteenth-century colonialists informing Marlow’s views relate to Blanche at the end of the colonial era? Unlike Conrad’s Marlow and Kurtz, Blanche did not travel abroad (except in her literary imagination, which may have included Conrad’s works). Rather, she remained in her native South. Since for European entrepreneurs the colonial Other existed in faraway places (the prize of European colonialism), the geography of difference in Europe can be described as predominantly horizontal. In contrast, the Other in America was right at home, identified as the “Negro inferior,” the native-American “savage,” or an ethnic “sub-human”—a Pole, an Irishman, a Jew, etc. Hence, by making Stanley Kowalski a Pole, Williams employs precisely America’s “vertical geography” of racial and ethnic differences. Conrad’s and Williams’s perceptions of colonialism, therefore, seem to derive from such invented hierarchies. In Europe’s “horizontal” colonialism, the “we” are at home while the “Others” are out there, whereas in American “vertical” colonialism, the *domesticated* “we” are at the upper social level and the *adopted* “Others” are below “us”—as exemplified in Williams’s depiction of Southerners’ views of their racial/ethnic Other.

While Marlow and Kurtz represent European dominance of Africa in search of an Eldorado, Blanche symbolizes the entrance of the Southern aristocracy into the “wilderness” of its racial and ethnic “inferior” in search of material gain: to wit, Stanley’s Elysian Fields apartment. Although Europeans justified their invasion in humanitarian terms, the

historical sources show that imperial excursions to Africa were often personally motivated by the desire of enrichment and/or escape from the misery at home. Given the parallels between *Heart of Darkness* and *Streetcar*, Conrad's depictions of the drive behind the European rush to Africa seem relevant for interpreting Blanche's behavior. Having left the *Belle Reve* (beautiful dream) of her aristocratic past, constructed by her ancestors through appropriating native-American lands and exploiting slaves, and having squandered what appeared to be her moral capital, she now seeks material and existential gain in the symbolic *Elysian Fields* inhabited by her social and ethnic Other. Her famous depiction of Belle Reve throws light on what has driven her, both literally and symbolically, away from home—"our improvident grandfathers and fathers and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications" (284). In one of her rare moments of frankness, Blanche admits her symbolic co-responsibility for squandering the family inheritance—"we've lost Belle Reve. *We thrashed it out*" (285; italics added).

Similar to European colonialists symbolized by Kurtz, Blanche looks upon Stanley Kowalski—whom she intends to use both financially and sexually—from the point of view of racial/ethnic superiority: "They are something like Irish, aren't they? ... Only not so—highbrow?" While pertaining to the Poles—whom Blanche groups en masse in one general category, while implying their inferiority—the distinction between "us" and "them" reminds us of the classic binary opposition of the colonial discourse. However, while Marlow's remark describing the Africans in the Congo as *not* being "inhuman" has produced much critical debate, Blanche's pointblank statement that Stanley is "sub-human" did not trigger a similar response. In fact, Blanche's thinking reflects similar mechanisms of prejudice and self-delusion that Marlow, and especially Kurtz, had articulated. In spite of her hypocrisy, Blanche proclaims herself as a "woman of intelligence and breeding," in possession of the "beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart" (396).

The parallel between Blanche and Kurtz becomes instructive in her assessment of her cultural superiority:

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 certain people some tenderer feelings have had some little

beginning! That we have got 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!* (323)

Blanche's famous indictment—which Stanley overhears—indicates that she sees “art, poetry, and music” as signifiers of progress and feels called to spread the “light of culture” while, ironically, denying the possibility of “the Others,” whom she summarizes as “the brutes,” having a culture of their own. In fact, her speech resembles the report Kurtz has written on the request of the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs” (561). We learn from Marlow that the report was a “beautiful piece of writing” demonstrating the “unbounded power of eloquence—of words—of burning noble words,” however devoid of “practical hints to interrupt the magic current of phrases” (561). Kurtz's report ends with the abrupt and surprisingly candid note—“Exterminate all the brutes!” (562). Blanche rephrases this note in the exclamation “*don't hang back with the brutes!*” Hence language, as a tool of colonialism in both Africa and the French Quarter, becomes a “vehicle, metaphor, and paradigm of the pretenses and deceptions of colonial expansion” (Lord 67).

In light of the parallels between *Heart of Darkness* and *Streetcar*, Blanche's identity as Southern belle becomes one aspect of the complex imperial discourse through which Williams has shaped her. Her name meaning “white” in French and paralleling the ivory-like whiteness of Kurtz's skin (559), Blanche symbolically confronts Stanley who “conflates the image of the foreign other with that of racial marginal” (Van Duybenvode 214). Stanley ultimately destroys Blanche because she reminds him of his “inferior, denigrated status and social difference” (214). Accompanied by a loud “hot trumpet and drums”—another echo of *Heart of Darkness*—the rape is, in one sense, Stanley's revenge on Blanche for reflecting him as her ethnic and cultural inferior. In another sense, the rape corresponds to the “unspeakable rites” (561) in which Conrad's Kurtz—whose “soul was mad” (566)—engaged himself before his final destruction. Blanche's ultimate madness also parallels with Kurtz's having “kicked himself lose of the earth” (586).

Blanche DuBois is trapped in a discourse that defines her identities while disabling her from facing the truth. Her moral orientation is directed by ideological preconceptions regarding class, race, gender, and ethnicity. Unable to cross the boundaries of these preconceived entities,

she is profoundly ignorant of the facts of her own life and unable to understand and interact with others, be they the Pole Stanley Kowalski, her homosexual husband Allan Grey, or other people. Blanche's problem exceeds her sexual drive and need for material and psychological security. Her ultimate tragedy lies in her living a lie as well as attempting to impose that lie onto others. Focusing on Blanche's discourse as representing an aristocratic South, Williams seems to have shared, in his own way, the "sense of urgency about the South's problems...that had been gaining intellectual momentum among...major literary figures in the South throughout the 1930" as much as Joseph Conrad was aware of the critical state of the imperial Europe that had produced Kurtz (Cobb 685). Indeed, the relevance of Williams's dramatic exposure of the Old South's imperial/colonial discourse of exclusion—as adopted by Blanche—exceeds the problems of American South. According to Howard Zinn, as a civilization the United States embodies all the negative qualities traditionally associated with Dixie: racism, violence, hypocritical piety, false elevation of women, nationalism, conservatism, and harboring extreme poverty amidst ostentatious wealth (qtd. in Cobb 713). The intellectual affinities between Tennessee Williams, a Southern dramatist ruminating American dialectics of difference, and Joseph Conrad, a Polish exile examining European imperialism at work, indicate that, notwithstanding its geographical particularities, imperialism employs a familiar discourse of exclusion and exploitation. Each in his own fashion, both Conrad and Williams, sought to expose it.

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