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White Woods and *Blue Jasmine*: Woody Allen Rewrites *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Most of Woody Allen's allusions to Tennessee Williams in his films and writings have been to *A Streetcar Named Desire*.¹ So it is not surprising that *Streetcar* (1947) is written all over Allen's recent film, *Blue Jasmine* (2013). Allen goes beyond adopting and adapting plot lines and characters from Williams's play. He has so deeply assimilated the earlier work that motifs and lines of



dialogue, often transferred to different characters or situations, become the imaginative counters with which he constructs his own screenplay. The film's reviewers almost invariably commented on the parallels with *Streetcar*, many noting, too, that Cate Blanchett, who plays the title character, Jasmine, had also successfully played Blanche Dubois in Liv Ullmann's 2009 production of the play at the Brooklyn Academy of Music.² But for all the similarities in character types and plot structure and for all the allusions to specific

lines in *Streetcar*, the themes of *Blue Jasmine* are very different from those of Williams's play because the story that Allen tells also channels the fall of Bernie Madoff and his wife, Ruth. In this essay I will review the similarities between *Blue Jasmine* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, explore the implications of the allusions and the changes Allen makes, and suggest how the post-World War II play works in the post-Madoff film.

Blanchett's Jasmine (as the character Jeanette has renamed herself) most obviously reiterates Blanche. She introduces herself to one of her suitors as Jasmine French, explaining that she is named for "night-blooming jasmine," just as Blanche explains to Mitch that "Blanche Dubois" is French for "white woods" (299).³ Like Blanche, Jasmine prefers illusion to reality. Blanche tells Mitch, "I don't want realism. I want magic! ... I don't tell truth, I tell what *ought* to be truth" (385). Jasmine similarly tells her sister that she did not lie to her latest suitor but rather "dressed up a few facts" and "omitted a few unpleasant details." After all, she says, speaking in contemporary parlance, "People reinvent themselves, don't they?" By the end of the play and film neither Blanche nor Jasmine can tell the difference between fantasy and reality. In an interview, Blanchett said that in preparing for her role she thought about characters such as Blanche Dubois, "people who have fallen from grace," but she also studied the Madoff story



and took particular note of once wealthy women, like Ruth Madoff, who lost everything in the recession.⁴ This blending of Blanche and a woman like Ruth Madoff (at least as she is popularly conceived)⁵ gives Jasmine a harder fashionable edge than Williams's Blanche possesses but also renders Allen's and Blanchett's portrait of a self-centered society woman fallen on hard times more sympathetic than we might expect.

At the beginning of Allen's film Jasmine comes to stay with her sister, Ginger (played by Sally Hawkins), in San Francisco (instead of New Orleans). We learn about Jasmine's past through a series of flashbacks triggered to contrast with or explain incidents in the present. For example, the cluttered, gauchely decorated apartment that is home to Ginger and her two noisy little boys clearly distresses Jasmine, much as Stella's more ramshackle two-room apartment shocks Blanche, and she mentally compares it with her own spacious and elegant former home. The flashbacks are a filmic equivalent for Williams's gradual exposition of Blanche's story recounted by Stanley, Stella, and Blanche herself. Since many of the flashbacks represent what Jasmine is remembering when she detaches herself from the present (talking to herself, staring into space), they also correspond to Williams's expressionist use of visual and aural effects—the glaring light of the passing train, the music of the *Varsouviana*—to convey Blanche's consciousness, her memory of the night her young husband shot himself. The night that Jasmine remembers is when she met her husband; the song "Blue Moon" was playing. When she hears it at the end of the film, it seems to be playing in her head.

In its particulars Jasmine's story is quite different from Blanche's, yet there are structural similarities in the plot lines that lead each woman to seek solace with her sister. Married to a wealthy Bernie Madoff-like businessman (Alec Baldwin), to whose corrupt financial practices she turned a blind eye, Jasmine lived a life of luxury, enjoying multiple homes, foreign travel, designer clothes, expensive jewelry, and effortless social acceptance. But when her husband, Hal, told her that he was going to leave her for a teenage au pair, the latest in a long line of infidelities, Jasmine in revenge turned him in to the FBI. Hal was sent to prison, where he hanged himself; Jasmine herself lost all of her wealth and suffered a nervous breakdown. Both Blanche and Jasmine effectively destroy a husband who has



betrayed them, and consequently contribute to their own self-destruction. After Blanche found her husband with an older man, his lover, and told him that he disgusted her, Allan killed himself. Unable to forgive herself, Blanche has sought compensatory "intimacies with strangers" (386), leading to the promiscuity and the nervous breakdown that bring her finally to the French Quarter of New Orleans on a streetcar named Desire. Jasmine, too, regrets her betrayal of her husband but mostly for more selfish reasons. Even less than Blanche can she abide a life without luxuries and without refinement.

Allen establishes his film's relation to *Streetcar* early on, in the blues background music, reminiscent of the sounds of the French Quarter in Williams's play, and in the scene of Jasmine's arrival at Ginger's apartment. Jasmine's white jacket echoes Blanche's white suit; like Blanche, Jasmine holds a piece of paper as she looks for the right address, but her cell phone call to Ginger marks the film's updating of the play. Jasmine shares many of Blanche's behavioral characteristics. She is clearly nervous, she talks to herself, she drinks (and also takes pills) to calm her nerves. When Ginger tells her she looks "great," Jasmine jokingly accuses her sister of lying, echoing the exchange between Blanche and Stella: "You haven't said a word about my appearance. / You look just fine. / God love you for a liar!" (254). Jasmine and Blanche are both anxious to be taken in by their sisters, but their priorities are different. Both are "out of cash," as Jasmine says, but Blanche focuses first on her emotional need: "I want to be *near* you, got to be *with* somebody, I *can't* be *alone!* Because—as you must have noticed—I'm *not* very *well!*" (257). Jasmine, too, says she "can't be alone" because she gets "bad thoughts," but she needs to stay with Ginger in the first instance because she is "dead broke." This slight difference in emphasis speaks to a major thematic difference in the two works. Where *Streetcar* focuses on the cultural differences that Blanche and Stanley represent, in *Blue Jasmine* such cultural difference is more diffusely determined by money. I will return to this point below.

A major structural and thematic difference between the film and the play is the lack of a central sexually tense conflict between Jasmine and a Stanley figure. This is in part because Allen splits Stanley between Augie, Ginger's ex-husband, and Chilli, her boyfriend—



Jasmine even tells Ginger that Chilli is "another version" of Augie—and in part because Allen's thematic concerns are different from Williams's. Augie (Andrew Dice Clay) and Chilli (Bobby Cannavale) are both working-class men who share Stanley's coarse vigor, his brutal honesty, and his hostility toward his sister-in-law. Augie reflects Stanley's suspicion and his cruelty. Just as Stanley suspects that instead of losing Belle Reve, Blanche may actually have appropriated Stella's property, Augie is convinced (correctly as it turns out) that Jasmine knew about her husband's unlawful business deals. When

he tells Ginger that Jasmine stole their money (lost in one of Hal's fraudulent investments), the rhythm of his accusations even sounds like Marlon Brando's in Elia Kazan's 1951 film of *Streetcar*: "You want to tell me she knew nothing about it?" And it is Augie who destroys Jasmine's last chance of happiness and security when in an accidental meeting in the street he frightens off the man she is planning to marry by challenging her with the embarrassing facts about her past, just as Stanley scares Mitch from marrying Blanche by telling him about her past promiscuity.

Allen endows Chilli with Stanley's virility, his sexual vitality, his potential for violence, and also his sensitivity. Chilli is a mechanic or, as Ginger calls him, a "grease monkey." (Allen is picking up here on Stanley's "grease-stained" pants and Stella's joke that he "must've got under the car" [322, 324] in scene four of *Streetcar*). Chilli is "sexy," as Ginger says: he appears throughout the film in shirts and tank tops that show off his well-toned body (and remind us of Brando), and he



repeatedly asserts his desire for (and ownership of) Ginger by grabbing hold of her. He can be brutal to Jasmine. He bluntly asks her, for example, about her nervous breakdown as a comeback for her rejection of his friend Eddie. Like Stanley, Chilli resents the intruding sister for interfering in his life, in his case by preventing him from moving in with Ginger and belittling him to her. When Chilli learns that Ginger has been seeing another man (for which he blames Jasmine), he pulls her telephone out of the wall and overturns her lamp, reminiscent of Stanley's smashing the radio and later throwing his cup and saucer on the floor in response to Blanche and Stella's criticism of his manners. More than Stanley's aggression, Chilli's violent act is a mark of his

emotional vulnerability. Ginger subsequently tells Jasmine that when they were reconciled, Chilli "cried like a baby." (In fact, we see Chilli crying in the supermarket where he tries to win Ginger back, a scene that is probably meant as an equivalent of the Stella-calling scene in *Streetcar*.) In Ginger's comment Allen transfers Stella's response to Stanley's absences—"And when he comes back I cry on his lap like a baby" (259)—to Chilli, making him appear softer and less manipulative than Stanley. Through a similar transmutation of a line

from *Streetcar* Allen makes Augie, by contrast, coarser than Stanley. Stanley objects to being called a "Polack" (371); Augie, Ginger complains, tells Polish jokes.

By splitting the Stanley role between Augie and Chilli, neither of whom serves as a counterpart or counterweight to Jasmine, Allen focuses his work more on the female lead than Williams does in *Streetcar*. In terms of plot Chilli and especially Augie destroy Jasmine much as Stanley destroys Blanche.



They do not act with as much deliberation as Stanley or through the criminal act of rape—Augie's confrontational meeting with Jasmine is accidental and Chilli is more set on moving into Ginger's apartment than forcing Jasmine out. Nonetheless, the result is almost the same. Blanche is taken to a mental institution and Jasmine is left to babble alone on a bench in the street.

Allen also refracts Blanche's suitor, Mitch, into three different characters, again with the effect of placing greater emphasis on Jasmine's trajectory

through the film as she meets each of them in turn. Some aspect of Mitch is reflected in Chilli's friend Eddie (Max Casella), in the dentist (Michael Stuhlbarg) for whom Jasmine briefly works, and in Dwight, the man she almost marries. Chilli tries unsuccessfully to set Jasmine up with Eddie, who is like Mitch in being working-class, socially inept (though in a pushy rather than shy way), and self-conscious about his appearance; Eddie is bothered about being short as Mitch is embarrassed by his weight. The dentist attempts to kiss Jasmine in a fumbling assault reminiscent of Mitch's crude attempt to kiss Blanche after he learns about her promiscuity. Dwight, like Mitch, represents the heroine's last hope of having someone take care of her. Dwight, however, has very little else in common with Mitch. In fact, in this character Allen combines Mitch with Blanche's old beau and imaginary savior, the wealthy Shep Huntleigh.



Dwight (Peter Sarsgaard) is rich, handsome, works for the State Department, and plans to run for Congress. It is with him that Jasmine has the conversation about her name. Like Mitch, Dwight has a dead woman in his past, his deceased wife. Mitch's recollection of the dead girl who gave him the silver cigarette case brings

out in him an appealing melancholy sensitivity. But the fact of Dwight's dead wife, relayed to Jasmine early in their conversation, just emphasizes his eligibility. Jasmine swaps him dead spouse for dead spouse, telling him that her late husband was a surgeon and that she is an interior designer (a profession to which she merely aspires and which is for Allen perhaps inspired by the aesthetic improvements Blanche makes to Stella's apartment). Mitch is fascinated by Blanche because he cannot help himself: "I like you to be exactly the way that you are, because in all my—experience—I have never known anyone like you" (343). Dwight responds to Jasmine in a more calculating way. He is drawn to her because of her "great style"—her designer accessories, her beauty, her elegance. She is the kind of woman he needs for his career. First she can help him decorate his new house and then adorn his political life. Shocked to learn from Augie that Jasmine has been lying to him, Dwight says that he can no longer marry her. Like Blanche telling Mitch, "I didn't lie in my heart" (387), Jasmine tells Dwight, "I wasn't deceiving you when I said I loved you." But it is too late. Blanche is "not clean enough to bring in the house" (390) with Mitch's mother, and Jasmine is not the "appropriate wife" for a would-be congressman.

As the film works toward its conclusion, Allen draws yet again on Williams's play to depict Jasmine's response to the loss of her last hope of salvation. In the penultimate scene of *Streetcar* Stanley attempts a rapprochement with Blanche—"Shall we bury the hatchet and make it a loving-cup?"—as he waits good-humoredly for the birth of his baby: "Well, it's a red-letter night for us both. You having an oil millionaire and me having a baby" (395). Blanche rejects this proffer of peace between them and goes on to justify why a wealthy man like Shep Huntleigh would desire her platonic company on his cruise of the Caribbean:

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 of those things—aren't taken away, but grow! (396)

She concludes by insulting Stanley again, saying that she has been "casting [her] pearls before swine!" (396). Angered, Stanley then shows up her fantasy about the millionaire as "lies and conceit and tricks!" He tells her, "I've been on to you from the start!" (398), and finally he rapes her. The play's last



scene opens with Blanche bathing before being forced to leave on the arm of her final kind stranger, the doctor from the mental asylum.

While there is nothing like Stanley's rape of Blanche in *Blue Jasmine*, Allen in other respects replicates Blanche's attitudes and experience in Jasmine's final trajectory. Rejected by Dwight and then by Hal's son, Jasmine makes her way home to find Ginger and Chilli celebrating their reconciliation. The once elegant Jasmine looks a wreck, with sweat stains under her arms, a substitution for Blanche's ravaged body (and perhaps, too, a transference from Mitch's anxiety about perspiring through his jacket). Chilli attempts to make peace with Jasmine—"Let's not dig at each other"—now that each has what he or she wants: Chilli is moving in with Ginger; Jasmine, he thinks, is moving out to marry a rich man. Like Blanche, Jasmine refuses the proffered olive branch, insults Chilli as unworthy of her sister, and pretends/imagines that she is still going to marry Dwight. She explains, "He's one of these men who's lost without a woman. It has to be the right woman. You know, one who's a plus for his career. And I have the social skills required for his future in politics." She then says that she will send for her luggage, takes a shower, and walks out of the apartment with wet hair and no make-up. The last we see of Jasmine, she is sitting on a bench alone, talking to herself, on the way, it would appear, to being committed to a mental institution or to becoming a bag lady.



The structural parallel between Blanche's and Jasmine's explanation of what the desired wealthy suitor (Shep, Dwight) sees in her emphasizes how different are the women's self-evaluations: "beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart" versus "social skills." Despite her promiscuity and attraction to boys, Blanche is a "cultivated woman" who talks about poetry, makes amusing allusions to literature (herself and Mitch as Marguerite and Armand, Poe's "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" [344, 252]), and jokes familiarly about the constellations (the Pleiades are "going home from their little bridge party" [342]). Jasmine never talks about things of the mind or imagination. With her everything is about wealth and style. So she has cultivated an ability to discuss antiques and pewter and European vacations. And while she can be sarcastic, she lacks Blanche's humor, her ability to laugh at her own foibles, and her sensitivity to anyone but herself.

Allen's and especially Blanchett's evocation of Blanche in their portrayal of Jasmine's failed attempt to find salvation and her gradual disintegration throughout the film helps audiences to sympathize with an ostensibly unlikeable—self-absorbed, arrogant—protagonist. Reviewer Peter Rainer, for example, notes that "Blanchett's all-out performance," in which she plays "a variant on Blanche," is the "best reason" to care about Jasmine. And Terrie

Waddell, arguing that both *Streetcar* and *Blue Jasmine* are “movingly focused on the loss of identity,” points out that Blanchett, who previously played Blanche, “is key to the *affect* aroused by this fear of regression” in *Blue Jasmine* (88). At the same time the differences between Blanche and Jasmine point to thematic dissimilarities between the play and the film. In fact, Allen’s pervasive allusions to Williams highlight these dissimilarities by way of contrast.

Though both Williams and Allen focus on the destruction of a complicated, fragile female protagonist seeking some kind of social salvation, the play and the film situate her in two different kinds of society, separated by time and geography. The one is set in the South, in post-World War II New Orleans, the other on the East and West coasts, in post-industrial, finance-centered New York (in the flashbacks) and San Francisco. Through the conflict between Blanche and Stanley, Williams dramatizes the clash of two cultures—the aristocratic, plantation society of the Old South and the industrial-commercial version of America that is, like Stanley, working-class, immigrant, and pragmatic. Allen’s film picks up the story after industrial America has also faded away and the apparent affluence of its successor, centered on finance and technology, has evaporated in the crash of 2008. But there is little conflict or clash of values as there is in *Streetcar*. Instead everyone wants money, both the one percent who has it and everyone else who has not. That is why Augie and Ginger invest their lottery windfall with Hal, and lose it. Culture is reduced to personal and ambient style that can be—and can only be—acquired by money. Hence the differences between Jasmine’s way of life, her clothes, her home, and Ginger’s. As Jasmine quotes Hal: “It’s not the money, it’s the money.”⁶

Blue Jasmine’s depiction of extreme wealth, the fraud that begets it, the luxurious lifestyle that is its reward, and the “social shame” (Blanchett’s term)⁷ consequent upon its loss reflects the Bernie and Ruth Madoff story, the other underpinning, along with *Streetcar*, of Allen’s film. Just as Allen echoes many lines and motifs from *Streetcar*, often transferring them to other characters or situations, he refracts elements from the Madoffs’ life and the fallout from Bernie Madoff’s Ponzi scheme throughout *Blue Jasmine*. Like Madoff, Hal is a wealthy, respected businessman and a philanthropist. Jasmine, like Ruth Madoff, is the perfect “society wife” who raises money for charities and is a “world-class shopper” (Seal 419, 428). Through his fraudulent financial dealings Madoff ruined thousands of people, including his wife’s sister and her husband. When Madoff’s Ponzi scheme became unsustainable and his family members (sons rather than wife) reported him to the authorities, the Madoffs lost their money, their real estate, and personal property, including millions of dollars’ worth of jewelry (some of which they had tried to send to friends); Bernie went to jail and Ruth did indeed go to live for a while with her sister, though in Florida. Jasmine complains to Ginger about her shameful poverty and how relatively little the expensive jewelry she managed to hide from the FBI brought her when she tried to sell it. One of Madoff’s sons committed suicide in 2010; the suicide by hanging gets transferred to Hal in jail. At the time the Madoff story broke, in 2008, there was speculation as to how much Ruth Madoff knew about her husband’s Ponzi scheme. (Many Madoff

assets had been transferred to Ruth [Arvedlund 266], as many of Hal's are in Jasmine's name.) For much of his film Allen leaves his audience to speculate about Jasmine's knowledge of Hal's corrupt business practices, confirming her complicity in his fraud and its consequences only in the final flashback when she turns him in to the FBI.⁸

Diana B. Henriques in *The Wizard of Lies* comments that Madoff's name has become "a universal shorthand for a selfish, shameful era": "In the aftermath of the economic meltdown of 2008, with dishonesty and chicanery exposed throughout the world of finance, no villain put a human face on the collapse the way Madoff did, perhaps because his crime encompassed far more than just the financial crisis. It was a timeless drama in itself, a morality play as ancient as human greed, as poignant as human trust" (xix). *Blue Jasmine* brings together character types and motifs from *A Streetcar Named Desire* with character types and motifs from the real-life "morality play" that was the collapse of Wall Street under the weight of its own greed, symbolically embodied in the Madoff scandal. By merging these two sources, Allen not only (re)tells the story of a woman dispossessed of her past and her identity by forces that she does not fully understand yet with which she is in some way complicit, he also rewrites—or continues—the larger American story of which she is a part. It is a story of massive social change. In *Streetcar* Blanche has watched her family members die and process to the graveyard that is almost all the land that remains of Belle Reve, and she herself has fallen into poverty and disgrace after an affair with one of her students. But for many middle-class and working-class people, for returning soldiers like Stanley, America in the late 1940s was a place of new opportunity. In the years after the crash of 2008, by contrast, the old rich became richer, while middle- and working-class Americans faced dwindling opportunities as the economy, and especially jobs, recovered only slowly. Stella tells Blanche that she is sure Stanley will be successful because of "a drive that he has" (293). Ginger has no such optimistic view of Chilli; she believes that she herself will have to work in the supermarket for the rest of her life; and her ex-husband, Augie, is obliged to find work in Alaska. Gesturing to her apartment, Ginger tells Jasmine that it is because Hal swindled her that she has to live "like this."

Blue Jasmine depicts a contemporary American society fuelled by income inequality, greed, and the commodification of everything—including family relationships and sex—that has no parallel in Williams's play. For Blanche sex fulfills a deep psychological need to forget and to assuage the guilt she feels for Allan's death. It fulfills, too, a metaphysical need for human connection, a need to hold off the ugliness, the "bloodstained pillow-slips" (388), of death. Desire, says Blanche, is the "opposite" of death (389). What Jasmine thinks about desire remains unknown. Her sexuality is presented primarily as part of the value she gives in return for wealth and pampering. Ginger and Chilli, by contrast, share in something like Stanley and Stella's exuberant sexuality. But influenced by her sister's snobbery, even Ginger becomes for a while, like Jasmine, subjected to sexual commodification in her relationship with Al.



Allen structures *Blue Jasmine*, not, as in *Streetcar*, as a central conflict between his heroine and her opposite, but via the—usually contrasting—parallels that he establishes between Jasmine's story and Ginger's, especially in the latter part of the film after both sisters meet new men at a party. In the America of *Blue Jasmine* wealth determines cultural style even when it comes to sex. Al (Louis C. K.), the man who crudely makes his move on Ginger, is clearly a predator. But so, Allen's

juxtaposition of scenes suggests, is the much more sophisticated and charming Dwight, who picks up Jasmine. Thinking that she has acquired a man who is socially a cut above Chilli—a sound engineer who gives her an audio device—Ginger has easy sex with Al, in a car and in a dreary motel room. Jasmine has sex with Dwight, too, but the focus is on his beautiful new house, the spectacular view from his balcony, and what the couple can offer one another. In succeeding scenes Dwight asks Jasmine to marry him, and Ginger refuses Chilli.



Jasmine then learns in a flashback about Hal's infidelities, and in the present Ginger finds out that Al is married. Enlightened about Jasmine's past, Dwight breaks up with her; enlightened about Al's marriage, Ginger reconciles with Chilli.

The parallel but contrasting trajectories of Jasmine and Ginger lead the sisters to opposite endings that echo the double ending of *Streetcar*. In the play Blanche is led off to an asylum; Stella and Stanley, with their new baby, are left to face their future together. But their future is uncertain at best, their marriage permanently tainted by Stanley's rape of his wife's sister. In the film Jasmine is headed toward life as a bag lady; Ginger and Chilli look forward, less problematically than Stella and Stanley, to a chance of happiness despite their lack of money. Like Stella, Ginger believes that sex compensates for other deficiencies. Stella tells Blanche: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant" (321). Whether Stella still believes this at the end of the play as Stanley attempts to soothe her with his hand down her blouse is an open question. Ginger, by contrast, does seem to believe her own more pragmatic words when at the end of the film she retorts to Jasmine that Chilli's lack of refinement does not bother her because he is "sexy," as well as kind and a good father to her boys.

In adapting and updating character types, plot elements, and lines of dialogue from *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Allen acquires a measure of “cultural capital” as well as the building blocks with which he constructs his film.⁹ In a 2005 interview with Eric Lax, Allen remarked on his admiration for Williams and Chekhov along with his own difficulty in writing drama, as opposed to comedy (104). Appropriating the template of *Streetcar* seems to have enabled him to write one of his most successful dramatic screenplays. Sixteen of Allen’s screenplays, including that for *Blue Jasmine*, have been nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Original Screenplay (or Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen). Two of them won: *Midnight in Paris* (2011) and *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986). The latter, in turn, is a loose revision of Chekhov’s *The Three Sisters*, suggesting that Allen is especially inspired in writing dramatic screenplays when drawing on the work of a classic author he admires. Though nominated for best “original” screenplay, as a script *Blue Jasmine* is actually an updated intramedial adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*; as a film it is also a remediated adaptation (except insofar as Allen may channel Kazan’s film as well as Williams’s play).¹⁰ Linda Hutcheon defines an adaptation as “an extended, deliberate, announced revisitation of a particular work of art” (170). *Blue Jasmine*, as I have shown, is certainly an “extended” and “deliberate” revisitation of *Streetcar*, though Allen does not announce it as such, except implicitly within the film itself and in the choice of Blanchett to reprise, to an extent, her stage role as Blanche Dubois. Because the film is not an “announced” adaptation, because it so deeply assimilates and transmutes what it adopts, and because Allen himself is an *auteur* with a following of his own, two kinds of critical judgment that have plagued adaptation studies are fortunately irrelevant to any consideration of his particular achievement in *Blue Jasmine*. The film need not be and has not been subjected to outmoded “fidelity” criticism; nor has it been subjected by viewers who note the parallels to a misplaced value judgment to the effect that it is “not as good as” its “original.”¹¹

A more important critical question is the kind of cultural work performed by Allen’s revision of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Allen develops a lens through which audiences might understand and evaluate the content of *Blue Jasmine* and a filter through which he channels their emotions, especially in creating sympathy for Jasmine despite her complicity in a Madoff-like scam. Unlike Williams, however, Allen puts the focus of his film squarely on the socioeconomic rather than the metaphysical. In particular, Allen omits the symbiotic relationship between desire and death that both structures *A Streetcar Named Desire* and is one of the play’s chief themes.¹² In his early film *Sleeper* (1973) the protagonist, played by Allen, at one point thinks he is Blanche Dubois¹³; at the end he tells his girlfriend that sex and death are the only things that matter. In Allen’s film *Anything Else* (2003) a character quotes Blanche’s line about desire being the opposite of death. Given how much else he assimilates from *Streetcar*, the absence from *Blue Jasmine* of this major motif, which obviously struck a chord with Allen earlier in his career, is of considerable significance. In this post-recession film, sex is a commodity

for those with money and a palliative for those without, and the only kind of death that matters is social death. Loss of money leads to loss of face. Jasmine feels more shame in being seen by her former wealthy friends working in a shoe store than in being complicit in other people's financial ruin. It is actually her moment of unwillingness to be a commodity that in effect ruins her. Though she has turned a blind eye to her husband's affairs for years, when



she is forced to confront the truth that he is leaving her, she reports Hal to the FBI and so deprives herself of any future financial settlement. It is a moment of vengeance, but also of protest. And it destroys her.

A Streetcar Named Desire and the Madoff scandal seem an unlikely pairing. Yet in *Blue Jasmine* Allen makes the two stories he retells work together. He creates a portrait of social disgrace and psychological disintegration in a dehumanizing capitalist culture that puts style before substance

and despises failure. Only in madness can Jasmine find the release and the reassurance of continuing to live in a familiar, if imaginary, social space. Just as Blanche Dubois exits the real world she can no longer inhabit on the arm of the doctor, a kind stranger, a make-believe new beau, Jasmine, too, leaves reality behind and finally immerses herself in the absorbing conversation that we have heard snatches of intermittently throughout the film but that exists only in her mind.



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Notes

¹ Hutchings describes "Woody Allen's unique assimilation of literary texts throughout his career as a filmmaker," noting that "clearly he respects his sources, but he is equally willing to diverge from them whenever his own creativity demands it" (362). Gothard's "census" of literary and other allusions in Allen's films indicates that the allusions to Williams's plays are primarily to *Streetcar* (400).

² See, for example, reviews by Handy, Denby, Dargis, and Kermode. Blanchett's portrayal of Jasmine won her the Oscar for best actress.

³ As a couple of *Blue Jasmine*'s reviewers noted, Blanche wears "jasmine perfume" (*Streetcar* 285). Quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from *The Theatre of Tennessee Williams*. Vol. 1.

⁴ Pond.

⁵ See, for example, Amanda Peet's play *The Commons of Pensacola* (2013).

⁶ Blanche's comment to Stella, "I think of money in terms of what it does for you" (316), expresses a similar sentiment, but the emphasis is much more on the money itself in Hal's world.

⁷ Pond.

⁸ Information about the Madoffs in this paragraph is taken from Seal, Arvedlund, Henriques, and Sandell. Opinions varied as to Ruth Madoff's complicity; she may well have been ignorant of her husband's schemes. Similar to his use of *Streetcar*, Allen appropriates the broad outline of the Madoff scandal and also apparently even details from the Madoffs' private lives to construct his story. For example, the Madoffs liked to buy antiques (Seal 418); in one scene in the film Allen shows Jasmine and Dwight looking at antiques. Ruth apparently turned a blind eye to Madoff's affairs (Sandell 259); Ginger implies that Jasmine for many years turned a blind eye to Hal's affairs.

⁹ On the purposes for which adapters adapt see Hutcheon 91-93.

¹⁰ Schwanebeck explains the distinction made, primarily for commercial purposes, by the Academy Awards between original and adapted screenplay.

¹¹ See Whelehan 3; Hutcheon xxvi, 7.

¹² For the structural, thematic, and generic implications of the symbiotic relationship between desire and death in *Streetcar* see Foster 149-58.

¹³ In character he speaks Blanche's lines beginning "Physical beauty is passing ..."; his girlfriend (Diane Keaton) responds in the manner of Marlon Brando.

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