Summary

On a streetcar named Desire, Blanche DuBois travels from the railroad station in New Orleans to a street named Elysian Fields, where her sister, Stella, pregnant and married to Stanley Kowalski, lives in a run-down apartment building in the old French Quarter. Having lost her husband, parents, teaching position, and old family home—Belle Reve in Laurel, Mississippi—Blanche has nowhere to turn but to her one remaining close relative.

Thirty years old, Blanche is emotionally and economically destitute. The most traumatic experience in her life was the discovery that her husband—a poet whom she had married at the tender age of sixteen—was a homosexual. Soon after she had taunted him for his sexual impotence, he committed suicide. Their confrontation had occurred in Moon Lake Casino, ubiquitous in Williams’s plays as a house of illusions. In her subsequent guilt over his death, she found temporary release in a series of sexual affairs, the latest having involved one of her young students and resulting in her dismissal.

She is horrified at the circumstances in which her sister Stella lives and at the man to whom she is married. Polish, uneducated, inarticulate, and working class, but sexually attractive, he has won Stella by his sheer masculinity. Stella, according to production notes by director Elia Kazan, has been narcotized by his sexual superiority. A fourth important character, Stanley’s poker-playing companion Mitch, is attracted to Blanche. She is attracted to his kindness to her, for he is gentle in his manner, as Stanley is not. Blanche refers at one point to having found God in Mitch’s arms, a religious reference frequently made by Williams’s characters at important moments in their lives.

The action of the play, then, as in Greek tragedy, consists of the final events in Blanche’s life. Tensions grow between her and Stanley, even as her physical attraction to him becomes palpable. She expresses her contempt for his coarseness and animality. In scene after scene, she reminds him constantly of their cultural differences. Their hostilities develop into a Strindbergian battle of the sexes for the affection of Stella. Blanche eventually loses not only Stella but also Mitch, a possible husband.

The theatrically ironic climax occurs on Blanche’s birthday while Stella is in the hospital giving birth to her baby. Blanche has prettied up the apartment for her birthday. Drunk and inflamed by Blanche’s taunts into proving his superiority, Stanley rapes her in what is Williams’s most famous and most highly theatrical scene. Simultaneously repulsed and attracted by his sheer rawness, Blanche acts out her final rebellion against her genteel but sexually repressive background, as though to punish herself for violating her “soul.” Her struggle with Stanley is the last in a series of losses in Blanche’s life. Her delicate sensibility already strained to the breaking point when she had first arrived, she breaks down and at the end is led away to a mental institution.
As in *The Glass Menagerie*, there are candles, these on Blanche’s birthday cake. Like the lights that go out in Laura’s life and that forever after haunt Tom, Blanche’s are symbolically extinguished. In the red pajamas that Stanley wears for the occasion, the blue candles on the cake, the extravagantly old-fashioned dresses that Blanche wears, the festive decorations, and Williams’s use of music and lights, the illusions of Blanche’s world are highlighted. In contrast, the repulsive vulgarity and the attractive animality of Stanley’s world are symbolized in details such as the opening scene in which Stanley throws Stella a package of raw meat and the famous beer-bottle-opening scene at the birthday party. Such violently opposing images are the hallmarks of Williams’s highly theatrical poetry.

Even more than in *The Glass Menagerie*, when Tom descends the staircase of the Wingfields’ St. Louis apartment for the last time, Blanche’s arrival at the Kowalskis’ home suggests a descent into the lower regions. It is her final descent into a mythical underworld, in which, like Orpheus, she is psychologically mutilated and eaten. In this modern American variation of the Greek myth, which Williams dramatizes more directly in *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and more violently in *Suddenly Last Summer*, one of the stops the streetcar makes is Cemetery; the Elysian Fields, ironically, is Blanche’s last stop before her insanity and death.

The play’s strongest effects can be found in Williams’s use of language and in the many symbols. The lines remaining in the memories of those who have seen *A Streetcar Named Desire* epitomize the strong contrasts which lie at the center of the play: Stanley’s bullish bellowing of “Stella, Stella” and Blanche’s confession, “I have always been dependent on the kindness of strangers.” Brutishness and reason, body and soul, mastery and dependency vie for survival within Stanley and Blanche.

In the loss of Belle Reve and the acceptance by Stella of a new life—the world of Stanley and of the kind but inarticulate Mitch—Williams, like Anton Chekhov in *Vishnyovy sad* (1904; *The Cherry Orchard*, 1908), dramatizes the replacing of one era by another. Like August Strindberg in *Fröken Julie* (1888; *Miss Julie*, 1912), Williams sees the social aristocracy being replaced by a coarser but more vital one. Social Darwinism is the basis for the change. As Stella rejects the old values and asserts dominance, audience sympathy for Blanche’s vulnerability grows measurably. Regarded generally as Williams’s most compactly constructed play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a dramatization of a heroine with few, if any, peers in her impact on the consciousness of the American theatrical tradition.

**Additional Summary: Summary**

Two streetcars, one named Desire, the other Cemeteries, brings Blanche DuBois on a spring afternoon to the Elysian Fields address of her sister Stella, whom she has not seen since Stella’s marriage to Stanley Kowalski. Blanche, dressed in a fluttering white garden party outfit, jars with the shabbiness and menace of the neighborhood from her first appearance. The proprietress of the building admits her to the Kowalski apartment a few minutes before Stella’s return. One of Blanche’s weaknesses becomes immediately apparent when, after a successful search for Stanley’s whiskey, she drinks a half glass of it neat.

When Stella returns, Blanche makes only a token effort to hide her dismay at her sister’s new surroundings. Stella is happy with her wild man and regards Blanche’s criticisms with good-humored tolerance. Blanche turns on Stella and defends herself against a fancied accusation that she allowed Belle Reve, the family mansion, to be lost. When Stanley enters some time later, he greets Blanche brusquely. When he mentions her dead husband, Blanche becomes first confused and shaken, then ill. Later, while Blanche is in the bath, Stanley and Stella are free to discuss the implications of her sudden visit. Stella asks him not to tell Blanche that she is going to have a baby. Stanley, who is suspicious over the loss of Belle Reve and imagines himself cheated of property, tears open Blanche’s trunk looking for papers. Blanche enters and, using a pretext to get Stella out of the house, presents him with legal papers detailing the forfeiture of all the DuBois property.
Blanche demonstrates a bewildering variety of moods in this scene, flirting with Stanley, discussing the legal transactions with calm irony, and becoming abruptly hysterical when Stanley picks up old love letters written by her dead husband. Her reaction to the news of Stella’s pregnancy is reverent wonderment.

It is Stanley’s poker night with three cronies, one of whom, Mitch, is a large, sentimental man who lives with his mother. Stella and Blanche enter after an evening in the French Quarter that they extend to two-thirty in the morning to keep out of the way of the poker game. They cross into the bedroom, separated only by portieres from the living room, and meet Mitch leaving the bathroom. Blanche looks after him with some interest as he returns to the game. She begins undressing in a shaft of light through the portieres that she knows will expose her to the men in the next room. She dons a robe in time for Mitch’s next trip to the bathroom. Out of the game, he stops to talk to Blanche, and during their conversation she adopts an air of primness and innocence. Not wanting Mitch to see how old she really is, she asks him to cover the naked light bulb with a little Chinese lantern she bought in the French Quarter. They dance briefly to some music from the radio, but when the radio distracts the poker players, Stanley becomes violent and throws the radio out of the window, which sets off displays of temper that involve everyone in the house. Blanche and Stella flee to the upstairs apartment, leaving the men to deal with an outraged Stanley. When Stanley discovers that he is alone, he bellows up the stairway like a lost animal until Stella comes down to him.

The next morning Blanche persists in regarding as desperate a situation that Stella has long since accepted as normal. Blanche recollects an old admirer, Shep Huntleigh, who she thinks might rescue them. When Stella defends Stanley, Blanche retaliates with a long speech describing Stanley as a Stone Age man. Because the noise of his entry is covered by the sound of a train, Stanley hears the entire speech. To keep them from realizing that he overheard, he leaves and enters again. Stella runs into his arms.

Several weeks later, well into the humid Louisiana summer, Blanche is hoping for a proposal of marriage from Mitch, whom she is dating. One day, Stanley, who was been making investigations into Blanche’s conduct in Laurel, Mississippi, tortures Blanche with hints of what he has found out. After he leaves, a young man comes to the door to collect for the newspaper. Blanche makes tentative advances to him, and before he leaves, she kisses him very gently on the lips.

Later that evening, Blanche and Mitch return from a date. He stays on for a talk in which Blanche tells him she is hardly able to put up with Stanley’s boorishness any longer. Mitch almost ends the conversation by asking Blanche how old she is. His mother wants to know. Blanche diverts his attention from her age by telling him about her husband, whom she married when they were both very young. One evening, she discovered her husband in a sexual act with an older man. Later, while they danced to the Varsouviana at a casino outside town, she confronted him with her knowledge. Rushing outside, the young man shot himself. Somehow, the mood of this speech prompts the long-awaited proposal from Mitch. Blanche is incoherent with gratitude and relief.

On Blanche’s birthday, in the autumn, Stella prepares a birthday dinner, which Stanley spoils as effectively as he can. He tells Stella that Blanche was a prostitute at a disreputable hotel in Laurel, a hotel she was asked to leave, and that she lost her high school job because of an affair with a seventeen-year-old student. At first Stella refuses to believe Stanley, then she defends Blanche’s behavior as a reaction to a tragic marriage. Stanley gives the same information to Mitch, who does not appear for the birthday dinner. Stanley climaxes the scene by smashing the dinner dishes on the floor and giving Blanche his birthday present, a bus ticket back to Laurel. At this point, Stella reveals that she is in labor, and Stanley takes her to the hospital.

Much later that same evening, Mitch comes to the Kowalski apartment in an ugly mood. He repeats to Blanche the lurid details of her past that he learned from Stanley. She admits them angrily and volunteers even worse episodes. In the street outside the house, an old Mexican woman sells her flowers for the dead. Even though Mitch no longer wants to marry Blanche, he begins a clumsy sexual assault on her that she repels.
by screaming, illogically, that the building is on fire.

With the help of Stanley’s liquor, Blanche retreats into the safety of madness. By the time Stanley returns from the hospital, she is decked fantastically in scraps of old finery from her trunk. Stanley rapes her, their struggle underlined by jazz music from a neighboring bar and by a fight between a drunk and a prostitute in the street outside.

In the final scene, another poker game is in progress when Blanche is taken to an asylum. Stella cannot accept her sister’s claim that Stanley raped her, for to do so would mean the end of her marriage. To persuade Blanche to leave quietly, Stella tells her that Huntleigh came for her. When Blanche sees the attendants, she is frightened at first, but then quickly responds to their kindness. Mitch rages at Stanley and has to be pulled off him by the other men. Stanley comforts Stella’s weeping, and the neighborhood returns to normal, its values undisturbed.

**Summary: Scenes 1 and 2 Summary**

**Scenes 1 and 2**  
The play opens in a shabby district of New Orleans where Stanley Kowalski lives with his wife Stella. After they leave for the bowling alley, where Stanley is to play with his friend Mitch, a well-dressed woman arrives carrying a suitcase. This is Blanche DuBois, Stella's sister. Hardly believing that this is Stella's home, Blanche ungraciously accepts the invitation of the landlady, Eunice, to wait inside. She appears nervous and highly strung and searches out a supply of alcohol, supposedly to calm her nerves. When Stella returns they greet each other fondly, but there is a hint of unease between them.

On his return home, Stanley meets Blanche and they talk amicably, but as the conversation develops and as details of Blanche’s past come out—particularly her marriage to a husband who is now dead, and the loss of Belle Reve, the family's property—we see Stanley beginning to distrust her. Blanche makes herself very much at home, taking long and frequent baths and drinking Stanley's alcohol, even whilst making disparaging comments about Stanley and Stella's standard of living.

**Summary: Scenes 3, 4, 5, 6 Summary**

**Scene 3**  
The tension in the house continues in the next scene when the sisters return after an evening out to the house where Stanley is holding a poker party. Resenting the interest that Mitch, one of his friends, shows in Blanche, the now drunken Stanley shows his jealousy of Blanche and becomes violent with Stella, who we now know is pregnant. After retreating briefly upstairs to the Hubbells' apartment, Stella returns to Stanley and they go off to bed together.

**Scene 4**  
Despite this brutality and Blanche's attempts to persuade her to leave him, Stella insists that she loves Stanley and will not leave him. Overhearing Blanche's hostile comments about him, Stanley determines to follow his suspicions about her and to find out more about her recent past. He discovers that she left Laurel, her home town, because of rumors about her promiscuity and her relationship with a young student.

**Scene 5**  
When Stanley hints to Blanche about what he knows, she is clearly terrified that it will all come out and tries to present a glossed-over version to Stella, focusing on her fear of growing old alone and hinting at a possible future with Mitch. After Stella's departure, Blanche flirts with a young man who arrives to collect newspaper subscriptions.
Scene 6
Blanche and Mitch's date in the next scene is not a success, but when they return home they speak more openly and Blanche tells Mitch of her dead husband who, we gather, was homosexual, and shot himself when she discovered him in bed with another man. Mitch comforts her and they discuss marriage.

Summary: Scenes 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 Summary

Scenes 7 and 8
Shortly afterwards there is a birthday dinner for Blanche, but Mitch, having been told by Stanley about Blanche's past, does not show up. The meal is awkwardly silent and, to make it worse, Stanley presents Blanche with a bus ticket back home as a supposed birthday gift. Stella complains at his cruelty, but then goes into labor. Stanley takes her to the hospital.

Scene 9
Mitch then visits Blanche, who is alone in the apartment. In a drunken state he tells her that he knows about her past and, when she tries to explain, dismisses her explanation as lies. He tries to force her to have sex but she resists and threatens to call for help. Left alone again, she drinks more alcohol and loses herself in delusions of a rich millionaire who will look after her.

Scene 10
Stanley returns from the hospital to find Blanche dressed up in a ball gown and tiara, trying to pack her suitcase. He mocks her, tells her what he thinks of her, and allows his anger to be transformed into sexual violence as he carries her off to bed to rape her.

Scene 11
A scene change denotes the passing of time at this point and we next see Stella, returned from the hospital, unwilling to believe her sister's story and in agreement with Stanley that Blanche should be certified as insane. Blanche packs her things, believing that she is to leave with a rich admirer. While she is taking another bath and Stanley and his friends are again playing poker, a doctor arrives with a nurse from a mental hospital. Realizing what is about to happen, Blanche tries to escape, but is calmed by the gentle doctor. She leaves on his arm, stating that she has always placed her trust in the kindness of strangers. Stanley's friends are horrified and Stella is almost hysterical with tears, but Stanley remains calm and soothes his wife into acquiescence. Life, it is suggested, will continue.

Themes

A Streetcar Named Desire opens with the arrival of Blanche DuBois, a Southern belle who has lost her inheritance, at the New Orleans home of her sister Stella and Stella's husband Stanley. A conflict arises between Stanley and Blanche, and after several secrets about her past have been revealed, Stanley rapes Blanche while his wife is in the hospital giving birth. Stella, refusing to believe Blanche's accusations, gives consent for the increasingly hysterical Blanche to be placed in a mental hospital.

Class Conflict
A major theme explored symbolically in Streetcar is the decline of the aristocratic family traditionally associated with the American South. These families had lost their historical importance as the agricultural base of the Southern states were unable to compete with the new industrialization. A labor shortage of agricultural workers developed in the South during the First World War because so many of the area's men had to be employed either in the military or in defense-based industries. Many landowners, faced with large areas of land and no one to work on it, moved to urban areas. With the increasing industrialization which followed in the 1920s through the 1940s, the structure of the work force changed further: more women,
immigrants, and black laborers entered the workforce and a growing urban middle class was created. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 and the old Southern tradition of an agrarian family aristocracy ruled by men began to come to an end.

In the context of this economic and cultural environment, Blanche represents the female aristocratic tradition of the Old South. Belle Reve, her family home, is typical of the plantations that were being sold off as the aristocracy bowed out to the new urbanization. Blanche's ultimate fate can be interpreted as the destruction of the Old South by the new, industrial America, represented by an immigrant to the U.S., Stanley Kowalski. Referring to his courtship of Stella, Stanley revealingly observes that, "When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns [Belle Reve]. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it." By the end of the play, Stanley's aggression has triumphed over Blanche's inherited family superiority. As she departs for the mental hospital, her old-fashioned manners are still apparent when she says to the men, "Please don't get up." Their politeness in rising is a small gesture, however, considering their role in Blanche's destruction and in the fall of the Old South itself.

Sex Roles
Some of Blanche's difficulties can be traced to the narrow roles open to females during this period. Although she is an educated woman who has worked as a teacher, Blanche is nonetheless constrained by the expectations of Southern society. She knows that she needs men to lean on and to protect her, and she continues to depend on them throughout the play, right up to her conversation with the doctor from the mental hospital, where she remarks, "Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." She has clearly known sexual freedom in the past, but understands that sexual freedom does not fit the pattern of chaste behavior to which a Southern woman would be expected to conform. Her fear of rejection is realized when Mitch learns of her love affairs back home. By rejecting Blanche and claiming that she is not the ideal woman he naively thought she was, Mitch draws attention to the discrepancy between how women really behaved and what type of behavior was publicly expected of them by society at large.

Violence and Cruelty
Violence in this play is fraught with sexual passion. Trying to convince Blanche of her love for Stanley despite his occasional brutality, Stella explains, "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant." Eunice and Steve Hubbell's relationship also has this element of violence, and there is the unnerving suggestion that violence is more common and more willingly accepted by the female partner in a marriage than one would like to believe.

Blanche translates Stella's comment into the context of sexual passion, claiming that, "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." Stella asks, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" and Blanche responds, "It brought me here—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be." It appears that the connection in Blanche's past between violence and desire in some way contributes to the events within the time scale of the play. This is not to excuse Stanley's later act of violence or to suggest that Blanche brings it on herself—rather, Williams is demonstrating how a cycle of violence, combined with passion and desire, is hard to break.

Madness
Considering how Tennessee Williams' sister Rose was the recipient of a lobotomy, the theme of madness running through Streetcar in the form of Blanche's neurosis and self-delusion may reveal some of the playwright's fears about the instability of his own mental life. His lingering regrets and guilt about Rose's treatment may also be seen in Stella's anguished cry as Blanche is taken away: "What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?"
Characters: Characters Discussed

Blanche DuBois

Blanche DuBois (dew-BWAH), a desperate, neurotic woman who goes to New Orleans to stay with her younger sister Stella after losing her home and job in Mississippi. Blanche is haunted by guilt over the death of her young husband, who committed suicide after she confronted him about his homosexuality. She then became a nymphomaniac, scandalizing her hometown and losing her high school teaching job because of her relationship with a teenage boy. With no money, no home, and fading youth, Blanche clings to romantic illusions to sustain her self-image, even as she depends on Stella for shelter and emotional support. She still sees herself as the beautiful, refined mistress of Belle Reve, the former DuBois family plantation. Unable to accept the changes in her life, she turns to alcohol and romantic fantasy for escape. She hopes to solve her problems by marrying her brother-in-law Stanley’s friend Mitch, but he rejects her after discovering the truth about her past. First told to leave and then raped by Stanley, Blanche suffers an emotional collapse, retreating completely into the beautiful but delusional world to which she had tried so desperately to cling in reality.

Stanley Kowalski

Stanley Kowalski, Blanche’s brother-in-law. Stanley is earthy, unrefined, sensual, and sometimes violent, in every way the opposite of the image of Southern gentility Blanche tries to project. Stanley loves Stella, though he is possessive, dominant, and occasionally abusive toward her. He views Blanche’s presence as a threat to his position of power and control in his home. He distrusts her immediately because she cannot adequately explain the loss of Belle Reve, which represents a significant financial setback for him and Stella. He resents Blanche’s ill-concealed belief that she is better than him, yet he is sexually attracted to her at the same time. Stanley’s sexual frustration resulting from the lack of privacy in the small apartment intensifies his hostility toward Blanche. By informing Mitch of her sordid reputation, telling her to leave his home, and finally raping her, Stanley forces Blanche to acknowledge the truth about herself, but he also destroys her completely in the process, apparently without regret.

Stella Kowalski

Stella Kowalski, Blanche’s younger sister and Stanley’s wife. Stella is more realistic than her sister, accepting Stanley and his working-class world rather than trying to re-create the life of wealth and privilege that has long since vanished for the DuBois family. Stella also is more shallow and less sensitive than Blanche. Stella loves Blanche and feels sorry for her, but she cannot fully understand the emotional turmoil Blanche is experiencing. After a drunken Stanley hits Stella (who is pregnant), she returns to him partly because the sexual attraction between them is so strong. Stella is furious when Stanley reveals Blanche’s past to Mitch and tells her she must leave, but the impending birth of their baby seems to dispel her anger. Even when Blanche is being taken away to a mental hospital, Stella cannot bring herself to acknowledge the truth of what Stanley has done to her sister, refusing to believe Blanche and choosing to stay with Stanley.

Harold Mitchell

Harold Mitchell, called Mitch, a friend and coworker of Stanley. Mitch is a simple, kind man, devoted to his dying mother and attracted to Blanche in an old-fashioned, romantic way. He is somewhat shy and socially awkward, but he is the gentlest and most refined of Stanley’s friends. He seems to be the only person capable of understanding Blanche’s needs and relating to her. Mitch is very traditional, and Stanley’s stories of Blanche’s sexual escapades embarrass and horrify him. He takes similar offense to her deception, about both her age and her past. Drunk and humiliated, he verbally attacks Blanche, treats her like a prostitute, and brutally rejects her. When Blanche is being led away to the mental hospital, however, Mitch expresses disgust.
over Stanley’s behavior and remorse over his own actions.

Eunice Hubbell

Eunice Hubbell, Stanley and Stella’s upstairs neighbor. Eunice is a no-nonsense, practical woman who comforts Stella and shelters her after her fight with Stanley. She also encourages Stella not to believe Blanche’s story of the rape for the sake of Stella’s marriage.

Character Analysis: Blanche du Bois

Blanche DuBois is a complex individual who provokes strong reactions from the other characters. We know that she has been a schoolteacher in Mississippi but was asked to leave her job because of an involvement with a student, that she was once a Southern belle from a wealthy family, and that she has a failed marriage and dubious past from which she has fled. Her complexity comes not from her history or background, but from the varied and often inconsistent facades she presents. At once strong in her desires and determined in her claims on the men who are around her, and yet weak and forever looking for someone to take care of her, she gives off a series of conflicting signals. She is neurotic, psychologically deluded about her beauty and attractiveness, and perhaps also an alcoholic. Her sexual desires come through clearly from behind her talk with Mitch about keeping her reputation: when we see her flirting with the young man who calls at the door, we realize just how split her desires are from her surface talk and behavior. This point is made visually in the opening scene where the dainty and beautifully dressed woman who appears leads us to expect quite a different character to emerge than the brittle woman running from her past who begins to display her neuroses and obsessions during the course of the following acts.

Underneath Blanche's quite calculating exterior, there is always a hint of hysteria. In her stories about Belle Reve or her tales of previous lovers, there is something edgy in her conversation, a threat of something that might erupt if she is not handled carefully. This disjunction between emotional surface and depth is brought out throughout the play in the way that Blanche cannot face up to her past, but only reveals glimpses of it through her neurotic behavior and occasional comments. For example, she is forever taking baths as if to clean her conscience, but continues to talk about her past actions in terms which suggest that she has no conception of their moral implications. Admitting, for example, that it is her affairs which have led to her losing her job and being ruined financially, she can only ask Stella, in a roundabout fashion, "Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar [named Desire]? ... It brought me here.” In similarly oblique terms, she describes a passionate affair as "someone you go out with—once—twice—three times when the devil is in you.” Her flirtation with Stanley and the man at the door also suggest that she does not have the self-awareness to realize that what she is doing here is no different from the things she has done in the past which she claims to regret so much.

Not only does Blanche lack self-awareness, she is also utterly self-centered. As a house-guest in a small apartment, her behavior is intensely irritating. (If David Mamet's play Oleanna could be described as a play about a man who needs an answering machine, A Streetcar Named Desire is a play about a man who needs a guest room.) Not only must Blanche's presence disrupt Stanley and Stella's sexual intimacy, but it also spoils the routine of their everyday life, particularly because she is always in the bath when anyone else needs to use the bathroom. The fact that she freely (and dishonestly) drinks Stanley's whisky and that she sends the pregnant Stella off to run errands for her further emphasizes a selfish nature.

Yet, despite her contradictions, dishonesty, inconsistency, and selfishness, Blanche comes across as a sympathetic, if not entirely likeable, character. Williams himself commented that "... when I think about her, Blanche seems like the youth of our hearts which has to be put away for worldly considerations: poetry, music, the early soft feelings that we can't afford to live with under a naked light bulb which is now." Even
though her faults are plain to see, Blanche still commands pity. Williams thought that this pity was an important element of the play. In a letter to Elia Kazan, the first director of Streetcar, he answered a question which Kazan had put to him, saying, "I remember you asked me what should an audience feel for Blanche. Certainly pity. It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding with a capital M) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel 'If only they had known about each other.'" Perhaps part of the reason for this pity is that Blanche's tragedy does not come about only because of her actions, but because of the flaws of society itself. As the old gentility of the South is threatened by modernization and industrialization, and as women's roles become uncertain as they are caught between old ideals of beauty and gentility and the modern toleration of sexual license, Blanche appears to be stranded at a crossroads, with each choice of path risking society's disapproval and her ultimate destruction.

**Character Analysis: Stanley Kowalski**

Much of Stanley's character is seen through his relationship with Blanche. Stanley does not seem to have a life outside of the immediate action of the play, but when he is on stage he has a commanding presence, a quality underlined by Blanche's obvious sexual attraction to him. She even jokingly tells Stella that she has been flirting with Stanley to get him to see her side of the story about the loss of Belle Reve. While this may be her motivation, it's obvious that Blanche is genuinely attracted to Stanley and that flirting does not take too much effort on her part.

Blanche's response to Stanley's strong presence suggests that he is some kind of an animal. In earlier versions of the play, Stanley had a gentler, ineffectual side, but in the final writing of Streetcar Williams made him Blanche's complete opposite—angry, animalistic, and reliant on his basest instincts. These qualities are seen most clearly in Blanche's rather patronizing, but highly revealing comment to Stanley that "You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. To interest you a woman would have to ..." The sentence is finished off for her by Stanley, but what we suspect she would have said is what she later says to Stella: that the only way to live with a man like Stanley is to go to bed with him. For Blanche, Stanley's sexual appeal and his primitive nature are closely bound up together. It is from the charge of such opposing feelings as attraction and disgust, expressed in this case through Blanche's eyes, that the play gains much of its energy.

Although Stanley responds in kind to Blanche's flirtations, telling her that "If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you," we know that actually he despises her and is enjoying the power that comes from being aware of the feelings she has for him. Stanley's actions are what would now be described as "macho." But not only is he violent in his masculinity, he also appears to lack any sense of moral order: his rape of Blanche does not strike him as betraying any moral code, it is simply the outcome of their strained relationship and what he deems to be her inappropriate behavior in the immediate and more distant past.

This action is consistent with his character in the rest of the play and in the events which are meant to have taken place before the play begins. Stanley has power despite his lower social class, but, as he is well aware, it lies in his physical actions. Talking of his wooing of Stella and the difference in their social backgrounds, he comments, "I pulled you down off them columns and you loved it." The social significance of his physical action, like his later rape of Blanche, suggests that the sources of power have changed in American culture and that Stanley is willing to grasp at whatever power he can find in order to assert his place in the family and society around him.

Where Stanley does have an identity independent from that created by the events of the play, he could be said to represent the new social order of modern America as a contrast to the decayed gentility of Blanche's
Southern manners. This is also seen in the fact that Williams makes him an immigrant who is proud to be part of the new society of a multi-cultural America. As such an immigrant, he is not concerned about traditions or old hierarchies of land ownership or the power and wealth brought by family positions in society (he appeals instead to the local law of the Napoleonic code to prove that he has been swindled by Blanche's loss of Belle Reve). Stanley's determination to belong to American society and to claim his place there is emphasized by his impassioned outburst in response to being called a "Polack." As he forcefully explains, "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is one hundred percent American ... so don't ever call me a Polack."

**Character Analysis: Stella Kowalski**

Stella appears to be a simple character, but is actually more intriguing than her role as sister and wife to the play's two main protagonists would suggest. She acts as a foil to both characters, allowing their selfishness and emotional failings to be emphasized. She also acts as a measuring stick against which the audience can gauge society's reaction to the events portrayed on stage.

In relation to Stanley, Stella is sensitive and loving, practical and sometimes independent. She clearly loves Stanley, despite his many failings and his violence towards her, and she is willing to accept his temper as part of the passion they feel for each other: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant." She is carrying Stanley's baby, and indeed Stanley's rape of Blanche takes place while she is in the hospital giving birth. In her blinkered loyalty to Stanley at the end of the play and in her willingness to be reassured that what they have done for Blanche is right, her practical nature asserts itself: this is a marriage which she can convince herself she wants to save and will save for the benefit of herself and her child. Whether she is right or wrong to do this is not relevant: what is important to understanding the play is the knowledge that her action is not so unusual. Like many other people in society, Stella continues to function in her daily life despite considerable upheaval. Blanche draws attention to this stoical aspect of Stella's character when she comments, "I never had your beautiful self-control."

Stella's decision symbolizes a greater choice facing American society. She rejects Blanche's strategy of living in a glamorous past and chooses instead the rational, practical, sometimes flawed world which her marriage to Stanley represents.

**Character Analysis: Other Characters**

**Doctor**
The Doctor's role is to escort Blanche to the mental hospital. He is calm, professional, and treats Blanche respectfully in order for her to trust him.

**Pablo Gonzales**
Pablo Gonzales is the other player at poker along with Stanley, Mitch, and Steve. He is coarse and loud, a strong, physical character who is, according to the stage directions, "at the peak of [his] physical manhood." He also speaks Spanish.

**Eunice and Steve Hubbell**
Eunice and Steve Hubbell, the landlords who live upstairs from Stanley and Stella, are a vision of what Stanley and Stella could become. Eunice is overweight and run down from too many pregnancies while Steve is not particularly understanding or supportive of his wife. Domestic violence appears to be routine in their marriage. Despite their failings, however, Steve and Eunice are not unlikeable characters. They are hospitable and neighborly and take Stella in when she seeks refuge from Stanley. Their audible presence upstairs gives a
sense of the cramped living conditions in which the play's actions occur.

**Mexican woman**
The Mexican woman appears briefly, speaks only Spanish, and is described as "An old Mexican crone."

**Mitch**
See Harold Mitchell

**Harold Mitchell**
Mitch is "207 pounds, six feet one and one-half inches" and lives with his sick mother. He is a foil to Stanley: he speaks in a more refined way, he is gentle and restrained while Stanley is rude and sexually forward. Blanche is aware of his kindness and even comments on it, saying, "I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle." Mitch is concerned with proper behavior: in contrast to Stanley, who walks around in his T-shirt and speaks frankly (even proudly) of his sweaty body, Mitch refuses to take his jacket off because he fears he might be perspiring too much.

Mitch's attempted rape of Blanche therefore comes as a shock. The action suggests how male views of female behavior were so idealized that if a man discovered any deviation from accepted norms of virginity and chastity, his reaction would be extreme. Mitch's actions reveal him as a deluded and rather pathetic man who has not fully grasped how relationships work and who has closed his eyes to the fact that men and women can deceive one another.

It is, of course, Mitch's assault on Blanche which leaves her in such a genuinely forlorn state that she becomes vulnerable to Stanley's cruelty and unwanted sexual advances in the later scene. Although Mitch may be upstaged by his more powerful friend, his actions bring about the destructive ending of the play.

**Negro woman**
The Negro woman is a neighbor whose presence at the opening of the play reminds the audience of the cosmopolitan society in New Orleans. She is vulgar in her conversation, fun-loving and good-humored.

**Nurse**
The Nurse who accompanies the Doctor is cold and professional, severely dressed, and speaks in a voice which is "bold and toneless as a fire-bell."

**Young collector**
The Young Collector calls to collect newspaper subscriptions. He is polite, reserved, and surprised by Blanche's unexpected sexual advances.

**Critical Essays: Critical Evaluation**

Tennessee Williams was a prolific writer who published short stories, poems, essays, two novels, an autobiography, and dozens of plays. It is for his plays that he is most widely known. The most successful of these, in both commercial and critical terms, are *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961). All four received New York Drama Critics’ Circle awards, and both *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* won Pulitzer prizes. Although Williams received less critical acclaim in his later years, he is regarded as one of the foremost American playwrights of the twentieth century.

Williams claimed that for him writing was therapy. He was always open about his troubled family background: his father’s drunken violence, the unhappy marriage of his parents, his own mental breakdown,
and the insanity of his beloved sister, who as a young woman was institutionalized for the rest of her life. Williams did not hide that he was gay or that he was an abuser of alcohol and drugs. Although he denied that his writing was autobiographical, elements from his life appear frequently in his work.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams shows the reality of people’s lives, an enduring concern of his throughout his writing career. He wrote this play believing he was about to die, so he wrote about what he felt needed to be said. When it was first presented, the play was considered shocking because of its frank presentation of sexual issues.

Williams did not rely on realism alone to portray reality. In *A Streetcar Named Desire* as in other plays, he effectively uses dramatic devices to convey and enrich meanings. Most of the action of the play takes place in the Kowalskis’ apartment, but there is also action in the street. This action—the Mexican woman with “flores para los muertos” and the struggle of the drunk and the prostitute—provides not only local color but also a commentary on the main action. When Blanche first arrives at the apartment, a screeching cat is heard, a minor bit of stage business that helps create a sense of Blanche’s tension. The background music, too, is carefully contrived. The “Blue Piano” and the “Varsouviana” fade in and out according to what is going on in the minds of the characters, particularly Blanche. Blanche’s rape is accompanied by “hot trumpet and drums.”

The use of literary devices also underlines the meanings of the play. There are a number of significant names. Blanche DuBois, white woods, as Blanche herself points out “like an orchard in spring,” is clearly ironic. The family plantation was Belle Reve, a “beautiful dream” now gone. The Elysian Fields address of Stella and Stanley is an ironic comment on the unheavenly reality of the place, and Blanche arrives there by means of two streetcars, Cemeteries and Desire, which foreshadow the recurring images of death and desire throughout the play.

Death and desire bring Blanche to this low point in her life. She never recovers from the devastating death of her young husband, indirectly caused by the nature of his sexual desires. The deaths of her relatives are instrumental in reducing her to poverty, as do the desires, the costly “epic fornications” of her forebears. Her own promiscuous sexual desire destroys her reputation and her professional career. The rape by Stanley, which he claims is the culmination of a perverse desire they felt for each other all along, is the act that finally pushes her into insanity.

Just as Belle Reve is a relic of the plantation system that was the cornerstone of the civilization of the Old South, so is Blanche an anachronistic leftover from that culture. She is a southern belle, born to privilege and meant to be beautiful and refined, to read poetry, to flirt, and ultimately to marry and reproduce. Blanche is born too late in the history of her family and in the history of the South to inherit this legacy: The money is gone; the values are disintegrating. She hangs on to what vestiges of gentility she can, but this serves only to alienate rather than to shield her. Tender and delicate, like the moth she resembles, Blanche is unable to survive in the harsh reality of modern society.

There is more to the character of Blanche than merely the role of pathetic victim. She, too, has been active in her destruction. As she confesses to Mitch, she was not blameless in her husband’s suicide, for her cruel remark seems to have pushed him to it. “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” she says pathetically to the doctor who leads her away, and perhaps it is a search for “kindness,” some warmth of human response, that leads to her gross, self-destructive sexual promiscuity. Despite recognizing her own undeniable flaws, she makes very little attempt to disguise her contempt for those she feels are inferior to her in refinement, and she is willing to use Mitch and Stanley to provide for her. She is also cruel to Stella, the one remaining person who loves her, in criticizing Stella’s husband and her way of life.

If Blanche represents defunct southern values, Stanley represents the new, urban modernity, which pays little heed to the past. If Belle Reve is not going to mean a financial inheritance, Stanley is no longer interested in
Belle Reve. Williams’s stage directions indicate that Stanley’s virile, aggressive brand of masculinity is to be admired. However, Stanley, like Blanche, is an ambiguous character. His cruel intolerance of Blanche can be seen as justifiable response to her lies, hypocrisy, and mockery, but his nasty streak of violence against his wife appalls even his friends. His rape of Blanche is a horrifying and destructive act as well as a cruel betrayal of Stella. Ultimately, however, Stanley prevails. He gets rid of Blanche, who loses everything, and in the closing lines of the play, he soothes Stella’s grief, and their life goes on.

**Critical Essays: A Streetcar Named Desire**

The play begins with Blanche DuBois visiting her sister Stella and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski at their home in the French Quarter of New Orleans. Blanche says that she is there on vacation, but in fact she has lost the family mansion, Belle Reve, and her teaching position because of her sexual indiscretions, the last one with a 17-year-old boy.

Blanche is clearly an emotionally disturbed individual. When she was very young, she married a homosexual. When she found out, she accused him, and he shot himself. Afterwards she earned a reputation for sleeping with men indiscriminately, all the while pretending to be a Southern belle.

From the moment Blanche arrives, Stanley suspects that Blanche’s manners are a facade and is angered by Blanche’s constant insults of his vulgar ways. Stella, however, tries to satisfy both her sister’s and Stanley’s desires.

The climax comes when Stella goes to the hospital in labor. Stanley confronts Blanche with her concealed past, and Blanche replies, “I don’t tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth.” Stanley then puts on the pajamas he wore on his wedding night and rapes Blanche.

In the final scene, Blanche is clearly insane; a psychiatrist and a nurse are on their way to take her to an asylum. Blanche told Stella about the rape, but Stella refused to believe her. “I couldn’t believe her story and go on living with Stanley,” Stella says. Clearly she chose to believe a lie in order to stay happy--the same choice that her sister had made.

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**Critical Essays: Critical Overview**

*A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered in Boston and Philadelphia, then in New York on December 4, 1947, to almost unanimously laudatory reviews. *The New Yorker* described Streetcar as "deeply disturbing—a brilliant, implacable play about the disintegration of a woman, or, if you like, of a society."

*Streetcar* was highly praised by its first director, Elia Kazan, who, from his knowledge of Williams' character, was one of the first to point out psychological similarities between Williams and Blanche. Kazan noted that "I keep linking Blanche and Tennessee ... Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her ... I also noticed that at the end of the play—all was an author's essential statement—Stella, having witnessed her sister's being destroyed by her husband, then taken away to an institution with her mind split, felt grief and remorse but not an enduring alienation from her husband ... The implication at the end of the play is that Stella will very soon return to Stanley's arms—and to his bed. That night, in fact. Indifference? Callousness? No. Fidelity to life. Williams' goal. We go on with life, he was saying, the best we can. People get hurt, but you can't get through life without hurting people."

Other critics were not always so appreciative or understanding. The distinguished American critic Mary McCarthy summarized Blanche with considerably less sympathy, remarking that in her character Williams had "caught a flickering glimpse of the faded essence of the sister-in-law: thin, vapid, neurasthenic, romancing, genteel, pathetic ... a refined pushover and perennial and frigid spinster." McCarthy criticized Williams for crafting Blanche's character with the trappings of "inconceivable" tragedy and melodrama, commenting that the playwright's work "reeks of literary ambition as the apartment reeks of cheap perfume: it is impossible to witness one of Mr. Williams' plays without being aware of the pervading smell of careerism."

Audiences clearly disagreed: *Streetcar* ran for eight hundred and fifty performances on Broadway. It also won the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson Award.

The 1951 film adaptation won the New York Critics' Film Award and several Academy Awards.

**Essays and Criticism: Sex and Violence in A Streetcar Named Desire**

Woolway is an author, editor, and educator affiliated with Oriel College, Oxford, England. Her essay examines Williams's themes of sex and violence, as well as the way in which the two are linked.

Violence in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is fraught with sexual passion. Trying to convince Blanche of her love for Stanley despite his occasional brutality, Stella explains, "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant." Eunice and Steve Hubbell's relationship also has this element of violence, and there is an unnerving suggestion that violence is more common and more willingly accepted by the female partner in a marriage than one would like to believe.

Blanche translates Stella's comment into the context of sexual passion, claiming that, "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!— the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." Stella asks, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" and Blanche responds, "It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be." It appears that
the connection in Blanche's past between violence and desire in some way contributes to the events within the time scale of the play. This is not to excuse Stanley's later act of violence or to suggest that Blanche brings it on herself—rather, Williams is demonstrating how a cycle of violence, combined with passion and desire, is hard to break.

The attraction between Blanche and Stanley gains an interesting perspective when compared to a work of classical literature by the Latin poet Ovid. In *Metamorphoses*, Philomela is raped by her brother-in-law Tereus while visiting her sister Procné. He cuts out her tongue so that she cannot tell what he has done. Philomela, however, embroiders a story picture to convey to her sister the recent events and Procné, in revenge, kills their son and serves him up in a pie which she encourages Tereus to eat.

Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley assaults his sister-in-law while his wife is away (in this case giving birth to their baby). But there are two substantial differences in the events which build up to the story's climax.

First, in Ovid's story there is no suggestion that Philomela associates sex with violence. There is no history of her previous lovers or any attraction between her and Tereus. In Williams's play, however, the issue of rape is confused because of Blanche's previous attraction for Stanley as well as her promiscuous past.

In a rape trial today, evidence of a woman's past sexual behavior would be discounted. If force was used by a man during sex, he has committed rape regardless of how the woman behaved in previous encounters. Williams was aware that many Americans did not always sympathize with the victim—it was all too easy to condemn women for their "loose" behavior and claim that female victims of rape brought sexual violence upon themselves. An indication of the chauvinism that still thrived during the 1940s can be found in the reviews by certain critics who covered the premiere of *Streetcar*; they interpreted Blanche's fate as the punishment for a fallen woman.

The issue is further complicated by Blanche's complex psyche. When talking about the combination of passion and violence in love, she appears strangely fascinated and not entirely repulsed by the thought. Speaking elliptically of the sexual arousal which violence can bring, Blanche comments, "Of course there is such a thing as the hostility of—perhaps in some perverse kind of way he—No! To think of it makes me...." Violence is a phenomenon Blanche knows to be bound up with sex, even if she chooses to appear to Mitch as sexually naive.

A second important difference from Ovid's story is that Blanche's sister does not believe her story and, consequently, gives her no support. Whereas Procné concocts revenge on her unfaithful and violent husband, Stella is actually part of Blanche's downfall, supporting Stanley's cruel act of placing her in a mental institution. Not only is Stanley powerful, he is not checked in any way by the family structure that should provide some protection and support for Blanche. In this case, blood is most definitely not thicker than water.

Given that these two changes in focus appear to be deliberate, *Streetcar* paints a grim picture for women. Females in the play accept and perhaps even welcome sexual violence as part of life, and their family structures offer little protection from the predators.

Of course, there is more to it than that. It could be argued that *Streetcar* is only superficially about the roles and positions of women in society. Elia Kazan, *Streetcar's* first director, commented on the issues which hover beneath the play's surface: "I keep linking Blanche and Tennessee ... Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her. I understand the play by this formula of ambivalence. Only then, it seemed to me, would I think of it as Tennessee meant it to be understood: with fidelity to life as he—not us groundlings, that he—had experienced it. The reference to the kind of life Tennessee was leading at the time was clear. Williams was aware of the dangers he was inviting when he cruised; he knew that sooner or later he'd be
beaten up. And he was. Still, I felt even this promise of violence exhilarated him."

While Blanche is often compared to Williams himself, Stanley--according to Williams's biographers--is based heavily on the playwright's brutal father, who taunted Williams about his effeminacy when he was a boy. In this light, the central issue in *Streetcar* is not necessarily violence towards women, but Williams's personal experience of brutality and the self-destructive enjoyment of fear which came out in the homosexual promiscuity he practiced as an adult.

*Streetcar* can be seen as an attempt to work through the purgatory of this fear and self-destruction. In addition to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Streetcar* has referenced other classical models of literature. It is from Virgil's *Aeneid* that Williams took the name of the slum in New Orleans, "Elysian Fields": in Virgil's poem this is the place where the dead were made to drink water from the river Lethe to forget all traces of their mortal past. Both Blanche's drinking and her endless hot baths suggest that she is attempting to wash away her past and emerge through a sort of watery purgatory. She is not successful and the playgoer is left with little hope for Blanche's future. Through Blanche's bleakness and hopelessness, Williams expressed his own struggles with depression, moments of mental illness, and the alcohol and drugs that finally cost him his life.

Williams also offered a clue to the desolation and loneliness he felt in his often anonymous homosexual life in the play's epigram: "And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love, its voice / An instant in the wind [I know not whither hurled] / But not for long to hold each desperate choice."
The lines are from "The Broken Tower," by the poet Hart Crane who lived from 1899 to 1932. Like Williams he was homosexual and much of his poetry conveys a sense of isolation and failure. This is one of the last poems Crane wrote before committing suicide by jumping off the ship he was traveling on. He, presumably, was buried at sea, just as Blanche wished to be. The epigram is appropriate for a tragic play that tells the story of a woman's destruction at the hands of a cruel society.

Source: Joanne Woolway, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale 1997

**Essays and Criticism: The Structure of A Streetcar Named Desire**

A contributor to numerous journals, Mood served as an English professor at Ball State University. In this excerpt, he examines the symbolic nature of Blanche DuBois's entrance dialogue in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

One of the most provocative entrance speeches in drama is the well-known enigmatic statement by Blanche DuBois, the second of Williams' numerous compelling women, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

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BLANCHE [with faintly hysterical humor]: They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields!
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These words have often been noted and discussed for both their realistic and symbolic significance. They have never been examined, however, as a clue to the structural development and design of the play itself and of the course of the life and fate of Blanche as portrayed in the drama.

The statement can be seen as having two parts, the first of which ("take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries") deals with the events of Blanche's life before the play opens, and the second of which ("ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields") deals with the play itself.
During the course of the play, the audience learns the story of Blanche's life prior to the time of the drama. What is vividly unfolded to us is that Blanche had taken the streetcar named Desire, and had transferred to the one called Cemeteries. We learn of Blanche's youthful loving desire for Allan Grey, her young husband. It was indeed a loving desire, and Blanche was one who could love greatly:

When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me (A Streetcar Named Desire, New American Library, 1963).

This was loving desire, the same loving desire that Stella has for Stanley—not that "brutal desire" of which Blanche speaks. This is the loving sensual desire which leads not to death but to life and wisdom. It is that loving desire, that Eros, which, as Blanche sees, lights up the world.

But her discovery of her young husband's homosexuality and her shocked brutal words to him ["I saw! I know! You disgust me ..."] which result in his suicide—this traumatic event twists Blanche's loving desire into hate and self-loathing. And disgust and self-hate result in her life of destructive lust for young men. Thus her loving desire becomes brutal desire, unloving desire. It becomes that sheer lust which is a kind of real death. Blanche, in short, has transferred to the streetcar named Cemeteries. She is psychically dead, and cannot stand the light ["The dark is comforting to me."].

At that point in Blanche's life, the play begins. And "Cemeteries" takes on a subtly different meaning. Death can bring heaven or hell. Blanche can "ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields!" She can continue her course on the streetcar called Cemeteries toward the final death—or obtain heavenly bliss. And the latter will take six blocks. Another play by Williams, Camino Real, has no act divisions, only sixteen scenes (just as Streetcar has no acts, only eleven scenes. Blanche and Mitch have a moment of tenderness at the end of their first date. In response to this kindness, Blanche confesses to Mitch (and to the audience) the ugly story of how she destroyed her young husband. It is a remarkable moment of striking honesty. This moment of honesty elicits further kindness and even the beginning of love from Mitch: "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" And Blanche, "in long, grateful sobs" replies: "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!"

Thus, at the end of the sixth scene, the sixth block on her ride of death, Blanche indeed is on the threshold of finding "God," "Elysian Fields," loving desire. At that point, she has life within her grasp. It is the turning point of the play. But the opportunity passes. The very next scene quickly demonstrates that Blanche has resumed her illusions and games with Mitch, and thus her chance for life is lost. The final scenes portray this with an appalling inexorability. Had the incipient honesty and loving desire between Blanche and Mitch been nurtured with further openness and vulnerability, Stanley would never have raped her.

Near the end of the play, this fate is made explicit, The Mexican Woman appears, chanting her wares: "Flores? Flores para los muertes?" (Flowers? Flowers for the dead?) Blanche dimly realizes that she is dead, that she is still on the streetcar called Cemeteries, that she has missed the stop at Elysian Fields, that she is doomed to sterile dead lust, when, in a kind of real recognition, she observes in response to the old woman: "Death—.... The opposite is desire." She has dimly realized that desire is the opposite of death, that the desire which is the opposite of death is open, honest, forgiving, loving desire, the kind Stanley and Stella have for each other.

The most that Blanche can expect now is "Kindness." All that remains for her is her final tragic collapse.

Essays and Criticism: Theater Review of A Streetcar Named Desire

First published on December 4, 1947, this laudatory review by Atkinson appraises the play's debut and labels Williams's work as a "superb drama."

Tennessee Williams has brought us a superb drama, A Streetcar Named Desire, which was acted at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. And Jessica Tandy gives a superb performance as rueful heroine whose misery Mr. Williams is tenderly recording. This must be one of the most perfect marriages of acting and play writing. For the acting and play writing are perfectly blended in a limpid performance, and it is impossible to tell where Miss Tandy begins to give form and warmth to the mood Mr. Williams has created.

Like The Glass Menagerie, the new play is a quietly woven study of intangibles. But to this observer it shows deeper insight and represents a great step forward toward clarity. And it reveals Mr. Williams as a genuinely poetic playwright whose knowledge of people is honest and thorough and whose sympathy is profoundly human.

A Streetcar Named Desire is the history of a gently reared Mississippi young woman who invents an artificial world to mask the hideousness of the world she has to inhabit. She comes to live with her sister, who is married to a rough-and-ready mechanic and inhabits two dreary rooms in a squalid neighborhood. Blanche—for that is her name—has delusions of grandeur, talks like an intellectual snob, buoys herself up with gaudy dreams, spends most of her time primping, covers things that are dingy with things that are bright and flees reality.

To her brother-in-law she is an unforgivable liar. But it is soon apparent to the theatregoer that in Mr. Williams' eyes she is one of the dispossessed whose experience has unfitted her for reality; and although his attitude toward her is merciful, he does not spare her or the playgoer. For the events of Streetcar lead to a painful conclusion which he does not try to avoid. Although Blanche cannot face the truth, Mr. Williams does in the most imaginative and perceptive play he has written.

Since he is no literal dramatist and writes in none of the conventional forms, he presents the theatre with many problems. Under Elia Kazan's sensitive but concrete direction, the theatre has solved them admirably. Jo Mielziner has provided a beautifully lighted single setting that lightly sketches the house and the neighborhood. In this shadowy environment the performance is a work of great beauty.

Miss Tandy has a remarkably long part to play. She is hardly ever off the stage, and when she is on stage she is almost constantly talking—chattering, dreaming aloud, wondering, building enchantments out of words. Miss Tandy is a trim, agile actress with a lovely voice and quick intelligence. Her performance is almost incredibly true. For it does seem almost incredible that she could understand such an elusive part so thoroughly and that she can convey it with so many shades and impulses that are accurate, revealing and true.

The rest of the acting is also of very high quality indeed. Marlon Brando as the quick-tempered, scornful, violent mechanic; Karl Maiden as a stupid but wondering suitor; Kim Hunter as the patient though troubled sister—all act not only with color and style but with insight.

By the usual Broadway standards, A Streetcar Named Desire is too long; not all those Words are essential. But Mr. Williams is entitled to his own independence. For he has not forgotten that human beings are the basic subject of art. Out of poetic imagination and ordinary compassion he has spun a poignant and luminous story.

**Analysis: Places Discussed**

**New Orleans**

*New Orleans,* Louisiana city in which the Kowalskis live adds to the tensions inside the apartment. New Orleans just after World War II but before air-conditioning was a hot and humid place to live. Windows had to be kept open, which adds to the noise and sense of overcrowding in the Kowalski apartment. The apartment is in the French Quarter, known for incessant activity day and night. Noises of all sorts, from trains to cats to prostitutes to street vendors, constantly intrude upon the tiny space. Rowdy neighbors, also with their windows open, increase the sense of invaded privacy. Furthermore, music and vulgar merrymaking emanate from neighborhood bars. Indeed, the life outside is so much a part of the life inside that Tennessee Williams calls for a transparent wall so that outside images and activities may be seen through the apartment wall at crucial moments. Stanley, whom Williams describes as a “richly feathered male bird . . . a gaudy seed bearer,” loves the turbulence, and he contributes to it at every opportunity. Blanche, the essence of cultured southern womanhood, is flabbergasted by the endless clamor of New Orleans. Stella, the bridge between the two, is caught between her attraction to the crude and exciting vigor of Stanley and his New Orleans and her loyalty to Blanche and her background of old South gentility.

**Kowalski apartment**

Kowalski apartment. The entire action of the play takes place in and around the apartment of Stella and Stanley Kowalski, recent newlyweds. The two are from opposite backgrounds. Stanley is a working-class former army sergeant, who now works for a tool supply company. Stella is from Laurel, Mississippi, where her family for generations owned a large plantation outside town. The days of family wealth have gone, hence Stella’s journey to New Orleans to seek her fortune, where she meets and falls in love with Stanley, a man with little income.

Located ironically on a street called Elysium Fields (heaven), the apartment consists of a small kitchen area, a small bedroom area, and a bath. It is located near the railroad tracks in a poor section of the French Quarter. Blanche Dubois, Stella’s older sister, comes for a visit and is given a daybed in the kitchen. A curtain is hung between the kitchen and the bedroom area. All three must use the same bath. When it becomes obvious that Blanche’s visit will be a long one, tensions erupt, especially over the space occupied by Blanche’s luggage, which symbolizes to Stanley Blanche’s superior attitude to people with a less privileged background. To worsen matters, Blanche is addicted to taking long baths, especially as an escape when Stanley is at home, much to Stanley’s emotional displeasure and genuine physical discomfort.

**Desire Street**

Desire Street. New Orleans in all its earthiness and quirkiness is so much a motivator in the play that the work’s very title comes from a streetcar that ran along Desire Street. Williams also uses two other actual place names when he has Blanche say she was told to “take a streetcar named Desire, transfer to one called Cemeteries and get off on Elysian Fields.” This reciting of place names ironically contains the whole story of the play. It is the city of New Orleans, however, with its French Quarter’s permissive attitude, that drives Blanche and Stanley to the cultural war that ends in sexual brutality and tragedy.

**Belle Reve**
Belle Reve (bel rev). Blanche and Stella grew up at Belle Reve, a lovely, graceful antebellum plantation, fronted with white columns, whose name means “beautiful dream.” Located outside Laurel, Mississippi, it is the antithesis of the brawling, urban French Quarter. The two places serve as emblems of the irreconcilable and tragic conflict between Stanley and Blanche. Blanche comes to tragedy because she cannot give up “Belle Reve,” and Stella contributes to Blanche’s agony because she chooses Stanley’s New Orleans over Belle Reve.

Analysis: Historical Context

Many of the major themes of A Streetcar Named Desire are embodied in the history and culture of New Orleans. The lively setting of the French Quarter, with its streetcars, bars, entertainment, and jazz and blues music, provides a rich background for the emotional events of the play; the setting also draws symbolic attention to changes which were taking place in American society, especially in the South during the post-World war II years.

Napoleonic Code
When Stanley feels he is being swindled by Blanche's loss of Belle Reve, he appeals to the Napoleonic Code, a set of laws devised by the French and implemented when they ruled the region known now as Louisiana. The state of Louisiana continued to operate under some of the precepts of the Napoleonic Code, such as the Code's emphasis on inheritance law: any property belonging to a spouse prior to marriage becomes the property of both spouses once they are married. Stanley, therefore, is legally correct to claim that, by depriving Stella of her share of the family inheritance, Blanche has also deprived him.

The South
On a more general level, the play represents the decline of the aristocratic families traditionally associated with the South. These once-influential families had lost their historical importance when the South's agricultural base was unable to compete with the new industrialization. The region's agrarian economy, which had been in decline since the Confederate defeat in the Civil War, suffered further setbacks after the First World War. A labor shortage hindered Southern agriculture when large numbers of male laborers were absorbed by the military or defense-based industries. Many landowners, faced with large areas of land and no one to work on it, moved to urban areas. With the increasing industrialization that followed during the 1920s through the 1940s, the structure of the work force evolved more radically yet, incorporating large numbers of women, immigrants, and blacks. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 and the old Southern tradition of an agrarian family aristocracy ruled by men started to come to an end.

Women's Roles
Some of Blanche's difficulties can be traced to the narrow roles open to females during this period. Although she is an educated woman who has worked as a teacher, Blanche is nonetheless constrained by the expectations of Southern society. She knows that she needs men to lean on and to protect her. She has clearly known sexual freedom in the past, but understands that sexual freedom does not fit the pattern of chaste behavior to which a Southern woman would be expected to conform. Her fear of rejection is realized when Mitch learns of her love affairs back home. By rejecting Blanche and claiming that she is not the ideal woman he naively thought she was, Mitch draws attention to the discrepancy between how women really behaved and what type of behavior was publicly expected of them by society at large.

Writing of the play's setting, Williams noted that "I write out of love of the South ... (which) once had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember—a culture that had grace, elegance, an inbred culture, not a society based on money." Through the destruction of Blanche and her struggles with the contradictory demands of society, Williams expressed a lament for the destruction of the old South, making clear his understanding that such change was inevitable.
Analysis: Literary Style

Scene Structure
The most striking feature of Streetcar's dramatic structure is its division into scenes rather than acts. Each of the eleven scenes that make up the play ends in a dramatic climax, and the tension of each individual scene builds up to the tension of the final climax. This structure allows the audience to focus on the emotions and actions of Blanche—the only character to appear in every scene. The audience is sympathetic to Blanche because they see more of her inner thoughts and motivations than the other characters on stage. Note, for example, how only the audience is aware of how much alcohol she is drinking. The scene organization adds to the audience's sense of tragedy—Blanche's destruction is inevitable, signaling the inexorable passage of the drama and of her movement towards a final breakdown.

That Williams chose to organize his play this way may reveal his interest in film and the possibilities inherent in that medium for combining several visually dramatic incidents into a coherent experience. He also wrote a number of one-act plays during his career.

Motifs
In order to connect the separate incidents of Blanche's story, Williams provided dramatic motifs and details of setting which are repeated at significant moments during the play and which signal changes in mood and tone and highlight the reemergence of crucial themes.

As the title of the play suggests, the motif of the streetcar is a crucial one, pointing to the growth of the suburbs and the urbanization of the play as well as the unrelenting and unforgiving continuation of life itself. To arrive at Stella's apartment in New Orleans, Blanche must transfer from a streetcar called Desire to one called Cemeteries in order to get to the slum known as Elysian Fields. These were actual New Orleans names but their careful combination introduces the themes of death and desire that resonate through the play. Williams wrote that the streetcars' "indiscourageable progress up and down Royal Street struck me as having some symbolic bearing of a broad nature on the life in the Vieux Carre,—and everywhere else, for that matter." An element of the play which is always heard rather than seen, the streetcar nonetheless adds much to the mood of the play and is a continual but subtle reminder of the play's setting.

Music
Music plays a similarly important part in the stage craft of the play. Two kinds of music dominate: the first type is what Williams called "blue piano"—the blues music first associated with Southern Blacks. Later to develop into the music of New Orleans' bars and night clubs, it suggests unrestrained physical pleasure, animal strength and vitality and appears at significant emotional moments in the play—for example, when Blanche tells of the loss of Belle Reve and when she hears about Stella's pregnancy. It is also heard during moments of leisure, when people are drinking and having fun. But, in a darker mood, it appears at the moment of the rape in scene ten, signifying animal desires, and again at the very end of the play when Stanley is consoling Stella and enabling her to forget about Blanche.

In contrast to the recurring blue piano, which highlights the animal emotions of some characters, the polka known as the Varsouviana, heard only by Blanche, signals crucial moments in the development of the plot. Once the audience discovers that this music reminds Blanche of the scene on the ballroom floor when she renounced her husband, one anticipates imminent disaster whenever the music appears and reappears—particularly in the last scene of the play. It also accompanies moments of cruelty, like Stanley's gift to Blanche of a bus-ticket back home.

Both kinds of music underline the nature of the situation which is being played out on stage and stress the location of the play's actions both in the past lives of its characters and in the cultural context of New Orleans.
The dramatic organization of the play into scenes which build, through recurring themes and motifs, on the ongoing tension of the play suggest the accuracy of Arthur Miller’s description of Williams’ “rhapsodic insistence that form serve his utterance rather than dominating and cramping it.”

Analysis: Compare and Contrast

1947: Hungary becomes a Soviet satellite after Hungarian Communists, backed by the Red Army, seize power while Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy is on holiday. Anti-Communist sentiment builds in the U.S. The Truman Doctrine announces plans to aid Greece and Turkey and proposes economic aid to countries threatened by Communist takeover. The CIA is authorized by Congress to counter Moscow’s attempts to establish governments through local Communist parties in Western Europe.

Today: Communism has all but broken down since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Revolutions in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany, as well as the break-up of the Soviet Union have eliminated many of the barriers between East and West. Eastern European countries are now undergoing a slow and difficult transformation to a market economy.

1947: New technology: the first commercial microwave oven is introduced by the Raytheon Co. of Waltham, Massachusetts. Tubeless automobile tires, which seal themselves when punctured, are introduced by B.F. Goodrich. Howard Hughes’ new seaplane, the Spruce Goose, the largest plane ever built, takes off for a one-mile flight across Long Beach Harbor before it is retired for good.

Today: Most American homes have a microwave, as well as toasters, coffee makers, freezers, and numerous other examples of electrical gadgetry. Cars are commonplace but their emissions, along with those from airplanes and heavy industry, contribute to the global problem of pollution.

1947: New consumable goods appear as America begins to recover from the effects of the Second World War. Frozen orange juice concentrate sales in the U.S. reach seven million cans. Reddi-Whip introduces whipped cream in aerosol cans. Sugar rationing ends on June 11. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is marketed for the first time, and butylated hydroxyamsole (BHA) is introduced commercially to retard spoilage in foods.

Today: Annual sales of convenience food reach new heights every year. Processed and “fast” food is readily available to Americans; consumers who maintain unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles significantly increase their risk of contracting heart disease and cancer. Additives are common in food and new developments, such as genetically engineered foods, continue to make headlines.

Analysis: Topics for Further Study

Investigate the emergence of industrialization and the decline of the old Southern aristocracy in the USA and analyze what bearing this has on A Streetcar Named Desire.

With whom does the audience's sympathy lie in A Streetcar Named Desire? Blanche? Stanley? Both? Neither?

Discuss the importance of New Orleans—its geography, its transport system, its laws, its music and culture—as a setting for A Streetcar Named Desire.

Examine the scene structure of A Streetcar Named Desire, paying particular attention to the beginnings and endings of scenes and the dramatic climaxes that they create.
Analysis: Media Adaptations

In addition to its successful run on Broadway, *A Streetcar Named Desire* was made into a film by Warner Bros, and was released in 1951. Many of its original cast were retained, including Marlon Brando as Stanley, but Jessica Tandy, who played Blanche, was replaced with Vivien Leigh. The film, directed by Elia Kazan, received numerous Academy Award nominations and carried off four Awards, including Best Actress for Leigh and Best Supporting Actress for Kim Hunter (Stella).

A made-for-television version appeared in 1984 with Ann-Margret as Blanche. Although this production reinstated some of the material which the censors had objected to in the 1950s, critics found it lacking in the spark and chemistry of the earlier version.

An unrated television version of 1995 recreated the 1992 stage version which starred Jessica Lange and Alec Baldwin. Again, it is truer to the dialogue and actions of the original stage production than the censored 1951 film.

Two sound recordings are available: HarperCollins's 1991 version stars Rosemary Harris and James Farentino in a 1973 recording of a production at the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center. Caedmon's 1985 publication is from the same production.

The play was adapted by the Dance Theatre of Harlem featuring Virginia Johnson as Blanche.

Analysis: What Do I Read Next?

Stanley Clisby Arthur's *Old New Orleans* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1990) provides an insightful picture into the setting of Williams' play and a view of the American South in the first half of the twentieth century.

Williams' earlier play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), also portrays a Southern belle, Amanda Wingfield, who represents the playwright's ambiguous feelings about his mother's pretensions, possessiveness, and insensitivity. She also shares some similarities with Blanche Du Bois.

The memoir of Williams' mother, *Remember Me to Tom* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), provides insight into the relationship between mother and son. This account was ghost-written by Lucy Freeman.

Margaret Mitchell's 1936 bestseller, *Gone With the Wind*, is set in the antebellum era in the American South on through the aftermath of the Civil War. Depicting the porticoed mansions of Southern planters, the suffering of black slaves, and the unspoiled glamour of Southern belles, this novel (and the more famous film, which, like *Streetcar*, starred Vivien Leigh) was one of the last popular works to idealize the South.

Bibliography: Bibliography and Further Reading

A historical exploration of New Orleans that provides background to *Streetcar*'s setting.

A collection of critical essays contextualizing Williams' work with that of other modern writers, drawing out psychological similarities between Williams, Hart Crane, and Arthur Rimbaud.
Falk, Signi, *Tennessee Williams*, New York: Twayne, 1961. An intelligent discussion of Williams’ life and works in which the plays are organized into thematic groups and attention is drawn to recurring character types.


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Hayman, Ronald. *Tennessee Williams: Everyone Else Is an Audience*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993. Biographical study that examines how Williams used events from his life and characters he knew, including himself, as source material for his drama.

Miller, Jordan Y., ed. *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “A Streetcar Named Desire.”* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971. Excellent collection of twenty essays and reviews divided into two sections that treat the play as commercial theater and as dramatic literature. Provides views from a variety of critics and includes a notebook of the director of the original production.


Weales, Gerald. *American Drama Since World War II*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1962. Places Williams’ work in the context of his time and questions the world and the values that Williams depicts as those of his characters, which often represent marginalized “fugitive types.”