I can recall where I was sitting at that first Streetcar viewing. It took only a few minutes to realize that the play and the production had thrown open doors to another theater world. This was not due to any invention in the play's structure, with its tangible, realistic story-telling line. Rather, it was the writing itself that left one excited and elevated. In a word, this play made it seem possible for the stage to express any and all things and do so beautifully. What Streetcar's first production did was to plant the flag of beauty on the shores of commercial theater. The audience, I believe, somehow understood this and was moved by what, in effect, was a kind of tribute to its intelligence and spiritual vitality. For the play, more than any of Williams' other works before or afterward, approaches tragedy and its dark ending is unmitigated.

—Arthur Miller, Introduction to the New Directions edition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 2004

Few other single plays have asserted such a seismic shock that shifted the dramatic landscape or can comparably claim milestone status as Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Indeed, American theater can be divided into before and after *Streetcar*. With it American drama in the post–World War II era gained a new subject, vocabulary, and grammar, as well as a new openness to deal with taboo subjects. Complex and hidden emotional and sexual drives that had never before been explored on an American stage were suddenly manifest with all their force and threat creating an electrifying experience for audiences. While opening up new fields for exploration Williams expanded the limits of existing theatrical practices by pioneering a new fusion of realistic, symbolic, and expressionistic techniques. He also added to the modern theatrical arsenal a lyricism that exploited the poetic and subjective possibilities of language, setting, and situation.

Moving away from the drama of social protest that had dominated serious American drama in the 1930s, Williams rejected the role of sociologist, arguing that "What I am writing about is human nature." If his *The Glass Menagerie* (1944) signaled the arrival of a powerful, new force in American drama, *Streetcar*, which Williams considered his best play, represented the fulfillment of that promise. When it premiered, critic Joseph Wood Krutch wrote: "This may be the great American play." Critic Jordan Miller has called it "a work as important as any other written for the American stage" and "as close to genuine tragedy as any modern American drama." Testifying to the play's hold on the imagination and persistence as an influence, reviewer T. E. Kalem has observed: "The inevitability of a great work of art is that you cannot imagine the time when it didn't exist. You can't imagine a time when *Streetcar* didn't exist."

The play dramatizes passions and torments with the intimacy and familiarity of firsthand experience. "My work is emotionally autobiographical," Williams told an interviewer. "It has no relationship to the actual events of my life, but it reflects the emotional currents of my life." The actual events and the origins of those emotional currents are these: Born Thomas Lanier Williams, in 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, Williams was the son of a traveling salesman from Tennessee and a Mississippi minister's daughter. With his father often on the road, Williams, his mother, and his older sister, Rose, lived in his grandfather's rectory. As a young child Williams survived a near-fatal bout of diphtheria that left him physically weakened and under the constant care of his overprotective mother. The boy's shyness, sensitivity, and dependence provoked the scorn of Williams's extroverted and robustly masculine father who nicknamed his son "Miss Nancy." When Williams was eight the family moved from rural Mississippi to St. Louis, Missouri, where his parents' marriage collapsed under the pressure of his father's increasing drinking and his mother's resentment about the move from her family, home, and her comfortable place in genteel southern society. Her son similarly felt displaced from a protective environment he described as "a dark, wide, open world that you can breathe in" to "a city I loathe." The imaginative opposition between city and country, North and South, romanticized past and dehumanizing and oppressive present would become central polarities in his writing. Often bullied by children in the neighborhood, Williams found his defense, and compensation, in reading and writing poems, plays, essays, and stories. His writing was "an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge." Williams's sister, Rose, similarly retreated inwardly, becoming increasingly afflicted with the schizophrenia that would lead to her being institutionalized.

In 1929 Williams entered the University of Missouri, but, after failing his officer training course in his third year, his father withdrew his son from school to labor for three years in a shoe warehouse. The experience, which Williams called "a living death," led to a nervous breakdown in 1935, followed by a year convalescing in Memphis under the care of his grandparents. It was during his recovery that Williams had his first play produced, *Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay!*, a farce.
Having elicited praise for his compassionate portrait of a frustrated family in *The Glass Menagerie*, in *Streetcar* Williams concentrates on the more elemental, starker passions of another family triangle. Williams would later warn that, having put "all the nice things I have to say about people" in *The Glass Menagerie*, his subsequent writing would deal with more challenging, harsher subjects. Like *The Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar* is organized in a series of scenes but without the earlier play's narrator providing transitions and commentary. Blanche DuBois is a more conflicted and damaged version of Amanda Wingfield. Both are southern belles relying on memories of past triumphs to offset a shabbier present, but the conflict between appearance and reality confronting Amanda is played out within Blanche in the battle between aspects of herself as a genteel figure of culture and refinement and as an earthbound seductress. Underscoring the division of Blanche's nature, Williams brings her into collision with her polar opposite, Stanley Kowalski, the all-American brute, who will assault Blanche, literally and figuratively, prompting her psychic break. Set in postwar New Orleans, the play opens with Blanche's arrival at Elysian Fields, the rundown slum where her sister, Stella, is living with her husband Stanley. The play's title emphasizes the journey of the play's protagonist, while Blanche's route to her new home ("They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries.") establishes the play's central conflict between desire and death, Eros and Thanatos. The play's naturalistic depiction of New Orleans's street life whose sights and sounds periodically invade the Kowalskis' apartment serves a symbolic and expressionistic function as objectifications of Blanche's mental disorientation and ultimate disintegration. Blanche has left the family mansion of Belle Reve after it and her job in Laurel, Mississippi, as a teacher have been lost. As Kazan records in his production "Notebook," the dispossessed and alienated Blanche has come to her sister searching for a place where she can "belong." Each of the play's 11 scenes represents, according to Kazan, a step in Blanche's "progression from arrival to expulsion," in what the playwright called a "tragedy of incomprehension."

In the initial scene Blanche, assuming the role of demure, prim southern lady, adjusts to the shock of Stanley, whom she will call a "survivor of the stone age," her sister and brother-in-law's apartment, and the neighborhood ("Only Poe! Only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!—could do it justice! Out there I suppose is the ghoulish-woodland of Weir!"). The threat Blanche perceives outside the small apartment is more than matched by Stanley within, who early on perceives Blanche as a rival for Stella, is suspicious of Blanche's past, and responds to her genteel airs by bullying and taunting boorishness. In scene 3, "The Poker Night," Blanche flirts with Stanley's friend Mitch as the most sensitive of the card players, provoking a violent outburst by Stanley, who strikes the pregnant Stella. Seeking refuge in the upstairs apartment, the sisters are momentarily united before Stella returns to the supplicating Stanley. Williams's stage direction underscores the sexual shock of the play, intensified by a seething and iconic Marlon Brando in the debut production.
Stella slips down the rickety stairs in her robe. Her eyes are glistening with tears and her hair loose about her throat and shoulders. They stare at each other. Then they come together with low, animal moans. He falls to his knees on the steps and presses his face to her belly, curving a little with maternity. Her eyes go blind with tenderness as she catches his head and raises him level with her. He snatches the screen door open and lifts her off her feet and bears her into the dark flat.

Having lost the battle to separate Stella from Stanley, Blanche concentrates her efforts on winning Mitch, even as her carefully constructed facade as a prim and proper schoolteacher begins to crumble under Stanley's investigation of her past behavior. Blanche confesses to Mitch the central trauma of her life: the suicide death of her young husband when she had humiliated him after discovering him in bed with another man. Mitch reacts to Blanche's tragic tale with sympathy, embracing her and saying, "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" Blanche responds to his proposal and embrace by answering, "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly." Blanche's triumph with the truth and refuge with Mitch prove short lived, however. As Stella prepares Blanche's birthday dinner and her sister is heard singing merrily in the bathroom, Stanley arrives to tell his wife that the stories he has heard about Blanche are true, that she had been forced from a disreputable hotel in Laurel as a prostitute and had lost her high school teaching job after the discovery of her affair with a 17-year-old student. Mitch fails to arrive, and Stanley's birthday gift to his sister-in-law, after he has cleared the table by smashing the dinner dishes, is a one-way bus ticket home to Laurel. As the scene ends Stanley accompanies his wife, whose labor has begun, to the hospital. Blanche is left alone and isolated to endure the first of two violations as an angry Mitch finally appears. Declaring that he has never seen her in the light, Mitch tears the paper lantern off the bulb "So I can take a look at you good and plain!" Horrified, Blanche asked if he intends to be insulting. Mitch answers that he just wants to be realistic, to which she responds: "I don't want realism. I want magic! Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what ought to be true." Blanche's admission leads to her recounting the sordid details of her promiscuity: "After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with…. I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection—here and there, in the most—unlikely places—even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy." The urgency of Blanche's need is symbolically underscored when a blind Mexican woman appears outside the apartment selling flowers for the dead: the state she has resisted with desire. Death has been Blanche's principal legacy, caring for her dying family and the passing of their way of life. "Death," Blanche says, "was as close as you are…. The opposite is desire. So do you wonder?" Mitch responds not with understanding but by his own sexual desire, confirming Blanche's humiliation as sexual object. Rejecting her as a marriage partner Mitch declares: "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother."

The consummation of Blanche's objectification occurs when Stanley returns from the hospital. Blanche has retreated into the fantasy of being rescued by a former beau, Shep Huntleigh. As a drunk outside struggles with a prostitute, inside Blanche futilely resists Stanley's advances with a broken bottle. Cornering her, Stanley declares before the rape: "We've had this date with each other from the beginning," Williams's stage directions indicate: "He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed. The hot trumpet and drums from the Four Deuces sound loudly." In the final scene Stella has returned home with her baby, and another poker game is in progress as Blanche is taken away to an asylum. Stella refuses to believe her sister's claim that Stanley has raped her, and Blanche's insanity is required for her to go on with her life with Stanley. To convince Blanche to leave quietly Stella tells her that Shep Huntleigh has come for her. When Blanche realizes the truth she is at first terrified but becomes compliant due to the respectful solicitude she receives from the doctor, as she delivers her memorable exit line: "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." The irony is multiple: Blanche has received precious little kindness from either family or friends, and the kindness she is now forced to depend on from strangers is more delusional than real. Blanche retreats, excluded from the world that has little time for or understanding of her strengths or failings, for her magic or truth as it ought to be. Blanche, however, claims a tragic dignity as a romantic dreamer driven by and ultimately destroyed by her and others' desires. At the end of the play Stanley "voluptuously, soothingly" comforts his sobbing wife, indicating that with Blanche's departure life for them will resume as before. The audience, however, is aware of the loss and human waste represented by Blanche's journey illuminated by a drama that is simultaneously psychologically astute, electrifying, and mythic in its capacity to represent the human condition.