Cruelty abounds in Tennessee Williams's masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire*, much of it inflicted on the play's central character, Blanche DuBois. Stanley Kowalski's cruelty predominates among the indignities Blanche suffers, but his is still only one aspect of this fragile woman's suffering, which seems to pervade her very existence.

Before the play's present action, Blanche suffered tremendous hardship. In a sense, the world is cruel. Her great love and husband, Allan Grey, was a closet homosexual whom she found in bed with another man. Although Blanche treated Allan cruelly, telling him, "You disgust me," society had forced the boy into secrecy in the first place, and Blanche became a victim as well when she learned Allan's secret. That the young man committed suicide only increases her guilt.

When Blanche arrives at the dingy New Orleans apartment belonging to her sister, Stella, and Stella's husband, Stanley, she receives no relief from the world's brutality. For instance, although a seemingly gentle soul, Stanley's friend Mitch ultimately treats Blanche cruelly when she is at her most desperate. Mitch begins dating Blanche shortly after she moves in with her sister and brother-in-law. That he cares for his sick mother endears him to her. However, when Mitch learns of Blanche's sordid sexual past, he abandons his gentlemanly manner, first failing to appear at Blanche's birthday party and later arriving drunk at the Kowalski apartment, where he confronts Blanche unsympathetically, although he knows the story of Allan Grey. Near the end of the scene, Mitch approaches Blanche in a sexual manner, telling her he wants "[w]hat I been missing all summer." But when Blanche asks for marriage, he cruelly states, "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother." Their relationship abruptly ends there.

Neither is any succor found for Stella, the sister Blanche turns to after she is run from Laurel, Mississippi, when she is caught with a 17-year-old boy in a hotel. Alarmingly, after Blanche tells her sister that Stanley has raped her, Stella tells her upstairs neighbor, Eunice, "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley." Eunice's response is equally alarming: "Don't ever believe it. Life has to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going." All this implies that Stella willfully denies the truth. She even calls the psychologist who leads Blanche to a mental asylum at the end of the play.

Even amid the other indignities brought upon Blanche, Stanley's cruelties far outweigh the others. In fact, anyone who attempts to change the status quo he creates in his house meets Stanley's fury. He struts around the stage like a peacock in his brilliant green bowling shirt and silk pajamas, seeming to seek confrontation. Although he is offended when others call him a Polack, Stanley refers to Pablo as a "greaseball" when the latter curses him in Spanish. Stanley chides Mitch about his sick mother, offering to get his friend a "sugar-tit" when his mother dies. In act 1, scene 3, after suffering a losing night at the poker table, he takes his bad luck out on Blanche, refusing to let her play the radio and destroying it when she insists on doing so. In the same scene, he strikes Stella when she comes to Blanche's defense. Later in the play, although he knows Blanche has nowhere to go, he gives her a one-way ticket out of New Orleans as a birthday present. Most horrifically, he rapes Blanche on the same night his son is to be born, goading her into a fight before doing so. Although Williams told Elia Kazan, the director of the original Broadway production, that each character views the others through his or her own prejudices, such an attempt to elicit sympathy for this monster falls short.

Williams's depiction of the cruelties heaped on Blanche DuBois stands as one of the most moving accounts of any character in modern American drama. Here we have the last victim of the Old South, one who inherits the trappings of that grand society but pays the final price for the inability to adapt to a modern world that seeks to wipe grace and gentility out of existence.