



STUDYING A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE



English
& Media
centre

An EMC Advanced Literature Resource

Acknowledgements

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The final scene of the original Broadway production of Tennessee Williams' play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is shown on December 17, 1947, in New York City. The cast includes Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Jessica Tandy as Blanche. AP/Press Association Images. Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois and Vanessa Kirby as Stella Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Young Vic Theatre, London, UK; 2014 Credit : Nigel Norrington / ArenaPAL. *A Streetcar Named Desire* at the Guthrie; Photo credit © T Charles Erickson tcharleserickson@photoshelter.com. *A Streetcar Named Desire* set concept by William Dudley (© William Dudley)

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Dancing at a juke joint near Clarksdale, Mississippi, in 1939 New Orleans downtown street, Louisiana c. December 1935 © Public Domain; Felix's Bar and Restaurant – New Orleans, La. Created/Published: Nationwide Advertising Specialty Co; San Francisco plantation home near Reserve Louisiana in 1938: State Library of Louisiana Historic Photograph Collection

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INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

This photocopiable resource is intended for advanced level students of English literature and language & literature. It provides resources and activities to support students in exploring and analysing *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a literary text and as a drama script in production.

The material is divided into:

- Before reading
- Activities on each scene to support a reading of the whole play
- After reading
- Resources and additional reading

The play is set in its literary, generic and historic context, with activities to support students in using this contextual knowledge effectively. There is a particular focus on New Orleans and the American South, Williams' 'plastic theatre' and the first production, all of which are used to illuminate the play. Critical material is used throughout the resource to sharpen up students' own responses and to suggest new ways of interpreting the text.

The material draws on literary, stylistic and creative approaches to critical analysis, providing ways of engaging with the play's structure, language, characterisation and dramatic qualities, as well as its themes and ideas.

Throughout the resource students are encouraged to balance close analysis of individual scenes, with a sense of the play as a whole, its development, structure and shape.

In the Resources section (pages 92-95) key aspects of the play are presented as cards, with ideas for how to use them for revision. They can also be used during reading as students investigate themes, symbols and motifs, the play's structure or Williams' use of music.

Finally, on page 96 there is a list of the texts which have proved particularly useful in preparing this publication. Teachers and students wanting to follow up extracts included in this resource or pursue their interest in *A Streetcar Named Desire* and Williams' dramatic art more generally will find them interesting and illuminating. There is also a list of the articles currently available (February 2016) in *emagazine*, the English and Media Centre's subscription website for advanced level students.

A note on the text

Extracts and quotations from *A Streetcar Named Desire* are taken from the Penguin Classics edition (2000) edited by E. Martin Browne.

Notes on activities

'Taking a leaf out of Blanche's notebook – analysing the dialogue' (page 75)

The snippets of dialogue are spoken by the following characters:

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|-------------|
| 1. Blanche | 9. Blanche | 17. Stella |
| 2. Stanley | 10. Stanley | 18. Stanley |
| 3. Eunice | 11. Blanche | 19. Stanley |
| 4. Stanley | 12. Eunice | 20. Stella |
| 5. Eunice | 13. Stella | 21. Blanche |
| 6. Blanche | 14. Stella | 22. Blanche |
| 7. Blanche | 15. Stanley | 23. Eunice |
| 8. Stella | 16. Stella | 24. Eunice |

BEFORE READING

An Introduction to Tennessee Williams' Drama

Tennessee Williams was a mid-20th century American playwright. His first full-length play *The Glass Menagerie* was staged to great acclaim in 1945. His second, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was first performed in 1947, running for 855 performances on Broadway and winning three prestigious awards for theatre – the Pulitzer, Donaldson and New York Drama Critics' Circle – the first play to do so.

The plays

Extracts from four of Williams' most popular and successful plays are included below and on pages 6-8.

- In pairs or small groups, read the extracts out loud. Talk about anything which particularly strikes you about them as play texts.

You might think about:

- subject matter
- characters
- use of stage directions
- language.

- Pool your ideas about the sort of playwright Williams seems to be and the drama you would expect him to create.

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

STELLA: Belle Reve? Lost, is it? No!

BLANCHE: Yes, Stella.

[They stare at each other across the yellow-checked linoleum of the table. BLANCHE slowly nods her head and Stella looks slowly down at her hands folded on the table. The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. BLANCHE touches her handkerchief to her forehead.]

STELLA: But how did it go? What happened?

BLANCHE *[springing up]*: You're a fine one to ask me how it went!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: You're a fine one to sit there accusing me of it!

STELLA: Blanche!

BLANCHE: I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish! You just came home in time for the funerals, Stella. And funerals are pretty compared to deaths. Funerals are quiet, but deaths – not always. Sometimes their breathing is hoarse, and sometimes it rattles, and sometimes they even cry out to you, 'Don't let me go!' Even the old, sometimes, say, 'Don't let me go.' As if you were able to stop them! But funerals are quiet, with pretty flowers. And, oh, what gorgeous boxes they pack them away in! Unless you were there at the bed when they cried out, 'Hold me!' you'd never suspect there was the struggle for breath and bleeding. You didn't dream, but I saw! Saw! Saw!

The Glass Menagerie (1945)

TOM: [...] This is the social background of the play.

[Music]

The play is memory.

Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic.

In memory everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings

I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it. The other characters are my mother Amanda, my sister Laura, and a gentleman caller who appears in the final scenes.

He is the most realistic character in the play, being an emissary from a world of reality that we were somehow set apart from.

But since I have a poet's weakness for symbols, I am using this character also as a symbol; he is the long-delayed but always expected something that we live for.

There is a fifth character in the play who doesn't appear except in this larger-than-life-size photograph over the mantel.

This is our father who left us a long time ago.

He was a telephone man who fell in love with long distances; he gave up his job with the telephone company and skipped the light fantastic out of town...

The last we heard of him was a picture postcard from Mazatlan, on the Pacific coast of Mexico, containing a message of two words –

'Hello – Good-bye!' and no address.

I think the rest of the play will explain itself ...

[AMANDA'S voice becomes audible through the portieres.]

LEGEND ON SCREEN: 'OÙ SONT LES NEIGES'.

He divides the portieres and enters the upstage area.

AMANDA and LAURA are seated at a dropleaf table. Eating is indicated by gestures without food or utensils. AMANDA faces the audience TOM and LAURA are seated in profile.

The interior has lit up softly and through the scrim see AMANDA and LAURA seated at the table in the upstage area.]

New Orleans and the American South – An Introduction to the World of *A Streetcar Named Desire*

‘America has only three cities: New York, San Francisco, and New Orleans. Everywhere else is Cleveland.’

Tennessee Williams

Old South v. New World, the special case of New Orleans

The action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is all set within the French Quarter (the *Vieux Carré*) of New Orleans in Louisiana, one of the ‘Deep South’ states of America. It is set soon after the end of World War 2, around the same time that it was written in 1946-7.

This is how Tennessee Williams describes it in the opening stage directions:

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both.

Unseen but referred to throughout the play is another setting – Mississippi and the ‘Deep South’, a name which stands not simply for a geographical location but also for a set of values and a way of life. This ‘South’, shaped by a belief in history and family ancestry, is a place looking backwards to before the American Civil War of 1861-65 (the antebellum era) when white plantation owners had made fortunes from black slave labour. Although this life no longer really existed by the 1940s, there continued to be a romantic view of both the past and its decline – kept alive by the blockbuster smash *Gone With the Wind*, published in 1937 and made into a film in 1939.

Although a ‘Deep South’ city, New Orleans had little in common with these values and way of life. Urban, with a diverse, often immigrant population, it was a city with liberal (even risqué) values and morals, the home of jazz music, a place in which family name and ancestry had little weight. In the 1940s New Orleans was a place looking forward to the second half of the 20th century. It was the sort of place a playwright like Tennessee Williams, gay at a time when homosexuality was both illegal and considered a psychiatric disorder, might feel at home.

A Streetcar Named Desire brings together into a small one-bedroomed flat the values and beliefs associated with these two very different worlds. Knowing something of these places and the values associated with them will help you understand and enjoy your first experience of the play.

- Read the extracts about New Orleans (pages 14-15) and the American South (pages 16-17) and look at the images.
- Share your impressions.

Reading the play

- While reading *A Streetcar Named Desire*, think about:
 - the way in which the lifestyle and values of the Old South are dramatised
 - which characters are associated with the Old South and how they appear
 - the role New Orleans plays in the drama
 - the characters challenging the values of the Old South and how they appear.

SCENE 1

Before Reading

Setting the scene

A distinctive feature of Tennessee Williams' drama is his long, detailed and expressionistic stage directions. The first stage direction from the beginning of Scene 1 is printed in the box below. This stage direction includes some factual information about the set and what is happening on stage (for example, there are two women sitting on the steps of the building). But it also includes descriptions which set the scene in less tangible ways – painting a visual and aural picture, much more like you'd get in a novel.

- Read the stage direction.
- In pairs, highlight words and phrases which seem to you particularly important in establishing the world of the play. What mood is evoked? Are any themes or ideas introduced in this direction?

Unlike a reader of the play, the audience never experiences Williams' stage direction exactly as he wrote it. An audience only experiences it as it is brought to life on stage by the director, set designer and actor.

The images on page 20 show the set from four different productions.

- Share your reactions.
 - How well do these sets capture for you Tennessee Williams' opening stage directions?
 - What else would be needed to bring this world to life on stage?

(If you have looked at the material on naturalism and expressionism on pages 9-12, draw on these ideas in your discussion.)

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both. It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a bar-room around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This 'blue piano' expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.

[Two women, one white and one coloured, are taking the air on the steps of the building. The white woman is EUNICE, who occupies the upstairs flat; the coloured woman a neighbour, for New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town.

Above the music of the 'blue piano' the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping.]

The ingredients – speculation before reading

Here are some of the 'ingredients' in Scene 1.

- A younger sister
- An older sister
- The husband of the younger sister
- A one-bedroomed flat
- An unexpected visit
- A bottle of whisky
- A secret
- A confession
- A meeting
- A game of bowls
- The music of the 'blue piano' from a nearby jazz bar

■ Talk about the following:

- what you think will happen – share all the possibilities you can think of
- what will be important in this scene (themes and ideas)
- possible tensions.

■ Now look at the short quotations below, all taken from Scene 1 and add to your ideas.

1. Don't waste your money in that clip joint!
2. *Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes, that suggests a moth.*
3. And turn that over-light off! Turn that off! I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!
4. You'll get along fine together, if you'll just try not to – well – compare him with men that we went out with at home.
5. When he's away for a week I nearly go wild!
6. Stop this hysterical outburst and tell me what's happened? What do you mean fought and bled? What kind of –
7. *The music of the 'blue piano' grows louder. Blanche touches her handkerchief to her forehead.*
8. I, I, I took the blows in my face and my body! All of those deaths! The long parade to the graveyard! Father, mother! Margaret, that dreadful way! So big with it, it couldn't be put in a coffin! But had to be burned like rubbish!
9. And the old lady is on her way to Mass and she's late and there's a cop standin' in front of th'church an' she comes runnin' up and says, 'Officer – is Mass out yet?' He looks her over and says, 'No, Lady, but y'r hat's on crooked!' [*They give a hoarse bellow of laughter.*]
10. [*He grins at Blanche. She tries unsuccessfully to smile back. There is a silence.*] I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type. Stella's spoke of you a good deal. You were married once, weren't you?