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Biography & Context

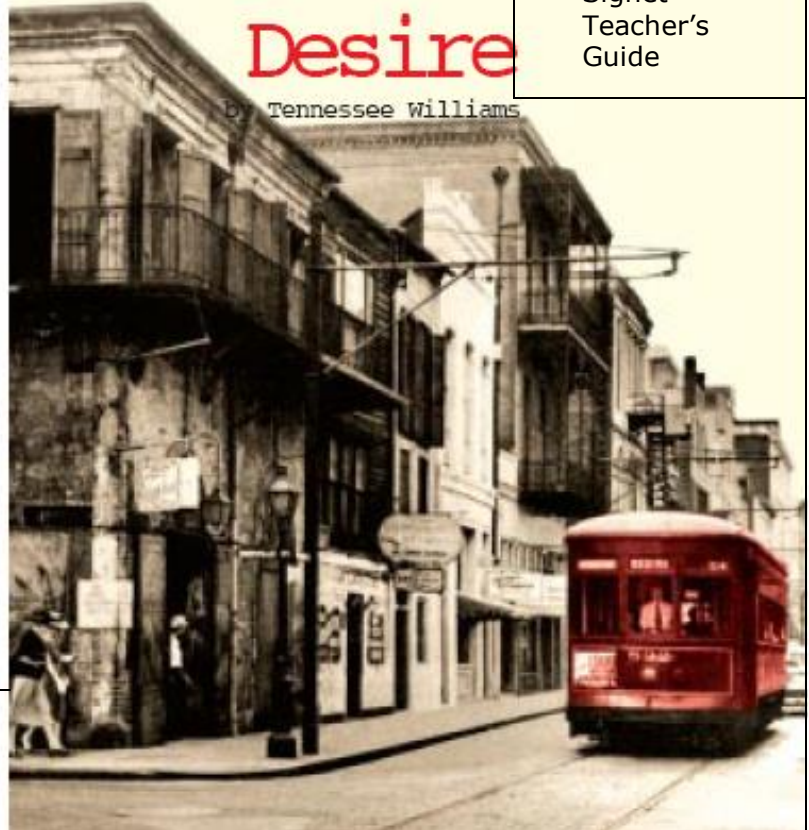
TENNESSEE WILLIAMS WAS BORN Thomas Lanier Williams III in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. His friends began calling him Tennessee in college, in honor of his Southern accent and his father's home state. Williams's father, C.C. Williams, was a traveling salesman and a heavy drinker. Williams's mother, Edwina, was a Mississippi clergyman's daughter prone to hysterical attacks. Until Williams was seven, he, his parents, his older sister, Rose, and his younger brother, Dakin, lived with Edwina's parents in Mississippi.

In 1918, the Williams family moved to St. Louis, marking the start of the family's deterioration. C.C.'s drinking increased, the family moved sixteen times in ten years, and the young Williams, always shy and fragile, was ostracized and taunted at school. During these years, he and Rose became extremely close. Edwina and Williams's maternal grandparents also offered the emotional support he required throughout his childhood. Williams loathed his father but grew to appreciate him somewhat after deciding in therapy as an adult that his father had given him his tough survival instinct.

After being bedridden for two years as a child due to severe illness, Williams grew into a withdrawn, effeminate adolescent whose chief solace was writing. At sixteen, Williams won a prize in a national competition that asked for essays answering the question “Can a good wife be a good sport?” His

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams



Collected from a variety of sources, including:

- Sparknotes
- NT Education Workpack
- Signet Teacher's Guide

“He was a born dramatist as few are ever born. Whatever he put on paper, superb or superfluous, glorious or gaudy, could not fail to be electrifyingly actable. He could not write a dull scene... He will live as long as drama itself.” Peter Shaffer

answer was published in *Smart Set* magazine. The following year, he published a horror story in a magazine called *Weird Tales*, and the year after that he entered the University of Missouri to study journalism. While in college, he wrote his first plays, which were influenced by members of the southern literary renaissance such as Robert Penn Warren, William Faulkner, Allen Tate, and Thomas Wolfe. Before Williams could receive his degree, however, his father forced him to withdraw from school. Outraged because Williams had failed a required ROTC program course, C.C. Williams made his son go to work at the same shoe company where he himself worked.

After three years at the shoe factory, Williams had a minor nervous breakdown. He then returned to college, this time at Washington University in St. Louis. While he was studying there, a St. Louis theater group produced two of his plays, *The Fugitive Kind* and *Candles to the Sun*. Further personal problems led Williams to drop out of Washington University and enroll in the University of Iowa. While he was in Iowa, Rose, who had begun suffering from mental illness later in life, underwent a prefrontal lobotomy (an intensive brain surgery). The event greatly upset Williams, and it left his sister institutionalized for the rest of her life. Despite this trauma, Williams finally managed to graduate in 1938.

In the years following his graduation, Williams lived a bohemian life, working menial jobs and wandering from city to city. He continued to work on drama, however, receiving a Rockefeller grant and studying playwriting at the New School in New York. His literary influences were evolving to include the playwright Anton Chekhov and Williams's lifelong hero, the poet Hart Crane. He officially changed his name to Tennessee Williams upon the publication of his short story "The Field of Blue Children" in 1939. During the early years of World War II, Williams worked in Hollywood as a scriptwriter and also prepared material for what would become *The Glass Menagerie*.

In 1944, *The Glass Menagerie* opened in New York and won the prestigious New York Drama Critics' Circle Award, catapulting Williams into the upper echelon of American playwrights. *A Streetcar Named Desire* premiered three years later at the Barrymore Theater in New York City. The play, set in contemporary times, describes the decline and fall of a fading Southern belle named Blanche DuBois. *A Streetcar Named Desire* cemented Williams's reputation, garnering another Drama Critics' Circle Award and also a Pulitzer Prize. Williams went on to win another Drama Critics' Circle Award and Pulitzer for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955.



Much of the pathos found in Williams's drama was mined from the playwright's own life. Alcoholism, depression, thwarted desire, loneliness, and insanity were all part of Williams's world. His experience as a known homosexual in an era unfriendly to homosexuality also informed his work. Williams's most memorable characters, many of them female, contain recognizable elements of their author, Edwina, and Rose. His vulgar, irresponsible male characters, such as Stanley Kowalski, were likely modeled on Williams's own father and other males who tormented Williams during his childhood. Williams's early plays also connected with the new American taste for realism that emerged following the Depression and World War II. The characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are trying to rebuild their lives in postwar America: Stanley and Mitch served in the military, while Blanche had affairs with young soldiers based near her home.

Williams set his plays in the South, but the compelling manner in which he rendered his themes made them universal, winning him an international audience and worldwide acclaim. However, most critics agree that the quality of Williams's work diminished as he grew older. He suffered a long period of depression following the death of his longtime partner, Frank Merlo, in 1963. His popularity during these years also declined due to changed interests in the theater world. During the radical 1960s and 1970s, nostalgia no longer drew crowds, and Williams's explorations of sexual mores came across as tired and old-fashioned.

Williams died in 1983 when he choked on a medicine-bottle cap in an alcohol-related incident at the Elysée Hotel in New York City. He was one month short of his seventy-second birthday. In his long career he wrote twenty-five full-length plays (five made into movies), five screenplays, over seventy one-act plays, hundreds of short stories, two novels, poetry, and a memoir. The mark he left on the tradition of realism in American drama is indelible.

A Note on the Epigraph:

Epigraph: A motto or quotation, as at the beginning of a literary composition, setting forth a theme. (dictionary.com)

The epigraph to *A Streetcar Named Desire* is taken from a Hart Crane poem titled "The Broken Tower." Crane was one of Williams's icons. Williams's use of this quotation is apt, as Crane himself often employed epigraphs from his own icons, including Melville, Whitman, Dickinson, and Blake. Williams felt a personal affinity with Crane, who, like himself, had a bitter relationship with his parents and suffered from bouts of violent alcoholism. Most important, Williams identified with Crane as a homosexual writer trying to find a means of self-expression in a heterosexual world. Unlike Williams, Crane succumbed to his demons, drowning himself in 1932 at the age of thirty-three.

Williams was influenced by Crane's imagery and by his unusual attention to metaphor. The epigraph's description of love as only an "instant" and as a force that precipitates "each desperate choice" brings to mind Williams's character Blanche DuBois. Crane's speaker's line, "I know not whither [love's voice is] hurled," also suggests Blanche. With increasing desperation, Blanche "hurls" her continually denied love out into the world, only to have that love revisit her in the form of suffering.

The Broken Tower," was essentially a love-poem, though it tellingly betrayed his longing for a time in the past that was intensely energetic and that now seemed unattainably remote. Friends were scattered.

(http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/a_f/crane/bio.htm)

“The Broken Tower” by Hart Crane

The bell-rope that gathers God at dawn
Dispatches me as though I dropped down the knell
Of a spent day - to wander the cathedral lawn
From pit to crucifix, feet chill on steps from hell.

Have you not heard, have you not seen that corps
Of shadows in the tower, whose shoulders sway
Antiphonal carillons launched before
The stars are caught and hived in the sun's ray?

The bells, I say, the bells break down their tower;
And swing I know not where. Their tongues engrave
Membrane through marrow, my long-scattered score
Of broken intervals ... And I, their sexton slave!

Oval encyclicals in canyons heaping
The impasse high with choir. Banked voices slain!
Pagodas campaniles with reveilles out leaping-
O terraced echoes prostrate on the plain! ...

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.

My world I poured. But was it cognate, scored
Of that tribunal monarch of the air
Whose thigh embronzes earth, strikes crystal Word
In wounds pledges once to hope - cleft to despair?

The steep encroachments of my blood left me
No answer (could blood hold such a lofty tower
As flings the question true?) -or is it she
Whose sweet mortality stirs latent power?-

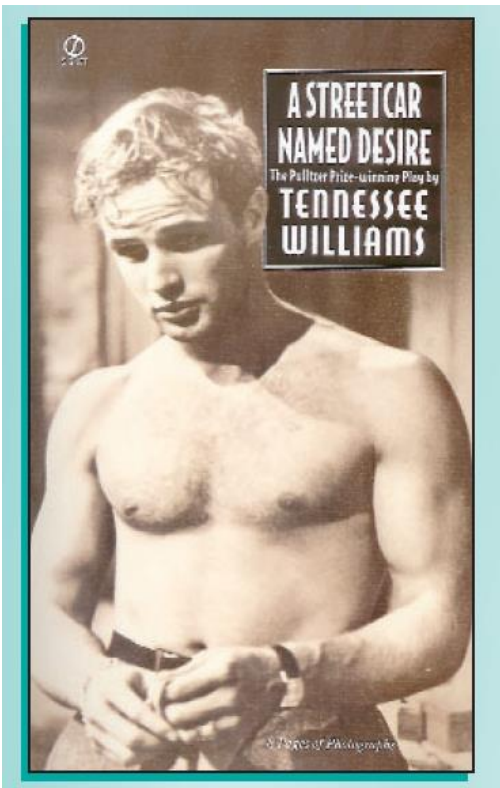
And through whose pulse I hear, counting the strokes
My veins recall and add, revived and sure
The angelus of wars my chest evokes:
What I hold healed, original now, and pure ...

And builds, within, a tower that is not stone
(Not stone can jacket heaven) - but slip
Of pebbles, - visible wings of silence sown
In azure circles, widening as they dip

The matrix of the heart, lift down the eyes
That shrines the quiet lake and swells a tower...
The commodious, tall decorum of that sky
Unseals her earth, and lifts love in its shower.

- Antiphon - 1. A devotional composition sung responsively as part of a liturgy.
 2. a. A short liturgical text chanted or sung responsively preceding or following a psalm, psalm verse, or canticle.
 b. Such a text formerly used as a response but now rendered independently.
 3. A response; a reply: "It would be truer . . . to see [conservation] as an antiphon to the modernization of the 1950s and 1960s" (Raphael Samuel).
- Carillon - 1. A stationary set of chromatically tuned bells in a tower, usually played from a keyboard.
 2. A composition written or arranged for these bells.
- Hive - to accumulate
- Sexton - An employee or officer of a church who is responsible for the care and upkeep of church property and sometimes for ringing bells and digging graves.
- Encyclical - Intended for general or wide circulation.
- Campanile - A bell tower, especially one near but not attached to a church or other public building.
- Cognate - related
- Angelus - a prayer said 3 times a day by Roman Catholics in memory of the Annunciation the sound of a bell rung in Roman Catholic churches to announce the time when the Angelus should be recited
- commodious - Large and roomy

Plot Overview



Blanche DuBois, a schoolteacher from Laurel, Mississippi, arrives at the New Orleans apartment of her sister, Stella Kowalski. Despite the fact that Blanche seems to have fallen out of close contact with Stella, she intends to stay at Stella's apartment for an unspecified but likely lengthy period of time, given the large trunk she has with her. Blanche tells Stella that she lost Belle Reve, their ancestral home, following the death of all their remaining relatives. She also mentions that she has been given a leave of absence from her teaching position because of her bad nerves.

Though Blanche does not seem to have enough money to afford a hotel, she is disdainful of the cramped quarters of the Kowalskis' two-room apartment and of the apartment's location in a noisy, diverse, working-class neighborhood. Blanche's social condescension wins her the instant dislike of Stella's husband, an auto-parts supply man of Polish descent named Stanley Kowalski. It is clear that Stella was happy to leave behind her the social pretensions of her background in exchange for the sexual gratification she gets from her husband; she even is pregnant with his baby. Stanley immediately distrusts Blanche to the extent that he suspects her of having cheated Stella out of her share of the family inheritance. In the process of defending

herself to Stanley, Blanche reveals that Belle Reve was lost due to a foreclosed mortgage, a disclosure that signifies the dire nature of Blanche's financial circumstances. Blanche's heavy drinking, which she attempts to conceal from her sister and brother-in-law, is another sign that all is not well with Blanche.

The unhappiness that accompanies the animal magnetism of Stella and Stanley's marriage reveals itself when Stanley hosts a drunken poker game with his male friends at the apartment. Blanche gets under Stanley's skin, especially when she starts to win the affections of his close friend Mitch. After Mitch has been absent for a while, speaking with Blanche in the bedroom, Stanley erupts, storms into the bedroom, and throws the radio out of the window. When Stella yells at Stanley and defends Blanche, Stanley beats her. The men pull him off, the poker game breaks up, and Blanche and Stella escape to their upstairs neighbor Eunice's apartment. A short while later, Stanley is remorseful and cries up to Stella to forgive him. To Blanche's alarm, Stella returns to Stanley and embraces him passionately. Mitch meets Blanche outside of the Kowalski flat and comforts her in her distress.

The next day, Blanche tries to convince Stella to leave Stanley for a better man whose social status equals Stella's. Blanche suggests that she and Stella contact a millionaire named Shep Huntleigh for help escaping from New Orleans; when Stella laughs at her, Blanche reveals that she is completely broke. Stanley walks in as Blanche is making fun of him and secretly overhears Blanche and Stella's conversation. Later, he threatens Blanche with hints that he has heard rumors of her disreputable past. She is visibly dismayed.

While Blanche is alone in the apartment one evening, waiting for Mitch to pick her up for a date, a teenage boy comes by to collect money for the newspaper. Blanche doesn't have any money for him, but she hits on him and gives him a lustful kiss. Soon after the boy departs, Mitch arrives, and they go on their date. When Blanche returns, she is exhausted and clearly has been uneasy for the entire night about the rumors Stanley mentioned earlier. In a surprisingly sincere heart-to-heart discussion with Mitch, Blanche reveals the greatest tragedy of her past. Years ago, her young husband committed suicide after she discovered and chastised him for his homosexuality. Mitch describes his own loss of a former love, and he tells Blanche that they need each other.

When the next scene begins, about one month has passed. It is the afternoon of Blanche's birthday. Stella is preparing a dinner for Blanche, Mitch, Stanley, and herself, when Stanley comes in to tell her that he has learned news of Blanche's sordid past. He says that after losing the DuBois mansion, Blanche moved into a fleabag motel from which she was eventually evicted because of her numerous sexual liaisons. Also, she was fired from her job as a schoolteacher because the principal discovered that she was having an affair with a teenage student. Stella is horrified to learn that Stanley has told Mitch these stories about Blanche.

The birthday dinner comes and goes, but Mitch never arrives. Stanley indicates to Blanche that he is aware of her past. For a birthday present, he gives her a one-way bus ticket back to Laurel. Stanley's cruelty so disturbs Stella that it appears the Kowalski household is about to break up, but the onset of Stella's labor prevents the imminent fight.

Several hours later, Blanche, drunk, sits alone in the apartment. Mitch, also drunk, arrives and repeats all he's learned from Stanley. Eventually Blanche confesses that the stories are true, but she also reveals the need for human affection she felt after her husband's death. Mitch tells Blanche that he can never marry her, saying she isn't fit to live in the same house as his mother. Having learned that Blanche is not the chaste lady she pretended to be, Mitch tries to have sex with Blanche, but she forces him to leave by yelling "Fire!" to attract the attention of passersby outside.

Later, Stanley returns from the hospital to find Blanche even more drunk. She tells him that she will soon be leaving New Orleans with her former suitor Shep Huntleigh, who is now a millionaire. Stanley knows that Blanche's story is entirely in her imagination, but he is so happy about his baby that he proposes they each celebrate their good fortune. Blanche spurns Stanley, and things grow contentious. When she tries to step past him, he refuses to move out of her way. Blanche becomes terrified to the point that she smashes a bottle on the table and threatens to smash Stanley in the face. Stanley grabs her arm and says that it's time for the "date" they've had set up since Blanche's arrival. Blanche

resists, but Stanley uses his physical strength to overcome her, and he carries her to bed. The pulsing music indicates that Stanley rapes Blanche.

The next scene takes place weeks later, as Stella and her neighbor Eunice pack Blanche's bags. Blanche is in the bath, and Stanley plays poker with his buddies in the front room. A doctor will arrive soon to take Blanche to an insane asylum, but Blanche believes she is leaving to join her millionaire. Stella confesses to Eunice that she simply cannot allow herself to believe Blanche's assertion that Stanley raped her. When Blanche emerges from the bathroom, her deluded talk makes it clear that she has lost her grip on reality.

The doctor arrives with a nurse, and Blanche initially panics and struggles against them when they try to take her away. Stanley and his friends fight to subdue Blanche, while Eunice holds Stella back to keep her from interfering. Mitch begins to cry. Finally, the doctor approaches Blanche in a gentle manner and convinces her to leave with him. She allows him to lead her away and does not look back or say goodbye as she goes. Stella sobs with her child in her arms, and Stanley comforts her with loving words and caresses.

Character Analysis:

Blanche DuBois

When the play begins, [Blanche](#) is already a fallen woman in society's eyes. Her family fortune and estate are gone, she lost her young husband to suicide years earlier, and she is a social pariah due to her indiscrete sexual behavior. She also has a bad drinking problem, which she covers up poorly. Behind her veneer of social snobbery and sexual propriety, Blanche is an insecure, dislocated individual. She is an aging Southern belle who lives in a state of perpetual panic about her fading beauty. Her manner is dainty and frail, and she sports a wardrobe of showy but cheap evening clothes. [Stanley](#) quickly sees through Blanche's act and seeks out information about her past.

In the Kowalski household, Blanche pretends to be a woman who has never known indignity. Her false propriety is not simply snobbery, however; it constitutes a calculated attempt to make herself appear attractive to new male suitors. Blanche depends on male sexual admiration for her sense of self-esteem, which means that she has often succumbed to passion. By marrying, Blanche hopes to escape poverty and the bad reputation that haunts her. But because the chivalric Southern gentleman savior and caretaker (represented by [Shep Huntleigh](#)) she hopes will rescue her is extinct, Blanche is left with no realistic possibility of future happiness. As Blanche sees it, [Mitch](#) is her only chance for contentment, even though he is far from her ideal.

Stanley's relentless persecution of Blanche foils her pursuit of Mitch as well as her attempts to shield herself from the harsh truth of her situation. The play chronicles the subsequent crumbling of Blanche's self-image and sanity. Stanley himself takes the final stabs at Blanche, destroying the remainder of her sexual and mental esteem by raping her and then committing her to an insane asylum. In the end, Blanche blindly allows herself to be led away by a kind doctor, ignoring her sister's cries. This final image is the sad culmination of Blanche's vanity and total dependence upon men for happiness.

Stella Kowalski

Blanche's younger sister, about twenty-five years old and of a mild disposition that visibly sets her apart from her more vulgar neighbors. Stella possesses the same timeworn aristocratic heritage as Blanche, but she jumped the sinking ship in her late teens and left Mississippi for New Orleans. There, Stella married lower-class Stanley, with whom she shares a robust sexual relationship. Stella's union with Stanley is both animal and spiritual, violent but renewing. After Blanche's arrival, Stella is torn between her sister and her husband. Eventually, she stands by

Stanley, perhaps in part because she gives birth to his child near the play's end. While she loves and pities Blanche, she cannot bring herself to believe Blanche's accusations that Stanley dislikes Blanche, and she eventually dismisses Blanche's claim that Stanley raped her. Stella's denial of reality at the play's end shows that she has more in common with her sister than she thinks.

Stanley Kowalski

Audience members may well see [Stanley](#) as an egalitarian hero at the play's start. He is loyal to his friends and passionate to his wife. Stanley possesses an animalistic physical vigor that is evident in his love of work, of fighting, and of sex. His family is from Poland, and several times he expresses his outrage at being called "Polack" and other derogatory names. When [Blanche](#) calls him a "Polack," he makes her look old-fashioned and ignorant by asserting that he was born in America, is an American, and can only be called "Polish." Stanley represents the new, heterogeneous America to which Blanche doesn't belong, because she is a relic from a defunct social hierarchy. He sees himself as a social leveler, as he tells [Stella](#) in Scene Eight.

Stanley's intense hatred of Blanche is motivated in part by the aristocratic past Blanche represents. He also (rightly) sees her as untrustworthy and does not appreciate the way she attempts to fool him and his friends into thinking she is better than they are. Stanley's animosity toward Blanche manifests itself in all of his actions toward her—his investigations of her past, his birthday gift to her, his sabotage of her relationship with [Mitch](#).

In the end, Stanley's down-to-earth character proves harmfully crude and brutish. His chief amusements are gambling, bowling, sex, and drinking, and he lacks ideals and imagination. His disturbing, degenerate nature, first hinted at when he beats his wife, is fully evident after he rapes his sister-in-law. Stanley shows no remorse for his brutal actions. The play ends with an image of Stanley as the ideal family man, comforting his wife as she holds their newborn child. The wrongfulness of this representation, given what we have learned about him in the play, ironically calls into question society's decision to ostracize Blanche.

Harold "Mitch" Mitchell

Perhaps because he lives with his dying mother, [Mitch](#) is noticeably more sensitive than [Stanley](#)'s other poker friends. The other men pick on him for being a mama's boy. Even in his first, brief line in Scene One, Mitch's gentlemanly behavior stands out. Mitch appears to be a kind, decent human being who, we learn in Scene Six, hopes to marry so that he will have a woman to bring home to his dying mother.

Mitch doesn't fit the bill of the chivalric hero of whom [Blanche](#) dreams. He is clumsy, sweaty, and has unrefined interests like muscle building. Though sensitive, he lacks Blanche's romantic perspective and spirituality, as well as her understanding of poetry and literature. She toys with his lack of intelligence—for example, when she teases him in French because she knows he won't understand—duping him into playing along with her self-flattering charades.

Though they come from completely different worlds, Mitch and Blanche are drawn together by their mutual need of companionship and support, and they therefore believe themselves right for one another. They also discover that they have both experienced the death of a loved one. The snare in their relationship is sexual. As part of her prim-and-proper act, Blanche repeatedly rejects Mitch's physical affections, refusing to sleep with him. Once he discovers the truth about Blanche's sordid sexual past, Mitch is both angry and embarrassed about the way Blanche has treated him. When he arrives to chastise her, he states that he feels he deserves to have sex with her, even though he no longer respects her enough to think her fit to be his wife.

The difference in Stanley's and Mitch's treatment of Blanche at the play's end underscores Mitch's fundamental gentlemanliness. Though he desires and makes clear that he wants to

sleep with Blanche, Mitch does not rape her and leaves when she cries out. Also, the tears Mitch sheds after Blanche struggles to escape the fate Stanley has arranged for her show that he genuinely cares for her. In fact, Mitch is the only person other than [Stella](#) who seems to understand the tragedy of Blanche's madness.

Play Synopsis (Detailed):

SCENE ONE:

A Streetcar Named Desire begins as Stanley and Mitch leave their apartments to go bowling. Stanley calls for Stella. When she appears, he tosses her a package of red meat as he and Mitch leave. Blanche arrives elegantly dressed and asks for her sister Stella. Eunice, who has been sitting outside, tells her where Stella is, and the Negro Woman offers to go bring her back. Eunice and Blanche talk about the neighborhood and where Blanche has come from, and Eunice lets her into the Kowalski's two-room apartment. Stella arrives and expresses happiness in seeing her sister. Blanche asks for a drink, and Stella prepares it. They chat, and Blanche tells Stella how terrible the neighborhood is. Stella responds positively about her home. Blanche explains why she left her teaching job, an explanation that proves to be false. She expresses a concern that Stanley may not like her. Stella reassures her but also tells her not to compare him to men they knew when they lived at Belle Reve. Blanche tells her that Belle Reve has been lost and blames Stella for the loss because she left home. They have an argument about who is to blame. Stella begins to cry and goes into the bathroom.

Stanley, Steve, and Mitch return, and Blanche hides from Stanley. He enters the house, sees Blanche, and they talk. Stanley asks her if she is "going to shack up here. Blanche says she will if he approves. He tells her he does but asks if she was ever married. Blanche says yes and tells him "the boy died" (31).

Structure

Whilst at Missouri University, Williams was heavily influenced by his tutor, Robert Ramsay, who used the *ouroboros* symbol – the snake with tail in mouth – to describe the perfect plot, the end being implicit in the beginning: opening situation, complicating circumstances, apparent success, flaw discovered, thickening clouds, sudden catastrophe, aftermath. It describes accurately the plotline of *Streetcar*.

Roxana Stuart, who played Blanche in two productions, described "*the first four scenes are comedy; then come two scenes of elegy, mood, romance; then five scenes of tragedy*".

Divided into eleven scenes, the play has no act divisions. The original production used the breaks marked by the seasonal divisions for its intervals, after scenes four and six.

Analysis

The play offers a romanticized vision of slum life that nevertheless reflects the atypical characteristics of New Orleans. The mix of characters and social elements around Elysian Fields demonstrates the way New Orleans has historically differed from other American cities in the South. It was originally a Catholic settlement (unlike most Southern cities, which were Protestant), and consequently typical Southern social distinctions were ignored. Hence, blacks mingle with whites, and members of different ethnic groups play poker and bowl together. Stanley, the son of Polish immigrants, represents the changing face of America. Williams's romanticizing is more evident in his portrayal of New Orleans as a city where upper-class people marry members of the lower class, fights get ugly but are forgotten the next day, and the perpetual bluesy notes of an old piano take the sting out of poverty.

The play immediately establishes Stanley and Blanche as polar opposites, with Stella as the link between them. Stage directions describe Stanley as a virulent character whose chief pleasure is women. His dismissal of Blanche's beauty is therefore significant, because it shows that she does not exude his same brand of carnal desire. On the other hand, Blanche's delicate manners and sense of propriety are offended by Stanley's brutish virility. Stanley's qualities—variously described as vitality, heartiness, brutality, primitivism, lust for life, animality—lead him over the course of the play into an unrelenting, unthinking assault on the already crumbling facade of Blanche's world.

Blanche comes across as a frivolous, hysterical, insensitive, and self-obsessed individual as she derides her sister's lesser social status and doesn't express joy at seeing Stella so in love. Blanche, who arrives in New Orleans having lost Belle Reve and having been forced to leave her job, exudes vulnerability and emotional frailty. Stanley's cocky interactions with Blanche show him to be insensitive—he barely lets Blanche get a word in edgewise as he quickly assesses her beauty. Nevertheless, in this introduction, the audience is likely to sympathize with Stanley rather than Blanche, for Blanche behaves superficially and haughtily, while Stanley comes across as unpretentious, a social being with a zest for life.

Stanley's entrance with a package of meat underscores his primitive qualities. It is as if he were bringing it back to his cave fresh from the kill. His entrance also underscores the intense sexual bond between him and Stella, which is apparent to the other characters as well. Stanley yells "Catch!" as he tosses the package, and a moment later the Negro woman yells "Catch *what!*" Eunice and the Negro woman see something sexual, and scandalously hilarious, in Stanley's act of tossing the meat to a breathlessly delighted Stella.

The name of the Kowalskis' street underscores the extreme, opposing archetypes that Stanley and Blanche represent. Elysian Fields is the name for the ancient Greek version of the afterlife. Stanley, the primitive, pagan reveler who is in touch with his vital core, is at home in the Elysian Fields, but the Kowalskis' home and neighborhood clearly are not Blanche's idea of heaven. Blanche represents a society that has become too detached from its animal element. She is distinctly overcivilized and has repressed her vitality and her sexuality. Blanche's health and her sanity are waning as a result.

They told me to take a street-car named Desire, and transfer to one called Cemeteries, and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!

*****SPOILER WARNING*****

Quotation Significance [Blanche](#) speaks these words to [Eunice](#) and the Negro woman upon arriving at the Kowalski apartment at the beginning of Scene One. She has just arrived in New Orleans and is describing her means of transportation to her sister's apartment. The place names that Williams uses in *A Streetcar Named Desire* hold obvious metaphorical value. Elysian Fields, the Kowalskis' street, is named for the land of the dead in Greek mythology. The journey that Blanche describes making from the train station to the Kowalski apartment is an allegorical version of her life up to this point in time. Her illicit pursuit of her sexual "desires" led to her social death and expulsion from her hometown of Laurel, Mississippi. Landing in a seedy district that is likened to a pagan heaven, Blanche begins a sort of afterlife, in which she learns and lives the consequences of her life's actions.

SCENE TWO:

Early the following evening, Stella and Stanley talk while Blanche is in the bathroom preparing to go out to dinner with Stella because it is poker night. She mentions that Belle Reve has been lost and asks Stanley to be nice to Blanche. She tells him of the difficult life Blanche has led and that she has never told Blanche about the apartment and neighborhood. Stanley asks about the plantation and becomes angry as Stella tries to downplay the loss. He tells her that the Napoleonic code means that he, because he is married to her, owned part of Belle Reve and they have been swindled. He goes to Blanche's trunk and pulls out her clothes and jewelry to prove that she has money when they do not. Stella becomes angry, tells him, "You have no idea how stupid and horrid you're being" (36) and leaves. Stanley stays in the kitchen waiting for Blanche. When she enters from the bathroom, Stanley mentions her elegant and expensive clothes, and they talk about her appearance and his manliness. When Stella calls out from the street, Blanche asks her to get her a lemon-coke at the drugstore, obviously a ploy to get her out of hearing distance. Stanley's comment—"If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister, I'd get ideas about you" (41)—makes clear the underlying sex that is part of their new relationship. Stanley asks to see papers related to the loss of Belle Reve. Blanche says that everything she owns is in her trunk. He rummages through the trunk, and she reaches in to get the box containing her papers. Stanley notices other papers under the box. When Blanche tells him that they are "love letters . . . all from one boy" (41), he grabs them. She demands them back and says, "Now that you've touched them, I'll burn them!" (42), adding that they are poems written by the young husband she hurt. As Stanley looks through the papers, she tells him that blame for the loss of the plantation belongs to "our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers [who] exchanged the land for their epic fornications" (43). While explaining the Napoleonic code, Stanley also mentions that Stella is pregnant.

Stella returns, Stanley takes the papers into the bedroom, and Blanche joins Stella outside. After Blanche tells her that she treated Stanley's comments as a joke, she admits to flirting with him. The poker players arrive, and Blanche and Stella leave for dinner and a show.

Analysis

Scene Two starts to move our sympathies away from Stanley as the more malignant aspects of his character start to surface. Whereas Scene One stresses the sexual attraction that drew Stella and Stanley to one another despite class differences, Scene Two shows Stanley acting disrespectful to Stella and antagonistic to her sister. Meanwhile, our compassion for Blanche increases as Williams reveals just how destitute she is by showing that all of her belongings in the world amount to a trunk full of gaudy dresses and cheap jewelry.

In one sense, Stanley and Blanche are fighting for Stella—each would like to pull Stella beyond the reach of the other. But their opposition is also more elemental. They are incompatible forces—manners versus manhood—and peace between them is no more than a temporary cease-fire. Blanche represents the Old South's intellectual romanticism and dedication to appearances. Stanley represents the New South's ruthless pursuit of success and economic pragmatism. When Stanley confronts Blanche after her bath, she shows that she understands the nature of their clash when she tells him that Stella doesn't understand him as well as she does.

Calling upon the Napoleonic code enables Stanley to justify his feelings of entitlement toward Stella's inheritance. In doing so, he shows that he is ignorant of legal technicalities, because Belle Reve, located in Laurel, Mississippi, wouldn't fall under New Orleans jurisdiction. However, Stanley's repeated references to the Napoleonic code highlight the fact that his conflict with Blanche is also a gender

showdown. Stanley's greed reveals his misogyny, or woman-hating tendencies. As a man, Stanley feels that what Stella has belongs to him. He also hates Blanche as a woman and as a person with a more prestigious family name, and therefore suspects that Blanche's business dealings have been dishonest.

Blanche takes the first of many baths in this scene. She claims that steaming hot baths are necessary to calm her nerves, a believable excuse given her constant hysteria. Yet Blanche's constant need to wash her body symbolizes her need for emotional, spiritual, and mental cleansing. Her bathing foreshadows the eventual revelation of her sordid past. She desires to rid herself of her social blemishes and start over after leaving Laurel.

Two mysteries from Scene One are solved in Scene Two. Blanche reveals the "boy" she spoke of at the end of Scene One to be her husband. She tells Stanley that she hurt her husband the way that Stanley would like to hurt her, warning him that his goal is impossible, since she is "not young and vulnerable anymore." Blanche knew her husband's weakness and unfeelingly used that weakness to destroy him. Yet she is naïve to think that Stanley won't be able to do the same thing to her. She would like to believe that her age and experience protect her against Stanley's callous assaults, but Stanley recognizes Blanche's essential weakness. Also, Stella's revelation to the audience that she is pregnant (when she asks Stanley not to mention her pregnancy to Blanche) explains Blanche's remark about Stella's weight gain, and Stella's refusal to discuss her weight gain with her sister.

******SPOILER WARNING******

There are thousands of papers, stretching back over hundreds of years, affecting Belle Reve as, piece by piece, our improvident grandfathers and father and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications—to put it plainly!

[Blanche](#) gives this speech to [Stanley](#) in Scene Two after he accuses her of having swindled [Stella](#) out of her inheritance. While showing Stanley paperwork proving that she lost Belle Reve due to foreclosure on its mortgage, Blanche attributes her family's decline in fortune to the debauchery of its male members over the generations. Like Blanche, the DuBois ancestors put airs of gentility and refinement while secretly pursuing libidinous pleasure. Blanche's explanation situates her as the last in a long line of ancestors who cannot express their sexual desire in a healthy fashion. Unfortunately, she is forced to deal with the bankruptcy that is the result of her ancestors' profligate ways. By running away to New Orleans and marrying Stanley, Stella removed herself from the elite social stratum to which her family belonged, thereby abandoning all its pretensions, codes of behavior, sexual mores, and problems. Blanche resents Stella's departure and subsequent happiness. In Blanche's eyes, Stella irresponsibly left Blanche alone to deal with their family in its time of distress.

Oh, I guess he's just not the type that goes for jasmine perfume, but maybe he's what we need to mix with our blood now that we've lost Belle Reve.

In Scene Two, [Blanche](#) makes this comment about [Stanley](#) to [Stella](#). Blanche's statement that Stanley is "not the type that goes for jasmine perfume" is her way of saying that he lacks the refinement to appreciate fine taste as Blanche can. She suggests that, under normal circumstances, he would be an inadequate mate for a member of the DuBois clan because of his inability to appreciate the subtler things in life, whether material or spiritual, jasmine perfume or poetry.

Yet the second half of Blanche's comment acknowledges that the DuBois clan can no longer afford luxuries or delude themselves with ideas of social grandeur. Since financially Blanche and Stella no longer belong to the Southern elite, Blanche recognizes that Stella's child unavoidably will lack the monetary and social privilege that she and Stella enjoyed. The genteel South in which Blanche grew up is a thing of the past, and immigrants like Stanley, whom Blanche sees as crude, are rising in social status. Like Stanley, Stella's child may lack an appreciation for perfume and other fineries, but Stanley will likely imbue him with the survival skills that Blanche lacks. The fact that Blanche's lack of survival skills ultimately causes her downfall underscores the new importance such skills hold.

"Since I am a member of the human race, when I attack its behaviour toward fellow members I am obviously including myself in the attack, unless I regard myself as not human but superior to humanity. I don't. In fact, I can't expose a human weakness on stage unless I know it through having it myself. I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities and consequently I have them. I don't even think that I am more conscious of mine than any of you are of yours. Guilt is universal. I mean a strong sense of guilt. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth, and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him, and I think that, at least below the conscious level, we all face it. Hence guilty feelings, and hence defiant aggressions, and hence the deep dark of despair that haunts our dreams, our creative work, and makes us distrust each other".

Tennessee Williams (1959)

SCENE THREE:

The scene begins with Steve, Pablo, Mitch, and Stanley playing poker. Mitch says he wants to leave to check on his mother. Stanley treats this with contempt, and Mitch heads to the bathroom. During the next hand, Stella and Blanche return and stay outside briefly while Blanche worries about how she looks. As they enter Stanley asks where they've been. Stella mentions the show and introduces Pablo and Steve to Blanche. When Stella mentions that it is two-thirty and suggests they end the game, Stanley "gives a loud whack of his hand on her thigh" (48). Stella and Blanche retreat to the bedroom and encounter Mitch leaving the bathroom. Mitch returns to the game, and Blanche comments, "That one seems—superior to the others" (49). Stella agrees and answers Blanche's questions about him, including that he is not married.

Blanche and Stella discuss Stanley and the other poker players. As they talk, they begin to undress. Stanley tells them to be quiet. Blanche turns on a radio, and Stanley yells at them to turn it off. When they refuse, he rushes into the room, turns it off, and goes back to the game. After some argument about the game, Mitch goes into the bedroom, saying he is going to the bathroom. He and Blanche talk. He lights a cigarette and gives her one. They discuss his cigarette case and the girl, now dead, who gave it to him. He places a Chinese lantern over a bare light at Blanche's request, because she fears that the bright light will reveal her age. They continue talking despite Stanley's shouting at him. After a discussion about Blanche as a teacher, Stella returns to the bedroom from the bathroom and turns on the radio. Blanche and Mitch begin to dance. Stanley rushes in and throws the radio out the window. Stella says, "Drunk—drunk—animal thing, you!" (57), and he rushes toward her. She runs from the room, yelling, "You lay your hands on me and I'll—" (57). He follows, and Williams's stage directions tell us, "There is the sound of a blow. Stella cries out. Blanche screams and runs into the kitchen" (57). The other men drag Stanley away. Blanche takes Stella upstairs as the men take Stanley into the bathroom and, after a struggle, turn the shower on him. The men leave. Stanley comes out of the bathroom, soaking wet, and calls for Stella. Getting no answer, he says, "My baby doll's left me!" (59). After trying to call upstairs, Stanley goes outside to the front of the house and "throws back his head . . . and bellows his wife's name, "STELLAHHHHH!" (60). Stella comes down the stairs, and "they come together with low, animal moans" and he carries her into the house (60).

Blanche appears at the top of the stairs looking for Stella. Mitch enters, speaks with her, offers her a cigarette, and they sit on the steps. Blanche closes the scene with a comment

that anticipates a famous line at the end of the play, "Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now" (61).

Analysis

Scene Three underscores the primal nature of Stella and Stanley's union, and it cements Stanley's identity as a villain. After Stanley's drunken radio-hurling episode, Stella yells at him and calls him an "animal thing," inciting Stanley's attack. Later that night, Stanley bellows "STELL-LAHHHHH!" into the night like a wounded beast calling for the return of his mate. Their reunion is also described in terms of animal noises. Stanley's cruel abuse of his wife convinces the audience that genteel Blanche has her sister's best interests in mind more than Stanley does. Yet Stella sides with Stanley and his base instincts, infusing the play with an ominous sense of gloom.

Audience sympathy may establish itself in Blanche's favor, but nothing about Blanche suggests that she will emerge as a heroine. The sense of mystery surrounding Blanche's peculiar arrival in New Orleans takes on a sinister taint, and Blanche's reluctance to be in bright light calls attention to this mysterious nature. Both metaphorically and literally, bright light threatens to undo Blanche's many deceptions. While conversing with Mitch, she asks him to place a Chinese lampshade on the bare lightbulb in the bedroom, claiming that the naked bulb is "rude" and "vulgar." Bright light, whether from a naked bulb or the midday sun, reveals Blanche's true age. She can claim to be a woman of twenty-five in semi-darkness, but the glare of sharp light reveals a woman who has seen more, suffered more, and aged more. In addition, probing questions and honest speech function as a metaphorical light that threatens to reveal Blanche's past and her true nature. Blanche is in no mental condition to withstand such scrutiny, so she has fashioned a tenuous make-believe world. Her effort to create a more flattering, untruthful portrait of herself for Mitch continues in upcoming scenes.

Mitch and Blanche clearly feel attracted to one another, perhaps because both have a broken quality as a result of their experiences with the death of loved ones. Blanche lost her husband and Mitch the girl who gave him the cigarette case with the poetic inscription. Both also nursed their parents through lingering deaths. However, whereas Mitch's experiences have engendered in him a strong sincerity, Blanche seeks refuge in make-believe and insincerity—insincerity that is painfully obvious in her remarks about the sincerity of dying people. The difference in their reactions to similar experiences and in their approaches to life suggests that they are not an ideally matched pair. Blanche thinks on a spiritual level, while Mitch behaves practically and temperately. When they dance, we see that they are ill suited to one another even on a physical level—Mitch dances clumsily, awkwardly mimicking Blanche's grand movements.

Prior to Scene Three, the piano music that sounds throughout the play functions chiefly to create atmosphere, suggesting the play's setting in a somewhat seedy section of New Orleans. Over the course of the poker game and the Kowalskis' fight, however, the piano's sound changes, registering the turbulent emotional shifts of the action onstage. For example, discordant sounds play as the violent drama heightens.

SCENE FOUR:

The next morning Blanche finds Stella in bed alone and asks where Stanley is. Learning that he is away briefly, she begins to express her disgust for Stanley, saying, "You're married to a madman" (64). Stella defends him, although she admits he can be violent. Blanche suggests contacting a wealthy man to get money and tries to call him on the phone, but Stella rejects the message Blanche wants to send. Blanche says she cannot live in the same house with Stanley and that she has "to plan for us both, to get us both—out!" Stella and Blanche argue. Stanley returns unseen and listens to their conversation. Blanche describes Stanley, using words like "sub-human," "ape," and "brutes" (72). He steps outside and calls Stella as if he has just arrived.

They embrace, and Stanley grins at Blanche.

Atmosphere

The presence of the outside world is felt from the opening, as vendors and street-sellers advertise their wares, prostitutes search for trade, drunkards sing and shout, people come and go. The atmosphere is needy, but also fun and lighthearted. These characters reappear during the transitions from one scene to another.

In Act 2 the atmosphere gets darker. Street characters get angrier, until they encroach, in Blanche's mind at least, into the apartment itself and as faces at the window, haunting and grotesque.

Analysis

Although Stella technically condemns Stanley's propensity for violence, it is clear to Blanche and to the audience that Stanley's violent behavior heightens Stella's desire for him. When Stella tells Blanche that Stanley broke all the lightbulbs with her shoe on their honeymoon, Blanche is horrified, but Stella assures her that she found the episode "thrilling." Even the stage directions at the beginning of Scene Four, which liken Stella's glowing face after a night spent with Stanley to that of an Eastern idol, suggest there is a mystical aspect to Stanley and Stella's violent attraction. Stella calmly lies in bed at the scene's opening as if she has just taken part in something holy.

When telling Stella that sheer desire is no basis for a marriage, Blanche points out that there is a streetcar in New Orleans named "Desire" that "bangs through the [French] Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." She invokes the streetcar as a metaphor for what she believes Stella feels. Stella asks whether Blanche has ever ridden on the streetcar, and Blanche's answer, "It brought me here," foreshadows later events in the play. As Stella, Stanley, and Mitch soon learn, Blanche's wanton acts of desire are indeed what led to her expulsion from life in Laurel, Mississippi. In fact, her family's attitude toward desire began to push her toward her present predicament even before she was born. The family's socially regulated need to shroud desire and cover up "epic fornications" led to the breakup of the Belle Reve estate and to the impoverishment of the present generation.

SCENE FIVE:

Later, as Blanche is writing a letter and reading it to Stella, the Hubbells have a loud and violent fight. Eunice rushes out saying she is going to the police. Stanley and Blanche exchange insults, and he brings up the hotel where she was a prostitute. He exits. Blanche asks Stella if she has heard any rumors. When she says no, Blanche begins to hint about what happened in the hotel. When Stella brings Blanche a drink, Blanche becomes emotional about the support that Stella gives her and promises to leave soon. She tells Stella that Mitch is coming that evening and admits to wanting him but needing "to deceive him enough to make him—want me" (81). Stanley returns, and Stella leaves with him, cautioning Blanche not to have anything more to drink. A young man arrives collecting for the newspaper, and Blanche flirts with him and kisses him as he tries to leave. Mitch then arrives with roses.

Analysis

Although Stella's reassurance and comforting of Blanche about her relationship with Mitch is a rare moment of unchecked affection between the two sisters, by not revealing her past Blanche prevents Stella's full comprehension of the desperate nature of Blanche's situation. Even without Stanley around to prevent free and open communication, Blanche cannot bring herself to explain her belief that Mitch is her last chance of salvation from ruin. Because Stella does not know the full weight of the baggage Blanche is carrying, she cannot provide the advice and support Blanche needs, and she simply expresses hope that Mitch will bring Blanche the same contentment that Stanley brings her.

When she throws herself at the young newspaper boy, Blanche reveals her hypocrisy—she is lustful underneath her genteel, morally upright facade. Blanche condemns Stanley and Stella's purely sexual relationship, but we see that her urges are every bit as strong as Stella's, yet much less appropriate. Compared with Blanche's behavior, Stella's love life looks healthy and wholesome. Eunice and Steve's quick reconciliation after their fight also underscores the notion that Stella and Stanley's violent love is the norm in these parts. Like the sexual attachment between Stella and Stanley, Eunice and Steve's sexual attachment appears far healthier than Blanche's, and Blanche's expectations for love begin to seem unrealistic. As a dramatic device, the scene with the newspaper boy prepares us to learn the truth about the circumstances surrounding Blanche's departure from Mississippi. She is one of the "epic fornicators" of her clan, the last in a line of aristocrats who secretly indulged in forbidden acts because they could not find a stable outlet for their desires. When a bumbling Mitch arrives at the apartment for his date with Blanche, he quickly becomes an antidote to Blanche's strong carnal desires.

As the identity Blanche has constructed for herself begins to disintegrate, she begins to lose ground in her battle against Stanley. Stanley's questioning of Blanche about her acquaintanceship with Shaw is the play's first direct mention of Blanche's blemished past. Blanche does a poor job of pretending not to know Shaw. Her claim that she needs to avoid revealing her past to Mitch further supports our suspicions about her truthfulness. Up to this point, Blanche's jitteriness and her need to hide herself from the outside world have suggested that she also had a past to hide. Now, the emerging facts of Blanche's past begin to confirm the hypocrisy of her social snobbery.

SCENE SIX:

At two o'clock the next morning, Blanche and Mitch return from "the amusement park on Lake Pontchartrain" (85). Blanche is exhausted, and Mitch recognizes that she hasn't had a happy time. She invites him in and, in the dark, serves drinks. They talk about themselves. Blanche describes Stanley's treatment of her as "rude" and says he hates her. Changing the subject, Mitch asks her age. The conversation then turns to Mitch's relationship with his mother, her sickness, and the loneliness he will experience following her death. Blanche talks of her husband's death in an extended monologue. She lies to Mitch telling him that she accepted Allen's older lover and they went out together as friends. Later, she says that Allen shot himself because she had told him, "'I saw! I know! You disgust me...'" Mitch then puts his arms around her and says, "You need somebody. I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" Blanche replies, "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!" (96).

Analysis

Blanche's encounter with Mitch exposes her sexual double standard. In secret, she bluntly attempts to seduce the young man collecting for the newspaper, an interaction that happens outside the boundaries of acceptable or even reasonable behavior. Because the incident is so far removed from Blanche's professed moral standards, she feels free to behave as she likes without fear. In contrast, since the Kowalskis and their neighbors know of Blanche's outings with Mitch, she believes that they must take place within the bounds of what she sees as social propriety.

Blanche's revelation of the story of her first love occurs in a heavily symbolic manner. Blanche describes her all-consuming first love in terms of lightness and darkness, using the concept of light to explain her interior state as she does earlier in the play. She says that when she fell in love, the once-shadowy world seemed suddenly illuminated with a "blinding light." She extends the metaphor when she describes the aftermath of her thoughtless, cruel remark to her husband, saying, "[T]he searchlight . . . was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this—kitchen—candle." We see in earlier scenes that a lack of light has enabled Blanche to live a lie, but now we see also that, without light, Blanche has lived without a clear view of herself and reality.

The music of the Varsouviana that plays in the background during Blanche's story is also symbolic. Blanche mentions that the Varsouviana was playing as she told her husband that he disgusted her, and the music represents Blanche's memory of her husband's suicide. When the polka surfaces from this point on, it signals that Blanche is remembering her greatest regret and escaping from the present reality into her fantasy world. Blanche's husband's suicide was the critical moment in her life, the moment she lost her innocence.

Mitch's lack of formal manners and education make him an imperfect match for Blanche, but he and Blanche are able to relate on a ground of common suffering and loneliness. Though she is clearly the object of Mitch's affection, he is the one with the upper hand in the relationship. Blanche needs Mitch as a stabilizing force in her life, and if her relationship with him fails, she faces a world that offers few prospects for a financially challenged, unmarried woman who is approaching middle age. Unfortunately, though Blanche lets down her flippant guard and confesses her role in her husband's suicide to Mitch at the scene's close, her failure to be upfront about her age, her entire past, and her intentions signals doom for her relationship with him. She tacitly admits that she needs Mitch when she accepts his embrace, but her fears of acknowledging reality overpower her and prevent her from telling the full truth.

SCENE SEVEN:

Several months later, Stella is setting the table for Blanche's birthday dinner. Stanley arrives and, learning that Blanche is soaking in the tub, ridicules her. Stella briefly defends Blanche as she sings, "Say, it's only a paper moon, Sailing over a cardboard sea— But it wouldn't be make-believe, If you believed in me" (99). Stanley tells Stella that he has learned from someone at work that Blanche lived in a hotel where she had prospective husbands, each of whom left her after two or three dates, was a prostitute with soldiers from a nearby army base, was told by the hotel to leave and not come back, and had an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy whose father discovered what happened and told the superintendent of the school where she taught. As a result, Blanche was fired and "practically told by the mayor to get out of town" (100). Before Stella can reply, Blanche calls her to bring a towel. Stella rejoins Stanley, denying the stories are true. She admits that Blanche is "flighty" and tells Stanley about the boy Blanche married and what she had discovered about him. She goes back to preparing the birthday cake and tells Stanley that Mitch has been invited. Stanley confesses that he has told Mitch about Blanche's life and that Mitch won't be marrying her. He tells Stella that Blanche will be leaving in a few days and he has bought her a bus ticket. They argue about forcing Blanche to leave. Stanley, having asked Blanche several times to leave the bathroom so

he can use it, orders her out. After telling Stella how refreshed she feels after the long bath, Blanche notices Stella's expression and asks what is wrong. Stella denies that anything has gone wrong. Blanche says, "You're lying! Something has!" (105).



Analysis

It is difficult to assess whether Stanley or Blanche herself is more to blame for Blanche's ruin, which is sealed by the end of Scene Seven. To some extent, Blanche brought her fate upon herself by leading a promiscuous and almost deranged life, in spite of the genteel morality to which she pays lip service. But Blanche's desire and her hypocrisy do not absolve Stanley of his vindictive pursuit of Blanche's vulnerabilities. Stanley is shortsighted and

unsympathetic, as we can see in his inability to understand why the story of Allan Grey, Blanche's lost husband, moves Stella so deeply. To Stanley, the fact that Blanche's husband committed suicide renders her a weak rather than sympathetic person.

Stanley's behavior toward Blanche seems even crueler once he reveals that Blanche is not just flighty and sensitive but also mentally unsound. In addition to proving Blanche's hypocrisy, the stories Stanley tells Stella about Blanche introduce the first outright reference to Blanche's mental state. Describing what he's heard from Shaw, Stanley declares that in Laurel Blanche is seen as a crazy woman.

Blanche's interminable baths function as a metaphor for her need to cleanse herself of her sordid past and reputation. She emerges from them refreshed and temporarily renewed. Stanley's repeated objections to Blanche's baths, ostensibly because he would like to urinate, function on a metaphorical level to show his rejection of Blanche's make-believe purification, which allows her to pretend modesty and put on airs without acknowledging reality.

The lyrics of "It's Only a Paper Moon," the popular 1940s ballad Blanche sings while bathing, summarize Blanche's situation with regard to Mitch. She sings, "It's a Barnum and Bailey world / Just as phony as it can be / But it wouldn't be make-believe / If you believed in me." Blanche's hope in a future with Mitch rests in his believing her act—or in his believing in her strongly enough to make the act reality. Williams juxtaposes Blanche's merry rendition of this song with Stanley's malicious revelations about her character, creating a situation of tense dramatic irony as Blanche sings about a future that will never come to fruition. The song describes the fanciful way one perceives the world while in love, but it also foreshadows the fact that Mitch falls out of love with Blanche after his illusions about her have been destroyed.

SCENE EIGHT:

People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is a one hundred percent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it, so don't ever call me a Polack.

Blanche makes derogatory and ignorant remarks about Stanley's Polish ethnicity throughout the play, implying that it makes him stupid and coarse. In Scene Eight, Stanley finally snaps and speaks these words, correcting Blanche's many misapprehensions and forcefully exposing her as an uninformed bigot. His declaration of being a proud American carries great thematic weight, for Stanley does indeed represent the new American society, which is composed of upwardly mobile immigrants. Blanche is a relic in the new America. The Southern landed aristocracy from which she assumes her sense of superiority no longer has a viable presence in the American economy, so Blanche is disenfranchised monetarily and socially.

The birthday dinner is nearly over, and Mitch has not joined them. Trying to relieve the tension, Blanche asks Stanley to tell a joke. When he says he doesn't know any jokes that are "refined" enough, Blanche tells one. Stanley shows no expression, and Stella criticizes him for his greasy hands and face. She tells him to wash his hands and help clear the table. He smashes a plate on the floor, grabs her, and orders her not to call him "Pig—Polack—disgusting—vulgar—greasy" (107). He throws a cup on the floor and goes onto the porch. Blanche tells Stella that she suspects Stanley has told Mitch something and, against Stella's urging, tries to call Mitch and leaves her number. Meanwhile, Stella goes to Stanley on the porch. He attempts to heal the rift between them by speaking of their love and life together. They rejoin Blanche as Stella lights the candles on the cake. Blanche and Stanley argue. The phone rings, and Stanley answers it. It is not Mitch. Stanley gives Blanche a birthday present, the bus ticket back home. Blanche runs to the bathroom where she can be heard vomiting. Stella criticizes him for having done that to Blanche. He changes into his bowling shirt as he reflects on the happy lives they led together until Blanche arrived. As he talks, Stella goes into labor. Stanley holds her as they leave for the hospital.

Analysis

In Scene Eight, Stanley, Blanche, and Stella become increasingly short-tempered. Stanley shows that he has taken all that he can handle of Blanche and will allow Stella to sway him with her protestations no longer. He is intent on removing Blanche from his house, and he sees no need for delicacy or kindness in doing so. However, Blanche too seems to have reached the limit of her capacity for niceness. She loses her temper briefly when she snaps to Stanley that she has already apologized three times for her bath. Her outburst constitutes the first time Blanche openly express anger in the play.

Stella too becomes increasingly assertive as she begs Stanley to explain his contempt for Blanche and to attempt to understand Blanche's nature. She insists that Stanley not leave to go bowling and demands an explanation from him for his cruelty to Blanche. These actions constitute the greatest assertion of independence Stella makes toward Stanley throughout the entire play. As Stella grows

angrier, her grammar becomes more formal, and she uses words such as "needn't." Stanley's grammar, on the other hand, grows sloppier, and he begins to speak in sentence fragments. The language Stella and Stanley use indicates their respective retreats away from each other into their social roles. But just when Stella seems to be thinking independently from Stanley and reasserting her connection to Blanche in her outrage at Stanley's cruelty, she goes into labor. The baby reasserts Stella's connection to Stanley and makes Stella dependent on him for help. He is once again in control as he takes her to the hospital.

Stella does not recognize her own similarities with Blanche. Her comments to Stanley as she begs him to understand Blanche's situation show that she views Blanche with pity. Yet, when making her case to Stanley, Stella argues that Blanche was trusting in her youth until "people like you abused her." Even though Stella recognizes that Blanche was worn down by "people like" Stanley, she does not reject him or realize that she could wind up in Blanche's place. Stanley, however, reminds Stella of her similarity to Blanche when he points out that he had to pull Stella down from the columns of Belle Reve.

Stanley's discussion of his and Stella's relationship as a response to Stella's demand to know why he is so cruel to Blanche seems strange. He begins by asking Stella if she remembers when she found him "common," and states that after he pulled Stella down from the columns of Belle Reve, he and Stella were happy to be "common" together until Blanche showed up. The implication of Stanley's speech is that he desires to take ownership of people and things, like Blanche and Stella, that make him feel inferior. What Stanley doesn't understand is how precarious and insecure the once majestic world of Belle Reve was by the time Stella and Blanche were born. His actions toward Blanche are all the more cruel because he misunderstands how weak Blanche is to begin with. Stanley's desire for ownership manifests itself as the furious sexual desire he displays for Stella in the play. The heated passion of Stanley's marriage foreshadows his enraged violence toward Blanche, which also expresses his need for ownership, but in a different form.

SCENE NINE:

Later, Mitch rings the doorbell. After Blanche applies makeup and puts away the whisky she has been drinking, she lets him in. She offers to kiss him, but he walks past her into the bedroom. Noticing that something is wrong, she offers him a drink and describes the decorating she has done to the bedroom. Mitch comments that the room is dark. Blanche replies, "I like the dark. The dark is comforting to me" (116). Mitch tells her that he hasn't had a chance to look at her in the light, as they never go out together during bright daylight. He tears the shade off the lamp and turns it on. She covers her face, and he tells her he does not mind her being older than she had looked in dim light but is angry about her lies and the pretense of being refined and idealistic. He confirms that Stanley told him the truth about her and that he has checked it out. She blames her affairs, including the one with a seventeen-year-old boy, on her loneliness following the death of her husband. She reminds Mitch that they both need someone. He accuses her of lying to him. As the Mexican woman peddles flowers, Blanche opens the door. When the woman offers to sell Blanche some flowers, she retreats, and closes the door. The flower woman's calls mix with Blanche's incoherent talk. Mitch attempts to put his arms around her. She asks what he wants, and he responds, "What I been missing all summer." Blanche cries, "Then marry me, Mitch" (120). Saying he doesn't want to marry her, he explains, "You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother (121). She orders him to leave and screams "fire" out a window when he doesn't. He exits and she drops to the floor.

Analysis

Mitch's act of turning on Blanche's light explicitly symbolizes his extermination of the fake persona she has concocted. Mitch recognizes that Blanche's deceptions have relied on darkness to obscure reality, thereby giving Blanche the freedom to describe things as she feels they "ought to be." For example, in Scene Six, Blanche revises reality by lighting a candle, claiming that she and Mitch will be bohemian and imagine they are in Paris.

Mitch behaves with resignation rather than anger when he confronts Blanche, showing that he holds genuine feelings for her. He initially bides his time, getting up the nerve to say what he has come to say. Sadness over lost love tempers his anger and frustration. When Mitch turns on Blanche's light, he violates Blanche's false dignity, but he does not violate Blanche sexually when she refuses him. However, his advances demonstrate that the only way he knows how to express his frustration over the relationship ending is through sexuality.

Whereas Mitch faces his breakup with Blanche with resignation, Blanche becomes desperate and unhinged. She sees marriage as her only means of escaping her demons, so Mitch's rejection amounts to a sentence of living in her internal world. Once Mitch crushes the make-believe identity Blanche has constructed for herself, Blanche begins to descend into madness. With no audience for her lies, which Blanche admits are necessary when she tells Mitch that she hates reality and prefers "magic," Blanche begins performing for herself. Yet Blanche's escapist tendencies no longer manifest her need to live in a world full of pleasant bourgeois ease. Instead of fancy and desire, her new alternate reality reflects regret and death. She is alone, afraid of both the dark and the light; her own mind provides her with a last bastion of escape. Her fantasies control her, not the other way around, but still she shrinks from the horror of reality.

Scene Nine fails to tell us conclusively whether Blanche is responsible for her fate or whether she is a victim of circumstances beyond her control. Mitch claims that it is Blanche's lying, not her age, that bothers him. Indeed, it is likely Mitch figures out that Blanche is past her prime in Scene Six, when she evades his questions about her age. Given Mitch's statement, it seems that Blanche's sexual duplicity and romantic delusions have been the source of her fall. Yet Blanche is also the victim of social circumstances. She was born into a society that required the suppression of desire, and her sense of entitlement, to wealth and social status, elicit the anger of new Americans in an increasingly diverse social landscape. Additionally, Blanche is Stanley's victim. His investigations of her past and his disclosure of his findings contribute directly to Blanche's fate.

Streetcar mirrored society; it caught a moment in time, a mood that was apparent in the wake of the war and the Depression. Williams' characters are reeling, desperately trying to find an identity, to re-evaluate themselves. Their own struggles are met by those of others, causing tension and conflict.

It was also the first play to truly tackle sexuality. Sexuality is at the core of the main characters; it can redeem or destroy.

Critic, Harold Clurman described Stanley Kowalski as "*The unwitting antichrist of our time. His mentality provides the soil for fascism*".

Nothing had prepared the audience for the searing and complex adult themes of the play. One critic called it the product of an "*almost desperately morbid turn of mind*". In contrast, another described it as "*a revelation. A lyrical work of genuine originality and disturbing power*". Such were and continue to be the extreme reactions to the play.

SCENE TEN:

Later that night, Blanche is drinking heavily. Sitting in front of the dressing table in the bedroom, she wears "a somewhat soiled and crumpled satin evening gown, and a pair of scuffed silver slippers" and a "rhinestone tiara" (122). Stanley arrives home and stands in the kitchen. After asking how the baby is and learning it will not be born until morning, Blanche tells him she has had a telegram from a former boyfriend inviting her on a cruise. He offers her a beer, comments on this news, and takes off his shirt. She expresses joy at the privacy she will have on the cruise and launches into a long soliloquy on her many positive qualities. She tells Stanley that Mitch returned and asked for forgiveness. She tells him that she rejected Mitch but, in doing so, reveals that there was no telegram. Stanley accuses her of "lies and conceits and tricks," including the lie about Mitch's return. All she can say is "Oh!" after each criticism, including his negative comments on her dress. He walks through the bedroom and into the bathroom. Blanche tries to call the man who was supposed to have sent the telegram. When she is told she needs his address, she leaves the phone and goes to the kitchen. While there, she sees a violent scene through the now transparent wall to the street outside. Returning to the bedroom, she picks up the phone, asks for Western Union, and starts to dictate a message as Stanley returns from the bathroom. He hangs up the phone and moves to the front door. She tries to get by him, then breaks a bottle and threatens him. He grabs her and she drops the bottle. He carries her to the bed and rapes her.

Analysis

Williams mimics classical tragedy by not showing Blanche's rape, the play's climax and most violent act. The omission of the rape heightens our sense of its offensiveness and also reflects the notions of acceptable stage behavior held by Americans in 1947, when *A Streetcar Named Desire* was first produced. Our sense of the rape's inevitability is another reason why it seems unnecessary that the act take place onstage. Stanley's final statement to Blanche that they have "had this date from the beginning" suggests that his rape of her has been fated all along. Instead of an act of force, he casts what happens as the endgame of their elemental struggle against each other.

The way Stanley terrorizes Blanche by shattering her self-delusions parallels and foreshadows his physical defeat of her. Increasingly, Blanche's most visceral experiences are the delusions and repressed memories that torment her, so that her physical rape seems an almost inevitable consequence of her psychological pain. The rape also symbolizes the final destruction of the Old South's genteel fantasy world, symbolized by Blanche, by the cruel but vibrant present, symbolized by Stanley. In the New South, animal instinct and common sense win out over lofty ideals and romantic notions.

Williams indicates the impending rape through Stanley's macho, imposing, animalistic body language. Like a snake, Stanley flicks his tongue at Blanche through his teeth. He corners her in the bedroom, refusing to move out of her way, then "springs" at her, calling her a "tiger" as he captures her. Blanche's silent resignation as Stanley carries her to the bed indicates the utter defeat of her will.

Our opinion of Stanley has changed greatly by this second-to-last scene. At the start of the play, Stanley is more likable and down-to-earth than Blanche. He lacks her pretension, and he represents the new America, where reward is based on merit and good work, not on birth into fortunate circumstances. But Stanley's rape of Blanche just before his child is born, when he is at his most triumphant and she at her most psychologically vulnerable, is the ultimate act of cruelty. If rape is realism, then surely Blanche's world of dreams and fantasies is a better alternative. To confirm the terrible nature of reality, the back of Blanche's make-believe world falls away, and the world of the street, with its prostitution, drinking, and thievery, impinges upon her surroundings. Each of these three characters—the prostitute, the drunkard, and the thief—reflects to Blanche an aspect of her personality.

SCENE ELEVEN:

Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

These words, which Blanche speaks to the doctor in Scene Eleven, form Blanche's final statement in the play. She perceives the doctor as the gentleman rescuer for whom she has been waiting since arriving in New Orleans. Blanche's final comment is ironic for two reasons. First, the doctor is not the chivalric Shep Huntleigh type of gentleman Blanche thinks he is. Second, Blanche's dependence "on the kindness of strangers" rather than on herself is the reason why she has not fared well in life. In truth, strangers have been kind only in exchange for sex. Otherwise, strangers like Stanley, Mitch, and the people of Laurel have denied Blanche the sympathy she deserves. Blanche's final remark indicates her total detachment from reality and her decision to see life only as she wishes to perceive it.



A few weeks later, the men are playing poker again. Stella is putting Blanche's things in the trunk. Eunice arrives, tells Stella the baby is well, and asks about Blanche, who is in the bathroom. Stella replies that they've "made arrangements for her to rest in the country" and that Blanche thinks it means she will be with the man from whom she pretended to get the telegram. Blanche asks Stella to take a message if there is a phone call, describes the clothes and jewelry she wants to wear, and asks Stella to get them ready. When

Blanche returns to the bathroom, Stella tells Eunice, "I couldn't believe her story [about the rape] and go on living with Stanley" (133). Blanche comes out of the bathroom, asking if her imaginary beau Huntleigh has called. When Mitch hears Blanche's voice, he withdraws from the game. Stanley tells him get back in the game. The sound of Stanley's voice upsets Blanche, who asks, "What's going on here?" (134). Stella and Eunice turn the conversation to Blanche's clothes and trip. Blanche starts to leave, but Stella persuades her to stay until the poker game is over. Blanche launches into a monologue concerning her own death at sea.

A doctor and nurse arrive and ring the doorbell. Eunice answers the door and tells Blanche it is for her. Eunice confirms Blanche's guess that it is "the gentleman I was expecting from Dallas" (137). Eunice leaves and later returns to tell Blanche her callers are waiting outside. Blanche, Stella, and Eunice walk through the kitchen, past the poker game, and outside. When Blanche discovers that the man outside is not Huntleigh, she becomes upset and returns through the kitchen to the bedroom. The nurse and Stanley move toward her, and Blanche become hysterical.

Outside Stella hears Blanche's cries and blames herself for what has happened to Blanche. She tries to enter the house but is stopped by Eunice. Mitch heads for the bedroom but is stopped by Stanley. Mitch punches Stanley, drops to the table, and cries. The doctor enters the bedroom, calms Blanche, helps her up, and walks with her into the kitchen. Blanche, speaking to the doctor, utters one of the most famous lines from the play, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (142). Stella is waiting for them and cries out to Blanche, but Blanche does not respond and walks away with the doctor and the nurse.

When Blanche, the doctor, and the nurse have turned the corner, Eunice brings the baby to Stella. Stanley speaks to Stella, who is crying, saying "voluptuously, soothingly: 'Now, honey. Now, love. Now, now love.'" While speaking, "He kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse" (142). Steve utters the final words of the play, "This game is seven-card stud" (142).

Analysis

Blanche's behavior toward the poker players and during her bath reflects the way being raped by Stanley has scarred her. At the start of the play, she performs for Stanley's friends and demands their charm and devotion. By its end, she wants to hide from their gaze and hopes they won't notice her. Blanche spends much of Scene Eleven in the bath, but the bathing in this scene is different than before—an attempt to wash away Stanley's recent violation rather than her past sexual acts. She also bathes to prepare for her -imagined meeting with Shep Huntleigh rather than for any real encounter with a man. Blanche's bath in this scene shows her cleansing herself for an impending ritual and hiding from real danger rather than simply calming her nerves. It is clear that Stanley has destroyed Blanche's already tenuous connection to reality. She no longer hopes that reality will prove itself adaptable to her dreams.

Blanche's illusions and deceptions about her past lose out to the disturbing reality of the Kowalskis' marriage, but by the end of the scene the marriage proves to be a sort of illusion, based on deception. The two sisters' roles reverse. Stella admits that she may have entered a world of make-believe when she acknowledges that she cannot believe Blanche's story about the rape and continue to live with Stanley. Blanche, by retreating into hysteria and madness, and by refusing to acknowledge her sister as she leaves the apartment with the doctor, may be sparing Stella the horror of having to face the truth about her husband. Blanche's descent into madness shields Stella from the truth. If Blanche were to remain lucid, Stella might have to give Blanche's claims credibility.

In many of his plays, Williams depicts unmarried, fallen, Southern women such as Blanche who are victims to society's rules. The desperate nature of Blanche's situation is apparent in her mental attempts to convince herself that the chivalric gentleman still exists in the form of Shep Huntleigh. Her quiet determination to depend "on the kindness of strangers" is funny, because in the past Blanche has slept with quite a few strangers, but it also indicates the resignation and defeat women in her position must accept when it comes to counting on their families. Most of the strangers we see in the play—the newspaper boy, the Mexican flower woman—show that they have very little other than sadness to offer Blanche. Social convention in the Old South diminishes unmarried women completely, leaving them vulnerable to domination or destruction by men. By showing the triumph of brutality and ruthlessness over gentility and delicacy, this scene captures and portrays the disposable nature of Blanche's kind.

When she insists that Stella's life with Stanley must go on, Eunice argues that male companionship is a woman's means of survival in the face of social convention. Eunice believes that Stella must work fiercely to maintain her relationship with Stanley. Given what the audience sees Stella and Eunice suffer at the hands of their husbands, it is unlikely that these women believe *nothing* of Blanche's story. However, acknowledging its truth would require them to acknowledge their husbands' brutality, and it would interfere with their survival. Life "going on" depends on having the social protection of marriage and a family, regardless of the cost.

Stella's "luxurious" tears at the end of the play are shed not only for her sister, but also for the complexity and tension between illusion and reality, between Blanche's story and Stella's own understanding of her life. Stella cannot believe Blanche's story, but she cannot completely deny it either. Ultimately, Stella cries for herself, for Blanche, and for the fact that a part of her is glad to see Blanche go. She accepts the overdone comfort Stanley offers, which is peppered with endearments like "now, love," and which conforms to the script Stella needs for life to go on. An offstage announcement that another poker game ("seven-card stud") is about to commence ends the play with a symbol of the deception and bluffing that has taken place in the Kowalski house. The play's last line also serves as a subtle reminder that the nature of the game in the Kowalski household can always change.

Style:

Williams became renowned for his unmistakable characterization, accomplished through impeccably observed dialogue. Once his characters speak, they are completely identifiable and unforgettable. The rhythms and patterns of speech draw us into new and unfamiliar worlds.

A second trait is his mixture of realism and fantasy. His work defies labelling and moves easily and seamlessly from realism to surrealism, from truth to fantasy.

In his tribute after Williams' death, Arthur Miller said he *"broke new ground by opening up the stage*

to sheer sensibility, and not by abandoning dramatic structure but transforming it. He made form serve his utterance. He did not turn his back on dramatic rules but created new ones. He has a long reach and a genuinely dramatic imagination... he is constantly pressing his own limits. He creates shows, but possesses the restless inconsolability with his solutions, which is inevitable with a genuine writer". Williams had a unique and individual voice, dramatically, socially and politically. He was not afraid of showing profoundly personal themes in his writing, nor those which society might see as alarming.



Williams developed a style that was precise and poetic, but always truthful. His beautiful and imaginative imagery was unusual within the constraints of traditional theatre and, while being grounded in reality, in places his plays were almost surreal. His work carries the audience inside the minds of the characters, rather than just dealing with the external façade. We are not being simply entertained or told; rather we are encouraged to use our imaginations and delve deeper, where we are emotionally charged and affected. This is where Williams is exceptional. He described it as *"the incontinent blaze of live theatre, a theatre meant for seeing and for feeling"*. Williams' grandmother was a music teacher, and his mother was a singer. Music to Williams was a major source of inspiration. His foreword to *Camino Real* talks of jazz experiments which are *"a new sensation of release, as if I could ride out like a tenor sax, taking the breaks in a Dixieland combo or a piano in a bop session"*. Overlaying music, sound, light, and textures, Williams was able to blur the line between realism and subjective expressionism.

Themes, Motifs & Symbols:

Themes:

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work.

Many of Williams' plays show a world that is dictated by forms of fascism and bigotry. Michael Billington observed:

"Williams' whole career can be seen as an attack on a society that elevates crude energy and muscular materialism above delicacy of feeling".

Williams himself said:

"If there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on stage, then it may be that my cycle of violent plays have had a moral justification after all".

"I have no acquaintance with political and social dialectics. If you ask what my politics are, I am a humanitarian. That is the social background of my life."

Williams grew up during the Depression, flirting with radical politics and regarding himself as something of a 'revolutionary'. He was drawn to theatre that addressed the concerns of the world. Theatre was no longer a place to be simply entertained, when on the streets people were homeless and starving. He debated political corruption, rarely voted, denounced America's war involvements and, as a homosexual, found himself harassed and threatened in a brutal world. A world without freedom to speak one's mind and to be the person one wants to be.

FANTASY'S INABILITY TO OVERCOME REALITY:

Although Williams's protagonist in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is the romantic Blanche DuBois, the play is a work of social realism. Blanche explains to Mitch that she fibs because she refuses to accept the hand fate has dealt her. Lying to herself and to others allows her to make life appear as it should be rather than as it is. Stanley, a practical man firmly grounded in the physical world, disdains Blanche's fabrications and does everything he can to unravel them. The antagonistic relationship between Blanche and Stanley is a struggle between appearances and reality. It propels the play's plot and creates an overarching tension. Ultimately, Blanche's attempts to remake her own and Stella's existences—to rejuvenate her life and to save Stella from a life with Stanley—fail.

One of the main ways Williams dramatizes fantasy's inability to overcome reality is through an exploration of the boundary between exterior and interior. The set of the play consists of the two-room Kowalski apartment and the surrounding street. Williams's use of a flexible set that allows the street to be seen at the same time as the interior of the home expresses the notion that the home is not a domestic sanctuary. The Kowalskis' apartment cannot be a self-defined world that is impermeable to greater reality. The characters leave and enter the apartment throughout the play, often bringing with them the problems they encounter in the larger environment. For example, Blanche refuses to leave her prejudices against the working class behind her at the door. The

most notable instance of this effect occurs just before Stanley rapes Blanche, when the back wall of the apartment becomes transparent to show the struggles occurring on the street, foreshadowing the violation that is about to take place in the Kowalskis' home.

Though reality triumphs over fantasy in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams suggests that fantasy is an important and useful tool. At the end of the play, Blanche's retreat into her own private fantasies enables her to partially shield herself from reality's harsh blows. Blanche's

insanity emerges as she retreats fully into herself, leaving the objective world behind in order to avoid accepting reality. In order to escape fully, however, Blanche must come to perceive the exterior world as that which she imagines in her head. Thus, objective reality is not an antidote to Blanche's fantasy world; rather, Blanche adapts the exterior world to fit her delusions. In both the physical and the psychological realms, the boundary between fantasy and reality is permeable. Blanche's final, deluded happiness suggests that, to some extent, fantasy is a vital force at play in every individual's experience, despite reality's inevitable triumph.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SEX AND DEATH:

Blanche's fear of death manifests itself in her fears of aging and of lost beauty. She refuses to tell anyone her true age or to appear in harsh light that will reveal her faded looks. She seems to believe that by continually asserting her sexuality, especially toward men younger than herself, she will be able to avoid death and return to the world of teenage bliss she experienced before her husband's suicide.

However, beginning in Scene One, Williams suggests that Blanche's sexual history is in fact a cause of her downfall. When she first arrives at the Kowalskis', Blanche says she rode a streetcar named Desire, then transferred to a streetcar named Cemeteries, which brought her to a street named Elysian Fields. This journey, the precursor to the play, allegorically represents the trajectory of Blanche's life. The Elysian Fields are the land of the dead in Greek mythology. Blanche's lifelong pursuit of her sexual desires has led to her eviction from Belle Reve, her ostracism from Laurel, and, at the end of the play, her expulsion from society at large.

Sex leads to death for others Blanche knows as well. Throughout the play, Blanche is haunted by the deaths of her ancestors, which she attributes to their "epic fornications." Her husband's suicide results from her disapproval of his homosexuality. The message is that indulging one's desire in the form of unrestrained promiscuity leads to forced departures and unwanted ends. In Scene Nine, when the Mexican woman appears selling "flowers for the dead," Blanche reacts with horror because the woman announces Blanche's fate. Her fall into madness can be read as the ending brought about by her dual flaws—her inability to act appropriately on her desire and her desperate fear of human mortality. Sex and death are intricately and fatally linked in Blanche's experience.

DEPENDENCE ON MEN:

A Streetcar Named Desire presents a sharp critique of the way the institutions and attitudes of postwar America placed restrictions on women's lives. Williams uses Blanche's and Stella's dependence on men to expose and critique the treatment of women during the transition from the old to the new South. Both Blanche and Stella see male companions as their only means to achieve happiness, and they depend on men for both their sustenance and their self-image. Blanche recognizes that Stella could be happier without her physically abusive husband, Stanley. Yet, the alternative Blanche proposes—contacting Shep Huntleigh for financial support—still involves complete dependence on men. When Stella chooses to remain with Stanley, she chooses to rely on, love, and believe in a man instead of her sister. Williams does not necessarily criticize Stella—he makes it quite clear that Stanley represents a much more secure future than Blanche does.

For herself, Blanche sees marriage to Mitch as her means of escaping destitution. Men's exploitation of Blanche's sexuality has left her with a poor reputation. This reputation makes Blanche an unattractive marriage prospect, but, because she is destitute, Blanche sees marriage as her only possibility for survival. When Mitch rejects Blanche because of Stanley's gossip about her reputation, Blanche immediately thinks of another man—the millionaire Shep Huntleigh—who might rescue her. Because Blanche cannot see around her dependence on men, she has no realistic conception of how to rescue herself. Blanche does not realize that her dependence on men will lead to her downfall rather than her salvation. By relying on men, Blanche puts her fate in the hands of others.

Motifs

Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, or literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text's major themes.

LIGHT:

Throughout the play, Blanche avoids appearing in direct, bright light, especially in front of her suitor, Mitch. She also refuses to reveal her age, and it is clear that she avoids light in order to prevent him from seeing the reality of her fading beauty. In general, light also symbolizes the reality of Blanche's past. She is haunted by the ghosts of what she has lost—her first love, her purpose in life, her dignity, and the genteel society (real or imagined) of her ancestors.

Blanche covers the exposed lightbulb in the Kowalski apartment with a Chinese paper lantern, and she refuses to go on dates with Mitch during the daytime or to well-lit locations. Mitch points out Blanche's avoidance of light in Scene Nine, when he confronts her with the stories Stanley has told him of her past. Mitch then forces Blanche to stand under the direct light. When he tells her that he doesn't mind her age, just her deceitfulness, Blanche responds by saying that she doesn't mean any harm. She believes that magic, rather than reality, represents life as it ought to be. Blanche's inability to tolerate light means that her grasp on reality is also nearing its end.

In Scene Six, Blanche tells Mitch that being in love with her husband, Allan Grey, was like having the world revealed in bright, vivid light. Since Allan's suicide, Blanche says, the bright light has been missing. Through all of Blanche's inconsequential sexual affairs with other men, she has experienced only dim light. Bright light, therefore, represents Blanche's youthful sexual innocence, while poor light represents her sexual maturity and disillusionment.

BATHING (ALMOST A SYMBOL):

Throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche bathes herself. Her sexual experiences have made her a hysterical woman, but these baths, as she says, calm her nerves. In light of her efforts to forget and shed her illicit past in the new community of New Orleans, these baths represent her efforts to cleanse herself of her odious history. Yet, just as she cannot erase the past, her bathing is never done. Stanley also turns to water to undo a misdeed when he showers after beating Stella. The shower serves to soothe his violent temper; afterward, he leaves the bathroom feeling remorseful and calls out longingly for his wife.

DRUNKENNESS:

Both Stanley and Blanche drink excessively at various points during the play. Stanley's drinking is social: he drinks with his friends at the bar, during their poker games, and to celebrate the birth of his child. Blanche's drinking, on the other hand, is anti-social, and she tries to keep it a secret. She drinks on the sly in order to withdraw from harsh reality. A state of drunken stupor enables her to take a flight of imagination, such as concocting a getaway with Shep Huntleigh. For both characters, drinking leads to destructive behavior: Stanley commits domestic violence, and Blanche deludes herself. Yet Stanley is able to rebound from his drunken escapades, whereas alcohol augments Blanche's gradual departure from sanity.

Symbols

Symbols are objects, characters, figures, or colors used to represent abstract ideas or concepts.

SHADOWS AND CRIES:

As Blanche and Stanley begin to quarrel in Scene Ten, various oddly shaped shadows begin to appear on the wall behind her. Discordant noises and jungle cries also occur as Blanche begins to descend into madness. All of these effects combine to dramatize Blanche's final breakdown and departure from reality in the face of Stanley's physical threat. When she loses her sanity in her final struggle against Stanley, Blanche retreats entirely into her own world. Whereas she originally colors her perception of reality according to her wishes, at this point in the play she ignores reality altogether.

THE VARSOUVIANA POLKA:

The Varsouviana is the polka tune to which Blanche and her young husband, Allen Grey, were dancing when she last saw him alive. Earlier that day, she had walked in on him in bed with an older male friend. The three of them then went out dancing together, pretending that nothing had happened. In the middle of the Varsouviana, Blanche turned to Allen and told him that he "disgusted" her. He ran away and shot himself in the head.

The polka music plays at various points in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, when Blanche is feeling remorse for Allen's death. The first time we hear it is in Scene One, when Stanley meets Blanche and asks her about her husband. Its second appearance occurs when Blanche tells Mitch the story of Allen Grey. From this point on, the polka plays increasingly often, and it always drives Blanche to distraction. She tells Mitch that it ends only after she hears the sound of a gunshot in her head.

The polka and the moment it evokes represent Blanche's loss of innocence. The suicide of the young husband Blanche loved dearly was the event that triggered her mental decline. Since then, Blanche hears the Varsouviana whenever she panics and loses her grip on reality.

"IT'S ONLY A PAPER MOON":

In Scene Seven, Blanche sings this popular ballad while she bathes. The song's lyrics describe the way love turns the world into a "phony" fantasy. The speaker in the song says that if both lovers believe in their imagined reality, then it's no longer "make-believe." These lyrics sum up Blanche's approach to life. She believes that her fibbing is only her means of enjoying a better way of life and is therefore essentially harmless.

As Blanche sits in the tub singing "It's Only a Paper Moon," Stanley tells Stella the details of Blanche's sexually corrupt past. Williams ironically juxtaposes Blanche's fantastical understanding of herself with Stanley's description of Blanche's real nature. In reality, Blanche is a sham who feigns propriety and sexual modesty. Once Mitch learns the truth about Blanche, he can no longer believe in Blanche's tricks and lies.

Meat:

In Scene One, Stanley throws a package of meat at his adoring Stella for her to catch. The action sends Eunice and the Negro woman into peals of laughter. Presumably, they've picked up on the sexual innuendo behind Stanley's gesture. In hurling the meat at Stella, Stanley states the sexual proprietorship he holds over her. Stella's delight in catching Stanley's meat signifies her sexual infatuation with him.