

A Streetcar Named Desire Film Summary

A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

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Context

A Streetcar Named Desire is the story of two sisters, Blanche and Stella, and Stella's husband, Stanley. Stella and Stanley have an abusive relationship. Stanley is constantly pushing Stella around, telling her what to do, and even beating her up. Although they supposedly love each other and seem to make up a lot, Stella is forced to do whatever Stanley wants.

Then, Blanche arrives. Blanche also wants to control and manipulate Stella. She uses lies and deception to manipulate Stella, Mitch, and others. Blanche wants to continue being a beautiful young Southern belle, but she recognizes the inevitable marks of age. Stanley finally puts an end to his battle with Blanche when he rapes her while Stella is in the hospital giving birth to their child. Blanche loses her sanity after this encounter and is sent to a mental institution, while Stella leaves Stanley and moves in with the woman upstairs.

Elia Kazan was a famous director for both his Broadway stage plays and his Hollywood films. Before *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951), Kazan had also directed *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* (1945), *The Sea of Grass* (1947), *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947), and *Panic in the Streets* (1950). Kazan's films and style are well-known throughout the world for their depth.

Vivien Leigh got her first big break performing on stage in England. While filming *Fire Over England* (1937), Leigh did more than play her small role well: she fell in love with co-star Laurence Olivier. While visiting Olivier in the United States, Leigh read for the part of Scarlett O'Hara in *Gone With the Wind* (1939). Although many other big Hollywood names were tossed around for the part, Leigh's performance outshone them all and the role of Scarlett, her greatest ever, was hers. Later, Leigh appeared as Cleopatra in *Caesar and Cleopatra* (1945) and in *Anna Karenina* (1948). Her performance in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one of her best performances, leaving the audience shocked and sorrowful over the life of Blanche DuBois.

Marlon Brando plays the tough, violent role of Stanley Kowalski in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Considered one of the best actors of all time, Brando made a name for himself even before *A Streetcar Named Desire*. He had proven himself in acting school and landed a part in the Broadway show *I Remember Mama* in 1944. In 1947, Brando played the role of Stanley Kowalski in the stage version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and after first making his big screen debut in *The Men* (1950), he reprised his role of Stanley for this film.



Summary and Analysis

A Streetcar Named Desire starts out in New Orleans. At the train station, Blanche DuBois walks alone. A sailor asks whether she is lost, and she tells him that she is supposed to be riding a streetcar named Desire. He helps her on, and she heads to another part of town. She still has difficulty finding the apartment, but a woman sitting on the stoop directs her. When Blanche explains that she is going to be living with her sister, Stella Kowalski, the woman sends her to the bowling alley where Stella is with her friends. Stella wants to introduce Blanche to her husband, Stanley. However, he is making a scene, and Blanche is so shocked that she and Stella leave.

As Stella and Blanche drink at a bar, Blanche explains that she left her job because she was going crazy. They begin to talk about weight: Blanche explains that she never gains weight but that Stella needs to watch herself. Blanche is frustrated with Stella for having left their home. They return to Stella and Stanley's home, where they discuss Stella's friends, how Stella is not well, and Stella's pride in Stanley.

Blanche begins to tell Stella about all that happened since Stella left, confessing the bad things she had been driven to do to try to keep their plantation home, Belle Reve. Blanche then tells Stella that Belle Reve is now gone. Blanche had to deal with everything after Stella ran away, and she could not keep up the plantation on her teacher's salary. Stella runs to hide in the bathroom, and Stanley comes home and talks with Blanche. Blanche watches as Stanley changes his shirt. She tells him that she was an English teacher, and that she plans to stay as long as possible. A cat makes a horrible screeching, Blanche jumps toward Stanley, and Stanley tries to find Stella.

Blanche tells Stanley that she was married once when she was young, but the boy died. Stanley does not seem happy that Blanche will be staying indefinitely. Stella is planning to keep Blanche away for the night because it is Stanley's poker night. She then tells Stanley that the plantation has been taken, and she wants him to keep her pregnancy secret until Blanche adjusts. Stanley doesn't believe Blanche's story, pointing out that she didn't bring any papers. He points out that there is a Napoleonic Code in Louisiana which means that everything that belongs to the wife also belongs to the husband. Stella doesn't want to hear about this, but Stanley doesn't want to be swindled. He comments on what nice clothes Blanche has for having lost the plantation, and then insists they get an appraisal of all of her stuff.

After Blanche gets out of the bathroom, she talks to Stanley. Blanche is going to put on her new dress, but she has to convince Stanley to leave first. Once she realizes someone had been going through her stuff, she becomes upset. Stella is gone, so Blanche asks Stanley to button her dress. Stanley questions Blanche about the papers and tells her about the Napoleonic Code; he then grabs papers from her trunk, which turn out to be love letters. Blanche starts getting out the papers about Belle Reve, and then Stanley tells her that he and Stella are going to have a baby. Stella and Blanche go out while Stanley and his friends play cards. When they come home, they meet



Stanley's friends, including Harold "Mitch" Mitchell. Blanche tries to find out whether he's married; he's not.

In the bedroom, Blanche begins playing some salsa music, but Stanley bursts in and turns it off. Mitch begins to go into the bathroom; Blanche stops him because Stella is in there. They begin to talk about Mitch's former love, who was sick and had a much greater capacity for love. Mitch is dealt out of the game so he can talk to Blanche. The two carry on a fond conversation filled with flirtation. Eventually they begin dancing, until Stanley throws the radio out the window. Stanley is really drunk, and he begins to beat Stella. His friends try to give him a cold shower, but he begins to beat on them as well.

After Stanley sobers up a little, he feels horrible and looks for Stella, but she's not there. The women are staying with the upstairs neighbor, who tells Stanley not to call anymore. Stanley goes outside and begins yelling for Stella. The neighbor threatens to call the police on him, but Stella finally goes out to the balcony and down the stairs to Stanley. He falls to his knees, and they embrace. Blanche runs downstairs and finds Mitch. He explains that Stanley and Stella are crazy about each other. The next morning, Stella tells Blanche that Stanley was perfect after she came back. Stella reminisces about her wedding night, telling Blanche how Stanley used her slipper to break all the light bulbs. Blanche wants to get Stella out, explaining that Stanley is from the Stone Age and Stella deserves better. Stella, however, has no desire to leave. Blanche and Stella embrace as Stanley walks in. Stella jumps on Stanley as Blanche watches with sadness.

Blanche and Stella have cleaned the apartment, and Stanley becomes angry that he can no longer find anything. Stanley asks Blanche whether she knows someone named Shaw who believes that they know each other from a meeting at the Hotel Flamingo. After Stanley leaves, Blanche asks Stella what she has heard about her. Blanche tells Stella that she has not been doing well over the past couple of years, and then she promises to leave soon.

Blanche is nervous about meeting Mitch that night, because most women over age 30 can't get married. A little later a man comes in collecting for the newspaper, and she asks him to have a drink. She tries to seduce him, and he finally gives in to one kiss. She says that he should leave because she's supposed to be good and keep her hands off children.

Soon after, Mitch shows up with flowers for Blanche. They go out to a nice restaurant for dinner and dancing. Blanche seems upset, but she finally becomes friendlier when they spend some time alone. Blanche pours on the flattery for Mitch, but when he starts making advances in public, she begins to talk about her old-fashioned ideals. The couple then discusses Stanley's feelings for Blanche. Mitch asks Blanche's age, because his mother had asked. He explains that his mother is sick and wants him settled down before she dies. Blanche tells about the boy she first loved and how he killed himself because of her cruelty. Mitch tells her that they both need someone, so they should be together.



Several months later, Stanley is tired of Blanche's continued presence. At work, he angrily tells Mitch the truth about Blanche's past. Later at home, Stella and Stanley talk about Blanche's past while Blanche is getting ready for her birthday party, and Stanley tells Stella that Blanche stayed at the Hotel Flamingo, where she was able to keep her affairs private. She apparently went through men every few days, and she lost her job for having an affair with a 17-year-old student. Stanley then bangs on the door to get Blanche out of the bathroom.

Stanley, Stella, and Blanche eat dinner. Mitch has not come for Blanche's birthday party. When Stella tells Stanley to wash up and help clear the table, he becomes angry and breaks a plate, telling them he is the King around there and they shouldn't forget it. Blanche wonders why Mitch didn't come and decides to call him. Stanley goes out and tells Stella that as soon as Blanche leaves, everything will go back to normal. As the phone rings, Stanley tells them that he's going to bowl in a little bit. He then hands Blanche a bus ticket back home for Tuesday. Stella becomes angry and asks why he's doing this. He tells her that everything was fine until Blanche showed up.

Stella goes into labor, and she and Stanley hurry to the hospital. At the apartment, Blanche answers the door and finds Mitch there. He wants to see her in the light: she always makes them go out at night to darkly lit places. She wants mystery and he wants reality. Mitch says that he checked out the stories Stanley told, and they were verified. Blanche explains that she moved because her youth was gone. However, she says that her heart never lied. A woman then comes to the door with "flowers for the dead." Blanche is tired of death, having lived in a house full of death. She says that the opposite of death is desire. Young soldiers trained at a camp near Belle Reve, and they would call to her at night. Mitch kisses Blanche passionately, and she asks him to marry her. He tells her she's not clean enough to bring in the house; she begins screaming and throws him out of the apartment.

Concerned by Blanche's screaming, a police officer arrives, but Blanche closes up the house and tells him she is fine. Blanche then begins to talk to herself, perhaps repeating conversations from her youth. Suddenly, Stanley is in the house. Stella in the hospital and the baby will be born tomorrow. Blanche seems concerned that she and Stanley will be alone, and Blanche tells him that she received an invitation for a cruise from an old admirer.

Stanley begins drinking, and he offers to make things right with Blanche. She tells him that she's been "casting her pearls before swine" such as Mitch. She says that she let Mitch go because some things were unforgivable. Stanley figures out that she didn't receive a telegram, and he throws her onto the bed. He says that he never believed her stories, and he walks out the door. Blanche hurries to put her things together, but she is too scared to leave. She tries to call for help, but Stanley walks back in. She is scared to walk past him, and when she tries, he stops her. She breaks a bottle to try to ward him off, but he overpowers her and throws her hand into a mirror and breaks it. Then, although we don't see it, we know he rapes her.



The next scene moves to the baby being at home, and the men playing cards. Stella and the lady upstairs talk about how Blanche won't eat and only talks about going on a cruise. Stella says that they have a nice rest for her in the country. Blanche comes out, and she has clearly lost her mind. The woman tells her that they have to keep going. Blanche comes out and realizes that Mitch is in the apartment, but Stella and the neighbor won't let her go out to see him. They calm her down by talking about her cruise. As the cathedral's clock chimes, Blanche decides to leave, but they have her wait. The doctor and matron who are taking Blanche away to the asylum wait outside. Stella and the neighbor gather Blanche's things and take her out to leave.

When Blanche sees the doctor, she becomes afraid and Stella begins to cry. Blanche runs away, but the matron and doctor come after her. Everything keeps echoing in Blanche's mind, and she is terrified. Stanley offers her the paper lantern, and she begins to scream and flail until the matron holds her. Mitch attacks Stanley, but Stanley punches him. The doctor says not to use the straightjacket unless it's necessary. The doctor offers Blanche his arm and they leave together.

Stella tries to follow Blanche but Stanley stops her. She tells him not to touch her now or ever again. Stella goes in and gets the baby. Stanley begins calling for her, and she tells the baby that she is never going back in there again. Instead, she runs upstairs to her neighbor's house, and the film ends.



Characters

Blanche DuBois, played by Vivien Leigh

Description

Blanche DuBois is Stella Kowalski's sister. Blanche was married to a man who was a homosexual. She spends her time trying to find love somewhere else. She even moves into a hotel and entertains men there. Finally though, she runs through the family fortune, and she decides to go stay with her sister, Stella, in New Orleans.

While staying with Stella, Blanche meets Stanley, Stella's husband, and his friend, Mitch. Stanley hates Blanche, partly because she tries to undermine his control of Stella. Mitch, on the other hand, falls in love with Blanche. However, once he discovers the truth about her past, he feels betrayed by all the lies.

Blanche becomes very upset when Mitch leaves her. She regrets her past, and she is distraught that she seems unable to find lasting love anywhere. While Stella is in labor at the hospital, Blanche waits at home alone. Stanley comes in and attacks her. Although the film does not show the scene, we know that he rapes her.

Analysis

Blanche lives her life in a fantasy world. The realities of having no money and a husband who didn't love her are simply too much for her to handle. After her husband committed suicide, Blanche began to receive gentlemen at a local hotel. She kept looking for the elusive feeling of love, and let her life pass her by in her search. Rather than facing reality, Blanche creates her own world where a paper lantern can change a light bulb into a beautiful fixture and her worn face into a beautiful, young, fresh face.

After being raped by Stanley, Blanche loses all sanity and spirals into a destructive world filled only with fantasy. She believes that a rich, handsome man is coming to sweep her off to the islands. The truth is that Stella has called the people from the asylum to take Blanche away where she cannot harm herself.

Stanley Kowalski, played by Marlon Brando

Description

Stanley Kowalski is a rough, uneducated man. He works in a factory and spends his free time gambling with his friends. Although Stanley seems to love Stella, his is a controlling love that harms those it touches. Stanley often beats Stella when he is in a drunken rage. Although she leaves, she always comes back to him.



Stanley does not trust Blanche. First, he believes that Blanche will take Stella away from him. While Blanche does try to control Stella through guilt, she also makes good points about how Stanley treats Stella. Second, Stanley believes that Blanche is keeping money from them and is lying about her past.

Stanley is angry that Stella would allow Blanche to stay in their home. Although he tries to get rid of Blanche, Stella remains strong on this point. Blanche and Stanley are always going at each other. When Stanley finally tires of Blanche, he rapes her and drives her to insanity.

Analysis

Stanley's violent streak causes problems between him and Stella. He cannot seem to give her any freedom without feeling that he is being threatened. After he makes a mistake with Stella or beats her again, he simply goes outside and calls to her. Until the end of the film, she always came back down.

Stanley has an ongoing feud with Blanche. They both seek to control Stella, but Stanley refuses to give her up to Blanche. The more influence Blanche has over Stella, the more likely Stella will be to leave Stanley. Stanley feels that his only avenue to destroy Blanche is to rape her. He goes through with it, but he doesn't realize that, in the end, this final act is what will truly drive Stella away for good.

Stella Kowalski, played by Kim Hunter

Description

Stella's character is not very well developed in the film. There are times when the viewer finds it difficult to determine where her real loyalties and fears lie. Stella seems to be a weak woman who allows herself to be pushed around and manipulated by both Stanley and Blanche.

Stella tries to convince everyone to get along, but she fails miserably. Even though she thinks that things are okay at times, there is always some hostility boiling under the surface. Stanley does not trust Blanche, and Blanche cannot bear to see her sister taken away from her. Although Stella tries to ignore the situation, she cannot ignore it any longer after Blanche is raped and loses her mind.

Stella is at the hospital giving birth when Stanley rapes Blanche. When Stella returns home, she finds that Blanche is no longer mentally stable. Stella does seem to come into her own as a woman after Blanche loses her sanity. At this point, Stella has to make the tough decision to send Blanche to the asylum, and she realizes that she has a child now. Stella ends up leaving Stanley to protect herself and their child.



Analysis

In the first part of the movie, Stella allows herself to be manipulated. Since she is the only person she must worry about, she seems to be okay with the way Stanley treats her. Stella loves Stanley despite his actions, and until Blanche shows up, she seems to have no thoughts of leaving. Rather, she seems completely content to stay in this unbalanced relationship with him.

Stella's experiences with Blanche and Stanley help her to realize that nothing is ever going to change if she stays with Stanley. Like many abused women, she cannot leave after one try, but rather she has to try to leave several times before she is successful. Stella finally realizes that she can no longer help Blanche, but she must keep her new child safe from Stanley. After Stanley rapes Blanche, Stella finally gives up hope for their relationship and leaves.

Harold "Mitch" Mitchell, played by Karl Malden

Description

Mitch is one of Stanley's friends from the factory. Mitch is lonely, and he is carried away by Blanche's beauty. Although he only sees Blanche in shadows, he believes that she is wonderful and that he loves her. Mitch is brokenhearted when he discovers that Blanche's tales of her past have all been lies.

Analysis

Mitch is a kind man, but he feels rejected and deceived when he learns from Stanley about Blanche's past. He finally demands to see Blanche in the plain light of the naked bulb. He then leaves Blanche, but he later becomes angry when he realizes what Stanley has done.

Eunice, played by Peg Hillias

Description

Eunice lives above Stanley and Stella. She tries to help Stella after Stanley beats her. Stella finally goes to stay with her after Blanche is admitted to the insane asylum.

Analysis

Eunice does her best to help protect Stella and Blanche. She tries to convince Stella to leave, and when she finally does, Eunice kindly gives her and the baby a place to stay.



Steve, played by Rudy Bond

Description

Steve is one of Stanley's buddies from the factory who comes over to play cards and get drunk at night.

Analysis

Steve seems to be one of Stanley's own kind. However, when Stanley begins to beat Stella, Steve and the others help pull him away.

Pablo Gonzales, played by Nick Dennis

Description

Pablo is another of Stanley's drinking and gambling buddies from the factory. He is also hot-tempered.

Analysis

Although Pablo seems to be much like Stanley in temperament and actions, he does help the others pull Stanley away when he begins to beat Stella.

A Doctor, played by Richard Garrick

Description

After Blanche has a mental breakdown, a doctor and the matron come to take her away to the asylum.

Analysis

The doctor seems to care little for his patients. He keeps a grim demeanor throughout his visit, and he helps take Blanche away.

The Matron, played by Ann Dere

Description

Known in the film only as the Matron, she comes to help the doctor take Blanche away to the asylum.

Analysis

The Matron seems a little more touched by Blanche's tragedy than the doctor, but she still keeps a frown throughout her scene.



Themes

Fight For Control

A Streetcar Named Desire focuses on the fight that often happens when two people seek to control another person. Stanley and Blanche both fight to control Stella. As her husband, Stanley believes that he should take care of all of Stella's property and concerns. On the other hand, Blanche believes that her position as Stella's sister gives her the right to make decisions for Stella, such as trying to force Stella to leave Stanley.

Stanley also seeks to control Blanche. The more they fight over control of Stella, the more Stanley wants to control Blanche as well. His first step is to tell Mitch, Blanche's only companion in New Orleans, the truth about her troubled past. When Mitch learns Blanche's true story and finally sees her in full light, he decides that Blanche is definitely not what he wants. Then, Stanley seeks final control over Blanche by raping her, which causes her to completely lose her sanity.

Fighting for control over people always causes destruction. Stanley and Stella's relationship is destroyed because he seeks to control both her and Blanche. When only Stella was at risk, she would continue living in the situation, but after he so terribly hurts her sister, Stella can no longer stay.

The fight has also destroyed Blanche. After the rape, Blanche can no longer cope with her life. She already partially lived in a world of fantasy, but now she cannot tell the difference between fantasy and reality at all.

Breaking Free

Abusive relationships are common in our world. Stanley and Stella's relationship is the classic abuse case. Stanley may treat Stella terribly, but she always comes back when he does something nice. Stella lives for the good times, even though they are few and far between.

For most women, it takes around seven times of trying to leave for them to actually leave their abusive boyfriends or spouses. We see this same trend as we watch Stella leave Stanley and return to him several times. Although she may know that he treats her badly, she can't seem to leave, not only because she loves Stanley, but also because she fears the consequences. No matter how much Blanche tries to convince Stella to leave Stanley, she refuses to listen until he does something unforgivable-rapeing Blanche.

Stella finally breaks free when she realizes that Stanley will never change, and she will always end up suffering at his hand. If he will treat her sister in such a way, Stella grasps the fact that he will never treat her differently. Stella's attitude also changes because of the new baby. If Stanley could be so cruel to her and Blanche, how would he



end up treating their child through the years? Stella realizes that she can no longer think only of herself. In order to truly care for her child, she has to think first of its well-being and later of her own happiness. We can be sure that she is much happier without Stanley than with him.

Different Worlds of Men and Women

The worlds of men and women stand in stark contrast in this film. Many films and stories show only the good parts of life. They would make people believe that women wanted to have service roles in comparison to husbands who could do anything they wished. The husbands in these types of stories were kind and caring.

The world of men in this film is a tough world. They are all dangerous men; many, like Stanley, are extremely cruel. The men work all day in terrible factories, then return home to demand service and adoration from their wives. These men show no love or caring. Instead, they expect their women to do everything for them as soon as they demand it.

In this film, women respond like real women, as compared to servile women portrayed in other films in the past. Instead of submitting to whatever their husbands wanted, these very real women fight back. Stella refuses to just take Stanley's abuse and she fights back. However, instead of leaving, she stays with her abusive husband. This action is actually more in line with reality, since the majority of abused women either never leave their abusive spouses or boyfriends, or it takes them many years to leave.

Although the story of Stella and Stanley does not describe every marriage, it does describe far too many of them. With such a realistic, harsh portrayal of life, viewers have to come to terms with the reality, and people in these types of situations may actually recognize themselves and get out.

Style and Cinematography

A Streetcar Named Desire has a unique style and cinematography. Elia Kazan uses darkness effectively to bring a sense of suspense and drama to the film. When Blanche first arrives outside Stanley and Stella's apartment, the streets are dark and the world seems dangerous. We see that she is living in a world where her sensual desires have brought her to a dark and sometimes scary place.

Inside the apartment, much of it is well lit, but Blanche uses the paper lantern to dim the lights in her room. She realizes that in the bright lights, people can see exactly who she is. She ends up looking her age, and she feels like even her personality and faults suddenly become clear to those around her. She keeps her relationship with Mitch in half darkness so that he will not see her for who she really is inside.

Kazan also uses symbolism and innuendo to get the point across. As the mirror breaks in the final scene, the breaking glass symbolizes the breaking point that Blanche has finally reached. She completely loses her sanity now that her entire world has fallen apart. Kazan also uses innuendo from the breaking glass to the sounds to Blanche's loss of sanity to show that Stanley raped Blanche. Since the censors would never allow the film to show a rape scene at this time, the director had to carefully present the truth without upsetting them.

Motifs

Darkness

Light and darkness are primary motifs in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. With such a dark subject, there are times when certain things need to be hidden and others exposed. The director does an excellent job in mastering the elements of light and dark to highlight the characters and events.

One example of this motif is Blanche's behavior with Mitch. Blanche realizes that she is no longer as young and attractive as she once was. In her world of fantasy, she wants Mitch to fall in love with her perfect ideal of herself. In order to present this ideal, Blanche makes sure that they only go out at night. She also takes Mitch to darkened places and never allows him to come close in harsh lights. Blanche wants to keep any flaws in her looks and in her character to herself so she can protect her relationship with Mitch and her world of fantasy.

Another time when we see this motif is at the end of the film. Stella has come home from the hospital with the baby and is preparing to send Blanche off to a mental institution.. While the light in the apartment has been rather dim throughout most of the film, suddenly everything is bright. We are seeing the true situation for the first time. Blanche has retreated completely into her world of fantasy, Stanley is still cruel, and Stella finally "sees the light," and realizes her situation. The harsh, bright light during this part of the film helps the viewer easily see the truth, just as the characters are finally realizing the truth.

Fights

Throughout the film, we see several fights that help move the story along while also creating a transition in the story. Each time we watch a fight, a relationship is changing in some way, and when we see the characters again, something else is different.

One of the first fights is between Stella and Stanley. Stanley becomes drunk one night as he is playing cards with his buddy. He becomes angry with Stella for something Blanche did, and he begins to beat her. Blanche and Stella run upstairs to the neighbor's house, where Blanche and the woman try to convince Stella not to return. However, Stanley comes outside and calls for Stella, and they end up reconciling immediately. Blanche is distraught when she sees this happen, and from that point, she hates Stanley even more.

Another fight is when Mitch comes to see Blanche about the rumors he has heard about her past. Mitch is livid to discover that Blanche has been lying to him. He yells at her and throws her against the wall so he can get a look at her in normal light. Until this point, he has only seen Blanche in dim lights. After their fight, the relationship is completely over, and Blanche becomes more desperate and aloof.



Finally, Stanley and Blanche's fight is by far the worst. These two have hated one another ever since Blanche arrived, and Stanley finally decides that he wants to show that he is the stronger, better person of the two. Stanley rapes Blanche, and everything changes. After this encounter, Blanche completely retreats into her fantasy world, Stella leaves Stanley, and Stanley is alone with no one to control.

Fantasies

Blanche's fantasies are also a motif used in the film. Blanche does not want real life to be the way it is. She is always trying to make things sound better than they are, and she creates stories to make sure she doesn't have to face the truth about her situation. By ignoring the truth, Blanche is able to retain her sanity.

Blanche's life is empty and sad, but she can ignore this fact by creating her own fantasy world. She believes that all men love her for her beauty, ignoring the truth that she is no longer as beautiful as she once was and that she is sexually easy. If Blanche were ever to admit this truth to herself, she would be forced to deal with the events in her life; instead, she can ignore the things that happen and place them into her own context in her fantasy world.

These fantasies also make Blanche's life more confusing. As we watch the film, we sometimes have to work in order to differentiate between Blanche's fantasy and the reality of the events. After Blanche is raped by Stanley and completely breaks down, we are able to see everything as it really was. Her sad life is illuminated against the truth of her insanity.

Symbols

Paper Lantern

When Blanche moves in with Stanley and Stella, she uses a cheap paper lantern to cover a bare bulb hanging in her room. She cannot bear the harsh light that emphasizes the truth about her looks and living situation. The paper lantern symbolizes all of Blanche's fantasies.

Blanche uses the paper lantern to make sure that no one can see her as she truly exists. When she first meets Mitch, she ensures that he will come into her room before he gets a closer look at her. Within that room and in that light, Blanche is able to retain her fantasies and have Mitch fall in love with her.

As the fantasies become more out of hand, Blanche and Mitch begin to have problems. Eventually he rips down the paper lantern so that he can get a closer look at Blanche. He realizes that he has never seen her clearly since she has stayed in dark and hidden corners. After being raped by Stanley, Blanche finally completely retreats into her fantasy world. However, instead of taking down the paper lantern and admitting she has grown older, Blanche becomes immersed in a fantasy of being swept away by a rich and handsome man.

Curtain

The curtain in the apartment symbolizes several types of separation. As we first see, the curtain keeps Stanley and Stella on one side and Blanche on the other. Blanche has interrupted the life they are living and the control Stanley has over Stella. In order to keep their normal pace, the couples stays on the other side of the curtain, keeping Blanche and her fantasies at bay.

Later, we see that both Stella and Blanche are on the same side of the curtain. Their world is the woman's world and the curtain separates them from the world of men: men who spend their time gambling on cards. As Blanche and Stella talk, they realize that men will always have the power in their world. They feel that their only way out of the trap is to use seduction to prevent their men from leaving them.

In the end, the curtain completely separates the men from the women. As Blanche talks about her fantasy plans to take a trip, Stella cries and tries to protect her sister. On the other side of the curtain, Stanley stands cruel but weak. He no longer controls either of the women, and he does not know how to deal with the loss. The women have finally become equals with the men, but the curtain still separates their worlds.



The Stairs

Outside Stanley and Stella's apartment are stairs to their upstairs neighbor's apartment. These stairs play a crucial role as Stella tries to leave Stanley. Stella's first trip upstairs occurs after Stanley beats her while he is drunk one night. Stella decides to leave him, and she and Blanche hide upstairs.

As we watch Stella come back down the stairs to Stanley, we see that she has trouble freeing herself from his controlling love. He wants to use her rather than love her. Stella is simply a tool for Stanley to make himself happy. Stella returns to him because she believes she loves him and she has not yet taken control of her own life.

After Blanche is taken to the asylum, Stella goes upstairs for good. Rather than allow Stanley to hurt her or their child as he hurt Blanche, Stella retreats upstairs with the neighbor to begin a healthier, happier life. The biggest question at the end of the film is whether Stella will go back to Stanley in the end. We know that generally she comes back downstairs to him, but viewers hope that she will save herself and her child by leaving Stanley for good.

Broken Mirror

When Stanley attacks Blanche near the end of the film, they break a mirror that hangs in her room. After the mirror breaks, we hear Blanche screaming and Stanley yelling until the film moves to the next scene, in which Stella is helping Blanche pack for her trip with a rich man (actually her trip to the asylum).

The breaking of the mirror symbolizes the breaking of Blanche's mind. After Stanley rapes her, Blanche retreats completely into the fantasy world she has created for herself. Rather than dealing with the awful reality of what happened, Blanche becomes obsessed with a trip she believes she is taking with a rich man.

The broken mirror can also represent the final breaking of Stanley and Stella's relationship. Although Stella has not left Stanley in the past, his actions toward Blanche make her reach a breaking point. She is tired of putting up with his terrible ways, and she now has a baby to consider as well. At the end of the film, Stella retreats upstairs with Eunice and does not reappear when Stanley calls.



Essay Questions

Why does Blanche come to New Orleans?

Describe the relationship between Stella and Stanley.

Why do Blanche and Stanley not get along?

Why is Stanley skeptical about Blanche's story about the plantation?

Describe the relationship between Mitch and Blanche.

How does Mitch react when he discovers the truth about Blanche?

Why does Stella continue to return to Stanley?

What does Stanley do to Blanche while Stella is in the hospital giving birth?

How does Blanche react to the event?

What finally happens to Blanche and Stella?