

A Streetcar Named Desire Study Guide

A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

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Plot Summary

A Streetcar Named Desire is a Pulitzer Prize winning dramatic work by acclaimed playwright Tennessee Williams. The play opened on Broadway on December 3, 1947, and closed on December 17, 1949.

The play is set in and around an apartment building on the corner of a street named Elysian Fields in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana, just after the end of World War II. Stanley and Stella Kowalski live in the lower apartment, and during the heat of summer, Stella's older sister, Blanche, arrives carrying suitcases. Blanche is thirty, approximately five years older than her sister, and represents the epitome of a Southern Belle, albeit a faded one. Blanche informs her sister their family plantation, Belle Rive, located in Laurel, Mississippi, has been lost due to financial failure and draining after deaths in the family.

Soon Blanche is faced with Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski, a man who in every respect is the opposite of Blanche. Stanley is animalistic, sensual, working-class, and brutish in Blanche's eyes, and the two seem to irritate each other from their first meeting. Stanley suspects Blanche is swindling his wife, and in effect, himself, and sets out to discover the truth about her and the status of the family plantation.

One night during one of Stanley's poker parties at the house, he becomes drunk and enraged and beats the pregnant Stella, who leaves to spend the night with a neighbor after the row is stopped. Later in the night, Stella returns to Stanley, much to Blanche's disbelief and outrage. The following day, Blanche attempts to convince Stella to leave her abusive marriage despite Stella's complete dismissal of the previous night's events and her attempts to convince her sister she has not entered into any arrangement she didn't want to be in. Stanley overhears the conversation and Blanche's complete disregard for him and begins to plot even more maliciously against her.

Stanley investigates Blanche's past and discovers she had most recently lived in a second-rate hotel named the Flamingo in Laurel and her questionable reputation had preceded her so she was asked to leave the establishment. In addition, Stanley learns Blanche had an affair with a seventeen-year-old student at the high school where she taught English and was considered morally unfit to remain as a teacher there. When he confronts his wife with these truths about her sister, Stella is disbelieving and offended, but soon comes to doubt the validity of Blanche's fabrications.

Mitch, a coworker and friend of Stanley's who has been courting Blanche during her stay in New Orleans, learns the truth from Stanley and dismisses Blanche after considering marrying her. On Blanche's birthday in September, Mitch stands her up with the intention of leaving her for good. Later that night, amidst an argument about the matter, Stella has Stanley take her to the hospital because she is going into labor. Mitch arrives late and confronts Blanche about her past and she admits to having been promiscuous in Laurel and to having had the affair with the seventeen-year-old. Mitch



attempts sexual advances with Blanche and she turns him away after he refuses to marry her, calling out “Fire!” in a loud voice until he’s left the building.

Stanley arrives a few hours later and Blanche has been drinking heavily and packing, claiming to have received a telegram from a former beau inviting her on a cruise to the Caribbean. Stanley confronts all of Blanche’s deceptions and unravels her both emotionally and physically before raping her.

A few weeks later, Stella weeps as she packs Blanche’s belongings and prepares to send her away to a mental institution, feeling she had no other choice. Believing she would be unable to go on living with Stanley if the accusations were true, Stella chooses to believe her husband and Blanche is taken away by doctors to an institution.



Scene 1

Summary

A Streetcar Named Desire earned Tennessee Williams the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948. The landmark play is centered on the faceoff between Blanche DuBois, a symbol of the Old South, and Stanley Kowalski, a rising member of the industrial working class in America.

Scene One opens to the exterior view of a two-story corner building on a street named Elysian Fields in New Orleans, Louisiana. “The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm” (Scene One, p. 3). The building contains two apartments—one upstairs and one down. It is early dusk in the beginning of May, and the sounds of “Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner” permeate the air (Scene 1, p. 3).

Two women, one white and one black, are sitting on the steps of the building. The white woman, Eunice, lives in the upstairs apartment, and the black woman is a neighbor. Two men come around the corner and stop at the steps. They are Stanley Kowalski and Mitch, and are described as about twenty-eight or thirty years old and dressed in rough denim work clothes. Stanley carries a bowling jacket and a bloody package from the butcher’s.

Stanley bellows to Stella, who comes out on the landing. Stella is “a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband’s” (Scene One, p. 4). Stanley heaves the package of meat up to Stella, who manages to catch it despite protesting, and begins starting back around the corner with Stella calling to ask where he is going. When Stanley says he is going bowling, Stella says she wants to go and watch and tells him she will be over soon.

As Stella passes Eunice and the black neighbor (who is only named “Colored Woman” in the text) and exits, Blanche DuBois appears around the corner, carrying a valise. Blanche is about thirty and stands out in this setting dressed in a dainty white suit, pearl necklace and earrings, and white gloves and hat, “as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district” (Scene One, p. 6). Blanche wanders on, appearing lost, and Eunice asks if she needs directions. When Eunice convinces Blanche she does in fact have the correct address, Blanche introduces herself as the sister of Stella DuBois, or Mrs. Stanley Kowalski.

Blanche’s reaction to Stella and Stanley’s home is one of obvious distaste, but is met with courteousness by Eunice, who offers to let Blanche inside and goes to find Stella at the bowling alley and inform her that her sister has arrived. In small-talk, Eunice and Blanche’s conversation reveals that Blanche is a schoolteacher from Mississippi and lives, or has lived on a plantation there named Belle Reve. Sitting alone in the kitchen, Blanche looks slowly around, notices something in a half-opened closet and springs to



remove a whiskey bottle. Blanche pours herself a whiskey, downs it, and then resumes her seat by the table, exclaiming to herself, "I've got to keep hold of myself" (Scene One, p. 11).

Stella comes quickly around the corner and calls out to Blanche, running up to her. The sisters breathlessly chatter with one another as Blanche goes for the liquor bottle to pour more drinks, claiming her nerves are completely wracked. Blanche assures her sister she hasn't turned into a drunkard, but is just shaken up and hot and dirty. Blanche then demands to know what has brought Stella to "a place like this," which only "Edgar Allan Poe—could do it justice!" (Scene One, p. 13).

Blanche goes on to explain why she left the school, having had a nervous breakdown and having taken a leave of absence. Blanche criticizes everything about the home and generally dominates the conversation, then is appalled when she realizes she will be sleeping on a fold-out cot separated by only a curtain from Stella and Stanley's room. Blanche questions Stella about the type of man Stanley is, and Stella describes him as Polish, and as a "different species" from the men the girls had dated at home (Scene One, p. 19). It is then revealed Stella had not yet informed Stanley that Blanche was coming to stay with them.

Blanche then reveals to Stella she has lost Belle Reve, their family plantation, and accuses Stella of having abandoned their home and not staying behind to help maintain it. Blanche expresses, in an extended diatribe, how the deaths and funerals in the family caused the finances to go into ruin and there was no one to help her keep it up. Stella runs from the room to wash her face from the tears she's been crying and during her absence, Stanley Kowalski returns home.

Stanley enters, followed by Steve and Mitch, and the three discuss tomorrow's poker game before Mitch and Steve exit. Stanley is described as medium height and strongly, compactly built. He has an animal magnitude and an aura of danger about him. Stanley "sizes women up at a glance, with sexual classifications, crude images flashing into his mind and determining the way he smiles at them" (Scene One, p. 27).

Blanche and Stanley share small-talk, discussing bowling and Blanche's job as an English teacher, with Stanley eventually asking how long Blanche will be staying with them. Blanche replies uncertainly that she isn't sure. Stanley tells Blanche, "I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type" before asking about Blanche's previous marriage (Scene One, p. 30). Blanche replies her husband died, before exclaiming into a faint in Stanley's arms.

Analysis

Tennessee Williams uses symbolism and motifs throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire* to illustrate the themes of reality and fantasy, sexuality, and death. This can be seen even in the setting of the play and the names of the characters established in Scene One.



When Blanche arrives in New Orleans, she takes a streetcar route named “Desire,” which is a thematic focus of the play. Additionally, Stanley and Stella live on the corner of a street named Elysian Fields. Elysium (from Greek) is a conception of the afterlife that evolved over time and was maintained by certain Greek religious and philosophical sects. Thus, symbolically, Blanche takes a journey through desire to change to a streetcar named “Cemeteries” and arrive at her final resting place.

Blanche describes her name in a later scene as meaning “white woods,” which are representative of the emotional decay within her character. Stella’s name refers to a star.

When Blanche arrives in Scene One, her displacement within the setting is immediate and obvious. Blanche appears to be a Southern Belle lost in the raucous cacophony of New Orleans. However, foreshadowing in this scene alludes to the fact that Blanche’s appearance may not be all truth, as she guzzles whiskey to calm her nerves and chain-smokes throughout the scene and play. Blanche’s attempts to create a façade of innocent virtue are perpetually in opposition to her true nature, even in her discussions of men.

When Blanche and Stanley first meet, there is foreshadowing of the ending of the play as Stanley sizes Blanche up and she retreats from his gaze. Blanche’s superficial obsessions are also illustrated clearly in this first scene, where Blanche first fishes for and eventually demands compliments from her submissive sister. Blanche’s character is overbearing and self-centered, and these are traits Stanley immediately detects and dislikes.

Vocabulary

corresponding, raffish, weathered, rickety, galleries, ornamented, gables, turquoise, lyricism, attenuates, decay, redolence, infatuated, fluency, cosmopolitan, intermingling, poor boy’s sandwich, valise, incongruous, bodice, streetcar, uncomprehendingly, plantation, drunkard, hypocritical, lunacy, reproachful, indulgence, dependency, auxiliary, gaudy, seed-bearer, classifications, involuntarily



Scene 2

Summary

Scene Two begins at six o'clock the evening after Blanche's arrival. As Blanche bathes, Stella and Stanley discuss the women's plans to go to Galatoire's for dinner and then to a show because it is Stanley's poker night. Stella reveals that the family has lost Belle Reve, and when Stanley asks how, Stella is unsure in her answer. Stanley pursues the topic, asking why Blanche didn't show any papers or bill of sale, and expresses suspicion that Blanche is attempting to swindle Stella and himself.

Stanley enlightens Stella on the Napoleonic code, "according to which, what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa," then, giving up on obtaining information from Stella intends to ask Blanche directly about the property loss when she gets out of the tub (Scene Two, p. 36). Stanley storms to Blanche's wardrobe trunk, grabbing out an armful of dresses and exclaiming, "Open your eyes to this stuff! You think she got them out of a teacher's pay?" (Scene Two, p. 37). Stella defends her sister, claiming Blanche's belongings are gifts from former suitors and her jewelry is only costume jewelry before angrily snatching up her hat and gloves and exiting through the outside door.

As Stella exits to the porch, Blanche enters from the bathroom in a red satin robe. Blanche airily exits through the curtains to dress in the other room, asking where Stella has gone and Stanley replies she's on the porch. Stanley then begins to question Blanche about her wardrobe and expensive attire, and Blanche replies her jewels and furs are gifts from former admirers. Blanche flirts with Stanley, fishing for compliments, only to have Stanley gruffly reply "I don't go in for that stuff" (Scene Two, p. 42).

Stella calls for Blanche on the porch and Stanley tells her he's having a little talk with her sister. Blanche lightly asks Stella to go to the corner and get her a Coke and then proceeds to tell Stanley she's perfectly willing to level with him. Blanche insists she has never cheated her sister or anyone else as long as she's lived and Stanley demands to see the papers, roughly searching her trunk. When Blanche takes out a tin full of papers and prepares to hand the paperwork to Stanley, he demands to know what the papers beneath them are. Blanche tells him they are "love-letters, yellowing with antiquity, all from one boy" and screeches for him to give them back to her when he snatches them away (Scene Two, p. 46).

When the papers fall to the floor, Blanche exhaustedly hands Stanley the box and paperwork and seems to emotionally collapse at the recollection of her dead husband, who had sent the letters. At the mention of Ambler and Ambler, the firm that had made the loans on the plantation, Stanley comes to realize the property was lost on a mortgage and insists he will have a lawyer examine them. He then lets slip that Stella is pregnant, much to Blanche's surprise, just as Stella reenters with Blanche's lemon Coke. Blanche expresses congratulations to Stella, who apologizes that Stanley



informed her as he had. The guests begin to arrive for the poker party and Stella leads Blanche away.

Analysis

The motif of water is illustrated throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*, largely through the constant baths of Blanche. As water is a cleansing symbol, it can be surmised that Blanche's frequent baths, or "hydrotherapy" as she refers to it, are attempts to cleanse herself from her questionable past.

Stanley's suspicions of Blanche begin in this scene with the discovery of the loss of Belle Reve. Stanley believes Blanche's jewelry and extravagant lifestyle are to blame for the loss of the plantation, and he is likely correct in this assessment.

Stanley's illustration of the Napoleonic Code in this scene indicates the roles and rights of women during the time period and the place, another consideration throughout the narrative. From Stanley's perspective, all that is Stella's is also his, which maintains a "man of the castle" viewpoint. And indeed, Stanley's objective throughout the play is to maintain control over his "castle," which position Blanche threatens with her arrival.

When Blanche and Stanley face off in the scene, Stanley's violent nature is foreshadowed in his ripping apart of the suitcase. Likewise, Blanche's love letters are symbolic of her lost husband and the turning point in her emotional past. The discovery of Stella's pregnancy is a shock to Blanche, but it does little in the way of shifting her attention away from herself.

Vocabulary

toilette, perpetual, monkey doings, composure, sacrificed, gloss over, charity, Napoleonic code, enlighten, swindled, perpetuated, wardrobe, fox-pieces, inexpensive, acquaintance, costume jewelry, empress, airily, cordially, smoldering, compliment, glamorous, straightforward, wishy-washy, re-bop, judicial, atomizer, treachery, antiquity, cascade, vulnerable, mortgage, fornications



Scenes 3-4

Summary

Scene Three

Scene Three takes place in the Kowalski home on poker night and there is a surreal shift in the kitchen, giving it “the raw colors of childhood’s spectrum” (Scene Three, p. 51). Present are Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo, each wearing shirts in primary colors. There are whiskey bottles and watermelon slices scattered about the table along with glasses. The men play poker, argue and heckle one another, especially Mitch, who is chastised for wanting to go home to check on his sick mother. Mitch accuses the others of not understanding because they’re all married and exits to the restroom.

Blanche and Stella appear around the corner, and Blanche’s superficial obsession can be seen when she says, “I feel so hot and frazzled. Wait till I powder before you open the door. Do I look done in?” (Scene Three, p. 54). Stella reassures her and they enter, with Blanche exclaiming for no one to stand, despite the fact that no one has attempted to do so. Blanche tries to interact with the men, but Stanley sends the women away, slapping Stella on the thigh as she exits to the bedroom. Blanche decides to take a bath and encounters Mitch exiting the bathroom. Mitch cannot take his eyes off Blanche, and the immediate attraction between them appears mutual.

Blanche turns on rhumba music and begins to seduce Mitch from across the room as Stanley demands the radio be turned off. Tension builds as the men argue about poker and Stanley crosses to the radio himself, shutting it off. Mitch escapes with the feigned excuse of going to the bathroom and meets Blanche again in the hallway, where they begin to talk and to flirt. When Mitch lights Blanche’s cigarette, she reads a quote by Elizabeth Browning on the case, and he relates how the case was given to him by a former love that died. When Mitch is called for the next hand, he sits the hand out because he’s talking to Miss DuBois.

Blanche proceeds to flirt with Mitch, claiming she’s younger than Stella by a year, and asking him to hang a Chinese paper lantern over the light because she “can’t stand a naked light bulb” any more than a “rude remark or a vulgar action” (Scene Three, p. 66). When Stella exits the bathroom, Blanche turns the radio back on and suddenly Stanley erupts, hurling the radio out the window despite Stella’s protests. Stanley and Stella begin to fight and go outside, where a loud blow can be heard and Stella’s cry out. Blanche exclaims her sister is pregnant, and Mitch calls the men to split up Stanley and Stella. The men bring in the struggling Stanley and take him into the bathroom to sober him up as Blanche helps Stella gather her things and go upstairs to stay in Eunice’s apartment for the night.

After a moment of stillness, Stanley emerges, dripping from the bathroom and sobbing, exclaiming, “My baby doll’s left me!” before picking up the phone and calling Eunice



(Scene Three, p. 72). When no one answers, Stanley stumbles out to the front porch and begins to call “Stellahhhhhh!” until Eunice appears and tells Stanley that Stella is not coming down and to stop shouting before she calls the police (Scene Three, p. 73). After Eunice’s door slams shut, Stanley calls one more time for Stella and to the accompaniment of low-tone clarinet moans, Stella slips downstairs in her robe.

Stella’s eyes are glistening with tears and she and Stanley stare at one another before embracing passionately and even tenderly. Stanley carries Stella into their dark apartment, and Blanche descends the steps, fearfully asking where her sister has gone. Blanche is struck dumb when she realizes Stella has actually returned to Stanley, and looks around as if for a sanctuary. From around the corner, Mitch quietly calls out to her. The scene ends as Blanche tells him, “Thank you for being so kind! I need kindness now” (Scene Three, p. 76).

Scene Four

Scene Four begins early the following morning. Stella is serenely lying in the bedroom as Blanche appears at the door, looking haggard from a sleepless night. Blanche rushes in, exclaiming her worry over her sister and that when she found out Stella had been crazy enough to come back after what happened, she almost rushed in after her. Stella dismisses Blanche’s excitement, telling her she’s making too much of a fuss about nothing, and that when men are drinking and playing poker, anything can happen. Despite Blanche’s exclamations, Stella makes it clear she is not involved in anything she didn’t choose to be involved in, and Blanche needs to let it go.

Blanche, however, proceeds to develop a plan to contact Shep Huntleigh, a former suitor of Blanche’s from college. Blanche had apparently met Shep last year on a trip to Miami during the Christmas holidays and discovered he was incredibly wealthy, having invested in oil wells all over Texas. Blanche grabs a pencil and paper and begins writing a message to Shep, who she believes will give her and Stella money to open a shop (although she has no answer when Stella asks what kind of shop).

When Stella insists Blanche is taking things to the extreme and that she is taking it for granted Stella will leave but she has no interest in leaving Stanley, Blanche erupts with outrage that her sister could be so insane as to want to be with such an animalistic beast based on desire alone. Stanley enters carrying packages, unheard due to the rumble of the overhead train, just as Blanche levels with Stella, erupting in a diatribe in which she calls Stanley an animal and sub-human. Blanche urges with her sister, “Don’t —don’t hang back with the brutes!” (Scene Four, p. 91).

Another train passes and Stanley calls in to Stella. Stanley enters with the packages and greets Blanche as Stella, who had listened gravely to Blanche’s monologue, embraces him fiercely in full view of her sister. “He laughs and clasps her head to him. Over her head he grins through the curtains at Blanche” (Scene Four, p. 92).



Analysis

In Scene Three, the surreal qualities of the staging of the play come into focus and the transition of the poker party is described in great detail, with "a surreal shift in the kitchen, giving it "the raw colors of childhood's spectrum" (Scene Three, p. 51). The importance in this is not only to note the use of strong primary colors to represent the male perspective, but also the transient reality of the world of the play. Unlike a play produced in the strict styles of naturalism or realism, Williams uses imagery and staging techniques to emphasize the surrealistic world of his characters.

The character of Mitch is also introduced here, as his sensitive demeanor is heckled by the other poker players for his concern over his sick mother. Mitch is the only unmarried man among the group, and his intense attraction to Blanche is also a part of this. Just as Blanche is facing the decline of age and fears of becoming an old maid, Mitch will lose his mother in only months and seeks assuring himself companionship beyond her grave.

The symbolism in Mitch's cigarette case draws Blanche toward him, as she views him as someone who, like her, has suffered loss. Blanche's attraction to the cigarette case too is symbolic because it is a literary allusion to Elizabeth Browning, and Blanche is an English teacher.

Blanche's flirtation with Mitch in this scene is also foreshadowing of the discovery of her past, as she dances a rhumba and seductively undresses while at the same time attempting to maintain a virginal demeanor. It seems clear that Blanche has more experience with men than she has been letting on.

Stanley's eruption and physical violence against Stella in the scene is representative of his animalistic nature and is terrifying to Blanche. More terrifying, though, is Stella's forgiveness and return to her husband. Blanche cannot understand the physical and emotional passion between Stella and Stanley and tries only slightly to make any attempts to do so. Blanche simply believes her sister is trapped in an abusive marriage and must escape. It is incomprehensible to her that Stella has no desire to leave.

The introduction of Shep Huntleigh is important in that Shep represents a sort of "deus ex machina" for the delusional Blanche. Later, Blanche will come to believe Shep will save her again by taking her away on a cruise; however, there is no indication that Blanche ever actually speaks to Shep or contacts him in the narrative.

The menacing smile of Stanley's in the ending of the scene is indicative of his determination to finally thwart Blanche as his antagonist in the play. After hearing Blanche's diatribe in which she calls him base and brute-like, Stanley has no empathy remaining for his sister-in-law and will stop at nothing to have her removed from his home.



Vocabulary

billiard-parlor, lurid, nocturnal, coarse, portieres, ante, openers, frazzled, precision, kimono, beefy, Rhumba, spitballs, Luckies, inscription, orchard, paper lantern, adaptable, gallantry, bobby-soxers, drug-store Romeos, reverence, waltz, dully, indistinguishable, dissonant, maternity, sanctuary, gaudy, hysterical, indifference, bromo, sub-human, anthropological, brutes, stealthily



Scenes 5-6

Summary

Scene Five

Scene Five begins with Blanche seated in the bedroom as she reads a just completed letter and bursts into a peal of laughter. Blanche reads aloud to Stella what she's written to Shep, fabricating a completely false depiction of her time in New Orleans, with "a continued round of entertainments, teas, cocktails, and luncheons—" (Scene Five, p. 93). Blanche is cut off when Eunice and Steve upstairs break into a row, with Eunice accusing Steve of chasing a blond at the Four Deuces. Sounds of crashing ensue with Eunice charging downstairs and demanding someone call the police.

Stanley arrives in his bowling shirt, asking what happened and saying instead of getting the police, Eunice was getting a drink. Steve comes downstairs nursing a bruise on his forehead and leaves to go find Eunice as Blanche asks Stanley what his astrological sign is. Blanche declares she believes Stanley would be born under Aries, as "Aries people are forceful and dynamic. They dote on noise! They love to bang things around!" (Scene Five, p. 96). Stella, who has been going in and out of the closet steps out and says Stanley was born "just five minutes after Christmas" (Scene Five, p. 97), to which Blanche declares him a Capricorn – the Goat.

Stanley asks what sign Blanche was born under and she replies Virgo – the Virgin. Stanley contemptuously advances toward her, asking if she knows anyone named Shaw, and suddenly Blanche reacts with faint shock and fear, exclaiming, "Why everybody knows somebody named Shaw!" (Scene Five, p. 98). Stanley pursues the matter, claiming someone named Shaw knew Blanche in Laurel and got mixed up with her at a hotel called the Flamingo. Blanche denies she should have ever been involved with such an establishment, but her fear is tangible as she tries to play it off as insignificant. Stanley leaves Blanche with a threat before calling to Stella to have a drink with him at the Four Deuces, saying "Shaw must've got you mixed up. He goes in and out of Laurel all the time so he can check on it and clear up any mistake" (Scene Five, p. 99).

When Stanley has exited, Blanche, in a panic, asks Stella what she's heard about her and whether she's heard any unkind gossip and Stella replies "Why, no, Blanche, of course not!" (Scene Five, p. 100). Blanche continues, explaining that in the last two years or so after Belle Reve began to slip through her fingers, she had begun to slip and there was some talk in Laurel—but Blanche is cut off by Stella, who says that she doesn't want to listen to her when she's being morbid. Blanche suddenly shifts into a hysterical state, pleading with Stella and promising her she will leave soon and won't hang around until Stanley throws her out. Stella insists she stop talking foolishly and gives Blanche a Coke as Blanche explains her nervousness as being due to Mitch coming over at seven.



Blanche and Stella discuss Mitch and Blanche's feelings about him, with Blanche claiming "Yes--I want Mitch...very badly! Just think! If it happens, I can leave here and not be anyone's problem...." before Stanley comes around the corner carrying a drink under his belt and calling up to the celebratory Steve and Eunice above (Scene Five, p. 104). Stella embraces Blanche before running out to meet her husband, and Blanche sinks into her chair as Stella, Stanley, Eunice and Steve all screech around the corner laughing together.

Blanche, left alone, is approached by a young man collecting for the Evening Star and answers the door. She begins to flirt with the boy and offers him a drink, attempting a seduction that is clearly manipulated by her and filled with uncertainty on his part. Blanche proceeds to touch the young man tenderly on the cheek and bribes him for a kiss before sending him along saying, "Now run along, now, quickly! It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good--and keep my hands off children" (Scene Five, p. 109). As the boy disappears down the steps, Mitch appears around the corner with a bouquet of roses and is greeted by Blanche.

Scene Six

In Scene Six, it is about 2:00 a.m. and Blanche and Mitch are returning from a carnival at the amusement park on Lake Ponchartrain. There is a depressed air about the couple and Mitch apologizes for not having been entertaining enough during the evening. They discover that Stella and Stanley have not yet returned and enter the apartment, and Blanche goes into an immediate search for drinks, despite attempting to hide her current intoxication. Mitch attempts to make passes at Blanche, who dissuades him, insisting she wants to remain chaste. They discuss Stanley and Blanche's desire to leave and her distaste for her sister's husband, with Mitch insisting his disbelief that Stanley hates Blanche. Eventually, Mitch asks Blanche her age and explains his mother is dying and wants him to be settled down before she dies, which will likely be in just a few months.

Blanche recalls having loved and lost someone too and speaks in soliloquy, describing how her young husband came to kill himself. Blanche describes falling for the boy when she was only sixteen, and how although he was not effeminate looking, there was a tenderness which wasn't like a man's. After their marriage, Blanche had walked into a darkened room and discovered her husband with an older man in intimate embrace and later told him of her discovery while dancing at the Moon Lake Casino. After Blanche said to him "I saw! I know! You disgust me..." the young man had run from the casino and shot himself in the parking lot (Scene Six, p. 127).

Mitch goes to Blanche, drawing her into his arms, and says, "You need somebody. And I need somebody too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" (Scene Six, p. 127). Blanche attempts to speak but can only cry and collapses into his arms.



Analysis

The theme of reality versus fantasy is clearly illustrated in the delusions and the fabrications of Blanche's character. In Scene Five, Blanche's letter to Shep is so false it is almost comical with her descriptions of teas and luncheons. The reader or audience member begins to question at this point how much of Blanche's facades are intentional and what she actually believes to be true.

The crashing violence of the fight between Eunice and Steve represents the "normal" reality of the couples in Stella's society. Like Stella and Stanley, they erupt violently and forgive passionately. There is an animalistic, primitive nature among these pivotal couples, one which Blanche does not comprehend.

Blanche's discussion of astrology is an attempt to take a stab at Stanley, accusing him of being bullish and unrefined. However, Stanley's rebuttal strikes genuine fear in Blanche, as the name "Shaw" indicates something she wants to remain hidden from her past.

Blanche's response to Stella about her feelings for Mitch indicates she cares more for herself and her future than she does about Mitch himself. Similarly, the scene between Blanche and the young boy illustrates there is a certain dangerous risk just under the surface in Blanche. Blanche's behavior in this scene depicts her as a "Mrs. Robinson" type of older woman, preying on the innocence of young men. This foreshadowing will prove true as Blanche's past is further revealed.

Scene Six, between Blanche and Mitch, is one of the most tender scenes of the play. Blanche's soliloquy in which she describes the suicide of her young husband is heartfelt and perhaps the most truthful moment Blanche's character has throughout the narrative. The guilt of her actions in the past has driven Blanche to her emotional state now, and it is in this scene that the audience and reader gain the greatest compassion for her character.

Vocabulary

peal, forewarned, forearmed, disturbance, wrath, daemonic, bureau, astrological, Aries, Virgo, Capricorn, handkerchief, luxuriously, gossip, self-sufficient, morbid, gaiety, sentimental, relations, vanity, impulsively, temperamental, uncertainly, gossamer, Rosenkavalier, coquettishly, neurasthenic, stolid, shooting-galleries, lifelessly, owl-car, dismal, eureka, Pleiades, joie de vivre, Bohemian, perspiration, alpaca, physique, demureness, fumblingly, reproving, insufferably, commonness, executioner, deluded, locomotive



Scenes 7-8

Summary

Scene Seven

Scene Seven begins in the late afternoon in mid-September. It is Blanche's birthday, and Stella is completing decorations and preparing a birthday dinner when Stanley enters. Blanche is bathing, and Stanley tells Stella that he's "got th' dope on your big sister" as Stella pleads with him to stop picking on Blanche (Scene Seven, p. 129). Stanley bulldozes past Stella's objections and reveals his reliable sources have checked her out and that Blanche is famous in Laurel at the Flamingo Hotel, where she had so many lovers she was asked to leave.

Stella reacts with disbelief, claiming there is no truth in the rumors Stanley has heard, but Stanley goes on to say that not only had Blanche been promiscuous, but that the real reason she was run out of Laurel was because she had begun having an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy. From the bathroom, Blanche can be heard singing "It's a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be—" as Stanley pummels on, describing how Blanche was removed by the school superintendent.

Blanche calls out to Stella for a towel, and Stella begins to lose her certainty. When Blanche enters from the bathroom, she asks what is wrong and Stella dazedly claims to be tired. As Stella goes back to the kitchen, she attempts to defend Blanche, telling Stanley the story of Blanche's husband and his suicide as she puts candles in Blanche's cake. Stanley appears uncomfortable at the mention of Mitch's company for the evening and reveals to Stella that Mitch knows the same information about Blanche that he discovered and has no intentions of coming over or seeing Blanche again. Stanley informs Stella that he's purchased Blanche's birthday present: a bus ticket back to Mississippi. Blanche emerges from the bathroom to find Stella looking shocked and saddened, but when she asks what happened, Stella denies anything is wrong.

Scene Eight

Scene Eight begins forty-five minutes later, as Stella, Stanley and Blanche complete the dismal birthday supper. Blanche tries to lighten the mood with her usual artificial gaiety, but there is tangible tension in the air. Stella chastises Stanley for his messy eating and orders him to help clear the table, and he hurls a plate to the floor, declaring, "That's how I'll clear the table!" (Scene Eight, p. 143). Stanley erupts, grabbing Stella by the arm and shouting "Don't ever talk that way to me! 'Pig--Polack--disgusting--vulgar--greasy!--them kind of words have been on your tongue and your sister's too much around here!" (Scene Eight, p. 143).

Stella begins to cry and Stanley goes onto the porch and lights a cigarette. Blanche asks what happened while she was bathing, insisting that Stella knows something about



Mitch and that is why Stanley and Stella are fighting, but Stella denies it. Blanche intends to call Mitch but Stella attempts to dissuade her before going out to the porch as Blanche rushes to the phone in the bedroom. Stanley reassures Stella things will be alright after Blanche leaves, saying, "It's gonna be all right again between you and me the way that it was. You remember that way that it was?" (Scene Eight, p. 145).

Blanche returns downstairs as Stella lights the candles on her cake and pauses reflectively before commenting she shouldn't have called Mitch. Soon Stanley enters, handing Blanche her birthday present. When she opens it and finds a Greyhound bus ticket back to Laurel on Tuesday, she runs from the room and the sounds of coughing and gagging are heard from the bathroom. Stella accuses Stanley of cruelty and demands to know why he did this to Blanche and Stanley replies that before Blanche arrived they were happy. "And wasn't we happy together? Wasn't it all okay? Till she showed here. Hoity-toity, describing me as an ape" (Scene Eight, p. 150). Stella gives no reply, but instead tells Stanley to take her to the hospital. Stanley supports her as they exit.

Analysis

Some time has passed before Scene Seven, which takes place on Blanche's birthday in September. There is tangible tension between Stella and Stanley regarding Stanley's bullying of Blanche throughout the scene and Blanche detects the conflict.

However, Stanley is determined in his fight and insists Stella listen to his discoveries about Blanche's past. The revelation that Blanche was fired for having had a sexual affair with a boy is too much for Stella, who attempts to deny the truth. She has to admit, however, that Blanche's behavior in the past, even in their childhood, was always "eccentric" and caused problems at home. Regardless, she does not believe Blanche is harmful and does not want Stanley to give her the bus ticket to Laurel. Stanley's choice for a birthday gift is particularly cruel in that he is aware Blanche cannot return to Laurel because of her reputation there, making it ironic.

The tone of Scene Eight is dismal as Blanche has been stood up by Mitch and Stella and Stanley are covertly fighting. Stanley's eruption at the dinner table only serves to explode this tension into something within his grasp. It is also clear in this scene the reasons for Stanley's cruelty to Blanche, as he pleads with Stella to understand things will be good again with them once she is gone. Stanley's love for Stella is believable and true, despite his temperamental outbursts. There is a sense that he is completely in love with his wife.

Vocabulary

mimicking, sensitive, circumstances, saccharine, squeamishness, make-believe, advantage, personalities, going-on, phony, contemptible, honky-tonk, hokey, loco, particular, frolicking, ordinance, possess, flighty, automatically, occupation, engineers,



serenely, highball glass, artificial, solemn, beau, vulgar, Polack, reproachfully,
reflectively, hydro-therapy, amiability, remembrance, indistinguishably



Scenes 9-11

Summary

Scene Nine

Scene Nine begins a while later the same evening. Blanche is dressed in her scarlet satin robe and has been drinking as Mitch comes around the corner in work clothes. Mitch is unshaven and had stopped to have some drinks on his way over as well. Blanche frantically rushes about, dabbing her face with perfume and hiding the liquor bottle before letting him in. Mitch pushes past Blanche into the apartment as she chastises him for his uncouth appearance and cold behavior, saying that she shouldn't have let him in after having stood her up earlier.

Blanche begins to feign searching for the liquor she hid, offering Mitch a drink, and he rebuffs her gruffly. The sound of polka music, the same that has played previously when Blanche discusses her young husband's suicide, begins to swell and Blanche describes the song stuck in her head until the sound of a gunshot breaks the tune. Mitch asks Blanche, "Are you boxed out of your mind?" as Blanche "discovers" the bottle of Southern Comfort from which she'd been previously drinking (Scene Nine, p. 154). Offering a drink to Mitch again, he refuses, claiming that she should lay off it too and that Stanley said she's been lapping up his liquor all summer "like a wildcat" (Scene Nine, p. 155).

Blanche reacts indignantly, but Mitch's mood doesn't change; he demands the lights be turned on, claiming he doesn't think he's ever seen Blanche in the light. He tears the paper lantern off the light bulb and crosses to the switch as Blanche pleads with him to stop. When he turns on the light and stares at her, he bitterly states he didn't mind her being older than she'd claimed she was, but expresses his outrage at the other lies she'd spouted all summer, saying "I was a fool enough to believe you was straight" (Scene Nine, p. 157). Mitch goes on to say he had initially called Stanley a liar, but then checked up on the story himself and determined the truth about Blanche through three witnesses who had known her back in Laurel.

Blanche, cornered, begins to confess the truth in a half-drunk and hysterical fashion, claiming, "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan—intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection--here and there, in the most--unlikely places--even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but--somebody wrote the superintendent about it--"This woman is morally unfit for her position!" (Scene Nine, p. 159).

Mitch accuses Blanche of having lied to her, which she denies, saying she never lied about her feelings for him. A Mexican woman peddling flowers passes by the apartment and Blanche begins speaking to herself in a philosophic way, speaking of death as the



opposite of desire. The polka music fades away and Mitch comes behind Blanche, placing his hands on her waist and attempting to turn her to him. When she asks what he wants, he fumbles to embrace her, saying “What I been missing all summer” and Blanche says “Then marry me, Mitch!” (Scene Nine, p. 162). Mitch replies he no longer wants to marry Blanche and she’s not clean enough to bring in the house with his mother. She begins to shout at Mitch to leave, screaming “Fire!” hysterically until Mitch releases her and exits. Blanche staggers back from the window and falls on her knees.

Scene Ten

Scene Ten begins a few hours later the same night. Blanche has not stopped drinking since Mitch’s departure and has dragged her suitcases to the middle of the room, where she packs and drinks, dressed in a crumpled white evening gown and a rhinestone tiara. She is talking to the mirror of the dressing-table as if speaking to a group of admirers when Stanley enters the kitchen. Stanley has also stopped to have a few drinks on his way and carries beer bottles with him. Blanche asks how Stella is doing and Stanley tells her she’s fine and that the baby won’t be born until the morning so he’s come home to rest.

Blanche shows signs of fear upon realizing that she and Stanley are in the house alone for the night, and tells him she received a telegram from a former admirer inviting her on a cruise of the Caribbean. She explains that this is why she is packing. Stanley goes to his dresser drawer after opening a beer and begins to put on the silk pyjamas he wore on his wedding night in celebration of his having a baby. Blanche continues her diatribe, saying that Mitch came by earlier repeating Stanley’s slander and adds she had sent him packing. Blanche relates he begged her forgiveness but that their attitudes and backgrounds were incompatible.

Stanley eventually erupts, calling Blanche out on her fabrications and telling her to take a look at herself “in that wornout Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some ragpicker! And with the crazy crown on! What queen do you think you are?” (Scene Ten, p. 172). Stanley enters the bedroom as Blanche exclaims for him to stay away, grabbing the phone and frantically calling for help. Finally, cornered, she grabs a bottle, breaking it on the table, and threatens to cut Stanley with it. Stanley springs at her, catching her wrist, and she drops the bottle and sinks to her knees. Stanley picks up Blanche’s inert figure and carries her to the bed where he rapes her.

Scene Eleven

Scene Eleven begins some weeks later, as Stella packs some of Blanche’s belongings. Water can be heard in the bathroom and the poker players, Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo, are sitting around the table in the kitchen and arguing over a game. Stella has been crying as she talks with Eunice, who comes down to the kitchen from her apartment. Eunice has been watching Stella’s baby and asks how Blanche is doing. Stella explains she told her that they’d made arrangements for her to rest in the country and that she’d somehow mixed it in her head with Shep Huntleigh. Stella tells Eunice



that she doesn't know if she did the right thing, but that she couldn't believe Blanche's story and go on living with Stanley.

Eunice replies that she made the right choice and life has to go on, as Blanche exits the bathroom. The women flatter her with compliments, but the sound of Mitch's voice can be heard in the other room, causing Blanche to break into sudden hysteria. The women attempt to calm her as the doorbell chimes and a Doctor and Matron appear around the corner of the building. Eunice excuses herself and whispered conversation takes place between Eunice and the doctor, who waits at the door. Finally, Blanche discovers the doctor and begins to panic, attempting to flee back into the room as the Matron and Stanley advance upon her, securing her by pinning her arms behind her back. The Matron asks if a straight-jacket is essential, but the doctor insists only if necessary.

The doctor removes his hat and becomes personalized. His voice is gentle and reassuring as he speaks to Blanche, lowering her defenses. Finally, she is released from the Matron and takes the doctor's hand, exiting with him as she says, "Whoever you are--I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (Scene Eleven, p. 191).

Eunice descends the stairs and places Stella's baby in her arms where she sits on the steps, weeping. Stanley returns to the porch and watches Stella as she sobs, then kneels beside her, his fingers finding "the opening of her blouse" as he consoles her (Scene Eleven, p. 192).

Analysis

Scenes Nine and Ten mark the rising action and climax of the narrative as Blanche is confronted by both Mitch and Stanley about her illicit past. Blanche's interaction with Mitch is heartbreaking, especially when he coldly tells her she is not clean enough to bring into the house with his mother. Blanche is clearly devastated and sends Mitch away after thwarting his sexual advances.

An important element to note in these scenes is the reiteration of the polka music which plays when Blanche remembers her husband's suicide. The increasing volume of the music represents Blanche's increasing loss of her mind and emotional faculties throughout the ending of the play.

Scene Ten, the climax of the play, begins with Blanche in complete disarray and obviously having fallen through the void between reality and fantasy; Blanche's drunkenness in this scene reiterates her loss of function. Stanley's emotions are caught between those of celebration at the birth of his child and his desire to end the battle with Blanche permanently. Stanley succeeds in destroying Blanche and rapes her, illustrating she was what he had suspected: a prostitute pretending to be a queen.

Scene Eleven marks the denouement of the narrative. After Stanley raped Blanche, Blanche's emotional stability plummeted. Stella is the central figure in this scene and remains conflicted until the end whether she made the right choice in institutionalizing her sister or not.



When Stella tells Eunice she could not have lived with Stanley if she believed her sister's allegations to be true, Eunice replies, "Don't ever believe it. Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you've got to keep on going" (Scene Eleven, p. 180). Indeed, Stella does appear to go on, although carrying a great deal of grief and likely, remorse.

Vocabulary

polka, frantically, uncavalier, uncouth, cross-examine, syllable, contemptuously, wildcat, misrepresent, malarkey, intimacies, morally, convulsive, water-spout, recriminations, legacies, bloodstained, paddy-wagon, purposefully, awkwardly, exhilaration, rhinestone, tiara, tremblingly, shuteye, accomplishment, breeding, transitory, destitute, deliberate, incompatible, ragpicker, lurid, inhuman, sinuously, interfere, turquoise, rat-race, callous, arrangements, boucle, lapel, sculptural, vivacity, perplexity, restraining, agonizingly, quinine, exaggerated, cynical, detachment, affectedly, colloquy, divested, mysterious, threatening, simultaneously, voluptuously, soothingly



Characters

Stanley Kowalski

Stanley Kowalski is the working-class husband of Stella Kowalski. Stanley is described as “of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his

life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependency, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens” (Scene One, p. 27).

Stanley is immediately at odds with his sister-in-law, Blanche, believing her to be attempting to swindle his wife. Stanley sees through Blanche’s debutante façade and proceeds to track down information about her history in Laurel and the foreclosure of the plantation’s mortgage. When Stanley discovers the truth of Blanche’s illicit past, he attempts to confront her with it and send her away from town but is held back by Stella, who has empathy for her sister. After Stella goes into labor in the hospital, Stanley and Blanche eventually do face off, and Stanley succeeds in destroying Blanche emotionally by raping her.

Blanche Du Bois

Blanche DuBois is the elder sister of Stella Kowalski. While Stella left Laurel for New Orleans some time ago, Blanche has remained and supposedly maintained the family plantation, Belle Reve. Blanche is about thirty and stands out in the setting of New Orleans when she arrives, dressed in a dainty white suit, pearl necklace and earrings, and white gloves and hat, “as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district” (Scene One, p. 6).

Blanche epitomizes the Old South and plays the role of the Southern Belle despite her questionable past. Blanche’s obvious distaste for Stanley and for New Orleans in general is illustrated early in the play, and Blanche and Stanley face off throughout the narrative. Blanche is superficially obsessed, concerned about her age, and eccentric in her behavior. After having experienced the loss of her young husband’s suicide many years earlier, Blanche became emotionally unstable and sought out the affections of many young men in an attempt at solace.

This behavior, according to Stanley’s friend Shaw, earned Blanche an abominable reputation in Laurel, where she was released from her teaching job after having an affair with a seventeen-year-old student. Blanche had apparently lived at a second-rate hotel in Laurel named the Flamingo, presumably working as a prostitute, until her actions and behavior there proved even too much and the management asked her to leave. Two weeks later, Blanche arrives in New Orleans, suitcases in tow.



Stella Kowalski

Stella Kowalski is described as “a gentle young woman, about twenty-five, and of a background obviously quite different from her husband's” (Scene One, p. 4). Stella left her plantation home in Laurel and moved to New Orleans years ago, where she met and fell in love with Stanley Kowalski. Stella, unlike her sister, is attracted to the violent and animal nature of Stanley and describes him having shattered all the light bulbs with her shoe on their honeymoon to her excitement.

Stella is also pregnant and is torn throughout the narrative between her love for her husband and her sister. Stella chooses to flatter Blanche and overlooks her obvious indiscretions, just as she overlooks Stanley's abusive temper. In the end, Stella chooses to believe her husband and has Blanche committed, claiming that if her accusations were true, she'd never be able to go on living with Stanley.

Harold "Mitch" Mitchell

Mitch is on the precision bench in the spare parts department for the plant where Stanley works and is another of his poker buddies. Mitch and Blanche meet at one of Stanley's poker nights and share an immediate attraction. Mitch idolizes Blanche and falls for her façade, believing her to be unique, proper and well-bred. When Stanley informs Mitch of Blanche's illicit past in Laurel, he at first doesn't believe him, then checks out the story himself. Mitch is hurt by Blanche's deceptions and decides to end their relationship, believing her to be too unclean to meet his dying mother.

Steve Hubbell

Steve Hubbell is the upstairs neighbor of Stanley and Stella and the husband of Eunice. Steve and Eunice argue constantly and violently, often with Steve bearing the brunt of the damage. Steve is also among Stanley's poker buddies and is present at both games in the play.

Pablo Gonzales

Pablo Gonzales is one of the poker players who frequent Stanley's house. Pablo only speaks briefly in the play, often during arguments over the poker games.

Eunice Hubbell

Eunice Hubbell lives in the apartment above the Kowalski's. Eunice claims to own the building, so she has a key to let Blanche inside when she arrives. Eunice later takes in Stella for the evening after her abusive fight with Stanley. Eunice and Steve, her husband, bicker constantly but make up immediately afterward



Young Collector

In Scene Five, Blanche is left alone at the home of the Kowalski's when a young man stops by to collect money for the Evening Star. Blanche answers the door and proceeds to attempt to seduce the boy, offering him a drink and then bribing him for a kiss before sending him swiftly on his way.

Shep Huntleigh

Shep Huntleigh is a former suitor of Blanche DuBois. Blanche tells Stella that she had re-encountered Shep in Miami last year on Christmas vacation and discovered he had become a millionaire from oil investments in Texas. Blanche hopes to write to Shep for financial assistance in helping Blanche and Stella open a shop, and later, comes to believe she is going on a cruise with him when in actuality she is being committed to an institution.

Allan

Allan is the name of Blanche DuBois's young husband who committed suicide many years ago. Blanche tells Mitch the story of how she discovered Allan having a sexual affair with an older man and then confronted him about it in the Moon Lake Casino. After Blanche told Allan on the dance floor that she found him disgusting, he went outside the casino and shot himself.

Shaw

Shaw is the name of a friend of Stanley's from work who often travels through Laurel, Mississippi. Shaw reveals to Stanley most of what he learns of Blanche's illicit past and her reputation in the town of Laurel. It is implied that Blanche had a sexual affair with Shaw.



Objects/Places

The Kowalski Home

Stanley and Stella Kowalski live in an apartment on the first floor of a building situated on the corner of a street named Elysian Fields in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. Above their apartment is a second apartment where Eunice and Steve Hubbell live, a couple who owns the building. The action of the play takes place in the Kowalski home and on the porch and steps of the building. Inside the apartment, there are a living room, kitchen area, bedroom and bathroom. There has been a cot set out for Blanche during her stay, with a curtain separating it from Stella and Stanley's bedroom.

The Streetcar

A streetcar is a passenger rail vehicle which runs on tracks along public urban streets and also sometimes on separate tracks. Blanche DuBois arrives at her sister Stella's residence by way of a streetcar named Desire, which she took and transferred to a car named Cemeteries, getting off at Elysian Fields.

Belle Reve

Belle Reve is the name of the plantation in Laurel, Mississippi, where Stella and Blanche DuBois grew up. Blanche arrives to tell Stella that she has lost the deed to Belle Reve, through the "epic fornications" of their ancestors (Scene One, p. 48). Blanche accuses Stella of having abandoned the family and plantation, only returning home for funerals, and Blanche was unable to keep up the mortgage payments herself.

Laurel, Mississippi

Laurel is a small city in the southeast of Mississippi. Laurel is the location of Belle Reve, the family plantation of Stella and Blanche DuBois. Laurel is also a town where Stanley's friend, a merchant named Shaw, passes through regularly. Shaw relates to Stanley of Blanche's illicit history and reputation in Laurel which comes back to haunt her in the narrative.

The Flamingo Hotel

The Flamingo Hotel is located on the outskirts of Laurel, Mississippi, and is described as a second-rate establishment in the narrative. It is implied that shady dealings take place at the Flamingo, including prostitution. It is discovered through Stanley's friend Shaw that Blanche had been living at the Flamingo for some time before her illicit



behavior and reputation caused the managers to ask Blanche to leave, just weeks before she arrived in New Orleans.

Moon Lake Casino

When Blanche retells the story of her young husband who committed suicide, she describes how it took place outside the Moon Lake Casino. Blanche, her husband Allan and an older gentleman had driven to the casino together. Inside, drunk, Blanche revealed on the dance floor to Allan that she had witnessed him with the older man having intercourse and that she was disgusted by him. Immediately afterward, Allan had fled from the casino and shot himself outside.

The Four Deuces

The Four Deuces is a bar around the corner from Stella and Stanley's apartment in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The bar is frequented by locals, including Stella, Stanley, Eunice and Steve.

Engraved Cigarette Case

When Blanche and Mitch first meet at Stanley's poker game, Mitch offers Blanche a cigarette from a silver case with an engraved quote by Elizabeth Browning. The case was given to Mitch by a previous love that died and symbolizes a shared empathy which Blanche immediately recognizes and becomes attracted to in him.

New Orleans, Louisiana

A Streetcar Named Desire is set in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. New Orleans, famous for its French Quarter in which the play is set, is considered "cosmopolitan" during the time because blacks and whites both coincide and live in overlapping areas.

Elysian Fields

Elysian Fields is a broad, straight avenue in New Orleans which runs through the French Quarter district. The apartment where Stanley and Stella reside is on the corner of Elysian Fields.

Blanche's Trunk

When Stanley initially begins suspecting Blanche of swindling him and his wife, his suspicions are based on Blanche's extravagant attire. Ripping open her trunk and suitcases, Stanley demands to know where these expensive furs and jewelry came

from. Stella defends her sister, insisting that Blanche's clothes are gifts from former suitors and that her jewelry is mere costume-jewelry.



Themes

Fantasy and Reality

Fantasy versus reality is the central thematic exploration in the play *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and is embodied in the characters of Blanche and Stanley. Blanche is deluded and lost in a world of false illusions in the play, symbolized through her constant obsession with beauty, youth and virtue. When Blanche is finally confronted with her fabrications, she claims that her fibs are defenses against the lot the world has given her. However, Blanche's reality itself is distorted, and her perceptions of herself and others are based not on any semblance of reality but merely imagination and emotion.

Blanche's grief at the loss of her young husband impacted her ability to see the world objectively. As such, she became trapped in the pursuit of something she could never regain; this is why Blanche has had illicit affairs with many men, or so she claims. Everything from Blanche's costume jewelry to her speech and demeanor represent illusion without reality to back it up. As Blanche states in Scene Nine, "I don't want realism. I want magic!" (Scene Nine, p. 157).

Stanley, on the other hand, embodies the opposite characteristics of Blanche. He is straightforward, honest, and hard-working. Stanley is described as animal-like and in his primitive way, he reflects reality, honesty and truth. Stella must face a decision between these two forces in the play and eventually chooses a middle ground: accepting the illusion of her husband's innocence while maintaining a realistic outlook for their lives together.

Desire and Sexuality

Blanche seeks to deny desire or at least to project the façade that she is virtuous; however, desire is the driving force of her character and what has driven her away from her past. Symbolically, the names of the streetcars ("Desire" and "Cemeteries") and the street ("Elysian Fields") of the setting all reiterate this theme, comparing and contrasting desire and death.

In Scene Nine, when Mitch confronts Blanche about her past, she confesses. "Yes, I had many intimacies with strangers. After the death of Allan--intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with.... I think it was panic, just panic, that drove me from one to another, hunting for some protection--here and there, in the most--unlikely places--even, at last, in a seventeen-year-old boy but--somebody wrote the superintendent about it--'This woman is

morally unfit for her position!'" (Scene Nine, p. 159).

The motif of homosexuality is also related to the theme of desire, as it was the discovery of Allan's homosexuality which drove Blanche to her current state. Blanche sees raw



desire as something that is immoral and perverse, but in the examples of Stella and Stanley and of Eunice and Steve, raw desire is something natural and pure. It is Blanche's denial of her desires which leads to her inability to share true intimacy with anyone and ultimately to her demise.

Nature versus Society

In the time period in which the play was written, there was a struggle in America between the world of the Old South and that of the new industrial working class. This transition, which took place after the Industrial Revolution and was in effect following World War II, can be seen in the characters and symbolism of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Blanche, as an emblem of the Old South, represents the illusion and falsehoods of that system. The reality of the slaves on the plantation prior to their emancipation is never discussed in the play, but the sense is that even during their existence, they would have been invisible to the self-centered Blanche. Stanley, on the other hand, represents a lower class of individual who has worked hard to get where he is, even if he's still low on the totem pole. Stanley's belief in reality and honesty are symbolic of the average middle-class working man in America.



Style

Point of View

A Streetcar Named Desire is a dramatic play written in third person. Tennessee Williams employs several theatrical techniques in the work which blur the lines between reality and fantasy. These include lighting shifts, the introduction of musical scoring, and distorted voices which arise from Blanche's mind. The effect of these techniques is that it gives the audience the perception of viewing the world through the characters' eyes as opposed to remaining completely objective spectators.

Examples of these effects can be seen in Stanley's poker game, in which the lighting of the Kowalski kitchen shifts and reflects primary colors. Similarly, the poker players are dressed in red, blue, green and yellow. Later, when Blanche discusses the history of her husband's suicide, the repeated sound of polka music, presumably that playing at the Moon Lake Casino, plays with greater intensity. As Blanche's delusions worsen in the play, these effects increase to include surrealistic voices and shadowy figures on the walls.

Setting

The setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is that of a two-story apartment building on Elysian Fields Avenue in the French Quarter of New Orleans, Louisiana. The time period, contemporary for when the play was written, is not long after the ending of World War II. "The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm" (Scene One, p. 3). The distinctive interracial and intercultural qualities of New Orleans are described in the prevailing atmosphere of the setting, as "corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically

always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers" (Scene One, p. 3).

Eunice and Steve Hubbard live in the upstairs apartment and Stella and Stanley Kowalski live in the lower flat. The Kowalski home consists of a living room, bedroom, kitchen and a bathroom. The action of the play takes place between the kitchen, the bedroom, and the steps outside of the building.

Language and Meaning

Language is used as an indication of class distinction in the play. While all of the characters speak with a southern dialect and colloquialisms, there are obvious differences between the style of speaking of Blanche and the other characters in the play. Blanche's history as an English teacher is partly responsible for her affected



speech, as is her status as a wealthy Southern debutante. Stella, while of the same class as Blanche, speaks with a more informal language, illustrating her transition from the world of the Old South to that of the industrial working class.

Stanley's dialogue reiterates his character: it is rough, blunt, and to the point. However, Stanley is not as ignorant as Blanche or perhaps the audience might initially believe. Stanley has clear understanding of human nature and of the motivations of those around him. He is able to see through the façade created by Blanche's superior speech and refine demeanor to the reality behind them.

Structure

A Streetcar Named Desire is divided into eleven scenes with no specific act transitions. In the original 1947 production directed by Elia Kazan, the play had two intermissions, after Scenes Four and Six. The effect of these intermission breaks was that of building suspense for the coming scenes after the break.

Scene Four ends with suspense and menace, as "Stella has embraced [Stanley]--with both arms, fiercely, and full in the view of Blanche. He laughs and clasps her head to him. Over her head he grins through the curtains at Blanche" (Scene Four, p. 92). Scene Six, however, ends on a tender note with the embracing of Blanche and Mitch. The conclusion of this scene makes the audience and reader gain empathy for Blanche and therefore have greater concern about Stanley's motivations.



Quotes

Her appearance is incongruous to this setting. She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district. (Scene 1)

I thought you would never come back to this horrible place! What am I saying? I didn't mean to say that. I meant to be nice about it and say--Oh, what a convenient location and such--Haa-ha! Precious lamb! You haven't said a word to me. (Scene 1)

Oh, I'm not going to be hypocritical, I'm going to be honestly critical about it! Never, never, never in my worst dreams could I picture--Only Poe! Only Mr. Edgar Allan Poe!--could do it justice! Out there I suppose is the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir! (Scene 1)

He is of medium height, about five feet eight or nine, and strongly, compactly built. Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes. Since earliest manhood the center of his life has been pleasure with women, the giving and taking of it, not with weak indulgence, dependency, but with the power and pride of a richly feathered male bird among hens. (Scene 1)

In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code according to which what belongs to the wife belongs to the husband and vice versa. For instance if I had a piece of property, or you had a piece of property-- (Scene 2)

Compliments to women about their looks. I never met a woman that didn't know if she was good-looking or not without being told, and some of them give themselves credit for more than they've got. I once went out with a doll who said to me, 'I am the glamorous type, I am the glamorous type!' I said, 'So what?' (Scene 2)

All right. Cards on the table. That suits me. I know I fib a good deal. After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion, but when a thing is important I tell the truth, and this is the truth: I haven't cheated my sister or you or anyone else as long as I have lived. (Scene 2)

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! (Scene 2)

I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action. (Scene 3)

No, it isn't all right for anybody to make such a terrible row, but--people do sometimes. Stanley's always smashed things. Why, on our wedding night--soon as we came in here--he snatched off one of my slippers and rushed about the place smashing the light bulbs with it. (Scene 4)



I am not a Polack. 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. (Scene 8)

Whoever you are--I have always depended on the kindness of strangers. (Scene 11)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

What is the motivation of Blanche DuBois? Why does she come to stay with her sister in New Orleans? Why did Blanche leave Laurel, Mississippi? How does Blanche feel about Mitch? What are Blanche's feelings about Stanley in the narrative?

Topic 2

How do the characters of Blanche and Stella differ? How are they similar? When did Stella leave Laurel and why? How do Blanche and Stella compare in their physical appearances and demeanors?

Topic 3

What is the significance of the music throughout the play? How does the music change from scene to scene? What inner emotions of the characters are represented through music and in what style?

Topic 4

How are the motifs of water and flowers used throughout the narrative? What do these motifs represent symbolically? How do they inform and illustrate the themes of the play?

Topic 5

What is Stanley's objective in the play? How does he go about achieving this objective? How does Stanley feel about his wife and marriage? How are those feelings affected by the arrival of Blanche DuBois?

Topic 6

What is the significance of Mitch's character in the narrative? What attracts Mitch to Blanche? How does Mitch relate to Stanley and the other male characters in the play? Why?



Topic 7

How are gender roles explored in the play? What is the Napoleonic Code and what does it mean for the rights of women? How do Stella and Blanche differ in their view of the role of a wife?

Topic 8

What impact does the setting of the play have on its themes, tone and style? How does the setting of New Orleans stand apart from other American cities during this time period? How does Blanche react to the setting of the French Quarter?

Topic 9

Topic 10

Topic 11

Topic 12

Topic 13

Topic 14

Topic 15