

ANALYSIS

A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)



Tennessee Williams

(1911-1983)

“*A Streetcar Named Desire* emerges as the most creative American play of the past dozen years.... What [it] has is the abundance of a good novel.... Life has density in this drama of a woman’s tragic effort to clothe her nakedness.... The author’s viewpoint combines a sharp sense of reality, a Naturalistic fearlessness in the face of what is gross in individual life and society, and a just compassion. The handling of the dramatic elements is remarkably astute, since the author keeps wave after wave of revelation hurtling through the play.... But what stands out as most contributory to the making of a memorable play is the overall effect of humanity seen in the round.”

John Gassner
Forum (February 1948) 86-7

“Numerous one-acters and ten full-length plays by the time he wrote his greatest success, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), testify to his energetic pursuit of a dramatic career.... He won an ecstatic reception in New York (and later throughout the country and abroad) with *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It was an unsavory tragedy of a woman’s frustration, but its sordid matter of sexual depravity and madness in the New Orleans Latin Quarter was transfigured by poetic dramaturgy and overwhelming compassion.... Both *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire* are among the noteworthy creations of the American drama.”

John Gassner, ed.
A Treasury of the Theatre
(Simon and Schuster 1950) 1032-33

“*A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) is set in the Creole quarter of New Orleans ‘on a street which is named Elysian Fields’ and which is reached by taking a streetcar named Desire and transferring to one named Cemeteries—i.e., an analogue of life itself. Stella DuBois, daughter of an old but now impoverished Southern family, has come to New Orleans and married Stanley Kowalski, an artisan of Polish extraction, strong, virile, a heavy drinker and a great poker player.

As the play opens Stella’s sister Blanche, who has remained home in the family mansion in Laurel, Mississippi, comes to ‘visit’—actually she is coming to live with them, since everyone else in the family

has died and Blanche, through incompetence and debauchery, has lost the family mansion to creditors. Although Blanche has pretensions to elegance and pretends to feel a fastidious repugnance for the surroundings in which Stella and Stan live, it soon becomes apparent that she is not only a neurotic but an alcoholic and a shameless nymphomaniac. She at first attempts to vamp Stan, but he, content with his satisfying relations with Stella, ignores her. Then she takes up with Harold Mitchell ('Mitch'), an unmarried friend of Stan, somewhat younger than she (Blanche is apparently in her late thirties and anxious over the approach of middle age). At first this affair goes well, and Mitch's interest in Blanche seems to be based on genuine love.

Once when they are alone Blanche confesses to Mitch the secret tragedy of her life, which has left her guilt-ridden and lonely ever since: married at sixteen, she accidentally discovered that her young husband was a homosexual, and drove him to suicide through her recriminations. Mitch accepts her in spite of this, and a marriage, the solution to Blanche's problems, seems in the offing. But meanwhile she has made an enemy of Stan through her haughty air of superiority, her hypocritically fastidious ways, and her secret drinking. When Stan learns the truth about her past—that she was virtually banished from Laurel after she had taken up a life of debauchery—he tells the full story to Mitch, who breaks off relations with her. To complete his revenge Stan roughly attacks her one night when Stella has gone to the hospital to have a baby. Her 'fiancé' gone and her pose of superiority toward Stan shattered, Blanche relapses into a psychotic world of self-delusion, consoling herself with an imaginary friend, the wealthy Shep Huntleigh, who is shortly to invite her on a yachting cruise of the Caribbean. Stella has no choice but to send her to a mental hospital; a doctor and a matron call for her, she struggles frantically against the female matron, but is led away quietly by the male doctor.

Two themes are interwoven in *A Streetcar Named Desire*: (1) the decline of the landowning Southern aristocracy, symbolized by Blanche and Stella, and its defeat at the hands of the modern commercial-industrial class, personified in Stan; and (2) the contrast between hysterical female sex-frustration (Blanche) and normal and healthy physical relations (Stella and Stan). As a human being Blanche is pitiable, especially when we understand the past history which has made her what she is; but as a visitor in the house of Stan and Stella she stands for evil, and she brings evil to everyone she touches. Particularly obnoxious is her ingrown and perverted delicacy, which contrasts strongly with Stan's hard-drinking, profane, vulgar, but basically healthy attitude toward life."

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron's Educational Series 1958) 411-12

"Blanche DuBois, visiting the New Orleans home of her sister Stella and her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski, is horrified by the contrast between their squalid surroundings and her idealization of life at Belle Reve, the family estate now lost through bankruptcy. She reacts against Stanley's crude humor and animal maleness, while he resents her affected refinement and intrusion on his sensual privacy with his wife. At Stanley's poker party, Blanche meets Mitch and sensing that he is lonely like herself and 'superior to the others,' she begins to think of marriage to him as a refuge from the past, which she has already sought in liquor and self-delusions about her age, beauty, and former admirers.

Blanche contends that Stella's marriage and unborn child are products of lust, as aimless as the 'streetcar named Desire' shuttling through the narrow streets, and urges her not to 'hang back with the brutes.' In retaliation Stanley tells Mitch that Blanche lost her schoolteaching job because of an affair with a student and that she has become a nymphomaniac in quest of love to compensate for the loss of her homosexual husband by suicide. Mitch accordingly makes the kind of advances that he now thinks suitable, and although Blanche refuses him hysterically she is violently raped by Stanley in angry lust. Upon her return from the hospital with her baby, Stella is told the story by Blanche, but believing it an example of her fantasies, she has her committed to a mental institution. Blanche leaves with the doctor, saying, 'Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.'"

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 733

“The play is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans, where two streetcars, one named Desire, the other named Cemetery, run on a single track. Blanche DuBois, the central character, is a fading Southern belle who tries to maintain illusions of gentility in spite of her poverty and moral degeneration. Forced to sell what is left of the family plantation, she comes to live with her sister, Stella, who is married to Stanley, a brutal, animalistic man. Blanche’s pretensions to gentility, her frilly clothing, and her affected and flirtatious behavior annoy Stanley and upset the household. Mitch, a more naïve friend of Stanley’s, accepts her at face value and thinks of marrying her, until Stanley tells him of Blanche’s notorious and neurotic sexual escapades. Her hopes of marriage destroyed, Blanche confronts Stanley in all her outdated finery and provokes him into raping her. Finally, completely unable to impose her illusions upon reality, she breaks down mentally and is led away to an asylum, still clinging to her fantasies and appealing to the ‘kindness of strangers.’ The play was awarded a Pulitzer Prize and a film version (1951) was also widely successful.”

Max Herzberg & staff
The Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1096-97

“The sisters DuBois are the last members of an impoverished Southern plantation family. Stella has married Stanley Kowalski, a brutish laborer. Though she lives as his slave while he plays poker with his swearing and sweating friends, she has found happiness in their intense sexual relationship. Into their squalid, heat-oppressed tenement in New Orleans comes Stella’s sister Blanche, who claims to have taken leave of absence from her job as a schoolteacher but who was in reality run out of town as a prostitute. She gives herself the airs of the refined, gracious lady from the South, and tries to entice Mitch, Stanley’s good-humored and somewhat civilized friend. When Stanley exposes her past and ruins her frail chances of marriage, she escapes into a psychotic world. Eventually, she has to be taken away to an asylum. The action is brutally naturalistic, the characters stripped raw in psychoanalytic vivisection; yet there are poetic overtones in Blanche’s spiritual yearning for gentleness and ‘the kindness of strangers’.”

Theodore J. Shank, ed.
A Digest of 500 Plays: Plot Outlines and Production Notes
(Crowell-Collier 1963) 367

“In *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1948) the contrast between the two spheres [dream and reality] is made even more glaring. Of two sisters, one marries a workman and, in spite of occasionally very rough treatment from her husband, appears to be quite happy in her surroundings, chiefly on account of the physical attraction her husband has for her. She is an example of perfect adjustment to reality. Her sister, on the other hand, follows every kind of illusion in her life—wealth, luxury, social success, good connections, a genteel life, only to discover that she fails in every respect, partly because she puts her stakes too high, partly through bad luck, partly through a shock received in her first love, partly through a lack of will power in resisting the temptations of the flesh. Her unwillingness to distinguish between illusion and reality eventually drives her insane. The moral intention of the play is perhaps a little too obvious and too simple and there is a good deal of frank melodrama in it, but there is no doubt that Tennessee Williams knows how to work ideas into drama.”

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century, 3rd revised edition
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 203

“Not all were successes comparable to *The Glass Menagerie*, but three were, and these have become a part of the standard repertory of the American theater. The first was *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), a play in which as in his first success he dramatized the contrast between the crass materialism and tunnel vision of America generally and of the South in particular with the South’s dream of a world of grace and charm that had faded and all but vanished during the years following the Civil War.

The setting for the play is a slum section of New Orleans, ironically called Elysian Fields. In it lives an insensitive and rootless Stanley Kowalski with his wife Stella Dubois, member of once proud planter aristocracy but more or less resigned to her present depressing circumstances. Into this menage comes

Stella's sister Blanche, fragile, unstable, still maintaining for herself the illusion that the antique glory has not faded, and, as is inevitable, in time she falls victim to Kowalski, who in a combination of resentment and animal lust brutally rapes the woman and precipitates her descent into insanity.

In the end it is Stella who maintains illusions, choosing to believe that Blanche's tale of the rape is the fantasy of madness. Many argue that Williams never surpassed his work displayed here: the characters are completely credible, the dialogue that ties them together reveals the essential isolation that dooms them, and the emotional impact of the conflict that develops continues to overwhelm audiences year after year. This play won both the Drama Critics Circle Award and the Pulitzer Prize. The other two plays that mark Williams's mastery of the theater are *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), which also won both prizes, and *Night of the Iguana* (1961), which won the Critics Circle Award."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 95-96

Michael Hollister (2015)