

## CHARACTERS

**Landlady** The Landlady, who is also referred to as Miss Gallaway, is a middle-aged woman who runs a boardinghouse. Because her husband is an invalid, she seeks out sexual relationships with her male boarders. She plays the balalaika and hates Musso's cat, Nitchevo.

**Musso** A frail and weak man who is given the nickname "Musso" by his Landlady. When Musso moves into Miss Gallaway's boardinghouse he befriends the cat Nitchevo, who also occupies his room.

**Old Man** He is the father-in-law of the Landlady. An alcoholic, the Old Man is thrown out of the boardinghouse for fraternizing with the tenants late one night.

## *A Streetcar Named Desire*

A full-length play written in 1947.

### SYNOPSIS

The setting is an old house that has been turned into two apartments. It is located in Elysian Fields, a section of the French Quarter of New Orleans. The action takes place in the downstairs two-room apartment rented by the Kowalskis.

#### *Scene 1*

Stella Kowalski relaxes in a shabby armchair in the bedroom of the small apartment. She eats chocolates and reads a movie magazine. Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski, enters, carrying a package of meat dripping with blood and yelling for his wife. Stanley tosses the meat to Stella, who catches it in a surprised reaction. Stanley leaves to go bowling with his friends, and Stella decides to tag along. She hurriedly prims in the living room mirror, quickly closes the apartment door behind her, and says hello to Eunice Hubbell and a Negro Woman who are sitting on the landing. As she exits, the two women laugh about Stanley's lack of manners.

Blanche DuBois enters. She is carrying a small suitcase and a piece of paper. She is a fading Southern belle, whose appearance suggests she is going to a garden party, but her search for her sister, Stella, has landed her in the slums of the French Quarter. Eunice notices the confused Blanche, and she asks whether she is lost. Blanche explains that she was instructed to take a streetcar named Desire to Elysian Fields via a streetcar called Cemetery. Eunice informs her that she is indeed in the right place. Eunice lets her into the Kowalskis' apartment to wait for Stella while the Negro Woman fetches Stella from the bowling alley. Blanche has arrived unannounced, and she is shocked to discover Stella living in such a dismal place.

Blanche searches for a drink, and Stella enters. The two sisters are ecstatic to be reunited. Blanche speaks excitedly, overwhelming Stella with criticism of the apartment. Stella is speechless and hurt by these remarks, and she notices that Blanche is shaking and anxious. Stella is concerned by her sister's behavior, and she attempts to calm her nerves by offering her a drink. Blanche urges Stella to explain why she is living in such depressing conditions. Blanche says she has taken a leave of absence from her high school teaching job. She says that she is having a difficult time and needed a break. Blanche mentions the weight Stella has gained, and she compliments her on her appearance; however, Stella knows that her sister is being critical. Blanche demands that Stella stand so she can fully analyze the size of her hips, her less than perfect haircut. She asks Stella about having a maid, but the Kowalskis' apartment only consists of two rooms. Blanche is horrified by this news. She pours another drink to curb her intolerance of the place. Blanche has been lonely; she feels her sister abandoned her when she left Mississippi and their father died. Blanche admits that she is not well. Stella insists that her sister stay at the apartment, and she directs her to a folding bed. She insists that Stanley will not mind the lack of privacy, as he is Polish. Stella advises her sister that Stanley is unlike the Southern gentlemen they knew back in Laurel, Mississippi. She confesses he is ill mannered, but she is madly in love with him.

Blanche confesses that she has lost Belle Reve, the family plantation. Blanche expresses her resentment of her sister because she was “in bed with [her] Polack” while Blanche scraped and clawed to hold on to Belle Reve. Stella is very upset to know that they have lost their homestead. Blanche bitterly blames the foreclosure on the many deaths in the family. Blanche is plagued with guilt, as well as being hopelessly adrift, and she projects her feelings of loss onto Stella, who runs into the bathroom to escape her sister’s wrath.

Stanley returns home. He shouts to his friends, Steve Hubbell and Mitch (Harold Mitchell), from the stairwell. Blanche speaks to him before he notices her presence. Stanley is cordial to her and asks for Stella, who has locked herself away in the bathroom. He offers Blanche another shot of whiskey, noticing that the bottle has already been sampled. Blanche declines the offer, stating that she rarely drinks. Her obvious dishonesty spurs Stanley to ask some very personal questions regarding her past, namely, about her husband. He sheds his sweaty shirt to find relief in the summer heat and welcomes her to stay with them. Upset by his meddling inquiries, Blanche replies that her young husband is dead. She grows nauseous discussing this subject and has to sit down to regain her composure.

### **Scene 2**

Around six o’clock the following evening, Blanche and Stella plan to have dinner out and see a movie while Stanley and his friends have a poker night in the apartment. While Blanche readies herself in the bathroom, Stella tells Stanley that Belle Reve has been lost. She also warns him not to mention that she is pregnant because Blanche is already so unstable. Stanley is most concerned with the loss of the estate. He suspects Blanche sold the plantation and kept all of the profits for herself. Referring to the Napoleonic Code, Stanley wants to know whether he has been swindled. To find proof of the foreclosure he rummages through Blanche’s trunk. Appraising the furs and jewelry she has, he urges Stella to acknowledge that Blanche has deceived her. Stella fears the looming confrontation, so she escapes to the porch.

When Blanche emerges from her hot bath and realizes that Stella is not around, she flirts with

Stanley as a means of winning him over; however, he is interested only in the profits from Belle Reve. When Stanley accuses Blanche of selling the plantation and keeping all of the money, she insists that she has never cheated anyone in her life. She says, “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.” Stanley rifles through the trunk again, searching for documents that will prove Blanche is lying. Stanley discovers yellowing letters held together by aging ribbons, and he withholds these visibly precious items until she pulls two manila envelopes from her belongings. Blanche says that his touch has contaminated her cherished love letters. She tells Stanley that this paperwork is all that is left of the plantation, and he continues berating her by demanding to know how she could allow the foreclosure to happen. Blanche recoils with anger and retorts that the plantation has been lost by generations of negligent men who “exchanged the land for their epic fornications.” Stanley intends to have the documents read by a lawyer friend, and Blanche invites him to do so. Now that Stanley has been proved wrong, he justifies his concern with the fact that Stella is pregnant. This is a happy digression for Blanche, who is genuinely excited by this information. When Stella returns, Blanche expresses her joy about the baby. She brags that she handled Stanley and even flirted with him. The two sisters leave as Stanley’s friends arrive for their poker night.

### **Scene 3**

Later that night in the Kowalski apartment, Stanley and his friends are still drinking and playing cards. Stella and Blanche return at 2:30 A.M., and Stanley asks them to visit Eunice until the game is over. When Stella does not comply, Stanley slaps her backside as a means of countering her disobedience in front of his friends. Blanche is intrigued by Mitch, who is uninterested in the poker game because he is worried about his ailing mother. Blanche is immediately attracted to his sensitivity. The two introduce themselves. Mitch offers her a cigarette, showing her the inscription on his cigarette case. She immediately recognizes it as the poetry of Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Mitch explains the case is from a former girlfriend who died. Mitch’s story of his former lover

resonates with Blanche's own sense of loss of her young husband, Allan Grey. She tells Mitch, "Sorrow makes for sincerity," and continues, "Show me a person that hasn't known sorrow and I'll show you a superficial person." She asks Mitch to cover the naked lightbulb with a Chinese lantern she recently purchased.

Stanley grows more inebriated and increasingly irritated by the music Blanche is playing. He crosses the room, rips the radio from the wall, and throws it out of the window. He hits Stella when she tries to stop him. Humiliated and stunned, Stella runs into the kitchen area and orders Stanley's friends to leave. Stanley chases and attacks Stella. Blanche begs Mitch to stop him, and the men restrain Stanley on the sofa. Blanche whisks Stella to Eunice's apartment upstairs while the men attempt to sober Stanley. After a cold shower, he stumbles out of the bathroom, goes out onto the porch, and yells up to Stella. He continues to shout for Stella, who descends the stairs and returns to him. Stanley falls to his knees, pressing his head against her legs. Kissing passionately, the couple retreat to their bedroom. Blanche runs down after Stella. When she discovers them making love, she is angered by her sister's weakness. Mitch calls out to Blanche. They share another cigarette. Blanche is thankful for Mitch's kindness.

#### **Scene 4**

Early the next morning, Blanche returns to the Kowalski apartment after spending the night at Eunice and Steve's apartment. When she realizes Stella is alone, she hugs her with nervous concern. Stella, on the other hand, is cheerful and content. Stella blames liquor and poker for Stanley's behavior. She explains to her sister that she gets a thrill from her husband's extreme actions. Blanche is infuriated. She says Stella has married a "madman." While Blanche devises an escape plan for them, Stella tidies the apartment. Stella says she is happy with Stanley. Blanche is still bewildered by Stella's cool resignation.

Blanche remembers an old beau, Shep Huntleigh, whom she plans to call on for their escape, but Stella does not want to be rescued. Blanche compares Stanley to an ape. During this conversation, Stanley has returned unnoticed. He has heard everything

that has been said. All of Blanche's persuading has been in vain: When Stella sees Stanley, she runs over and jumps into his arms.

#### **Scene 5**

Blanche has been living at the Kowalskis' apartment for three months. While she finishes writing a letter to Shep about imaginary cocktail parties she has been attending, Stanley enters. He slams drawers and creates noise to express his irritation by Blanche's presence. To provoke Stanley, she asks him his astrological sign. He remarks that he is a Capricorn (the goat) and Blanche replies she is Virgo, the sign of the virgin. Stanley laughs and asks her about a man by the last name of Shaw who claims to have spent an evening with Blanche at the Flamingo Hotel. Blanche adamantly denies this accusation, but her face registers panic and alarm. Stanley is victorious and exits to go bowling.

Blanche becomes hysterical. She asks Stella whether she has heard rumors about her, but Stella gracefully denounces gossip. Blanche confesses that she did not maintain a good reputation when she was losing Belle Reve. She admits her fears of being a "soft" person, of needing people too much, and of her fading beauty. Blanche fears she will not be able to "turn the trick" much longer because she is visibly aging. She also confesses that she lied about her age to Mitch because she wants him to fall in love with her. Blanche has presented an illusion of herself as a prim and proper woman to Mitch. Stella is accustomed to Blanche's nervous tirades, and she pays little attention to what her sister is actually saying. Stella comforts her by pouring her a drink. A young boy stops by the apartment selling newspapers. On his way out, Blanche calls him back inside and kisses him. Blanche chastises herself for putting "her hands" on the boy. He leaves and Mitch arrives with a bouquet of roses for her.

#### **Scene 6**

Later that night, Blanche and Mitch return from a disappointing date. Blanche blames herself for the dull evening. Mitch asks whether he may kiss her good night, and she consents but says their actions can go no further because she is a single woman. Stanley and Stella are not home, so Blanche invites

Mitch in for a nightcap. Blanche plays the coquette while Mitch perspires with desire for her. While she searches for a bottle of whiskey, Blanche asks Mitch in French whether he would like to sleep with her. She comments that it is a good thing Mitch does not understand French. She encourages him to take off his coat, but he is embarrassed by his sweatiness. Blanche asserts that he is just a healthy man.

When Mitch suggests that the four of them go out together sometime, Blanche makes it clear that Stanley hates her. She asks whether Stanley has said anything derogatory about her. Mitch replies that he does not understand how Stanley could behave so rudely to her. Blanche says she plans to leave as soon as Stella has the baby.

Mitch asks Blanche her age, and Blanche refuses to answer. He explains that he asks because he has

been with his mother talking about her. Blanche presumes Mitch will be very lonely when his mother dies. She explains that she knows this sort of loneliness firsthand because her one true love has passed away. She tells Mitch about Allan's tenderness and sensitivity and says that she never understood him until she discovered he was having an affair with an older man. Blanche explains that Allan needed her to help him, but she could not see what was happening until it was too late. She confronted him while they were drunk at a dance at Moon Lake Casino. Her words provoked him to run to the edge of the lake and commit suicide. She can still hear the polka music that was playing during the time. Blanche cannot forgive herself for condemning Allan's desires and pushing him to such drastic measures. She compares her love for Allan to a



Production photograph for the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Jessica Tandy as Blanche Du Bois, Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski, and Kim Hunter as Stella Kowalski. (Photographer: Eileen Darby. Photograph courtesy of The Billy Rose Theatre Collection, New York Public Library)

“blinding light.” Mitch answers that they are both lonely, and they both need someone. The polka tune that continually plays in Blanche’s mind ceases. Mitch and Blanche embrace with thoughts of marriage.

### **Scene 7**

Several weeks later, Stanley arrives home after a day of work to find the apartment decorated for Blanche’s birthday party. He is disgruntled to know that Blanche is taking a hot bath, making the apartment even hotter and increasingly unbearable. Stanley proudly announces to Stella that he has found out the real story behind her sister’s extended visit. She was fired from her teaching job because she had an indecent relationship with a 17-year-old boy and set up residency at the Flamingo Hotel, which she was then forced to leave because of her sexual excesses. She has become the laughingstock of Laurel, Mississippi. Stella is profoundly stunned by this information, and she tries to defend Blanche by explaining the tragic situation with Allan. Stanley informs Stella that he felt it was his duty to warn his friend about Blanche. Blanche calls for a towel and notices a strained expression on Stella’s face, but Stella assures her nothing is wrong. Stella is fraught with worry about what will happen to Blanche now that Mitch is likely to abandon her. Stanley implies that Mitch may not be through with Blanche, but he certainly will not marry her. He remarks that he bought Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel. Stanley yells for Blanche to get out of the bathroom so that he can use it. Sensing something is wrong, Blanche cautiously enters the room.

### **Scene 8**

Nearly one hour passes. Stella, Stanley, and Blanche are eating dinner. Blanche is trying to ignore the empty chair where Mitch would be sitting. Blanche tries to lighten the mood of the party by telling a joke, but no one finds it funny. Stella says Stanley is “too busy making a pig of himself.” She instructs him to wash up and help her clean the table. Stanley flies into a rage, sweeping the table’s contents to the floor, and declares that he is the king in his home. When Stanley leaves the table and goes out onto the porch, Blanche begs

Stella to tell her what is going on. Blanche calls Mitch’s home while Stella chastises her husband for passing rumors to Mitch. Stanley presents the bus ticket to Blanche. She runs into the bedroom crying. Stella yells at Stanley for being so terrible to Blanche. Stanley reminds his wife that she loves his commonness, especially at night in their bedroom. As he shouts for Blanche, Stella doubles over with pain. She is rushed to the hospital.

### **Scene 9**

Later that evening, Blanche sits alone in the darkness of the apartment drinking liquor. Mitch enters wearing his work uniform. Although he is dirty and unshaven, she admits that she is happy to see him, as his presence stops the polka music that otherwise persistently plays in her mind. She searches for more liquor to serve him, but he declines drinking Stanley’s liquor. Mitch inquires why Blanche keeps the apartment so dark and insists on seeing him only at night. He wants to turn on the light, but Blanche begs him to allow the magic (illusions) to continue. When he wrenches the lantern off the lightbulb, Blanche’s aged face is revealed. He proceeds to tell her what he has heard about her promiscuous life in Laurel. Blanche immediately pleads that after Allan and the loss of Belle Reve, she could only find relief from the pain in the arms of strangers. A vendor is heard outside selling flowers for the dead. This sparks Blanche to talk about all of the deaths in her life. She says she was “played out” when she finally landed in New Orleans. She found solace and love with Mitch, believing that she could possibly find happiness and rest. Mitch embraces her, and she pleads for marriage. Mitch says she is unsuitable. He pulls her hair and demands the physical intimacy she has denied him all summer. Blanche orders him to leave, and when he does not, she runs to the window and shouts, “Fire!” This action prompts Mitch to leave.

### **Scene 10**

A few hours later, Blanche is still alone and drinking heavily. She is wearing an old gown and a rhinestone tiara. Stanley enters carrying liquor. He informs Blanche that Stella will not have the baby before the morning, so he has come home. Blanche is nervous about being in the apartment alone with Stanley all

night. Stanley laughs at her and questions her attire. Blanche announces that she has received a telegram from Shep Huntleigh, inviting her on a cruise to the Caribbean. Stanley retreats to the bedroom and collects the red silk pajamas he wore on his wedding night. When he returns, Blanche says that Mitch came by begging for forgiveness, but she simply could not forgive his cruelty. Stanley angrily denounces her lies. Blanche rushes to the telephone and pleads with the operator to connect her with Shep Huntleigh. When she puts down the phone, Stanley corners her. Blanche retreats to the bedroom, where she smashes a bottle to use as a weapon against him. Stanley lunges at her, grabs the bottle, and gathers Blanche in his arms. She fights him, but he overpowers her, stating that they have had this date with each other from the moment she arrived.

### Scene 11

Several weeks later, Stella cries as she packs Blanche's belongings. Eunice holds the baby while Stanley and his friends play poker. Stella wonders whether she is doing the right thing in sending her sister to the state institution. Eunice responds that if Stella wants to save her marriage, she must believe that Stanley did not rape her sister. Blanche enters from the bathroom with a "hysterical vivacity." She asks whether Shep has called while she dresses. The doorbell sounds and a doctor and attendant enter to collect Blanche. Blanche wants to leave the apartment, but she does not want to be seen by Mitch, Stanley, and the other men. When she sees that the man at the door is not Shep, she tries to run back into the apartment. Stanley blocks her way. He cruelly tells her that all she has left in this apartment is the paper lantern hanging over the lightbulb. He tears it down and hands it to her. Blanche screams, and Stella rushes to the porch, where Eunice comforts her. The doctor and attendant wrestle Blanche to the ground to restrain her.

Mitch attacks Stanley, blaming him for Blanche's condition. The men fight and their friends pull them apart. Blanche is helped to her feet. The doctor helps her to the door and she says that she has "always depended on the kindness of strangers." Stella is heartbroken by the scene. She sobs while the doctor escorts Blanche out of the

apartment. Stanley consoles Stella by fondling her breasts. Steve announces the next round of poker.

### COMMENTARY

When asked about the meaning of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams responded, "the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society" (Haskell, 230). All the characters in *Streetcar* have been ravished by life to some degree. Although Stanley clearly functions as the most damaging force against Blanche, he, too, has also been forced to grow up too quickly as he spent his youth as a soldier serving in World War II. Reintegration into a mundane, peaceful world does not keep him fulfilled. He is moody and restless, and his animalistic tendencies are challenged by the overly refined Blanche.

Stella is a submissive character, placed in the middle of a war between gentrified society, represented by Blanche, and the rugged, practical world of the working class personified by Stanley. In war there are the victors and the vanquished. Blanche ultimately suffers the most damaging defeat, being institutionalized, while Stanley continues to brutalize his way through life.

In the opening scene of the play, Stanley appears carrying a package of bloody meat, which immediately establishes his primitive nature. In stark contrast, Blanche enters the scene wearing white. Williams compares her to a moth, symbolically stressing her fragility, purity, and virtue. Her pristine attire serves as an effective camouflage for her sordid past. As Chance Wayne (in *SWEET BIRD OF YOUTH*), Sebastian Venable (in *SUDDENLY LAST SUMMER*), and Lot (in *KINGDOM OF EARTH, OR THE SEVEN DESCENTS OF MYRTLE*) do, by wearing white, Blanche uses her clothing to disguise her "degenerate" self-perception. Her name, which is French, literally means "white of the woods." Out of her unlucky and desperate wilderness, Blanche enters the Kowalski apartment a transformed, mothlike creature of nature, recast as a virginal character. Although she has been a prostitute, Blanche prefers to believe in her renewed chasteness. She lives in a world of illusion and believes that her sexual encounters with strangers never constituted love; therefore, she never forfeited any aspect of her true self.

As has Karen Stone in *THE ROMAN SPRING OF MRS. STONE*, Blanche has an aversion to being viewed in bright light that will reveal her true age. As early as the first scene, she asks Stella to turn off the overhead light. Blanche is most comfortable in the warm glow of a lamp that allows her to play the part of the innocent coquette completely. She lies about her age when she courts Mitch and avoids spending time with him in daylight. When Mitch returns in the final meeting with her, he insists on tearing the lantern off the overhead light so that he may finally have a good look at her. When Blanche asks why he wants the glare of bright light, he says he is just being realistic. Blanche replies:

I don't want realism. I want—magic! . . . Yes, yes, magic! I try to give that to people. I do misrepresent things to them. I don't tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth. And if that's a sin, then let me be damned for it! *Don't turn the light on!*

Of course, Stanley has informed him that she has been lying about everything. However, her mothlike, youthful facade is not just used to fool Mitch; it is an integral part of who she is. Blanche wishes she could actually be what she pretends to be. She resigns from reality because it has been too harsh. The “magic” in which she chooses to dwell is her only means of survival, as her suffering has been so great. She fears that looking her age will further discredit her in a world that has already discarded her.

Blanche also drinks heavily, while pretending to adhere to a Southern gender code that restricts well-bred women from drinking in company or in public. This is another aspect of playing the innocent coquette. Late in the play, Mitch informs Blanche that Stanley has talked about how much of his liquor she has consumed, and she realizes that her subterfuge has failed.

Although it is a means of comfort and relief, alcohol has long been a source of shame and regret for Blanche. She particularly regrets her drunken criticism of Allan because she did not mean the words that drove him to take his own life. Leonard Berkman suggests:

It is not the existence of Allan's homosexuality that signals the failure of Blanche's marriage; it is, rather, that Blanche must uncover this information by accident, that Blanche is incapable of responding compassionately to this information, that in short there never existed a marriage between them in which Allan could come to her in full trust and explicit needs. (“The Tragic Downfall of Blanche DuBois,” 2)

Blanche responded to Allan's sexuality with a sense of wounded pride, and as Brick in *CAT ON A HOT TIN ROOF* does to his friend Skipper, she spends the rest of her life regretting that she did not love and accept him. Blanche responded too harshly. She loved Allan and truly believed in their marriage; however, she lived in a romantic world of delusion until she witnessed a real moment when Allan was having sex with another man, which completely shattered the illusion. As Blanche explains to Mitch:

[Allan] was in the quicksand clutching at me—but I wasn't holding him out, I was slipping in with him! I didn't know that. I didn't know anything except I loved him unendurably but without being able to help him or help myself.

In this instance, it was Blanche who was cruelly responsible for the ravishment (or abuse) of one that was “tender, sensitive, and delicate.”

Allan Grey's suicide scene is reminiscent of the final scene in *The Seagull* by ANTON CHEKHOV (see *THE NOTEBOOK OF TRIGORIN*). When Konstantin can no longer endure his life and the knowledge that he must live without the love he desires, he is drawn to the lake (like a seagull) and shoots himself. Konstantin and Allan are tragically similar characters, who are gravely misunderstood by those around them. Williams was enamored of Chekhov's characters, finding them dynamically flawed and powerfully present. Chekhov's dramaturgical influence is inherent in *Streetcar*, as the psychological reality of the characters creates the dramatic tension and fuels the action to an unavoidable conclusion.

Blanche tells the story of her homosexual husband to Mitch, who could very easily assume that Blanche and Allan's marriage was never consummated. Even through her tragically truthful tales

Blanche continues to create the illusion that she is prim and virginal. This makes the news of her promiscuous past more shocking and insulting to Mitch, who has respected her wish to abstain from sexual intimacy. Blanche presents the person she would like to be: naive, proper, and respectable. Blanche has found an Allan substitute in Mitch. She longs to have an opportunity to re-create that marriage and have a second chance to make up for her cruel past actions. Mitch is the answer as his sensitivity stops the haunting polka music in her mind (i.e., the painful memories of Allan's death).

Throughout the play, Blanche frequently takes long hot baths in the sweltering heat of a New Orleans summer. This symbolic act of baptism absolves her of her past sins and cleanses her body in preparation for her husband-to-be. She repeatedly purifies her body in water, and in her mind, by each ritual bathing, she creates more distance from the sullied strangers she encountered at the Flamingo Hotel in Laurel. In moments of desperation and self-doubt, Blanche bathes. This repeated action greatly annoys Stanley.

Stanley and Blanche are archenemies because they possess antithetical personalities, and each lays claim to Stella. Whereas Stanley respects complete honesty, Blanche delights in experiencing the world through rose-colored glasses. She spends much of her time rejecting the harshness of life, and Stanley is always there to make her acknowledge the truth. Blanche enjoys the protocol of the Old South; she is nostalgic about the tradition of Southern life, whereas Stanley hates sentimentality. In his production notebook, Elia Kazan writes of Blanche:

Her problem has to do with her tradition. Her notion of what a woman should be. She is stuck with this "ideal." It is her. It is her ego. Unless she lives by it, she cannot live; in fact her whole life has been for nothing. (Kazan, 22)

Blanche defines her existence according to the traditions of the Old South. She is completely immersed in that world, whereas Stanley symbolizes the new or modern world that is obliterating that former way of living.

Early in the play these two characters clash over the subject of Belle Reve. It is Blanche's lost, beau-

tiful dream, rich with family heritage and pride; Stanley is interested only in the property's material or monetary real estate value. He is happy in the loud, harsh, and dirty world of the Vieux Carré of New Orleans, whereas Blanche prefers finer accommodations, the bucolic setting of hundreds of acres of land and large white pillars on a grand veranda that provide lounging quarters out of the midday sun. Some critics see Blanche as Williams's most representative character, as she has lost the stability of her ancestral home and is now in exile.

According to Kazan, Blanche's emotional decline begins when she is stripped of her plantation:

The things about the "tradition" in the nineteenth century was that it worked then. It made a woman feel important with her own secure positions and functions, her own special worth. It also made a woman at that time *one with her society*. But *today* the tradition is an anachronism which simply does not function. It does not work. So while Blanche must believe it because it makes her special, because it makes her sticking by Belle Reve an act of heroism, rather than an absurd romanticism, still *it does not work*. . . . She's a misfit, a liar, her "airs" alienate people, she must act superior to them which alienates them further. (Kazan, 22)

Blanche is one of Williams's "lost souls," those characters who are caught between an old and a new world. As are Amanda Wingfield (in *THE GLASS MENAGERIE*) and Alma Winemiller (in *SUMMER AND SMOKE*), who also delight in tradition, Blanche is lost in a modern, industrial society because in it she does not have a special position simply by virtue of being a Southern woman. Belle Reve is her identification or authentication as a person, and without it, she does not possess a self and therefore must rely on others to supply stability, security, and substance. Blanche only realizes that she is responsible for her own financial and social status when it is too late. Her "airs" are her tragic flaw in this new world, Stanley's world, a world that has been changed through hardship and struggles associated with industry, war, and economic depression. Blanche becomes "a last dying relic . . . now adrift in our unfriendly day" (Miller, 23). Although

this situation may make her more pitiable, it does not make her less offensive to her peers.

Blanche's very vocal disapproval of Stanley serves to isolate her from Stella, the one sympathetic person in her life. Her critical opinion of the dismal apartment and of Stanley's brutish demeanor creates a chasm in the sisters' relationship, and her chances of familial bonding are sacrificed. Blanche demonstrates her racial prejudices when she calls Stanley a "Polack," and her gradual, yet persistent provocations lead to her ultimate violation. This act of rape wounds Blanche to a point of no return. The culmination of Stanley's victory over Blanche occurs when Stella refuses to believe that her sister has been assaulted. Stella sides with her husband as Blanche's past and world of illusions (or dishonesty) serve to silence her in her most desperate moment.

Williams's ability to "capture something of the complexity of the novel within the dramatic form, especially in the area of character probity



Marlon Brando (Stanley Kowalski) and Kim Hunter (Stella Kowalski) embrace, as Jessica Tandy (Blanche DuBois) looks on, in the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, 1947 (Eileen Darby)

and psychology" (Adler, 9), has set *Streetcar* apart and is the reason it merits its status not only as a modern classic, but as a watershed moment in U.S. theater history. Essentially, Williams created a new genre in the modern theater: a heightened naturalism that allows dreams (or nightmares) to coexist with reality.

## PRODUCTION HISTORY

*A Streetcar Named Desire* opened at the Barrymore Theater, New York, on December 3, 1947, and electrified its audience. The cast, which included MARLON BRANDO (Stanley), KIM HUNTER (Stella), and JESSICA TANDY (Blanche), received a standing ovation that lasted a full half hour after their opening performance.

At this point in his career, Williams had only one other major success, *The Glass Menagerie* (on Broadway in 1945), which was revered as a delicate, elegiac, lyrical, and gentle play. By comparison, *Streetcar* was outrageously raw, sexual, and violent.

Critics immediately praised the first Broadway production, complimenting every facet of the production: acting, directing, and design. In his review of the first production Irwin Shaw wrote:

As far as I am concerned, even the ushers and ticket-takers at the Ethel Barrymore Theater are beautiful these nights. . . . Such is the effect of a magnificent play, magnificently done. The play is "A Streetcar Named Desire," by Tennessee Williams, and the production is the result of Elia Kazan's direction, Jo Mielziner's scenery and lighting and, I suppose, Irene Selznick's money, all of which have my unqualifying blessing. (Miller, 45)

Shaw preferred *Streetcar* to *The Glass Menagerie* because he believed that in *Streetcar* Williams incorporated elements of "true tragedy" (Miller, 45). Some critics and audience members were shocked by the coarse nature of the play. They were not prepared for its overt sexuality or its protagonist, Blanche DuBois, a teacher turned prostitute. However the naysayers held the minority point of view.

*Streetcar* ran on Broadway longer than any other Williams play: 855 performances between December 1947 and December 1949. In addition,

Williams received both the Pulitzer Prize and the Drama Critics Circle Award for this play. Since its premiere, *Streetcar* has been produced more than 20,000 times, and worldwide it remains the most popular American play.

The film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1951) popularized the play further. The film, as was the Broadway production, was directed by Elia Kazan. With the exception of VIVIEN LEIGH playing Blanche, the cast remained the same. The film took on a life of its own and sparked great controversy among censors, who deemed it “immoral, decadent, vulgar and sinful” (Sova, 285). Much to the chagrin of Kazan and Williams, the movie was censored after it had been shot and was altered without their consent. Several close-up shots were deleted to tone down the insatiable sexual dynamic between Stella and Stanley, and the scene in which Stanley rapes Blanche was cut, as were references to Blanche’s promiscuous nature and several of Stanley’s licentious comments to Blanche, such as his statement that she “might not be bad to interfere with.” The most significant alteration in the move from stage to screen was Stella’s final response.

Under pressure from the censors, who required that Stanley be punished for his violation of Blanche, the ending was altered significantly. Instead of remaining with Stanley, Stella takes her newborn baby in her arms, looks into the child’s eyes, and exclaims, “We’re never going back. Never, never back, never back again.” She is last seen running up the stairs to seek refuge with Eunice and Steve Hubbell.

Vivien Leigh (Blanche), Karl Malden (Mitch), and Kim Hunter (Stella) all garnered Academy Awards (Oscars) for their performances in the film of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

## PUBLICATION HISTORY

*A Streetcar Named Desire* was first published by New Directions in 1947.

## CHARACTERS

**DuBois, Blanche** Described in the opening scene as “mothlike,” Blanche is an aging Southern belle. She is refined, delicate, and steeped in the traditions of Southern gentry. She first appears

wearing white, symbolizing her feigned purity and virtuous nature. Blanche is one of Williams’s dreamers, forfeiting reality for a magical or romantic approach to life. She is not concerned with truth, but rather “what ought to be the truth.”

When she was a young woman, Blanche married her true love, Allan Grey. He was tender and sensitive, different from the other men in her life. Although he was not “the least bit effeminate looking,” she learned of his homosexuality when she entered a room uninvited and found Allan having sex with an older male friend. Later that night, the three of them attended a dance at Moon Lake Casino. During this evening of heavy drinking, Blanche confronted Allan about his sexuality while a polka played and lovers danced around them. Devastated by Blanche’s disgust toward him, Allan ran off the dance floor. He found refuge at the edge of the nearby lake, where he shot himself. Blanche is forever haunted by the guilt she feels over Allan’s suicide. She cannot move beyond the loss of her husband, and in moments of desperation she still hears the polka waltz in her mind. She drinks whiskey to cope with her self-reproach, but the cruelty she displayed toward Allan forever torments her.

Blanche’s life continues on a downward spiral with the deaths of several other family members. She is obligated to nurse them, witnessing the slow, torturous deterioration of life. Blanche is forced to earn her living as a high school English teacher because her ancestral home, Belle Reve (which means “beautiful dream” in French), in Laurel, Mississippi, is in danger of foreclosure. Severely lonely and desperate, she finds consolation in the embrace of strange men. When she is fired from her teaching position because of a “morally unfit” liaison with a 17-year-old boy, her reputation is completely ruined. Belle Reve is foreclosed and she is forced to live in a seedy hotel called the Flamingo. Because of her practice of entertaining men at the Flamingo, she is eventually forced to leave that establishment as well.

Destitute and homeless, Blanche travels to New Orleans, taking a “streetcar named Desire” to the slums of Elysian Fields, where her sister, Stella Kowalski, lives with her brutish husband, Stanley Kowalski. She arrives unannounced at the cramped

two-room apartment. She immediately rejects Stanley because of his unrefined behavior and crude, straightforward response to life. Her worst opinions of Stanley are justified when she witnesses the beatings Stella suffers at the hands of her husband. Blanche believes that “a woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion,” and she clashes with Stanley, who is determined to catch Blanche in all of her lies. Her facade quickly positions her as Stanley’s prime enemy. He is sickened by her exaggerations and false prudishness. Despite her past, Blanche remains married to the ideals of purity, creating the illusion of what she “ought to be.”

Stanley triumphs over her when he finds out about her promiscuous past in Laurel. He destroys her only chance of comfort by relating her sordid past to Mitch (Harold Mitchell), her only and final marriage prospect. Stanley then rapes Blanche, presuming that she has had so many sexual encounters that one more will make no difference. After this act, a deed that Stella refuses to acknowledge, Blanche is wounded once and for all. She loses her grip on reality and finds consolation in a type of magical world that will not allow her to hurt anymore. This world places her at the mercy of “the kindness of strangers.” The strange men in her life are replaced by the medical staff of a mental institution.

**Hubbell, Eunice** Eunice is the wife of Steve Hubbell. She and Steve are the upstairs neighbors of Stanley and Stella Kowalski. As do Stanley and Stella, Eunice and Steve have a volatile marital relationship. In many ways, the older couple (Eunice and Steve) mirror Stanley and Stella and offer a vision of what the young couple will be in the future. Eunice is a confidante to Stella, and Eunice eases the younger woman’s transition into a life of denial and compromise. When Stella’s sister, Blanche DuBois, accuses Stanley of rape, Eunice instructs Stella to disavow Blanche’s claims for the sake of her marriage, her child, and her own sanity.

**Hubbell, Steve** Steve is the husband of Eunice Hubbell. He and Eunice are the upstairs neighbors of Stanley and Stella Kowalski. As do Stanley and Stella, Eunice and Steve have a volatile marital relationship. In many ways, the older couple (Eunice

and Steve) mirror Stanley and Stella and offer a vision of what the young couple will be in the future.

**Kowalski, Stanley** He is a strong, brutish man of Polish descent. Stanley is a former soldier, who fought during World War II and who now lives in the mundane world of factory work. He is cruelly honest. His pastimes include bowling, drinking, playing poker with his friends and having sex with his wife, Stella Kowalski. Stanley enjoys the comforts of Stella’s love. Although he is unrefined, loud, and quick-tempered, he possesses a simplicity which makes him desirable to Stella. There is also an animal attraction between Stanley and Stella, and their relationship is based not on communication but on physical attraction. In the stage directions of *Streetcar*, Williams describes him as a “gaudy seed bearer [who] sizes women up at a glance.”

Stanley revels in the fact that Stella is from an old aristocratic Southern family and that she has rejected upper-crust society to live with him in a tenement house in the slums of New Orleans. Stanley functions with very basic objectives. He is strong-willed and responds to adversity with violence.

When his sister-in-law, Blanche DuBois, moves in, Stanley feels threatened by her presence and her rejection of his way of life. He does not like to share what is his: his wife, his liquor, and his apartment. When he finds out that the DuBois plantation, Belle Reve, has been foreclosed, he immediately demands proof that Blanche did not sell it and keep the money. Stanley expects to share any profits, as he is Stella’s husband. Stella and Blanche are personally devastated by the loss of their ancestral home; Stanley is only concerned with the practical, monetary side of the situation. He has no way of comprehending the emotional loss of such a thing. In addition, Blanche’s large personality leaves little room for him to be the center of attention. The two engage in a power struggle that draws out the worst in Stanley’s personality. The tension created by Blanche’s presence provokes Stanley to beat Stella and to seek a way to ruin his sister-in-law.

He triumphs over Blanche after searching for the truth of her disreputable past. When he has gathered this ammunition, he informs Blanche’s only marriage prospect, Mitch (Harold Mitchell)

of her sordid past. By this he is able to pierce the virginal facade that Blanche has used to manipulate and control. Stella defends her sister by explaining that she has had a tragic past and she is weak, but Stanley is interested only in survival of the fittest. He rapes Blanche and denies that he did to Stella. This is Stanley's ultimate triumph. In the end, Blanche is taken to a mental institution while Stanley comforts his wife by fondling her breasts.

**Kowalski, Stella** She is the wife of Stanley Kowalski and the sister of Blanche DuBois. Stella is a member of a very refined and dignified Southern family, who has chosen to cast off her social status in exchange for marriage to Stanley, a vulgar and often brutal simpleton. She is caught in the war between Stanley and Blanche, whose constant bickering and fighting leads to Stanley's sexually assaulting Blanche. Stella refuses to believe that her husband would rape her sister. After her accusations of rape, Stella commits Blanche to a mental institution. As does her sister, Stella glosses over harsh reality to live in the world of illusions to cope with Stanley's abhorrent behavior.

**Mitchell, Harold (Mitch)** A middle-aged man whose dedication to his ailing mother leaves him lonely and troubled. Mitch falls in love with Blanche Dubois, a refined, yet fading Southern belle. They engage in a respectable courtship, and Blanche insists on delaying sexual relations until they are married. When Stanley Kowalski informs Mitch of Blanche's sordid past as a prostitute, he is shocked and offended that she has made him wait for sexual intimacy.

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## Suddenly Last Summer

A one-act play written in 1958.

### SYNOPSIS

The setting is a Gothic-style Victorian mansion in the Garden District of New Orleans, one late afternoon between late summer and early fall

#### Scene 1

Mrs. Violet Venable, an aging aristocrat, entertains her guest, Doctor Cukrowicz (or Doctor Sugar), in the exotic gardens of her deceased son, Sebastian. She tries to persuade the neurosurgeon to perform a lobotomy on her niece, Catharine, who is ruining the family reputation with a sordid story about the particulars of Sebastian's death. In order to combat Catharine's story, Mrs. Venable had her niece committed to Saint Mary's Asylum.

Mrs. Venable tells Dr. Sugar that Sebastian was a locally famous poet who, with her unflinching guidance, perfected one poem every summer. Mrs. Venable offers a detailed account of her travels with Sebastian. She then proposes to donate money for a neurosurgery wing at the Lion's View Hospital if Dr. Sugar will agree to silence Catharine. The doctor is ambivalent about agreeing to this deal when he has not yet met the patient. Catharine and her nurse, Sister Felicity, can be seen entering the house.

#### Scene 2

Miss Foxhill, Mrs. Venable's secretary, leads Catharine and her nurse outside while Mrs. Venable drinks her routine afternoon cocktail inside her home. While Catharine and her nurse argue about Catharine smoking a cigarette, Doctor Sugar spies on them from a nearby window. Catharine discovers him and shouts, "Lion's View Hospital,"