



a study guide

compiled and arranged by
the Education Department of The
Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

A Streetcar Named Desire: A Brief Introduction

A Streetcar Named Desire took an unusual route to worldwide literary fame, from its author's observation of the signs on the streetcars passing nearby his New Orleans apartment to the now-iconic image of a disheveled young Marlon Brando howling "Stella!" in the 1951 movie adaptation.

A notorious hypochondriac, Tennessee Williams had spent much of the year of the play's creation brooding on his impending death (he later indicated that he wrote *Streetcar* in the belief that it would be his "swan song") and watching the New Orleans RTA streetcars running up and down Royal Street. Hour after hour, the trolleys slid past one another— one reading "Cemeteries," the other, simply, "Desire." The symbolism of these interwoven paths of longing and death helped Williams craft the story of Blanche DuBois, a woman whose dreams and longings serve only to lead her inexorably toward humiliation, madness and doom.

Streetcar is a play of and about the intersection of opposite paths: dreams and reality, caring and violence, delicate gracefulness and brute strength, the past of the Old South and the future of post-war America. Appropriately, it is also a play about transition, not just Blanche's literal journey from Belle Rêve to Elysian Fields (to, ultimately, an insane asylum), but a larger cultural transition in which Williams felt himself to be swept up.

Blanche DuBois, the last scion of a dying Southern aristocracy, comes, via the streetcar of the title, through the cemeteries of New Orleans to seek refuge in the lower middle-class home of her sister, Stella, in a shabby neighborhood optimistically known as Elysian Fields. In Greek mythology, of course, the Elysian Fields were the home of the noble dead, a place of peace and beauty associated in particular with fallen heroes. From the beginning of the play, Blanche's existence in New Orleans figures as a kind of afterlife.

The Elysian Fields that Williams portrays, however, are far removed from their paradisaical origins. The Elysian Fields neighborhood of New Orleans was named by the city's French settlers for the Champs Elysées of Paris, which suggests a more worldly paradise: the aristocratic wealth and opulence of Blanche's ancestors. But in another act of substitution, when Blanche arrives in New Orleans' Elysian Fields she finds a chintzy district between the railroad tracks and the river, a swath of low-rent tenements ideal for returning soldiers like Stanley. Poetry has been transmuted into poker; chivalry into industrial grit. Thus, Williams once noted, this can be seen as a play about "the ravishment of the tender, the sensitive, the delicate, by the savage and brutal forces of modern society."

Certainly Tennessee Williams himself adored the languorous, genteel world of the Old South (which he associated with his early childhood memories of Mississippi) and loathed much about modern urban America (which he associated, conversely, with his difficult adolescence in St. Louis). However, he also cautioned against a simplistic view of the play as the tragic tale of Blanche's violation at the hands of the malevolent brute Stanley. "I don't believe in villains or heroes— Blanche and Stanley are neither— I only believe

in right or wrong ways that individuals have taken, not by choice but by necessity or by certain still-uncomprehended influences in themselves, their circumstances, and their antecedents."

Stanley Kowalski's name and personality were taken, in fact, from a brash, macho co-worker of Williams' during his time in a St. Louis shoe factory (also alluded to in *The Glass Menagerie*), a man who was Williams' opposite in almost every way, to whom he nevertheless found himself powerfully attracted.

In a way, *Streetcar* hearkens back to a classical Greek model of tragedy in which men and women are the hapless and helpless pawns of indifferent universal forces. There is an element of fatalism to the depiction of this doomed encounter between Blanche and Stanley, as though they were indeed machines travelling on colliding tracks. Blanche merely behaves as she has always behaved, just as Stanley does.

A Streetcar Named Desire represents a complicated, personal response to the utter transformation of post-World War II America. It is likely that this, as much as the personal magnetism of Marlon Brando, cemented the play's place in the popular imagination. From his idiosyncratic, rootless place in American culture, Tennessee Williams skillfully mapped the changing roles of social class and gender for a new society. As Philip Kolin wrote about *Streetcar*, "surely no play of the American theatre, perhaps no play in English since the time of Shakespeare, has won such praise from *both* the critics and the populace."



Blanche DuBois (Laila Robins) is reunited with her sister Stella (Nisi Sturgis) in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2008 Main Stage Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein, 2008.

A Streetcar Named Desire: A Brief Synopsis

With her family's plantation estate lost to creditors, Blanche DuBois arrives at the New Orleans tenement home of her sister and brother-in-law, Stella and Stanley Kowalski, where she is repelled by the shabby looks of the place and pointedly criticizes both Stella and Stanley. The opposition between Blanche and Stanley's personalities gives rise to a contest of wills between the two, with Blanche vying with Stanley for Stella's allegiance. However, through the course of the play, she finds herself no match for Stanley's hold over her sister.

The following evening, Blanche and Stella go out to dinner and a movie while Stanley and his friends play poker; when the women return the men are still in the kitchen playing, and Blanche notices that one of the players, Mitch, seems to be more sensitive than the others. Thus, she begins to charm him with the idea of eventually marrying him. However, the momentary peace is broken when a drunken Stanley becomes angry over a series of minor incidents. He throws the radio out the window, hits Stella when she tries to intervene, and has to be held back by the other men to be kept from doing more damage. To protect her, Stella takes Blanche upstairs to a friend's apartment. Yet, when Stanley recovers, he calls for Stella, and she returns to spend the night with him.

The next morning, Blanche is angry that Stella would return to a "madman." However, Stella assures her that everything is fine and that "there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant."

Through the next couple of months Blanche and Mitch's romance

Stanley, however, has learned more details of Blanche's past, which he shares with Stella and Mitch: Blanche was asked to leave the school where she was teaching following an affair with a teenage student, and had acquired a reputation for alcoholism and promiscuity. Later that evening Blanche cannot understand why Mitch does not come over to her small birthday party. However, the situation begins to become clear when Stanley presents her with her birthday present: a one-way bus ticket back to Mississippi. Just as tensions seem about to boil over, Stella announces that she is having labor pains and that the couple's first child is about to be born.

With Stella and Stanley gone to the hospital, Blanche begins to drink heavily; and Mitch arrives to confront her about her past. At first she tries to deny it, but then confesses that after the death of her young husband, nothing but intimacies with strangers seemed to have any meaning for her. Mitch then tries to get her to sleep with him, they argue, and he leaves, telling her she is not good enough for him.

The hospital soon sends Stanley home, telling him the baby won't be born until morning. At home he finds Blanche dressed in bits of outlandish finery and fantasizing about an invitation to join a cruise. He confronts her with all the lies she has told; then his animosity and anger quickly explode into sexual violence, and he rapes her.

Three weeks later, Stella is home and packing Blanche's clothes in preparation for her to be admitted to the state mental institution.

Blanche, now deranged, believes that an old boyfriend is coming to take her on a cruise. When the nurse from the mental hospital arrives instead, Blanche recoils in fear, but Stanley helps trap her. The doctor speaks more gently to her, and eventually Blanche is persuaded to go with him, saying "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

The play ends with Stella sobbing as the poker players start up another round: "This game is seven-card stud."



blossoms. Blanche confides some of her past to Mitch, including the fact that she had once been married to a young man who, when she confronted him about his homosexuality, committed suicide. Mitch confesses to Blanche that he fears that after his mother's death he, too, will be lonely—and he proposes marriage to her.

A historic 1920s-era streetcar still in use on New Orleans' Carrollton Avenue in April 2005. Photo courtesy Infrogmation from Wikipedia Commons.

About the Author: Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi, the second child (and first son) of Cornelius Williams, a travelling salesman, and his wife Edwina (Dakin) Williams. Because his father was away from home so much, until the age of 7, young Tom lived with his mother, his older sister Rose and his maternal grandparents in Clarksdale, Mississippi. This brief time, when he was doted upon by his mother, his grandparents, and a nursemaid nicknamed “Ozzie,” was the foundation of his lifelong love of the South.

In 1918, Cornelius Williams obtained a steady job in sales with a St. Louis-based shoe company, and relocated his family (which soon included a new son, Dakin) there. Tom’s idyllic Southern childhood was over, and his feelings of dislocation were exacerbated by the unhappiness of his mother, who missed the social status that she had enjoyed as a minister’s daughter in a small Mississippi town. Edwina Williams reminded her children, bitterly and often, that they were now poor outsiders in St. Louis. Although Cornelius Williams attained a managerial position, money was a constant source of conflict between the couple, conflict that escalated as Cornelius turned to drinking and Edwina to manipulating her children’s lives.

As a child, Williams was often ill and confined to his tumultuous household, where he found solace in the company of his sister Rose as well as in voraciously reading and writing. In 1927, he received third prize in a national essay contest, and had a story published the next year in the magazine *Weird Tales*. As a graduation present, his grandfather took him on a trip to Europe, whose atmosphere and culture further fueled his literary ambitions.

In 1929, he enrolled in the University of Missouri in Columbia. One of the many versions of the origin of Williams’ nickname which he circulated during his lifetime held that it was his brothers in the Alpha Tau Omega fraternity there who first christened him “Tennessee,” to tease him about his heavy Southern drawl. Williams struggled academically, and in 1931 his father forced him to withdraw and take a job at the shoe factory. It is this unhappy period of his life that is memorialized in *The Glass Menagerie*. Williams continued writing on the side, and saving money from his detested job to re-enroll in college on his own. After a brief stint at Washington University in St. Louis, Williams eventually enrolled at the University of Iowa, supporting himself with odd jobs and eventually graduating in 1938. It was at IU that Williams had his first play, *Spring Storm*, produced.

However, in escaping his poisonous family environment for Iowa, Williams had been forced to leave behind his beloved sister, who had been diagnosed with the then-poorly-understood condition of schizophrenia. By the time Williams was reinventing himself in Iowa, Rose had begun to experience hallucinations and seizures, and their parents were told that she should be considered for a new type of brain surgery, prefrontal lobotomy. This procedure, which has since been described as “one of the most barbaric mistakes ever perpetrated by mainstream medicine,” involved causing targeted brain damage with an ice pick or other sharp instrument. In Rose Williams’ case, as in numerous others, the dangerous surgery left her mentally incapacitated. Her brother was not informed about the surgery until afterwards, and his guilt and anger over this would haunt him and his writing for the rest of his life.

In 1939, Williams moved to New Orleans and formally adopted his old nickname, “Tennessee,” marking an almost complete break with his family. After short stints of work with the Group Theatre and MGM, Tennessee Williams established himself as a major playwright with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944-45.

In little more than a year, Williams followed it up with an even bigger success, the Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The *New York Daily News* reviewed the premiere as “the answer to a playgoer’s prayer... full-scale-throbbingly alive, compassionate, heart-wrenchingly human.” Over the next decade, Williams produced two dozen plays, many successful in their own right, and several adapted as movies (including the famous film version of *Streetcar*).

Williams was plagued by bouts of drinking and depression throughout his life, and these worsened following the death from cancer of his longtime partner, Frank Merlo, in 1961. At the same time, critics and audiences alike cooled on Williams’ new plays. In 1969, he hit bottom, and his brother Dakin, fearing that he was suicidal, had him hospitalized in St. Louis.

After being released from the hospital, Williams resumed writing, but his dependency on drugs and alcohol as a means of self-medicating his depression continued. Despite his personal struggles, he wrote a number of innovative, experimental plays during this period, and supervised productions of his earlier work.

In 1983, he died in his room at New York’s Hotel Elysée, apparently from asphyxia caused by choking on the cap of a pill bottle. He was interred alongside his mother in St. Louis’s Calvary Cemetery.



Tennessee Williams, 1965. From the archives of the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Local Color and Historical References:

“the ghoulish-woodland of weir”: Blanche quotes from the Edgar Allan Poe poem “Ulalume,” which evokes death and the loss of love in a nightmarish landscape.

“those are the L&N tracks”: The “L&N” was the Louisville and Nashville Railroad, one of the premiere Southern railroad companies, operating for 132 years with destinations along 7,000 miles of track, including New Orleans. L&N ceased to exist in the 1980s, being absorbed into other corporations.

“I’m taking Blanche to Galatoire’s”: A famous Creole restaurant on New Orleans’s Bourbon Street, Galatoire’s was founded in 1897 by French immigrant Jean Galatoire, and has been operated by his family for five generations. Until 1999, the restaurant famously did not accept reservations, resulting in long lines of well-dressed ladies and gentlemen waiting on the sidewalk. Tennessee Williams was a regular customer, preferring a window seat near the front of the restaurant.

“did you ever hear of the Napoleonic Code?”: In 1804, Napoleon Bonaparte introduced a sweeping legal reform which clarified and codified French law based on traditions dating back to ancient Rome. Since this took place after the Louisiana Purchase, Stanley’s comment that “in the state of Louisiana we have what is known as the Napoleonic Code” is not quite true. Louisiana’s unique legal system features aspects of Roman, German, Spanish and French systems of law, including statutes adapted from the Napoleonic Code, which powerfully influenced legal reform in many countries. Whereas most other state legal systems are based on English Common Law, Louisiana’s unusual system means that even today lawyers in other states must pass a separate bar exam to practice in Louisiana.

“How about cuttin’ the re-bop!”: Re-bop was an early synonym for be-bop, a new style of jazz that became popular in the 1940s when *Streetcar* was written. Be-bop jazz featured fast tempos and an emphasis on improvisation, pioneered by musicians such as Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. More conservative fans of the melodic big-band jazz of the 1930s frequently disparaged re-bop/be-bop as grating, unpleasant noise, which seems to be what Stanley is also implying about Blanche’s conversation.

“One-eyed jacks are wild”: In a standard deck of cards, the Jack of Spades and Jack of Hearts are shown in profile, so that only one of their eyes is visible. Interestingly enough, the only movie Marlon Brando ever directed was the 1961 western *One-Eyed Jacks*, in which he also acted with his *Streetcar* co-star Karl Malden.

“Hurry back and we’ll fix you a sugar-tit”: A sugar-tit was a piece of cloth tied around a lump of sugar, used to quiet crying babies before the invention of the pacifier. Stanley is calling Mitch a baby and a mama’s boy.

“Could I kibitz?”: The Yiddish word *kibitz*, meaning “chat” or “gossip,” in this context means telling the cardplayer what to do with his hand.

“Is he a wolf?”: In the slang of the 1940s, a “wolf” was roughly synonymous with “player” in contemporary slang.

“Sounds like Xavier Cugat!”: Xavier Cugat was a Cuban-American bandleader of the 1920s-1960s. He is widely credited with introducing Latin sounds into American popular music.

“this game is Spit in the Ocean”: Spit in the Ocean is a version of draw poker in which each player holds four cards and a single card (the “spit card”) is dealt into the center of the table. This card is played by every player as his or her fifth card and is wild for that round of

play.

“that’s from my favorite sonnet by Mrs. Browning”: Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-61) was the most famous woman poet of the Victorian era, especially noted for her love sonnets.

“Our first American ancestors were French Huguenots”: The Huguenots were French Protestants, followers of John Calvin. Subject to frequent persecution by French Catholics, their faith was made illegal in 1685, resulting in a mass migration of Huguenots.

“bobby-soxers and drug-store Romeos”: The girls’ ankle socks known as “bobby sox” were such a ubiquitous feature of teenage fashion in the 1940s that “bobby-soxer” became slang for “teenage girl.” Today’s teenagers might not realize that an ice cream and soda counter was once a typical drugstore feature, making it a standard afterschool hangout for would-be Romeos looking to meet their own bobby-soxer Juliet.

“Three bullets! You dirty greaser!”: “Three bullets” is three aces, a good hand, but not enough to beat Pablo’s straight. “Greaser” was a derogatory word for a Mexican, because many Mexican-Americans in the 19th century held the unpleasant job of greasing cart axles.

“All quiet on the Potomac now?”: After Gen. George McClellan’s Civil War field reports became public knowledge, “all quiet on the Potomac” became a catchphrase for exhaustion.

“That don’t make no difference in the Quarter”: The French Quarter, or *Vieux Carré*, is the historic downtown area of New Orleans, famous for its nightlife. As Mitch notes, various states of public undress are traditional in the French Quarter, then as now.

“That’s a dial phone, honey”: Prior to the 1920s, phone calls were made by simply picking up the phone handset and speaking to a live operator who would connect you to the person or company of your choice. As phone service spread, “direct dial” was introduced to cut labor costs (and curb the problem of nosy operators listening in on private conversations). Even in the 40s, dial phones were more common in urban areas like New Orleans than in rural ones, which is likely why Blanche is so befuddled by Stella’s phone.

“Je suis la Dame aux Camélias”: French, “I am *La Dame aux Camélias*.” *La Dame aux Camélias* (The Lady of the Camellias) is an 1848 Dumas novel about a famous courtesan who died young. Both *Pretty Woman* and *Moulin Rouge* are loosely based on the novel.

“There’s just these portieres between the two rooms”: Portieres, from the French word for a porter or doorkeeper, are curtains used in place of doors, or as room dividers.

“Remember what Huey Long said”: Huey Long, known as “The Kingfish,” was Governor of Louisiana from 1928-1932 and a U.S. Senator from 1932-1935. His slogan “Every Man a King” (which Stanley slightly misquotes) referred to his radical populist program of taxing corporations and redistributing the money to Louisiana’s working class. A fiery orator and political firebrand, Long became a folk hero to some poor Louisianans, especially after his 1935 assassination.

“Flores para los muertos”: Spanish, “Flowers for the dead.” The Mexican woman is selling tin flowers for Day of the Dead altars.

“Take at Salerno”: Salerno is a town in Southern Italy where in 1943 Allied forces began Operation Avalanche, an invasion designed to drive the Nazi army from Italy. As with D-Day, heavy casualties were sustained in the initial assault, in which Stanley apparently took part.

Commentary and Criticism

“The one American playwright who is a conspicuous exception to the dichotomy between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture is Tennessee Williams. Williams’ South, with its sexual ambivalence, self-delusion, and irrational violence, has become part of our popular mythos, the ambience of countless B-movies and television melodramas.”

—Philip Kolin,
Confronting Williams’ Streetcar Named Desire

“Many of the personages he has created would seem to be projections of his own disoriented personality, frightened, timid, groping, highly sensitive, somewhat neurotic dreamers who, like their creator, are unable to adjust to the harsh realities of a world of crass materialism and brute strength. Or, if they have been forced to make an adjustment, this adjustment usually hardens and distorts them . . .”

—Durant DaPonte, “Williams’ Feminine Characters”

“Finding most men savage, Williams’s sympathy is on the side of the delicately built person whose soul is revolted by crass life. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is his allegorical demonstration of this ‘pitiful’ situation.”

—John T. von Szeliski,
“Tennessee Williams and the Tragedy of Sensitivity”

“Blanche is dangerous. She is destructive. She would soon have [Stanley] and Stella fighting. He’s got things the way he wants them around there and he does not want them upset by a phony, corrupt, sick, destructive woman. This makes Stanley right! Are we going into the era of Stanley? He may be practical and right... but what the hell does it leave us?”

—Elia Kazan,
from his director’s notebook

“[Uta] Hagen’s Blanche under [Harold] Clurman’s direction left audiences feeling they had watched a delicate woman driven insane by a brutish environment epitomized by Stanley Kowalski. [Jessica] Tandy’s Blanche under [Elia] Kazan’s direction left audiences feeling that a madwoman had entered an alien world and after shaking that world had been successfully exorcised.”

—Susan Spector, “Alternative Visions of Blanche DuBois”

“With the tragic implications of so many events in *Streetcar*, one is tempted simply to label the play a tragedy, if an imperfect one. What rises again and again, however, to contradict such a position is a comic spirit that continuously puts the audience off balance. Rather than viewing these comic elements as imperfections in a purely tragic mode, then, or the tragic events as weak melodramatic elements in a comic mode, our appraisal should encompass both modes and allow Williams his tragicomic stance with all of its irreconcilabilities.”

—John Roderick,
“The Tennessee Williams Tragicomic Transit Authority”

“Scholars do not agree about a precise meaning, a single idea that informs the thematic framework of *Streetcar*. They do, nevertheless, see the play as dramatizing basic human conflicts—struggles not peculiar to twentieth-century man [or woman], but common to all humanity.”

—S. Alan Chesler,
“*A Streetcar Named Desire*: Twenty-Five Years of Criticism”



Blanche DuBois (Laila Robins) pleads with her suitor Mitch (Robert Clohessy) in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s 2008 Main Stage Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein, 2008.

Stanley Kowalski (Gregory Derelien) consoles his wife Stella (Nisi Sturgis) in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s 2008 Main Stage Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein, 2008.



Tennessee Williams and the City of New Orleans

Tennessee Williams is only one of many American artists for whom the city of New Orleans has exercised a unique fascination and charm. One of the oldest cities in North America, New Orleans was established in 1718 at the mouth of the Mississippi river by mercantile traders of the French Mississippi Company, who named it honor of the Regent of France, Philippe II, Duc d'Orléans. As an extremely valuable trade port for goods from the continental interior and all over the Caribbean, it flourished, and was ceded to the Spanish as part of the 1763 Treaty of Paris.

This unusual French-Spanish cultural mix contributed greatly to the cosmopolitan air New Orleans has retained to this day. Napoleon Bonaparte regained control of the city from the Spanish, then sold it to the United States in 1803 as part of the Louisiana Purchase. Americans now moved to the city, as well as vast numbers of Haitians following the 1804 Haitian Revolution, establishing the city's long association with Haitian culture.

By the time of the War of 1812, New Orleans had already become one of the world's busiest commercial ports, shipping raw materials such as sugar and cotton worldwide. The British attempted to seize the port during the war, but were defeated by General Andrew Jackson at the Battle of New Orleans.

While New Orleans was a center of the slave trade, with the largest slave market in the United States, it also featured the largest population of free African-Americans, many of whom belonged to the city's prosperous, educated middle class.

When the Civil War erupted, President Lincoln's military commanders moved immediately to seize the vital port and cut off a key source of revenue and supplies for the Confederate government. In spring 1862, the Union victory in a naval battle outside the harbor ensured that the city was peacefully occupied, sparing its historic buildings the destruction visited upon most other Southern cities during the war.

The early 20th century saw a development that would shape the city's future irrevocably: the building of a vast drainage system by engineer A. Baldwin Wood. An intricate network of pumps and levees allowed the crowded city to expand into low-lying areas that had previously been too flood-prone to build upon. By the 1950s, much of the city lay below sea level.

During the latter half of the twentieth century, New Orleans went into economic decline as automation moved many shipping and manufacturing jobs elsewhere. Poverty and crime rose accordingly. The city became heavily dependent on tourism as its primary source of income.

In August 2005, disaster struck the city with the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina. While most of the residents evacuated ahead of the hurricane, many of the poorest and most vulnerable did not, and were helpless as the aging drainage system failed entirely, inundating 80% of the city. Ironically, some of the oldest sections of the city, such as the French Quarter, were spared most of the flooding since they were built on patches of higher ground that pre-dated the levee system.

Not just utilities and other public services, but entire neighborhoods were devastated by the floods. Statewide, over 1,500 people died in the hurricane, and it is estimated that the population of New Orleans remains at only 50-60% of its pre-Katrina size.

As Tennessee Williams noted, New Orleans has long been regarded as a haven for the unusual. In part, this is probably due to the great diversity of cultures that have intermingled there from its founding. Continental Europeans, Creoles from the Caribbean,

Native Americans, slaves and free blacks, Acadian ("Cajun") refugees from Canada all met and mixed in the city's vibrant streets. French slaveowners generally had a more relaxed attitude towards their slaves than

Anglo-Americans, and New Orleans was the only city in North America where slaves could gather in public and play their music. This rich cultural diversity and contact with travellers from across the world made the city as popular with artists in the 19th and early 20th centuries as New York.

For Williams, this bohemian, immigrant-rich city was an escape from the "monolithic puritanism" of his mother which provided him with a belated coming-of-age among the artists, prostitutes and working poor in the French Quarter. While he lived in many places throughout his life, the writer always described New Orleans as his "spiritual home."

In New York, eccentrics are ignored; in L.A. they're arrested, but in New Orleans they're allowed to develop their eccentricities into art.

-Tennessee Williams



"The Old Rookery": Illustration of a French Quarter tenement from the October 1887 issue of *Harper's Monthly*.

The Lost Dream of the Old South

There a was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South. Here in this pretty world, Gallantry took its last bow. Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair, of Master and of Slave. Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered, a Civilization gone with the wind...

Gone With The Wind, 1939

By the mid-20th century, there were few living Americans who had lived through the events of the Civil War itself, let alone the antebellum culture that had preceded it. With the benefit of hindsight, a highly-romanticized vision of the pre-war South began to take root in American popular culture, fueled particularly by works of art such as Margaret Mitchell's 1936 novel, *Gone With The Wind*. Under new economic pressures from industrialization, Americans in the South and elsewhere began to perceive the antebellum plantation culture as a lost era of tranquility, class and refinement.

Prior to the Civil War, Southern states had an economy that was almost entirely dependent on large-scale agriculture, exporting cotton and tobacco. With almost all land owned by a fairly small percentage of wealthy white families, this agrarian economy was in turn dependent on slavery to provide the vast quantity of cheap labor required to sustain pre-industrial farming on such a large scale. While commerce and manufacturing were rapidly expanding the middle class in the North, Southern society was fundamentally stratified into a small white aristocracy and a vast underclass of poor blacks and whites— the blacks enslaved and the whites scraping by as subsistence farmers.

The lack of opportunities for economic advancement combined with the prevailing racial attitudes in the South meant that those whites who were not plantation owners became all the more urgently concerned with social status and a sense of cultural advancement. If manners and gentility were indeed particularly prominent in antebellum society, as some writers allege, it was likely because these things were a cultural signifier for “good breeding,” which was roughly synonymous with whiteness.

Much of the image of the Old South as “genteel,” however, originated either with the small literary output of the pre-war aristocracy themselves, or from the literature that sprang up after the Civil War and the bitter period of Reconstruction. The Civil War resulted in major social dislocation— new economic enterprises foundered or never got off the ground at all (in part thanks to the unscrupulous nature of many of the post-war investors from the North), while large-scale agriculture struggled to sustain itself without its slave labor force. This daily struggle for survival only validated an image that the pre-war literature had already begun to promote: the greedy, materialistic, classless culture of the Northern states poised to snuff out the noble, pastoral Eden of the Southern states.

By the time Margaret Mitchell wrote her novel (less than a decade before Tennessee Williams wrote *Streetcar*), the antebellum era had become mainly an imaginary construct, the perceived “memory” of a “golden age” in which all Southerners had prospered and lived in harmony. Tennessee Williams' own personal relationship with the South and Southern culture bears a curious biographical

similarity to the nation's historical experience.

As a small boy, Williams had lived with his maternal grandparents in the town of Clarksdale, Mississippi, the heart of the historic Cotton Belt. In Williams' memory, it would perpetually figure as a landscape of idyllic peace and happiness, before the tensions in his parents' marriage, his sister's mental illness, and the other pressures of his adult life became apparent. He would return to the region in his writing again and again, and Blanche DuBois and her lost mansion, Belle Reve, were almost certainly inspired by Clarksdale's Cutrer Mansion and its founder, the heiress Blanche Clark Cutrer.

Although Williams never lost his love for the South, he was far from uncritically embracing its mythos in the way that, for instance, his mother did. The very name of Blanche's home, “Beautiful Dream,” suggests that Williams perceived just how much unreality there was in this romanticized image. Illusion is a major theme in the play, and a crucial component to Blanche's self-image as well as her method of relating to the world. Far from being a landscape of chivalry, Belle Reve, as Blanche describes it, was a landscape of “epic fornications,” a place with a history of slow moral and economic decay ending, at last, in a graveyard.

This complex relationship to the myth of the Old South characterizes Williams' play, which simultaneously exalts the fragility and beauty of Blanche's illusions and mercilessly charts their inevitable destruction. Set in New Orleans (itself a crossroads city), in an apartment near the intersection of two streetcar lines (significantly and symbolically named “Desire” and “Cemeteries”), *A Streetcar Named Desire* maps the intersection of Williams' longing for the romantic ideal of antebellum culture with his clear-eyed perception of its illusory nature.



Blanche DuBois (Laila Robins) is assaulted by her brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski (Gregory Derelian) in The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's 2008 Main Stage Production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Photo copyright Gerry Goodstein, 2008.

Additional Topics for Discussion

About the Play

1. The conflict between truth and illusion is one of the major themes of this play: Blanche continually takes refuge in invented scenarios to avoid confronting her past; Stanley remorselessly uncovers the sordid details of Blanche's past. Even as his brutal truths seem to have crushed her illusions at the end of the play, a new illusion takes root as Stella forces herself to ignore Blanche's accusations that Stanley has raped her. What do you think the author was trying to say about truth versus illusion? Are both necessary for life? When is one more helpful and the other more harmful? Why?
2. In all Tennessee Williams' plays, objects on stage take on great symbolic importance and are specifically called for in his stage directions. What are the symbolic objects in the text of this play, and what do they represent? Why did Williams select these particular things to make up the world of his play?
3. Williams toyed with (and abandoned) many other potential titles for the play before settling on: *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Why do you think he selected this title? What is the role of desire in the events of the play? What is the significance of desire being represented by a streetcar (as opposed to, say, a bus)? How does desire relate to other themes of the play?
4. Critics (and directors) of this play have long debated whether Blanche can be considered its tragic heroine. Do you think this play fits the genre of tragedy, and if so, how? Is Stanley principally responsible for Blanche's downfall? Are his actions in the play mostly justified? If not, would you classify him as a villain?
5. Blanche describes Stanley as "primitive" and "ape-like," and he is referred to as a "Polack." He himself hurls ethnic slurs at Pablo in the course of their poker games. What is the significance of ethnicity in this play? Why does Williams draw attention to the ethnicities of Stanley and Pablo, as well as creating roles for a "Negro Woman" and a "Mexican Woman?"

About this Production

1. Various pieces of music are called for in the script of *Streetcar* and have been integrated into the sound design for this production. What is the significance of these particular pieces and of music generally in the play? How did the sound design influence your viewing of the play?
2. Many people have seen the famous film version of *Streetcar*, which helped make Marlon Brando a Hollywood star. If you have also seen the film, discuss similarities and differences in the performances and the storytelling. How did each director and cast communicate their particular understanding of the play?
3. Williams' plays generally contain elements of both realism and expressionism (symbolic or metaphoric design). How is this mixture reflected in the visual landscape for this production? What elements might be more symbolic than realistic?

Follow-up Activities

1. Write a review of this production. Be sure to include specific information and your own reactions to both the acting and the design elements (like lights, set, costumes and sound). Explain what you liked about the production, and what you disliked, and support your opinions. Then submit your review to The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey's Education Department, or see if it can be published in your school newspaper.
2. *Boxed Characters*: Tennessee Williams uses numerous specific objects in a symbolic way in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Select one of the characters in the play and fill a shoebox with small objects that reflect his or her personality. Be as creative as possible. Follow up with an oral presentation or a display.
3. *Talk Show*: The various personal and family dysfunctions in *Streetcar* would make for a great set of talk show guests. Using the play as a reference point, conduct interviews with the characters of the play. How would they present themselves to an audience? Make sure your interviewers come up with probing and thoughtful questions, and that you are being truthful to the play.
4. *Staging the Scene*: In most cases, a play is best understood by getting on your feet and attempting to act it out. The first scene of Act Two in *Streetcar* is a good one to examine since, as Williams describes it, it is "a point of balance between the play's two sections." As a group, read the whole scene out loud and discuss. Then divide into at least three groups to work on staging the last couple of pages (Blanche's encounter with the newspaper collector). Allow time for rehearsal, then present and carefully analyze each interpretation. What did each group do to make their telling of the story clear, realistic, and true to the text?
5. *The Sequel*: Many situations and plot points are left unresolved by the ending of the play. What do you think becomes of these characters? In a short story or playscript, reveal the future of one or more of the characters, using what you already know about them from the play. Does Stanley and Stella's marriage survive? Does Blanche ever leave the sanitarium? What happens to Mitch with Blanche out of his life?

Teachers:

Do you have activities or exercises to suggest for this play? We are always looking for new ideas to inspire students (and teachers). Send your suggestions to info@ShakespeareNJ.org, and we will share them with other teachers, or maybe even include them in future study guides.



Meeting Core Curriculum Standards

In 1996, the New Jersey State Board of Education adopted Core Curriculum Content Standards that set out to clearly define what every New Jersey student should know and be able to do at the end of his/her schooling. The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is committed to supporting teachers by ensuring that our educational programs are relevant to standards-based teaching and learning.

Viewing a performance at The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey and participating in the post-performance discussion can serve as a powerful springboard for discussion, writing, and other outlets for higher-order thinking. On this page you will find suggestions for ways to align your study of our production to each standard.

LANGUAGE ARTS LITERACY STANDARDS

As a theatre dedicated to the classics, we are continually engaged in exploring some of the world's greatest literature, and the relationship between the written text and performance. Our philosophy and practice follow the four underlying assumptions of the Language Arts Literacy CCCS: that "language is an *active process* for constructing meaning," that "language develops in a *social context*," that language ability increases as learners "engage in texts that are *rich in ideas and increasingly complex in language*," and that learners achieve mastery not by practicing isolated skills but by "*using and exploring language* in its many dimensions." In the practice of theatre, we merge all areas of the language arts, as the standards suggest, "in an integrated act of rehearsal, reflection, and learning." Using the visual and performing arts to motivate and enhance language arts learning is explicitly recommended by the CCCS, citing extensive research.

Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

STANDARD 3.1: All students will apply the knowledge of sounds, letters and words in written English to become independent and fluent readers, and will read a variety of materials and texts with fluency and comprehension.
Read a scene from the play as a class and use context clues to interpret new words and expand vocabulary (3.1.C/F); demonstrate understanding by performing a scene from the play (3.1.G); compare and contrast literary elements in the play with another text being studied (3.1.H)

STANDARD 3.2: All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
Write a new ending for the play in blank verse or in modern prose (3.2.D), write a critique of the play which will be workshopped and published in a classroom setting (3.2.A/B/D)

STANDARD 3.3: All students will speak in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
Participate in a post-show discussion (3.3.A/B), memorize and perform a monologue or scene from the play (3.3.D)

STANDARD 3.4: All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.
Select a speech from the play and compare its stage and film performances (3.4.A/B)

STANDARD 3.5: All students will access, view, evaluate and respond to print, nonprint, and electronic texts and resources.
Discuss how the play expresses cultural values of the playwright's time (3.5.A); compare and contrast the printed and staged version (3.5.B)

VISUAL AND PERFORMING ARTS STANDARDS

According to both No Child Left Behind and the New Jersey CCCS, the arts (including theatre) are a core subject and "experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education." In the area of performing arts, performances, workshops and study guide exercises developed by The Shakespeare Theatre address all five state standards.

Below, you will find just a few of the possibilities for aligning your study of our productions to each of these standards.

STANDARD 1.1: All students will use aesthetic knowledge in the creation of and in response to dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Discuss the use of metaphor in the text and the design of the production; discuss how the play expresses cultural values of its period

STANDARD 1.2: All students will utilize those skills, media, methods, and technologies appropriate to each art form in the creation, performance, and presentation of dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Perform a monologue or scene from the play; participate in a classroom workshop that develops the physical and technical skills required to create and present theatre

STANDARD 1.3: All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dance, music, theatre and visual art.
Participate in a post-show discussion of elements such as physicality and creating motivated action; discuss the relationship between playtext and production design

STANDARD 1.4: All students will develop, apply and reflect upon knowledge of the process of critique.
Write a review of the production using domain-appropriate terminology; develop a class rubric for effective theatrical presentations; compare and contrast the play with work by other artists

STANDARD 1.5: All students will understand and analyze the role, development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.
Discuss the representation of social issues (class, political leadership, etc.) in the play; research how the historical period affected the writer's work; compare the play to work from other historical periods

Sources for this study guide and recommended reading:

A Streetcar Named Desire, by Tennessee Williams. New York: Signet, 1951.

Twenty Century Interpretations of A Streetcar Named Desire, edited by Jordan Y. Miller. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971.

Tennessee Williams' A Streetcar Named Desire, edited by Harold Bloom. New York: Chelsea House, 1988.

“Criticism on *A Streetcar Named Desire*: A Bibliographic Survey 1947-2003,” John S. Bak, *Cercles* No. 10, 2004.

PBS American Masters website
(http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/williams_t.html)

The Mississippi Writers Page: Tennessee Williams
(http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/english/ms-writers/dir/williams_tennessee/)

Signet Edition Teacher's Guide for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Robert C. Small, Jr.
(<http://us.penguingroup.com/static/pdf/teachersguides/streetcar.pdf>)

Utah Shakespearean Festival study guide to *A Streetcar Named Desire*
(<http://www.bard.org/education/studyguides/index.html>)

Papermill Playhouse study guide to *Summer and Smoke*
(http://www.papermill.org/_media/outreach/SUMMER%20AND%20SMOKE%20sg.pdf)

Wikipedia, the free online encyclopedia
(www.wikipedia.org)



Photo of a Southern plantation house from Charles and Mary Beard's *History of the United States*, New York: Macmillan, 1921.

Other Opportunities for Students... and Teachers

SHAKESPEARE LIVE! EDUCATIONAL TOURING COMPANY

Shakespeare LIVE! is the educational touring company of The Shakespeare Theatre. This dynamic troupe of actors brings exciting, artistically-exceptional abridged productions of Shakespeare’s plays and other world classics directly into schools.

JUNIOR AND SENIOR CORPS

Two- and three-week summer acting intensives, geared for students in grades 6 through 12, these programs offer professional-caliber instruction and performance opportunities for young people who have developed a serious interest in theatre. Admission to this program is through audition and/or interview.

SUMMER PROFESSIONAL TRAINING PROGRAM

For graduating high school seniors and for university students, the 11-week Summer Professional Training Program offers acting apprenticeships and professional internships, providing academic training and hands-on experience in acting, technical, artistic and arts management areas.

SHAKEFEST: SUMMER SHAKESPEARE INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS

Designed for elementary and secondary teachers of Shakespeare, *ShakeFest* is a weeklong professional development intensive filled with myriad practical ways to conquer “ShakesFear” and excite students about the Bard. In hands-on sessions, experienced teaching artists model active and exciting performance-oriented techniques to get students on their feet and “speaking the speech.”

SHAKESPERIENCE: NJ STUDENT SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL

This annual spring festival, developed in partnership with the Folger Shakespeare Library and Rider University, gives middle and high school classes the opportunity to spend a day at the Theatre experiencing Shakespeare together as both actors and audience. The *Shakespeare: NJ* Festival celebrates the power of performance as a teaching tool on a statewide scale.

About The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey

The acclaimed Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey (formerly called “New Jersey Shakespeare Festival”) is one of the leading Shakespeare theatres in the nation. Serving nearly 100,000 adults and children annually, it is New Jersey’s only professional theatre company dedicated to Shakespeare’s canon and other classic masterworks. Through its distinguished productions and education programs, the company strives to illuminate the universal and lasting relevance of the classics for contemporary audiences. The longest-running Shakespeare theatre on the east coast, The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey marks its 46th season in 2008.

In addition to producing and presenting classic theatre, the Theatre’s mission places an equal focus on education— both for young artists and audiences of all ages. The Theatre nurtures emerging new talent for the American stage and cultivates future audiences by providing extensive student outreach opportunities. Through our work, we endeavor to promote literacy, civilization, community, cultural awareness, the theatrical tradition, and a more enlightened view of the world in which we live and the people with whom we share it.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is one of 20 professional theatres in the state of New Jersey. The company’s dedication to the classics and commitment to excellence sets critical standards for the field. Nationwide, the Theatre has emerged as one of the most exciting “new” theatres under the leadership of Artistic Director Bonnie J. Monte since 1990. It is one of only a handful of Shakespeare Theatres on the east coast, and in recent years has drawn larger and larger audiences and unprecedented critical acclaim. The opening of the intimate, 308-seat F.M. Kirby Shakespeare Theatre in 1998, provided the Theatre with a state-of-the-art venue with excellent sightlines, and increased access for patrons and artists with disabilities.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is a member of ArtPride, The Shakespeare Theatre Association of America, Theatre Communications Group, and is a founding member of the New Jersey Theatre Alliance.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey is an independent, professional theatre located on the Drew University campus.

The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey’s programs are made possible, in part, by funding from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts/ Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as funds from the National Endowment for the Arts. Additional major support is received from The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, the F. M. Kirby Foundation, The Edward T. Cone Foundation, The Shubert Foundation and Drew University, as well as contributions from numerous corporations, foundations, government agencies and individuals. Crystal Rock Bottled Water is the official water supplier of The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey.

