

THE
CONNELL SHORT GUIDE
TO TENNESSEE WILLIAMS'S



A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

“I think this is a wonderful and useful series and I
highly recommend them.”

CLAIRE TOMALIN

ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE
PLAY IN ONE CONCISE VOLUME

by Kirsten Shepherd-Barr

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Introduction

“*Streetcar* is a cry of pain,” Arthur Miller once said, paying tribute to Tennessee Williams’s achievement. The most famous line in the play – “I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers” – contains the three most important words for the entire drama. What does it mean to be dependent (or independent)? What does it mean to be kind (or cruel)? And what does it mean to be a stranger? Are we all more or less strangers to one another – even to those we love, and who love us? In a sense, all of Williams’s work addresses these fundamental questions, and never more powerfully than in *Streetcar*.

A Streetcar Named Desire was a triumphant success for Williams, running for two years on Broadway (1947-49) and opening in London’s West End in 1949. It followed his first hit play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). Although they are vastly different in style, the two plays have much in common: their focus on the fragile female and the faded southern belle, their empathy for the marginalised, outcast and oppressed, their emotionally immature male characters, their depiction of the artist figure, their infusion of realism with theatricality and an expressive, poetic language that led critics to hail a new lyricism in a theatre that many felt had grown prosaic and dull. These elements have continued to define Williams

as a playwright, despite a much more diverse body of work that is often bravely experimental (e.g. *Camino Real*) and diverges sharply from these early plays. The fact that he is still best known for *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) is not just because they are enduring and powerful works; it is also due to Hollywood.

The film versions of these plays have stubbornly implanted themselves in the cultural memory through stars like Richard Burton, Marlon Brando, Paul Newman, Elizabeth Taylor and Vivien Leigh, and it is often a great surprise to encounter the plays as they were originally written and discover that the film versions differ radically – most prominently through changed endings that Williams only grudgingly went along with – in ways that deeply affect our interpretations and understanding of the plays. Hollywood gave us indelible individual portrayals, such as Leigh as Blanche DuBois; but it also dampened some of Williams’s theatrical ideas and narrowed his range in the public’s imagination.

Certain themes do recur in his plays, such as lying, self-deception, human frailty, mental illness, sexual repression, and otherness. But these are not the whole story. Like other great modern playwrights – Ibsen, Chekhov, Strindberg, Beckett – Williams was influenced by two key intellectual developments: psychology and evolution. His works powerfully merge these two strands of

thought, exposing with compassion and insight the psychology of character while keeping in focus the larger issue of how environment acts on the individual and the group. *Streetcar* puts these concerns centre stage, asking: how do organisms survive in a hostile environment? Why can’t they escape those environments?

A summary of the plot

The play is set in the New Orleans tenement home of Stella, married to Stanley Kowalski and expecting their first baby. Their neighborhood is called Elysian Fields. The play opens with the arrival of Stella’s older sister Blanche DuBois, a thirty-something former southern belle whose delicate, refined good looks jar with the earthy, steamy, run-down surroundings of the neighborhood where Stella and Stanley live. Her appearance also masks her true situation: she is destitute, having lost the family home, Belle Reve (French for “Beautiful Dream”), to creditors. She has also left her job as an English teacher due, she says, to her nerves. She has come to live with her sister as a last resort. She and Stanley dislike each other from the start, as she finds him “common” and unrefined while he feels she is snooty and intrusive.

Bits of Blanche’s past gradually come forth in

the ensuing scenes, as the truth of her circumstances is revealed. She had married very young but was widowed and finds it hard to discuss her dead husband. She confides some of her story to Mitch, a friend of Stanley's who, though he sweats profusely in the sultry New Orleans heat, seems a cut above the other men with whom Stanley plays poker. They flirt. But the evening turns nasty when Stanley, drunk and violent, hits Stella, and she and Blanche flee to the neighbour upstairs, Eunice, who has obviously seen this sort of thing before, while it is a complete shock to Blanche.

Even worse for Blanche, Stella goes back downstairs and to bed with Stanley when he cries out for her repeatedly in the open courtyard. Mitch and Blanche then sit on the front steps and talk about what happened. Mitch apologises for his friend's crass behaviour. The next morning Blanche, assuming that Stella regrets having returned to Stanley after being so badly mistreated by him, tells Stella sympathetically that she regards Stanley as an animal; Stanley overhears this but doesn't let on. Stella shows where her allegiance lies by pointedly hugging and kissing Stanley in front of Blanche.

Tensions mount over the following weeks as Blanche and Stanley continue their frosty stand-off, with no détente in sight. Blanche is nurturing her relationship with Mitch in the hope that she will no longer be a burden for Stella. She reveals to

him the truth about her marriage: her husband was gay, as she found out when she discovered him having sex with an older man. Blanche told her husband that he disgusted her and he committed suicide.

Mitch is drawn even closer to Blanche by this revelation. But Stanley is trying to undermine her. He has been looking into her past and says to Stella that Blanche was fired from her job as a teacher because she had sex with a student, and lived in a hotel known for prostitution. Stella is so angry and upset by Stanley's viciousness, and for telling Mitch this gossip, that she goes into labour and is rushed to the hospital. Blanche is alone and Mitch comes to confront her. She denies the stories Stanley has told him about her but finally admits they are true. She begs him to forgive her but he spurns her. He seems about to assault/rape her so she screams "fire!" and he flees.

Stanley returns from the hospital, where Stella has had the baby. He and Blanche are alone and he apparently rapes her, saying as he carries her into the bedroom: "We've had this date with each other from the beginning." This causes Blanche to have a nervous breakdown and her sister decides to have her committed to a mental institution. Weeks have passed and Stella doesn't believe that Stanley has raped Blanche. Stanley, Mitch and their friends are playing poker when a doctor and nurse arrive to take Blanche away; she fights against them and collapses on the floor, bringing Mitch to tears. The

doctor gently helps her to her feet and she goes with him, saying: “Whoever you are, I have always depended upon the kindness of strangers.” At the play’s close, Stanley is comforting Stella while the poker game goes on.

How Tennessee Williams uses symbolism in *Streetcar*

Two main aspects of *Streetcar* are strongly biographical in nature, and Williams used them repeatedly in his plays. One is the theme of mental illness, particularly that suffered by the fragile female. This is based on Williams’s sister Rose, who was given a lobotomy and institutionalised for much of her life. Williams movingly depicts Rose in *The Glass Menagerie* and again in *Streetcar*. The other is the theme of repressed homosexuality. The powerful combination of these themes in so many of his plays makes Williams one of the leading spokesmen of Otherness and oppression.

Fans of *The Glass Menagerie* would have been expecting heavy symbolism in this play too, after their immersion in Williams’s magic-realism world of glass figurines, allusions to a unicorn, a broken horn and “blue roses” (pointed symbols of Otherness), the portrait of the deserting father on the walls (the patriarchy), and a brooding

narrator-writer revisiting his past on a fire escape (ie. going nowhere). *Streetcar* does not disappoint; even its title, place names and characters breathe symbolic meanings. The opening stage directions evoke all the senses as they describe Elysian Fields, the run-down New Orleans neighborhood permeated by the faint whiff of “bananas and coffee”, the feel of the “warm breath of the brown river”, the sight of “a peculiarly tender blue” sky, and the sounds of a tinny “blue piano [that] expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here”.

Since Elysian Fields is the last stop on the line, the streetcar is paradoxically going nowhere, to a dead end. It also suggests a life lived in transit, yet with no clear destination (or a destination only defined by unfulfilled emotion – desire). The paradox of Blanche arriving in Elysian Fields where her sister lives is clear. In Greek mythology this was the final resting place of the souls of the heroic and the virtuous, and Blanche seems to be neither. As she tells Mitch in their first scene together, Blanche means white and DuBois means woods in French, one of the many languages of New Orleans, a multicultural and linguistic melting pot – or as Williams puts it in the opening stage directions, “a cosmopolitan city” with a “relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town”. Blanche, by contrast, self-identifies with the woods: a non-urban, dark, solitary environment.

It is common to think of Blanche as a blank white page waiting to be written on. But “to blanch” also means to turn pale, or to turn something else pale, through shock. It has other meanings, too, that all involve unnatural, traumatic or violent processes: in cooking, “to blanch” means to peel by scalding, or to immerse something briefly in boiling water; in botany, it means to whiten a plant by depriving it of light; and in coinage, it describes a method used to whiten metal. Although she pointedly does not flinch when faced with Stanley’s rough and overbearing manners during the poker scene, this initial bravado gives way to a scared retreat into the bathroom throughout much of the rest of the play and an increasing sense of being blanched by too harsh an emotional light. How can she survive in the rough environment of Elysian Fields? Far from being the resting place she is seeking, the neighborhood is densely populated, poor, hot and loud from the noise of jazz and streetcars and trains.

As Williams indicates, she looks “incongruous” in this setting, a pure white “moth” fluttering dangerously against the harsh light to which it is inexorably attracted. She has just been seen by both the audience and the men on stage walking in and out of the light, as if flirting with it – although here again we see an interesting contradiction in her as she tells Mitch to attach a lamp-shade to the light because “I can’t stand a naked light-bulb”.

One of Williams’s innovations is the way he combines this notion of the light that ruthlessly reveals the truth (“the searchlight turned on the world”) with various musical motifs (jazz, polka) to convey Blanche’s inner turmoil.

The central scene of the play in which Blanche tells the story about her failed marriage and her husband’s suicide, which she directly helped to bring about through her wounding comments (“you disgust me”), expertly interweaves these light and sound motifs. The “searchlight” went off again with his death, Blanche says, and “never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this – kitchen – candle...” When Mitch takes her in his arms, she is speechless; “the words won’t come,” the stage directions tell us, signaling a brief moment of genuine connection so real for Blanche that it can’t be described or expressed.

An added dimension to her character is the theme of cleansing by water; Blanche constantly soaks herself in a hot bath as if to regain her pure-white state, asks if the grapes Eunice has brought are washed, and refers to the cathedral bells as “the only clean thing in the Quarter”. She wants to die on the ocean, “be buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack and dropped overboard”. In a very literal sense, her departure for the mental institution at the end of the play suggests that she will have this dream realised in the form of a straitjacket.

The truth about Blanche

“I don’t want realism, I want magic,” Blanche cries. She is an actress performing a role: that of the elegant Southern belle. The stage directions have her “improvising feverishly” and she does it like a pro. Blanche “lies as a protection against solitude and desperation”, says the critic Michael Billington, and her “limitless capacity for self-delusion”, a combination of “fake grandeur and genuine pain”, is tied explicitly to her gender.

With gestures straight out of a 19th-century melodrama – “she touches her forehead shakily”, she speaks with “feverish vivacity”, “her knuckles pressed to her lips” – Blanche plays not so much Southern Belle as Lady of the Camellias, and even self-consciously casts herself in this role with Mitch as her lover Armand (scene 6). Given her state of fallenness, some critics have dismissed her as just a “little trollop” (John Chapman), but Harold Clurman saw shrewdly that she was far more than that: she was “the potential artist in all of us”. As a woman, she has no stage on which to perform beyond the domestic sphere, so that potential remains untapped and this is what sends her over the edge of sanity. There is a direct line back to Ibsen’s heroines, particularly Nora in *A Doll’s House*, who likewise performs a role she has learned – how to be female in a male-ordered world – and then realises that she must start again



Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire at The Young Vic in 2014

and learn from scratch, without male instruction and coercion, what it means to be a woman. Nora’s frenzied rehearsal of the tarantella dance is often cited as an expression of her extreme mental state brought about by this tension between authenticity and artifice – the moment when she unconsciously shows the impossibility of being herself. Nora and Blanche epitomise this gendered idea of the “theatricalising self”. The difference is that Nora comes back from the abyss of insanity while Blanche collapses into it.

Theatre history is full of “mad women”: Hamlet’s Ophelia is a famous example, and there are many, many others right up to the present day (e.g. in Sarah Kane’s *4.48 Psychosis*). Blanche’s psychic deterioration is deeply moving, but