**C7T: American Literature**

**A Discussion of Tennessee Williams’ “A Streetcar Named Desire”**

This is an e-material intended for the students of English Honours students of 3rd Semester under CBCS syllabus of Vidyasagar University



Tennessee Williams

**Introduction to “A Streetcar Named Desire”**

**Tennessee Williams’s “A Streetcar Named Desire.”**

\*By [Wolcott Gibbs](https://www.newyorker.com/contributors/wolcott-gibbs), December 6, 1947

“ ‘A Streetcar Named Desire’ by Tennessee Williams, is a fine and deeply disturbing play, almost faultless in the physical details of its production and the quality of its acting. It is hard to define it very satisfactorily for those who haven’t seen it. Most of us at one time or another have come on some incident in the street, some scene of senseless brutality or intolerable humiliation, that struck us inescapably as the last act in a life. Usually, of course, we were mistaken, since the real climaxes are almost never identifiable, but still it gave the imagination, especially if literary, something to wrestle with, and often we got home with quite a story worked out in our heads. Mr. Williams’ play might easily be the triumphant product of just such an experience. The last scene shows a woman being led away from a crumbling house in a nightmare street. She is not young, being in her middle thirties, but she is still handsome and she has a certain amount of style—Old South, as it happens, but still style—both in her manner and her dress. It would not be necessary to identify the two people with her as a doctor and an asylum attendant for anyone to see that she is quite mad. Obviously, any explanation for such a moment, for such a coincidence of smiling insanity—she is clearly delighted with her companions—and ruined elegance and unspeakable squalor, is faced with the danger of seeming either hopelessly inadequate or absurdly melodramatic. All I can say is that Mr. Williams has written a strong, wholly believable play that, starting in a low key, mounts slowly and inexorably to its shocking climax. I think it is an imperfect play, for reasons that I’ll get around to in a minute, but it is certainly the most impressive one that has turned up this season, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it was a sounder and more mature work than “The Glass Menagerie,” the author’s previous compliment to Southern womanhood.

Mr. Williams has placed “A Streetcar Named Desire” in the Vieux Carré in New Orleans, where it seems there is or was just such a car, as well as one labelled “Cemetery” and a neighborhood known as the Elysian Fields, life in this case being singularly obliging to art. The set represents the two-room apartment occupied by Stanley Kowalski, a young Pole somehow cryptically connected with the automobile business, and his pregnant bride, Stella, a fine, highly sexed girl, though the daughter of that most exhausted of all aristocracies, an old Southern family. It is possible that some scenic artist somewhere has contrived a more gruesome interior than the decaying horror that Jo Mielziner has executed for the Kowalskis, but I doubt it. It is on the ground floor (outside, a circular iron staircase winds up to another apartment, containing perhaps the least inhibited married couple ever offered on the stage); there is no door between the two rooms, only a curtain; the furnishings are sparse and dreadful; the desolate street outside can be seen through the windows, or, rather, through the walls, since Mr. Mielziner’s design is by no means literal. It is a wonderful effect and, as the evening wears along, oppressive almost beyond words.

One spring morning, Stella’s older sister, Blanche, turns up at this hovel. She is a strange girl, but at first there is nothing visibly wrong with her except a slight hysteria, which she tries to fight down with frequent surreptitious drinks of whiskey, and that grotesque and terrible refinement that Mr. Williams has carried over from his portrait of the mother in “The Glass Menagerie.” She is fashionably appalled by the Kowalski apartment and the goings on in it, which include an incredibly seedy, brawling poker game, but this is nothing compared with the dismay she experiences at her first sight of her sister’s husband. This is understandable, since, thanks to a peculiar combination of script and casting, this character emerges as almost wholly subhuman—illiterate, dirty, violent, and even somehow with a suggestion of physical deformity, an apelike quality, about him. In addition to the personal disgust he inspires in her, Blanche is slowly forced to realize that her desperate pretending is no good with him; from the moment she comes in, he suspects the unbearable truth about her, and when she seems to be infecting her sister with her stylish ways, he drags it out into the light, with contemptuous brutality.

It is something of a tribute to Mr. Williams’ talent that the story of Blanche’s past can seem even momentarily credible. The two girls were brought up in an old house, apparently the conventional “decaying mansion,” which he has chosen to call Belle Rêve, though they pronounce It “Belle Reeve.” Like Stella, Blanche married, but it was a brief and tragic escape, since the boy was a homosexual who shot himself after his seventeen-year-old bride had discovered him in a situation that could hardly be misinterpreted. She went back to Belle Rêve, where she watched the awful, lingering deaths of three old women, and then, when the creditors had taken the house, went on to a town called Laurel, where she taught school and gradually, in a sick—or quite possibly, by this time, an insane—revulsion against death, took up with many men. The Laurel episode ended with her seduction of an adolescent boy (youth plus love, I gather, seemed to her the absolute antithesis of death, though, of course, some authorities might have diagnosed simple nymphomania) and with her expulsion from the town, where, in her brother-in-law’s sardonic phrase, she was getting to be somewhat better known than the President of the United States.

By the time Blanche comes to her sister’s apartment, she has manufactured a gaudy and pathetic substitute past for herself, full of rich and handsome suitors, who respectfully admire her mind, but Kowalski tears that down ruthlessly, without any special moral indignation but with a savage, obscene humor that is infinitely more torturing. He also gives her secret away to the one man—a poor specimen, but kind and honest—who might conceivably have saved her and then takes her, casually and contemptuously, himself. The end comes when she tries to tell this to her sister, who, unable to believe it and still go on with her marriage, consents to having her committed to an asylum. This is, I’m afraid, a pretty poor synopsis—there is no way, for instance, to convey the effect Mr. Williams achieves in his last act of a mind desperately retreating into the beautiful, crazy world it has built for itself—but perhaps it is enough to give you the general idea.

The reservations I have may easily be captious. Principally, it seems to me that in the emotional surge of writing his play Mr. Williams has been guilty of establishing a too facile and romantic connection between Belle Rêve and the Vieux Carré. Not knowing much about the South, old or new, it was hard for me to visualize the girls’ ancestral home, except as something vaguely resembling the House of Usher, but Stella is written and played as a pretty, reasonably cultivated girl, in no sense unbalanced, and her abrupt and cheerful descent into the lower depths of New Orleans seems rather incredible. Mr. Williams attempts, though the evidence on the stage is against him, to portray Kowalski as a man of enormous sexual attraction, so that the very sight of him causes her to see colored pinwheels, but even that is scarcely enough. It is the same, to some extent, with Blanche; whatever the forces working against her may have been, her degradation is much too rapid and complete, her fall from whatever position she may have occupied in a top level of society to the bottom of the last level a good deal more picturesque than probable. As I say, it is conceivable that these transitions do occur in the South, but it is my suspicion that Mr. Williams has adjusted life fairly drastically to fit his special theme. The only other thing I might complain about (Blanche’s arrival from Laurel, where apparently she had just been tossed out of a cheap hotel, with a trunkful of pretty expensive-looking jewelry and clothes perplexed me some, but I’m willing to let it go) is the somewhat sustained and literary analogy that keeps turning up between the streetcars named for passion and death and the tragic conflict in the heroine’s mind. Mr. Williams seems to me much too good a playwright now to bother his head with these ladies’-club mystifications. “A Streetcar Named Desire” is a brilliant, implacable play about the disintegration of a woman, or, if you like, of a society; it has no possible need for the kind of pseudo-poetic decoration that more vacant authors so often employ to disguise their fundamental lack of thought.

After all that, I’m sorry to say there isn’t much room left for the compliments to the cast, though God knows they and, of course, Elia Kazan, their director, deserve all I can offer them. Briefly, Jessica Tandy gives a superb, steadily rising performance as Blanche; Marlon Brando, as Kowalski, is, as hinted previously, almost pure ape (his sister-in-law’s description of him as “common” entertained me quite a lot, there in the dark), and though he undoubtedly emphasizes the horrors of the Vieux Carré as opposed to Belle Rêve, it is a brutally effective characterization; Karl Malden, as Blanche’s unhappy suitor, gets a queer, touching blend of dignity and pathos into what you might call one of those difficult, listening parts; and Kim Hunter, as Stella, is sympathetic and restrained and very decorative indeed. The others, representing the inhabitants of that abandoned district, all seemed admirable and awful to me.”

**A Discussion on the themes of “A Streetcar Named Desire”**

“The structure of this play is best seen through a series of confrontations between Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. In the first scene the confrontation is not so severe, but it increases in severity until one of the two must be destroyed. To understand fully the scenes of confrontations, readers should have a good understanding of what is at stake in each encounter. That is, they should understand some of the differences between the DuBois world and the Kowalski world.

The most obvious difference between the worlds of Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski lies in the diversity of their backgrounds. We immediately recognize that the very name DuBois and Kowalski contrast. Williams has begun to sketch the personalities by a nationality association. We assume DuBois to be an aristocratic name, possibly one with a proud heritage. A DuBois wouldn't be found working in a steel mill, as would a Kowalski. A DuBois speaks softly and flittingly. A Kowalski speaks loud and brutally. Kowalskis relish loud poker parties with their characteristic rough humor. Blanche DuBois winces at this. Her preferences for entertainment are teas, cocktails, and luncheons. Speech, to Stanley, is a way of expressing his wants, likes, and dislikes. Blanche speaks on a higher level. She searches for values, reflecting education in her manner of speaking. Kowalski regards money as the key to happiness; money will buy anything. Stanley's interest in Belle Reve centers only upon the fact that under the Napoleonic Code he loses money. He cares nothing for the tradition of the place but only its financial value. Money, to his type, is a power that can buy some basic wants or pleasures of life. This gives him a type of animal superiority to the world of people (like the DuBois) who do not understand the value of money and then become destitute.

Stanley and Blanche, as individual representatives of these two worlds, show even more contrasts in their personalities. The use of color differs remarkably. Stanley needs vividness to prove his physical manhood. He is presented "as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors." His green and scarlet bowling shirt is an example. Blanche shuns loud shades and selects pastels or white. The directness of bright colors repulses her; she prefers muted, muffled tones.

Another contrast arises in the comparison of their zodiac signs. Stanley was born in December under Capricorn the Goat. This brings to mind many obvious associations in connection with Stanley's personality. Blanche's sign is Virgo, the virgin. True, she is a very degenerate "virgin," but in body only. She tries to keep the mentality of a virgin. She believes she is a virgin because the men she has slept with have meant nothing to her; they have not actually taken from her. She has not given of her real self to them. But to represent herself in such a manner seems a direct lie to the Kowalski world. There can be no such subtle difference in the Kowalski world. This leads to one of the central conflicts of the play, Blanche's honesty versus her seeming dishonesty.

A Kowalski, as seen in Stanley, is "simple, straightforward, and honest." He tolerates nothing but the bare, unembellished truth. Blanche, so to speak, "puts a gaily-colored paper lantern" on the harshness of truth. This isn't lying to her. A lie, for Blanche, would be a betrayal of herself, of everything she believes in. Therefore, it would not only be a verbal lie but also a lie in act. Stanley abhors the paper lantern. He accepts it for nothing other than a lie and detests Blanche for deceiving others with it. This conflict is irresolvable because it originates in the essence of their personalities. To concede to the other's view entails self-destruction.

Love is essential to both worlds but has entirely different significance for each. Stanley needs love to satisfy his animal desires. To him it is the physical act of love, no more. Blanche's sensitivity is the key to her approach to love. She needs someone not to fulfill her basic physical desires but to protect her or she feels the need of giving herself to someone. Her concept of love is on a higher level than Stanley's. Shunning the brutality and animality of a Kowalski, she seeks some type of communication, some capacity for devotion. Desire isn't the lustful passion that Stanley regards it, but it is a spiritual need. Speaking of Mitch, Stella asks her, "Blanche, do you want him?" She answers, "I want to rest. I want to breathe quietly again." She seeks security and protection for her sensitiveness against the rough edges of her surroundings.

The symbol employed most frequently by Williams in his emphasis of the essential differences in the worlds is light. It represents the reality Stanley lives by and the harshness Blanche must soften. He faces it because it is him; he is "a naked light bulb." He faces the way things are, doesn't delude himself into believing they are something else. Blanche did that once when she saw the truth about her young husband, and it nearly broke her. Since then she has retired into a world of shadow and illusion. "There has never been any light that's stronger than this — kitchen — candle." If she must have a light, she prefers candlelight. The light in her room is too strong for her; so she covers it with a paper lantern. She uses this in a symbolic explanation of her own approach to reality: "soft people have got to court the favour of hard ones... have got to be seductive — put on soft colors . . . shimmer and glow." This then is the only way in which Blanche can cope with Stanley's world, but his world forbids it. She must improvise, make the necessary adjustments. He tolerates no compromise. His primitive, honest manner threatens to destroy her. The two ways of life are totally incompatible; there can be no peaceful coexistence.

Thus the play is structured on the principle of presenting the two worlds, establishing what each world believes in, and then placing these worlds in a series of direct confrontations until one is destroyed.”

**A Discussion on the characters of “A Streetcar Named Desire”**

**Blanche DuBois** A sensitive, delicate moth-like member of the fading Southern aristocracy who has just lost her teaching position as a result of her promiscuity.

**Stella Kowalski** Blanche's sister who is married and lives in the French Quarter of New Orleans. She has forgotten her genteel upbringing in order to enjoy a more common marriage.

**Stanley Kowalski** A rather common working man whose main drive in life is sexual and who faces everything with brutal realism.

**Harold Mitchell (Mitch)** Stanley's friend who went through the war with him. Mitch is unmarried and has a dying mother for whom he feels a great devotion.

**Eunice and Steve Hubell** The neighbors who quarrel and who own the apartment in which Stella and Stanley live.

**Character Analysis: Blanche DuBois**

“Blanche DuBois appears in the first scene dressed in white, the symbol of purity and innocence. She is seen as a moth-like creature. She is delicate, refined, and sensitive. She is cultured and intelligent. She can't stand a vulgar remark or a vulgar action. She would never willingly hurt someone. She doesn't want realism; she prefers magic. She doesn't always tell the truth, but she tells "what ought to be truth." Yet she has lived a life that would make the most degenerate person seem timid. She is, in general, one of Williams' characters who do not belong in this world. And her type will always be at the mercy of the brutal, realistic world.

Early in her life, Blanche had married a young boy who had a softness and tenderness "which wasn't like a man's," even though he "wasn't the least bit effeminate looking." By unexpectedly entering a room, she found him in a compromising situation with an older man. They went that night to a dance where a polka was playing. In the middle of the dance, Blanche told her young husband that he disgusted her. This deliberate act of cruelty on Blanche's part caused her young husband to commit suicide. Earlier, her love had been like a "blinding light," and since that night Blanche has never had any light stronger than a dim candle. Blanche has always thought she failed her young lover when he most needed her. She felt also that she was cruel to him in a way that Stanley would like to be cruel to her. And Blanche's entire life has been affected by this early tragic event.

Immediately following this event, Blanche was subjected to a series of deaths in her family and the ultimate loss of the ancestral home. The deaths were ugly, slow, and tortuous. They illustrated the ugliness and brutality of life.

To escape from these brutalities and to escape from the lonely void created by her young husband's death, Blanche turned to alcohol and sexual promiscuity. The alcohol helped her to forget. When troubled, the dance tune that was playing when Allan committed suicide haunts her until she drinks enough so as to hear the shot which then signals the end of the music.

Blanche gives herself to men for other reasons. She feels that she had failed her young husband in some way. Therefore, she tries to alleviate her guilt by giving herself at random to other young men. And by sleeping with others, she is trying to fill the void left by Allan's death — "intimacies with strangers was all I seemed able to fill my empty heart with." And she was particularly drawn to very young men who would remind her of her young husband. During these years of promiscuity, Blanche has never been able to find anyone to fill the emptiness. Thus Blanche's imagined failure to her young husband and her constant encounter with the ugliness of death forced the delicate young girl to seek distraction by and forgetfulness through intimacies with strangers and through alcohol which could make the tune in her head stop.

But throughout all of these episodes, Blanche has still retained a degree of innocence and purity. She still plays the role of the ideal type of person she would like to be. She refuses to see herself as she is but instead creates the illusion of what *ought to be.*Thus, in her first encounters, she fails with Stanley, because she attempts to be what she thinks a lady *should*be rather than being frank, open, and honest as Stanley would have liked it.

Blanche's actions with Stanley are dictated by her basic nature. The woman must create an illusion. "After all, a woman's charm is fifty percent illusion." And if Blanche cannot function as a woman, then her life is invalid. She therefore tries to captivate Stanley by flirting with him and by using all of her womanly charms. She knows no other way to enter into her present surroundings. Likewise, she must change the apartment. She can't have the glaring, open light bulb. She must have subdued light. She must live in the quiet, half-lit world of charm and illusion. She does not want to see things clearly but wants all ugly truths covered over with the beauty of imagination and illusion.

But Blanche also realizes that she must attract men with her physical body. Thus, she does draw Mitch's attention by undressing in the light so that he can see the outline of her body.

When Blanche meets Mitch, she realizes that here is a strong harbor where she can rest. Here is the man who can give her a sense of belonging and who is also captivated by her girlish charms. She deceives him into thinking her prim and proper but in actuality, Blanche would like to *be*prim and proper. And as she later told Mitch: "inside, I never lied." Her essential nature and being have never been changed by her promiscuity. She gave of her body but not of her deeper self. To Mitch, she is ready to give her whole being.

Then Mitch forces her to admit her past life. With this revelation, Blanche is deprived of her chief attributes — that is, her illusions and her pretense. She is then forced to admit all of her past. After hearing her confessions, we see that Mitch aligns himself with the Stanley world. He cannot understand the reasons why Blanche had to give herself to so many people, and, if she did, he thinks that she should have no objections to sleeping with one more man. But Blanche's intimacies have always been with strangers. She cannot wantonly give herself to someone for whom she has an affection. Thus she forces Mitch to leave.

Later that same night when Stanley comes from the hospital, Blanche encounters the same type of brutality. Stanley rapes Blanche, assuming that she has slept with so many men in the past, one more would not matter. In actuality, Blanche's action in the first part of the play indicates that on first acquaintance, when Stanley was a stranger, she desired him or at least flirted with him. But Stanley was never able to understand the sensitivity behind Blanche's pretense. Even when Stella refers to Blanche as delicate, Stanley cries out in disbelief: "Some delicate piece she is." It is, then, Stanley's forced brutality which causes Blanche to crack up. The rape is Blanche's destruction as an individual. In all previous sexual encounters, Blanche had freely given of herself. But to be taken so cruelly and so brutally by a man who represents all qualities which Blanche found obnoxious caused her entire world to collapse.

Blanche's last remarks in the play seem to echo pathetically her plight and predicament in life. She goes with the doctor because he seems to be a gentleman and because he is a stranger. As she leaves, she says, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." Thus, Blanche's life ends in the hands of the strange doctor. She was too delicate, too sensitive, too refined, and too beautiful to live in the realistic world. Her illusions had no place in the Kowalski world and when the illusions were destroyed, Blanche was also destroyed.”

## Character Analysis: Stanley Kowalski

“We cannot deny the fact that Stanley Kowalski is a fascinating character. The usual reaction is to see him as a brute because of the way that he treats the delicate Blanche. Some will even go so far as to dislike this man intensely. But this dislike would stem from too much identification with Blanche.

Stanley Kowalski lives in a basic, fundamental world which allows for no subtleties and no refinements. He is the man who likes to lay his cards on the table. He can understand no relationship between man and woman except a sexual one, where he sees the man's role as giving and taking pleasure from this relationship. He possesses no quality that would not be considered manly in the most basic sense. By more sensitive people, he is seen as common, crude, and vulgar. Certainly, his frankness will allow for no deviation from the straightforward truth. His dress is loud and gaudy. He relishes in loud noises, and his voice rings out like a loud bellow.

To the over-sensitive person, such as Blanche, Stanley represents a holdover from the Stone Age. He is bestial and brutal and determined to destroy that which is not his. He is like the Stone Age savage bringing home the meat from the kill. He is animal-like and his actions are such. He eats like an animal and grunts his approval or disapproval. When aroused to anger, he strikes back by throwing things, like the radio. Or he breaks dishes or strikes his wife. He is the man of physical action.

Even the symbols connected with Stanley support his brutal, animal-like approach to life. In the first scene, he is seen bringing home the raw meat. His clothes are loud and gaudy. His language is rough and crude. His outside pleasures are bowling and poker. When he is losing at poker, he is unpleasant and demanding. When he is winning, he is happy as a little boy.

He is, then, "the gaudy seed-bearer," who takes pleasure in his masculinity. "Animal joy in his being is implicit," and he enjoys mainly those things that are his — his wife, his apartment, his liquor, "his car, his radio, everything that is his, that bears his emblem of the gaudy seed-bearer."

With the appearance of Blanche, Stanley feels an uncomfortable threat to those things that are his. Blanche becomes a threat to his way of life; she is a foreign element, a hostile force, a superior being whom he can't understand. She is a challenge and a threat. He feels most strongly that she is a threat to his marriage. Thus when the basic man, such as Stanley, feels threatened, he must strike back. It is a survival of the fittest.

Stanley first feels the threat when he finds out that Belle Reve has been lost. He does not care for Belle Reve as a bit of ancestral property, but, instead, he feels that a part of it is his. If his wife has been swindled, he has been swindled. He has lost property, something that belonged to him. He probes into the problem without tact or diplomacy. He goes straight to the truth without any shortcuts. His only concern is to discover whether he has been cheated. He does not concern himself with the feelings of Blanche. He wants only to force the issue to its completion.

Stanley feels the first threat to his marriage after the big fight he has with Stella after the poker game. He knows that this would not have occurred if Blanche had not been present. It is her presence which is causing the dissension between him and his wife. Then the following morning when he overhears himself being referred to as bestial, common, brutal, and a survivor of the Stone Age, he is justifiably enraged against Blanche. He resents her superior attitude and bides his time.

Throughout Blanche's stay at his house, he feels that she has drunk his liquor, eaten his food, used his house, but still has belittled him and has opposed him. She has never conceded to him his right to be the "king" in his own house. Thus, he must sit idly by and see his marriage and home destroyed, and himself belittled, or else he must strike back. His attack is slow and calculated. He begins to compile information about Blanche's past life. He must present her past life to his wife so that she can determine who is the superior person. When he has his information accumulated, he is convinced that however common he is, his life and his past are far superior to Blanche's. Now that he feels his superiority again, he begins to act. He feels that having proved how degenerate Blanche actually is, he is now justified in punishing her directly for all the indirect insults he has had to suffer from her. Thus he buys her the bus ticket back to Laurel and reveals her past to Mitch.

Consequently, when we approach the rape scene, we must understand that Stanley perceives Blanche as having made him endure too much. In his mind, she has never been sympathetic toward him, she has ridiculed him, and earlier she had even flirted with him but has never been his. When he finds out that she has slept so indiscriminately with so many men, he cannot understand why she should object to one more. Thus, he rapes her partly out of revenge, partly because one more man shouldn't make any difference, and finally, so that she will be his in the only way he fully understands. To the reader’s sensibilities, his actions are abhorrent.

Stanley, then, is the hard, brutal man who does not understand the refinements of life. He is controlled by natural instincts untouched by the advances of civilization. Thus, when something threatens him, he must strike back in order to preserve his own threatened existence. If someone gets destroyed, that is the price that must be paid. It is the survival of the fittest, and Stanley is the strongest.”

**For further analysis and materials-** <https://sg.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/70745/9/09_chapter%203.pdf>

https://www.csus.edu/indiv/s/santorar/engl190v/pref-notes-street.htm