



**TEACHER GUIDE**

**GRADES 9-12**

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

# **A Streetcar Named Desire**

Tennessee Williams



**READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT**

# A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams

## TEACHER GUIDE

**NOTE:**

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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## Skills and Strategies

### Thinking

Analysis, compare/contrast, brainstorming, research, critical thinking, evaluation, conflict

### Vocabulary

Target words, definitions, application, connotation, denotation

### Writing

Journal, poetry, screenplay, monologue, letter

### Listening/Speaking

Discussion, script performance, reports, monologue

### Comprehension

Cause/effect, predicting, inference, plot development, thematic development, conflict resolution

### Literary Elements

Metaphor, simile, allusion, personification, symbolism, foreshadowing, irony, characterization, setting, theme, genre, tone, mood, juxtaposition

### Across the Curriculum

Music—ballad, appropriate background selections; Art—collage, caricature, diorama

**Genre:** drama

**Setting:** New Orleans, late 1940s

**Themes:** reality vs. illusion, social status, mental illness, violence, desire, deception, male chauvinism, loneliness, guilt, love, family

**Conflict:** person vs. person (Stanley vs. Blanche), person vs. self (Blanche), person vs. society (decline of way of life)

**Tone:** realistic, ironic, cynical

**Date of First Production:** December 3, 1947

## Summary

Blanche DuBois arrives at the New Orleans apartment of her sister and brother-in-law, Stella and Stanley Kowalski, for an extended visit. Blanche has been dismissed from her teaching position in Laurel, Mississippi, because of immoral conduct. She has lost the family estate and has nowhere else to go. She exists in a world of self-deception, clinging to the illusion of her past beauty and the social status of the DuBois family. Conflict erupts between Blanche and Stanley, whose cruelty ultimately destroys her last chance at happiness. She has a mental breakdown after Stanley rapes her. Stella, torn between her love and need for Stanley and her loyalty to Blanche, will not allow herself to believe Blanche's story about the rape. Blanche is left with no one to defend her. As the play draws to a close, a doctor and nurse lead Blanche away to a mental hospital.

## About the Playwright

**Personal:** Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. His father, Cornelius, was a shoe salesman who came from a prestigious Tennessee family. Edwina, his mother, was the daughter of a minister. The family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis, Missouri, in 1918. He had an older sister, Rose, and a younger brother, Walter. He changed his name to "Tennessee" after moving to New Orleans after his college graduation in 1938. Williams died February 24, 1983, at the Hotel Elysee in New York City.

**Education:** In 1929, Williams began attending the University of Missouri but dropped out two years later and took a job with a shoe company. He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1938.

**Career:** Williams began writing when he was a teenager and, at the age of 16, won \$5 for an essay, "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?," which was published in *Smart Set*, a leading literary magazine of that era. His story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris" was published a year later in the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*. He wrote his first play, *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* in 1937. Other plays followed, and in 1944 his play *The Glass Menagerie* won the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award as the best play of the season and established his reputation as a playwright. He followed this success with *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947. Other well-known works include *Summer and Smoke* (1948), *The Rose Tattoo* (1950), *Camino Real* (1955), *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Orpheus Descending* (1957), *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958), *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959), and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961). In addition to 30 full-length plays, Williams produced two volumes of poetry;

# Conflict

The **conflict** of a story is the struggle between two people or two forces. There are three main types of conflict: person vs. person, person vs. nature or society, and person vs. self.

Character:

Conflict	Resolution

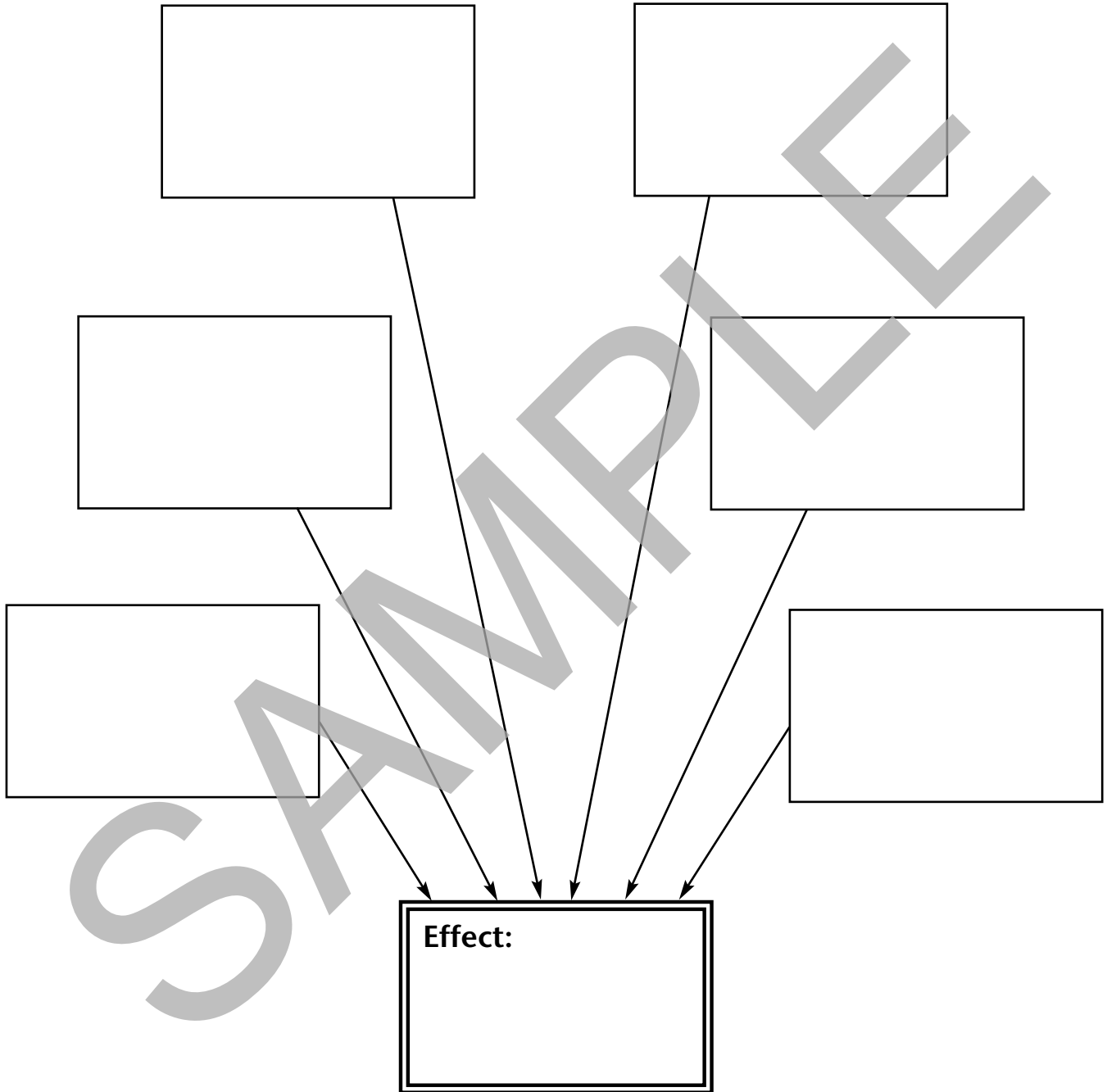
Character:

Conflict	Resolution

Character:

Conflict	Resolution

# Cause/Effect Map



**Suggested Teaching Strategy:** Plays are written to be acted onstage, not read silently. Students will gain a deeper appreciation for *A Streetcar Named Desire* if they read it aloud. By assigning sections a day in advance, students have a chance to go over their lines and will feel more comfortable reading the play aloud in class. Because the setting is vital to the students' understanding of the drama, have a student read aloud the directions for each scene.

## Scene One, pp. 13–31

Blanche DuBois arrives for an indefinite stay with her sister, Stella, and brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche attributes her visit to a nervous condition that forced her to take a leave of absence from her job as a schoolteacher in Laurel, Mississippi. She reveals that she has lost the family estate, Belle Reve.

Vocabulary	
raffish (13)	
attenuates (13)	
cosmopolitan (13)	
incongruous (15)	
spasmodic (18)	
hypocritical (19)	
dubiously (22)	
highbrow (23)	
heterogeneous (23)	
implicit (29)	

### Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the setting, noting the name of the street and the significance of the two women who are sitting on the steps of the building. Observe the stage directions about the “Blue Piano” and examine the mood the setting evokes (p. 13). *(The Kowalskis live in a tiny flat in New Orleans, a city of economic and cultural diversity. This section of the city is poor but charming, and people of different races and backgrounds live here harmoniously, e.g., the friendship between the two women, one white and one black. Literally, Elysian Fields is the name of the street where Stella and Stanley live. Figuratively, the term is a mythological reference to Elysium, the section of the underworld where souls must reside before returning to Earth. New Orleans is Blanche’s “Elysium,” where she must live until she can find a new life. The Blue Piano appears in introductory stage directions and just before the last line in the play;*

*the word “blue” denotes sadness and loneliness. Throughout the play, the sound of the piano materializes to express a change in the mood of the play, especially when Blanche’s emotions are most fragile. p. 13)*

2. Discuss the meaning of “male chauvinist.” Analyze whether or not Stanley Kowalski fits this definition. Note the metaphor describing him as a “richly feathered male bird among hens” (p. 29). *(A male chauvinist has excessive enthusiasm for his sex, race, or group. Stanley makes the living and expects Stella to serve him, gratify his desires, and never question his actions. Stanley’s coarse speech and blunt behavior become evident in Scene One, where he is described as displaying “animal joy...implicit in all his movements and attitudes” [p. 29]. As the “richly feathered male bird...” his pride in his sexual prowess forms the basis of his relationships. He vigorously interacts with men, loves liquor and food, and enjoys his possessions. pp. 13–14, 23–25, 29)*
3. Examine the information about Stella and analyze her relationship with Stanley. *(In contrast to Stanley, Stella is gentle and cultured, revealing her refined ancestry. Her first onstage interaction with him sets the tone of their relationship. Stanley tosses a package of bloody meat to Stella, symbolic of a “cave man” returning from the “hunt.” She protests but laughs breathlessly after catching it. She adores Stanley, is proud of his accomplishments, and accepts him as he is. Her strong sexual attraction to him supersedes his crudeness and brutality. pp. 13–14, throughout play)*
4. Discuss the information about Blanche, including her physical appearance and the reason she gives for her visit. Note the inference about her drinking. *(She is “delicately beautiful” and seems out of place in the neighborhood. When she arrives, she is dressed all in white, symbolizing the French meaning of her name [white] and the purity she attempts to portray. Her*

*uncertain manner and white clothes suggest a moth [p. 15], i.e., an insect that changes in form as it develops. Blanche's journey from Belle Reve [her cocoon] to Elysian Fields is symbolic of her metamorphosis, i.e. from a protected Southern belle to a "moth" who has "flown away" and become a creature who seeks darkness to cover her age, alcoholism, and sexual promiscuity. pp. 15–19)*

5. Analyze Blanche's reaction to the setting and contrast the area with the family estate, Belle Reve. Note her reference to the "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" (p. 20). *(She is appalled at Stella's decline of social status, as exemplified by her apartment in a poor section of the city. Belle Reve is a plantation in Laurel, Mississippi, typifying Blanche and Stella's upbringing as members of an elite society. The "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir" is a line from Edgar Allan Poe's poem, "Ulalume," in which the narrator roams with his Soul through an imaginary world where he finds the tomb of his lover, Ulalume. Blanche's comparison implies that she views Stella's flat as a tomb and the neighborhood as the surrounding forest. pp. 15–23)*
6. Analyze the symbolism of Blanche's travels on the two streetcars, Desire and Cemeteries, and her arrival at Elysian Fields (p. 15). *(See "Symbolism" in the Background Information on page 5 of this guide for a more complete explanation. The terms describe Blanche's "journey," literally and figuratively. The two streetcars, Desire and Cemeteries [implying death] bring her to New Orleans. She has now arrived at Elysian Fields, the literal street where Stella and Stanley live. Figuratively, Blanche hopes to find "new life" in this third step of her journey. As the plot unfolds, however, Elysian Fields becomes just another stop in her search for redemption. Ultimately, Desire [Stanley's] sends her to a mental hospital, i.e., Cemeteries or Death.)*
7. Analyze the interaction between Blanche and Stella. Note what their dialogue suggests about their relationship. *(They initially seem delighted to see each other. Blanche calls Stella by the actual meaning of her name, "Star," suggesting that she views Stella as the bright spot in her dreary world. Blanche is the more talkative of the two, indicating her role as the older sister and the spokesperson throughout their lives. Stella tries to make Blanche feel welcome but tells her that Stanley and his friends are different and cautions her not to compare Stanley with men from Laurel. She has not told Stanley about Blanche's visit. Blanche criticizes Stella's posture and her appearance, questions her about the tiny flat, and reproaches her for abandoning Belle Reve. Her attitude reflects envy of Stella's happiness and bitterness over being the one who stayed and tried to save the plantation. Blanche taunts Stella about being in bed with her "Polack" while Belle Reve was failing. pp. 18–29)*
8. Examine indications that Blanche is deceptive. What hidden truths will eventually be revealed? *(She pretends to find the liquor when, in reality, she has already had a drink from that bottle, says that one drink is her limit, and tells Stanley she rarely touches liquor. Her excuse for leaving her teaching job later proves to be a lie. She says that her reason for not going to a hotel is to be near Stella, but she actually has no money. Answers will vary. pp. 18–29)*
9. Discuss what Blanche reveals about Belle Reve and Stella's reaction, noting the importance of the "blue piano" in the stage directions. *(Blanche relates her tale of the loss of Belle Reve, telling Stella that she fought, bled, and almost died for it. During this discourse, the "blue piano" grows louder, symbolizing Blanche's emotional upheaval. Blanche is distraught and fearful of Stella's reaction and subtly blames her for leaving. She vividly portrays the deaths of their father, mother, and other relatives. While Stella returned only for the funerals, Blanche lived through the trauma of death as they struggled to breathe and begged her not to let them go. Blanche tried to save the estate, but the illnesses and burials of family members depleted the income from the plantation, and Blanche's salary could not cover the expenses. Stella is shocked and begins to cry. pp. 25–27)*



10. Examine the first meeting between Blanche and Stanley and analyze the importance of the stage directions concerning the polka (p. 31). (*Blanche hides when she hears Stanley and the other men coming in, but he sees her when he comes into the bedroom. Their initial meeting is friendly but guarded. They discuss her teaching, and he discovers that her husband died when he was quite young. The polka music rises when Stanley asks about Blanche's marriage, symbolizing Blanche's association of this type of music with her husband. She becomes ill while talking about him, foreshadowing a revelation of the tragedy of his death. pp. 29–31*)
11. **Prediction:** What will Blanche reveal about her marriage?

### Supplementary Activities

1. Based on the personification of Death as the “Grim Reaper” (p. 27), write a paragraph or a poem retelling Blanche’s discourse on death from the Grim Reaper’s point of view.
2. Write a journal entry in which Stella reveals her emotions about Blanche’s arrival.

### Scenes Two–Three, pp. 32–61

Conflict erupts between Stanley and Blanche over the loss of Belle Reve. Blanche reveals her despair over the death of her young husband years earlier. Blanche meets Mitch when he arrives for a poker game. Stella leaves after Stanley beats her but returns when he begs for her.

Vocabulary	
	ominously (33)
	judicial (41)
	absconding (41)
	antiquity (41)
	improvident (43)
	fornications (43)
	kibitz (48)
	indolently (51)
	portieres (57)
	diffidently (61)

### Discussion Questions

1. Examine the significance of the opening dialogue between Stanley and Stella. (*This scene portrays Stella's attempts to mediate between Stanley and Blanche. Stella tells Stanley about the loss of Belle Reve but tries to protect Blanche from his accusations about mishandling the funds. She cautions him that Blanche is emotionally fragile and assures him that she would never swindle anyone. Stanley's anger and resentment toward Blanche and his possessiveness of Stella are evident when he demands his “rights” under the Napoleonic code. During their conversation, however, Blanche bathes, plays, and sings, oblivious to the controversy that surrounds her. pp. 32–35*)
2. Examine the importance of Blanche’s trunk. (*Stanley angrily pulls open the trunk and jerks out Blanche's things. He believes she has spent the estate money on expensive clothing and jewelry and vows to have them appraised. This scene reveals the conflict that is developing between Stanley and Stella over Blanche's presence in their small apartment and foreshadows the escalation of this tension. pp. 35–36, 41*)
3. Assess the importance of the interaction between Blanche and Stanley when she emerges from her bath. Note the color of her bathrobe. What does this scene foreshadow? (*Blanche appears dressed in a red satin robe, symbolizing her passion, contrasting with the white [for purity] she wears when she first comes to the apartment. This scene foreshadows the revelation of Blanche's sexuality and the history of her promiscuous past. After discovering that Stella is outside, she openly flirts with Stanley, asking him to button her dress, having a cigarette with him, and fishing for a compliment from him. She flatters him and then sends Stella on an errand so the two can be alone. She assures him that she understands him and is ready to answer his questions. She attempts to lighten the mood by playfully and seductively spraying him with perfume. Answers will vary. pp. 37–41*)