



Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Tennessee Williams's

A Streetcar Named Desire

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Edited by

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *A Streetcar Named Desire*

OPENING ON DEC. 3, 1947, *A Streetcar Named Desire* secured Tennessee Williams's place in the pantheon of American playwrights. With its raw depiction of alcoholism, sexuality—including an offstage rape—and explosive human emotion, the play shocked and thrilled critics and audiences alike. The drama won for Williams the first of his two Pulitzer Prizes.

Set in New Orleans, where Williams lived for a time, *A Streetcar Named Desire* tells the story of the colossal and ultimately disastrous culture clash between Blanche DuBois, a fragile aging Southern belle, prone to drink and mendacity, and Stanley Kowalski, her brutally masculine, blue-collar brother-in-law. Stella Kowalski, sister to Blanche and wife to Stanley, forms the third point of this human Bermuda triangle.

Elia Kazan, an award-winner producer and director of both films and stage play, and a successful playwright and novelist, directed the Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, as well as the 1951 film version. The drama introduced audiences to the raw power of a 23-year-old actor named Marlon Brando and starred a young Jessica Tandy in the stage production.

In later years, Williams confirmed that when he wrote the play, he intended for Blanche to be the more sympathetic character, a relic of the South's past, destroyed by the barbaric Stanley. However, audiences thrilled to Brando, whose performance overpowered his costars. According to an Internet Movie Database biography of Brando, Kazan feared the audience was becoming too enamored of Brando and suggested toning down the part, lest the actor's power undermine the audience's sympathy for Blanche. Williams, who also was enthralled with Brando, was not worried and permitted the actor to exercise his full range of power.

As with many of Williams's works, *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains overt and subtle autobiographical elements. Williams, who was openly homosexual, struggled for much of his life with alcoholism and depression, much like his protagonist, Blanche.

The movie garnered twelve Academy Award nominations and won four Oscars for best actress (Vivian Leigh), best supporting actress (Kim Hunter), best supporting actor (Karl Malden) and best art direction. Ironically, Brando, who remains the actor most identified with *Streetcar*, and director Kazan, the person most responsible for bringing Williams's work to life, were nominated for Oscars but did not win.

Formalist Approach Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is often dismissed as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michaelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Analyzing the Repetitive Use of Musical Themes

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Formalist Activity One Questions: Varsouviana, The Blue Piano, and Other Music and Sounds.
2. Divide the class into three groups or a number of groups divisible by three (NOTE: as each group will be examining the entire play, you might want to leave the groups large enough to make the task manageable).
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) either the Varsouviana, the Blue Piano, or other music and sounds.
4. Have each group examine the play and answer the questions on the handouts that pertain to their assigned topic.
5. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
6. As a class, discuss the following questions:
 - Recognizing that the experiences of *reading* a play and *viewing* a play are very different, how do Williams's stage directions pertaining to music and sound effects contribute to (or detract from) your understanding of the play? Your *appreciation* of the play?
 - How does the music replace what would be narration in a novel? Specifically, how does the playwright use the Blue Piano music and the Varsouviana to communicate emotions and transitions?
 - How important are the music and sound effects to your understanding of the plot? The characters?
 - What effect do the music and sound effects attempt to create?

Feminist Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Analyzing the Portrayal of Women as Dependent Upon Men

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: *A Streetcar Named Desire: Activity One Selected Passages and Questions*. You may want to distribute the handout in advance and ask students to read the assigned passages before class to provide more time for discussion.
2. Divide the students into two groups or a number of smaller groups divisible by two.
3. Ask each group to read the assigned passages before answering the questions. The groups will read the same passages before answering different questions.
4. Reconvene the class and ask a representative of each group to present its answers.
5. As a class, explore and discuss the following final questions.
 - What is the playwright's attitude toward women? How does he communicate this attitude?
 - How are Blanche and Stella alike in their responses toward men? How are they different?

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *A Streetcar Named Desire*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.
- According to psychoanalytic theory, there are three parts to the subconscious, which is the largest part of the human personality.

Activity One

Discerning the Relationship Between the Playwright and his Protagonist

1. Copy and distribute the handouts: Tennessee Williams Biography and *A Streetcar Named Desire*: Psychoanalytic Activity One: Moderator's Questions
2. Review the explanation of the Psychoanalytic Theory, second view, with the entire class if you have not already done so.
3. Divide the class into an even number of teams and assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following positions:
 - **Team A:** Blanche DuBois expresses the viewpoints of the playwright and exhibits his strengths and weaknesses.
 - **Team B:** Blanche DuBois is a fictional and symbolic character, inspired by the playwright's mother and sister.
4. Have each team examine the Moderator's Questions and then review the play to construct an answer to each question that supports their assigned position.
5. Have each team list any additional support, not necessarily revealed by answering the moderator's questions, that supports its position.
6. Reconvene the class.
7. Use the Moderator's Questions to frame the debate. The instructor may pose the questions or choose student moderators to do so. The moderator(s) should instruct the debaters to cite specific examples from the play to support their points. The moderator also should feel free to introduce follow-up questions of his or her own.
8. After the debate, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each argument.

NOTE: Although this activity is framed as a "debate," students do not need to agree with one another or even come to consensus. The point is for them to consider both positions and examine the textual and biographical support for each.