

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams

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A Streetcar Named Desire

Note to Teacher

A Streetcar Named Desire contains adult themes and potentially controversial elements. You may want to prepare students for these subjects before they begin reading the play. Alternatively, you may decide to discuss the topics as they come up in the course of the reading. Controversial elements include: sexuality, alcoholism, violence, domestic abuse, rape, and suicide.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Notes

Tennessee Williams followed the 1945 production of his first play, *The Glass Menagerie*, with the 1947 production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. With these two plays, Williams secured his place in the American theater. Indeed, there are critics who say that Williams's work never again equaled these two early masterpieces.

Students who are familiar with *The Glass Menagerie* may note some themes and concepts in this play that resemble those of the earlier play. For example, Blanche's illusions are similar in some aspects to Amanda's illusions. In fact, the concepts of illusion as deception and illusion as an approach to reality are obvious in both plays. On the other hand, much is different in the plays. Most notably, the staging and the moods of both plays have little in common. Whereas *The Glass Menagerie*, with its bittersweet sadness, is seen through the hazy filter of memory, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is more like a slice of life seen in the harsh light of reality.

All references come from the Signet edition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, copyright 1986.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the following themes and/or major concepts that appear in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:
 - loneliness and our feeble attempts to overcome it
 - illusion as an attempt to deceive and illusion as an approach to reality
 - sexuality as a primitive, powerful force capable of creating or destroying life
 - the clash of the primitive and brutish with the civilized, the rational, and the cultured
 - the idea that one cannot escape one's past
 - the relationship between sex and death and/or desire and destruction
 - loss of innocence
2. identify and point out the significance of some of the play's symbols, including the following:
 - the two streetcars, *Desire* and *Cemeteries*
 - Stella's neighborhood, *Elysian Fields*
 - the paper lantern over the naked light bulb
 - the Varsouviana polka
3. identify the following motifs, and point out how they support some of the play's themes and/or major concepts:
 - washing and bathing
 - alcohol and drunkenness
 - light and shadows
 - jungle imagery
4. present an argument demonstrating that Blanche is a tragic hero.
5. write an essay supporting the argument that Stanley and Blanche represent two cultures or two parts of the human race, and discuss the conflict between the two.
6. explain the behaviors, beliefs, and motivations of the following characters:
 - Blanche
 - Stella
 - Stanley
 - Mitch

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Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. As the play opens, Blanche has just arrived at Stella's neighborhood after having taken two streetcars, one named *Desire* and another called *Cemeteries*. Explain the symbolic significance of these two streetcars. What do they represent, and how do they emphasize some of the play's major concepts and/or themes?
2. Point out incidents in the play where desire and/or death are mentioned or suggested. Discuss how Williams synthesizes the two concepts and brings them together as one in the character of Blanche.
3. Tragic heroes' lives usually end in defeat or death because of a flaw in their character. As the tragedy unfolds, there is a sense of inevitability; that is, because of a "tragic flaw," there seems to be nothing the hero can do to avoid the approaching disaster. Using this as your criterion, state why Blanche fits the description of a tragic hero.
4. Point out examples from the text that suggest that Blanche suffers from a deep sense of loneliness. Describe the steps she takes, imprudent and prudent, to overcome this loneliness.
5. Discuss the differing views expressed by Stanley and Blanche regarding Blanche's illusions. How does Stanley view them? How does Blanche view them?
6. By referring to incidents and comments in the play, prove the assertion that sexuality is a primitive, powerful force capable of creating or destroying life.
7. State some of the ways in which Blanche represents the civilized, rational aspect of life and Stanley represents the primitive, brutish aspect of life.
8. It is easy to see Stanley as the villain in this play, but is there any justification for his actions? Provide examples to support your opinion.
9. Describe the type of relationship that Stanley and Stella have. What is it based upon? Considering the ending of the play, do you think they will remain together? Give reasons for your opinion.
10. Elysian Fields is the name of the community where Stanley and Stella live. It is also an allusion: In Greek mythology, Elysian Fields is paradise, the place where heroes go after death. Why does Williams give this name to the area where the Kowalskis live?
11. The DuBois plantation was named Belle Reve, which translates to "Beautiful Dream." Given Blanche's character, why is that a particularly apt name for her home?

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Scene I

Vocabulary

attenuates – weakens in strength, force, or degree
auxiliary – secondary, in addition to
dubiously – with doubt or uncertainty
fluency – ease, smoothness, eloquence
heterogeneous – varied, diverse; mixed
implicit – contained, embedded, inherent
incongruous – not compatible; out of place
infatuated – obsessed, passionate
lyricism – an emotional or expressive quality
radiant – bright; glowing
raffish – having a carefree or unconventional style
redolences – fragrances
reproach – to scold or criticize
spasmodic – fitful; occurring in a sudden burst
unrefined – crude, unsophisticated
valise – a suitcase
vivacity – liveliness, cheerfulness

1. Describe the setting of the play.

2. From her very first appearance, how is Blanche’s vulnerability expressed?

Scene III

Vocabulary

diffidently – shyly, timidly
dissonant – jarring; harsh
feigned – artificial; not real or sincere
gallantry – good manners; gentlemanly behavior
indolently – lazily
kibitz – to watch and make comments on
lurid – strikingly bright and garish
nocturnal – of the night
portieres – curtains that are hung across a doorway
reverence – respect
sanctuary – a shelter; a safe place
whelp – a young dog

1. How would you describe the general mood of the poker game? What is Stanley's demeanor during the game?

2. Why does Mitch say he has to leave?

3. Why is Blanche interested in Mitch? How does Mitch seem to feel about her?

4. During the scene in which Mitch shows Blanche the inscription on his cigarette case, Williams references a sonnet by a poet that the audience will most likely recognize. What is the inscription on the cigarette case? Who is the poet? What literary term does this passage demonstrate?

Scene VII

Vocabulary

blithely – in a merry or carefree way
contemptible – disgraceful, despicable
contrapuntally – relating to two or more voices speaking at the same time
ordinance – a rule or law
saccharine – overly sweet

1. As the scene begins, Blanche is taking yet another one of her frequent baths. Why does she bathe so much? What seems to be symbolic about her bathing?

2. Stanley has found out several things about Blanche. What is “Lie Number One,” according to him?

3. What is “Lie Number Two”? How does this information fit with Blanche’s kissing the young man who had come to the door? What might these incidents explain about Blanche?
