Themes

The play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is about Blanche DuBois; therefore, the main theme of the drama concerns her directly. In Blanche is seen the tragedy of an individual caught between two worlds - the world of the past and the world of the present - unwilling to let go of the past and unable, because of her character, to come to any sort of terms with the present. The final result is her destruction. This process began long before her clash with Stanley Kowalski. It started with the death of her young husband, a weak and "perverted" boy who committed suicide when she taunted him with her disgust at the discovery of his perversion. In retrospect, she knows that he was the only man she had ever loved, and from this early catastrophe evolves her promiscuity. She is lonely and frightened, and she attempts to fight this condition with sex. Desire fills the emptiness when there is no love and desire blocks the inexorable movement of death, which has already wasted and decayed Blanche's ancestral home Belle Reve.

For Blanche, Belle Reve was the remaining symbol of a life and tradition that she knows in her heart have vanished, yet to which she clings with a desperate tenacity. She is dated. Her speech, manners and habit are foolishly passe, but still she cannot abandon this sense of herself as someone special, as a "lady" in the grand tradition. She knows she is an anachronism in an alien world and yet she will not compromise. She cannot and will not surrender the dream she has of herself, and even though she wants desperately not to be lonely, it is precisely the clinging to this dream, the airs, mannerisms and sense of herself, which alienate her further. She is trapped in a terrifying contradiction. Her need to be special, to adhere to codes and a tradition no longer valid, creates an intense isolation, while simultaneously her desire not to be alone, to be loved, threatens to break through this isolation. It not only threatens, but does break through. Betrayed by love once in her life, she nevertheless seeks it in the effort to fill the lonely void; thus, her promiscuity. But to adhere to her tradition and her sense of herself as a lady, she cannot face this sensual part of herself. She associates it with the animalism of Stanley's love making and terms it brutal desire. She feels guilt and a sense of sin when she does surrender to it, and yet she does, out of intense loneliness. By viewing sensuality as brutal desire she is able to disassociate it from what she feels is her true self, but only at the price of an intense inner conflict. Since she cannot integrate these conflicting elements of desire and gentility, she tries to reject the one - desire - and live solely by the other. Desperately seeking a haven she looks increasingly to fantasy. Taking refuge in tinsel, fine clothes, and rhinestones, and the illusion that a beau is available whenever she wants him, she seeks tenderness and beauty in a world of her own making.

Blanche is not really lost in **illusions**; rather she uses them as camouflage. She wears them as she wears her clothes and her glass necklaces, in protection from a reality which she finds horrifying. One must not think of Blanche as just a fragile, delicate blossom. There is a fierce desire in her for life at any cost. Her masquerade may be a defence against a brutal world, but it is a clawing, desperate defence. Tragically for Blanche, it is a losing defence. Blanche simply has too many strikes

against her. Her past, the lies she must tell to conceal it, and her concept of herself as a Southern lady, all conspire to destroy her when Stanley Kowalski sets himself to the task of exposing her.

Desire And Fate

The theme that dominates the play is contained in its arresting and memorable title. There really was a streetcar in New Orleans that carried the word "Desire" as its destination, and another that went to "Cemeteries". When Tennessee Williams was living in New Orleans in 1946, and was working on A Streetcar Named Desire he was so struck by the names of these two streetcars that he mentioned them in an essay he wrote at the time: "Their indiscourageable progress up and down Royal Street struck me as having some symbolic bearing of a broad nature on the life in the Vieux Carré - and everywhere else for that matter" (quoted in *The Kindness of Strangers: The Life of Tennessee Williams* by Donald Spoto, p.129).

A streetcar running unswervingly along the rails to its destination could be seen as a symbol of the inexorability of fate. To Tennessee Williams, however, the streetcar's destination, "Desire", spoke of more than an undefined force of fate. The force that drives Blanche to her destruction is desire, sexual passion. In Scene 4 when the sisters speak of sexual desire, Blanche uses the same image of a streetcar for it, "that rattle-trap street-car", and Stella ripostes, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car? They both know what they are talking about - and so did the playwright himself.

Throughout his life Tennessee Williams was driven from one sexual encounter to another, exactly like Blanche, and like Blanche he too seemed incapable of committing himself to a permanent relationship, in his case homosexual. When Blanche longs for Mitch to marry her, she is not seeking a permanent sexual relationship but the material security of a home of her own ("The poor man's Paradise - is a little peace" - Scene 9).

To be driven by desire, Tennessee Williams seems to be saying, is self-destructive, yet the victims of an overpowering passion are carried along helplessly, unable to escape. Blanche's fate is foreordained, and the playwright stresses this in the streetcar image. We might say that Stella too is driven by the same force, having abandoned herself to her passionate love for Stanley. What her final destination might be is not shown - except perhaps in Eunice?

There is another image of fate in the play, one with a very respectable literary lineage. In Scenes 4, 6 and 10 Tennessee Williams introduces a roaring locomotive at a dramatic moment (Blanche's condemnation of Stanley, her description of her husband's death; just before the rape), but the random introduction of the locomotive as a symbol of fate does not carry here the impact of the streetcar metaphor, though it had been used with considerable effect by other writers (Leo Tolstoy in *Anna Karenina*, 1875-7, Emile Zola in *La Bete Humaine*, 1890).

It may be that Tennessee Williams had originally intended the locomotive as the *leitmotiv* of his play, but was so struck by the irony of a lurching streetcar with the grand name "Desire" that he abandoned his original plan.

Death

The streetcar to "Desire" was linked in Tennessee Williams's mind with another going to "Cemeteries". This fortuitous reminder of the likely eventual outcome of a life driven by passion served to reinforce the theme of fatal desire.

Images of death recur throughout the play. Blanche's descriptions of the deaths at Belle Reve, though oblique, contain enough gruesome detail to make their impact felt - the dying woman so swollen by disease that her body could not be fitted into a coffin, but had to be "burned like rubbish" (Scene 1); the "blood-stained pillow-slips" which Blanche had to change because there were no longer any servants to do it (Scene 9). Blanche's dream of being "buried at sea sewn up in a clean white sack" (Scene 11) is equally chilling, perhaps because of her emphasis on a clean sack.

One significant death that cannot be forgotten throughout the play, is the suicide of Blanche's young husband. Its own polka music reminds us insistently of the tragedy. It recurs, the music in Blanche's mind growing louder until it stops with the fatal shot. The shock of the discovery of her husband's homosexuality and her guilt at his subsequent suicide after she had blurted out her disgust, partly accounts for her mental instability, her promiscuity and her alcoholism, the three contributory factors in her tragedy.

Tennessee Williams himself was obsessed with death, perhaps because of a nearly fatal illness in childhood. In later years his terror of disease, especially of cancer, and of dying took the form of a dangerous obsessive hypochondria. The reminders of death throughout the play, which echo his own private terrors, culminate in the symbolic figure of the Mexican seller of flowers for the dead (Scene 9). This figure plays a similar part to the grotesque shadows surrounding Blanche in Scene 10. The realism of the earlier scenes is abandoned in order to give these symbolic figures the prominence that Tennessee Williams gave them in his own mind.

Loneliness

Loneliness comes from an unfulfilled desire to be loved and needed. Blanche was lonely when she arrived at Elysian Fields, the home of Stanley and Stella Kowalski. She recognised this same condition in Mitch and thereby became attracted to him. Both are individuals who desperately attempt to achieve some kind of meaningful human communication and contact, but because of their respective characters and the situation in which they find themselves, are unable to succeed. Blanche's greatest dilemma is finding someone to take the place of the husband whom she loved and inadvertently lost. This search for love, for the need to fill the void within her, is the essential reason for her promiscuity. Mitch, too, is a victim of loneliness. Although bound to his aged mother, he is restless and unsatisfied. He feels incomplete and longs for someone who will give him a sense of wholeness. He, like

Blanche, had loved once and lost. In the mutual need of Blanche and Mitch, and in their inability to fulfil this need, they beautifully and poignantly express the theme of loneliness.

Madness

Blanche's fear of madness is first hinted at in Scene 1 ("I can't be alone! Because - as you must have noticed - I'm - not very well..."). Never stable even as a girl, she was shattered by her husband's suicide and the circumstances surrounding it. Later the harrowing deaths at Belle Reve with which she evidently had to cope on her own, also took their toll. By this time she had begun her descent into promiscuity and alcoholism, and in order to blot out the ugliness of her life she created her fantasy world of adoring respectful admirers, of romantic songs and gay parties.

She is never entirely successful at this, as the memories of her husband's suicide remain persistently alive in her mind, always accompanied by the polka music. Drink is her solace on these occasions as she waits for the sound of the shot that signals the end of the nightmare. It seems that she has learned to live with this, as she remarks to Mitch in a matter-of-fact way, "There now, the shot! It always stops after that!" (Scene 9).

She has reached an accommodation with the nightmares in her mind, but she cannot bear the intrusion of ugly reality into her make-believe world. Stanley's revelations of her past, Mitch's rejection of her as "not clean enough" and his clumsy attempt at raping her, and finally her rape by Stanley on the night when her sister is giving birth to his child - all these break her and her mind gives way. She retreats into her make-believe world, making her committal to an institution inevitable.

Like the other major themes of the play - desire and fate, and death - madness too was Tennessee Williams's obsession. His sister Rose's strange behaviour which had long been a source of anxiety to her parents, later took the form of violent sexual fantasies and accusations against her father. Her parents had her committed to an institution. Following the medical practice of the time a pre-frontal lobotomy was carried out, and Rose calmed down, certainly, but was left with no memories, no mind. Not only did Tennessee Williams feel guilty for not having saved Rose from all this, but he now feared for his own sanity because the mental illness that afflicted Rose might be hereditary. He certainly did have a breakdown of sorts in his early twenties.

All these major themes of *A Streetcar Named Desire* reflected Williams's own private terrors which gave the edge to his writing. He brought empathy to the character of Blanche and the circumstances of her collapse.

Illusion and Reality

Williams's play is a powerful declaration of the importance of illusion or fantasy as a mechanism by which all humans cope with their reality. Blanche's idealism of

chivalry, kindness and gentility enable her to press on with a life that is shattered and harsh. It is ironic that it is Blanche who, in the initial stages tells Mitch that, 'I'm very adaptable - to circumstances' and, in the moments before the rape scene, she falsely reports to Stanley that she told Mitch that 'We have to be realistic about such things...'. She seeks out tenderness in a world of depravity and sexual emptiness. Blanche asserts, quite correctly, that she tells what 'ought to be the truth' even though it is not and this 'magic' is what gives her life meaning and focus. When she finally retreats into that fantasy she is hauled away as insane but, in truth, she is happier in her insanity than her reality.

Blanche is not the only character who would rather a life of illusion than reality. Stanley refuses her description of him as a 'brute' and an 'ape' yet they are accurate. His illusion is that he is in control, yet he is merely a bully, using physical force to obtain his power. There is no superiority in him but he claims himself 'king around here' and will take whatever means needed to eradicate all enemies to that ideal. Stanley is cruel and cunning and deludes others into seeing that cruelty as honourable, 'I'd have that on my conscience the rest of my life if I knew all that stuff and let my best friend get caught' and necessary where, in truth, destroying Blanche merely feeds his own overgrown ego. He denies the reality of his raping his wife's sister, asserting, instead, that she is mad.

Stella makes a clear choice between reality and fantasy because 'I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley'. Indeed, this echoes her willingness to overlook Stanley's physical abuse, excusing it as nothing I as serious as you seem to take it. In the first place, when men are drinking and playing poker anything can happen. It's a powder keg. He didn't know what he was doing . . . . He was as good as a lamb when I came back and he's really very, very ashamed of himself'. She patronisingly explains to Blanche that 'there are things that happen between a man and a woman that make everything else seem unimportant' .

Blanche's fantasies give Mitch a glimpse of an elevated existence and it is appealing to both of them. He resents the intrusion of reality, leaving him sobbing at his loss, 'You! You done this, all o' your God damn interfering with things you —.' Eunice glosses over every socially destructive behaviour - preferring to see pragmatism as more important than truth or rightness, reassuring Stella that 'you done the right thing, the only thing you could do. She couldn't stay here; there wasn't no other place for her to go'.

Memory

The repetition of the music of the Varsouviana and the subsequent gunshot are the aural reminders to Blanche and to the audience of the source of this profound, guilt-causing experience: Allan's suicide. Clearly, Blanche loved Allan. Stella refers to her as having 'worshipped the ground he walked on! Adored him and thought him almost too kind to be human!'. Blanche's dedication to the boy began at sixteen and she describes the discovery of love as turning 'a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow'. Blanche, in her confession to Mitch, articulates her limitations as a young woman who failed the man she loved because she didn't

know what it was he needed. Allan's homosexuality would have been, as Williams himself understood, a terrible burden. It is the last moment of her confession that makes clear why Blanche feels responsible for his death. Not because of her reaction to finding him making love to another man but because of her comment to him on the dance floor: 'You disgust me' and her rejection of him as a person was too much for him to bear and he shot the back out of his head. She admits her part in his death early in the play, 'I hurt him the way that you would like to hurt me'. Her guilt from that time on has crippled her and it remains with her fourteen years later as a potent force. Her ritual bathing is an attempt to cleanse herself of the stain of Allan's death, albeit unsuccessfully.

In truth, Blanche's life stopped the moment Allan Grey died. While time, real time, has moved on, for Blanche the days have gone and she has aged but mentally she is still trapped in the moment of Allan's death. Stella has grown up, moved away, got married and is pregnant - all signs of life progressing. Stanley went to the war to fight, returned, assumed a job, married Stella and is going to be a father - again, real life, real time. But Blanche sees herself as she always has and is caught in that moment of her youth, trying desperately to hold onto the physical nature of her youth. This is seen in her preoccupation with weight and appearance, which is taken to the extreme by her covering naked bulbs with a lantern and dating Mitch only at night when the reality of time passing cannot be seen. The difference between her life not moving for her, but moving in reality causes her nervousness and, eventual, breakdown.

It is not immediately evident whether or not Blanche does make sense of the loss of Allan Grey. Her angry admission of her sexual exploits to Mitch is followed, quickly, by the same bargain she attempted to make with every man since Allan:

'What do you want?'
'What I been missing all summer.'
'Then marry me, Mitch!'

She tries to trade sex for commitment, sex for connection and sex for safety. This is the pattern of her life and one that she fails to see as dysfunctional and destructive. She has relived that experience of 'the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that's stronger than this - kitchen - candle'. Blanche has failed to adjust to life without Allan and that ideal, and thus she continues to search, in a tragically melodramatic way, for that light. Without the psychoanalytical skills, ability or desire to make sense of the loss of Allan, and, more precisely, the loss of her ideal, she is doomed to repeat that pattern ad infinitum. The muted rape scene gives us clues as to the conclusion that Williams draws. While she fights, she warns Stanley that 'Some awful thing will happen!' and that 'I'm in danger'. The thing she fears is that her hold on reality will snap and the danger she recognises herself as being in is the last threads of her illusion and, should she lose them she will lose everything. The reality is too crushing, too harsh for her and to be taken by brute force by the man

who represents conventional manhood in all its insensitivity, is what will, and does, finally break her.

One has to consider carefully what the outcome of this scene is to determine whether or not Blanche has finally made sense of the terrible experience that she had. When she receives the stranger, the doctor, because he is kind, gentle and respectful, she acknowledges her dependency on the kindness of men she doesn't know. This echoes her realisation that 'People don't see you - men don't - don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection'. She understands her own need for protection and connection with men and this is the same dependence that she has had since Allan's death and she has traded sex for this. Given the reality of her life, however, of alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, judgement and ostracism, it is not difficult to understand that the illusion she cherishes wins in the end. Indeed, Williams offers Blanche sweet release by giving up the tension between reality and illusion and yielding entirely to fantasy because, after all, the reality has nothing to offer her. To succumb to the illusion is, however, a declaration that she has not made sense of the initial experience. For that reason we can have little hope for her future.

In the final scene between Stella and Stanley we see that they have learned nothing also. Stanley continues to use sexual chemistry as a means to overcome friction, tension and division. Stella yields to Stanley's advances, despite just seeing her sister taken to an asylum. It is possible to see this moment as the first stage in the memory play for Stella and Stanley. Although Stanley seems incapable of guilt, Stella, having shared her sister's history and experience of sensitivity, runs the risk of following her sister's example of making the same mistake over and over again. That mistake? Believing in her husband's essential goodness, which is, as we know, an illusion.

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http://resources.mhs.vic.edu.au/streetcar/themes.htm#commentaries