

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE:
A Reaction, Assessment of Literary Value,
Biography of the Author, and Literary Criticism

Tennessee Williams's play *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains more within it's characters, situations, and story than appears on its surface. As in many of Williams's plays, there is much use of symbolism and interesting characters in order to draw in and involve the audience. The plot of *A Streetcar Named Desire* alone does not captivate the audience. It is Williams's brilliant and intriguing characters that make the reader truly understand the play's meaning. He also presents a continuous flow of raw, realistic moods and events in the play which keeps the reader fascinated in the realistic fantasy Williams has created in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The symbolism, characters, mood, and events of this play collectively form a captivating, thought-provoking piece of literature.

A Streetcar Named Desire produces a very strong reaction. Even at the beginning of the play, the reader is confronted with extremely obvious symbolism in order to express the idea of the play. Blanche states that she was told "to take a streetcar named *Desire*, and then to transfer to one called *Cemeteries*". One can not simply read over this statement without assuming Williams is trying to say more than is written. Later in the play, the reader realizes that statement most likely refers to Blanche's arriving at the place and situation she is now in because of her servitude to her own desires and urges. What really makes *A Streetcar Named Desire* such an exceptional literary work is the development of interesting, involving characters. As the play develops, the audience sees that Blanche is less proper and refined than she might appear or claim to be. Her sexual desire and tendency to drink away her problems make Blanche ashamed of her life and identity. *Desire* was the "rattle-trap streetcar" that brought her to her pitiful state in life.

Blanche is the most fascinating character in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. One reason for this is that she has an absolutely brilliant way of making reality seem like fantasy, and making fantasy seem like reality. This element of Blanche's personality is what makes her character interest the audience and contribute to the excellence of the work. Returning to the beginning of the play, Blanche, shocked with the dirtiness and gloominess of Stella and Stanley's home in New Orleans, looks out the window and says "Out there I suppose is the ghoulish-woodland of Weir!", to which Stella replies "No honey, those are the L and N tracks." Blanche would assume that something so common and simple as noisy, dark railroad tracks might as well be "ghoulish-woodlands." Further evidence of Blanche's warped view of reality and fantasy is shown throughout the entire play. She seems to hint to Stella and Stanley, and therefore the audience, that she is actually much more than she seems. In scene seven, Blanche soaks in a tub, singing:

"Say, it's only a paper moon, sailing over a cardboard sea
-But it wouldn't be make-believe If you believed in me!
It's a Barnum and Bailey world, Just as phony as it can be
-But it wouldn't be make-believe If you believed in me!"

As she sings this song, telling the story of her tendency to believe a more pleasant, warped view of reality over the actual reality, Stanley is telling Stella the horrifying truth about Blanche's scandalous past. The reader is as drawn into Blanche's illusion as much as Stella is, and just as Stella refuses to believe Stanley's harsh words, the audience also does not want to accept that the view they have had of Blanche for a good deal of the play is nothing more than a story made up to hide her unpleasant history. The clearest example of this is also one of the most intense and involving scenes of the entire play. In scene nine, Blanche is confronted by Mitch, who has learned the truth about her past. Mitch tells Blanche that he has never seen her in the light. He tears Blanche's paper lantern off of the plain, bright light bulb, and tries to see her as she really is, and not in a view warped by Blanche's efforts to make herself seem more innocent, young, and

beautiful than she is. Blanche responds to this by saying "I don't want realism. I want magic!...I try to give that to people. I misinterpret things to them. I don't tell truth, I tell what ought to be truth...Don't turn the light on!" This intense, frightening scene reveals to the audience the way Blanche views the world. Tennessee Williams's use of this kind of dual view of the world to develop Blanche's character is a perfect example of the way *A Streetcar Named Desire* makes the audience react to the characters in the play. It is this reaction between the audience and the brilliant characters in the play that makes the play such a valuable literary work.

The literary value of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is in Williams's ability to create a fantasy world which draws the reader into it as if it was their own reality. In some ways, the setting and conflict of the play is familiar to the reader, but in many ways the conflicting worlds of Stanley Kowalski and Blanche DuBois are too different to share the same reality. Tennessee Williams's world in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and the characters within it, become so familiar and fascinating to the reader that every event that occurs in the play affects the reader's reaction to the overall outcome of the play and his opinions of the characters.

The theme of the play does not occur to the reader until after the play's overall experience is concluded, and he is left to reflect on just what Tennessee Williams was trying to say in the play. While the play is being read, the audience is not interested in the overall meaning of the work, but simply in the intriguing action occurring at that moment in the play. However, *A Streetcar Named Desire* certainly contains many potential themes. One theme of the play could be that time is precious, and to waste it is to lose it. This theme of *carpe diem*, or "seize the day" is strong in the play. As time goes on in Blanche's life and her social behavior changes, she wastes away her youth. The loss of her young husband Allan has caused her loneliness, sexual desire, and even certain signs of psychological instability. All of these problems were increased by her attempt to lose them through drinking. What Blanche does not realize is that she can not change the past through the present. Blanche's youth is gone, and she tries to give the appearance of being as youthful and innocent as she once was, but her illusion can not last. As an epigraph to the play, Williams quotes from the poem "The Broken Tower", by Hart Crane:

"And so it was that I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice."

The use of this poem helps to express Williams's choice of theme in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Blanche has entered a "Broken world" of fear, longing, and sorrow because of her simple desire to hear "the visionary company of love, it's voice", or tender, gentle words of love and appreciation from Stella and Mitch. However, these words are only "visionary". Blanche hopes that these words will bring to her what she needs to rebuild her life, but they do not last. Stanley feels he needs to prove that Blanche is not what she seems. To this end, he destroys her dreams of becoming what she wants to be, and not what she was. By telling Stella and Mitch about her activities in the past, Stanley ruins Blanche's illusion. Blanche won their love by covering the past, and she could no longer build a new person from herself. The breakdown of Blanche's character climaxes when Stanley rapes her, trying to prove to her that he always knew she was less than she appeared. After this event, Blanche is forced to deal with the reality that she can never change who she is, and she is doomed to live with her reputation. This final outcome for Blanche is a brutally realistic way of proving the idea that youth is precious and should not be wasted on trivial desires.

Thomas Lanier Williams, known as Tennessee Williams, was born on March 26, 1911 to Cornelius Coffin and Edwina Dakin Williams in Columbus, Mississippi. During extended periods of Tennessee Williams's early life, his father was on the

road as a shoe company salesman. Williams and his family lived with his maternal grandparents in the parsonage of St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Between the ages of two to seven years old, Williams lived in various locations in Tennessee and Mississippi. After a long bout with diphtheria and a kidney infection, Williams became withdrawn. In July of 1918, Williams's father became a branch manager of the shoe company, and the family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. His father taunted him for his reclusion and effeminacy, nicknaming him "Miss Nancy." As Williams grew up, he took refuge from his intense shyness in his creativity. He wrote for his school newspaper, and became a published writer in 1927 at age sixteen with the essay "Can a Good Wife Be a Good Sport?" in *Smart Set*, for which he received third prize. In September of 1928, Williams entered the University of Missouri. In 1931, his father withdrew him from the university for failing ROTC. He began work as a clerk in the warehouse for the International Shoe Company, and pursued writing at home during the night. In 1935, Williams suffered a breakdown and went to recuperate for a year at his grandparent's home in Memphis. In July of that year was the first production of his play *Cairo! Shanghai! Bombay!* by the Memphis Garden Players. In 1936 and 1937, Williams Enrolled in Washington University, where he wrote poetry and produced several plays, then transferred to the University of Iowa. In 1938, he received a degree in English from Iowa. From 1939 to 1943 Williams lived briefly in a number of locations in the Midwest, South, and West, including New Orleans, which became his favorite city and where he had his first homosexual experience. During this time, he first used the name "Tennessee" as the author of "The Field of Blue Children." In 1944 and 1945, *The Glass Menagerie* premiered in Chicago on December 26th., and opened on Broadway on March 31st. In 1947, *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway, won the Pulitzer Prize for drama and made the longest Broadway run of any of Williams's plays, 885 performances. The next year his parents separated. In the next 13 years, over twenty of Williams's works were published, opened on stage, or made into films, including *The Night of the Iguana*, his last Broadway success. In 1963, after the death of his intimate friend by cancer, Williams entered what he refers to as his "Stoned Age." In 1969, he was baptized as a Roman Catholic, was awarded an honorary doctor of human letters from the University of Missouri, and entered Barnes Hospital for psychiatric care from September to December of that year. During the next ten years, Williams received more awards, and dealt openly with his homosexuality in *Memoirs and Moise* and *the World of Reason*. In the last three years before his death, his mother died, he received the Medal of Freedom from President Carter, and received an honorary doctorate from Harvard University. On February 24th. or 25th. of 1983, Williams died at the Hotel Élysée in New York, apparently from choking on a cap from a medicine bottle, and was buried in St. Louis, against his expressed wish to be buried at sea, like one of his favorite poets, Hart Crane. (Adler, xi-xviii)

Due to Tennessee Williams's unique style of writing and use of symbolism, there is much room for individual interpretation in it's theme and meaning. Because of this, many writers have presented their views of the work in critical essays and books. One of these such authors is Leonard Quirino in his essay, "The Cards Indicate a Voyage on A Streetcar Named Desire." Quirino remarks that the recurring theme of the poker game is a strong symbol in the play. Quirino states: "...Much of the verbal and theatrical imagery that constitutes the drama is drawn from games, chance and luck. ...Two of the most crucial scenes are presented within the framework of poker games played onstage. Indeed, the tactics and ceremonial of games in general, and poker in particular, may be seen as constituting the informing structural principle of the play as a whole. Pitting Stanley Kowalski...against Blanche DuBois..., Williams makes the former the inevitable winner of the game whose stakes are survival in the kind of world the play posits. For the first of four of the eleven scenes of *Streetcar*, Blanche, by reason of her affectation of gentility and respectability, manages to bluff a good hand in her game with Stanley; thus, in the third scene Stanley is continually losing, principally to Mitch the potential ally of Blanche, in the poker game

played onstage. However, generally suspicious of Blanche's behavior and her past, and made aware at the end of the fourth scene that she considers him an ape and a brute, Stanley pursues an investigation of the real identity of her cards. ...He continually discredits her gambits until, in the penultimate scene, he caps his winnings by raping her. In the last scene of the play, Stanley is not only winning every card game being played onstage, but he has also won the game he played with Blanche. Depending as it does on the skillful manipulation of the hands that chance deals out, the card game is used by Williams throughout *Streetcar* as a symbol of fate and of the skillful player's ability to make its decrees perform in his own favor at the expense of his opponent's misfortune, incompetence, and horror of the game itself." (Quirino, 62)

Quirino's view of the symbolism in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is insightful and interesting. The idea of the poker game being a microcosm of the conflict of the entire play is not one that all critics and readers would agree with.

One other critical view on *A Streetcar Named Desire*, that of Alvin B. Kernan, deals with Williams's interpretation of reality within the play. The theme of reality vs. fantasy is one that the play centers around. In "Truth and Dramatic Mode in *A Streetcar Named Desire*," Kernan says:

"In each of his plays, Williams poises the human need for belief in human value and dignity against a brutal, naturalistic reality; similarly, symbolism is poised against realism. But where the earlier playwrights were able to concentrate on human values, Williams has been unable to do so because of his conviction that there is a 'real' world outside and inside each of us which is actively hostile to any belief in the goodness of man and the validity of moral values. His realism gives expression to this aspect of the world, and *A Streetcar Named Desire* is his clearest treatment of the human dilemma which entails the dramatic dilemma. We are presented in *Streetcar* with two polar ways of looking at experience: the realistic view of Stanley Kowalski and the 'non-realistic' view of his sister-in-law, Blanche DuBois. Williams brings the two views into conflict immediately." (Kernan, 9)

Kernan's idea of the conflict between Stanley and Blanche acting as a messenger of the conflict between reality and fantasy is one that the reader sees quite clearly in the play. Critical interpretations of books like *A Streetcar Named Desire* not only help the reader to better understand what the author is trying to say in the work, but also provide the reader with many other stimulating points of view on the work.

In conclusion, the reader of *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not only entertained by an interesting story when he reads the play. He is also thrust into a reality which is not his own, yet somehow seems familiar. This realistic fantasy Williams creates with his brilliant use of symbolism, intriguing characters, and involving action in the play causes the reader to connect fully with the setting, characters, conflicts, and emotions within it.

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