



A Study Guide for Tennessee Williams'

A Streetcar Named Desire

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Welcome to Purdue Theatre! We are delighted you will be joining us for our production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

YOUR ROLE AS AN AUDIENCE MEMBER

Every performance of a play is a unique experience, created by particular actors in collaboration with a particular audience. The audience is a very important part of the play. The experience of seeing live theatre is very different from watching TV or going to the movies. The actors are very aware of the reactions of the audience, and indeed it is the audience – YOU - that inspires the actors to create a great performance. An audience may applaud, laugh, cry and respond in a variety of ways that makes it part of the on-stage action. Please avoid talking or inappropriate behavior that may distract from the action on the stage. Remember, the actors can see and hear you. If you have any problems or questions, please ask the ushers for help. Enjoy yourself; we are glad you are here!

THE WORLD OF THE PLAY



Thomas "Tennessee" Lanier Williams (1911-1983), was an American playwright who received many of the top theatrical awards for his works of drama. He moved to New Orleans in 1939 and changed his name to "Tennessee", the state of his father's birth. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1948 and for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. In addition, *The Glass Menagerie* (1945) and *The Night of the Iguana* (1961) received New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards. His 1952 play *The Rose Tattoo* received the Tony Award for best play. Williams is known for the sense of poetry he brought to his plays, and is considered one of America's greatest playwrights.

The French Quarter, also known as *Vieux Carré*, is the oldest and most famous neighborhood in the city of New Orleans, Louisiana. When *La Nouvelle Orléans* ("New Orleans" in French) was founded in 1718 the city was originally centered on the French Quarter, or the *Vieux Carré* ("Old Square" in French) as it was known then. The district as a whole is a National Historic Landmark. The area is known for its distinctive architecture, Creole and Cajun cuisine, jazz and blues music, and flourishing art scene.



USEFUL VOCABULARY

Belle Reve: French, *beautiful dream*. This is the name of Blanche and Stella's family home in Laurel, Mississippi.

Elysian Fields: The name of the street in New Orleans where the action of the play takes place. In Greek mythology this was where the blessed spent eternity. The phrase has come to mean a place or condition of ideal happiness.

Napoleonic Code: a civil code of law carried over into Louisiana from the French. One aspect of the Napoleonic Code was the concept of community property, where property was owned communally by both husband and wife.

Cut the rebop! Stanley is telling Blanche to stop buttering him up and say what she really thinks.

Xavier Cugat: Latin American musician known as *King of the Rumba* (A rhythmical dance that originated in Cuba) who introduced Latin American rhythms into the USA.

Bromo: Bromo seltzer was a popular hangover/upset stomach remedy which basically worked like Alka-Seltzer.

My Rosenkavalier!: Blanche romanticizes Mitch by casting him as the hero of Strauss's waltz opera of the same name.

Pleiades: cluster of seven stars (also known as the Seven Sisters) in the constellation Taurus, historically thought to represent sweet influences.

Je suis la Dame aux Camellias! Vous etes—Armand!: Blanche refers to Camille, the popular 19th century French melodrama of a high-class prostitute and her lover Armand, who remains true to her despite the fact that his family forbids the relationship. She ultimately dies of tuberculosis.

Voulez-vous coucher avec moi ce soir? Vous ne comprenez pas? Ah! Quel dommage!: Blanche asks an uncomprehending Mitch if he would stay with her for the night. She is certainly at the end of her rope psychologically and financially, and has probably had too much to drink, allowing her desperation to show through, albeit in a foreign language.

Flores para los muertos: Spanish: *Flowers for the dead*. The woman is selling flowers for people to place on their loved ones graves.

TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AFTER THE PLAY

What aspect of the performance impacted you the most? Did it have more to do with the play's words and dialogue or physical action?

Do you feel the play makes a particular statement about life or how we should live our lives? If so, how would you articulate the playwright's message? Do you agree with it?

How did you feel about the way things were left at the end of the play?

Are the characters true to life? Did they arouse emotions, such as sympathy, affection, disgust, admiration, or hatred?

Did the play sustain your interest throughout the play?

Did the actors create authentic, believable characters? Did they seem natural or artificial?

Before the performance began, what were your first impressions of the set design? How did it make you feel?

After viewing the performance, do you feel the set design supported the play? Did it make sense to you? Would you have done anything differently?

What could you tell about each of the characters based on his or her appearance before any action took place? Did the costumes influence your expectations or opinion of each character? Were there any parts of the costumes you found distracting or out of place?

What clues did the lighting design give you about the feel or emotional tone of the play?

What types of sound effects were used? Were the sounds environmental noise or in response to specific character actions? (For example: crickets chirping in the summer or a gunshot)

Did the sound score fit the situation or intensify elements in the play or distract you from the performance?

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES AFTER THE PLAY

Some of America's most distinctive authors have hailed from the South. Read some of the works by Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, William Faulkner, Ernest Gaines, or other Southern writers. What sensibilities, if any, do these writers share with Tennessee Williams?

Blanche mentions some of the poets she teaches to her students: Hawthorne, Whitman, and Poe. Do you think that Blanche has ever tried her hand at poetry? Write a few verses about her first love that might have come from her pen. Keep in mind Blanche's florid style.

Write a monologue for Stella in which she tells Blanche why she left Belle Reve.

Write a monologue for Mitch where he tells his mother why he wants to marry Blanche.

Envision Stanley and Stella's future together. Will they stay married? Write an epilogue to the play that addresses their future.