Tennessee Williams

1911-1983
Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911. He grew up overprotected by his mother and sister and was alienated from his father. His family moved from Mississippi to St. Louis and it was difficult going from a small town to larger city.
•Williams went to the University of Missouri, but left after two years. His father found him a job in his shoe-factory warehouse. His closest friend at the time was a burly co-worker, easygoing and attractive to women, named Stanley Kowalski (Williams used this name for a character in “A Streetcar Named Desire”). This life was difficult for Williams and he had a nervous breakdown. After recovering with his grandparents, he went back to school and graduated at the age of 27.
About a year after graduation Williams moved to New Orleans, the first of many temporary homes, and the future setting for “A Streetcar Named Desire.” It was when he lived in New Orleans that he changed his name to Tennessee. It was during this time he also entered the homosexual world.
Williams’ career really began with his first success, “The Glass Menagerie” in 1945. “A Streetcar Named Desire” evolved over a period of time. Originally, Williams began writing a play called “The Poker Night,” which was intended to be about a series of confrontations between working-class poker players and two refined southern women. As the focus of his attention changed from Stanley to Blanche, the play gradually turned into “A Streetcar Named Desire.” When the play opened in 1947, it was an even greater success than the “Glass Menagerie” and won the Pulitzer Prize.
•For years, Williams depended on a wide variety of drugs, especially to help him sleep and to keep him awake in the early mornings when he worked. In the 1960s, these began to take a real toll. Despite much of his self-destructiveness, critics began to see him as one of America’s best and most dedicated playwrights. He was actually working on a film when he died in 1983 from apparently choking to death on the lid of a pill bottle.
Williams once said of his writing, “I have always been more interested in creating a character that contains something crippled. I think nearly all of us have some kind of defect, anyway, and I suppose I have found it easier to identify with the characters who verge upon hysteria, who were frightened of life, who were desperate to reach out to another person.”
Written in 1947, “A Streetcar Named Desire” explores six key themes.

**Themes:**

1. **Fantasy/illusion:** Blanche dwells in illusion; fantasy is her primary means of self-defence. Her deceits do not carry any trace of malice; rather, they come from her weakness and inability to confront the truth head-on. She tells things not as they are, but as they ought to be. For her, fantasy has a liberating magic that protects her from the tragedies she has had to endure. Unfortunately, this defense is frail and will be shattered by Stanley. In the end, Stanley and Stella will also resort to a kind of illusion: Stella will force herself to believe that Blanche's accusations against Stanley are false.
2. **The Old South and the New South**: The Old South and the New South: Stella and Blanche come from a world that is rapidly dying. Belle Reve, their family's ancestral plantation, has been lost. The two sisters, symbolically, are the last living members of their family. Stella will mingle her blood with a man of blue-collar stock, and Blanche will enter the world of madness. Stanley represents the new order of the South: chivalry is dead, replaced by a "rat race," to which Stanley makes several proud allusions.

New Orleans is the hinterland between the two extremes.
3. Cruelty: The only unforgivable crime, according to Blanche, is deliberate cruelty. This sin is Stanley's specialty. His final assault against Blanche is a merciless attack against an already-beaten foe. On the other hand, though Blanche is dishonest, she never lies out of malice. Her cruelty is unintentional; often, she lies in a vain effort to survive. Throughout Streetcar, we see the full range of cruelty, from Blanche's well-intentioned deceits to Stella self-deceiving treachery to Stanley's deliberate and unchecked malice. In Williams' plays, there are many ways to hurt someone.
4. **The Primitive and the Primal:** Blanche often speaks of Stanley as ape-like and primitive. Stanley represents a very unrefined manhood, a romantic idea of man untouched by civilization and its effeminizing influences. His appeal is clear: Stella cannot resist him, and even Blanche, though repulsed, is on some level drawn to him. Stanley's unrefined nature also includes a terrifying amorality. The service of his desire is central to who he is; he has no qualms about driving his sister-in-law to madness, or raping her.
5. **Desire:** Closely related to the theme above, desire is the central theme of the play. Blanche seeks to deny it, although we learn later in the play that desire is one of her driving motivations; her desires have caused her to be driven out of town. Desire, and not intellectual or spiritual intimacy, is the heart of Stella's and Stanley's relationship. Desire is Blanche's undoing, because she cannot find a healthy way of dealing with it: she is always either trying to suppress it or pursuing it with abandon.
6. **Loneliness:** The companion theme to desire; between these two extremes, Blanche is lost. She desperately seeks companionship and protection in the arms of strangers. And she has never recovered from her tragic and consuming love for her first husband. Blanche is in need of a defender. But in New Orleans, she will find instead the predatory and merciless Stanley.
Characters

1. Blanche DuBois:

She is about 30. When she appears in New Orleans, she appears to be the essence of purity. Wearing a white dress, she is delicate and cannot bear vulgar language. She is intelligent, yet prefers magic over realism. Perhaps because of his famous scene screaming “Stella, Stella!” Stanley is probably the best-known character; however, most critics agree that Blanche is the focus of the play. She is a complex character worth serious study. “If a single character in contemporary American stage literature approaches the classical Aristotelian tragic figure, it must surely be Blanche DuBois. Deceptive, dishonest, fraudulent, permanently flawed, unable to face reality, Blanche is for all that thoroughly capable of commanding audience compassion, for her struggle and the crushing defeat she endures have the magnitude of tragedy. The inevitability of her doom, her refusal to back down in the face of it, and the essential humanity of the forces that drive her to it are the very heart of tragedy. No matter what evils she may have done, nor what villainies practiced, she is a human being trapped by the fates, making a human fight to escape and to survive with some shred of human dignity, in full recognition of her own fatal human weaknesses and the increasing absence of hope” (Miller 11).
A Streetcar begins with the protagonist’s (Blanche) movement toward death; however it also indicates that the defeatist behaviour follows a time of disillusionment which was preceded by a long period of idealism. And it is this idealism that characterises Blanche’s heroism; Blanche now depends on the kindness of strangers. In a sense, the self-destructiveness is a direct result of the idealism, for it is the total dedication to the ideal that results in the disintegration of personality, alienation from the community and even death.
Stanley Kowalski:
A factory worker, aged 28 - 30. Stanley is more ambitious than any of his friends. He is childish; he only cares about what he wants and is very rude. He is a very domineering: he overpowers his timid wife, Stella, constantly, to keep her from leaving him. He does the same to his friends when he wants to. Stanley is also incredibly protective of Stella: he doubts everything about Blanche from the beginning, and tries to make sure that he and Stella are not being tricked by a con artist. He seems incapable of subtlety, and does everything whole-heartedly: he loves Stella thoroughly and hates Blanche vehemently. Stanley is honest to the point of brutality, and he does not care about offending others. He despises Blanche because she is the opposite of his honesty; she thrives on illusion and pretense.
3. Stella Kowalski:

Stella is the connecting figure to two different worlds - the supposed royalty world of Blanche DuBois and the more common world of Stanley Kowalski. Stella is five years younger than Blanche, about 25, and has been submissive to her for her entire life. Blanche and Stanley both attempt to influence her, and they succeed, to a degree. Stella said "Mr. Kowalski is too busy making a pig of himself to think of anything else!" This statement shows a direct influence from Blanche on Stella, as Stella never would have said that if she was alone. However, Stanley pulls his weight as well and attempts to turn Stella against her sister.
4. Harold Mitchell (Mitch):

A friend of Stanley's from the plant. The two are about the same age. Mitch falls in love with Blanche, and wants to marry her. He is very sensitive. There are two reasons for this: the death of the girl he loved in his youth, and the terminal illness of his mother, who has no more than a few months to live. This sensitivity makes him feel very awkward sometimes. Mitch is, in Blanche's words, "capable of great devotion:" Mitch is not very intelligent, and so he cannot see through Blanche's feigned innocence or her lies. Mitch is a gentleman, especially compared to his friends, Stanley in particular. He is also is very trusting.
Symbolism

Williams has used symbols as a poetic means of expression to further the plot and meaning of his play, they enable the audience understand the emotional space surrounding the events and characters. The most obvious symbols used in A Streetcar are:

1- Names (Blanche vs Stanley Du Bois vs Kowalski)
2- The Streetcar named Desire and Cemeteries
3- Elysian Fields
4- Blanche’s Bathing
5- Paper Lanterns
6- Shep Huntleigh (imaginary saviour)
7- The Old Flower Vendor’s Cry / The Mexican Flower Woman
8- Light
9- Stella’s Baby
Structure

11 scenes.
• Each scene is self supporting
• Each has an exposition, a complication and a climax
• Williams ignores the traditional 3 or 5 Act structure of most modern plays.
• The structure mirrors Blanche and her fragmented episodic personality.
• The climax of the whole play comes in Scene 10 with the final confrontation between Blanche and Stanley resulting in her rape.
Technically, Williams has built the events of A Streetcar through joining the present incidents with the memories of the past. The construction of the play is very light, all the scenes are connected together and each one depends mainly on its predecessor. The play also presents a double vision of time as it passes through the present situations but usually refers to the previous events which remain frozen in the memories of certain characters. Building the play in such a double vision has caused the interior struggles and conflicts in Blanche’s character. Blanche has failed to take complete control over her present by accepting the interfering of the past.
The structure of *A Streetcar* can also be seen through a series of confrontations between Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski. In the first scene the confrontation is not so severe, but it increases in severity until one of the two must be destroyed. There are differences between the DuBois world and the Kowalski world; the most obvious difference between these two worlds lies in the diversity of their backgrounds. The name DuBois completely contrasts with Kowalski as the first is an aristocratic name, possibly one with a proud heritage.
A DuBois wouldn’t be found working in a steel mill, she would speak softly while the latter speaks loudly and brutally especially in the poker parties. Blanche’s preferences for entertainment are teas, cocktails and luncheons. Speech, to Stanley, is a way of expressing his wants, likes, and dislikes while Blanche speaks on a higher level; she searches for values, reflecting education in her manner of speaking.
Kowalski regards money as the key to happiness; money is the power that will buy pleasures of life, thus Stanley’s interest in Belle Reve centers only upon the fact that he has lost *his* money. He doesn’t care for the tradition of the place but only its financial value. This gives him a type of animal superiority to the world of people (like the DuBois) who do not understand the value of money and then become destitute.

Stanley and Blanche, as individual representatives of these two worlds, show even more contrasts in their personalities. The use of colour differs remarkably; Stanley needs vividness to prove his physical manhood; his green and scarlet bowling shirt is an example whereas Blanche selects pastels or white.
A Kowalski, as seen in Stanley, is “simple, straightforward, and honest “, he is always seeking the truth, but Blanche “ puts a gaily-colored paper lantern” on the harshness of truth and to her, this isn’t lying. Stanley does not like Blanche because she is deceiving other people thus this conflict is irresolvable as it originates in the essence of their personalities.
Blanche confesses to her sister about their need for such a strong man like Stanley to help them regain the lost plantation.

‘But maybe he’s what we need to mix with our blood now that we’ve lost Belle Reve and have to go on without Belle Reve to protect us .......' 

Blanche has some wisdom when she admits that it would have been better for her own world of illusion to mix with some realistic forces that Stanley has. Blanche’s declaration is ironically showing that Stanley’s world is the strongest and the fittest while hers is going to vanish and disappear.