

Literacy Skills Teacher's Guide for A Streetcar Named Desire by Tennessee Williams

Book Information

Tennessee Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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This Pulitzer Prize-winning play shows a woman's descent into oblivion following her inability to deal with desire and death.

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Main Characters

Blanche DuBois Stella's sister, who tries to maintain her Southern-belle image in the face of a tragic and sordid past

Eunice Stella and Stanley's upstairs neighbor, another woman who accepts brutality as part of her marriage

Mitch a timid young friend of Stanley whose interest in Blanche is squelched when he hears the truth about her reputation

Stanley Kowalski Stella's handsome but crude young husband

Stella Kowalski Blanche's sister, a well-bred Southern woman who loves her husband, Stanley, in spite of his coarseness

Vocabulary

bromo a remedy for headache or nervousness

neurasthenic showing fatigue and feelings of inadequacy, perhaps the result of nervous exhaustion

portiere a heavy curtain hung across a doorway

streetcar a public passenger car run on rails; a trolley

Synopsis

The play's setting is an apartment building in a poor but charming section of New Orleans. We see a brief glimpse of Stella and her husband, Stanley, before they both leave the flat. Then Stella's sister Blanche arrives from Mississippi for a visit. The prim and delicate Blanche seems to think there is some mistake -- her sister could not possibly live in such squalor. But she is finally convinced and waits in the apartment for the couple to return. When Stella arrives home, we see several things about Blanche and her relationship with her sister. Blanche is critical and domineering, and she has a liking for liquor. Blanche admits to Stella she has "lost" the family home, Belle Reve, and the scene between the two sisters deteriorates into hysterics, mostly on Blanche's part. When Stanley returns, Stella is in the bathroom. He had not known Blanche would be visiting. Stanley is a man who instantly "sizes up" women, and he appears to have made a decision about Blanche as he rapidly asks personal questions until Blanche declares she is going to be sick.

The next evening, tensions in the two-room apartment mount when Stanley becomes angered about Belle Reve and goes through Blanche's trunk looking for papers. He comes upon love letters from Blanche's young husband, now dead, and Blanche tells him, "the touch of your hands insults them." Later that evening, during a poker game with his friends, Stanley becomes angered at an act of insubordination on Stella's part, and it is implied that he strikes her. This is shocking to Blanche because Stanley told her earlier that Stella is pregnant. After a brief stay in a neighbor's apartment, Stella returns to Stanley and forgives all. Blanche is incredulous.

Tensions escalate between Blanche and her sister, but even more so between Blanche and Stanley. Blanche talks desperately to Stella about escaping from Stanley, but Stella is not interested in being saved. Blanche has been trying over several days to capture the interest of Mitch, a timid young poker buddy of Stanley. During their first evening together, Blanche opens up and tells him the tragic story of the suicidal death of her first husband -- a tragedy in which she played a role.

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Several months go by and stresses in the apartment are becoming unbearable. Exasperated with Blanche's feigned delicacy and her criticism, Stanley tells his wife he has found out that Blanche's reputation in her hometown of Laurel is tawdry at best. He informs Stella that he has passed on the information to Mitch, which effectively ends the relationship. That evening, Stella goes to the hospital to deliver her baby. Blanche and Stanley, drinking heavily, are left alone in the apartment. The two come to verbal blows, after which Stanley carries Blanche into the bedroom.

Two weeks later, Stella is waiting at the flat for a doctor and sanitarium nurse to take Blanche away. Blanche has lost her grip on reality, and when the pair arrives for her, she backs away from them. As the matron leads Blanche away, Stella cries after her while Stanley plays seven-card stud.

Open-Ended Questions

Use these open-ended questions as the basis for class discussions, student presentations, or extended writing assignments.

Initial Understanding

In the final scene Stella reflects on her decision and relationship with Blanche and says, "I couldn't believe her story and keep on living with Stanley." What does her statement indicate about her feelings for Stanley and her perception of what is necessary for her own survival?

Stella's statement seems notable in what it fails to say. She does not say she doubts Blanche's story, and the implication is she may believe Stanley capable of infidelity -- or worse. The dialogue also seems to imply a certain desperation. Stella may feel that, with a new baby, accepting Stanley's version of the truth is her only means of survival.

Literary Analysis

How does the playwright gradually convey to the audience the extent of Blanche's desperation?

He begins by introducing Blanche as a rather high-strung woman with a little too much interest in alcohol. As the story progresses, we learn more about the unpleasant circumstances involving the loss of Belle Reve. Finally, Blanche offers Mitch a booze-influenced description of her husband's suicide. After Mitch rejects her, Blanche's grip on reality weakens to the point at which Stanley finds her in an evening gown and tiara, talking to imaginary companions.

Inferential Comprehension

What can you infer from Blanche's dialogue about how the glory that was once Belle Reve was "lost" over the generations?

Blanche angrily recounts to her sister how she lived with death during the last days of the family's ownership of Belle Reve. She mentions the deaths of their mother, father and an unknown character, possibly a sister, named Margaret. She tells Stanley how her ancestors squandered most of their plantation for selfish reasons. It would be reasonable to guess that poor health consumed what was left of the family fortunes, and when the house passed to Blanche, she was unable to pay the mortgage or other expenses.

Constructing Meaning

In what way does Blanche try to make herself both soft and attractive? Why does she feel it is necessary to do so?

Blanche describes herself as a "soft" person -- someone who has never been "hard" enough. She uses her most charming manners, obvious flattery, and feminine charms to capture the attention of Mitch. Using soft light, pretty clothes, and make-up, she seeks to soften her image. She knows very well that her looks are fading, and she is desperate for a man to rescue her.

Teachable Skills

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Responding to Literature Stanley Kowalski, the brutal but sensuous "hero" of this play, turns out to be a somewhat questionable husband. Initiate a classroom discussion in which students talk about their opinion of the Kowalski marriage. Is Stanley and Stella's obvious compatibility enough to excuse Stanley's occasional roughness with his wife?

Deriving Word or Phrase Meaning During the emotionally intense scene in which Mitch rejects Blanche, the action is punctuated by the sound of a woman calling, "Flores para los muertos"? Assign students to translate this Spanish dialogue and reread the scene in which the dialogue occurs. Ask students to write a brief analysis of the meaning of the phrase, its larger meaning in the context of the plot, and the playwright's probable reasons for including it in the action.

Understanding the Author's Craft Tennessee Williams used stage directions in the script to accent dramatic climaxes and create the effect he desired. As a class project in understanding the value of the playwright's written stage direction regarding props and music, obtain a copy of the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, starring Marlon Brando and Vivian Leigh. Ask students to write a short paper on how faithfully Williams's stage direction was followed in the film and how lighting, props, and music contribute to the drama.

Understanding Characterization The characters of Stanley and Blanche are probably the most distinctive ones in this play. Provide the following small-group activity to give students added insight into character development in this play. Divide the class into several small groups. Using either Stanley or Blanche, have each group identify three examples of dialogue that define him or her as a character. During class discussion, ask groups to share their findings. The groups should be prepared to tell the class what each line reveals about the various aspects of Stanley's or Blanche's character.