



A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

American playwright and two-time
Pulitzer Prize winner, whose works
are set largely in the American South.



Life

- Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, on March 26, 1911, and named Thomas Lanier Williams. He spent most of his youth in St. Louis, Missouri.
- After intermittent attendance at the University of Missouri and Washington University, he received a B.A. degree from the University of Iowa in 1938.
- He worked at a variety of odd jobs until 1945, when he first appeared on the Broadway scene as the author of *The Glass Menagerie*.



Life

- This evocative “memory play” won the New York Drama Critics' Circle award as the best play of the season.
- It was filmed in 1950 and has been performed on the stage throughout the world.
- The emotion-charged *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) has been called the best play ever written by an American.
- It was successfully filmed (1952), and it won Williams his first Pulitzer Prize in drama.



Works

- He was awarded another Pulitzer for *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (stage, 1954; film, 1958).
- All three of these plays contain the poetic dialogue, the symbolism, and the highly original characters for which Williams is noted and are set in the American South, a regional background which the author used to create a remarkable blend of decadence, nostalgia, and sensuality.
- Other successful plays by Williams are *Summer and Smoke* (1948), rewritten as *Eccentricities of a Nightingale* (produced 1964); *The Rose Tattoo* (1950); the long one-act *Suddenly Last Summer* (1958); *Sweet Bird of Youth* (1959); and *Night of the Iguana* (1961). Although Williams continued to write for the theater, he was unable to repeat the success of most of his early works.
- One of his last plays was *Clothes for a Summer Hotel* (1980), based on the American writer F. Scott Fitzgerald and his wife, Zelda.
- Williams died in New York City, February 25, 1983.



Works

- Two collections of Williams's many one-act plays were published: *27 Wagons Full of Cotton* (1946) and *American Blues* (1948). Williams's fiction includes two novels, *The Roman Spring of Mrs. Stone* (1950) and *Moïse and the World of Reason* (1975) and four volumes of short stories—*One Arm and Other Stories* (1948), *Hard Candy* (1954), *The Knightly Quest* (1969), and *Eight Mortal Ladies Possessed* (1974).
- Nine of his plays were made into films, and he wrote one original screenplay, *Baby Doll* (1956).
- In his provocative *Memoirs* (1975), Williams described his own dramatic problems with drugs and alcohol and his latterly avowed homosexuality.



Theme

- as time passes, losses always accrue
- the struggle to preserve personal values
- the outsider or fugitive in a hostile group
- the ambiguity of morality
- the search for relief from the anguish of life
- fear of dying and a longing to live



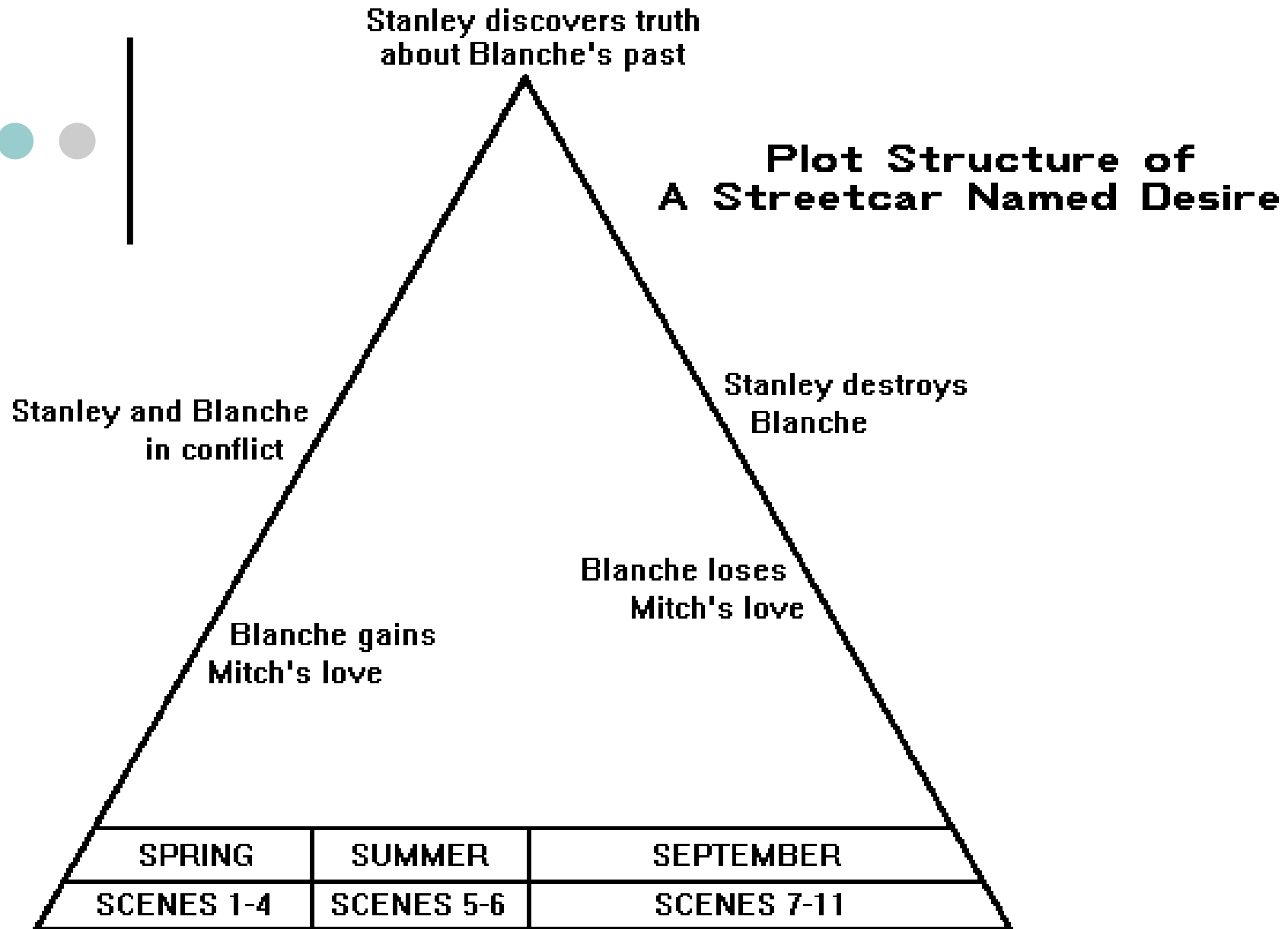
Method

- psychological realism and realism of setting combined with anti-realistic devices:
 - dialogue mixed with direct address, soliloquy, and confession
 - isolation of characters during set peaches by lighting
 - projection of words and pictures to explain or elaborate the action
 - frequent use of symbols and significant names and of music to enhance mood



A Streetcar Named Desire

- Southern decay
- Blanche DuBois
 - alcoholic
 - nymphomaniac
 - psychosis
- Stella
- Stanley Kowalski
- New Orleans



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS' A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE



Test

- _____ 1. Blanche proposes that Stella and she escape from Elysian Fields because Blanche A. feels threatened by the lifestyle of the place B. knows that her younger sister feels trapped by the circumstances of life C. wants company when she leaves New Orleans
- _____ 2. When Blanche calls Mitch her "Rosenkavalier," she is A. trying to impress him with her knowledge of opera B. poking fun at his awkwardness C. having a bit of harmless fun
- _____ 3. Mitch asks Blanche why she attempted to enjoy their date even though she didn't feel like it. His question I. shows that Mitch is naive II. reveals that Mitch does not understand Blanche's values III. illustrates the clash of cultures you find in the play A. I and III only B. II and III only C. I, II, and III



- _____ 4. Stanley feels obliged to tell Mitch about Blanche's degenerate past because he A. wants to destroy Blanche's chance to marry Mitch B. doesn't want his old army buddy to be fooled C. will feel guilty if he doesn't
- _____ 5. In addition to being the name of a streetcar, "Desire" A. refers to the love between Mitch and Blanche B. symbolizes the life force in Blanche and other characters C. stands for Blanche's self-destructive personality
- _____ 6. Blanche tells the truth about A. the loss of Belle Reve B. her activities in the hotel called Tarantula Arms C. Shep Huntleigh
- _____ 7. Stanley can't abide Blanche because I. she interferes with his sex life II. she considers herself superior to him III. of her numerous pretenses A. I and II only B. II and III only C. I, II, and III
- _____ 8. Elysian Fields is often called a jungle and its residents described in animal terms largely because A. the play is full of violence B. the language of the play reflects Blanche's point of view C. it's a dangerous place to be



- _____ 9. Mitch and Blanche are attracted to each other because both I. have been in love with people who died II. feel out of place in the brutal world around them III. are lonely and in need of love A. I and III only B. II and III only C. I, II, and III
- _____ 10. Blanche is committed to an asylum at the end of the play A. to symbolize the victory of brutality over gentility B. as poetic justice for her sinful life C. to keep her safe from further harm
- 11. In which ways is the conflict between Stanley and Blanche more than a mere disagreement between two incompatible people?
- 12. How does Tennessee Williams create the mood for Streetcar?
- 13. How does Stella try to bridge the gap between Blanche and Stanley?
- ANSWERS
- 1. A 2. C 3. C 4. A 5. B 6. A 7. C
- 8. B 9. A 10. A



Explanation

- 11. The question implies that Stanley and Blanche are symbolic figures. Your task is to determine what each stands for. You know that Stanley is lusty and animalistic. He rages and grunts, but isn't he more than just an uncaged ape? Outside the house, he holds a responsible job at a factory. He travels a good deal and apparently earns enough money to provide for Stella and even to feed and support Blanche for several months. What does Stanley like to do? He bowls, plays cards, and drinks. If television had been in use in the 1940s, he probably would watch ballgames and sitcoms. Except for his violent streak, he's probably not very much different from millions of other middle-class urban men.



- Does Williams mean to imply that Stanley symbolizes middle-class America? Or do Stanley's actions merely suggest that life in that level of society brings out men's basest, most animal-like instincts?
- Stanley's adversary, Blanche, represents another stratum of society altogether.



Blanche

- Her people used to be wealthy landowners. In the early days, the DuBois family probably owned slaves. Blanche herself is well-educated and appreciates poetry and music. During much of the play she tries to maintain the illusion that traditional values are alive and well. In the end, she is destroyed.
- What conclusion might be drawn? That Stanley's world now dominates Blanche's? That Blanche stands for a faded and useless way of life? That man's bestial instincts, repressed by civilization, will again reign supreme? Obviously, the conflict between Stanley and Blanche may be interpreted in many ways.



Mood

- "Mood" is an elusive term. A piece of literature as complex as *Streetcar* might contain several moods simultaneously.
- Here are some possibilities: (1) violent, angry, and tense; (2) sad and sentimental; (3) sexual and animalistic; (4) morbid and tragic; (5) grotesquely comical. Williams creates such moods using characters' words and actions as well as music, lighting and stage directions.



Stella

- It takes skill to mediate between two people who detest each other. If you've ever tried, you can appreciate the problem Stella faces throughout the play. She employs various tactics to force Stanley and Blanche into peaceful coexistence. None of her methods work, however.
- From the beginning she pleads for understanding. To keep Blanche from being shocked, Stella prepares her sister to meet Stanley. She explains that Stanley may be different from the sort of men Blanche may be accustomed to.
- Later, Stella points out Stanley's attractiveness, especially in bed, but her words fall on deaf ears.



Stella

- Similarly, Stella can't convince Stanley to accept Blanche. He is unmoved by Blanche's delicate condition and the tragic loss of her husband. He distrusts Blanche the moment he meets her. Once he's made up his mind, nothing can sway him. During most of the play Stella acts as a buffer between the adversaries.
- Gradually, she drifts toward Blanche's side. Her sister needs help. But if Stella isn't careful, she stands to antagonize Stanley.
- Ultimately she sends her sister away. Why Stella sides with Stanley in the end is worth exploring. What has Stella realized about her sister, about Stanley, and about herself? Why can't she simply continue to serve as intermediary? What might Williams be saying by having Stella and Stanley reunited at the end of the play?



Links

- <http://www.kennedy-center.org/programs/specialevents/honors/history/honoree/williams.html>
- <http://hipp.gru.net/scarperspect.html>