Article by Rachel Kafka

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Tennessee Williams

INTRODUCTION

Thomas Lanier Williams was born on March 26, 1911 in Columbus, Mississippi to Cornelius Williams and Edwina, a Southern belle. He later changed his name to Tennessee, the state of his father's birth. Williams' older sister, Rose, was a delicate young woman who suffered from mental illness. As a result, he had first-hand knowledge of the impact such an illness can have on a family. In his writing, Williams explores the impact mental illness has on the concept of reality, most notably through the character Blanche DuBois in A Streetcar Named Desire (1947). He often links mental illness to the construction of an alternative reality, whereby the line between reality and illusion is blurred as a means of survival.

A Streetcar Named Desire was first performed on Broadway on December 3, 1947 and received a 30-minute standing ovation. In 1951 the play was filmed by its Broadway director, Elia Kazan, starring Vivien Leigh and Marlon Brando. Williams died on February 24, 1983 yet is remembered as one of the twentieth century's greatest playwrights, winning two Pulitzer Prizes and the New York Drama Critics' Circle award. His legacy includes giving a voice to the American South in a cultural arena in which it had barely been heard. Like The Glass Menagerie (1944), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955) and Sweet Bird of Youth (1959), A Streetcar Named Desire chronicles the changing reality of the American South and its traditions.

The Context in A Streetcar Named Desire

Perceptions of reality are central to A Streetcar Named Desire. A number of characters in the play choose and shape their own realities. The play explores how people engage in fantasy in order to cope with the often harsh or unpleasant reality of a situation. In A Streetcar Named Desire, realities are
re-created so that characters can cope with the confusion that surrounds them. Each character’s sense of reality is personal, leading to conflict within the play when it is questioned and challenged. What reality actually is becomes a matter of perception and of who has the power to shape it. The presentation of multiple points of view on a character or situation is central to this play.

Williams’ plays often focus on women using their sexuality to survive in a brutal, male-dominated world. In A Streetcar Named Desire both Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski are forced to survive in a changing world, but choose alternate paths determined by their gender, social status and personal histories. Blanche’s sister and Stanley’s wife, Stella, adapts (for the most part) to a changing world. She enjoys the chaos and noise of New Orleans’ French Quarter and takes pleasure in her husband’s animal masculinity. Blanche, however, struggles to relinquish her connection to old Southern ways and to move into the future. Her experience of the past shapes her perception of her present situation.

Williams also explores mental illness as a condition which changes one’s perception of reality and how others see you. In the wider context of the play, Blanche’s mental illness raises questions about who has the power to construct reality, and indeed whether all realities are merely constructions. In the play’s dramatic climax, where a delusional Blanche is led away to a mental hospital, we must question whether it is ultimately the physically and emotionally powerful who decide on the reality others will accept.
IDEAS & ARGUMENTS IN THE TEXT

Williams presents a number of ideas and arguments in *A Streetcar Named Desire* relevant to the Context *Whose Reality?* These are outlined briefly below and will be developed in the following section.

**Overview of key ideas and arguments**

*The clash between fantasy and reality*

The lines between what is real and what is imagined, or fantasy, are often blurred throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Through Blanche, the play explores the ways in which a fantasy world is often substituted for, and accepted as, reality. The consequences of this clash between fantasy and reality can be devastating.

*Illusion as refuge and salvation*

Why do we construct alternative, illusory realities for ourselves? Are we aware we are doing this? Often we shape our own reality in order to survive and cope with an unpleasant situation. We may also take comfort in the past, as a refuge from the present and future. *A Streetcar Named Desire* reveals the complex nature of these competing realities.

*Clashing social realities*

The last vestiges of the ‘Old South’ (what remained after the American Civil War) were crumbling in post-World War II America. This decline, the growth of cities and the rising immigrant population provide the social backdrop for clashing cultures and realities in the play. This clash is articulated through the play’s primary conflict between Blanche and Stanley. It is a conflict that raises the question: can two realities coexist or must one triumph over the other?
**Gender and reality**

The realities we construct are partly influenced by our gender identity. In particular, *A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the ways in which women in the postwar period had to do what they could to survive. Both Blanche and Stella are faced with this situation. Women’s reality is, therefore, quite different from the reality faced by men in this period. Throughout the play we witness the growing irrelevance of the feminine and its associated gentility, as it is overwhelmed by the aggressive, masculine modern culture.

**Analysis of key ideas and arguments**

*The clash between fantasy and reality*

The lines between fantasy and reality are repeatedly blurred throughout *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When fantasy becomes real for Blanche, Williams offers a clash between different versions of reality. Some of these may be seen as mere illusion, despite their being experienced as real and authentic by a character. Blanche is so distraught by the loss of the family home, Belle Reve, and the events of her more recent past, that she creates an alternative reality mired in her past triumphs. Her inability to tell truth from illusion intensifies throughout the course of the drama and any shred of sanity is destroyed at the play’s climax, when she is raped by her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley.

From the play’s opening, Blanche is presented as an outsider, emerging from another reality, described in the stage notes as ‘incongruous to this setting’ (p.117). Blanche has created a fragile and easily damaged reality, at odds with the often harsh world of the French Quarter of New Orleans in which Stella and Stanley reside. Blanche is initially aware that she creates ‘magic’ (p.204), rejecting realism for the creations of the ‘imagination’ (p.212). Blanche tells her suitor Mitch that she replaces the truth with ‘what ought to be truth’ (p.204). When her ‘pack of lies’ (p.186) is exposed by Stanley we witness Blanche’s rapid decline as she awaits a fantasy ‘cruise of the Caribbean’ (p.209) with Mr Shep Huntleigh.

Blanche substitutes the reality of her situation (poverty, unemployment and sex scandals) with the way she wants her life to be. She doesn’t tell Stella the real reason she ‘happened to get away from the school before the spring term.
ended’ (p.122), omitting from discussion the truth behind her recent expulsion from Laurel. Blanche’s fear of ageing and losing her attractiveness to the opposite sex is a manifestation of her fear of death. She already seems to be dying as her world and everything she knows collapses around her. Instead of facing her fears, Blanche simply hangs a paper lantern to diffuse the cruel glare of truth. When she sings ‘Paper Moon’ Blanche reinforces her belief that fantasy can become reality: ‘it wouldn’t be make-believe/ If you believed in me!’(p.186).

The fantasy is shattered in Scene Seven when Stanley crudely reveals the truth about Blanche’s past in Laurel and her sexual promiscuities, including the seventeen-year-old boy ‘she’d gotten mixed up with’ (p.188).

Blanche’s belief in the power of fantasy to reshape reality is part of her attempt at rebirth. She tries to reclaim her beauty and purity. This extends beyond the evocation of her name or her wearing white clothing. Blanche fully embraces an alternative narrative for her life in which she is still ‘A cultivated woman, a woman of intelligence and breeding’ (p.211). This fantasy world reaches its peak in Scene Ten when, in a state of drunkenness and dressed in a ‘somewhat soiled and crumpled white satin evening gown and a pair of scuffed silver slippers’ (p.208), Blanche addresses ‘a group of spectral admirers’ (p.208). Her inability to tell reality from illusion has intensified – she no longer simply adapts reality to suit her needs, she has created a new reality altogether. The scene culminates in her rape, which symbolises the final violation of her fragile world of ‘lies and conceit and tricks’ (p.212) by the brute future Stanley represents.

To some extent, Blanche does recognise the tenuous nature of her grip on reality. She recognises that Stanley possesses the strength she and her sister require ‘now that we’ve lost Belle Reve and have to go on without Belle Reve to protect us’ (p.141). Despite this, Blanche implores Stella not to ‘hang back with the brutes’ (p.164). She wants her sister to rejoin her in a now obsolete past, imploring ‘You can’t have forgotten that much of our bringing up, Stella’ (p.163).
The past cannot be escaped and repeatedly encroaches on Blanche’s fantasy life. The polka music of the ‘Varsouviana’ (p.199) is echoed at key moments throughout the play, transporting Blanche to the moment her young husband, Allan Grey, died. Blanche continues to be tormented by guilt, knowing ‘This beautiful and talented young man’ (p.190) killed himself because of her impulsive condemnation of his homosexuality. This revelation also helps to explain her dalliances with young men in Laurel, and her attraction to the young man ‘collecting for the Evening Star’ (p.172) in Scene Five, whom she warns ‘I’ve got to be good and keep my hands off children’ (p.174).

Discussion questions

- Do you think there is an official version of reality in A Streetcar Named Desire? Does the ‘truth’ Stanley uncovers about Blanche’s life in Laurel ultimately matter if it isn’t real to her?
- Stella tells Blanche, ‘You take it for granted that I am in something that I want to get out of’ (p.161). Make a list of the different ways in which Stella and Blanche perceive the reality of life in the Kowalskis’ apartment. Do you think it is ultimately difficult for people to understand how other people experience the world?

**Illusion as refuge and salvation**

Blanche is unable to let go of the past and constructs an illusory identity or alternative reality as a refuge from her fear of an uncertain future. This illusion can also be seen as a refuge from the consequences of her sexual desires. The play repeatedly suggests that sexual desire and death are connected, that sex is a way of staving off decay and death. Blanche’s journey on the streetcars named Desire and Cemeteries is symbolic of the connection between sexual desire and loss, isolation and death. As Blanche arrives in New Orleans, searching for her own ‘Elysian fields’ (in Greek mythology, the home of the blessed after death), she is ‘dressed in a white suit’ (p.117), which displays an illusion of her innocence and purity. This purity has long been forgotten, symbolised by the ‘red satin robe’ (p.135) she wears in Scene Two. Blanche later concedes to Stella that she has ridden on ‘that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter’ (p.162), that she has known ‘brutal desire’ (p.162) and that it is this desire which has brought her to New Orleans.
While readers/audiences may condemn Blanche for her lack of truthfulness, Williams highlights the usefulness and necessity of an imaginary world. Blanche is an escapist. Despite the inevitable destructive consequences of her dream-life, Blanche is able to cope on a day-to-day basis by imagining her life is something it isn’t. Her excessive consumption of alcohol helps her to deny this reality. For Blanche, sexual desire threatens the life of purity and refinement she pursues, so she pretends she doesn’t feel it. She takes refuge in a courtship with Mitch, believing his respectable love can save her. He seems more concerned, however, with his mother, fearing that ‘I’ll be alone when she goes’ (p.144). Blanche shares these fears. Later, after Stanley informs him of Blanche’s past, Mitch becomes frustrated by her illusion that ‘she had never been more than kissed by a fellow’ (p.186) and decides he doesn’t want to marry her anymore. He cruelly tells her, ‘You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother’ (p.207). He is determined, instead, to take ‘What I been missing all summer’ (p.207). Blanche’s last chance to retreat into her past innocence vanishes with Mitch’s sexual demands.

Blanche tells Mitch, as the Mexican woman passes selling ‘Flores para los muertos’ (flowers for the dead), that sexual desire is the opposite of death (p.206). Blanche talks to Stanley about the ‘epic fornications’ (p.140) of her forefathers which resulted in the loss of Belle Reve. After this loss, Blanche’s own sexual desire led to her expulsion from Laurel when the management of the second-class hotel Flamingo ‘requested her to turn in her room-key – for permanently!’ (p.187). It remains ambiguous throughout the play what the actual nature of Blanche’s sexual activities at the hotel were – whether they were simply meaningless affairs with local soldiers or actual prostitution. What we do know is that Blanche felt alive when she ‘slipped outside to answer their calls’ (p.206). Despite a fear of death, Blanche is initially unwilling to explain her sexual past, hiding behind the mask of ‘prim and proper’ (p.171) lady for Mitch and others. This is a more pleasant identity to present to others than the ‘Dame Blanche’ (p.187) Stanley reveals her to be.
Blanche is also haunted by the guilt she feels over her husband, Allan’s, suicide when she discovered his homosexuality. She recounts how she, Allan and his lover drove out to Moon Lake Casino, got drunk and pretended that she hadn’t just walked in on them in bed. But this illusion could not be maintained. Love is a ‘blinding light’ (p.182) and its loss plunged her into a darkness from which she has been unable to escape:

And then the searchlight which had been turned on the world was turned off again and never for one moment since has there been any light that’s stronger than this – kitchen – candle. (p.184).

Trying to return to a time of lightness and young love, Blanche’s fear of her own mortality is apparent in her obsession with her age and looks. She takes refuge in the dark, not permitting Mitch to look at her in the ‘merciless glare’ (p.120), frightened of what truth the light may reveal. As she explains, ‘The dark is comforting to me’ (p.203). Blanche associates the ‘blinding light’ with her love of Allan and the past. She also takes refuge in her looks because she realises that being attractive to men is a way for her to survive in this world. She admits to Stella, ‘I never was hard or self-sufficient enough’ (p.169) to get by alone. Her fear of the future is clear in the following passage:

People don’t see you – men don’t – don’t even admit your existence unless they are making love to you. And you’ve got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you’re going to have someone’s protection (p.169).

Blanche realises that she must maintain the illusion of beauty and youth if she wants to belong but realises the difficulty of this: ‘I don’t know how much longer I can turn the trick. It isn’t enough to be soft. You’ve got to be soft and attractive. And I – I’m fading now!’ (p.169).

Blanche’s rape reinforces the darker side of human sexuality. Stanley has been challenging her façade since her arrival and it seems inevitable that they will clash in the most violent way. As he notes, ‘We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!’ (p.215). Prior to the rape there has been a preseniment of the collapse of her illusory sanctuary. Blanche shatters the mirror she has been using in her drunken fantasy at the beginning of Scene Ten. It is a symbolic moment in which she is appalled by her reflection and smashes it.
Creating an illusory life in order to deal with reality is also true for Stella, particularly in the aftermath of her sister’s rape. Her eventual decision to believe Stanley is innocent encourages audiences to question the extent to which we construct our own reality through the choices we make. Do we often choose the reality that is easiest for us to live with, knowing, as Eunice Hubbel does, that ‘No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going’ (p.217)?

For Stella it is the ‘things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark – that sort of make everything else seem – unimportant’ (p.162). This ‘brutal’ sexual desire, as Blanche calls it (p.162), gives Stella’s life with Stanley meaning and it is to this that she returns when ‘his fingers find the opening of her blouse’ in the play’s final scene (p.226). This desire makes the reality she has chosen in the dilapidated apartment bearable and permits her to believe what she quite possibly knows is a lie. At the play’s end Blanche returns to her sphere of affectation and Stella and Stanley resume their relationship, only this time their love is also an illusion – a reality formed by Stanley’s lies and Stella’s choices. Despite exiling Blanche, frustrated by her inability to adjust to reality as he sees it, Stanley has invited a world of fantasy into his apartment, only this time it is he and Stella who are culpable in its creation.

**Discussion questions**

- In addition to Stanley, do you think the actions of any other characters contribute to Blanche’s destruction?
- In what ways does reality defeat Blanche?
- Although Blanche has convinced herself that she is something she is not, why do you think she is unsuccessful at persuading others?

**Clashing social realities**

The years after World War II were a time of great social change in America. During World War II, the world witnessed a brutality previously unimaginable throughout the West, as the most civilised of societies disintegrated into a hotbed of mass murder and genocide. Williams’ anxiety regarding the transformation of the Old South can be located in this context of change and upheaval.
The play’s primary clash is between Blanche and Stanley, who represent two opposing ways of experiencing and understanding the world. Stanley represents the new migrant working class, instrumental in shaping modern America in the postwar period. He is physical, earthy and unpretentious. Blanche, on the other hand, is a fading emblem of a conservative and genteel American South that all but died at the end of the American Civil War (1861–5). When Stanley challenges Blanche’s beliefs he also challenges her sense of who she is, and it is not long before this comes crumbling down around her.

At the play’s opening Williams indicates: ‘Two women, one white and one coloured, are taking the air on the steps of the building’ (p.115). We are told that ‘New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races’ (p.115). Blanche arrives into this world from the other South where many hired a ‘coloured girl to do it’ (p.206). She carries with her the prejudices of an old world and brings them into the Kowalski apartment with her. In contrast to this cosmopolitan city where different races live side by side, Blanche clutches to what makes her different, evident in the link she draws between the colour white and purity. She tells Mitch that ‘Blanche means white’ (p.150) and compares herself to ‘an orchard in spring’ (p.150). However, Blanche’s moral integrity is, like the South, in a state of decay. New Orleans represents the new world and Blanche the old. Her inability to step into the future mirrors that of much of the South clinging to a world of racial segregation and propriety, despite the new world developing all around them.

Blanche’s bias against Stanley’s class is clear from her opening remarks to Stella. She describes the Kowalski apartment as ‘this horrible place’ (p.120) and wants to know if they have a maid (p.122). Blanche repeatedly demonstrates an unwillingness to understand the realities of modern life, despite her recent losses. The Kowalski’s apartment contrasts with the past grandeur of Belle Reve. Blanche never really gets comfortable in the two-room, one-bathroom apartment in New Orleans, maintaining her performance as a fully-fledged member of the old South, ‘fanning herself with a palm leaf’ (p.165).

Blanche proclaims her family’s ancestors ‘French Huguenots’ (p.150) to emphasise the importance of breeding in her world, and Stanley’s lack of it. While Blanche claims she is ‘very adaptable – to circumstances’ (p.150) it is
Stella who is ‘peaceful’ (p.123) about life after Belle Reve. Before even meeting Stanley, Blanche brands him a ‘Polak’ (p.127), revealing her prejudice towards migrants, despite Stanley’s assertion that ‘I am one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it’ (p.197). His patriotism and willingness to protect his country and his home are reinforced by his past as a ‘Master Sergeant in the Engineers’ Corps’ (p.125). Blanche’s arrival is an invasion of his territory by a foreign entity and, like a soldier, he fights to save his home turf.

Stanley is the antithesis of the social reality Blanche represents. He is an immensely physical man who radiates ‘Animal joy’ (p.128) and an almost primitive sexuality. He is practical, ruthless and infuriated by Blanche’s ‘superior attitude’ (p.162), airs and graces. The animal imagery associated with him also suggests that modern society is like a jungle in which only the fittest will survive.

Despite the fact that he prevails by the play’s end, it is important to note that Stanley’s world is no more real than Blanche’s. He also puts faith in illusions, such as the American Dream and all that this promises. Williams highlights the fact that the artifice which Stanley places his faith in is far cruder than that of more romantic dreamers such as Blanche. Stanley is proud that he pulled Stella ‘down off them columns’ (p.199). This new American identity triumphs in the play’s conclusion when Blanche is taken away and Stanley’s child is born. Stanley’s coarse manner endures while Blanche’s dainty gentility is now irrelevant to the world. Southern plantations and estates such as Belle Reve have crumbled, their inhabitants die and those who remain are left with a crushing debt as ‘Death is expensive’ (p.127).

Discussion question

- Do you think that Williams is sorry for the passing of the Old South that Blanche represents?
Gender and reality

The construction of concepts of gender in society impacts heavily on how we see ourselves. *A Streetcar Named Desire* explores the ways in which gender politics can impact on how we interact with the world and other people. Through Blanche and Stanley, we are presented with two opposing and clashing identities – a soft, fragile femininity set against an aggressive masculinity.

While Blanche believes she gains strength through illusion and fantasy, Stanley compensates for any weaknesses with acts of violence. As Stella notes, he has ‘always smashed things’ (p.157). In Scene Eight he hurls a plate, cup and saucer to the floor. These are all domestic objects, objects which occupy the arena of the feminine. In Scene Three, Stanley tosses Blanche’s ‘small white radio’ (p.151) out the window in a further attempt to overpower her.

Stanley’s identity is defined by sexual aggression and macho behaviour. From the moment the audience first encounters him, his animal-like tendencies are clear. He arrives home from work in Scene One, literally ‘bringing home the bacon’, carrying a ‘red-stained package from a butcher’s’ (p.116). Animal imagery dominates as Stella describes him as a ‘different species’ (p.124) and a ‘pig’ (p.194), and Mitch a ‘bull’ (p.216). Blanche notes that

> He acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There’s even something – sub-human – something not quite to the stage of humanity yet! (p.163).

In comparison to Stanley’s animalistic aggression, Blanche is constructed as delicate and wilting. She constantly has hot baths, which may be linked to the psychological condition of ‘hysteria’, often thought to be a particularly female illness. The baths may also be seen as symbolising Blanche’s need to wash away her past and the dirty feelings she associates with sexual desire. Unlike Stella’s sexual desire, Blanche’s is not deemed appropriate because it doesn’t exist within the confines of marriage.
Discussion questions

- How do the men in *A Streetcar Named Desire* talk about women? Are violence and sexual aggression towards them presented as the reality for women at this time?
- Why is Stanley so bothered or threatened by Blanche’s version of her past? Why do you think he needs to know the truth?
- Do you think that Stanley and Stella will live happily ever after?

Points of view on the Context

The discussion topics, writing topics and activities below will provide you with the opportunity to expand and reflect on your point of view on the ideas raised by the Context *Whose Reality?* Use *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a point of reference.

Discussion/writing topics

- We choose our own reality.
- Fantasy is a legitimate and useful means of surviving harsh circumstances.
- The life we live as children shapes who we become as adults.
- Sexual attraction is often the product of deception.
- Illusion is the only way to combat personal suffering.

Activities

- Watch the ending of the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which differs significantly from the ending Williams wrote. Do some research to find out why the ending was changed. Compare and contrast the two endings. Which do you think is more effective or believable? Write a dialogue between Stanley and Stella of the conversation they might have after Blanche is taken away – write two dialogues, each following a different ending (the play and the film version).
In his poem ‘Burnt Norton’ (1935) from *Four Quartets* (1943) T.S. Eliot writes that ‘human kind/ cannot bear very much reality’. This statement is certainly true of Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Write an anonymous letter to a close friend describing a time when you could not bear the reality of a situation. What did you do to help deal with this situation? Are there any similarities between the ways you coped with an unpleasant reality and the ways Blanche copes with hers? What are the differences? Consider these questions in your writing.

**Writing in Context: Sample topics**

Students will be assessed in Units 3 and 4 and in the end of year examination on writing stimulated by the ideas and arguments found in texts studied in the Context *Whose Reality?* The following topics provide you with the opportunity to draw on ideas arising from *A Streetcar Named Desire* in order to develop your own writing pieces. As in the exam, your writing here may be expository, persuasive or imaginative. Refer to both the Context and the text in your response.

- ‘Our past experiences determine our current reality.’
- ‘The line between illusion and madness is a fine one.’
- ‘It is difficult to let go of the past when we face an uncertain future.’
- ‘Reality has the ability to crush the human spirit.’
- ‘People’s strengths lie in their ability to transcend reality through fantasy.’
- ‘Not facing up to reality often leads to unhappiness.’

**THE TEXT**

OTHER RESOURCES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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