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CHARACTER MAP

Stella Kowalski
Blanche’s younger sister; married to Stanley, has his child at end of play.

Stanley Kowalski
Blanche’s brother-in-law, a proud, virile working man who loathes and destroys Blanche.

Blanche DuBois
Ageing beauty, fallen on hard times; desperate to find a protector in New Orleans.

Eunice Hubbel
Stella’s neighbour and friend; married to Steve.

Steve Hubbel
Eunice’s husband; friend of Stanley, Mitch and Pablo.

Harold Mitchell
(Mitch)
Stanley’s workmate and friend; attracted to Blanche.

Pablo Gonzales
Stanley’s friend; card player.

loves
seeks help from
betrayed
helps

friends
friends
friends

seeks help from
destroys
friends
OVERVIEW

About the author

Thomas Lanier Williams was born on 26 March 1911, in Mississippi, USA. He was a shy child who endured bouts of serious illness and always suffered from the feeling of being an outsider. His family life was often unhappy. Williams’ mother was a difficult woman with fantasies of being an aristocratic Southerner and his father, a travelling salesman for a shoe manufacturer, favoured Thomas’ younger brother, Dakin, over the other children. His sister, Rose, suffered from mental illness and was confined to hospitals and institutions for most of her adult life.

During the 1930s Depression, Williams entered university in Missouri where his Southern accent earned him the nickname Tennessee. He could not afford to stay at university and left to take a job in a shoe factory, although he later returned to his studies, graduating from the University of Iowa.

Williams was a prolific writer of fiction, essays, poems and more than thirty plays. His earliest essays and short stories were published when he was a teenager and his first play, Cairo, Shanghai, Bombay, was produced in 1937, when he was at university. During World War II, American Blues was produced and towards the end of the war, in 1944, Williams had great success with The Glass Menagerie, which contains many autobiographical elements and is often thought to be his greatest work. However, it was for A Streetcar Named Desire that Williams received the Pulitzer Prize in 1948: a prize he later won again, in 1955 for Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Williams became famous internationally in the 1950s when several of his plays, including A Streetcar Named Desire, were made into successful films featuring renowned Hollywood stars. Although some later works did not show the quality of his earlier writing, others, such as Suddenly Last Summer, Night of the Iguana and Sweet Bird of Youth, were acclaimed and also made into films.

Williams drew on his own experiences to create works that give a distinctive voice to the post–Civil War South (that is, during the late 1800s and early 1900s). The genteel but decaying society he brings to life in his
plays was fast disappearing at the time during which he was writing. His plays explore sexual frustration and suppressed violence, themes that were shocking to audiences at the time. Many of his characters suffer from loneliness, often to the point of breakdown. Brutal and fragile elements counterbalance each other in many of the plays. Williams’ own struggle as a homosexual man in a disapproving society; his bouts of depression; and his dependence on alcohol, barbiturates and amphetamines are reflected in the isolation suffered by the outcasts in his plays. Tennessee Williams died on 24 February 1983 at the Hotel Elysée in New York.

**Synopsis**

Blanche DuBois arrives at her sister Stella’s home, on the edge of the French Quarter of New Orleans, hoping to stay. She is shocked by the seedy area and the shabby little apartment and has to drink several whiskies before she can face Stella, who returns from watching her husband, Stanley Kowalski, at the bowling alley. Blanche expresses dismay at Stella’s poor circumstances but Stella claims to be happy and fulfilled in her marriage and way of life.

Stanley’s return home unsettles Blanche, who finds him crude and vulgar. He is initially offhand about her arrival but becomes suspicious when Stella tells him that Blanche has confessed that their family home, the beautiful Belle Reve, has been lost to pay for the debts and funerals of their older relatives. Stanley accuses Blanche of trying to cheat Stella, and by extension himself, out of the inheritance. When he seizes her papers to investigate, Blanche is distressed that he has snatched some letters and poems written by her husband, who died as a young man.

Stanley is drinking and playing cards with his friends when Stella and Blanche return from an outing later that evening. Blanche is pleased by the quiet, polite Mitch, who lives with his sick mother and is a workmate of Stanley’s. Stanley becomes more aggressive as he gets drunk, throwing a radio out of the window and finally hitting Stella. Blanche is horrified by his violence and takes Stella to her friend Eunice’s apartment upstairs.
Stanley sobers up enough to howl in anguish for Stella outside Eunice’s window. Stella comes slowly downstairs, they kiss and Stanley carries her into their home.

Blanche is appalled. The next morning she tries to convince Stella to leave and set up home with her, vowing that a rich admirer of hers will finance them. But Stella, fiercely loyal to her husband, claims that the occasional rough treatment is part of the passionate love they share. Tension grows between Stanley and Blanche, and Mitch and Blanche begin a tentative relationship. She tells him about her brief marriage, and confides that when she found that her husband was homosexual she expressed her disgust and he committed suicide. Stanley, meanwhile, has been checking up on Blanche. He has found out about her promiscuous past: her liaisons with soldiers from the local camp, her prostitution at a hotel in her home town, Laurel, and her seduction of a student – an event which led to her being virtually driven out of Laurel. Blanche is horrified to learn that Stanley has told all this to Mitch. Stanley presents Blanche with a birthday present – a one-way ticket back to Laurel – just as Stella goes into labour.

Blanche is alone in the apartment later that night when Mitch arrives, drunk and angry. Blanche asks for pity and understanding, telling him that her actions came from grief and guilt at her husband’s death. He tries to rape her but stumbles out when she calls ‘fire!’ (p.207). She is less successful at discouraging Stanley. He returns from the hospital and turns aggressively on Blanche who has retreated into a make-believe world. Although she tries to fend him off with a broken bottle, Stanley rapes Blanche.

Several weeks later, the men are playing cards again. Stella has decided not to believe Blanche’s story of the assault. To protect her marriage and the future of her child she has agreed to have her sister committed to a state mental institution. Blanche at first believes she is going on holiday and eventually responds to the doctor’s gentle manner, going with him willingly. Stella is distressed and weeps, holding her baby as Stanley begins to make love to her and the play concludes.
**Character summaries**

**Blanche DuBois**
An ageing beauty, raised in a wealthy Southern family whose money has been lost. Blanche feels terrible guilt over the suicide of her young husband, Allan, and her desperation has driven her to sexual promiscuity. Forced out of her home town, she seeks a last chance at life in her sister’s home in New Orleans, Louisiana. She tries to establish a relationship with Mitch, but her neurotic behaviour shows a woman on the edge of breakdown. Stanley’s behaviour towards Blanche pushes her over this edge.

**Stanley Kowalski**
Aggressively masculine and controlling, and a proud working-class man. He despises Blanche’s sense of refinement and resents her airs of superiority. He dominates Stella and is enraged when Blanche defies his authority in his own home. In the crowded little apartment, he is very aware of Blanche’s sexual nature and while Stella is in hospital he takes advantage of her absence and rapes Blanche. He denies this assault to Stella and has Blanche committed as a patient at a state mental institution.

**Stella Kowalski**
Blanche’s younger sister. She has fled the dying culture of the South where she grew up, in favour of the energy of New Orleans. Stella has married Stanley and is pregnant with their child when the play begins. Stella adores the passion and sexuality of her relationship with Stanley. Her loyalty is divided when Blanche arrives and points out his failings. Stella makes her decision at the end of the play, when she permits her sister to be committed to an institution in order to continue her own life with Stanley and their new baby.
Harold Mitchell (Mitch)
Stanley’s workmate and ex–army buddy. He lives with his sick mother. He is attracted to Blanche and is ready to propose marriage until Stanley tells him about her past. Mitch becomes angry and tries to assault Blanche. Unlike Stanley, Mitch is easily confused and rebuffed. Although Blanche is ready to settle for Mitch, he is a weak, ineffectual character.

Minor characters
Eunice Hubbel, Stella’s neighbour, landlady and friend. She takes Stella in when Stanley hits her.
Steve Hubbel, Eunice’s husband and Stanley’s friend. With Pablo, he tries to sober up the drunk Stanley by putting him under a cold shower.
Pablo Gonzales, Stanley’s friend who makes up the numbers at the card table.
Negro Woman, a neighbour in this relaxed, cosmopolitan part of New Orleans. She is welcoming when Blanche arrives in Elysian Fields.
Young Man, a young man collecting for the Evening Star newspaper. When he comes to the apartment, Blanche, who is home alone, flatters and flirts with him, and kisses him.
Doctor and Matron (also called Nurse), staff who arrive to escort Blanche to the mental institution. While Blanche is afraid of the no-nonsense Matron, the Doctor is gallant and courteous and wins her trust.
BACKGROUND & CONTEXT

Historical and social setting

_A Streetcar Named Desire_ was written just after World War II. The United States was emerging as a dominant global power, the world was separating into East and West along the Communist divide and the Cold War was beginning. The notion that people needed to work, to be strong and look after their own interests was growing in society, reflecting the fact that strong nations had been seen to dominate weaker ones during the war. Self-reliance and hard work were regarded as the keys to success and Stella is confident that Stanley is likely to succeed in his job because of these qualities. Stanley’s forceful behaviour is an expression of this social mood, just as Blanche’s clinging frailty represents weakness and failure. The postwar period was a time of change, as soldiers (like Stanley and Mitch) returned from wartime experiences in Europe and Asia, and refugees and immigrants poured into America. It was a time to question what it meant to be American.

Playwrights of the 1940s and 50s, such as Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, were crucial in exploring these changes to the sense of national identity. _A Streetcar Named Desire_ presents the conflict between the old and the modern as Blanche’s pride in her French ancestry and her cultured mind are derided by Stanley, son of Polish immigrants, who calls her ‘hoity-toity’ (p.199). Tensions and resentments were emerging between Americans who had been settled for generations, like the DuBois family, and the floods of immigrants who wanted to share in the country’s prosperity. As industry grew and cities became bigger, rural life dwindled in importance. Great cotton plantations in the South, like Belle Reve, became impoverished and were tainted by memories of the slavery that had supported them. In _A Streetcar Named Desire_, Blanche and Stella are stranded when their wealth disappears, but while Stella embraces the new and more classless world, Blanche is unable to adapt.

When Blanche calls Stanley a ‘Polack’ (p.196), she demonstrates the racism that she has been brought up to accept. She is disdainful of cosmopolitan New Orleans, expecting that the Negro woman she meets in Scene One will run to fetch Stella for her. The play, however, endorses the