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Prestwick House
Literature
Teaching Unit
Chapter-by-Chapter Study Guide



A Streetcar
Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams

- Learning objectives
- Study Guide with short-answer questions
- Background information
- Vocabulary in context
- Multiple-choice test
- Essay questions
- Literary terms



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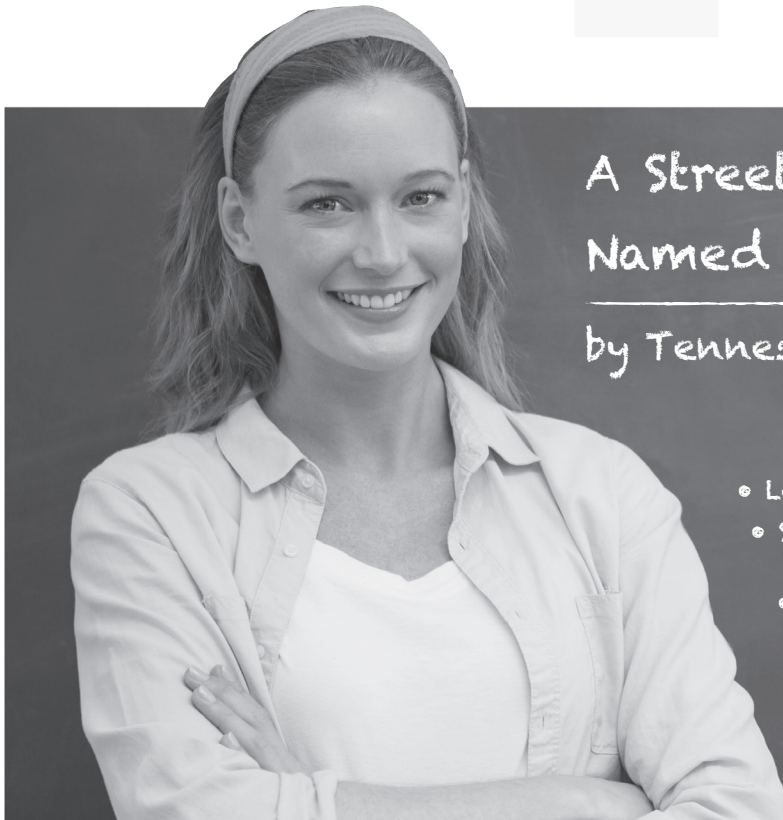
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A Streetcar Named Desire

Note to Teacher

A Streetcar Named Desire contains adult themes and potentially controversial elements. You may want to prepare students for these subjects before they begin reading the play. Alternatively, you may decide to discuss the topics as they come up in the course of the reading. Controversial elements include: sexuality, alcoholism, violence, domestic abuse, rape, and suicide.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Objectives

By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:

1. discuss the following themes and/or major concepts that appear in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:
 - loneliness and our feeble attempts to overcome it
 - illusion as an attempt to deceive and illusion as an approach to reality
 - sexuality as a primitive, powerful force capable of creating or destroying life
 - the clash of the primitive and brutish with the civilized, the rational, and the cultured
 - the idea that one cannot escape one's past
 - the relationship between sex and death and/or desire and destruction
 - loss of innocence
2. identify and point out the significance of some of the play's symbols, including the following:
 - the two streetcars, *Desire* and *Cemeteries*
 - Stella's neighborhood, *Elysian Fields*
 - the paper lantern over the naked light bulb
 - the Varsouviana polka
3. identify the following motifs, and point out how they support some of the play's themes and/or major concepts:
 - washing and bathing
 - alcohol and drunkenness
 - light and shadows
 - jungle imagery
4. present an argument demonstrating that Blanche is a tragic hero.
5. write an essay supporting the argument that Stanley and Blanche represent two cultures or two parts of the human race, and discuss the conflict between the two.
6. explain the behaviors, beliefs, and motivations of the following characters:
 - Blanche
 - Stella
 - Stanley
 - Mitch

A Streetcar Named Desire

Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. As the play opens, Blanche has just arrived at Stella's neighborhood after having taken two streetcars, one named *Desire* and another called *Cemeteries*. Explain the symbolic significance of these two streetcars. What do they represent, and how do they emphasize some of the play's major concepts and/or themes?
2. Point out incidents in the play where desire and/or death are mentioned or suggested. Discuss how Williams synthesizes the two concepts and brings them together as one in the character of Blanche.
3. Tragic heroes' lives usually end in defeat or death because of a flaw in their character. As the tragedy unfolds, there is a sense of inevitability; that is, because of a "tragic flaw," there seems to be nothing the hero can do to avoid the approaching disaster. Using this as your criterion, state why Blanche fits the description of a tragic hero.
4. Point out examples from the text that suggest that Blanche suffers from a deep sense of loneliness. Describe the steps she takes, imprudent and prudent, to overcome this loneliness.
5. Discuss the differing views expressed by Stanley and Blanche regarding Blanche's illusions. How does Stanley view them? How does Blanche view them?
6. By referring to incidents and comments in the play, prove the assertion that sexuality is a primitive, powerful force capable of creating or destroying life.
7. State some of the ways in which Blanche represents the civilized, rational aspect of life and Stanley represents the primitive, brutish aspect of life.
8. It is easy to see Stanley as the villain in this play, but is there any justification for his actions? Provide examples to support your opinion.
9. Describe the type of relationship that Stanley and Stella have. What is it based upon? Considering the ending of the play, do you think they will remain together? Give reasons for your opinion.
10. Elysian Fields is the name of the community where Stanley and Stella live. It is also an allusion: In Greek mythology, Elysian Fields is paradise, the place where heroes go after death. Why does Williams give this name to the area where the Kowalskis live?
11. The DuBois plantation was named Belle Reve, which translates to "Beautiful Dream." Given Blanche's character, why is that a particularly apt name for her home?

A Streetcar Named Desire

Scene I

Vocabulary

attenuates – weakens in strength, force, or degree
auxiliary – secondary, in addition to
dubiously – with doubt or uncertainty
fluency – ease, smoothness, eloquence
heterogeneous – varied, diverse; mixed
implicit – contained, embedded, inherent
incongruous – not compatible; out of place
infatuated – obsessed, passionate
lyricism – an emotional or expressive quality
radiant – bright; glowing
raffish – having a carefree or unconventional style
redolences – fragrances
reproach – to scold or criticize
spasmodic – fitful; occurring in a sudden burst
unrefined – crude, unsophisticated
valise – a suitcase
vivacity – liveliness, cheerfulness

1. Describe the setting of the play.

2. From her very first appearance, how is Blanche’s vulnerability expressed?

Scene II

Vocabulary

absconding – running away, usually after having stolen something
airily – in a light or frivolous manner
atomizer – a type of spray dispenser that turns liquids (perfume, in this usage) into a fine mist
fornications – sexual acts
gander – a look
improvident – careless, reckless, irresponsible
perpetrated – committed, carried out
peruse – to read carefully or thoroughly
swindled – cheated
tiara – a type of jeweled headdress resembling a crown
treachery – betrayal, disloyalty

1. Why is Stanley upset about the loss of Belle Reve? Explain the “Napoleonic code” to which he refers.

2. What makes Stanley think that Blanche has “swindled” him and Stella? What does he assume has happened to Belle Reve?

3. What does Stanley think Blanche has done with the money? What does Stella tell him?

4. Why does Stanley refuse to leave the room when asked by Stella?

Scene IV

Vocabulary

anthropological – concerning the study of human evolution and development

bestial – like a beast; inhuman

bromo – a type of headache remedy

cultivated – developed; nurtured

narcotized – drugged, tranquilized

serene – calm, tranquil

stealthily – in a sneaky or quiet manner

1. As the scene begins, Blanche is trying to persuade Stella to leave Stanley. What is Blanche’s plan for her and Stella? Is it a realistic plan, in your opinion?

2. Why does Blanche find it hard to believe that Stella is uninterested in leaving Stanley?

3. In this scene, Williams alludes once again to the title of the play. How is the streetcar named Desire presented during Blanche and Stella’s conversation? How might it act as a metaphor?
