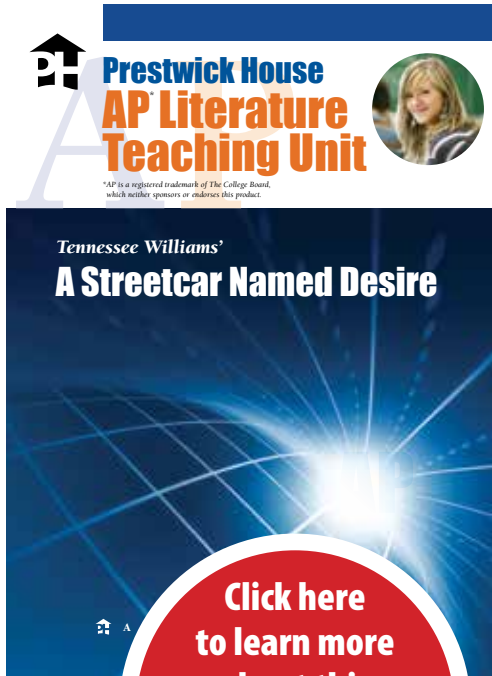




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Teaching Unit

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams

written by Douglas Grudzina



Prestwick House

Item No. 305041

A Streetcar Named Desire

Objectives

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

1. analyze the significance of the play within the context of the development of twentieth-century American drama.
2. trace the development of the major and secondary themes of the play:
 - The Old South cannot survive the industrialized, modern world.
 - Desire leads to sorrow, loneliness, and death.
 - Life is inherently lonely.
 - Fantasy and reality are incompatible with one another.
 - Human beings are animals.
3. identify the common motifs used throughout the play.
4. analyze the use of music, costumes, scenery, and lighting.
5. identify the characteristics and components of a tragedy, including:
 - exposition
 - conflict
 - rising action
 - crisis
 - climax
 - falling action
 - denouement
 - catastrophe
6. analyze the significance of the title of the play and its relationship to the central themes of the work.
7. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
8. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. offer a close reading of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the play.

Introductory Lecture

THE PLAY

When *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened on Broadway on Dec. 3, 1947, critics lauded the Tennessee Williams play as a landmark work. Though tame by today's standards, the drama, with its overt representations of sexuality and an off-stage rape, shocked and thrilled audiences who were only beginning to experience the change in social mores that followed World War II. The play won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1948 and secured Williams's reputation as one of the premier playwrights of the twentieth century.

The one-act drama revolves around the conflict between protagonist Blanche DuBois, a fragile, aging Southern beauty hobbled by her past and her drinking, and her brother-in-law, the virile and aggressive working-class Stanley Kowalski. Blanche prefers magic to realism. ("I don't tell the truth. I tell what ought to be true.") Stanley takes what he wants, abuses his wife, and likes women who lay their cards on the table. While Blanche is ephemeral and evasive, Stanley is a blunt instrument, who, in Williams's words, exhibits "animal joy in his being," as a "richly feathered male bird among hens." The pregnant Stella Kowalski, Blanche's sister, and Harold Mitchell, Blanche's would-be suitor, are caught between these two colliding forces.

Blanche has come (uninvited) to stay with her sister in New Orleans after losing both her teaching job and the family plantation in Mississippi (Belle Rêve or "Beautiful Dream"). Alone in the two-room apartment, she heads straight for the whiskey bottle. When Stella returns, Blanche delivers the bad news about the family fortune, managing in the process to lay a healthy dose of blame on her sister. Blanche rants: "I, I, I took the blows on my face and my body! All of those deaths . . . Death is expensive . . . Sit there thinking I let the place go! I let the place go? Where were you? In bed with your—Polack!"

The "Polack" recognizes at once that Blanche has not only been dipping into his liquor supply, but that she also aims to take his wife away from him. The two are immediately at odds, each seeking to destroy the other.

As the conflicts mount, Blanche, revealing a past that is both heroic and sordid, begins to unravel. Stanley, like the "Survivor of the Stone Age, Bearing the raw meat home from the kill in the jungle," pursues his prey. He exposes Blanche's dirty secrets, destroying her chance for a measure of security and happiness with Mitch. Finally, as their conflict reaches a crisis (amid the sound of "inhuman jungle voices" and beating drums), Stanley moves in for the kill—an off-stage rape that pushes the fragile Southern belle over the edge and into full-blown madness.

In the final scene, as she is carted off to the insane asylum, Blanche delivers her signature line and what has become one of the most often repeated and parodied lines of twentieth century American drama: "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers."

A Streetcar Named Desire

Scene One

1. Explain the irony of the street name Elysian Fields Avenue.

2. How does the opening of the play evoke tone and mood?

3. How does the “Blue Piano” contribute to the tone and mood of the play?

4. What does the first line spoken in the play do to the mood Williams has established by his description of the setting?

5. How does Williams establish the dynamic between Stella and Stanley when these two characters first appear together on stage?

6. What does Stanley and Stella’s positioning on the stage during their first exchange suggest? Why is this ironic?

5. How does the dialogue between Blanche and Stella contribute to the portrayal of Blanche as a tragic heroine?

6. How does the conversation between Blanche and Stella, especially Blanche's monologue about Stanley, contribute to the rising action?

7. List some of the basic inconsistencies in Blanche's character. What do these inconsistencies contribute to the character? To the plot?

8. How does this overheard conversation increase the tension?

5. What is ironic about the fact that it is Stanley who brings the play to its climax? In what ways are Blanche and Stanley foils for one another?

6. What is the significance of the wordless images seen through the transparent back wall of the apartment?

7. When Stanley says to Blanche, "We've had this date with each other from the beginning," what does he mean?

8. Why is the ultimate, climactic event a rape?
