This is a study guide for the book A Streetcar Named Desire written by Tennessee Williams. A Streetcar Named Desire is a 1947 play written by American playwright Tennessee Williams for which he received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948. The play opened on Broadway on December 3, 1947, and closed on December 17, 1949, in the Ethel Barrymore Theatre.
Scene 1:

Summary

The play begins in a poor but lively, racially mixed area of New Orleans, on an evening in early May. Music from a bar around the corner can be heard as two men enter. They are Stanley Kowalski and his friend Mitch. Stanley calls up to a two-story building on the corner for his wife Stella, who comes out to the first-floor landing. He throws some meat up for her to catch, and then says he is going bowling. Stella says she will come and watch.

Blanche, Stella’s sister arrives. She is well dressed, all in white, and looks out of place in the impoverished surroundings. Eunice, the woman who lives in the upstairs flat, confirms that Blanche has arrived at the right place. Blanche is uncertain. She cannot believe that her sister lives there. Eunice, who owns the building, lets Blanche into the downstairs flat and tells her to make herself at home. As Eunice chats with her it transpires that Blanche is a schoolteacher from Mississippi who lives in a large house.

After Eunice leaves, Blanche takes a whiskey bottle from a half-opened closet and makes herself a drink. Stella returns and the two sisters greet each other joyfully. Blanche soon asks her what she is doing living in such a run-down building. Stella says it isn’t that bad. Blanche reveals that she is able to come during the school term because the high school superintendent suggested she take a leave of absence. She has obviously been under a lot of stress, and she gets Stella to reassure her about her appearance. They agree that Blanche will stay with Stella and Stanley in the apartment, even though there is not much room. Blanche wants to know whether Stanley will like her. Stella says they will get along fine as long as Blanche does not compare him to the men they used to date at home. It is clear that Stella is wildly in love with Stanley, although Blanche is concerned when she hears that Stella has not told her husband that Blanche is coming.

Blanche then complains that while Stella left their home to come to New Orleans, she was left to struggle to keep the family home going. She now reveals that the home, Belle Reve, has been lost. Stella asks what happened, but Blanche continues to reproach her for leaving. She recalls the deaths of their parents and other relatives. None left any money, and all Blanche had was her paltry salary from the school. Stella cries at Blanche’s reproaches.

Stanley returns with his friends Steve and Mitch. They part after agreeing to meet for poker the next day. Stanley enters the apartment and Blanche introduces herself. Stanley offers her a drink, which she declines, and then removes his shirt because the room is so hot. They make awkward small talk while Stella is in the bathroom. Stanley says that Stella has told him of her, and he asks her about her former marriage. Blanche reluctantly recalls that her husband, whom she calls a boy, is dead.

Analysis

The first scene establishes the sharp contrast between the two main characters, Blanche and Stanley. They are from completely different worlds, she a refined woman from an southern aristocratic background, he a down-to-earth working man with crude manners. They are not going to be able to understand each other. But this scene also gives an early hint about Blanche’s duplicity. She is not quite what she appears, as is seen when she pretends to Stanley, after he offers her some whiskey, that she rarely touches it. (The audience has already seen this is not true.)

This scene also introduces two of the prominent themes of the play, sex and death. The basis of the love between Stella and Stanley is sexual passion. Although Stanley is what today might be called a “male chauvinist,” they are happy in their own way, bound together by physical love. On the other hand, Blanche’s longest speech in this scene is all about death. She gives Stella a
long catalogue of the deaths at the Belle Reve plantation, emphasizing the heartrending nature of death and the details of people’s last moments. The note of morbidity continues throughout the play.

There are also some important symbolic and visual elements in the opening scene. Stanley removes his shirt (which he will do often), signifying his elemental, animal-like strength and virility, whereas Blanche spends a lot of time bathing and freshening up, a symbol of her attempts to wash away her past and live up to her image of being beautiful and refined. However, she is twice in this scene associated with the raucous sound of cats, which tends to undermine her attempts to present herself in this way.
Scene 2:

Summary

The following evening, Blanche and Stella are preparing to go out to dinner while the men play poker at home. Stella tells Stanley that they have lost Belle Reve, their plantation home in Mississippi. Stanley wants to know more, but Stella does not know any details. Stanley gets angry. He says that under the Napoleonic law of Louisiana, anything that belongs to a wife also belongs to the husband, and he feels that he has probably been swindled. He goes to the bedroom and pulls out an armful of dresses from Blanche’s trunk, and says that Blanche could never have acquired such finery on a schoolteacher’s pay. He says he will get an expert to appraise the value of the clothes. Then he finds Blanche’s costume jewellery, and says he will get an expert to appraise that as well. Stella tells him he is being stupid and goes out to the porch.

When Blanche comes out of the bathroom she fishes for compliments from Stanley on her appearance, but he claims he does not give women compliments. Blanche tries to humour him. She knows that something is on Stanley’s mind, and she says she will tell him the truth. He explains about the Napoleonic code, and Blanche swears that she has never cheated anyone. Stanley starts to rifle through her trunk, looking for papers relating to Belle Reve. Blanche protests, and hands him a tin box in which she says she keeps most of her papers. He grabs some papers from the box but Blanche says they are love letters and demands them back. She snatches at them and they scatter on the floor. Distressed, Blanche gathers them up, saying they are letters from her dead husband. Stanley finds some papers relating to Belle Reve, and then Blanche explains that there are hundreds of such papers, going back hundreds of years, as her family squandered their wealth. Finally, all that was left was the house itself and twenty acres of land. She says Stanley can have all the papers. Stanley says he will have a lawyer examine them. He also reveals that Stella is pregnant, which Blanche does not know. When Stella returns, Blanche congratulates her and laughs off the unpleasant scene with Stanley.

Analysis

The dramatic climax of this scene is the first clash between Blanche and Stanley. It is well prepared for in the dialogue between Stanley and Stella, which builds up the tension. Not for the last time, Blanche is soaking in the bathtub, oblivious to what is going on in the other room. When she comes out, she reveals a little more of her personality by flirting with Stanley. Stanley is quite aware of this, and says that if she were not his wife’s sister, he would get ideas about her. This foreshadows what takes place in scene 10. Blanche also reveals a self-knowledge that is perhaps surprising in a woman who appears to be vain and sets great store by her looks. She acknowledges that a “woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion.”
Scene 3:

Summary
The following night, Stanley, Mitch, Steve and Pablo gather for poker in the kitchen. Mitch is the only single man out of the four. He lives with his sick mother, and is clearly lonely. Stella and Blanche return from a show, and Blanche fusses about her appearance. Stanley does not really want them around, and they go to the bedroom.

Outside the bathroom, Blanche encounters Mitch, and Stella introduces her to him. After Mitch returns to the kitchen, Blanche remarks that he seems superior to the other men. Stella agrees, and Blanche makes several inquiries about him. Stella tells her that Mitch has an insignificant job in the spare parts department of the company for which Stanley works as a mechanic. Stella says that of all the men, Stanley is the only one who will get anywhere in his career, because he has drive.

Stanley complains that they are talking too loudly, and then complains again when Blanche switches on the radio. He gets up and switches it off himself. Then Steve and Pablo start arguing about the card game, and all three men take it out on Mitch with some cruel humour at his expense. Mitch, who has already risen from his chair at the first insult from Stanley, strikes up an awkward conversation with Blanche. He asks her for a cigarette, and she gives him one. She notes that there is an inscription on his cigarette case, from a sonnet by Elizabeth Browning. Mitch tells her that it was given to him by a dying girl. Blanche expresses sympathy and says that sorrow is a virtue because it makes people sincere. Mitch is charmed by Blanche and asks her about the origins of her last name, DuBois. She asks him if he will do her a favour by putting a coloured paper lantern over the light bulb. He is pleased to oblige. Continuing his inquiries, Mitch finds out that Blanche is not married and is a schoolteacher. He inquires further, and she tells him she teaches English. She turns the radio on again and waltzes to the music, while Mitch clumsily tries to imitate her.

Then Stanley, who is drunk, hurls the radio out of the window, and when Stella protests he chases her. Offstage, there is the sound of a blow and a cry, as he hits her. Two of the men drag him off Stella, and Blanche takes her upstairs to their neighbours. The men try to sober Stanley up and there is another brief struggle. The men leave. Stanley begins to sob and calls out for Stella to return. He stands outside the building and calls up to Eunice to return Stella. Eunice tells him Stella will not come, and yelling abuse at Stanley. Stella returns and she and Stanley embrace passionately. He carries her back to the flat.

Blanche is terrified by what has happened. She encounters Mitch, but he tells her there is nothing to be scared of. Stanley and Stella are crazy about each other. Blanche thanks him for being so kind.

Analysis
This scene highlights the theme of loneliness, in the characters of Mitch and Blanche. They are drawn to each other through their strong mutual need.

The theme of death emerges again, and is linked in the minds of both Mitch and Blanche with romance. This is seen in the inscription on Mitch’s cigarette case, and his story about the dead girl he appears to have loved. Blanche’s sympathetic response again calls attention to the hints that have occurred in both preceding scenes, about her tragic marriage.

There is a telling symbolic moment when Blanche asks Mitch to put the coloured paper lantern over the light bulb. Blanche is frequently anxious to avoid light, because of how it might reveal her age, and the covering of the light with the lantern suggests how she takes refuge in illusions. The light of life itself is too much for her, so she tries to soften it with a pretty disguise. But even so, Blanche cannot stop revealing herself, at least to the audience, who will notice another of her little white lies when she tells Mitch that Stella is her older sister. The truth is the opposite.
Scene 4:

Summary
The following morning, Stella is serene but Blanche is agitated after a sleepless night. Stanley is out getting the car serviced. Blanche wants to know how Stella could possibly have gone back into the flat and spent the night with Stanley after what happened. But Stella tells her she is making too much fuss about it. She says that Stanley has always smashed things. She speaks about it in a matter-of-fact way that appalls Blanche, who thinks her sister is married to a madman. She tells Stella that she is still young enough to get out of her situation, but Stella says she has no desire to get out. She says people must make allowances for the habits of others. Blanche gets the idea that they must get hold of some money. She tries to call a rich married man named Shep Huntleigh, an old college friend of hers, whom she met recently in Miami. She tells Stella that he could set them up together in a shop. Stella thinks Blanche is being ridiculous, but Blanche insists that she cannot live in the same small apartment as Stanley. She says once more that she has a plan to get them both out, but Stella again replies that she does not want to get out. Stella hints that there is a sexual attraction between her and Stanley that makes up for everything else, but Blanche calls that “brutal desire.” Stella insists that she loves Stanley. In a speech that the returning Stanley overhears, Blanche says that Stanley is common and bestial. He is just like an animal, not even human in his crude manner and desires. Stanley calls out to Stella and then enters. He embraces Stella and grins at Blanche.

Analysis
The scene directions at the beginning clearly show how for Stella, sex has an almost mystical effect. It lifts her to a transcendental realm of peace that follows the satisfaction of desire. Her face is described as “serene,” and “her eyes and lips have that almost narcotized tranquility that is in the faces of Eastern idols.” Stella’s comment that “there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant,” also emphasizes this. Blanche does not understand this element of the relationship between her sister and Stanley. She sees only the brutality of Stanley’s behaviour and dismisses Stella’s remarks about their fulfilling sex life as no more than animal desire. Blanche has far more pressing desires to pacify—the need for love and security, for example. As later scenes will reveal, these are the needs that have in the past been the motivation behind her own sex life. She is a far more complicated person than her easily satisfied sister.
Scene 5:

Summary
Blanche and Stella are in the bedroom. Blanche is laughing about the lies she has written in a letter to Shep. They are interrupted by the sound of a quarrel upstairs between Eunice and Steve. Eunice rushes down saying she is going to call the police, although she has no real intention of doing so. Steve comes down looking for her. He has a bruise on his forehead. Stanley, who has just arrived home, says Stella will be at the Four Deuces bar. Blanche tries to engage Stanley in a discussion about astrology, but he shows little interest. Stanley then reveals he has heard some gossip about Blanche from a man named Shaw, who says he met her in the Hotel Flamingo at Laurel, her hometown. Blanche says the Flamingo is not the sort of hotel she would be seen at, but she is flustered by Stanley’s comment. As Steve and Eunice return, Stanley goes out to the Four Deuces. Blanche immediately wants to know from Stella what people have been saying about her. She reveals that there was some unsavoury gossip about her in Laurel. Stella gives Blanche a Coke with a shot of whiskey in it. Blanche, emotional, promises Stella that she will not be staying long, but Stella tells her not to talk so foolishly. It transpires that Blanche has been dating Mitch, and he is due to arrive at seven that night. Blanche wants the relationship to develop to marriage so that she will not have to stay with Stella and Stanley any longer. Stella encourages her and then goes to meet her husband. A young man arrives who is collecting money for the evening newspaper. Blanche flirts with him. He is shy and uncertain of himself. She crosses the room and kisses him on the mouth. As the boy leaves, Mitch appears carrying a bunch of roses.

Analysis
The quarrel between Eunice and Steve reveals a relationship similar to that between Stanley and Stella. Sexual passion is strong, and there are frequent violent outbursts from the man. But they are quickly over and the couple makes up. Both couples seem happy with this uninhibited state of affairs; there is a raw animal vigour about it that satisfies the man and seems to arouse admiration in the woman. It is a kind of sensual paradise for them. Not for nothing is the area in which they live called the Elysian Fields. The Elysian Fields were the happy land in Greek mythology in which those who have found favour with the gods lived forever. This is in complete contrast to Blanche’s fragility and neuroticism. Each scene reveals more of the real woman behind the façade that she tries so hard to keep up. Her letter to Shep, for example, reveals her as an accomplished liar, although one senses that it is only desperation that drives her to such lengths. The audience is likely to sympathize with her because she has considerable self-awareness about what is happening to her. She reveals this in her confessions to Stella in this scene. She is a highly sensitive, “soft” woman, ill-suited to survive in a harsh world. If she is not to be destroyed, she must somehow shield herself from reality and keep the illusion going, both for herself and others. It is not an easy task.
Scene 6:

Summary

At 2 a.m. the following morning, Mitch and Blanche return from their date. They are both aware that they did not have a very enjoyable time together. Blanche blames herself because she was not sufficiently entertaining. She invites Mitch into the kitchen for a night-cap, and then tells him to go into the bedroom. She brings in some drinks and a lighted candle. She takes his coat, and the conversation gets round to Mitch’s weight. He prides himself on his physical fitness since he joined the New Orleans Athletic Club. He tells her he weighs 207 pounds, and then he asks her what she weighs. She allows him to pick her up, and he exclaims that she is light as a feather. He puts her down but keeps his hands around her waist. Blanche politely tells him to remove them, although she emphasizes that she does not want him to think she is a severe old maid. She says she has old-fashioned ideas. She then asks Mitch whether Stanley talks about her and what his attitude to her is. Mitch diplomatically replies that he thinks Stanley does not understand her, to which Blanche responds that Stanley is common and extremely rude to her. Mitch changes the subject by asking her how old she is; his mother asked him, and he was not able to give an answer. On questioning from Blanche, it transpires that his mother will only live a few more months and she wants him to settle down. Blanche says he will be lonely when she dies, and adds that she knows what loneliness feels like. She then explains something from her past. She fell in love at sixteen and married. A sensitive man, her husband was somehow in need of help but was unable to articulate what he needed, and she was unable to provide it. Blanche believes she failed him in that respect. Then one day she discovered that her husband was in a sexually compromising position with his friend, an older man. They all pretend that nothing has happened, but at the dance that night, her husband goes outside and shoots himself. Blanche believes he did it because on the dance floor she had told him that she knew what he had been doing, and she was disgusted by it. Mitch draws her to him, and they embrace. Mitch expresses the hope that they can find love together.

Analysis

Mitch is a shy man, possibly with little experience of women, who does not see through the image Blanche projects. He is perhaps a little overawed by her, conscious of the difference in their social backgrounds, and of course Blanche is carefully cultivating her desired image of a refined woman with old-fashioned ideals and high moral standards. The fact that Mitch is caught up in a certain image of Blanche, perhaps even infatuated with her, is clear when Blanche complains that Stanley is rude to her. Mitch replies that he does not see how anyone could be rude to her. He is idealizing her. Mitch is a man who is still very attached to his mother. He has not have the maturity to have a relationship with Blanche that is based on something other than superficial attraction and stereotyped notions. Blanche’s speech in which she explains to Mitch what happened in her marriage reveals the doomed romanticism that is so common in Tennessee Williams’s plays. Falling passionately in love lights up the world like nothing else can. And yet this kind of love cannot survive in the world and is always accompanied by tragedy.

Music symbolism enters in this scene in the form of the polka music that reminds Blanche of that fateful night when she and her husband danced the Varsouviana. This music will return at key points in the remainder of the play. As a reminder of death, it serves as a contrast with the music that has been heard up to this point, that of the “blue piano” that can be heard coming from the bar round the corner. This music, as the stage direction at the beginning of the play states, “expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.”
Scene 7:

Summary

It is late afternoon in mid-September. The table is set for Blanche’s birthday supper. Blanche is in the bathroom, and Stanley makes hostile remarks to Stella about her. Stanley then tells his wife that he has found out some unsavoury details about Blanche’s life in Laurel. She is not the refined woman she claims to be. She used to live at the disreputable Flamingo Hotel, but Blanche was too much even for that hotel. She was asked to leave. This was about two weeks before she arrived in New Orleans.

Stella says there is no truth in such a story, but Stanley insists he has proof. He says that everyone in Laurel thought Blanche was crazy. Even the soldiers at the nearby army camp had been told not to go near her, and the mayor of Laurel had practically run her out of town. Stanley also claims that Blanche will not be going back to teach at the school. She was kicked out of her job because she had an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy.

Stella still insists that not all the stories are true, but admits there may be some truth in some of them. Blanche had always been flighty. Stella tells Stanley about Blanche’s marriage to the man who committed suicide. Then it comes out that Mitch, who had been invited to the birthday party, will not be coming, because Stanley passed on the stories about Blanche to him. Stella reproaches him, pointing out that Blanche was hoping Mitch would marry her. Stanley says there is no chance of that now. He explains that he has bought Blanche a bus ticket back to Mississippi for Tuesday. Stella is horrified, because she does not know what Blanche will do if she is forced to leave.

Blanche emerges from the bathroom saying she feels so good after her long bath. But she knows immediately from Stella’s look that something has happened.

Analysis

Blanche spends almost the entire scene in the bathroom. Bathing for her seems to have a kind of ritualistic significance, as if it can make her whole and pure once more. The theme of the naïve popular song she sings is the illusory nature of life, except when it can be redeemed by love. It’s an appropriate song for Blanche, and the juxtaposition of her singing with Stanley’s ruthless demolition of her character in his words to Stella is dramatically extremely effective. The veil has now been torn from Blanche, and her chances of surviving the disclosure are slim.
Scene 8:

Summary

Stanley, Blanche and Stella are finishing the dismal birthday supper. Blanche says this is the first time she has ever been stood up, and she tells a joke to try to cheer them all up. Stanley then reacts badly to a remark of Stella’s and sweeps his cup and saucer to the floor, then goes outside for a cigarette. Blanche has guessed that Stanley has told Mitch something bad about her, and she calls Mitch and leaves a message. Stella goes to the porch and reproaches Stanley. Back in the kitchen, Blanche regrets having called Mitch, and Stanley gets annoyed again because Blanche calls him a Polack. The phone rings and Blanche hopes it is Mitch, but it is a friend of Stanley’s. Stanley then presents Blanche with an envelope as if it is a birthday present. Inside is the bus ticket. Upset, Blanche rushes to the bathroom. Stella reproaches Stanley once more for his cruelty. She demands to know why he did it. Stanley explains that they were happy until Blanche arrived. Stella then feels her baby moving inside her, and tells Stanley to take her to the hospital.

Analysis

The recurrence of the Varsouviana polka music at the moment Stanley presents Blanche with the bus ticket has a symbolic significance. It shows that Blanche’s world now collapses as suddenly and as completely as it did when she learned that her husband had shot himself. It is a devastating blow.

There is another reminder in this scene of the nature of the sexual bond between Stanley and Stella. It is this that has been disrupted by the presence of Blanche, separated from them only by a curtain. Stanley refers to sexual pleasure as getting “the colored lights going.”
Scene 9:

Summary

Later that evening, Mitch comes round. He is unshaven and in his work clothes. Blanche has been drinking, but hides the bottle in a closet. She greets Mitch in a forgiving manner, but he ignores it. He too has been drinking. Blanche fetches a bottle of liquor, pretending that she has just discovered it. Mitch says he wants none of Stanley’s liquor, and adds that Stanley told him she had been lapping it up like a wild cat all summer. Blanche won’t even respond to the accusation. Mitch then says he wants to see her in the light. He has never seen her in the light before (because Blanche does not want him to see how old she is). Over her protests, he switches the light on. She covers her face, and he switches the light off again. He says he doesn’t mind that she is older than he thought, but he does mind that she pretended to have such old-fashioned ideals. He has heard the stories about her not only from Stanley but from others too. Blanche admits that after her husband’s suicide, she was so distraught and lonely she did have intimate relations with strangers. She admits also to the affair with the seventeen-year-old at the school. Mitch accuses her of lying to him, but she denies it, saying she never lied in her heart.

A blind Mexican woman comes around the corner selling flowers for the dead. Blanche opens the door and says she does not want any flowers. But the woman has reminded her of death and the tragedies of Belle Reve. She goes back inside and is lost for a few moments in disturbing thoughts from the past. She also recalls her Saturday nights in Laurel with the drunken soldiers. Mitch places his hands on her waist, and tries to embrace her. Blanche says that if he wants her, he should marry her. But he says he no longer wishes to marry her. Her last hope crushed, she tells him to go away, but he remains there staring at her. She rushes to the window and calls out “Fire!” Mitch leaves quickly as Blanche falls to her knees.

Analysis

The musical symbolism continues with the polka tune, which shows what is going on in Blanche’s mind. As the stage directions state, a “sense of disaster [is] closing in on her.” The tune stops when Mitch arrives, symbolizing her brief revival of hope, but she cannot keep it out of her head for long. The moment when Mitch tears the paper lantern off the light bulb is also a symbolic moment. It represents the final unveiling and destruction of the illusions about herself that Blanche has been trying to maintain. The entry of the blind Mexican woman selling flowers for the dead, Blanche’s reflective comments on death, and the recurrence of the polka music all work together to emphasize yet again the theme of death that runs through the play. The opposite of death, as Blanche herself points out, is desire. Desire is what makes Stanley and Stella such a vibrant couple together, and it is desire that lies at the heart of Blanche’s promiscuity after the death of her husband. It was just her desperate attempt to keep the spark of life alive.
Scene 10:

Summary

Later that night, Stanley returns from the hospital. The baby is not due until the following morning. Blanche, who has been drinking since Mitch left, is wearing a white satin evening gown. She has been packing. Blanche lies to Stanley that she has received an invitation by telegram from Shep Huntleigh to join him on a cruise of the Caribbean on a yacht. Stanley does not believe her but for a while he goes along with her story. Blanche insists that Shep is a gentleman and wants her for companionship. She says that physical beauty passes, but other qualities, such as tenderness and beauty of the mind, grow as a person ages, and she is rich in such qualities. She also tells Stanley that Mitch came back with some roses and implored her to forgive him. Stanley knows this is untrue because he knows where Mitch is. He confronts Blanche with her lies, claiming that he has known from the day she arrived what sort of person she is. He walks into the bedroom although Blanche tells him not to. As he goes into the bathroom, Blanche tries to make a telephone call to Shep Huntleigh. She is trying to leave a message when Stanley emerges from the bathroom in brilliant silk pyjamas. She backs away as he stares at her. She asks him to stand aside so she can get out. But a moment later, he takes a step toward her and she backs into the bedroom. She warns him not to come any further, but he does not take any notice. She smashes a bottle on the table and faces him, clutching the broken top. He grabs her and makes her drop the bottle top. Then he carries her to the bed.

Analysis

This is the only scene in the play that features only Blanche and Stanley. The tension that has been growing between them since the beginning has suggested there may at some point be a nasty confrontation, and this is indeed what happens in this scene. The rape is not shown, and nor is it referred to explicitly in the next scene, but there is no doubt as to what has taken place. Even before the rape, it is clear that Blanche, with the help of liberal amounts of alcohol, has begun her retreat into a fantasy world. Her need for a saviour is so great, and now that Mitch can no longer fulfil the role she has to invent someone to take his place. Stanley, as might be expected, brutally shatters all her illusions, and this, together with the physical assault, drives Blanche into a complete mental breakdown.
**Scene 11:**

**Summary**

It is some weeks later. Stella is packing Blanche’s things. Stanley, Steve, Mitch and Pablo are playing poker. Blanche is bathing. Eunice, who is looking after the baby, brings some grapes. Stella has told Blanche that she has made arrangements for her to rest in the country. She tells Eunice that she could not have continued to live with Stanley had she believed Blanche’s story (presumably about the rape). It transpires that Blanche has lost her mental balance, and she thinks she is going to stay with Shep Huntleigh. Blanche appears in a red stain robe, and Eunice tells her she looks good, as Stella has told her to. Eunice continues to humour her. Mitch is upset by Blanche’s presence and refuses to look at her, while Blanche is confused and says she is anxious to get away from there. Stella makes her sit in a chair, where Blanche makes rambling comments that combine thoughts of death, reminiscences of her first lover, and images of the ocean.

A doctor and nurse arrive from the state mental institution. When Blanche hears she has a visitor, she assumes it is Shep, but wonders who the woman with him might be. When Blanche sees the doctor, she exclaims that he is not who she was expecting. She rushes back into the bedroom in a panic. The nurse goes to fetch her. Blanche screams and tries to get past her. There is a struggle as Blanche tries to scratch the nurse, but the nurse pinions her arms. Mitch goes toward the bedroom but Stanley blocks his path. Mitch aims a punch at Stanley, who pushes him away. Mitch collapses, sobbing. Meanwhile, Stella is extremely upset at what is going on, and wonders what she has done to her sister.

Finally, the doctor speaks softly to Blanche, takes her arm and leads her away. Blanche accepts his help, although she has no idea of who he is. Stella sobs in great distress, while Stanley tries to comfort her.

**Analysis**

The tragedy of Blanche is now complete. Like so many characters in Tennessee Williams’s plays, she is a sensitive woman who even in her degradation retains a core of innocence about her, but who is crushed by a world that is harsher and more ruthless than she can cope with. The description in the stage directions of her “sorrowful perplexity as though all human experience shows on her face,” almost seems to make her a martyr for all the suffering endured by those who seek but cannot find what they need no matter how hard they look.

Ironic use of robe in the old Madonna figures. It recalls her mention earlier that she was born under the astrological sign of Virgo, the Virgin, reinforced by her comments about the cathedral bells as the only clean thing in the Quarter. As she sinks in mental breakdown, she still clings to these images of purity, innocence, and even holiness. Since the beginning of the play she has been trying to wash herself clean, and the allusions to the Virgin show that she longs for a purity that perhaps in her heart she still believes is attainable. The only way out for her now, the final shield against the world, is madness, which will keep reality at bay forever.
Character Profiles

Blanche DuBois: Blanche DuBois is the elder sister of Stella. She comes from Mississippi to stay at the apartment of her sister and brother-in-law in New Orleans. Blanche is a sensitive, highly-strung woman of about thirty. She is aware that she is getting older and worries about losing her beauty. To assuage her anxiety, she seeks out compliments on her appearance. In the decaying environment in which she finds herself, she is very aware of her more refined, aristocratic background. She objects to Stanley because he is common. As the play develops, it transpires that she has had a very troubled history. The family fortune vested in the plantation at Belle Reve, in Mississippi, was squandered and the house has been taken over by creditors. Blanche married young and the marriage had a disastrous outcome when her husband, whom she discovered in a homosexual act, shot himself. Blanche then developed a local reputation for being promiscuous and she was forced to leave the high school where she taught English because of an affair with a seventeen-year-old boy. Blanche is like a ship without an rudder. She hopes to find safe harbour with Mitch, but the budding romance fails when Stanley reveals her past to him. She is then devastated when Stanley presents her with a bus ticket home. Her gradual mental deterioration culminates in the final scene where she is committed to an institution. She is lost in some kind of fantasy world in which she does not know the difference between reality and illusion.

Stanley Kowalski: Stanley Kowalski is married to Stella. He is of Polish descent, but prides himself on being an American. Stanley is strongly built, and coarse in manners and sense of humour. Blanche calls him an animal or a cave man. Stanley’s pleasure has always been women, and the sexual pleasure he can give and take. He likes to drink, and has a rowdy group of male friends. He is also quick-tempered, and when he does not get his way he reacts violently. He believes that the man should be master in his own house. During one outburst, he strikes Stella but then is remorseful and wants her back. In other incidents, he throws a radio out of the window, and sweeps cups and saucers to the floor. He does not like to be challenged. Whatever his faults, Stanley is full of uninhibited masculine energy that Stella finds alluring, and that is why she loves him. But Stanley behaves cruelly toward Blanche, finding out about her past and telling Mitch about it. Stanley believes that Blanche is responsible for disturbing his happiness with Stella. On her birthday, he causes her anguish by presenting her with a bus ticket home. When Stella is in the hospital giving birth to their child, Stanley rapes Blanche. But he gets away with it because Stella refuses to believe Blanche’s story.

Stella Kowalski: Stella Kowalski is Blanche’s younger sister, who is married to Stanley. The sexual attraction between Stella and her husband is strong, and although Stanley is coarse in his manners and aggressive, Stella remains in love with him. She has adjusted well to the difference in their social backgrounds and appears to be happy with her lot, in spite of Stanley’s violent outbursts. She refuses to believe Blanche’s story that she was raped by Stanley, and arranges for Blanche to be committed to an institution. However, she feels guilty over her actions.

Mitch: Mitch is a close friend of Stanley’s. They were in the army together and they work for the same company. Mitch is a member of the mens’ poker-playing group. Mitch is a shy man, less uncouth than the others, and still very attached to his mother. He falls for Blanche, but then rejects her when he discovers her unsavoury past. He is tormented when he sees her being taken away to the institution, and blames Stanley for her fate.

Pablo: Pablo is a friend of Stanley’s and a member of their poker group.

Steve: Steve is one of Stanley’s poker-playing friends. He is married to Eunice. They have a stormy relationship rather like that between Stella and Stanley.
Eunice: Eunice is married to Steve. They live in the apartment above the Kowalskis.

A Doctor: The Doctor appears in the last scene to take Blanche to the mental institution. He is surprisingly gentle with Blanche, and she allows him to lead her away.

A Nurse: The Nurse accompanies the doctor to take Blanche to the mental institution. In her severe dress, she looks sinister.

A Young Collector: The Young Collector is a young man who comes to the Kowalski apartment collecting newspaper money. Blanche takes a fancy to him and kisses him.

A Mexican Woman: A Mexican Woman is a blind woman who sells flowers to be displayed at funerals and other festive occasions.
Theatrical Metaphor

Light
Not only is stage lighting used in the play to express different dramatic moods, light is also used as a metaphor for truth, as opposed to illusion. This can be seen when Blanche asks Mitch to put the paper lantern over the bare light bulb. Covering the light, making it less harsh, is literally a way for Blanche to conceal the signs of her age; symbolically it expresses her desire for illusion over reality.

Blanche uses light as a metaphor in a different context when she describes her feelings when she first fell in love with the man who was to become her husband. It made her see everything in life in a new context, as if a blinding light had been turned on what before had been in shadow. Blanche is not the first person in literature or life to describe love in terms of light. After her husband’s death, the light went out, so the world Blanche lives in is deprived, as if existing only in shadow. She uses the same metaphor of light and darkness when she refers to art and music bringing light into the darkness of a world that is characterized by people like Stanley.

Music
The play is permeated by different musical backgrounds. The music of the “blue piano,” coming from the Four Deuces bar, expresses the spirit of life in that part of the city. It responds to the moods depicted in the play, and is also heard in conjunction with brass, drums and clarinet at appropriate times. The opposite of the “blue piano” music, which represents life, is the polka music, also called the Varsouviana music, which represents death. It is first heard in scene 1, and is repeated whenever Blanche remembers her dead husband. It is heard most prominently in scene 6, when Blanche tells the story to Mitch.

Other symbolic elements
There are some other symbolic elements in the play. The names of the two streetcars Blanche takes to reach Stella’s house, Desire and Cemeteries, symbolize the themes of sex and death that permeate the play. The name of the area where Blanche and Stanley live is called Elysian Fields. The Elysian Fields are the blissful abode where ancient Greek heroes dwell in the afterlife. The term suggests that Blanche and Stanley live in a kind of paradise (a paradise that of course is hard for Blanche to understand). A clue to this paradise of sexual fulfilment is given in Stanley’s first action in the play, which is to toss a package of raw meat to Stella, which she catches. The sexual innuendo is the reason behind the laughter of the black woman who observes this. The locomotive that is heard in scene 10, just before the rape, can be seen as an expression of aggressive male desire. Finally, Blanche’s seemingly constant desire to bathe symbolizes her longing for purity, her desire to wash off the sins of her past.
Loneliness
Apart from her sister, Blanche is alone in the world. She loved once, and deeply, but since the death of her husband, the world has had no love in it for her. She longs for a deep connection with another human being. But her pathetic attempt to find love through sexual affairs with casual acquaintances has only made her situation worse. The attraction she feels toward very young men (the young man who come to the apartment for newspaper money, for example) is an attempt to reproduce the one magical, fulfilling thing Blanche had found in life—her love for her young husband. The more desperate Blanche becomes in her loneliness, the more deeply she digs herself into it.
Mitch is lonely too. He only has his mother and he is shortly to lose her. The brief moment of hope that he and Blanche share, when it seems as if they might find happiness together, is a poignant and tender moment in a world that will not sustain such romantic hopes for long. At least it will not do so for Blanche, and probably not for Mitch either, who also seems bound for failure and continued loneliness in life.
Blanche’s isolation and loneliness is contrasted with the hearty embrace that Stanley gives to life. He enters into male friendships with an easy camaraderie, and he effortlessly wins and retains Stella’s love. Unlike Blanche, he is well adapted to his environment. So are Steve and Eunice. They belong where they are; it is only Blanche who is rootless, unable to find her own niche.

Illusion and Reality
Blanche is sufficiently self-aware to know that she cannot survive in the world as it is. Reality is too harsh, so she must somehow create illusions that will allow her to maintain her delicate, fragile hold on life. “A woman’s charm is fifty percent illusion” (scene 2) she acknowledges to Stanley. And then when Mitch wants to switch the light on so that he can get a realistic look at her, she tells him that she does not want realism, she wants magic. This means that she seeks to manipulate reality until it appears to be what Blanche thinks it ought to be. She wants life to be lived in a permanent romantic glow, like the light that lit up the entire world when she first fell in love. But in this play, reality dominates. The realism of the setting, with its down-to-earth characters and the sounds of the busy life of this corner of New Orleans, suggests that Blanche’s illusions are not going to be sufficient. The fact that Blanche is probably aware of this too is what wins her the sympathy of the audience. Eventually, her thin hold on reality disappears altogether and she takes refuge in an illusory world in which she is about to go on a trip with her imaginary rich beau.

Passion, Sex and Death
The audience is given an early clue to the theme of sex and death when Blanche in scene 1 describes the directions she was given to reach her sister’s house. She was told to take a streetcar named Desire, and then take another called Cemeteries. The theme is stated again in scene 9, when Blanche says that the opposite of death is desire. Blanche means love as well as sexual desire—the need for connection with another person. She does not admire the raw desire embodied by Stanley, even though it is sexual passion that makes Stella and Stanley (as well, in a lesser way, as Steve and Eunice) so fully alive in a way that Blanche is not. Stanley and Stella know how to keep the “coloured lights” going, which is their term for rewarding sexual relations. Everything about Stanley suggests that sexual fulfilment is the centre of his life. The playwright emphasizes this in the stage direction that accompanies Stanley’s first appearance: “Animal joy in his being is implicit in all his movements and attitudes.” His sexuality is the “complete and satisfying centre” of his life.
Blanche, on the other hand, finds that her desires are continually frustrated. She is associated with death—the death of her relatives at Belle Reve, and the death by suicide of her husband,
which still haunts her. Reminders of death keep popping up to torment Blanche—the inscription on Mitch’s cigarette case, the Mexican woman who sells flowers for funerals. It was to stave off this death-impulse that Blanche indulged in promiscuous sex after her husband’s death. This was simply an attempt to keep life going, to stop her from withering inside, and to try to rekindle the transforming love and desire she had felt for her husband. But sensitive Blanche is no healthy animal like Stanley, which is why she is bound for failure and madness, while the final sight of Stanley is of him comforting Stella and reaching inside her blouse.
TOP 10 Quotations

1. “I’m not young and vulnerable any more.”
   Blanche speaking to Stanley, Scene 2 – AGE, GENDER

2. “He acts like an animal, has an animal’s habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one!”
   Blanche speaking about Stanley, Scene 4. - GENDER

3. “In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning! That we have to make grow! And cling to, and hold as our flag!”
   Blanche speaking to Stella, Scene 4 - GENDER

4. “And men don’t want anything they get too easy. But on the other hand, men lose interest quickly.”
   Blanche speaking to Stella, Scene 5 - GENDER

5. “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.”
   Blanche speaking about the effect on her of her husband’s suicide, Scene 6
   LOSS, ALIENATION, GENDER

6. “I don’t want realism. I want magic!”
   Blanche speaking to Mitch, Scene 9
   GENDER

7. “Never inside, I didn’t lie in my heart.”
   Blanche speaking to Mitch, Scene 9
   GENDER

8. “You’re not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother.”
   Mitch speaking to Blanche, Scene 9
   GENDER, ALIENATION

9. “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!”
   Stanley speaking to Blanche as he carries her to the bed, Scene 10
   GENDER

10. “Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.”
    Blanche speaking to the Doctor, Scene 11
    GENDER, ALIENATION
ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Tennessee Williams is one of America’s best known playwrights. He was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, the second of three children born to Cornelius Coffin (a traveling salesman) and Edwina (Dakin) Williams.

Williams attended the University of Missouri from 1931 to 1933. After seeing a production of Ghosts, a play by Heinrik Ibsen, he decided to become a playwright. But his education was interrupted by his father’s insistence that he work for a shoe company. Williams managed to resume his education at Washington University, St. Louis, Missouri, from 1936 to 1937, and he finally graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Iowa in 1938. He then worked in various jobs in New Orleans, Jacksonville, Florida, and New York City. These included clerk, waiter, hotel elevator operator, teletype operator, and theatre usher.

In 1940, Williams’s first major production, Battle of Angels, was staged in Boston, but critical reception was harsh and the play was quickly withdrawn. But success was not long in coming. In 1944, The Glass Menagerie was staged in Chicago and then ran for over five hundred performances in New York City. The play won the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award and established his reputation as a playwright of considerable promise.

His new reputation was further enhanced by A Streetcar Named Desire in 1947, which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize. In 1951, the play was made into a highly successful film starring Vivien Leigh as Blanche and Marlon Brando as Stanley. By that time, Williams had entered his most prolific writing period, producing a new play about every two years. His major plays during the 1950s and early 1960s include The Rose Tattoo (1950), Camino Real (1953), Cat on a Hot Tin Roof (1955), which won the Pulitzer Prize, Garden District (1957, which became Suddenly Last Summer, 1964), Orpheus Descending (1957, a revised version of Battle of Angels, and The Night of the Iguana (1961).

In 1961, Williams’s long-time companion, Frank Merlo died. This plunged the playwright into a depression that lasted many years. He was also afflicted with a dependence on prescription drugs and alcohol. For a while he was committed to an institution in St. Louis. However, Williams recovered and during his last decade he continued to produce plays. These include Small Craft Warnings (1972), The Two-Character Play, and Clothes for a Summer Hotel (1980). During this period, his reputation, which had slumped during the 1960s, revived, and he was universally acknowledged as a master dramatist. His plays were translated into many languages and many of them were made into films. Williams also wrote two novels, a novella, three volumes of short stories, poems, and an autobiography.

On February 24, 1983, Tennessee Williams choked to death on the lid of a medicine bottle at the New York City hotel where he lived.