

A Streetcar Named Desire

by Tennessee Williams · Language: EN

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Overview

A Streetcar Named Desire is a 1947 play by Tennessee Williams that tells the story of Blanche DuBois, a fading Southern belle who arrives in New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella and Stella's husband, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche's delicate pretensions and hidden past clash violently with Stanley's brutish, working-class realism, leading to a psychological and physical confrontation that destroys her. The play explores the collision between illusion and reality, the decline of the old South, and the brutal power of desire and cruelty.

The play is structured in eleven scenes and follows Blanche's descent from a fragile attempt to maintain a genteel facade to a complete mental breakdown. Her lies about her past—including her husband's suicide, her promiscuity, and her alcoholism—are gradually exposed by Stanley, who sees her as a threat to his home and marriage. The climax occurs when Stanley rapes Blanche, driving her into madness. In the final scene, Blanche is taken away to a mental institution, uttering her famous line about relying on the kindness of strangers, while Stella remains with Stanley, choosing to believe her sister's story was a lie.

A Streetcar Named Desire is a cornerstone of American drama, celebrated for its poetic dialogue, psychological depth, and raw emotional power. It won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1948 and has been adapted into a landmark 1951 film starring Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh. The play's themes of class conflict, sexual violence, and the fragility of mental health remain deeply relevant, making it a staple of theater and literature courses worldwide.

Key Takeaways

- Blanche's tragic flaw is her inability to accept reality, leading her to construct elaborate illusions that ultimately shatter.
- Stanley Kowalski represents a raw, unapologetic masculinity that sees Blanche's pretensions as a threat and uses cruelty to destroy her.
- The play highlights the clash between the old Southern aristocracy and the new industrial working class, symbolized by Blanche and Stanley.
- Desire is a central force in the play, driving characters' actions and leading to both passion and destruction.
- The ending shows that survival often requires compromise, as Stella chooses to stay with Stanley despite his violence.

- Blanche's reliance on 'the kindness of strangers' underscores her vulnerability and the failure of those closest to her to protect her.

Chapter Summaries

Scene One

Blanche DuBois arrives at her sister Stella's apartment in a poor New Orleans neighborhood called Elysian Fields. She is shocked by the squalor and the contrast to their former life at Belle Reve. Stella welcomes her, but Blanche is nervous and drinks heavily. Stanley arrives and is immediately suspicious of Blanche, questioning her about her husband and her past. Blanche tries to charm him but reveals her fragility and her dependence on alcohol. The scene establishes the tension between Blanche's delicate, aristocratic manner and Stanley's coarse, physical presence.

Scene Two

Stanley demands to know about the loss of Belle Reve, the family plantation, suspecting Blanche has swindled Stella out of her inheritance. He rummages through Blanche's trunk, finding her furs and jewelry, and becomes more hostile. Blanche explains that the plantation was lost due to a series of family deaths and debts, but Stanley is unconvinced. Stella defends Blanche, but Stanley remains suspicious. The scene intensifies the conflict between Stanley and Blanche, setting the stage for their power struggle.

Scene Three

Stanley and his friends play poker while Blanche and Stella watch. Blanche, uncomfortable, turns on the radio, which angers Stanley. In a drunken rage, he throws the radio out the window and strikes Stella. The other men restrain him, and Stella and Blanche flee upstairs to a neighbor's apartment. Stanley, remorseful, calls for Stella and eventually goes to her, and they embrace passionately. Blanche is left bewildered by their violent yet passionate relationship, which she cannot understand.

Scene Four

The next morning, Blanche tries to convince Stella to leave Stanley, calling him an animal and a brute. She argues that Stella must escape this degrading life. Stella, however, insists that she loves Stanley and that their relationship is not as bad as it seems. Stanley overhears their conversation and, when Stella returns, he embraces her in a way that shows his dominance. Blanche is left alone, realizing she cannot separate them. The scene reveals Stella's complicity in her own situation.

Scene Five

Blanche writes a letter to a wealthy suitor, Mitch, hoping to secure a future. She flirts with a young newspaper collector, showing her need for male attention. Stanley confronts Blanche about her past, revealing that he has been investigating her. He tells her that she is not welcome in his home and that he knows about her reputation in Laurel, Mississippi. Blanche is shaken but denies the accusations. The scene increases the tension as Stanley's threats become more explicit.

Scene Six

Blanche and Mitch return from a date. Mitch is smitten and expresses his desire for a serious relationship. Blanche, however, is evasive and reveals her fear of aging and loneliness. She tells Mitch about her late husband, Allan, who committed suicide after she discovered his homosexuality. The scene deepens the connection between Blanche and Mitch, but also exposes Blanche's vulnerability and her tendency to romanticize her past. Mitch is sympathetic, but the truth about Blanche's past is still hidden.

Scene Seven

It is Blanche's birthday, and Stella has planned a dinner. Stanley, however, reveals to Stella that he has learned the truth about Blanche's past: she was a prostitute in a hotel in Laurel and was asked to leave town. Stella is horrified but refuses to believe it. Stanley gives Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel as a birthday present, exposing her lies. Blanche, unaware, continues to act as if everything is fine, but the tension is unbearable.

Scene Eight

The birthday dinner is a disaster. Stanley reveals the bus ticket and the truth about Blanche's past in front of Mitch and Stella. Blanche is humiliated and retreats to the bathroom. Stanley and Stella argue, and Stanley's violence erupts again as he smashes dishes. Stella, now aware of Blanche's lies, is torn between her sister and her husband. The scene marks the complete breakdown of Blanche's facade and the beginning of her final descent.

Scene Nine

Mitch confronts Blanche, having learned the truth about her past from Stanley. He accuses her of lying and of being unclean. Blanche tries to explain that she was desperate and that her lies were a way to survive. Mitch is disgusted and rejects her, saying she is not good enough for his mother. Blanche is left alone, her last hope for a stable relationship destroyed. The scene is a devastating blow to Blanche's already fragile psyche.

Scene Ten

Alone in the apartment, Blanche's mental state deteriorates. She imagines a Mexican woman selling flowers for the dead, symbolizing her own impending doom. Stanley returns, drunk and aggressive. He confronts Blanche, and in a violent climax, he rapes her. The scene is brutal and symbolic, representing the destruction of Blanche's illusions by Stanley's raw power. After the

rape, Blanche is left broken and disoriented, unable to distinguish reality from fantasy.

Scene Eleven

Weeks later, Stella and Stanley are preparing for a poker game. Blanche is in the bathroom, having a breakdown. Stella has decided to have Blanche committed to a mental institution, believing that is the only solution. A doctor and nurse arrive to take Blanche away. Blanche initially resists, but the doctor's kindness calms her, and she goes with him, saying she has always depended on the kindness of strangers. Stella is devastated, but Stanley is unmoved. The play ends with Blanche being led away, and Stanley comforting Stella, who has chosen to stay with him.

Themes

- Illusion vs. reality
- Desire and death
- Class conflict
- Gender and power
- Mental illness

Notable Quotes

- "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." — Blanche's final line as she is led away by the doctor to the mental institution.
- "Whoever you are—I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." — Blanche says this to the doctor who comes to take her away, showing her delusion and vulnerability.
- "I don't want realism. I want magic!" — Blanche says this to Mitch when he asks her to be honest about her past, revealing her preference for illusion.
- "The opposite of death is desire." — Blanche says this to Mitch while discussing her late husband, linking desire to life and vitality.
- "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers." — Blanche's final line, repeated as she leaves with the doctor.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is A Streetcar Named Desire about?

A Streetcar Named Desire is about Blanche DuBois, a fragile Southern belle who moves to New Orleans to stay with her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley. Her pretentious manner and hidden past clash with Stanley's brutish nature, leading to a violent confrontation that destroys her sanity. The play explores themes of desire, illusion, and the decline of the old South.

Is A Streetcar Named Desire worth reading?

Yes, A Streetcar Named Desire is a masterpiece of American drama. Its powerful dialogue, complex characters, and exploration of timeless themes make it essential reading for anyone interested in literature, theater, or psychology. The play's emotional intensity and social commentary remain relevant today, offering deep insights into human nature and relationships.

How does A Streetcar Named Desire end?

Spoiler: Blanche is taken away to a mental institution after Stanley rapes her. Stella, devastated but choosing to believe Blanche's story was a lie, stays with Stanley. Blanche leaves with the doctor, saying she has always depended on the kindness of strangers, while Stanley comforts Stella, and the poker game resumes.

Who should read A Streetcar Named Desire?

A Streetcar Named Desire is ideal for students of literature and drama, theater enthusiasts, and anyone interested in psychological character studies. It also appeals to readers who enjoy exploring themes of class conflict, gender dynamics, and the fragility of the human mind. Its concise length and powerful narrative make it accessible to a broad audience.

How long does it take to read A Streetcar Named Desire?

A Streetcar Named Desire is a short play, typically around 80-100 pages. At an average reading speed of 250 words per minute, it takes about 2-3 hours to read. However, many readers take longer to appreciate the rich dialogue and subtext, so plan for a leisurely afternoon.