

2013 Suggestions for Teaching *A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams

Before seeing/reading the play

1. Research the life and work of Tennessee Williams. These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.imagi-nation.com/moonstruck/clscg.htm>

http://www.pbs.org/wnet/americanmasters/database/williams_t.html

<http://www.booksfactory.com/writers/williams.htm>

2. Research the culture of American Southern society, paying special attention to the rules of social conduct or etiquette for women. What is a Southern Belle? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Culture_of_the_Southern_United_States

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Southern_Belle

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/D%C3%A9butante>

3. Research the history surrounding post-Civil War industrialization. These and other websites provide information:

<http://www.theusaonline.com/history/industrialization.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_South

4. Research American society and the city of New Orleans during the 1940s. These and other websites provide information:

<http://kclibrary.lonestar.edu/decade40.html>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Orleans

<http://www.academicamerican.com/postww2/topics/domestic.html>

5. Research Polish Immigration to the United States in the 19th and 20th centuries. What were some of the reasons Poles fled from Poland? What kinds of jobs were available

to them in the U.S.? What were common attitudes toward them? What is a Polack?

These and other websites provide information:

<http://culture.polishsite.us/articles/art41fr.htm>

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polish_American

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Polack>

6. Research the Napoleonic Code. What is the difference between common law and civilian law? These and other websites provide information:

http://www.la-legal.com/history_louisiana_law.htm

http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/explainer/2005/09/louisianas_napoleon_complex.html

7. “Elysian Fields” is the name of the street that Stanley and Stella live on. Research the Elysian Fields of Greek mythology. These and other websites provide information:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elysium>

<http://www.roman-colosseum.info/roman-gods/elysium.htm>

Resources

Film—*A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Elia Kazan (1951)

Film—*A Streetcar Named Desire*, directed by Glenn Jordan (1995)

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer to your research on New Orleans. Discuss the importance of New Orleans—its geography, its transport system, its laws, its music and culture—as a setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
2. Refer to your research on the culture of American southern society. What do the rules of Southern gentility suggest about the upbringing Blanche and Stella had as young girls? In what ways do Stella’s and Blanche’s attitudes about southern gentility differ?
3. Consider the initial conversation between Blanche and Stanley in the opening scene. What does this exchange reveal about their attitudes toward members of the opposite sex?

4. Refer to your research on Polish Immigration. How does Stanley react to Blanche's use of the term "Polack"? How does the prevailing attitude society had toward Polish-Americans inform Stanley and Blanche's relationship?
5. Refer to your research on the emergence of industrialization and the decline of the old Southern aristocracy during the Post-Civil War era of America. How is this cultural societal shift reflected in the play? How is Blanche's loss of the plantation a result of this shift?
6. Refer to your research on the Napoleonic Code. Why is it important within the context of the play? How does Stanley invoke the Napoleonic Code? What does this reveal to us about his character?
7. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, what lies in Blanche's past that she yearns for? "Belle Reve" translates to "Beautiful Dream" in French. How is this name both symbolic and ironic in relation to Blanche's life?
8. What is the meaning of the name "Blanche?" What is the meaning of the name "Stella?" What do the meanings of the sister's names reveal about their personalities? In what ways does each woman live up to her name? In what ways does each woman not?
9. Privacy (and the lack of it) plays a large role in the action of the play. Name instances where Blanche's privacy is violated. Name instances when Stanley's and Stella's are violated. How does the lack of privacy cause the conflict between the characters to escalate? How does the stage setting physicalize the difficulty of finding privacy in the apartment?
10. How is Mitch different from the other men in the play? What is he looking for in a relationship? Explain the significance of the inscription on Mitch's silver cigarette case and how it relates to Blanche's past.
11. In what ways do Blanche and Stanley's unique ways of speaking give them status? Site examples from the play. When do Blanche and Stanley use the way they speak to gain power over each other.

12. Consider Stella's relationship with Stanley. What attracts her to Stanley? What keeps her in the relationship? Consider her relationship with Blanche. Other than being her sister, what connects her to Blanche? What strategies does Stella employ to keep the peace between her husband and her sister? When is she successful? When is she not?
13. In scene four, Blanche tells Stella that, "I'm going to *do* something. Get hold of myself and make a new life!" What specifically does she plan to do in order to make a new life for herself? In what ways are her plans thwarted? Who or what thwarts them? How is Blanche a victim of a fading culture? How is she a victim of her own delusions?
14. What does her letter to Shep Huntleigh reveal about Blanche and her ability to leave the past behind?
15. How does Stella's pregnancy heighten the play's action? What affect does the news have on Stanley? On Blanche?
16. Compare Blanche and Stella's attitudes toward Stanley's violence. How are they different? How does Stella feel about Stanley's temper and why does she justify his violent actions? What do the comments made by Eunice and Mitch regarding Stanley's temper reveal about the relationship between Stanley and Stella?
17. Why does Blanche drink? How does she try to conceal her alcoholism to other people? How does her drinking compare to Stanley's? What else do Blanche and Stanley have in common?
18. What do we learn about Blanche from her encounter with the teenager who comes to the apartment? How does her treatment of Mitch differ from her treatment of the young man? What does Blanche's attraction to youth reveal? How does this factor into Blanche's fear of aging?
19. What is symbolism? How do symbols operate in dramatic literature? Make a list of all the symbols in the play. What does each mean?
20. Refer to your research on Elysian Fields in Greek mythology. What is the relationship between mythological Elysian Fields and the Elysian Fields in the French Quarter?

Consider the first words that Blanche speaks in the play: “They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at—Elysian Fields!” How is this statement symbolic of her life’s journey?

21. What does the act of placing the paper lantern over the light bulb represent to Blanche? What does it represent to Stanley? Why does Mitch destroy the paper lantern and what does this action symbolize?
22. Toward the end of the play, Blanche says to Mitch “I don’t want realism, I want magic! I try to give that to people. I misrepresent things to them. I don’t tell the truth, I tell what *ought* to be the truth.” Make a list of the illusions in the play, and the realities that the characters are hiding from.
23. Blanche is the only character who can hear the Varsouviana polka tune. What does this tune evoke for Blanche? What effect does her past have on her and how is it important in her present? What does hearing the Varsouviana tune foreshadow?
24. At the end of scene two, Blanche says “the blind are leading the blind.” Explain how this theme resonates throughout the play’s entirety, including in the final scene.
25. All of the principal characters in *A Streetcar Named Desire* have a different relationship with the notion of “truth.” Describe instances when characters lie, deny or conceal the truth from each other. What are their reasons for doing so? Are any of their evasions justified? Who, in your opinion, is the most honest character in the play and why? Which character is ultimately the most damaged from the lies that are told and in what ways? Which character is the most damaged by the truths that are revealed and in what ways?
26. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*’s final scene, a commotion occurs outside the apartment involving some shady street characters tussling with each other and scrounging for money. Why do you think Williams placed this chaos outside the apartment at this particular moment?

27. What is true about Blanche’s final line, “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers”? At this moment in the play, which character (Stanley, Stella or Blanche) do your sympathies most lie with and why?
28. The stage directions in *A Streetcar Named Desire* call for many specific offstage noises, such as the sound of a tamale vendor, the street cries of the neighborhood, the sound of a train, a policeman’s whistle and music coming from the Four Deuces. How do these noises enhance the play’s action? What effect do the sounds have on you as an audience member?
29. What is the significance of the title of the play? What desires are present in the story? To what lengths are the principal characters willing to go to satisfy their desires?
30. If you are seeing *The Taming of the Shrew* and *My Fair Lady* as well as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, consider the three leading female characters: Kate, Eliza and Blanche. Describe the ways that each woman negotiates a world where men hold positions of status and power. What strategies does each employ to get what she wants? Who is more or less successful in reaching her goals?
31. If you are seeing *The Taming of the Shrew* and *My Fair Lady* as well as *A Streetcar Named Desire*, cite examples from the productions when each leading female character (Kate, Eliza, Blanche) is powerless in the face of her male counterpart (Petruccio, Henry Higgins, Stanley). Cite examples when the female characters are perhaps more powerful than the males. Describe these three relationships and the battles that take place between each couple. Who, of each couple, “wins” their battle? Who loses?

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