



[A Streetcar Named Desire](#), by Tennessee Williams

In A Nutshell

Tennessee Williams is an American playwright famous for three big plays: *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944, *A Streetcar Named Desire* in 1947, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in 1955. If *The Glass Menagerie* propelled Williams to fame, *Streetcar* ensured that his name would never leave the ranks of the playwright elite. The play, which tells the story of an aging Southern belle's difficult relationship with her aggressive brother-in-law, was successful both commercially and critically. It opened in December of 1947 on Broadway and ran for over two full years, earning two Tony awards for the stage production and the 1948 Pulitzer Prize.

The initial Broadway cast is almost as famous as the play for one big reason: Marlon Brando. (Whom you know as the Godfather, but who was the Brad Pitt of his day when he was younger.) Virtually an unknown at the time of the play's casting, *Streetcar* propelled this young star to big-time fame after the Broadway production (and cast) was converted to a blockbuster movie in 1951. The only change from the Broadway cast was the role of protagonist Blanche DuBois, given in the film to then-famous Vivian Leigh (Scarlett from *Gone with the Wind*), so the movie would have some star-power.

Streetcar really pushed the envelope of what was acceptable sexually in the 1940s, and Brando took the role of aggressive, macho Stanley Kowalski to the very edge (critic Arthur Miller aptly called him "a sexual terrorist, a tiger on the loose"). His performance was so memorable that many theaters to this day refuse to produce the play on the grounds that any

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actor trying to portray Stanley Kowalski would inevitably be written off as a lesser version of Brando.

Speaking of sexuality, *Streetcar* was censored when it was converted to film, like another Williams play, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Both plays include a gay man who, restricted by social boundaries in the 1940s and 50s, marries a woman. While this is a central part of *Cat*, it is a minor part of *Streetcar*. *Streetcar* also shares similarities with Williams's first big play, *Glass Menagerie*. *Streetcar*'s Blanche Dubois resembles Amanda Wingfield in *Glass Menagerie*; both are Southern belles who have difficulty moving past their outdated social ideals.

These common themes appear to be autobiographical for Williams, who was raised in Tennessee (hence the nickname) and grew up gay in a homophobic society. In fact, some believe that Williams based the character of Stanley Kowalski on a man named Pancho Rodriguez Gonzalez whom he was dating at the time (source).

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Big Picture Study Questions

- 1 *Streetcar* is divided into eleven scenes rather than the traditional act and scene divisions. What is the effect of this structure?
- 2 How does Williams tend to end scenes? On a consistently dramatic note? A tragic one? With suspense?

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- 3 Have you read *Glass Menagerie*? If so, think about Williams 's two Southern belle characters – Blanche in *Streetcar* and Amanda in *Glass Menagerie*. What makes these women similar? What makes them different?

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