

WHAT TO KNOW ABOUT TENNESSEE WILLIAMS



Tennessee Williams was a playwright and screenwriter, considered one of the most prolific playwrights of 20th century American drama. Williams was born in Columbus, MS, and moved to New Orleans in 1938, where he wrote his breakout play: *The Glass Menagerie* (1944). His career later exploded in 1947 with the massive success of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams's works often incorporate themes and characters taken from his own life, addressing topics such as homosexuality, domestic abuse, and mental illness.

Both *Streetcar* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955) were awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Williams died in 1983, at the age of 71. By the time of his death, 14 of his plays had debuted on Broadway, with several more being adapted into motion pictures.



QUESTIONS: A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE (1947)

- Williams is known for having negative portrayals of homosexuality in his work, reflecting his complicated feelings toward his own identity. How is homosexuality treated in this play, by each of the characters and by the text itself?
- Blanche DuBois is a very performative character, hiding various aspects of herself until they are forcibly revealed. How does the reader's relationship to and perception of Blanche evolve throughout the play?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- The social issues in *A Streetcar Named Desire* are all still widely discussed in media today. What contemporary stories address these topics in a similar way? How do they compare to Williams' work?
- In *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* by Angie Cruz, the main character, Cara Romero, is a woman who has experienced much loss and financial hardship throughout her lifetime. How might Cara's experiences compare to those of Blanche DuBois? What do the differences say about their individual personalities and backgrounds?
- One of the great points of shame in Blanche's past is her late husband, Allan Grey, revealing himself as homosexual. Compare this to *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water*. How does Cara's story of her estranged son, Fernando, compare to the way Blanche talks about her late husband?

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

- [National Women's Shelter Network](#)
- [The Trevor Project](#)
- [National Organization for Women](#)
- [GLAAD](#)
- [Alcoholics Anonymous](#)
- [National Coalition Against Domestic Violence](#)

- Blanche and Stella have a strong disagreement regarding Stanley's spousal abuse. How does this difference depict their individual personalities and backgrounds?
- In response to his violence against Stella, Blanche calls Stanley "subhuman" and a "brute." How does class play a role in the dynamic between these characters? In what ways might classism affect Blanche's perception of Stanley?



A Streetcar Named Desire. Directed by Elia Kazan, Warner Bros., 1951.

LITERATURE AS PRAXIS

- Stella and Blanche do not see eye-to-eye regarding Stella's safety within her marriage. How can we be there for women in dangerous situations, particularly when they are resistant to changing their own conditions?
- Blanche is judged very harshly as the other characters discover her history working as a prostitute. Discuss how this compares to contemporary social politics. How can we handle situations like this with more care?
- By the end of the play, Blanche has suffered an assault by Stanley and gone through a complete mental breakdown with no one left on her side. Discuss the importance of being there for those in crisis. How can we provide safe spaces for victims of abuse?

ADDITIONAL READINGS

- Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962)
- Angie Cruz, *How Not to Drown in a Glass of Water* (2022)
- Arthur Miller, *Death of a Salesman* (1949)
- Tennessee Williams, *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* (1955)
- Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944)