

“A Streetcar Named Desire”: key issues. . . (general idea)

Death, sexuality, delusion and societal expectations create a dynamic rife with tension and power transfers in "A Streetcar Named Desire." Tennessee Williams' play tells the story of Blanche DuBois, an intelligent, fragile woman who moves in with her sister Stella and brother-in-law Stanley Kowalski after being expelled from her own community.

Blanche becomes gradually more immersed in her fantasy world as the play progresses, eventually claiming that her millionaire lover will whisk her away from New Orleans. Her circumstances exacerbate the condition, as it peaks in the aftermath of her rape by Stanley. Her brother-in-law exerts his authority by institutionalizing her, though as a rapist and abuser he is hardly the picture of mental health.

Blanche and Stella come from a wealthy family, and Blanche is deteriorating in part because she has lost so much of her status along with her ancestral property. Her sense of being displaced and dependent haunt her throughout the play; she is even willing to settle for the somewhat foolish Mitch to secure a home of her own. Conversely, Stella ran away from their home and seems unaffected by its loss, whereas the blue-collar characters who populate the play were born with no expectation of property.

By Blanche's account, she found her husband Allan Grey in the embrace of another man, then later expressed disgust at a party. Grey committed suicide to spare himself further humiliation, whereas his young widow was left distraught with guilt, her innocence destroyed. Like Grey, Blanche would endure social stigma. In her case, she was turned away from an apartment for her numerous sexual liaisons and fired from a teaching post due to an affair with a student. Stanley and Stella stand for primitive carnality.

Blanche arrives at Stella and Stanley's home in the Elysian Fields by riding two streetcars, one named "Desire" and one named "Cemeteries." Other references to death include a woman selling flowers for the Day of the Dead, the death of Allan Grey and Blanche's discussion of funerals. Some scholars believe these serve as harbingers of Blanche's death, but they may also indicate her spiritual death, as she is alive at the play's close.