

A streetcar named desire

Literature



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Williams uses the effect of dramatic tension to his advantage throughout his plays, however it has been said that this is a more obvious technique in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. When discussing this dramatic tension we usually associate it with Blanche, whether it is tension between Blanche and Stanley, Blanche and Stella or Blanche and Mitch. Williams deliberately allows the dramatic tension revolve around her because it singles her out as an outsider, who is, alien to Elysian Fields and with an air of superiority that is unwanted in her current surroundings.

The rest of the characters seem comfortable with each other in the beginning, until it comes to a stage where Blanche has manipulated the environment around her so much that she makes the characters native to Elysian Fields feel uncomfortable with each other and uncomfortable in their own home. In scene, three we are shown the same tension between Stanley and Blanche as there was in the previous scene only with slightly more aggression.

Williams begins by setting a scene, " the poker party" there are men gathered around playing poker " a game strictly for the men", telling rude jokes and getting drunk, which creates a typically male environment. The women, on the other side of the curtain, are giggling and gossiping, which creates a typically female environment. There is tension is created here through the separation of the male and female characters. This is interesting because it not only sets up the tension between the characters, but it also creates a sense of tension in the audience, as they await the point of the scene when the two sets of characters unite

Tension is also created through the previous actions of the characters; we know right from the beginning of the scene that both sets of characters, male and female, have been drinking. Stanley says, " Nothing belongs on a poker table but cards, chips and whiskey" and Blanche later comments after slurring her speech; " I'm not accustomed to having more than one drink. Two is the limit and three! [She laughs.] Tonight I had three". We also know from previous scenes that Stanley and Blanche both drink whiskey, a very potent alcohol renowned for making the drinker short tempered and particularly nasty.

It is obvious from this evidence alone, that something highly dramatic is going to occur. Stanley is very domineering in this scene; he is the card dealer, he tells the men what to do and they obey. Later in the scene Blanche turns on the radio, Stanley tells her to turn it off and she does not obey him, finally Stanley comes in to turn the radio off himself. Stanley has a short temper naturally and he has been drinking. Blanche, an outsider, has come into his home and disobeyed a direct order from the head of the household; this would have angered him greatly.

Furthermore, she has manipulated the other characters so much that Stanley's friends side with Blanche and in doing so they question their " leader's" authority and insult him by siding with someone he strongly dislikes. This would have further annoyed Stanley and created enough tension for the audience to know that some sort of eruption of this tension was about to take place and as the audience await the highly dramatic that is to occur as a result of all this built up tension it too creates anxiety

amongst the audience. The stage directions also create tension within the atmosphere of the scene.

The description of the light at the beginning; " Over the yellow linoleum of the kitchen table hangs an electric bulb with a vivid green glass shade. " The electric bulb is an artificial disorientating light that is shaded by a vivid green lampshade. We get the impression that the strong white light is desperate to escape the veil provided by the mask of the lampshade, much in the same way that the tension building up among the characters in the scene, is masked only by the illusion of fun that they seem to be having at the poker party.

In the Stage directions at the beginning of the scene Williams talks a lot about primary colours, this represents the strong, dominant presence of the men at their best " at the peak of their physical manhood, as coarse and direct as the primary colours" Men are notoriously the more aggressive gender, especially when drunk. There is a strong sense of competition with these men; we find out that Stanley is losing, and it is quite possible that this would have irritated him considering Stanley would prefer to think of himself as being slightly more superior than the other men.

This sense of irritation and competition would add to the atmosphere of tension and discomfort, as the poker party lasts almost the duration of the entire scene this discomfort, and tension would spread throughout the scene. We are also given this impression of the characters discomfort through another set of stage directions " For a moment there is absorbed silence as a hand is dealt" This is an awkward silence between the men. This

gives the impression of people who don't necessarily enjoy each others company but feel forced together by their situation, because they work together and live near to one another.

The dialogue informs us of many of the things that have previously created tension, a tension that still lingers between the two characters now. For example, Blanche's feeling of superiority is something that caused Stanley to dislike her, something she brings up when she insists that the men don't stand as she enters the room. Stanley is abusive to Mitch, Stanley take his frustration with Blanche's behaviour out on Mitch as he doesn't yet feel he is able to fully take it out on Blanche. This pent up emotion that cannot be released is all adding to the looming cloud of tension that absorbs the entire atmosphere of the scene.

Besides the obvious kind of tension we see in scene three, the built up anger that everybody is masking behind fake grins to temporarily keep the peace, there is a lot of sexual tension among the characters. Blanche's undressing in front of the portieres, so that she can partly be seen to seduce and entice the men, is an outward expression of the sexual frustration she later confesses to Stella in scene five; " men don't - don't even admit your existence unless they are making love to you" Blanche feels she needs to make love again so that she can feel real and wanted.

Her sexual frustration is met by that of Mitch's, he, as a man, believes he is entitled to sex. He however remains unmarried and without a partner and Blanches, display of her undressed body projected onto the drapes would have certainly caught Mitch's attention. As a result of his attraction, tensions

between Stanley and Mitch would begin to stir. Mitch's display of disloyalty would anger Stanley creating a rift in their relationship. Stella and Stanley too suffer from this sexual frustration, with Blanche's presence behind the drapes it has been made difficult for Stella and Stanley to make love.

This is another strain in the relationships between Blanche and Stanley, Stanley and Stella and Blanche and Stella. This makes the characters uncomfortable with one another and there is a great deal of tension in the atmosphere around them. The tensions that are made obvious throughout scene three can be seen throughout the entire play, For example, the scenes in which the tension was originally created. In scene, one Blanche begins creating tension with her sister; she offends her home, her husband and her current life style.

Her superiority is out of place and unwanted and she makes Stella Feel uncomfortable. Williams uses the stage directions of scene one to his advantage here when he describes Stella's home and Blanche's first appearance. The description of Elysian Fields isn't very impressive " the houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables" When Blanche arrives, she is given quite a grand description and we are given the impression of someone who is of a higher social class, and should not usually find herself in a place like Elysian Fields.

The audience would immediately pick up on Blanche's conspicuousness and realise that if she seems so unwelcome and uncomfortable now in the new surroundings of New Orleans, that tensions will rise during the play when she

becomes unwanted by the other characters in the play, and when she herself realises that she is unwelcome. " Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be... "

Blanche's dialogue at the beginning of the play shows that it was she who created the tensions between her and the other characters by being so painfully arrogant and blunt about everything in scene one alone, she manages to insult both Eunice and Stella. Blanche often puts her foot in her mouth at times when it would really be best to avoid, this is part of her self-destructive nature. Blanche also struggles with inner conflicts, she says things she knows she shouldn't say and this is an example of tension within her own character, part of the struggle to be something she is not.

This can also be seen throughout the play especially towards the end of the play as we observe Blanche's downfall. The climax of the tension I believe is the final violation of Blanche at the end of scene ten. By this stage, the tensions have been running high for months. Stanley's physical dominance and craving for control has been held back all summer and he decides to deal with this in the most degrading and disarming way he can possibly think of, rape is a violation of a woman's body, rendering the woman powerless.

The moments leading up to this tragic event shadow any of the other tensions that have gone before as the audience, Blanche and Stanley apprehend what is about to occur. Matt McUsic, a journalist for a theatre studies magazine, disagrees; he does not feel that Blanche was rendered powerless he believes that Blanche consented to the sexual act " Blanche's conscious consent to Stanley is what makes Streetcar a tragedy. As the play builds, the

audience becomes very aware of the strong attraction between Blanche and Stanley.

The two characters' personal and idealistic conflicts create the tension which drives the play" After the rape the tension that previously dominated the play seems to have lifted from most of the characters, Stella is a new mother and is too absorbed in the child to worry about complications a tensions with other people, Stanley Is no longer sexually frustrated, for obvious reasons, and he is now finally getting rid of Blanche. Blanche however was released from her tension in a much different manner.

After the trauma of the rape, Blanche has become unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality and she no longer cares about tension or complications with other people, only her fantasy world. Not everything has gone completely back to normal, there will be a lingering tension between Mitch and Blanche; we know this from one of Mitch's Final comments in the play (to Stanley) " You! You done this, all o' your goddamn interfering with things you" Tennessee Williams shows a great display of skilful creation of dramatic tension, through many details and aspects of the play.

He uses it in clever places too to create suspension and mould the viewers mind to decide how we perceive the characters, In particular Blanche and Stanley. It is through this creative use of tension that Williams manages to save Blanche's character and in some ways Stanley's character from complete condemnation from the audience, he uses this feeling of tension and irritation to create pity for the character, which I think is needed for the play to stop it from becoming a tale of complete tragedy.