

# A streetcar named desire

Literature



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the first scene of the play, one of the central protagonists, Blanche DuBois, is seen arriving at Stella's (her sister) home in Elysian Fields, where 'her appearance looks incongruous to the setting'. The contrast of the character to her setting, and her conflicts with the other characters is a motif used throughout the play to explore the social and cultural changes occurring in America when the play was originally published.

We are introduced to the setting of the play in scene one, a street called Elysian Fields in a run-down quarter of New Orleans. The name Elysian Fields is ironic since, in classical mythology, it is meant to be paradise; the stage directions indicate the street is anything but! The area is described as poor, and the atmosphere is one of decay. Nevertheless, the playwright reveals some affection for the place referring to its 'raffish charm' and his lyrical images of the colours the sky imparts on the buildings in the evenings.

Stella's apartment is cramped and not to Blanche's taste, she sarcastically remarks that only Edgar Allen Poe, renowned for his macabre poems, could justifiably describe it and surmises that New Orleans must be the "ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir". Williams provides a more realistic portrait of an urban area through the descriptions of the noises and smells, the sounds of a piano played by the black bar-pianists, the aromas of banana and coffee emanating from the warehouses, and the voices of the throng, where white and black people intermingle.

This is the modern America of trade and commerce, jazz music and the urban sprawl. In contrast, we learn that Blanche has come from a plantation house called Belle Reve in Mississippi. Belle Reve translated from French

means beautiful dream, which seems fitting for its description as 'a great big place with white columns'. We get an idea of its grandeur when Eunice, the Mexican neighbour, comments in scene one, " A place like that must be awful hard to keep up.

The house is representative of old American life: a wealthy household, inhabited by an established Aristocratic family living off the toil of immigrant servants. At one point Blanche naively enquires of Stella, " You have a maid, don't you? " This grand lifestyle was difficult to sustain and is echoed in the fragile and vulnerable nature of Blanche's character. Early on she reveals her aristocratic pretensions in her casual dismissal of Eunice in the first scene. She never lets us forget her learning when she sprinkles her conversations liberally with allusions to great American authors and poets.

However, there are contradictions apparent; we learn of the loss of Belle Reve because her " grandfathers and fathers and uncles exchanged the land for their epic fornications" (Blanche's speech Scene Two). We become aware of her alcoholism and promiscuity as the play progresses, perhaps symptomatic of the decadent South. Yet she disapproves of the 'bestial' behaviour of Stanley, her brother-in-law, and maintains high ideals when appealing to the higher virtues of " art - as poetry and music - such kinds of new light have come into the world since then! (Blanche's speech Scene Four).

In marked contrast, Stanley, who can be seen as Blanche's nemesis, is very much a product of modern America. His immigrant Polish origins lack the refinement of Blanche's and his ungrammatical speech is functional, to-the-

point and littered with slang: " Now let's cut the re-bop! " he says to Blanche when confronting her over the loss of Belle Reve. Williams describes him as the 'gaudy seed bearer' suggesting his uncomplicated masculine physicality: when first meeting Blanche he removes his shirt with complete disregard to her genteel manners.

His aggressive, huckstering presence causes Stella to remark, " Stanley's the only one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere" because " It's a drive that he has" in scene three. We get an extreme view of his domineering character and immorality in the penultimate rape scene. In his presentation of Blanche and Stanley, two diametrically opposed characters, Williams draws a parallel to the condition of post-Second World War America.

In Blanche, he laments the passing of the culture of the old American South, but is quick to point out its hypocrisies. In Stanley, he reflects the urgency of the New America, but warns of its lowbrow culture, immorality and greed. We see Stanley gradually destroy Blanche through the duration of the play, mirroring the destruction of old America. However, with the birth of Stella's baby and the mixing of the two families' bloodlines, perhaps we are seeing hope for America's future?