A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams

THE AUTHOR AND HIS TIMES
**Word:** Illusion

**Definition:** something that deceives by producing a false or misleading impression of reality.

**Example:** Pulling a rabbit out of a hat.

**What’s it Like?**

- A trick
Word: **Allusion**

Definition: passing or casual reference; an incidental mention of something, either directly or by implication.

Examples: **Romeo**

What’s it Like?

connections

What’s it Like?

What’s it Like?

What’s it Like?
Advanced Organizer

Tennessee Williams

Family Life
  Father
  Rose

Streetcar
  Life Experiences
  Setting

Major Characters
Works Lead to Fame

- *The Glass Menagerie* was Tennessee Williams' first successful play.
- Less than three years later, *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened.
  - It captured the Critics' Circle Award and also won the Pulitzer Prize.
Success Leads to Depression

- As a young man who achieved great success, he suddenly missed the challenges of life; many people who reach glory at an early age realize the emptiness of fame.

- Autograph seekers depressed him. Strangers who told him "I loved your play" annoyed him; praise bothered him.

- He even suspected his friends of false affection, and he felt constant pressure for the rest of his life to write plays as good as Menagerie and Streetcar.
Price of Fame

How many celebrities can you name who have become depressed from being in the public eye?

- Brittany Spears
- Heath Ledger
- Michael Jackson

Why do you think they reject fame?
His real name was Thomas Lanier Williams of Columbus, Mississippi, where he was born in 1911.

Tom and his sister, Rose, became city children; they played in littered alleys where dogs and cats roamed at night.

Or they holed up in a small dark bedroom to play with Rose's prized collection of small glass animals.
Family Life

- His father C.C. was an abusive man that strained everyone in the family.
- C.C. fought with Edwina, disparaged Rose, and sometimes beat Tom.
- Eventually, he deserted the family altogether, but not until Rose, Tom, and a younger brother, Dakin, had reached adulthood.
- A favorite pastime for his sister and him was to make up tales, which he would often record.
As his family atmosphere grew more unhappy, Thomas isolated himself. To avoid the family conflicts, he increasingly took to writing stories alone behind a closed door, instead of making them up with Rose. His sister reacted to the parents' fighting in a more tragic way.
Rose and Her Impact

- Of the three Williams children, Rose had the hardest time growing up.
- During the early years she and Tom were as close as a sister and brother can be, but in her teens she developed symptoms of insanity.
- She withdrew into a private mental world.
- Mrs. Williams could not accept her daughter's illness and tried repeatedly to force friends on her.
Diagnosed as a schizophrenic, Rose was put in a mental institution.

Tom, who loved Rose dearly, heaped blame for Rose's madness on himself.
Rose and Her Impact

- Not even he understood why.
- But as he saw it, Rose's terrors started at about the time when he began to feel the irresistible urges of homosexuality.
- At the time—long before the advent of gay rights—to be a homosexual meant being an outcast.
Rose and Her Impact

- You were scorned and abused, and you were made to feel excruciating guilt.
- Rose's condition had no bearing on Tom's self-realization, nor did his sexual preferences trigger Rose's breakdown.
- Yet, the two events became strangely interlocked in Tom's thinking.
In the agonies of his family, Williams found the stuff of his plays.

In *Streetcar*, he shaped the story from his own experience.

He wrote about what he knew best - himself.

Perhaps that's why the plays, although considered dream-like and unreal, can nevertheless, like magic, give you illusion that has the appearance of truth.
He hardly disguised his parents, his sister and himself when he cast them as characters on the stage.

Places where he lived became settings, and he adapted plots from life's experiences.

He relived the past as he wrote.

"The play is memory," says Tom, the character in The Glass Menagerie.
Life Experiences Shape Williams’ Plays

- If you combine Williams' mother, the genteel and prudish Southern lady, with Rose, the fragile sister, you get Blanche (protagonist).

- Blanche chases dreams of the past in an increasing urbanized and industrialized present.

  - This conflict is the basis for most of his fiction, including *A Streetcar Named Desire*. 
Life Experiences Shape Williams’ Plays:
The Role of Women

- For his female characters, he chooses women with a solid, but romantic, southern background; he shows how the aristocratic lifestyle fades around them.

- Blanche Dubois is one such woman who clings to the past with a compulsive sense of duty.
Life Experiences Shape Williams’ Plays

- Stanley Kowalski (antagonist) resembles Williams' father in his rough, boisterous ways, in his foul language, and in his love for poker and alcohol.

- Williams knew firsthand what happened when a brute like Stanley clashes with a refined lady like Blanche due to his parents' stormy marriage.
Setting

- *A Streetcar Named Desire* is set in the war-torn years of the forties; in the residence of the Kowalski’s.
  - Located in a poor, yet charming neighborhood of the French Quarter in New Orleans, Louisiana.
- At the Kowalski’s, the reader is introduced to the characters that are of varied origins in their nationalities, in their backgrounds, and in their beliefs.
- Through the play, therefore, the reader is given a glimpse of the world in coexistence.
Major Characters

- **Blanche Dubois** - the central character and the tragic heroine of the play.
  - She is a "moth-like" creature who is overly sensitive and overly proud of her aristocratic background.
  - She is a stranger to New Orleans with its rough, boisterous ways. She lives in an illusory world, prompted by a very young marriage that ended in tragedy.
  - She seeks refuge with her sister Stella and her husband Stanley after losing her teaching position.
  - She is dubbed as a misfit by Stanley as she is the catalyst for his and Stella’s confrontations.
Major Characters

- **Stanley Kowalski** - Stella's domineering and possessive husband and Blanche's brother-in-law.
  - Of Polish origin, he represents all that is virile, masculine, common, and boisterous in life.
  - Vengeful in nature, he becomes Blanche's nemesis, spoils her chance of a possibly happy marriage with his best friend, Harold Mitchell (Mitch), and rapes her as a final sign of his dominance.
Major Characters

- Stella Kowalski - Blanche's younger sister, and Stanley's wife.
  - She is a figure of silent suffering and tremendous compromise.
  - Despite her gentle and refined background, she has surrendered to Stanley's domineering ways, for she truly loves him and enjoys the physical pleasures he provides.
  - She feels sorry for Blanche but sacrifices her to save her marriage.
Harold Mitchell (Mitch) - Stanley's poker friend and Blanche's last hope for a husband.

- He is sensitive in nature, like Blanche, but also mediocre.
- He listens to Stanley's story of Blanche's past and decides to forget her, thus triggering her tragic end; unfortunately, he repents too late to change the course of events.
Williams’ Downfall

- All of Williams' plays illustrate a dark vision of life, a vision that grew dimmer as the years went by.
- During his last years Williams kept writing, but one play after the other failed.
Williams’ Downfall

- To ease his pain, Williams turned to drink and drugs.
- His eyes needed several operations for cataracts.
- The new plays received terrible notices, driving him deeper into addiction.
- He died in a New York hotel room in 1983.
- Police reports say that pills were found under his body.