

A Streetcar Named Desire

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Upper-class females were expected to behave as "southern belles," gracious, respectable, and lady-like. Women were typically encouraged to show restraint even to the point of submissiveness and to avoid being assertive, dominant, or vulgar. Their sexual drives and desires typically needed to be masked or denied, certainly in public and often to themselves. Women were expected to enhance the man's self-esteem and never overshadow it. Upper-class males were expected to be "gentlemen," to show courtesy and respect to women, and to protect and provide for their wives and families.
2. Some of our students may have had personal experience with family members marrying between classes and will understand the pressure on someone from a lower economic class to "measure-up." Others will recognize how wealthy family members may look down on someone who is not in their social class. Such attitudes can cause a working-class husband to feel defensive, resentful, or rebellious and may even prompt the wife to be more critical of her spouse.
3. Many students may be aware of the rigorous Production Code that, by 1950, had been regulating the movie industry for twenty years. This Code was responsible for censorship of any content that could be seen as capable of corrupting American society: profanity, obscenity, nudity, depictions of murder and crime, explicit dancing, sexuality, homosexuality, ridicule of religion, and unpatriotic ideas. Three controversial scenes from the play had to be adapted to satisfy censors--Blanche's interaction with the newspaper collector, Allan's homosexuality, and Stanley's rape of Blanche. In addition, the Catholic Legion of Decency also exerted a strong influence on the entertainment industry during this era, but in 1993, Warner Bros. reinstated three minutes of the excised material.
4. If students have read Tennessee Williams' play, they will recognize certain challenges for a director adapting this play to a film production, particularly in 1951:
 - where to find actors who can capture these powerful characters and their conflicts
 - how to help viewers empathize, to some degree, with both Blanche and Stanley
 - how much to "expand" scenes beyond Stella and Stanley's apartment
 - how to integrate the music--the "blue piano" and the polka tunes
 - whether to add any flashbacks to dramatize Blanche's background
 - how to handle the scene between Blanche and the newsboy without risking censorship
 - how to hint at Allan's homosexuality without being censored
 - how much to show of the rape
 - how to capture Blanche's emotional instability
 - whether to have Stella stay with Stanley at the end of the film

5. Most students are familiar with discrimination against gay people, but they may need to be reminded of how most gay individuals felt isolated, ashamed, and often in denial of their sexual orientation. Many men felt pressure to be "manly" to avoid ridicule and rejection for seeming effeminate or a "sissy." The predominant view was that homosexuality was not natural and was even perverse.

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. In the opening scene of the film, the camera records Blanche's arrival at the train station in New Orleans. She is a well-dressed woman in tailored suit with consciously selected accessories—hat, jewelry, flowers bunched on her lapel. She would be admirable if it were not immediately apparent that she is intensely nervous and insecure. Even though she has exact directions to find her sister's home—which streetcar to take, the address of the apartment—Blanche is more puzzled and distressed than she is a confident woman accustomed to traveling alone. She is immediately helped by a sailor who perceives her concern. In her first conversation with her sister, she admits that she needs a drink, that she is on the verge of "lunacy," and that her nerves are broken. Later, she admits that she is "shaken up," hot and "tired." She lies to her sister when she claims that her "broken nerves" are why she has left the school term before the end of the semester. She seems frail, insecure, and physically incapable of dealing with the environment.
2. In this play, several of Tennessee Williams' names have symbolic significance. As Blanche mentions when she first sees her sister, "Stella for star!" Indeed, Stella, pregnant and in love with Stanley, seems to be radiant throughout the film. Stella is able to shine on her own, after leaving her childhood estate, and her passion for Stanley burns intensely. It seems deliberate that the newspaper that Stella subscribes to is *The Evening Star*. Blanche tries to avoid the light and stay out of any lights that expose her aging. Blanche's name is French for "white," suggesting purity and innocence. Blanche seems to have been innocent and even naive when she married Allan, not realizing he was gay, but her name is clearly ironic as, after Allan's death, she has numerous sexual encounters with "strangers" at a disreputable hotel and even seduces one of her students, which causes her to be fired. Blanche's last name Dubois is French for woods so, as she tells Mitch, "the two together mean white woods. Like an orchard in spring! You can remember it by that" (59). The woods image may suggest wilderness and the wild or unknown realms, even the fertility or sexual abandon of springtime, so the combination of "white" and "woods" captures Blanche's conflicting nature, her double edge.

"Elysian" means "happy" and "delightful" and "Elysian Fields" refers to the abode of the blessed in Greek mythology. Therefore, Elysian Fields is the paradise or the happy land of the Greek poets. Blanche catches the irony that this is her sister's address since Stanley and Stella's claustrophobic apartment in a run-down area of New Orleans seems to Blanche to be far from paradise. In fact it is where she is raped and sent away to an asylum. It seems fitting that Blanche arrives on a streetcar named Desire, desperate and searching for a home and sanctuary. When Stella explains her feelings for Stanley, Blanche charges, "What you are talking about is brutal desire--just--Desire!--the name of

that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another" (81). When Stella asks Blanche, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" Blanche responds, "It brought me here, Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be" (81). Streetcars are noisy and inexpensive public transportation that seemed antiquated even then. Blanche and Stella grew up on a southern estate, Belle Reve, which means "beautiful dream," but the family encountered hard times because of the men's debaucheries and eventually lost the property and any wealth that they had. Losing this "beautiful dream" foreshadows Blanche's downfall in society as well as her personal and emotional decline.

3. Initially, the tensions between Stanley and Blanche might be attributed to their differences in background, that they come from **different social classes**. It is true that there are class differences: Blanche's family is old Southern gentility, and Stanley's family is working class. Although Blanche's family can trace its heritage and land holdings back many generations and Stanley is a first-generation, American-born citizen of Polish immigrants, their class differences are less significant than other tensions that exacerbate their relationship.

Their **perceptions** of each other block the possibility of any true relationship. Blanche sees Stanley as "primitive," a "brute," an "animal" who is "sub human." There is "no part of a gentleman in his nature." When she speaks to Stella about Stanley she describe him as "common," the man who brings home the meat from the hunt and, when he arrives, will either "strike," "grunt at," or "kiss" his wife. When she is trying to flatter Stanley, she admits to him that she never liked "wishy-washy" people, that she admires "forceful" men. In one moment, Blanche thinks that maybe Stanley's blood is what the Du Bois blood needs to be mixed with now that they have lost Belle Reve. Stanley sees through Blanche's evasiveness and veneer of gentility. He acknowledges that "he puts his cards on the table." He is frank, openly asking Blanche how long she is going to stay with them, and soon after meeting her asking about her marriage—clearly a painful topic for Blanche—and then acknowledging that his liquor is going fast in the hot weather. He forthrightly says to Blanche, "I guess I'll strike you as being the unrefined type." He distrusts her because she has lost Belle Reve and seems to have no explanation for the loss of the sisters' inheritance. He also perceives that Blanche flirts with him and says to her, "If I didn't know you were my wife's sister, I'd get ideas about you." Blanche, who is spraying herself and him with her Jasmine perfume, says, "Such as what?" Stanley's retort, "Don't play dumb; you know what" illustrates his perception of Blanche as a tease, his disgust with her lack of honesty, and his direct method of communication. Stanley knows that Blanche perceives him as a "greasy pig, Pollock," and he is offended by her being all "hoity toity" and seeing him "like an ape."

Their **values** necessarily contrast. In spite of losing Belle Reve and living on a teacher's salary, she seems to have a trunk full of fashionable clothes, as Stanley notices. In fact, Stanley wants to have her wardrobe and jewelry appraised. Blanche loves fine clothes and dresses consciously. She is ever aware of how she looks, what she is wearing, and she bathes, shampoos, and checks her makeup continuously. Her preoccupation with how she looks is evidence of the superficial values she has. Blanche lives in a dream world of nostalgia for better times, when Belle Reve was home, women dressed up, and

gentlemen suitors called. She is broken by her life of past mistakes and tries to cover her present instability with superficial choices that she hopes will disguise her lack of control. Stanley lives in the present, in the raw and physical world of food, sex, drink and competitive card playing. He is not ashamed of his physical nature and openly changes clothing when he has sweat through a shirt during an evening of intense bowling. He does not hide his body when he changes his shirt in front of Blanche. When Blanche admits that nice dresses are a “passion,” Stanley agrees that the Kowalskis and the Du Bois have different “notions” about clothing. An overt acknowledgement of one of Stanley’s values is that he doesn’t want “to get swindled.” His valuing the fact that he can check the grease job that the mechanic has done on his car is indicative of his pride in not wanting to be cheated, an obvious contrast to Blanche who hasn’t a clear idea of how she has lost Belle Reve.

Their manifestations of **their sexuality** contrast. Blanche has a history of complicated or distorted sex, a short marriage to a homosexual, a number of quickly settled passions with the soldiers at the military base who visited her at Belle Reve, the suggested commercial exchanges in the disreputable Hotel Flamingo, and the inappropriate relationship with the high school student that precipitated her dismissal from her teaching position. She flirts with Stanley and Mitch, but has no intention of a sexual union with either. At one point she admits to Stanley that she is “fishing for compliments,” but he acknowledges that he doesn’t “go in for that stuff.” His sexuality is raw, open, physical—knocking out the light bulbs on his wedding night. His assault on Blanche may indicate his mixed understanding of the signals she sends, but his lack of remorse for finally destroying Blanche in raping her is indicative of his animal nature and his belief that he can take what he wants.

Blanche and Stanley have contrasting **relationships with Stella**. Blanche seems to believe that she can perpetuate the relationship that she and her sister had at Belle Reve. She relies on her sister to attend to her needs, for drawing baths, fetching beverages, selecting clothing so Blanche can dress. Blanche assumes that Stella will leave the “mad man” Stanley after Blanche has sufficiently denigrated him. She finds it implausible that Stella could have moved away from the traditions and values of Belle Reve. For Stanley, Stella is “the little woman” from whom he demands dinner, sex, and quiet on his card-playing nights. He physically hurts Stella who nevertheless stays by his side, comforted that he is “a lamb” when he sobers up. The **cramped apartment** exacerbates the tensions between Blanche and Stanley. There is no place to escape the heat of the New Orleans spring nor the heat of tense relationships. Thin curtains separate their sleeping areas, and Stanley refers to the need to keep their lovemaking quiet when he tries to assure Stella that things will return to normal when Blanche departs. Blanche’s fixation on bathing keeps others from using the bathroom and when she does leave the bathroom, it is left dripping with collected steam from her hot bath. Conversations are overheard in the small space, and each character suffers from overhearing the tensions that are voiced. Blanche’s immediate and overt condemnation of the apartment does nothing to help her sister feel comfortable about where she and Stanley live.

4. Most viewers will recognize Stanley's famous cries, "STEL-LAHHHHH!" Stanley bellows his wife's name to try to get her to come back downstairs to him after a major fight that sent her and Blanche up to stay with their neighbor Eunice. Before the fight, Stanley is quite drunk and playing cards with his buddies while Blanche and Stella are playing dance music on the radio, and Blanche is getting to know Mitch. When Stanley grabs the radio and throws it out the window, Stella calls him "drunk" and an "animal." Her anger prompts Stanley to charge after her and hit her, off screen, and we hear Stella's cry. Blanche screams that Stella is going to have a baby, and they escape upstairs to Eunice's house. After Stanley's buddies get him into a cold shower to try and sober him up, he erupts again and sends them all away. Alone and devastated that Stella has left, Stanley sobs and tries to call upstairs on the phone, but Eunice won't let him speak to Stella. The line that prompts his famous cry is when Eunice shouts that Stella won't be coming down. After Stanley's last cry of "STEL-LAHHHHH," Stella opens the upstairs door and slowly steps down the winding staircase, as if she is under a spell and drawn to him. Stanley drops to his knees, as she bends down to him and pulls him up to her, kissing him uncontrollably. Their passion for each other is palpable and intense, as he carries her back into their flat, pleading "Don't ever leave me, baby." Watching someone who characteristically exhibits such bravado and aggression seem so recalcitrant and vulnerable is striking--and unforgettable.

5. Mitch's feelings about Blanche evolve from his initial meeting with her to the final scene in the film when she is taken away for medical treatment. At first Mitch is attracted to Blanche's gentility, the fact that she recognizes the Browning sonnet on his silver cigarette case. She values the beautiful case and his story about its being a gift to him from a girl who died. As she sees him as a "superior type" compared with the others in Stanley's card-playing group, he sees her as refined and different from the other women he has met. He is delighted when she expresses gratitude to Mitch for hanging the paper lanterns for her, to cover the bare light bulbs that offend her. When she sways to the music on the radio, enchanted by the new light in her area of the apartment, he dances along with her, charmed by her and the "magical" moment that they have created. In looking forward to her date with Mitch, Blanche tells Stella that she wants to deceive Mitch into thinking that she is prim and proper, "Just enough to make him want me." When she is reluctant to cut loose on the dance floor, Mitch accepts the fact that she hasn't had much fun.

As they become more frank with each other—Mitch acknowledging his weight-training program and Blanche her early marriage—it seems that Mitch is willing to accept her reluctance to become more sexually open with him. He has settled for a kiss from her. When she explains her reluctance to engage in fuller intimacy with him—"a single girl has to keep a firm hold on her emotions or she'll be lost"—he accepts the explanation and wants her to remain "exactly as she is," an old-fashioned girl. She tells him about her young husband Allan, and how at sixteen she was "too completely" in love. Mitch listens intently and sensitively to Blanche's story, to her admission that she finally told her husband that she had lost respect for him, that she despised him and that he had killed himself on hearing her admission. Mitch's admiration for Blanche turns to love, a desire to comfort and protect her. He says, "You need somebody, and I need

somebody, too.” It appears that Mitch accepts what he knows of Blanche’s history and wants to marry her.

However, Mitch’s feelings about Blanche change when Stanley tells Mitch about Blanche’s more recent sexual behavior at the Flamingo Hotel, where she entertains the many men who come through her life and leave after a few days. Stanley has also told Mitch that Blanche was asked to leave her teaching job after the father of a boy at the school informed the school board of her sexual relations with the student. On her birthday, Mitch does not appear for dinner and comes later, to verbally accost Blanche after he verifies Stanley’s stories about Blanche. He acknowledges that he has never had a good look at her—metaphorically and literally—as she has insisted that their meetings were to be after dark, in dim light. She has not wanted Mitch to learn that she is older than he senses. While she admits to Mitch in this final scene between them that she has had many meetings with strangers after the death of Allan, to “fill her empty heart,” for Mitch there is too much subterfuge and outright deceit in Blanche’s narrative to accept her as a wife. Blanche calls Mitch “a cleft in the rock of the world that I could hide in,” but he resents her omissions and lies. He kisses her passionately—perhaps excited by the revelations of her sexual history—but he admits that he does not want to marry her. She isn’t “clean enough” for him to bring into his mother’s home.

6. When Stanley arrives home unexpectedly, he overhears a lengthy conversation between Blanche and Stella, without them realizing he is listening. He hears Blanche tell Stella of her "plan to get us both out of this" and listens while Blanche claims that Stanley is beneath her: "He acts like an animal, has an animal's habits! Eats like one, moves like one, talks like one! There's even something--sub-human--something not quite to the stage of humanity yet." Blanche's argument against Stanley continues for many lines as she tries to inspire Stella to aim higher than someone as base as Stanley. "Maybe we are a long way from being made in God's image, but Stella--my sister--there has been some progress since then. Such things as art--as poetry and music--such kinds of new light have come into the world. In some kinds of people some tenderer feelings have had some little beginning." Impassioned and intense, Blanche concludes, "In this dark march toward whatever it is we're approaching. . . . Don't--don't hang back with the brutes." After Blanche's persuasive appeal, Stella embraces her as if she is convinced by Blanche's argument. The camera then cuts to Stanley outside who retraces his steps and acts as if he is just arriving home. While they are still embracing, they start to hear sounds of movement in the flat and they continue holding each other and looking at each other, obviously feeling anxious and guilty about what Stanley might have heard. Stanley calls out for Stella several times and then, when she answers, asks her innocently if Blanche is back yet. Blanche gives Stella a final look of appeal and puts her hand on Stella's shoulder, but Stella only runs into Stanley's arms, clearly rejecting Blanche's plea. Blanche looks noticeably dejected, as Stanley grins triumphantly at her, holding Stella. Stanley clearly realizes that Blanche has declared war on him, but he has won a decisive battle.

7. The scene where Blanche engages with the newsboy who comes to collect payment for the paper delivery is one of the most revealing and frightening in the film. For all of its brevity, the scene reveals a great deal about Blanche and foreshadows what the audience will shortly learn about her sexual history. Blanche flirts with the newsboy, offers him a drink, discovers that she has no money in her purse to pay him and describes herself as one of those "poor relations" everybody knows something about. She sees the boy as a prince out of the Arabian nights, and as she hears the waltz theme in her head, asks the boy for a light for her cigarette, which he provides. Finally, she asks him to come close to her as she says, "I want to kiss you just once, softly and sweetly on the mouth." After a gentle kiss, she sends him away and admits, "It would be nice to keep you, but I've got to be good--and keep my hands off children." He departs just as Mitch arrives to pick Blanche up for their date. The scene with the newsboy explicitly illustrates what sexual activity Blanche is capable of and the scene foreshadows what the audience will shortly learn, that Blanche was asked to leave her teaching position when it was revealed that she had a sexual relationship with a student at the high school.

8. In the play, Blanche explains to Mitch that she fell in love with Allan and married him when she was only sixteen. She stresses that Allan was young, too, and she felt that she had "failed him in some mysterious way and wasn't able to give the help he needed but couldn't speak of!" Blanche reveals that she discovered Allan in bed with "an older man who had been his friend for years . . ." (114). They pretended that it hadn't happened, but, later, while she was dancing the Varsouviana with Allan at Moon Lake Casino, she said to him: "I saw! I know! You disgust me . . ." (115). Blanche explains that he ran from her to the lake, "stuck a revolver into his mouth, and fired--so that the back of his head had been--blown away" (115). Years later, Blanche is still so distraught by Allan's violent suicide and her role in prompting it. Throughout the play, she repeatedly is haunted by the Varsouviana music that plays in her head until she hears the shot. After Blanche explains Allan's death, Mitch is exceptionally compassionate and supportive of Blanche as he embraces her and says, "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be--you and me, Blanche?"

In the film, Mitch shows this same compassion, but there is no mention of Allan's homosexuality, due to the censorship regulations. Instead, Blanche just claims that she couldn't understand why this boy who wrote poetry couldn't do anything else and couldn't even keep a job. On the dance floor, unable to stop herself, she told Allan, "You are weak--changed. I've lost respect for you. I despise you" (115). Without any mention of Allan's homosexuality, viewers don't get a sense of Allan's shame or the extent of Blanche's shock, sense of betrayal and inadequacy, and guilt.

Similarly, the Production Code required that the rape scene be muted and only suggested. In the play, when a drunk Stanley returns home from the hospital where Stella is preparing to give birth the next day, a drunken Blanche smashes a bottle on the table to defend herself from what she perceives will be a sexual attack. Stanley takes this as a challenge, as he inevitably does when anyone stands up to him, and he responds, "Oh! So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house!" He advances toward her, she cries out and tries to strike him with the bottle top, but he stops her and says, "Tiger--tiger! Drop the bottle-top! Drop it! We've had this date with each other from

the beginning!" [She moans. The bottle-top falls. She sinks to her knees. He picks up her inert figure and carries her to the bed.] (162). The film, however, deletes Stanley's comment that "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!" Instead, viewers watch Stanley attack Blanche as she struggles fiercely and tries to defend herself with the jagged bottle. Stanley, an experienced fighter, smashes the bottle against the mirror which shatters dramatically as the music becomes shrill. To underscore the sexual violence, the camera zooms in on a close-up of the smashed mirror reflecting an image of Blanche's terrified face tilted backwards, suggesting she is overwhelmed and violated. The scene ends with this shattered image of Blanche, perhaps implying the fragmentation and disintegration of her life.

9. The black and white film hauntingly captures the post war atmosphere of New Orleans. As the film opens, a train pulls into the station and a bevy of young women chase a good looking young man. Taxi-cabs zoom about. Music and street noises are omnipresent throughout the film; jazz trumpets blare and trolley cars rattle past. Stanley and Stella's apartment is in the heart of New Orleans with its many bars and brawls. Alcohol consumption is constant, as is the steamy heat. Even when it is not raining, the residents and atmosphere seem damp, humidity is high, heat is a significant force that is fought with baths and ceiling fans, and staying in underwear as long as possible before finally getting dressed. Tempers boil over in the heat; sexual tensions and passions are ever present. It is a giddy atmosphere where men chasing and abusing women seem to be part of the accepted setting. In addition to the clatter of the trolley car, the cathedral clock chimes, to toll the hours and remind the listeners of passing time, just as the old woman selling flowers reminds Blanche that she and Stella are the remaining DuBois to make their way to the family cemetery.

10. At the conclusion of the film, the audience can see that Blanche has been traumatized; she is terrified to be anywhere near Stanley or the poker players, including Mitch, who are all in the front room. Blanche peeks out from the bathroom to timidly request her clothes, but her eyes avoid both Stella's and Eunice's. Clinging to her fantasy that Shep Huntleigh is coming to take her away, Blanche is clearly detached from reality. Stella and Eunice coax her to get dressed by feeding her fantasy that she is going on a vacation. Both Stella and Eunice are concerned about Blanche's mental state, and Stella worries that she has made the wrong decision to commit Blanche to an institution. Stella reveals her dilemma: "I couldn't believe her story and go on living with Stanley." Eunice concurs, "Don't ever believe it." However, everyone can see that Blanche is afraid to enter the room and even to pass by where the men are playing cards, but Stella offers to go with her. When Blanche goes outdoors and sees a strange woman and man, she rushes back into the house, terrified. We hear everything that is said to her as it echoes a second time so we share a sense of her mental instability. The camera cuts to Mitch who is watching Blanche's torment with great pain. Earlier in the poker game, he had verbalized his criticism of Stanley by saying, "You . . . you . . . brag . . . brag . . . bull . . . bull . . ." and Stanley had asked, "What's the matter with him?" Now as the Doctor and Nurse enter the home after Blanche, Mitch openly accuses Stanley: "You've done this to her" and turns to the other poker players, "He did this to her." The other men look at Stanley suspiciously

as he protests, "What are you looking at? I never once touched her." This dialogue is only in the film, not in the play. The play shows Mitch striking at Stanley but then collapsing and sobbing.

But the verbalization of Mitch's accusation and Stanley's need to defend himself prepare us for a different ending for the film. Unlike the play's ending, where Stella remains with Stanley while he kneels beside her and his fingers find the opening of her blouse, the film's ending shows that Stella refuses his embrace: "Don't you touch me. Don't ever touch me." As Stanley tries to persuade her to stay, Stella picks up the baby and promises the infant: "We're not going back in there again. Not this time. We're never going back. Never!" and she hurries up the stairs to Eunice's apartment as Stanley once again shouts after her: "Hey, Stella--Stel-lahhhh!" This changed ending for the film was mandated by the Production Code, but it is interesting that Stella only goes upstairs as she has many times and doesn't really leave the premises, so her resolve still seems tenuous at best. Viewers can decide if Stella could actually break from Stanley and if Stanley's buddies will soon embrace him again.