

## Context Revision - 'A Streetcar Named Desire' by Tennessee Williams

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Columbus, Mississippi, in 1911. After spending most of his youth in St. Louis, Missouri, "Tennessee" (a name he chose because of his family's extensive roots in that state) moved to a New Orleans rooming house in the winter of 1938 and remained there through the spring of 1939. Proclaiming New Orleans "his favorite city in America, perhaps in the world" (Williams and Mead, p. 73), Williams returned there in 1945 to write *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a play that dramatizes the social and economic transition between traditional Southern life and the newly industrialized South. **Date first premiered – 1947**

### Events in History at the Time of the Play

**The Industrial South.** *A Streetcar Named Desire* chronicles the defeat of an aristocratic Southern belle by a new working-class society. What befalls Blanche DuBois in Williams's play befell many upper-class Southerners as industrialization swept away their traditional power base. The decline of the Southern aristocracy that had begun with the Confederate defeat in the Civil War was openly evident by World War I (1914-18). Long after the war, which ended in 1865, the South continued to be a region with a mostly agrarian economy controlled by wealthy landowners. The late 1800s saw the growth of iron and textile industries in the South, but progress was slow until the arrival of World War I brought rapid industrialization in the form of factories supporting the war effort of America and Europe. Though the U.S. did not officially enter World War I until 1917, a labor shortage developed in Southern agriculture as a result of the mobilization of men for both military and defense- industry needs. Owners of vast stretches of land, without laborers to work their farms, moved to urban areas, as did smaller farmers, who preferred steady paychecks at the mills to inconsistent incomes from raising livestock and growing cotton and other cash crops.

From the 1920s through 1940s, industrialization continued to expand in the South, and the old Southern class structure could not withstand its effects. The composition of the labor force changed radically: more blacks, poor whites, immigrant stock, and women began working than ever before. In 1945, 5 million women were in the work force in the South, a full million more than five years earlier. Between 1939 and 1947, the number of industrial workers in the South almost doubled, from 1.3 million to 2 million. They benefited from increased unionization and legislation that ensured higher wages than ever before in the area.

The more successful members of these groups became part of a burgeoning middle class that slowly replaced the disappearing aristocracy of the Old South as the elite in Southern communities. The aristocratic tradition, rooted in concepts of the social man as master and homebound woman as mother and nurturer, gave way to a new social order, particularly after women gained the constitutional right to vote in 1920 and as divorce, employment, and education became more readily available to them. If the Southern sense of hierarchy appeared to remain, it was no more than the aristocrats clinging to the last vestiges of obsolete power, for by the 1940s Southern wealth and influence already had shifted to the industrialists.

**The Napoleonic Code.** Napoleon Bonaparte was the French emperor when the United States purchased Louisiana and its accompanying territories from France in 1803. Despite the change of ownership, Louisiana's state government continued to operate under the precepts of French law, which had been codified beginning in 1800 and which went into effect four years later. France's Napoleonic Code concerns itself with civil law, as opposed to criminal law, and represents a compromise between the differing legal systems of northern and southern France at the time Napoleon took power. It preserved traditional patterns of inheritance, but also provided more freedoms for the French people. In 1808, Louisiana put into effect a civil law based on the Napoleonic Code, a new adaptation of which was instituted in 1825; it remains the basis of Louisiana's civil law today. Under Louisiana civil law, any property belonging to a spouse prior to marriage became the property of both spouses once they were wed. This law sheds light on the dynamics in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. In the play Stanley Kowalski, a Polish immigrant, has married Stella, daughter of a family whose declining fortunes have until recently included a plantation; Kowalski asserts his ownership interest in the DuBois property, which became his also at the time of his marriage.

**The French Quarter.** The French Quarter, located in the downtown section of New Orleans (which became a city in 1805), is its oldest neighborhood and is sometimes referred to as "Vieux Carre," French for "Old Square." The designation "French Quarter" itself recalls the French immigrants who settled here in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, when the neighborhood was first built. The heart of the famous Quarter is made up of grand brick houses, narrow sidewalks, ivy-covered patios, fountains, and wrought-iron railings. In 1947, as today, this area of New Orleans

was distinguished by fashionable nightclubs, regional food, and jazz music. The outer reaches of the Vieux Carre, where Williams set his play, were much poorer than the heart of the Quarter, but nevertheless had what Williams identifies in the play as "a raffish charm" (Williams, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, p. 13).

At the time the play is set, the French Quarter was a melting pot of races and classes: blacks, Creoles (people who trace their ancestry to the early French or Spanish settlers of Louisiana, or in more recent usage, people of mixed European and black ancestry who speak a Creole dialect), Cajuns (descendants of early Acadian settlers from eastern and maritime Canada), Mexicans, and Asians coexisted there in a mix that would not occur for decades in other American cities. While Polish Americans like Stanley Kowalski made up only a tiny percentage of the New Orleans population as World War II drew to a close in 1945, European immigrants in general and their descendants also composed a significant part of the racial tapestry of New Orleans.

**Jazz and blues music.** As designated in the stage directions, the sound of a "Blue Piano" and other jazz instruments punctuate *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Actually New Orleans, where the play is set, is sometimes referred to as "the cradle of jazz." An American musical style that originated around the turn of the twentieth century among Southern black musicians, jazz is heavily rhythmic, melancholy, and impromptu. It was born of the musical traditions associated with slavery- West African rhythms, work songs, spirituals, and American folk songs. The blues, a slower, more melancholy kind of jazz music, may have originated in the music played at African American funerals. This variety of jazz is characterized by the "blue note"-a note intentionally sung a quarter or half tone flat. Since the 1920s, jazz and, more specifically, blues have been played throughout the French Quarter and all areas of New Orleans, particularly in bars and clubs along Bourbon Street (itself an inspiration for a standard blues tune in the 1920s). Other popular jazz styles in Tennessee Williams's day were the upbeat "swing" and complex "bebop" styles, the latter of which was famous for its subtle harmonies and extended musical phrases. In general, jazz represented to many people the music of rebellion and sensuality, associated as it was with the nightlife, interracial socializing, and the sultry South.

**The New Orleans streetcars.** By 1900, most of the streetcars that ran in Southern cities were electrically powered, an improvement in cost and efficiency over the horsecars and steam engines that used to rumble through the streets. New Orleans, following the lead of Richmond, Virginia, employed a large fleet of electric streetcars powered by an overhead trolley wire system.

Historians credit the development of the electric streetcar with the growth of suburbs and the definite division between rich and poor neighborhoods. New Orleans's "Desire" line served Bourbon and Royal Streets in the affluent nightclub section of the French Quarter. Williams once wrote that the streetcars' "indiscourageable progress up and down Royal Street struck me as having some symbolic bearing of a broad nature on the life in the Vieux Carre-and everywhere else, for that matter" (Williams in Spoto, p. 129). The "Desire" line shut down in 1948; by 1964, the city's last great line, "Canal," halted service. The "Cemetery" line, to which Blanche transfers in the play to reach her destination-Elysian Fields-actually ran up and down Canal Street in the French Quarter.

**Southern women.** The classic Southern woman was expected to be "a model of virtue, a guardian of youth, and 'a restraint on man's natural vice and immorality'" (Wolfe, pp. 61-2). She was considered inferior to men of her own race, while at the same time supposedly being virginal and morally superior to the male-in other words, less sinful than him. In her male-dominated society, the Southern woman was furthermore taught to look not to herself but to others for protection. Blanche does this in the play, appealing first to Stella and Stanley, then to Mitch, and in the final scene to her doctor: "Whoever you are," she says with a kind of blind faith, "I have always depended on the kindness of strangers" (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, p. 142).

The fact that Blanche is an educated woman fits with trends in the South, especially Mississippi, from whence she hails; the South's first public college for women was established there in 1884. Education, though, was no guarantee of a sober, unidealized, or any less Southern outlook on life. As the historian Margaret Ripley Wolfe points out, "many able, intelligent, and educated southern women... still reveled in the past" (Wolfe, p. 132), as Blanche clearly does in the play. The character Mitch also lives by traditional standards, as evidenced by his dismay and subsequent rejection of Blanche. Once he learns the truth about her multiple love affairs back in Laurel, she grows sullied in his mind and too distasteful to continue pursuing.