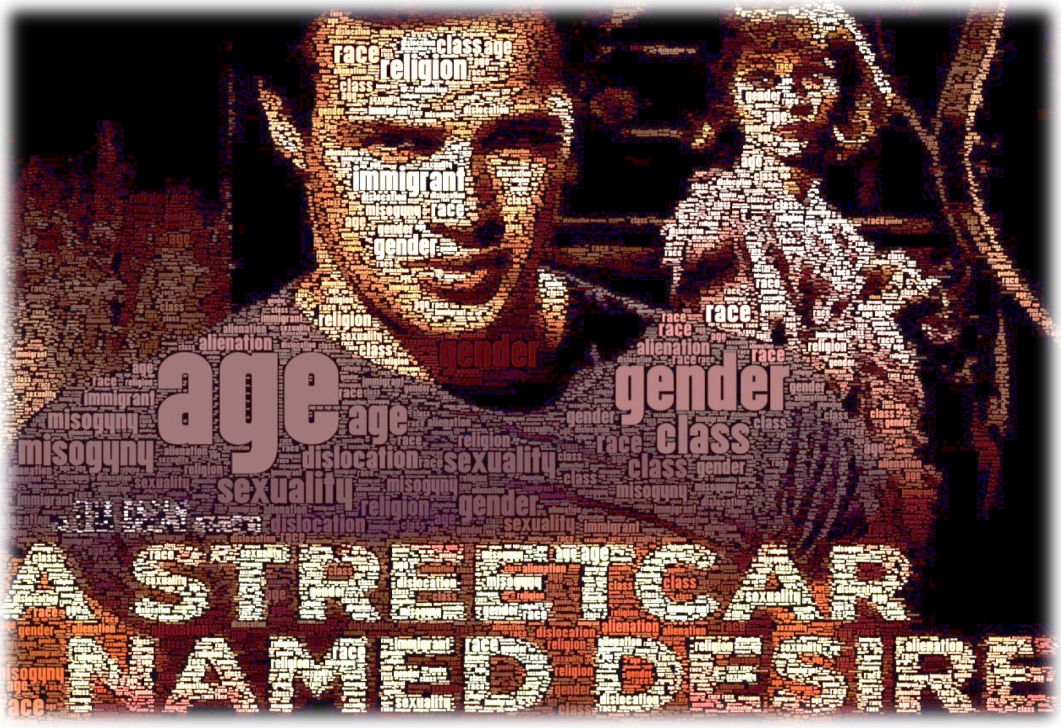

by Tennessee Williams

Various documents on social and historical background on the play.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: New York Times Review of the first New York performance of the play

December 4, 1947

First Night at the Theatre
By BROOKS ATKINSON

Tennessee Williams has brought us a superb drama, "A Streetcar Named Desire," which was acted at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. And Jessica Tandy gives a superb performance as a rueful heroine whose misery Mr. Williams is tenderly recording. This must be one of the most perfect marriages of acting and playwriting. For the acting and playwriting are perfectly blended in a limpid performance, and it is impossible to tell where Miss Tandy begins to give form and warmth to the mood Mr. Williams has created.

Like "The Glass Menagerie," the new play is a quietly woven study of intangibles. But to this observer it shows deeper insight and represents a great step forward toward clarity. And it reveals Mr. Williams as a genuinely poetic playwright whose knowledge of people is honest and thorough and whose sympathy is profoundly human.

"A Streetcar Named Desire" is history of a gently reared Mississippi young woman who invents an artificial world to mask the hideousness of the world she has to inhabit. She comes to live with her sister, who is married to a rough-and-ready mechanic and inhabits two dreary rooms in a squalid neighborhood. Blanche- for that is her name- has delusions of grandeur, talks like an intellectual snob, buoys herself up with gaudy dreams, spends most of her time primping, covers things that are dingy with things that are bright and flees reality.

To her brother-in-law she is an unforgiveable liar. But it is soon apparent to the theatregoer that in Mr. Williams's eyes she is one of the dispossessed whose experience has unfitted her for reality; and although his attitude toward her is merciful, he does not spare her or the playgoer. For the events of "Streetcar" lead to a painful conclusion which he does not try to avoid. Although Blanche cannot face the truth, Mr. Williams does in the most imaginative and perceptive play he has written.

Since he is no literal dramatist and writes in none of the conventional forms, he presents the theatre with many problems. Under Elia Kazan's sensitive but concrete direction, the theatre has solved them admirably. Jo Mielziner has provided a beautifully lighted single setting that lightly sketches the house and the neighborhood. In this shadowy environment the performance is a work of great beauty.

Miss Tandy has a remarkably long part to play. She is hardly ever off the stage, and when she is on stage she is almost constantly talking- chattering,

dreaming aloud, wondering, building enchantments out of words. Miss Tandy is a trim, agile actress with a lovely voice and quick intelligence. Her performance is almost incredibly true. For it does seem almost incredibly that she can convey it with so many shades and impulses that are accurate, revealing and true.

The rest of the acting is also of very high quality indeed. Marlon Brando as the quick-tempered, scornful, violent mechanic; Karl Malden as a stupid but wondering suitor; Kim Hunter as the patient though troubled sister- all act only with color and style but with insight.

By the usual Broadway standards, "A Streetcar Named Desire" is too long; not all those words are essential. But Mr. Williams is entitled to his own independence. For he has not forgotten that human beings are the basic subject of art. Out of poetic imagination and ordinary compassion he has spun a poignant and luminous story.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: THE SETTING OF THE PLAY AND NEW ORLEANS

Setting Overview:

A Streetcar Named Desire written by Tennessee Williams is set in the French Quarter of New Orleans. The year is 1947 - the same year in which the play was written. All of the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place in on the first floor of a two-bedroom apartment. The set is designed so that the audience can also see "outside" and observe characters on the street.

Blanche's View of New Orleans:

There's a classic Simpsons episode in which Marge Simpson lands the role of Blanche DuBois in a musical version of A Streetcar Named Desire. During the opening number, the Springfield cast sings:

New Orleans!
Stinking, rotten, vomiting, vile!
New Orleans!
Putrid, brackish, maggoty, foul!
New Orleans!
Crummy, lousy, rancid, and rank!
After the show aired, the Simpsons producers received a lot of complaint from Louisiana citizens. They were highly offended by the disparaging lyrics. Of course, the character of Blanche DuBois, the "faded Southern belle without a dime," would whole-heartedly agree with the cruel, satirical lyrics. To her, New Orleans, the setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, represents the ugliness of reality. To Blanche, the "crude" people that live on the street called Elysian Fields represent the decline of civilized culture.

Blanche, the tragic protagonist of Tennessee Williams' play, grew up on a plantation called Belle Reve (a French phrase meaning "beautiful dream"). Throughout her childhood, Blanche grew accustomed to gentility and wealth. As the estate's wealth evaporated and her loved ones died off, Blanche held on to fantasies and delusions - two things that are very difficult to cling to in the two-room apartment of the her sister Stella and Stella's domineering husband Stanley Kowalski.

The Two-Room Flat:

A Streetcar Named Desire takes place in 1947, two years after World War II. The entire play is staged in the cramped two-bedroom flat in a low-income area of the French Quarter. Stella has given up her life at Belle Reve in exchange for the exciting, passionate (and sometimes brutal) world that her husband Stanley has to offer.

Stanley Kowalski thinks of his small apartment as his kingdom. During the day,

he works in a factory. At night he enjoys bowling, playing poker with his buddies, or making love to Stella. He sees Blanche as an intruder to his environment. She occupies the room adjacent to theirs - invading his privacy. Her garments are strewn about the furniture. She adorns lamps with paper lanterns to soften the glare of the light. Blanche hopes to soften the light in order to look younger; she also hopes to create a sense of magic and charm within the apartment. However, Stanley does not want her fantasy world to encroach upon his domain.

In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, three is definitely a crowd, and the tightly-squeezed setting provides instant conflict.

Art and Cultural Diversity in the French Quarter:

From another perspective, *A Streetcar Named Desire* can be seen as a thriving, exuberant atmosphere, one that nurtures an open-minded sense of community. In the play's beginning, two minor female characters are chatting. One woman is black, the other white. The ease at which they communicate demonstrates the casual acceptance of diversity of the French Quarter. In the low-income world of Stella and Stanley Kowalski, racial segregation appears non-existent, a sharp contrast to the elitist realms of the old South (and Blanche Dubois' childhood). As sympathetic as Blanche may appear, she often says intolerant remarks about class, sexuality (in the case of her homosexual husband who was devastated by her negative comments), and ethnicity. In fact, in a rare moment of political-correctness, Stanley insists that Blanche refer to him as an American (or at least Polish-American) rather than use the derogatory term: "Polack."

For all Blanche's preaching about poetry and art, she never acknowledges the beauty of the jazz and blues which permeates the setting. A uniquely American art form, the music of the blues provides a transition for many of the scenes within *Streetcar*. It could represent change and hope -- but it goes unnoticed to Blanche's ears. Belle Reve's style of aristocracy has died away, and its art and gentile customs are no longer relevant to Kowalski's post-war America.

America After World War II:

The war brought innumerable changes to American society. Millions of men traveled overseas to face the Axis powers, the greatest adversary of the free world. Millions of women joined the workforce and the war effort, many of them discovering for the first time their independence and tenacity.

After the war, most of the men returned to their jobs and most of the women, often reluctantly, returned to the roles as homemakers.

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE: THE SETTING OF THE PLAY AND NEW ORLEANS

The setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire* betrays the post-war tension between the sexes. Stanley wants to dominate his home, in the same way males had dominated American society before the war. Female characters like Blanche and Stella expect more than a life of servitude, just as thousands of women after World War II wanted to retain their new-found careers and sense of socio-economic self-worth.

History of the Deep South: The Different Social Classes

Many people migrated to the Deep South due to the development of a booming economy based on cotton. This created the formation of new social classes. The classes were based not only on wealth but on gender status. There were three different classes that were defined by wealth. The classes were the planter class, the plain folk and the hill people. In all three classes men were considered higher than women.

The highest class was the Planter class. The Planter class was made up of a small number of whites who were competitive capitalists. Members of the Planter class included slave owners, landlords, creditors, and marketers. People of this class focused on values of old Europe such as chivalry, education in the classics, leisure, elegance and social grace. Both men and woman of the Planter class had specific roles of social elegance in southern society.

It was important that a man of the planter class chose a wife based on her beauty, social grace and social status. Having a beautiful submissive wife was essential to the man for power and social status. Women of the south were hostesses to their husbands as well as companions. They were also supposed to care and nurture their children. Women always had to obey their men but if a woman was threatened by her husband she did have a right of protection. Most women had very little access to the public world especially on large plantations where women were busy with managing the home and slaves.

The class under the Planters was the plain folk. People in the plain folk class owned very few slaves and usually worked along with them. They did not own large plantations and grew just enough food for themselves. The lack of quality schools in the south led many of them to be uneducated. Therefore there were very few opportunities open to the plain folk.

The poorest class in southern society was known as the hill people. They lived alone in the Appalachian Mountains and didn't have much connection with the commercial society. The hill people supported the confederacy because they felt it would protect their basic rights. This view differed from the planter's view only in reason. Planters pledged their support because they were afraid of having their slaves taken away, however hill people didn't have any slaves so that fear was not actualized.

The south had three very different classes. These classes were formed from the big wealth that was made through the farming of cotton. The highest and smallest class being the planters, the middle class was known as the plain folk, and the lowest and poorest class called the hill people. Even though all three classes were diverse they came together to support the confederacy for different reasons. The planter class supported the confederacy for fear of having their slaves taken away. The plain folk and the hill people supported the confederacy because to them it was a defense of their basic rights as citizens.

American immigration history can be viewed in four epochs: the colonial period, the mid-19th century, the start of the 20th century, and post-1965. Each period brought distinct national groups, races and ethnicities to the United States. During the 17th century, approximately 175,000 Englishmen migrated to Colonial America. Over half of all European immigrants to Colonial America during the 17th and 18th centuries arrived as indentured servants. The mid-19th century saw mainly an influx from northern Europe; the early 20th-century mainly from Southern and Eastern Europe; post-1965 mostly from Latin America and Asia.

Immigrants arriving at Ellis Island, 1902

Historians estimate that fewer than one million immigrants—perhaps as few as 400,000—crossed the Atlantic during the 17th and 18th centuries.[13] The 1790 Act limited naturalization to "free white persons"; it was expanded to include blacks in the 1860s and Asians in the 1950s.[14] In the early years of the United States, immigration was fewer than 8,000 people a year,[15] including French refugees from the slave revolt in Haiti. After 1820, immigration gradually increased. From 1836 to 1914, over 30 million Europeans migrated to the United States.[16] The death rate on these transatlantic voyages was high, during which one in seven travelers died.[17] In 1875, the nation passed its first immigration law, the Page Act of 1875.[18]

The peak year of European immigration was in 1907, when 1,285,349 persons entered the country.[19] By 1910, 13.5 million immigrants were living in the United States.[20] In 1921, the Congress passed the Emergency Quota Act, followed by the Immigration Act of 1924. The 1924 Act was aimed at further restricting the Southern and Eastern Europeans, especially Jews, Italians, and

Slavs, who had begun to enter the country in large numbers beginning in the 1890s.[21] Most of the European refugees fleeing the Nazis and World War II were barred from coming to the United States.[22]

Polish immigrants working on the farm, 1909. The welfare system was practically non-existent before the 1930s and the economic pressures on the poor were giving rise to child labor.

Immigration patterns of the 1930s were dominated by the Great Depression, which hit the U.S. hard and lasted over ten years there. In the final prosperous year, 1929, there were 279,678 immigrants recorded,[23] but in 1933, only 23,068 came to the U.S.[13] In the early 1930s, more people emigrated from the United States than to it.[24] The U.S. government sponsored a Mexican Repatriation program which was intended to encourage people to voluntarily move to Mexico, but thousands were deported against their will.[25] Altogether about 400,000 Mexicans were repatriated.[26] In the post-war era, the Justice Department launched Operation Wetback, under which 1,075,168 Mexicans were deported in 1954.[27]

Name_____

Info Sheet

Biographical Information of Tennessee Williams

Many of Tennessee Williams' characters are individuals psychologically trapped in the myths, selfdelusions,
and pretensions of the "gentility" of the agrarian, "Cavalier" past. Some are of the Southern "wench" variety, passionate in behavior, sex-driven, in conflict with Puritan/Victorian mores. Some of his male characters are lusty, self-serving, "rednecks"; others are "poet realists" who try to find their way in the shifting economic profile, changed values, and altered morality of a new South. Yet others are dull, unimaginative types, representative of Williams' view of those who have bought into the "herd mentality" of the American "shoe-factory" world.

Williams' primary genius, however, is in his ability to develop compelling characters that transcend the Southern environment in which they are implanted. The obsessed mother, Amanda, and her overly-shy daughter Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, the fragile, "displaced" Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the raw sexual energy of Stan in *Streetcar* and of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the vulnerability of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Mitch in *Streetcar* grow out of the embedded tensions of the post- Civil War South, but their problems and conflicts resonate deep chords of all human experience.

Williams' dramatic power comes not only from the content of his plays, but also from his non-linear structural patterns and the devices of technical support he integrates into his scripts. His use of symbols such as the animal figures in *The Glass Menagerie*, his use of music, lighting, and set design to move his narrator in and out of memory, his "destination" names for trolleys and the end- of- the- line location in *Streetcar*, and certainly the vibrant images in his play titles reinforce, through nuance and insinuation, his characterizations and basic themes and add a haunting third dimension to his plays.

The writer

Introduction to Tennessee Williams
"He was a born dramatist as few are ever born. Whatever he put on paper, superb or superfluous, glorious or gaudy, could not fail to be electrifyingly actable. He could not write a dull scene... He will live as long as drama itself." Peter Shaffer

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams III in 1911 to humble beginnings in Mississippi. His grandfather was a clergyman and his father, a travelling salesman, was away more often than not. Tom and his sister, Rose, were inseparable. An early move to St Louis when Tom was seven was the beginning of a difficult time, during which he found it impossible to settle down as he watched his parents grow further apart. He began writing at twelve, his poems and short stories winning him prizes and recognition.

Tennessee (he took the name in 1939 when his first short story was published) Williams enrolled at the University of Missouri, but lack of funds forced him to leave before graduating and to take a job in a shoe factory alongside his father. He spent his spare time writing: *"When I came home from work I would tank up on black coffee so I could remain awake writing. Gradually my health broke down. One day I collapsed and was removed to the hospital. The doctor said I couldn't go back to the shoe company".* He was sent to live with his grandparents in Memphis where, as he recovered, he continued to write.

He returned to university, and in 1938 at the age of 27, he received his BA from the University of Iowa, where his *Spring Storm* was produced. He produced an enormous number of poems, sketches and plays, as he nurtured his style under the exposure to theory, deadlines, stagecraft, as well as the influence of tutors and fellow students. Meanwhile, he was holding down several part-time jobs to make a living for himself and his family. Even through this, the *need* to write, to purge, was unsurpassed and irrepressible.

The struggle for recognition took many years. He experienced many failures, let-downs, times of depression and 'wandering'. He pawned his typewriter, slept rough, worked as a lift operator (but was sacked when he forgot to close the door to the shaft), as a waiter, a cashier, an usher. Episodic adventures came and went and towns 'swept around him like dead leaves'. *"All the while I kept on writing, writing",* he recalled, *"not with any hope of making a living at it but because I found no other means of expressing things that seemed to demand expression. There was never a moment when I did not find life to be immeasurably exciting to experience and to witness, however difficult it was to sustain".*

Ultimately, he produced some of the landmark plays of the century, receiving huge acclaim and recognition, including two Pulitzer Prizes in 1948 and 1955. Among his most recognised plays are *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), *Camino Real* (1953), *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof* (1955), *Baby Doll* (1957), *Orpheus Descending* (1957) and, of course, *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947). Many of his plays have also become legendary films. *"I don't believe all this has happened to me"*, he once said.

In 1981 Williams and Harold Pinter shared the Commonwealth Award 'for excellence and outstanding achievement in various fields of human endeavour'. Williams told Pinter *"Harold, take care of your health – I could have done a lot more if I'd taken care of my health".*

He died in 1983 but his work continues to receive revivals worldwide, to great acclaim. Pinter directed *Sweet Bird Of Youth* in 1985, describing Williams as *"The greatest American playwright"*.

New audiences continue to discover the unique world of Tennessee Williams. Directors, designers and actors are still excitedly drawn to his work time and time again.

The writer

Style

Williams became renowned for his unmistakable characterisation, accomplished through impeccably observed dialogue. Once his characters speak, they are completely identifiable and unforgettable. The rhythms and patterns of speech draw us into new and unfamiliar worlds.

A second trait is his mixture of realism and fantasy. His work defies labelling and moves easily and seamlessly from realism to surrealism, from truth to fantasy.

In his tribute after Williams' death, Arthur Miller said he *"broke new ground by opening up the stage to sheer sensibility, and not by abandoning dramatic structure but transforming it. He made form serve his utterance. He did not turn his back on dramatic rules but created new ones. He has a long reach and a genuinely dramatic imagination... he is constantly pressing his own limits. He creates shows, but possesses the restless inconsolability with his solutions, which is inevitable with a genuine writer".*

Williams had a unique and individual voice, dramatically, socially and politically. He was not afraid of showing profoundly personal themes in his writing, nor those which society might see as alarming.

Williams developed a style that was precise and poetic, but always truthful. His beautiful and imaginative imagery was unusual within the constraints of traditional theatre and, while being grounded in reality, in places his plays were almost surreal. His work carries the audience inside the minds of the characters, rather than just dealing with the external façade. We are not being simply entertained or told; rather we are encouraged to use our imaginations and delve deeper, where we are emotionally charged and affected. This is where Williams is exceptional. He described it as *"the incontinent blaze of live theatre, a theatre meant for seeing and for feeling".*

Williams' grandmother was a music teacher, and his mother was a singer. Music to Williams was a major source of inspiration. His foreword to *Camino Real* talks of jazz experiments which are *"a new sensation of release, as if I could ride out like a tenor sax, taking the breaks in a Dixieland combo or a piano in a bop session".* Overlaying music, sound, light, and textures, Williams was able to blur the line between realism and subjective expressionism.

Iain Glen, Glenn Close, Essie Davis
photo Catherine Ashmore

A Woman's Role in the 1950s

November 17, 2005 by **RoobixCoob**

More topics 1950 | Errands | Allowance | Stereotype | Pity | Degrading | Homemaker | Role

Analysis Based on Popular Media

The role of women in the 1950 was repressive and constrictive in many ways. Society placed high importance and many expectations on behavior at home as well as in public. Women were supposed to fulfill certain roles, such as a caring mother, a diligent homemaker, and an obedient wife. The perfect mother was supposed to stay home and nurture so society would accept them. A diligent housewife had dinner on the table precisely at the moment her husband arrived from work. A wife was a "good" wife only if she carried out her man's every order and agreed with him on everything. In fact, even if she wanted to voice an opinion, he education, or rather lack of thereof would not allow it. Another reference is the 1950's American High School Home Economics textbook. An essay found in the book is entitled "How to be a Good Wife." The television shows aired at this time reflect the publics need for stability and conformity. The main character of the most watched show at the time, I Love Lucy, portrayed a woman as the stereotypical woman-in-distress, who always needed her husband, the man, to bail her out. She also was symbolic of the inept woman: the "woman driver," the "over-spender" who cannot budget, and the basic downfall of man.

Pleasantville's Betty was an appropriate example of a 50's mother. Following is an excerpt that applies to motherhood. Prepare the children: Take a few minutes to wash the children's hands and faces, comb their hair, and if necessary change their clothes. They are God's creatures and he would like to see them playing the part.

Minimize all noise…eliminate the noise of the washer, dryer, dishwasher or vacuum. Try to encourage the children to be quiet.

Every morning, she woke her children up, cooked breakfast for them and sent them off to school. The breakfast however was far from the cereal and milk often enjoyed today. This was feast that consisted of towers of pancakes, piles of eggs, and platefuls of bacon and patties, all topped with a pound of syrup. Another example of women who longed to be good mothers was the contestants on Queen for a Day. They competed for pity points, but some of them genuinely wanted to make life better for their kids. Such over exaggerated behavior was typical of women at this time. They wanted to appeal to men and society and therefore felt they had to be perfect and overworking. They only felt secure when they were praised for their house keeping or kids.

A diligent homemaker not only kept the house sparkling but she cooked dinner, did laundry and ran errands.

"Have dinner ready. Prepare yourself. Touch up your makeup, put a ribbon in your hair and be fresh looking. He has just been with a lot of work-weary people. Be a little gay and a little more interesting. Clear away the clutter…run a dust cloth over the tables." reads the essay, listing the many chores of a woman. The woman's life revolved around the house and home and even when she went out to meet her friends. When women started complaining of boredom, society invented the sowing and quilt making clubs. They would do anything to please their men because their life depended on them so much. To disagree with her husband would have been the gravest of all errors. The men ha almost total control over their wives.

"Some Don'ts: Don't greet him with problems or complaints. Don't complain if he is late for dinner. Arrange his pillow and offer to take off his shoes. Speak in a low, soft, soothing and pleasant voice. Listen to him: You may have dozens of things to tell him, but the moment of his arrival is not the time. Let him talk first. Make the evening his. Never complain if he does not take you out to dinner or other pleasant entertainments." Fear of some how displeasing their husbands was prominent in all women…after all even their weekly monetary allowances depended upon their husbands. Men did not trust their wives with money because they were not educated enough, yet ironically and paradoxically, it was untraditional for a woman to receive as good of an education.

In the 1950's, the fact that a woman was even attending a college was uncanny and paranormal. Most women married after high school and fell into their traditional roles right away. The brave women that chose to learn further were not taught mathematics and science (fields they were later going to succeed in) but home economics and cooking. Women did not join the conversations, they just stood near the men with platters of heure d'heurves. Men feared intelligent women because of their tendency to "think" for themselves and disagree with their man. In Pleasantville, when Betty starts doing things on her own, her husband is outrages and

confused. He has never known any other way or treating his wife. He loves his wife, or rather the image and template that she is, for her simplicity and "propriety". He however, becomes weary when his wife takes on new interests and refuses to follow the old rules. As soon as she learns something, she becomes a threat, seemingly to his manhood and manliness.

A contemporary example of stereotypical roles for women is the present day situation. By achieving equality with men, women have also set up new stereotypes. Now in order to be respected, a woman has to be a "career" woman balancing both children and a job. In fact, stay home moms now receive the same degrading look as educated working women did in the 50's. Although the pressure of being a perfect mother and wife are now gone, pressure still remains to get a good education and become a successful citizen. However, in the attempt to become equal, women have swung too far…neither extreme is reasonable and neither is truly the solution. In reality, the goal should be freedom of choice without prejudice. A woman must have the right to choose whether she wants the career or a homelike. Neither stereotype is healthy and right and society (women especially) who think they have accomplished the goal are delusional.

Many women during the fifties may feel that they were happy being mothers and that they were equal to men, just different. Homemaking was an engaging activity which appealed to many women. There is nothing degrading about raising kids, in fact, a woman needs to be skilled and wise. Also, a weakly allowance is not such a bad idea because then it does not have to be a responsibility. Another responsibility that succumbs is the guilt of not having enough time to educate the children. If a woman was not educate then she did not feel like a failure. Following a husbands orders may not have been so restricting either because it freed the mind to worry about the kids rather than what to think. There are many examples where the position of women is easier because eof men. Nevertheless, who wants to stay a three-year-old forever?

The role of women in the 1950 was a society-endorsing template that all women had to fill. Women had to be prefect mothers, obedient wives and clever homemakers. This perfection was not n a personal level, but rather on societies standards. The raising of the new generation was extremely important at this time so women worked diligently and hard to fill the oversized shoes prepared for them. Many TV shows of the fifties portrays this angelic mother figure with not a care in the world except her children. That is merely an illusion: women were bored, they wanted something more mind stimulating and weaving just didn't cut it.

Written by RoobixCoob
hmmmm - Full profile

Name_____

Background Info

Tennessee Williams: Themes and Forms

American theater grew out of the milieu of sweeping economic, political, social, and cultural changes that occurred in the last half of the nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth. The fallout of the Industrial Revolution and the shockwave of new psychological theories would resonate throughout American culture, making strong impact on a burgeoning American population realigned by surges of immigrants, traumatized by war, and increasingly uprooted in the shift from a primarily agrarian to an urban/suburban society. Ironically, American playwrights in their reach to clarify and give meaning to the turbulent changes of this "modern" world would draw heavily from the sources that had helped effect change. Experimenting in symbiotic relationship with European writers and artists of other genres, American dramatists found inspiration in the intellectual "arguments" of Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Herbert Spencer and especially the psychoanalytical concepts of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. The vibrancy of the themes and forms of modern American drama resound with these influences.

To speak to a world in which the individual had been increasingly cut loose from the traditional "anchors" of religion, socio/political alignments, family relationships, and a defined self-image, American dramatists such as Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams crafted forceful statements of psychological and spiritual displacement, loss of connections, loneliness, self deception, and retrogression into sexual hedonism. In confronting problems of the "lost" individual in an industrial, "mechanized" society, they lay bare human passions, exposed the raw tensions of the American family, and challenged Victorian/Puritan "morality". Whether delivered in the shocking hyperbole of overstatement, the ambiguity of images and symbols, or the heartbreak tone of understatement, the "messages" wrought indictments of a "wasteland" in which the term "heroic" was redefined. The protagonist was no longer an idealistic "doer" who ventured out to "save the day". He was an alienated tragic hero seeking to "belong" in an eroded "jungle" society, or an "everyman" trying to "cope" through false compensations of "pipe dreams", or a muted survivor living a life of "quiet desperation", a victim of societal pressure, animal desires, and loss of integrity.

Such themes cried out for fresh designs in form. Freudian and Jungian theories and the innovative patterns of visual art helped point the way. Such psychological delineation as layers of the inner self, the duality of "anima" and "persona", the delusions of neuroses, the power of association and simultaneous experience in stream of consciousness provided ideas for provocative structural patterns. The presuppositions and canvases of Impressionism, Expressionism, and Surrealism served as inspirations for the effusion of evocative imagery and symbolism into both diction and technical directions. Lighting, music, visual props, and set design became an integral part of dramatic scripts, deepening characterization, punctuating dramatic tensions, reinforcing theme, and achieving heightened intensity in presentation.

The themes and forms of the work of one of America's most powerful dramatists, Tennessee Williams, showcase many of the above influences and trends. Williams, on the periphery of the Southern Renaissance group of writers that included such names as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, and Robert Penn Warren, would build many of his themes around the old South's lost aristocracy in tension with the invading materialism of the reconstructed South. Many of his female characters are individuals psychologically trapped in the myths, self-delusions, and pretensions of the "gentility" of the agrarian, "Cavalier" past. Some are of the Southern "wench" variety, passionate in behavior, sex-driven, in conflict with Puritan/Victorian mores. Some of his male characters are lusty, self-serving, "rednecks"; others are "poet realists" who try to find their way in the shifting economic profile, changed values, and altered morality of a new South. Yet others are dull, unimaginative types, representative of Williams' view of those who have bought into the "herd mentality" of the American "shoe-factory" world.

Williams' primary genius, however, is in his ability to develop compelling characters that transcend the Southern environment in which they are implanted. The obsessed mother, Amanda, and her overlyshy daughter Laura in *The Glass Menagerie*, the fragile, "displaced" Blanche of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, the raw sexual energy of Stan in *Streetcar* and of Maggie in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, the vulnerability of Tom in *The Glass Menagerie* and Mitch in *Streetcar* grow out of the embedded tensions of the post- Civil War South, but their problems and conflicts resonate deep chords of all human experience.

Williams' dramatic power comes not only from the content of his plays, but also from his non-linear structural patterns and the devices of technical support he integrates into his scripts. His use of symbols such as the animal figures in *The Glass Menagerie*, his use of music, lighting, and set design to move his narrator in and out of memory, his "destination" names for trolleys and the end- of- the- line location in *Streetcar*, and certainly the vibrant images in his play titles reinforce, through nuance and insinuation, his characterizations and basic themes and add a haunting third dimension to his plays.

From different perspectives and with varying degrees of emphasis on social themes, America's great dramatists become both the " consciousness" and "conscience" of America, digging deeply into the American psyche, probing the implications of the Freudian "Id", pulling back layer after layer of the social "ego", scrutinizing the probity of the American Dream. But in these processes of thrusting, peeling, and poking, they reveal, in stunning ways, that the American heart is the universal heart.

Increasingly the American dramatist became the "voice" of social conscience.

There were exceptions to these "dark" profiles. Maxwell Anderson would write romantic comedy, George Kaufman and collaborator Moss Hart would develop sophisticated social comedies, Thornton Wilder would capture the nostalgia of main street America. Many in "polite" Victorian England "Puritan" society often found the shocking. Equally shocking to the sensibilities of some were the experimental modes of expression.

The play

Introduction to A Streetcar Named Desire
A Streetcar Named Desire is undoubtedly the play most closely identified with its writer and it has certainly provoked the most critical commentary.

Williams began working on *A Streetcar Named Desire* in January 1945, only settling on this title once the final manuscript was submitted to his agent. For two years he had been working through revisions and drafts, variously titled *The Passion Of the Moth, Blanche's Chair In the Moon*, etc. He had also considered various epigraphs of blind hope, delicate moths in a world of mammoth figures, flight from reality. He finally chose a verse from Hart Crane's poem, *The Broken Tower*:

And so it was I entered the broken world
To trace the visionary company of love, its voice
An instant in the wind (I know not whither hurled)
But not for long to hold each desperate choice.

During this time, Williams also had his premiere openings on Broadway of *The Glass Menagerie* and *You Touched Me!*, whilst also starting to write *Summer and Smoke,* which opened a year later, and *Camino Real*.

Streetcar opened on 3 December 1947 at the Ethel Barrymore Theater in New York. It starred Jessica Tandy as Blanche, Marlon Brando as Stanley, Karl Malden as Mitch and Kim Stanley as Stella. It catapulted Williams to the forefront of American playwrights. *Streetcar* won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama, the Donaldson and New York Drama Critics' Circle Awards – the first play to win all three.

Glenn Close, Iain Glen
photo Catherine Ashmore

The 1951 film version with the same cast but this time with Vivien Leigh as Blanche (she had played the part in the London production two years earlier), won the New York Film Critics' Circle Award.

Structure
Whilst at Missouri University, Williams was heavily influenced by his tutor, Robert Ramsay, who used the *ouroboros* symbol – the snake with tail in mouth – to describe the perfect plot, the end being implicit in the beginning: opening situation, complicating circumstances, apparent success, flaw discovered, thickening clouds, sudden catastrophe, aftermath. It describes accurately the plotline of *Streetcar*.

Roxana Stuart, who played Blanche in two productions, described *"the first four scenes are comedy; then come two scenes of elegy, mood, romance; then five scenes of tragedy"*.

Divided into eleven scenes, the play has no act divisions. The original production used the breaks marked by the seasonal divisions for its intervals, after scenes four and six.

Synopsis
The play opens in the oppressive summer heat of New Orleans, right after World War II. Blanche DuBois arrives unexpectedly with a suitcase at the apartment of her sister, Stella, who lives with her husband, Stanley Kowalski.

They seem out of touch, and Blanche brings the news that their ancestral home, Belle Reve, has been lost. Blanche had stayed behind to care for their elderly and dying family, whilst Stella had left to make a new life. Blanche tells Stella that she has been given a leave of absence from her teaching position because of bad nerves.

Blanche is disdainful of her sister's cramped flat and the working-class neighbourhood. Her social condescension wins her the animosity of Stanley, who distrusts her, believing that she's swindled them out of Stella's and his share of the family inheritance.

One night Stanley hosts a drunken poker game with three friends. Blanche gets under Stanley's skin, particularly as she begins to win the affection of his friend Mitch. Stanley erupts when Mitch leaves the poker game and spends time talking with

The play

Blanche in the bedroom. He storms in and throws the radio out of the window. When Stella attempts to defend Blanche, Stanley hits Stella. She and Blanche retreat to the neighbours' apartment but Stella, much to Blanche's alarm, returns to Stanley when she hears his remorseful cries.

The following day, Blanche tries to persuade Stella to leave her husband. Stanley overhears much of their conversation and later hints to Blanche that he has heard rumours of her disreputable past.

One evening while Blanche waits for Mitch to pick her up for a date, a teenage boy comes by to collect money for the newspaper and Blanche attempts to seduce him. Later, Blanche reveals to Mitch that many years ago her husband committed suicide after she had discoverd his homosexuality. Mitch too has lost a former love; they need each other.

It is Blanche's birthday. Stanley reveals to Stella, Blanche's sordid past, claiming she was evicted from her previous hotel because of her numerous sexual liaisons. Mitch, hearing the news, fails to appear at the birthday meal. For a birthday present, Stanley gives Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel.

The onset of Stella's labour cuts short the ensuing argument between Stella and Stanley.

Later that night, Blanche, drunk and alone in the flat, is confronted by Mitch. She admits that the stories are not untrue and Mitch tries to have sex with her. She says that she will not sleep with him unless they marry, to which he responds that it is no longer possible – she is not fit to live in the same house as his mother.

Robert Pastorelli, Glenn Close
photo Catherine Ashmore

When Stanley returns from the hospital, Blanche tells him that she will soon be leaving to join her former millionaire suitor, Shep Huntleigh. Stanley laughs at her and they fight. He carries her to the bed. "We've had this date with each other from the beginning!"

Weeks later, Stanley hosts another poker game. Blanche believes she is leaving her sister in order to join her millionaire. In fact, Stella and Stanley are waiting for a doctor and nurse to arrive, who are going to take her to an asylum. Stella confesses to her neighbour Eunice, that she cannot allow herself to believe Blanche's story that Stanley raped her.

After an initial struggle, Blanche leaves on the doctor's arm without a backward glance. Stella sobs with her child in her arms while Stanley comforts her.

Themes

Many of Williams' plays show a world that is dictated by forms of fascism and bigotry. Michael Billington observed:
"Williams' whole career can be seen as an attack on a society that elevates crude energy and muscular materialism above delicacy of feeling".

Williams himself said:
"If there is any truth in the Aristotelian idea that violence is purged by its poetic representation on stage, then it may be that my cycle of violent plays have had a moral justification after all".

"I have no acquaintance with political and social dialectics. If you ask what my politics are, I am a humanitarian. That is the social background of my life."

Williams grew up during the Depression, flirting with radical politics and regarding himself as something of a 'revolutionary'. He was drawn to theatre that addressed the concerns of the world. Theatre was no longer a place to be simply entertained, when on the streets people were homeless and starving. He debated political corruption, rarely voted, denounced America's war involvements and, as a homosexual, found himself harrassed and threatened in a brutal world. A world without freedom to speak one's mind and to be the person one wants to be.

The play

"Since I am a member of the human race, when I attack its behaviour toward fellow members I am obviously including myself in the attack, unless I regard myself as not human but superior to humanity. I don't. In fact, I can't expose a human weakness on stage unless I know it through having it myself. I have exposed a good many human weaknesses and brutalities and consequently I have them. I don't even think that I am more conscious of mine than any of you are of yours. Guilt is universal. I mean a strong sense of guilt. If there exists any area in which a man can rise above his moral condition, imposed upon him at birth, and long before birth, by the nature of his breed, then I think it is only a willingness to know it, to face its existence in him, and I think that, at least below the conscious level, we all face it. Hence guilty feelings, and hence defiant aggressions, and hence the deep dark of despair that haunts our dreams, our creative work, and makes us distrust each other".
Tennessee Williams (1959)

Streetcar was premiered at a time when Broadway was dominated by musicals, comedies and revivals of the classics. Few new writers of the 20s and 30s continued to write in the 40s. *Streetcar* mirrored society; it caught a moment in time, a mood that was apparent in the wake of the war and the Depression. Williams' characters are reeling, desperately trying to find an identity, to re-evaluate themselves. Their own struggles are met by those of others, causing tension and conflict.

It was also the first play to truly tackle sexuality. Sexuality is at the core of the main characters; it can redeem or destroy.

Critic, Harold Clurman described Stanley Kowalski as *"The unwitting antichrist of our time. His mentality provides the soil for fascism".*

Nothing had prepared the audience for the searing and complex adult themes of the play. One critic called it the product of an *"almost desperately morbid turn of mind".* In contrast, another described it as *"a revelation. A lyrical work of genuine originality and disturbing power".* Such were and continue to be the extreme reactions to the play.

Glenn Close
photo Catherine Ashmore