

#StreetcarNamedDesire



VIRGINIA  
STAGE  
COMPANY  
AT THE  
Wells Theatre

# A Streetcar Named Desire

written by

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

directed by CHRIS HANNA

JANUARY 17

THROUGH

FEBRUARY 5

# STUDY GUIDE

study guide by KAT MARTIN

# WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM VSC EDUCATION PROGRAMS

## Our Teaching Philosophy

We've witnessed firsthand what the creative process nurtures in children, teens and all lifelong learners:

- excitement, enthusiasm, and openness to explore their own creativity
- critical-thinking and problem solving skills
- enthusiasm for teamwork
- empathy and support toward peers
- strength in their ability to listen and express themselves effectively
- healthy self-image and awareness

Because it has such positive and far-reaching outcomes for our students, VSC's education model emphasizes process over product. We believe that students will emerge from their time with VSC's educational programs with skills that will serve them well in all areas of life.

## Benefits for Students

Students enrolled in VSC's education programs will:

- develop leadership qualities
- enhance communication skills
- develop an appreciation for the creative process
- learn to take ownership of their own ideas and concepts
- increase their knowledge of theatre terms
- develop greater confidence through the creative play experience
- develop a spirit of curiosity
- learn to develop and appreciate the value of kindness
- develop or expand spatial awareness
- use dramatic prompts to create imaginative movement
- cooperate with others in group sessions
- learn how to use their voice safely and effectively
- learn how to use their bodies effectively with character development
- work with peers to write scripts
- explore characters and settings
- rehearse in a positive, supportive environment
- practice respectful critique of others' work
- put it all together to create original theatre for others.

Virginia Stage Company's production of **A Streetcar Named Desire** adheres to the following Virginia's English Standards of Learning requirements for grades 9-12:

**Reading and Writing** – 7.4, 7.5, 7.7, 7.8, 8.5, 8.5, 8.7, 8.8, 9.3, 9.4, 9.5, 9.6, 9.7, 10.3, 10.4, 10.5, 10.6, 10.7, 11.3, 11.4, 11.5, 11.6, 11.7, 12.3, 12.4, 12.5, 12.6, 12.7

**Theatre Arts** – 7.17, 7.18, 7.19, 7.20, 7.21, 7.22, 7.23, 8.15, 8.16, 7.17, 8.18, 8.19, 8.20, 8.21, 8.22, 8.23, 8.24, 8.25

**Introduction to Theatre** – TI. 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18

**Theatre Arts II Dramatic Literature and Theatre History** – TII. 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21

# WHAT YOU CAN EXPECT FROM THIS STUDY GUIDE

## In This Guide...

You will find activities that are appropriate for grades 9-12.

Vocabulary Building Block terms and definitions will be marked with



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## About A Streetcar Named Desire

Tennessee Williams' hauntingly beautiful play *A Streetcar Named Desire* is thought by many to be the seminal work of his canon. In the oppressive heat of 1940s New Orleans, Blanche duBois attempts to escape from reality and hide in the cool comforting shadows of her sister Stella's home. The respite Blanche seeks shatters as Stanley Kowalski stomps into her world, turning the solace of the shadows into a sharp world of nightmares and uncertainty. The sophistication of Blanche and Stella's upbringing on the Belle Reve plantation bows under the weight of Stanley's brash masculinity and determination to uncover the "truth." Belle Reve has been lost, Blanche has been chased out of her job as a school teacher, and Stanley isn't buying any of Blanche's excuses. Stanley is relentless in his determination to conquer Blanche and protect his working class way of life. The deeper he digs the less clear things become as Blanche fades into her past.

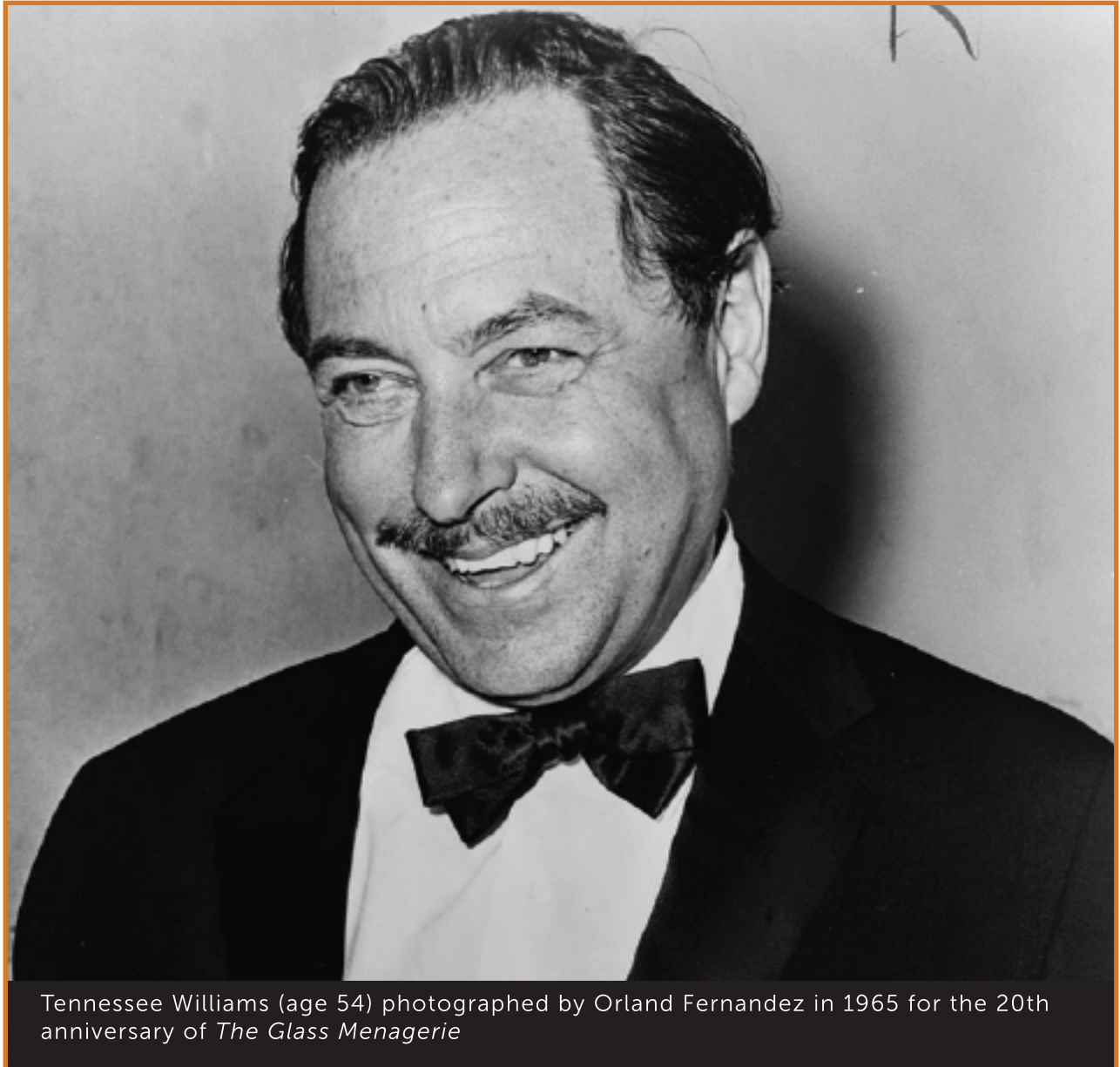
**A high station in life is earned by the gallantry with which appalling experiences are survived with grace.**

— Tennessee Williams



# About Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams' work is incredibly autobiographical and rooted in the culture of the American South.



Tennessee Williams (age 54) photographed by Orland Fernandez in 1965 for the 20th anniversary of *The Glass Menagerie*

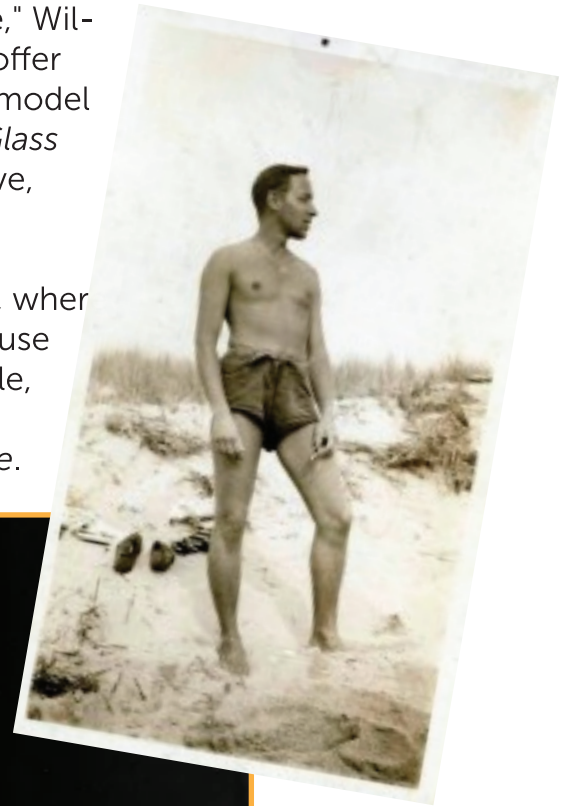
Playwright Tennessee Williams was born on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. After college, he moved to New Orleans, a city that would inspire much of his writing. On March 31, 1945, his play, *The Glass Menagerie*, opened on Broadway and two years later *A Streetcar Named Desire* earned Williams his first Pulitzer Prize.



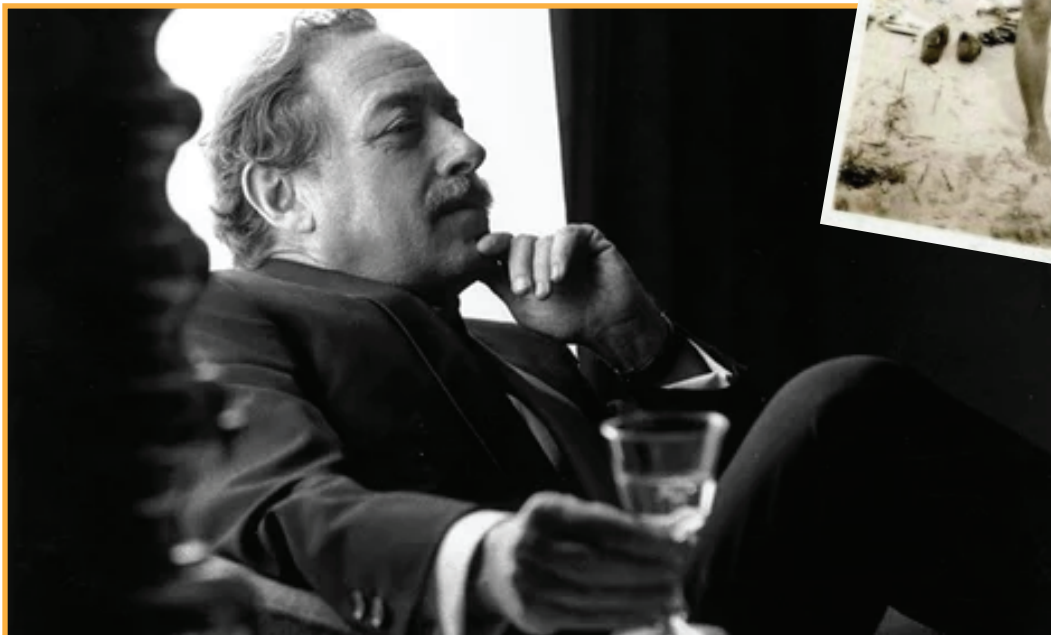
**Tennessee Williams** was born “Thomas Lanier Williams” on March 26, 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi, the second of Cornelius and Edwina Williams' three children. Raised predominantly by his mother, Williams had a complicated relationship with his father, a demanding salesman who preferred work instead of parenting. Williams described his childhood in Mississippi as pleasant and happy. But life changed for him when his family moved to St. Louis, Missouri. The carefree nature of his boyhood was stripped in his new urban home, and as a result Williams turned inward and started to write.

His parents' marriage certainly didn't help. Often strained, the Williams home could be a tense place to live. "It was just a wrong marriage," Williams later wrote. The family situation, however, did offer fuel for the playwright's art. His mother became the model for the foolish but strong Amanda Wingfield in *The Glass Menagerie*, while his father represented the aggressive, driving Big Daddy in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.

When he was 28, Williams moved to New Orleans, where he changed his name (he landed on Tennessee because his father hailed from there) and revamped his lifestyle, soaking up the city life that would inspire his work, most notably the later play, *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



▲ Tennessee Williams in 1944 in Provincetown. PHOTO BY HAROLD NORSE.



For more information on Tennessee Williams visit:

All cruel people describe themselves as paragons of frankness.

— Tennessee Williams

# Welcome to the Elysian Fields

## Uncovering Mood in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

Playwrights and authors alike can set a tone early in their work which captures the imaginations of their audiences. Unlike authors, a playwright's written word is only a foundation. Their work has to be interpreted by theatre artists who make the work of the playwright come alive in a tangible experience. Through mood theatre artists can create an evocative world that creates the desired impact on their audiences.

Tennessee Williams is the master of crafting a mood through his use of stage directions. In the opening stage directions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Williams crafts a prevailing mood while leaving room for the artistic license of theater artists who will later stage his work. By establishing a mood Williams tells performers and theater designers how an audience should feel about the setting and the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

### Thinking About Mood:

Theatrical designers often have different ideas and interpretations of the the same script. Take a look at two different scenic designer's ideas for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. What makes them different? Similar? Choose the set design that you think best suits the stage directions above. Why did you choose this design?



**Stage Directions:** an instruction written into the script of a play, indicating stage actions, movements of performers, or production requirements.

**Mood:** In literature, mood is an element that evokes certain feelings or vibes in readers through words and descriptions. Usually, mood is referred to as the atmosphere of a literary piece, as it creates an emotional situation that surrounds the readers.

Success is blocked by concentrating on it and planning for it... Success is shy - it won't come out while you're watching.

— Tennessee Williams



Set for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. (<http://www.shmoop.com/streetcar-named-desire/setting.html>)



Joshua Scott's set design for *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Directed by: Michael Harding

Life is all memory, except for the one present moment that goes by you so quickly you hardly catch it going.

— Tennessee Williams



# Welcome to the Elysian Fields *(continued)*

## ACTIVITY

Read the excerpt from the opening stage directions of *A Streetcar Named Desire* closely. While you read think about the ways that Williams engages all of your senses. While you read highlight or underline phrases and words that paint a tactile picture (words like grey, shabby, heat, turquoise, music etc).

After you have read the selection, compile all the highlighted and underlined words and phrases into a large list. Looking at the list you just made how would you describe the mood of *A Streetcar Named Desire*? What effect does the mood have on your perceptions of the play? Why do you think Williams sets this mood? How does it affect the action of the play? The themes?

*The exterior of a two-story corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the river. The section is poor but, unlike corresponding sections in other American cities, it has a raffish charm. The houses are mostly white frame, weathered grey, with rickety outside stairs and galleries and quaintly ornamented gables. This building contains two flats, upstairs and down. Faded white stairs ascend to the entrances of both.*

*It is first dark of an evening early in May. The sky that shows around the dim white building is a peculiarly tender blue, almost a turquoise, which invests the scene with a kind of lyricism and gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay. You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouses with their faint redolences of bananas and coffee. A corresponding air is evoked by the music of Negro entertainers at a barroom around the corner. In this part of New Orleans you are practically always just around the corner, or a few doors down the street, from a tinny piano being played with the infatuated fluency of brown fingers. This "Blue Piano" expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here.*

*Two women, one white and one colored, are taking the air on the steps of the building. The white woman is Eunice, who occupies the upstairs flat; the colored woman a neighbor, for New Orleans is a cosmopolitan city where there is a relatively warm and easy intermingling of races in the old part of town.*

*Above the music of the "Blue Piano" the voices of people on the street can be heard overlapping.*

### Words

### Moods

# Writing for the Senses

## ACTIVITY

Think about where you live. Try to picture it through the eyes of a stranger. What are the sights, smells, sounds, and feelings they would experience while they walk up to the front door? Set a timer for 3 minutes and write freely or brainstorm. In that time think about the place where you live and write down any words colors or phrases that come to mind. After you complete your free writing, write a brief set of stage directions about a stranger arriving at your home using *A Streetcar Named Desire* as inspiration.

**Brainstorm**

**Stage Direction**

What is straight? A line can be straight, or a street, but the human heart, oh, no, it's curved like a road through mountains.

— Tennessee Williams

# Representing Realism

## ACTIVITY

*A Streetcar Named Desire* was written in 1947. At this time in theatrical history realism was the dominant style of performance and acting in the American Theatre. Realism is a style of theatre that attempts to portray reality as closely as possible. Tennessee Williams writes in a specific style of realism known as poetic realism or magical realism. The next activity in the guide deals with Williams' specific style of realism. In the realistic style of theatre, the audience is looking in on action that should be believable and almost indistinguishable from real life. Attempting to present real life is a representational style of theatre.

For playwrights and actors who work in realistic theater observation is a powerful tool. In order to create a careful and detailed portrayal of reality theater artists have to take careful and detailed notes about everyday life. Actors will sometimes keep a journal of observations they make about the people around them.

Over the next few days when you are in public spaces, take a moment and look at the people around you. Choose one in your mind and try to really observe him or her. What is this person like? What age? What makes him absolutely unique? What was the reason you chose him? Name three qualities that make this person different from all the others around. Can you pick up a gesture he is doing? If not, can you imagine one that would match him? For example, touching his chin when nervous. Be sure to write down your thoughts and the things you see about each person.

These specific observations can form the background and foundations for an actor's work on a character making sure their performance is grounded in reality. This exercise creates a filing cabinet in the actors head of gestures, personalities, and postures that ground the way they perform on stage in reality.

For time is the longest distance between two places.

— Tennessee Williams



### REPRESENTATIONAL VS. PRESENTATIONAL

**Representational:** reality hide all elements of performance from audience

**Presentational:** artificial always aware of performance



# Representing Realism *(continued)*

**PERSON #1**

**PERSON #1**

**PERSON #1**

**location:**

**location:**

**location:**

In memory, everything seems to happen to music.

— Tennessee Williams

# Poetic Realism & Heightened Reality

## in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

*"I say that symbols are nothing but the natural speech of drama."*

— Tennessee Williams, foreword to *Camino Real*

Although early work by Williams is often seen as the epitome of realism his style is not purely realistic. Williams combines elements of realism with moments of heightened reality infused with symbols and poetry. Blanche is described in the stage directions of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, "her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. There is something about her uncertain manner, as well as her white clothes that suggests a moth," the tone and beauty of this writing is a good example of the "reality plus" that is uniquely Williams. The art of the 1940s in which Williams was writing *A Streetcar Named Desire* was influenced by the social realism of the 1930s which presented a slightly distorted reality with political goals as well as abstract expressionism that was developing in New York at the time. Below are some examples of Social Realism and Abstract Expressionism. Look at the paintings carefully and answer the questions next to each painting.

## EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL REALISM



***Bluebird***  
by Francis de Erdely in 1940

What emotions are evoked in you by this painting?

How was this achieved by the artist through their choices (color, texture, line)?

Who/what is the subject of this painting? Can you tell?

How does the artist feel about the painting's subject? How can you tell?

# Poetic Realism & Heightened Reality *(continued)*



## WPA artist Michael Lensen, *Mining, Mount Hope, West Virginia*

What emotions are evoked in you by this painting?

How was this achieved by the artist through their choices (color, texture, line)?

Who/what is the subject of this painting? Can you tell?

How does the artist feel about the painting's subject? How can you tell?

## EXAMPLES OF ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM



### **Number 1 (Lavender Mist) by Jackson Pollock**

What emotions are evoked in you by this painting?

How was this achieved by the artist through their choices (color, texture, line)?

Who/what is the subject of this painting? Can you tell?

How does the artist feel about the painting's subject? How can you tell?



# Poetic Realism & Heightened Reality *(continued)*



## Woman I, 1952 by Willem de Kooning

What emotions are evoked in you by this painting?

How was this achieved by the artist through their choices (color, texture, line)?

Who/what is the subject of this painting? Can you tell?

How does the artist feel about the painting's subject? How can you tell?



**Poetic Realism:** a lyrical style of realism which utilizes elements of poetry to communicate deeper meaning and emotional impact. Poetic realism in the theater specifically injects a realistic representational theatrical contract with elements of poetry in a play's characterization, language, theatrical devices, and symbolism.

**Social Realism** is a style of figurative art with social concerns - generally left-wing. Inspired in part by nineteenth-century Realism, it emerged in various forms in the twentieth century. Political radicalism prompted its emergence in 1930s America, while distaste for abstract art encouraged many in Europe to maintain the style into the 1950s. (<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-abstract-expressionism.htm>)

**Abstract Expressionism** was never an ideal label for the movement which grew up in New York in the 1940s and 1950s. It was somehow meant to encompass not only the work of painters who filled their canvases with fields of color and abstract forms, but also those who attacked their canvases with a vigorous gestural expressionism. Yet Abstract Expressionism has become the most accepted term for a group of artists who did hold much in common. All were committed to an expressive art of profound emotion and universal themes, and most were shaped by the legacy of Surrealism, a movement that they translated into a new style fitted to the postwar mood of anxiety and trauma. In their success, the New York painters robbed Paris of its mantle as leader of modern art, and set the stage for America's post-war dominance of the international art world.

(<http://www.theartstory.org/movement-abstract-expressionism.htm>)

# The Light and the Dark

## Thematic Poetry in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action. (p. 60)

Blanche

I never was hard or self-sufficient enough. When people are soft - soft people have got to shimmer and glow - they've got to put on soft colors, the colors of butterfly wings, and put a - paper lantern over the light... It isn't enough to be soft. You've got to be soft and attractive. And I - I'm fading now! I don't know how much longer I can turn the trick. (p. 92)

Blanche

The poetic realism of *A Streetcar Named Desire* not only strengthens the script's evocative nature it also highlights important thematic elements. There are many themes within *A Streetcar Named Desire*. There are themes of illusion and reality, life and death, rich and poor, body and brain, and the old and new south, just to name a few. Motifs, symbols, and moments of heightened reality reinforce these themes for audience members of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. For now let's focus on the theme of illusion and reality. For Blanche illusion and memory are safe and in some ways are more real for her than the moment that she finds herself in. Williams uses language, characterization, and theatrical elements to reinforce themes of illusion and reality.

Scene Ten in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a good example of Williams' ability to weave together different themes in heightened moments of theatricality that demonstrate that sometime illusion represents the most real and visceral experience for Blanche. Read scene ten carefully. While reading through highlight or underline any words, phrases, stage directions, or heightened moments that reinforce the theme of reality and illusion. Once you have gone through the scene carefully making careful notes answer the following questions:

What do the words, phrases, stage directions, or heightened moments have in common with one another? How are they different?

Take a look at which characters say or do the moments you have selected? What does that tell you about how that character relates to the theme of illusion and reality?

Using the text as your guide how does Williams feel about reality? How does he want his audience to feel?

How does your answer to question three impact the way you visualize the scene? Does it affect what people are wearing? How they move? The lighting in the room?





I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.

— Tennessee Williams

Jessica Tandy as Blanche duBois on Broadway. Notice the ethereal nature of her costume. She doesn't seem to be a part of the "real" world around her. As she relives her life out loud asking, "How about taking a swim, a moonlight swim at the old rock quarry?" audience themselves are left to question whether what they are seeing onstage is real.



**Theme:** is defined as a main idea or an underlying meaning of a literary work that may be stated directly or indirectly.

There is a time for departure even when there's no certain place to go.

— Tennessee Williams





# Decoding Metaphor

## in Theatrical Design

Although *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a strong example of realistic theater metaphor is a crucial tool for understanding Williams' script. Theatre artists, and especially theatrical designers, often make artistic choices after they have decoded a play's central metaphor. This metaphor allows designers to think creatively without taking away from the scripts meaning. Every play has 100s of potential metaphors and designers have to work through several options before they decide what metaphor will ground their design concepts.

Every designer has their own process but there is a formula that you can follow.

Take a look at the example provided then fill in your own chart to discover your central metaphor for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

### EXAMPLE Beauty and the Beast

PROTAGONIST		ANTAGONIST
Belle		Society
The Beast	VS	Gaston
The Beast		The Beast
ADJECTIVES/STRONG DESCRIPTIVE NOUNS		ADJECTIVES/STRONG DESCRIPTIVE NOUNS
<del>Different</del> Abnormal	VS	<del>Strict</del> Sever
Rough		Fearful Apprehensive
Alone Isolated		Judgmental
	<p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;"><b>ACTIVE TRANSITIVE VERB</b></p> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;"><del>Destroys</del> Dismantles</p> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">Erases Abolishes</p> <p style="text-align: center; margin: 0;">Triumphs Transcends</p>	
Abnormal		Judgment
Abnormality		Judgment
Abnormality		Judgment
FINAL STATEMENT OF CENTRAL METAPHOR:		
Abnormality	Transcends	Judgement

**PROTAGONIST**

**ANTAGONIST**

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**VS**

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**ADJECTIVES/STRONG DESCRIPTIVE NOUNS**

**ADJECTIVES/STRONG DESCRIPTIVE NOUNS**

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**VS**

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**ACTIVE TRANSITIVE VERB**

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**FINAL STATEMENT OF CENTRAL METAPHOR:**

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# Her White Clothes Suggest a Moth

## Costume Design in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

The central metaphor chosen by a designer helps to inform their artistic interpretation and choices. Let's say that after analysing *A Streetcar Named Desire* you wind up with "corporeal conquers ethereal." Stanley as the protagonist conquers Blanche the antagonist. Or you might wind up with "ethereal defies corporeal." Blanche as the protagonist defies Stanley.

How would this central metaphor affect the costume design for Stanley and Blanche? What colors would each character be in? What type of lines would you use (angled or curved)? What type of textures would you use in each costume (rough and heavy or smooth and light)?



Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski in the 1951 film adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Notice the line, color, and texture in the pants and t-shirt. Does this costume design make you think of the word corporeal? Why or Why not?



Actress Vivien Leigh as Blanche DuBois in the 1951 movie adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Notice the colors, line and textures of this dress. Does this costume design make you think of the world ethereal? Why or why not?



# Her White Clothes Suggest a Moth *(continued)*

Now think about your central metaphor and your protagonist and antagonist. How would you design a costume for both your protagonist and your antagonist that evokes your central metaphor? Remember line, color, and texture. Create a collage of inspirational photos that represents your costume design for either your protagonist or your antagonist that upholds your central metaphor.

**CENTRAL METAPHOR:** \_\_\_\_\_

When so many are lonely as seem to be lonely, it would be  
inexcusably selfish to be lonely alone

— Tennessee Williams.



VIRGINIA STAGE COMPANY

EDUCATION & COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

## **A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE**

*JANUARY 17 - FEBRUARY 5 | THE WELLS THEATRE*  
TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 1 at 10AM

## **THE WIZ**

*APRIL 11 - 30 | THE WELLS THEATRE*  
TUESDAY, APRIL 19 at 10AM  
TUESDAY, APRIL 26 at 10:30AM

For more information, visit [vastage.org/student-matinees/](http://vastage.org/student-matinees/)

# STUDENT MATINEES

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