

Literature  Live!

Study Guide

for Students

*A Streetcar
Named Desire*

by Tennessee Williams

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Study guide created by Lauren Mlicko, Allen O’Reilly,
and Moriah Moore

Literature Live!

Literature Live! is Bay Street's annual flagship educational offering. Now in its sixteenth year, this program has served over 43,000 students from more than 100 schools from Queens to Montauk and beyond Long Island who have attended professional productions at Bay Street free of charge. This BOCES-approved initiative has featured great American Classics throughout its history: *Death of a Salesman*, *The Great Gatsby*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, and last year's production of *The Crucible* (pictured below).

This fall's production of Tennessee Williams's classic drama, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is sure to engage our adult as well as our student audiences. Directed by Stephen Hamilton (Bay Street's co-founder and first Executive Director), *Streetcar* set in post-World War II New Orleans, chronicles the perilous journey of Blanche DuBois, the faded and delusional southern belle as she encounters the plain-speaking and often brutal, Stanley Kowalski. Please join us for what has been called "one of the greatest plays of the twentieth century" as we celebrate another year of Literature Live!



Literature Live! 2023 *The Crucible*

When You Arrive

Tennessee Williams', play, *A Streetcar Named Desire* contains adult themes, scenes of domestic violence, and implied sexual assault. The portrayal of these events occurs off stage and are presented in a manner appropriate for school-aged audiences as in all previous Literature Live! presentations.

For Teachers

- Please arrive at least 15 minutes prior to the start of the performance to allow time for students to use the restrooms and get seated.
- Your bus may unload right in front of the theater's entrance and then proceed to park for the duration of the show further down on Long Wharf.
- If you are traveling westbound to Bay Street, please allow extra travel time to account for morning traffic, which can take an additional 30- 45 minutes!
- Your lead contact should check-in with House Management for your school's seating assignments.
- Provide Bay Street with a cell phone number of your coordinator who will be attending in case we need to reach you the day of.
- There is no food or drink permitted in the theater.
- There will be a brief 5-minute break between the end of the show and the beginning of the Q&A talkback to usher out any schools that do not wish to stay.
- There will NOT be an intermission.
- PLEASE NOTE: The use of student's cell phones are prohibited in the theater for the duration of the performance. Please plan and comply accordingly!

For Students

- Please do not talk or whisper during the performance in order to not distract your fellow classmates or the actors on stage.
- Remain in your seat during the entirety of the performance. If you must leave the theater for an emergency, please use the exits up the stairs at the back of the house.
- Trips to the restroom should occur before or after the performance.
- There is no food or drink permitted in the theater. THANK YOU!



About the Playwright: Tennessee Williams

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in 1911, in Columbus, Mississippi. He and his siblings, Rose, and Walter were raised primarily by their mother, as their father was a traveling salesman. The Williams family later moved to St. Louis, Missouri, which exacerbated existing familial tensions, including their father's alcoholism. This inspired a young Thomas to begin expressing himself through writing. However, after being forced by his father to leave behind his studies at the University of Missouri, Williams began working at a St. Louis shoe factory and continued to work there through the Great Depression. Following a nervous breakdown in 1935, Williams underwent a brief

recuperation period in Memphis, Tennessee, where he picked up the nickname that is now recognized worldwide. Williams then completed his studies in English at the University of Iowa, and went on to live in New Orleans, Louisiana, where he remained for most of his adult life.

Williams' first commercial and critical success as a playwright came with *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944 and was followed by additional achievements such as *Camino Real* and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. However, it was *A Streetcar Named Desire*, conceived and written by Williams in New Orleans, which struck many as his finest play. To this day, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is widely considered to be Williams' crowning achievement as one of the great American playwrights.

In the final years of his life, Williams became increasingly dependent on alcohol and drugs as he suffered from depression. Even amidst these struggles, Williams continued to write new plays and oversee productions of his earlier works. Although many of his later works did not meet the same critical or commercial acclaim as did pieces like *A Streetcar Named Desire*, these works have more recently come to be appreciated for their avant-garde, and at times controversial, qualities. Even after his death in 1983, Tennessee Williams' writings have maintained a strong hold in the breadth of great American plays, and within American culture at large. As theater critic and historian John Gassner states, Williams "made pulsating plays out of his visions of a world of terror, confusion, and perverse beauty," and thus makes indifference to the theater virtually impossible."

Relevant sources: [Biography.com](https://www.biography.com) [PBS: American Masters](https://www.pbs.org/americanmasters) [Poetry Foundation](https://www.poetryfoundation.org)
[Kennedy Center](https://www.kennedycenter.org) [Britannica.com](https://www.britannica.com) [Wikipedia.org](https://www.wikipedia.org)

About the Story: Stage to Screen

The original Broadway production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* opened in December of 1947, at the Ethel Barrymore Theatre in New York City. It was an immediate commercial and critical triumph, met with “a moment of stunned silence before the crowd erupted into a round of applause that lasted 30 minutes” on opening night ([History.com](#)). The stage production ran for over eight hundred performances, and solidified Williams’ stature as one of the great American playwrights following his earlier success with *The Glass Menagerie*. “The play struck a deep chord in the post–World War II United States, where people struggled to find their places in a rapidly changing social order. Audiences had lived through one of the most violent periods in human history, and.... were ready to embrace...their new era.” ([The Historic New Orleans Collection, HNOC](#)).

In the original Broadway cast, Jessica Tandy, Kim Hunter, and Karl Malden starred as Blanche, Stella, and Mitch, respectively. *Streetcar* was Kim Hunter’s Broadway debut and marked Jessica Tandy’s first Tony award. The youngest of all the original cast members was 23-year-old Marlon Brando, a rising star of New York theater and former student of Lee Strasberg’s Acting Studio and the Stanislavsky method of acting. Tennessee Williams said of Brando’s audition for Stanley, “A new value came out of Brando’s reading which was by far the best reading I have ever heard. He seemed to have already created a dimensional character, of the sort that the war has produced among young veterans.” The original show’s director, Elia Kazan, also noted Brando’s “raw talent,” “instantaneous enthusiasm,” and sensuality, as well as how he captured “misperceptions, ...callousness and [the] insensitivity of youth” (*The Kindness of Strangers* by Donald Spoto).

After its Broadway run and tour, the film version of *Streetcar* soon started to take shape, thanks to the efforts of its producer Irene Selznick and director Elia Kazan. While Kazan and most of the Broadway cast remained tied to the project, the role of Blanche was re-cast from Jessica Tandy to Vivien Leigh. Leigh had played Blanche in the West End production of *Streetcar* in London and was a world-famous film star after her performance as Scarlett O’Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.

Amidst the pre-production process, Hollywood’s Production Code Administration demanded substantial changes to the script, most notably the removal of

Blanche’s rape by Stanley. However, Williams believed any additional changes to his adapted screenplay did not make sense and warned that “the simplistic moralizing of prewar Hollywood was hypocritical in the wake of new realities of post WWI America” ([University of Albany](#)). The film version kept in the rape scene, but Stella ends up leaving Stanley instead of staying with him, as she does in the original play.

A poster from the 1951 film



Even with this subtle change, Kazan's film version of *Streetcar* received just as much, if not more, acclaim than did his Broadway show. The film "enfolded all the anxieties of the era in its story of perverse gentility colliding with the earthy truths of the working class." ([University of Albany](#)) Thus, "*Streetcar*... demonstrated that there was a market for literary films with adult themes, opening the door for many of the most notable productions of the following two decades." ([HNOC](#)).

Over 75 years since its live premiere, and after eight Broadway revivals, *A Streetcar Named Desire* continues to stimulate cultural discussion and creative production, both in the United States and across the world. "The play has become a renewable resource in popular culture.... Its deep connection to fundamental human struggles has been used to explore issues of class, gender, and race in a wide variety of mediums." ([HNOC](#)).

Synopsis

Blanche DuBois arrives by streetcar in New Orleans, Louisiana, after losing her family estate, Belle Rêve. She finds the apartment in the Elysian Fields neighborhood where her sister and brother-in-law, Stella, and Stanley Kowalski, live. Blanche is immediately appalled by how run-down the apartment is, as well as by her brother-in-law's personality. Blanche and Stanley continue to be at odds with each other the longer that Blanche remains living in the apartment.

The night after Blanche moves in, a game of poker turns violent when Stanley throws a radio out the window in a drunken rage. He also hits his wife Stella, who is pregnant, when she tries to de-escalate the situation. Blanche notices how one of the other players, Mitch, helps hold Stanley back to keep him from causing any more damage. Blanche and Stella then go to a neighboring apartment to spend the night, but Stella soon returns to her husband as he cries out to her in remorse.

Over the coming months, Blanche begins a relationship with Mitch, though she tends to keep him at arm's length. Meanwhile, Stanley begins to learn about Blanche's past, including how her husband committed suicide after Blanche denounced him for having an affair with another man. Stanley also discovers further details regarding why Blanche had to leave her home in Mississippi and come to New Orleans; In addition to losing the family estate, Blanche was asked to leave the school she worked at after having an affair with a teenage student. No sooner does Stanley discover the extent of Blanche's reputation for drinking and engaging in loose romantic affairs, than his wife begins to go into labor.

The Cutrer Mansion in Clarksdale, Mississippi; the inspiration for Belle Reve



While Stanley and Stella are at the hospital awaiting the birth of their child, Mitch finds Blanche drunk in the Kowalski apartment. He comes to confront her about her past, which he has learned from Stanley. Blanche tries to explain herself by revealing how lonely she has been, but she and Mitch only manage to argue before he decides to leave her and pursue their relationship no further. Stanley then returns home to Blanche dressed in her finest clothing, having convinced herself that she is about to be picked up by a young man to join him on a cruise. Enraged by her fantasies, Stanley confronts Blanche about her past, and then rapes her.

Following her assault, Blanche is completely consumed by her fantasy that she is about to be swept away by her boyfriend onto a cruise. Stella and Stanley send Blanche to a mental institution, and Stella decides to stay with Stanley despite his abuse of both her and her sister. Blanche parts with the words “I have always depended on the kindness of strangers,” before another game of poker resumes.

Pre-Show Activities: writing, class discussion and/or presentations

At First Glance: What are your initial thoughts/opinions of this story? What portions resonated with you? Confused you? Made you think or feel something? What did you like and/or dislike?

The Playwright: Review ‘About the Playwright: Tennessee Williams’ along with the other listed resources. Based on your knowledge of the playwright, and your viewing of the film/ reading of the play, how did aspects of his life inform his creation of this story (i.e., the setting, the characters, etc.)?

Historical Themes: Consider the following quote by Tennessee Williams: “I write about the South because I think the war between romanticism and the hostility to it [romanticism] is very sharp there.” What might Williams mean by this? How and where do “romanticism” and “hostility to” romanticism appear in the storyline, characters, and setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire*?

Where it Began: Review and discuss the historical context/ production details of the original Broadway production and the 1951 film.



New Orleans, where the play is set

Cast

Blanche DuBois	Daniela Mastropietro
Stella Kowalski	Katie Rodgers
Stanley Kowalski	Shea Buckner
Harold “Mitch” Mitchell	Sawyer A. Spielberg
Eunice Hubbell	Nicole Marie Hunt
Steve Hubell	Joe Pallister
Pablo Gonzalez	Carlos Garcia
Doctor	Matthew Conlon
Nurse/Mexican Woman	Adelaide Mestre

Director's Statement

One essential character in *A Streetcar Named Desire* never appears onstage yet dominates the entire psychological world of the play and dramatically influences the action of all the other characters.

Belle Reve—Stella and Blanche's family estate that is "lost" before play begins—looms over the play like a malevolent spirit. Through Eunice, the upstairs neighbor and owner of the apartment building where Stanley and Stella live, we learn that that Belle Reve was "a great big place with white columns," and Blanche later describes it as "the plantation."

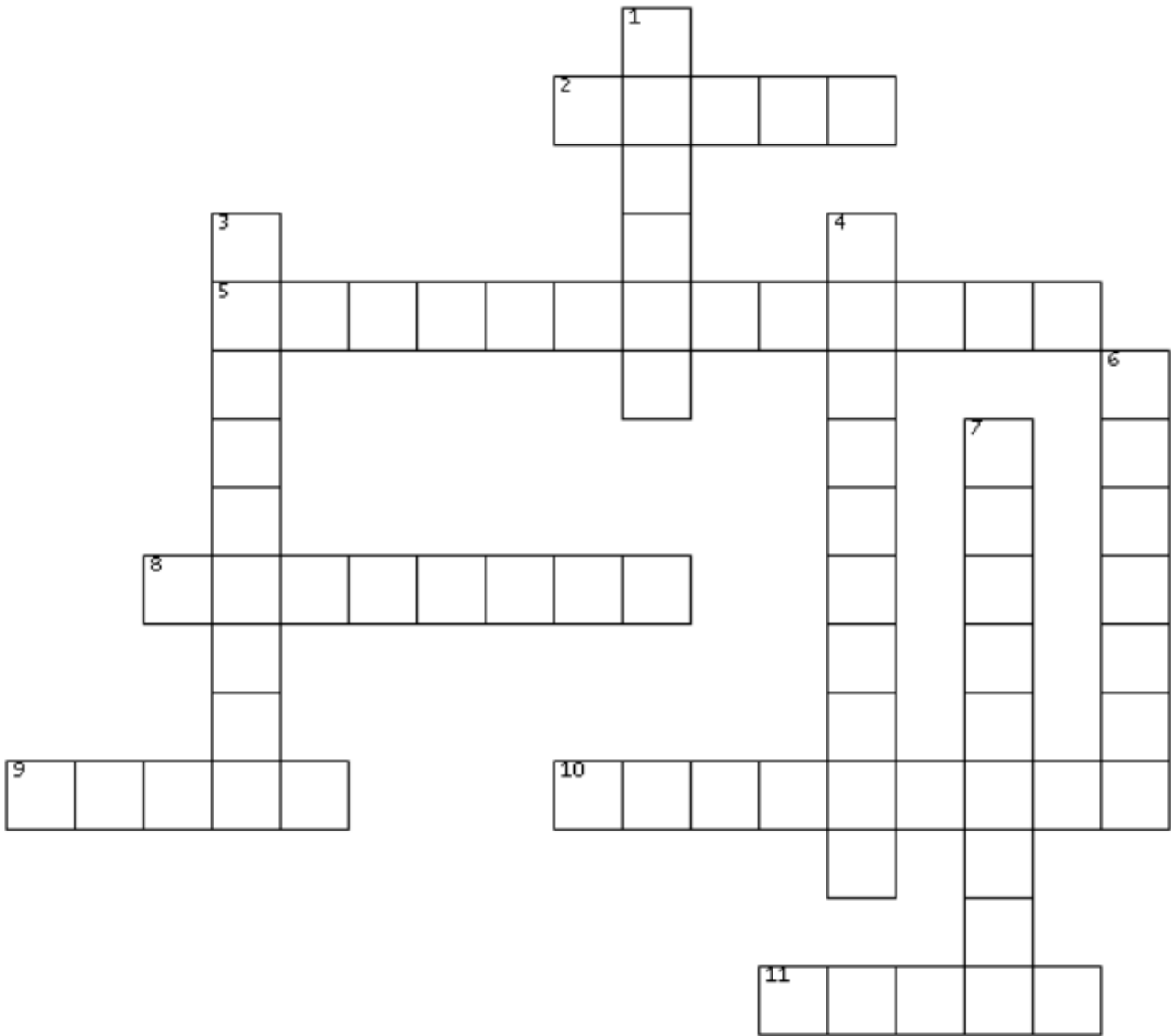
The estate, whose name translates from the French to "beautiful dream," had been in the family for generations. Blanche describes the nature of its loss as "...piece by piece, stretching back over hundreds of years," and attributes the cause as "our improvident grandfathers and fathers and uncles and brothers exchanged the land for their epic fornications." Though Tennessee Williams is never explicit, a property of that description and from that era in Laurel, Mississippi likely was once the home to enslaved people.

Call it karma, fate, or "a man reaps what he sows," Blanche arrives in New Orleans from Laurel bearing not only her own difficult past, but also the dark legacy of Belle Reve and the generations of trauma, transgression, and violence that attended the institution of slavery in the American South.

Given that context, Blanche's unraveling and awful descent into madness is like a Greek tragedy—anticipated by those witnesses on stage and by the audience. Belle Reve quite literally represents the play's themes of loss and decay, illusion versus reality, and drives much of the emotional tension and character conflict, particularly between Blanche, Stella, and Stanley, thereby making it a living presence in the narrative.

We continue to witness the echoes of slavery in today's America. Racism, economic inequality, and generational trauma stemming from the horrors of enslavement continue long after its abolishment. And although *A Streetcar Named Desire* does not address it directly, the America of post WWII, as illustrated onstage, and the America of today bear some striking resemblances to one another—both being informed by unresolved issues relative to the legacy of human bondage.

- Stephen Hamilton



ACROSS

2. The music to which Blanche and her husband danced just before he died
5. The area in which the Kowalskis live, named for a place in the Greek Underworld
8. Stella's delicate condition revealed in scene 2
9. The game Stanley plays with his buddies
10. "I have always relied on the kindness of _____"
11. What does Blanche try to avoid?

DOWN

1. The country that Stanley's family is from
3. The name of Blanche and Stella's lost home
4. The city in which the play takes place
6. Blanche and Stella's relationship
7. Surname of Blanche's former beau

Use the clues to fill in the words above.

Words can go across or down.

Letters are shared when the words intersect.

Post-Show Activities:

writing, class discussion, and/or presentations

A Review: What did you think of Bay Street's production of *Streetcar*? Give your opinion of the actors' performances, as well as the production-design elements (the set, lighting, etc.). Explain what you liked and disliked about this interpretation and support your opinions. What about the production felt true to your understanding of the story? Did anything surprise you? What might you have done differently, and what aspects of the show met or exceeded your expectations?

Stage vs. Film: After viewing a live performance of *Streetcar*, has your perception of the story changed at all? What are some similarities and differences between the film and stage versions? Which medium (theater or film) do you prefer for presenting this story?

Characters & Symbols: In small groups, work together to explain the connection between certain characters and items or symbols in the play: Blanche and the yellow lantern, Stanley and poker, Mitch and light vs. dark, Blanche and Belle Rêve, etc. What is the nature of this character and item/ symbol's connection? Is it positive or negative? Does the item dictate some element of the character's life, or does it symbolize some aspect of their personality?

Beyond Williams: What do you think happens to *Streetcar*'s characters after Williams' story comes to a close? How and when might certain plot points be resolved, if at all? Create a potential future for one or more of the characters, based on what you know already: Do Stanley and Stella remain married? Does Blanche ever recover after her nervous breakdown? What becomes of Mitch without Blanche?

Crossword Puzzle Answers

ACROSS

2. Polka
5. Elysian Fields
8. Pregnant
9. Poker
10. Strangers
11. Light

DOWN

1. Poland
3. Belle Reve
4. New Orleans
6. Sisters
7. Huntleigh

Note from the Music Director

Pre and post-show playlists will represent the history of African-American music in New Orleans, the birthplace of jazz. Pieces will range from work songs of enslaved people to modern jazz, including blues, ragtime, and early rock and roll. Louis Armstrong, Sidney Bechet, Lead Belly, Fats Domino, Wynton Marsalis, and many others will be featured, as well as historic recordings from the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress and original piano rolls by Jelly Roll Morton.

You can find this music on [this Spotify playlist](#) starting November 11th.

- David Brandenburg

Post-Show Talkback

Following each show there will be a brief break before an optional talkback. People involved in the production of the show will answer questions and discuss the performance with the members of the audience. Any groups who do not wish to attend can exit during the break. The talkback will be approximately 20 minutes long.

New York State Education Department ELA Learning Standards (2017) - Breakdown

	9-10th Graders	11-12th Graders:
Cite:	Implicit/ explicit text	Ambiguity
Analyze:	Interaction between ppl, events, ideas (how this advances plot or develops theme)	Impact of author's choices
Determine:	Literal, figurative, connotative, and syntactical meaning	Words w/ multiple meanings, how author refines meaning over course of text
Examine:	Persuasiveness, aesthetic quality, satire, sarcasm, irony, understatement	Rhetorical strategies, literary elements & devices
Pose:	Questions that probe reasoning & evidence, address range of opinion, challenge ideas/ conclusions	Questions that promote divergent & creative perspectives
Respond:	To diverse POVS, Summarize points of (dis)agreement, make new connections in light of evidence & reasoning presented	To diverse POVS, Synthesize evidence on all sides, resolve contradictions, conduct research
Present:	Claims appropriate to task, purpose, audience	Claims conveying distinct perspectives

Both:

- Develop questions for deeper understanding & further exploration.
- Determine themes & analyze their development, including specific details, objective & accurate summary.
- Consider how aspects of structure create meaning & affect the reader.
- Examine how the author employs point of view, purpose, etc. to shape explicit and implicit messages.
- Make strategic use of digital media and/or visual displays in presentations.

STAFF

Creative Team

Director	Stephen Hamilton
Assistant Director	Brian Clemente
Scenic & Projection Designer	Mike Billings
Costume Designer	Yuka Silvera
Lighting Designer	Justin Poruban
Sound Designer	David Brandenburg
Dialect Coach	Allen O'Reilly

Stage Management

Production Stage Manager	Melissa Sparks
Assistant Stage Manager	Brian Clemente

Crew

Wardrobe Supervisor	Alisha Kraus
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Theater Production Staff

Director of Production	Mike Billings
Technical Supervisor	Justin Poruban
Props Designer	Eric Jacobson

Executive Director	Theater Administrative Staff	Tracy Mitchell
Artistic Director		Scott Schwartz
Associate Artistic Director		Will Pomerantz
Deputy Director		Chris Siefert
Associate Producer		John Sullivan
Director of Philanthropy		Kimberly Fink
Development Coordinator		Mick Johnson
Director of Sponsorships.....	Paul Anthony Mongelluzzo	
Director of Marketing and Communicatons		Carah Von Funk
Marketing Coordinator		Moriah Moore
Director of Education and Outreach		Allen O'Reilly
Executive Assistant		Eric Jacobson
House Manager		Nancy Thompson
Box Office Manager		Tony Marr
Box Office Associate		Michael Williams
Literary Manager		Hope Villaneuva
Bookkeepers	Sherry Lyles and Gayle Donahue	

Many Thanks to Our Sponsors



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