

A Streetcar Named Desire

Life luggage

Jackie Shead discusses the play's title and explores the significance of a related prop

In 2004 an examining board set this task on *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

Explore the significance of the play's title and the uses that Williams makes of the streetcar named Desire through the play.

Probably, the question surprised few candidates; Williams himself draws attention to the significance of the play's title in Scene 4:

BLANCHE: What you are talking about is brutal desire — just — Desire — the name of that rattle-trap streetcar that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another.

STELLA: Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar?

BLANCHE: It brought me here — Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be.

So, such an examination question looks like the proverbial 'gift' (a topic students and teachers tend to revise and one which focuses on a central theme of the play). Dare I suggest, then, that those who threw themselves energetically into the task might have found it more difficult than they anticipated to carry out the second part of the question, which asked for specific illustration:

You should include in your answer an examination of two or more appropriate extracts of your choice.

After half a century of critical and public acclaim, *Streetcar* is so much a part of theatrical heritage it is hard to imagine it called anything else. But it is worth remembering that what seems natural and inevitable now did not seem so to Tennessee Williams when he wrote the play. His string of working titles suggests the final choice was not glaringly obvious. Desire as a driving force is clearly a central concern of the play, but there so is the idea of fatal attraction suggested by *The Moth*, or a ruthless cat-and-mouse competition suggested by *The Poker Night*. And, while those titles connect closely to patterns of imagery permeating the play's action, dialogue and stage effects, my contention is that the title finally chosen does not. Those who took up the question about Williams's uses of the streetcar might have been surprised to find themselves with relatively poor pickings. Why might that be?

Limited journeys

On the one hand, the metaphor of experience as a physical journey has a long literary history. And the kind of travel particularised by a streetcar fits well with the play's representation of desire as a driving force taking characters to destinations which are, at best, very approximate choices. On arrival, Blanche refers to her bewildering tram ride, and Williams uses the New Orleans districts — Desire, Elysian Fields, Cemeteries — as indicators of her fears and complications. With her departure, the playwright reintroduces the travelling metaphor with Blanche's tragic 'Please don't get me. I'm only passing through.'

On the other hand, by the time the play opens, Blanche is near the end of her journey; in fact we are watching her last-chance road-stop. Between her arrival and departure — the opening and closing moments of the play — Williams has created a fixed interior in the two rooms of the Kowalski flat, with exterior stage areas also strongly suggesting a specific location. There is limited opportunity within that stage space to make use of streetcar-related props and imagery. One exception occurs in Scene 8, when Stanley hands Blanche a bus ticket back to Laurel, signifying his determination that she will be defined by her past — and by the seediest part of it. (He could have spent the money on a journey to any destination, but Laurel is the one place where Stanley can be sure Blanche will be labelled as depraved.) Other than that, vehicular allusions seem somewhat dragged in — like those quoted above from Scene 4, or here in Scene 6:

MITCH: I'll walk over to Bourbon and catch an owl car.

BLANCHE: Is that streetcar named Desire still grinding along the tracks at this hour?

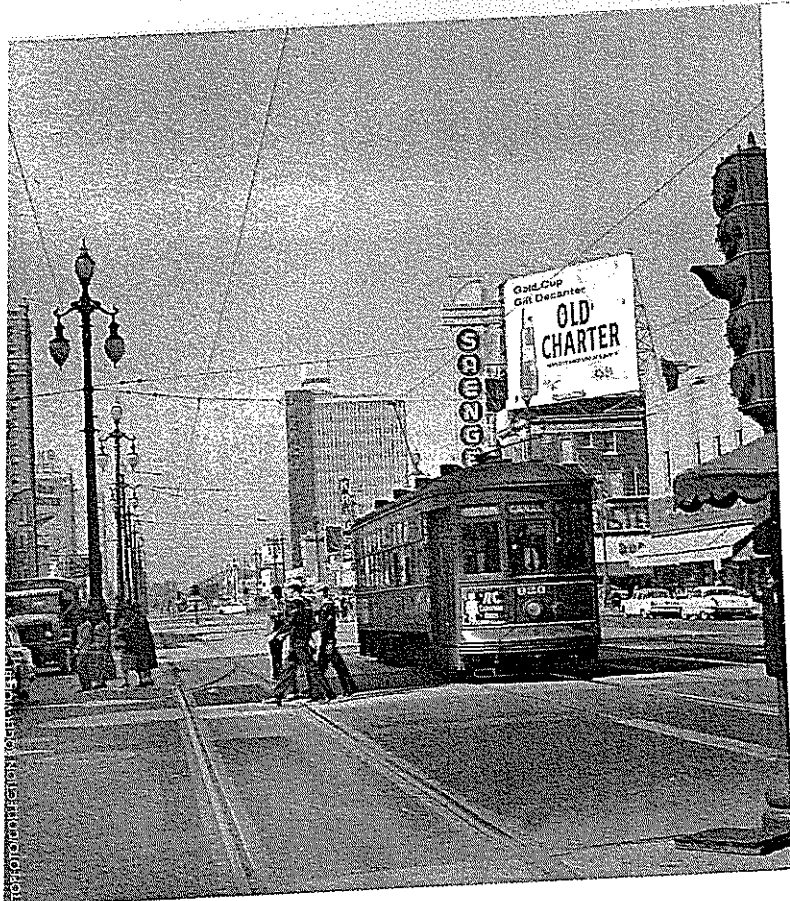
True, the dialogue at times alludes to life as geographical movement. This, I think, is why Williams makes Stanley a worker who travels. Stella describes him as the 'one of his crowd that's likely to get anywhere'. Compare Mitch, employed on the appropriately chosen spare-parts bench. The Kowalskis' flat faces the L&N tracks *because* they are connected to an industrial future, while the sound effect of a locomotive is always a threat to Blanche. It is first heard when Stanley enters in Scene 4, thunders past with glaring lights as she relives Allan's death in Scene 6, and the engine's roar makes her crouch as Stanley approaches menacingly in Scene 10. However, the symbolic relevance of the train is much reduced by Williams changing his earlier intention that Blanche would die by throwing herself under the wheels of a locomotive.

Lighting the stage

Despite the play's allusions to life as a journey, scrutiny of the text shows Williams actually makes scant use of the streetcar, because — banal as it sounds — the play is set neither in a bus

Marlon Brando as Stanley and Vivien Leigh as Blanche in the 1951 film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*





station nor on a tram. In contrast, if we turn to one of his working titles, *The Moth*, Williams's stage setting allows him to introduce and use light symbolism and related props with effortless skill. Take, for example, the Chinese lantern. Naturalistically, it seems just the purchase Blanche would make: frivolous, elegant and blurring the shabby surroundings she longs to obscure. Dramatically, in Scene 3 it changes the lighting effect as Blanche exerts her influence over Mitch, and sets one half of the stage in opposition to the lurid light over the poker players. The contrasting effects define two opposing territories from which Blanche and Stanley wage a tug-of-war over Mitch during Scene 3.

Symbolically, the lantern shields Blanche from the 'merciless glare' of a bare bulb, itself connected through the dialogue to acts of deliberate cruelty or vulgarity, and to a harsh, unforgiving attitude. Later, Mitch angrily snatches off the shade, complaining he has been deceived, but Williams's stage business in Scene 3 shows Mitch's deceptions are as much self-induced as anything. His willingness to put up the lantern signifies his active collusion in the romanticised version of herself that Blanche constructs. In contrast, Stanley's refusal to participate, his view of Blanche's yearning for magic and glamour as mere trickery, is expressed in his ironic reference to the lantern:

You come in here and sprinkle the place with powder and spray perfume and cover the light-bulb with a paper lantern and lo and behold the place has turned into Egypt and you are the Queen of the Nile!

I could go on to examine how Williams uses the lantern in the final scene, but I think the point is made: some elements of the play seem effortlessly woven into its fabric, naturalistically and symbolically; the play's title is not one of them.

Life luggage

Having said that, one travel-related property works supremely well: Blanche's trunk. Seamlessly integrated into the play's action, it unifies the literal and metaphorical meanings of Blanche's journey. Travellers have luggage, and experience also brings psychological and emotional baggage. Both are evident in the contents and arrangement of Blanche's trunk, whose importance is made clear by her comment, 'Everything I own is in that trunk.' Clearly, the compartments represent areas of Blanche's experience — ones she would no doubt prefer to keep separate — and highlight the contradictions in her situation and in her psyche: glamour overlaying debt, tributes from conquests overlaying vulnerability and pain. And Stanley's intrusion into the trunk marks the beginning of an invasion of Blanche's self, which does not cease until his ultimate penetration — rape.

In Scene 2, Stanley starts to rummage through Blanche's possessions for proof she has misappropriated the family assets. Immediately visible are the glamorous clothes and accessories in which Blanche takes refuge to bolster her crumbling sense of self-worth. She tells Stanley 'clothes are my passion' and in a sense they are — a sublimation of other passions Blanche has learned to fear and tries to repress. But the trunk also contains Allan's love letters, and it is when these not the clothes, are handled that Blanche expresses a sense of desecration. Allan's letters are romanticised by Blanche's description of them as '*yellowing with antiquity*'. Yet they are beribboned not simply because they are precious, but because they are taboo, connected to repressed feelings of guilt:

I hurt him the way you would like to hurt me, but you can't! I'm not young and vulnerable any more. But my young husband was and I — never mind about that!

Stanley's 'ravaging' of Blanche's trunk prefigures his raking over of her past to get 'the dope' on 'sister Blanche'. The rough handling begins behind her back (as do his enquiries through Shaw) while she bathes:

He pulls open the wardrobe trunk standing in the middle of the room and jerks out an armful of dresses.

When he spots the relics of her marriage tucked beneath the papers, Stanley, the wary poker player, mistakes secret subterfuge:

What's them underneath? (He indicates another sheaf of papers)

He ends by '*ripping*' the ribbons from Allan's letters, which are scattered to the floor. And what Stanley accidentally uncovers here about Blanche's distant past is of absolutely no interest to him, just as it is not in Scene 7. There he enquires about the scandals he has unearthed: Blanche's affair with a student and her stay at the Hotel Flamingo. Stella's interest for understanding falls on deaf ideas. Stanley's only response to her account of Blanche's marriage is: 'All we discussed was recent history. That must have been a pretty long time ago.'

Unpacking the past

It is fitting that the trunk makes a second major appearance in scene 10 — dragged to the centre of the stage again. In the patterning of the dramatic structure, the second and penultimate scenes are mirror scenes. Both cover the only significant periods of time when Stanley and Blanche are alone and Stella is out of the flat. In the former scene Blanche is 'unpacked' and by the latter she is packing. Her tiara and gowns are again on display, this time crumpled and soiled, symbolising the damage Stanley has inflicted on her self-image and her image in Mitch's eyes. This degradation is also reflected in Stanley's scornful description of Blanche's costume. Earlier, his suspicions about being swindled are voiced in deliberate exaggerations: 'genuine fox fur-pieces, a half a mile long'; 'bracelets of solid gold'; 'a crown for an empress'; but there is also, perhaps, a grudging admiration. By Scene 10 Stanley assesses Blanche's costume with confident mockery: 'Take a look at yourself in that worn-out Mardi Gras outfit, rented for fifty cents from some rag-picker.'

Under his 'merciless glare' Blanche is stripped of all dignity. She drops the bottle in defeat when she sees even her assistance construed as whorehouse posturing: 'So you want some rough-house! All right, let's have some rough-house!'

In summary, then, Blanche's trunk represents aspects of herself: her inherited circumstances, her experiences, her

memories, losses and aspirations. Stanley's intrusive investigation and dismissal of its contents show his contempt for all these aspects of Blanche.

An exploration of Williams's use of this prop, as with the Chinese lantern, shows how naturally symbolic meanings seem to emerge from the drama, so much so that these meanings can be summed up idiomatically. In Scene 3, the radio shows that Mitch literally and figuratively 'dances to Blanche's tune'; in Scene 5 coke spilling on her white dress reveals Blanche's fear of 'staining her image'; in Scene 5 the young man's lighter illustrates the temperamental 'spark of attraction'. Likewise, Blanche's trunk shows her 'psychological and emotional baggage'. In contrast, the play's title does not seem to emerge from the drama itself. Instead, the characters have to import it by reference to a world beyond the stage. This reflects the way the author himself arrived at his title, looking out through his New Orleans window:

Down this street, running on the same tracks, are two streetcars, one named Desire, the other Cemetery. Their ind discourgeable progress up and down Royal struck me as having some symbolic bearing of a broad nature on life... And that's how I got the title.

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