

Literary Contexts: American Literature

A Streetcar Named Desire in Context

| Transcript

Narrator: At eight years old, Thomas Lanier Williams moved with his family from a comfortable life in Mississippi into a crowded low-rent apartment in St. Louis, Missouri, where his father worked at the local shoe factory. For the first time, Williams became conscious of his lower-class status. The relationship between Williams's parents was turbulent and unhappy. Cornelius Williams frequently directed his anger at his frail and sensitive son. As a result, Williams clung closely to his female family members.

By the late 30s, Williams had adopted the professional name of "Tennessee." Years of hard work finally paid off for the struggling playwright when *The Glass Menagerie* became a Broadway success in 1944. Three years later, at age 36, Williams finished a new play about dreams, desperation, domestic despair, and a streetcar named Desire.

Williams's success with this play rested on his choice of theme: the tragic gulf between the ideal of the American Dream and the impossibility of achieving it in reality. Williams was harking back to a heritage that struck a chord with ordinary Americans. Since 1776, thirteen colonies had freed themselves from British rule and drafted the Declaration of Independence. In it, they asserted:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

(The Declaration of Independence, 1776)

Wrapped up in the American Dream was the promise of equal rights and limitless opportunity. The concept was defined by historian James Truslow Adams in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. He wrote that it was the:

... dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement... It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.

(James Truslow Adams, *The Epic of America*, 1931)

The American Dream was the promise of a better life to immigrants who ventured to the land of the free. The 19th and early 20th centuries saw huge numbers of European immigrants enter the United States, often fleeing poverty, famine, or persecution. Between 1880 and 1920, the U.S. welcomed more than 20 million immigrants. But for many who made the journey, whether by choice or by force, achieving success through hard work remained little more than a dream.

New Orleans, the setting of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was first colonized by the French. By 1840, it was a thriving port city trading in goods from the Caribbean, South America, and Europe. Immigrants from all over the world flocked to the city while thousands of African slaves were transported there and put to work on cotton and sugar plantations. Slavery allowed white families in the South to prosper, selling their crops for higher prices while saving a fortune on labor costs. Though slavery was officially abolished in 1865, cotton plantations continued into the 1900s. Black workers still commonly worked long hours in the fields for little pay.

By the early decades of the 20th century, New Orleans was a melting pot of different races, languages, and cultures. African music fused with European brass band traditions to create a new style of music that would eventually be christened “jazz.” The city was modernized in the Jazz Age and electricity enabled the development of a manufacturing sector and the introduction of electrified streetcars. The streetcar line that ran through the city’s French Quarter was called “Desire” and operated between 1920 and 1948 before being replaced by buses.

The ironically named avenue, Elysian Fields, where Stanley and Stella reside in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, was in a neighborhood called Faubourg Marigny. Established by wealthy plantation owner Bernard de Marigny, the precinct initially attracted a vibrant mix of Black and Creole residents. But by the mid-20th century, it was a hub of poverty and crime.

The advent of World War II helped to boost American manufacturing industries and factory jobs became a popular source of employment. By the end of the war, unemployment was low, wages were at record levels, and the economy was thriving. The buoyant labor market was great for many middle-class Americans whose prosperity delivered a better standard of living and strong outcomes in education and healthcare. But the poor and marginalized segments of the population continued to struggle.

For more European immigrants in the 20th century, employment opportunities were limited. By 1910, around 900,000 Polish immigrants had entered the United States, with huge numbers working manual labor jobs. They toiled in coal mines and factories, struggling against low wages and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Children from poor or working-class families had limited access to education. In 1947, around two-thirds of the population over the age of twenty-five never finished high school. Women were encouraged to prioritize marriage and abandon aspirations outside the domestic sphere. Men were expected to be the breadwinners while women were expected to look after their children and home.

Poor understanding of mental illness caused sufferers to be institutionalized, given electric shock treatments, and surgical lobotomies. In the war's tragic aftermath, hundreds of thousands of state-run mental hospitals would spring up over the next few decades. Over 1.3 million soldiers, sailors, and airmen were treated for psychological stress during World War II. Returning soldiers often hid their mental health struggles from their families and self-medicated with alcohol.

Homosexuality was classified as a psychiatric illness at the time, and doctors and psychoanalysts sought to cure patients of their homosexuality. Sodomy laws additionally outlawed sexual activity among homosexuals, forcing most gay men to hide their sexuality. As a gay man from a poor background, Tennessee Williams knew what it was like to feel like a social outcast. He populated *A Streetcar Named Desire* with characters haunted by loneliness, lust, and longing.

When the play opened on Broadway on December 3, 1947, it was an instant sensation. Audiences were shocked and captivated by its frank depiction of sexuality and domestic cruelty.