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Another World of Literature

For decades, high school students have been reading great works of literature ranging from William Shakespeare to William Golding. Most often though, students read these works under duress, frustrating teachers and students alike and leading to a long term distaste for reading. Consequently, people fail to realize that there are works of literature outside the canon of high school that are more contemporary and still have literary merit. However, there is life, and literature, beyond William Shakespeare and his high school cohorts. Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one such play, containing many elements that attest to its worthiness as a meaningful work of fiction. Although Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is not a part of the typical canon of high school literature, it is still a worthwhile book to read.

One basic literary element of all works of fiction is the setting. Used well, a setting can “enhance the action or emotions of a pivotal scene” (Vini 47). *Streetcar* employs a meaningful setting where the temperature reflects the tensions between Stanley and Blanche. First of all, Williams begins his play “early in May” in New Orleans (13); even as Stan and Blanche first meet, already there is “hot weather” (30). As the conflicts between Stanley and Blanche escalate, so does the temperature until finally, Stanley reveals Blanche’s lies and rapes her on a day where it remains “100 on the nose” in the “late afternoon in mid-September” (97). Ultimately, “some weeks later” in October, the tensions and temperature cool with Blanche’s departure (131). *A Streetcar Named Desire* gives readers an opportunity to consider the significance of not only what happens in the play but when it happens as well.

Clearly, strong characterization is essential to any work. Essential also is that the characterization be subtle. When developing a character, Adam Ginder simply advises a writer to “Show it, don’t tell it” (39). Williams does just this in characterizing Stanley Kowalski and Mitch. To illustrate, the very first scene of the play depicts Stanley as a barbaric Neanderthal; his monosyllabic utterances such as “Catch!” and “Meat!” give the reader a clear image of Stanley and his lack of evolution (Williams 14). Therefore, the author prepares the reader for Stanley’s insatiable drive for dominance when he exposes Blanche’s lies in scene seven and brutally rapes her while his wife gives birth at the end of scene ten. One of Stanley’s first movements defines his dominant characteristic.

Similarly, Williams creates a vivid image of Mitch as a “dancing bear” (57). Mitch, appearing tame, “stands awkwardly” throughout most of the play (86); however, as Williams’ description of Mitch implies, he has the potential to be dangerous. He fulfills this potential when he attacks Blanche, seeking “What I been missing all summer,” namely, sex (120). While both Mitch and Stanley’s animalistic behavior often shocks the audience, they cannot deny that Williams deftly indicated both men’s capability for cruelty in his initial characterizations of them.

In addition to animal imagery, other figurative language enhances the play. Frank Foster commends Williams for his “remarkable artistic and psychological maturity throughout ..., skillfully making use of colors and clothes” Williams notably develops specific colors to associate with Blanche. As Blanche’s name indicates, white is her primary color of choice. Williams first introduces Blanche in white (15), and she wears it later on her date with Mitch (80), underscoring her façade of purity and innocence. She even claims to be wearing “Della Robbia blue. The blue of the robe in the old Madonna pictures” in the final scene (135). However, Blanche has a more sensual and promiscuous side, reflected in her “red satin robe”

which she dons when flirting with Stanley (37), and again when she meets Mitch at the fateful poker night (53). Williams eloquently captures Blanche's dual nature in the colors she wears.

Furthermore, Williams blends the two aspects of Blanche's character as the play progresses, and Blanche's licentious side taints her veneer of purity. Williams' first exemplifies this when Stanley mentions "somebody named Shaw" (77). Blanche, shaking with fear, spills soda on her "pretty white skirt" with "a piercing cry" (80). Since Stanley does not irrevocably tarnish Blanche's reputation at this point, her skirt is not permanently stained. However, once it is clear that Mitch is not going to marry Blanche, Williams dresses her in a "somewhat soiled and crumpled white ... gown ...," and her shoes are as "scuffed" as is her status (122). She stands as an icon of sullied innocence simply expressed through her color and clothes.

Ultimately though, for a book to appeal to its readers, it needs to have a strong, universal theme. T. S. Eliot understands that "A good book is about a man. Great books are about mankind" (qtd. in Safire and Safir 312). In other words, while novels are literally a story about specific people at a specific place and time, great books also offer insight into the timeless human condition. Although many people may not have specifically experienced Blanche's loss of Belle Reve or the loss of Allan, many can relate to her painful loneliness that stems from her unfulfilled desire to feel loved. When she first arrives at Elysian Fields, Blanche is lonely. As she tells Stella, "I want to be *near* you, got to be *with* somebody, I *can't* be *alone!*" (Williams 23). Mitch, too, worries that "I'll be alone when she [his mother] goes" (47). Mitch, like Blanche, has also experienced a "pretty sad" romance with a dying girl (53). One particular expert believes, "the mutual need of Blanche and Mitch ... beautifully and poignantly express the theme of loneliness" ("Williams"). The tension and conflict resulting from the unfulfilled search for love while combating loneliness is a common human experience. Many readers can

relate to this universal theme, making *Streetcar* a work of fiction that is enjoyed by a wide range of people.

Overall, sophisticated literature is carefully crafted and requires readers to think carefully about what they read. Cyril Connolly asserts, “Literature is the art of writing something that they’ll have to read twice” (qtd. in Safire and Safir 58). Figurative language, such as metaphors and symbols, adds a deeper dimension to a work that often requires a second, closer reading for a full appreciation. A close reading of *Streetcar* indicates the paper lampshade is a symbol of Blanche herself. When readers encounter Williams’ statement in scene eleven that Blanche “cries out as if the lantern was herself” as Stanley “seizes” the shade from the light (140), they are compelled to reread the play, looking for parallels between Blanche and the lampshade.

The play features Blanche and the lampshade in several places. Foster insists that “The key to Blanche’s survival” is her lies that are “intended to produce a more pleasant ‘illusion’ than reality.” As Blanche begins to weave a tale of deception with Mitch in scene three, she produces the lampshade, telling Mitch that she “can’t stand a naked light bulb ...” (Williams 55), but what she really cannot tolerate is harsh reality. Consequently, she softens the truth as the lampshade dims the light. Blanche admits retreating from “any light ... stronger than this --kitchen--candle” after her traumatic discovery of Allan’s homosexuality and his subsequent suicide (96); however, Williams symbolically means that Blanche is hiding from the truth.

Later, both Blanche and the paper lantern suffer rough treatment. When Mitch “tears the paper lantern off the light” as he confronts Blanche about her lies, she “utters a frightened gasp” (117). On a simple level, Mitch literally exposing her aging face to the bright light causes her reaction, but on a symbolic level, harsh reality is what hurts Blanche. Although Williams completes the symbolic destruction of Blanche through the exposure of harsh truth when Stanley is seen “tearing” the lampshade off the light bulb (140), this is often where the reader first

realizes the symbol exists. Then, the reader is compelled to reread the play carefully to appreciate Williams' skillful employment of symbolism.

Lastly, Williams carefully created this fine piece of literature, selecting a title to reflect an important idea in the play. While Gerald Weales praises William Golding's *Lord of the Flies* for its thoughtful title (356), readers must not overlook the significance of Williams' title. Mainly, sexual desire motivates all of the characters in the play. For example, all of the males in the DuBois family traded tracts of land from Belle Reve for sex (Williams 43). Similarly, Blanche's desires cost her the privilege of existence in Laurel. Blanche admits, "intimacies with strangers was all I ... could fill my empty heart with" after Allan's suicide (118) because "The opposite [of death] is desire" (120). The streetcar named Desire literally brought Blanche to New Orleans, but it was her and her forefathers' sexual desires that brought her to where she is today.

Moreover, sexual desire also leads Stella to Elysian Fields and causes her to remain there at the end of the play. Even though Stanley abuses her, Stella stays Stanley's wife because of what Blanche refers to as "brutal desire—... like the name of that rattle-trap street-car ..." (70). In other words, since Stella's sexual desires are fulfilled, she feels fulfilled in general in her marriage. Williams distinctly indicates that desire is Stella's motivation for staying with Stanley when, at the end of the play, Stella accepts Stanley's "fingers find[ing] the opening of her blouse" to fondle her as an act of comfort (142). Williams' play is aptly named *A Streetcar Named Desire* because sexual desire is what drives the motivations of the characters in the play.

While students can derive much from reading classics, they should not snub newer authors. With skilled characterization, metaphors and symbolism, Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a fine example of quality literature. Its strong universal themes, significant setting, and attention to detail make it worth reading twice. Although it is not a typical part of the canon of high school literature, it is still a worthwhile play to read.

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