

## Explore the concept of 'the past' in A Streetcar Named Desire. –

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Blanche arrives on stage in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', 'incongruous to this setting', and a 'delicate beauty' which, with the adjective 'delicate', denotes her weariness and fragility which 'must avoid a strong light.' Her entire demeanour is presented, initially as a weary traveller, varying (literally – 'carrying a valise') her emotional baggage. Blanche is the epitome of 'the past' in this play, bringing with her not only a representation of the old south, but also her own preformed backstory with consequences yet to unfold. The past is presented, by Williams, as something simultaneously inescapable, with profound consequences on the present, yet also avoidable, being left behind in the wake of a creation of a New America. The presentation of this theme is evolving and conflicting, concluding with Blanche's inevitable expulsion, and 'the past' along with her.

One of Blanche's first lines depicts her journey to the play's setting, also acting as a metaphor for her journey through life: "They told me to take A Streetcar Named Desire, and then transfer to one called cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields." Her syndetic lists take the audience through her stages of life: First Desire, a reference to her family's 'epic fornications', her desire for a better life represented by the beautiful dream ('Belle Reve') and her desire for Allan, the schoolboy and her 'intimacies with strangers'. 'Cemeteries' represents the consequences of these desires – the 'loss of Belle Reve', the 'deaths' and quiet 'funerals', and perhaps even the death of her reputation. Elysian Fields is the end of her journey, where she now finds herself. The name comes from Book VI of Virgil's Aeneid, depicting a realm in the underworld as a place of purification of the soul prior to their return to the living. This 'purification', poetically described as: "No speck is left of their habitual stains, but the pure ether of the soul remains." May provide reason for Blanche's compulsive desire to clean and purify herself, heightening the symbolism of her declaration: "I feel like a brand-new human being." Blanche has reached the end of her life, preparing herself for a new journey. Her past is represented as something fading, that which brought her here "where [she's] ashamed to be." Juxtaposed with Stanley, who's only reference to the past is isolated to his days past recently a soldier in WW2 as part of the "Two-forty-first Engineers," Stanley, full of passion and virility, has no past to hinder him in his progress towards the American Dream of self-earned wealth. Blanche's past inhibits her, foreshadowing the 'death' of her character, if not her physical death. Thus, Williams' presentation of the past is an exploration of mortality. Blanche's weighted past foreshadows her tragic end, having reached the end of her 'journey'. Stanley's limited past demonstrates his new life in a new America he will go on to live.

Yet, in 'A Streetcar Named Desire', and other Williams' works such as *The Glass Menagerie*, the past is presented as something the protagonists desire to escape, resulting in a frantic desire to make time static and immovable. Tom, the narrator of *A Glass Menagerie*, autobiographically named, has freed himself from the limiting prospects of his family life in pursuit of a career in writing. As a memory play, Williams uses plastic theatre through the use of projected images to dramatize Tom's memories. Although he has physically escaped his past life, the dramatization and thus physical manifestation of his past demonstrates its continued power over him through guilt and regret. Blanche's manifestation of the past is

shown through Williams' masterful dramatic use of the 'Varsouviana polka'. When the music is first presented as Blanche tells the story of Allan to Mitch in Scene 6, there is no indication that the characters, too, are aware of the music. In filmic terms, it is non-diegetic. Williams, then, daringly brings it not only into his dramatic world but also into the very imagination of his protagonist, forcing the audience's alignment with her: "The Varsouviana is filtered into weird distortion" (Scene 11) to represent the final collapse of her façade, based on an idealistic former self. These dramatized references to the past show how Blanche, like Tom, fails to escape her past, the consequences of which (her 'desire' and 'fornications') have resulted in the cruel destruction of her character. Blanche's fate, like the passage of time, was inevitable.

Williams' also explores the notion of the past through the 'death' of the culture of the South. Williams has said that 'he writes out of love for the south' but also 'out of regret...of the forces that have destroyed it' and this can be seen through the use of the documents of Belle Reve: "It's wonderfully fitting that Belle Reve should finally be this bunch of old papers." Blanche's juxtaposition of the emphatic adjective 'wonderfully', almost serving as an additional fitting description of the former glory of Belle Reve, compared to the blunt 'bunch of papers', acts as a metaphor for the South's social decline from a seat of economic power to a former aesthetic. However, there are flaws in Blanche's perception of the wonderful Belle Reve given that its name is grammatically incorrect. If 'Reve' is masculine, so too should be Belle. Thus, the name itself not only represents Blanche's crumbling illusions as it was based on a flawed, deceitful 'beautiful dream' but is also Williams' chance to acknowledge the cruelty and corruption that, although did not affect Blanche directly, affected the African Americans that lived beneath the aristocracy which resulted in the dissolution of the South. Hence, Williams' treatment of the past notes the 'grace, elegance' and grandeur permeated through Blanche, but also the corrupt morality on which it was founded. It is a past that will inevitably give way to a vivacious new America, despite Williams' regrets at the lost qualities of tenderness and fragility.

"The past is never dead. It's not even past." – Requiem for a Nun. Perhaps Williams' dramatic presentation of the past is his manner of preserving the culture in which he grew up, despite his admission of its inevitable destruction. Perhaps, his representations of Tom and Blanche's inescapable pasts, those with auto-biographical elements, are Williams' ways of exonerating himself from his own guilt over leaving his family, and more potently his sister, who suffered irreparable brain damage whilst he was gone, or, perhaps, his sense of 'fading' past is a way of preserving a society, he is saddened to lose. In any of these interpretations, Williams' dramatic presentation has succeeded in alleviating his guilt and depression over his own past. Thus, 'A Streetcar Named Desire' is a reflexive form of catharsis that diminishes the pain of the playwright's past.