

Explore the use of setting in A Streetcar Named Desire. – Sophie YM

Tennessee Williams hailed from the Deep South in America at a time where the aristocracy and romantic image of the south was declining. Post-civil war America, combined with a rising wave of socialist attitudes, resulted in a multicultural and liberal society in which Williams found himself. Arguably the most liberal city at the time was New Orleans, where Williams set his play. It is plausible that Williams, a homosexual, artistically inclined man was attracted to New Orleans as being somewhere he could 'belong', as a result of its liberal views. Thus, Williams' choice of setting can be used to analyse Williams' views on contemporary society, represented by Stanley Kowalski, against Williams' own heritage, represented by Blanche. Nevertheless, 'A Streetcar Named Desire' does not only serve as a social criticism. The symbolism presented through the choice of 'Elysian Fields' as well as the claustrophobic nature of a play set within one apartment, allows for the exploration of plastic theatre and dramatic presentation.

The audience's first introduction to the setting is presented through the opening stage directions in Scene 1. Elysian Fields "runs between the L&N tracks and the river", presenting the location as an intermediary between nature, represented through the noun 'river' and the 'L&N tracks' which represent America's pioneering industrial revolution. In a way, this setting is very appropriately chosen to explain some of the dramatic tensions between the principal characters. Williams himself had many conflicts with his father, Cornelius, over his father's perception of what constitutes a 'real man' – Cornelius worked in a factory, prioritising manual labour and physical exertion as the characteristic of a 'real man'. He was disappointed at Tennessee's sensitivity and focus on the arts, in a manner that divided father and son between the strain of the Old South and the hard-working new America. Stanley (based on Cornelius) represents the L&N tracks with Blanche representing the vulnerable river. Therefore, Stella, the only, and tenuous, link between Stanley and Blanche could represent Elysian Fields. Stella is presented as the mediator between Blanche and Stanley throughout the play, thus becoming the basis of their war. This is most obviously presented in Scene 4, when Blanche adequately states her views about Stanley: "Don't have back with the brutes." Her broken syntax emphasises her message, whilst the adjective 'brutes' continues the zoomorphic imagery sustained through Blanche's monologue. Unbeknownst to Blanche, Stanley had overheard. When Stanley does finally enter, the audience witnesses how 'over [Stella's] head he grins through the curtains at Blanche' following Stella and Stanley's embrace. The malice presented through the verb 'grins' represents the looming threat of Stanley; his new world and the L&N tracks present to sensitive Blanche. Thus, the setting is used to represent the social evolution of America as well as the tension between Blanche and Stanley.

Much of Williams' setting seems to suggest the basis of a Greek tragedy. The use of the mythological reference to "Elysian Fields" is very prominent – 'Elysium Fields' was meant to be a part of the Greek Underworld where righteous souls would want to be returned to the land of the living. Given that Blanche is the first person to arrive, 'incongruous to this setting' one may assume that Williams is foreshadowing her eventual departure. Furthermore, the use of the adjective 'incongruous' suggests a juxtaposition between Blanche and the souls already present in Elysian Fields. The audience can decide who can be

declared 'righteous'. Nevertheless, another aspect of Greek setting is the single location – the apartment. There are 3 important aspects to a Greek tragedy: one location, action takes place within one day and the tragic downfall of a 'hero', supposedly Blanche. This use of setting in accordance to some Greek dispositions may foreshadow the inevitable outcome of Blanche DuBois.

The restricted location of the play allows Williams to utilise some Plastic Theatre techniques as well as more abstract expressionism. For example, Williams presents diegetic music and non-diegetic music throughout the play. When the audience first hears the Varsouviana Polka, they are unaware whether any of the characters can also hear it. Only when Blanche's admission in Scene 9: "There now, the shot. It always stops after that" is the audience aware it represented Blanche's past. This use of plastic theatre culminates in Scene 10: "the back walls of the rooms, which have become transparent" allowing the sidewalk to be seen. The adaptable nature of the setting, emphasised by the adjective 'transparent', implies that it reflects Blanche's own perceptions. Her foreboding is echoed by the 'lurid reflections on the wall' and the 'inhuman voices like cries in a jungle' which additionally serve to represent Blanche's fear of desire. It is unclear whether Stanley can perceive or is affected by these changes of Scene, though one may perceive not given his indeterminable, predatory stalking of Blanche. Therefore, the setting is a dramatic tool to heighten the audience's proximity to the characters and the action, to allow them to perceive Blanche's reality when it may not be appreciated by her fellow characters.

The setting has been evidenced as being able to heighten dramatic tension, foreshadow events and be used as an expressionistic tool for bringing the audience closer to Blanche's perception. This final note may represent Williams' bias towards Blanche's almost autobiographical sensitivity as he encourages the audience to react with her. Furthermore, the location and constant presence of the industrial revolution and the L&N tracks shows Williams' observation of the direction in which America was heading. This particular use of setting may have better represented the social commentary on old/new America and Blanche and of Blanche to throw herself onto these tracks. Thus, the setting allows an audience's insight into Williams' perceptions of his society and the way he utilises this surrounding to present his characters.