

New Orleans in A Streetcar Named Desire – Its Significance and Symbolism

Salima Abbasi Freeman's account of the setting for Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* shows how an understanding of its history, changing population and atmosphere are at the heart of the presentation of the characters and what they represent.

When Blanche DuBois arrives in the French Quarter of New Orleans, carrying a valise and dressed, 'as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party', she could not be more out of place. Williams' stage direction that Blanche's 'appearance is incongruous to this setting' understates her inability to adapt, not only to her circumstances, but to the bustling and unique world of New Orleans itself.

Colonial New Orleans

Founded by the French in 1718, New Orleans developed around the French Quarter or 'Vieux Carré', meaning 'Old Square'. Being one of the oldest (and thus, most established) parts of the city, the French Quarter is at the heart of New Orleans and of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. It has, in Williams' words, a 'spirit and life' of its own and the tinny sound of the 'blue piano', heard everywhere in this neighbourhood, 'expresses the spirit of the life which goes on here'. Historically, New Orleans has had many cultural influences. The French ceded it to the Spanish for forty years in 1763 and, shortly after its return to the French, it was sold to the United States, in the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. There would have been many French and Spanish colonial buildings but most of these were destroyed in fires in 1788 and 1794 – it is likely, then, that most of the architecture which Blanche encounters would date from American rule.

Nonetheless, the buildings which create the 'atmosphere of decay', in the opening scene of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, are, unmistakably, colonial in style. These are 'mostly white frame, weathered grey' houses with 'quaintly ornamented gables'. These suggest French colonial style and are outmoded, much like the way of life of the wealthy plantation owners of the Southern states of America. It is significant that Williams draws attention to these edifices as they correspond to the social background of Blanche and Stella. Whatever sentimentality the buildings may evoke in an observer – and Williams admitted to longing for the lost genteel life of the South – they must now adapt to the world that they are in and serve as apartment blocks for working people. If they do not adapt – and an analogy can be drawn with Blanche – they are useless and an obstruction to others.

The Experience of the Town

Williams moved to New Orleans at the age of 28, ready to immerse himself in the cultural life of the city. He took on, permanently, his college nickname of 'Tennessee', given to him because of his Southern accent and the state in which his father was born. From his apartment overlooking the French Quarter, he was perfectly placed to take in the blend of sounds, sights and smells that create the setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire*. The shouting of street vendors, selling tamales and flowers,

the whooping of men returning from a hard day's work, the chatting of women as they go about their chores and the frequent and violent quarrelling of couples, all blend into a raucous backdrop of blues and jazz for which New Orleans is famous.

Williams offers a sensual appreciation of the Quarter as we 'almost feel the warm breath of the brown river' and smell, faintly, 'bananas and coffee'. The sky is 'a peculiarly tender blue', suggesting a vulnerability amidst the chaos, along with 'a kind of lyricism'. Williams' use of expressionism – or 'poetic realism' as he called it – allows him to create a whole experience of life in the city, based around what is seen, heard, smelt and evoked as much as what is played out between the characters. There may be challenges in staging all of this for an audience but Williams brings this deep appreciation of the character of New Orleans to those who read the script.

Music and Popular Culture

It is particularly telling that Blanche, who prides herself on her sensitivity and sense of culture, never acknowledges the atmosphere of the neighbourhood, aside from calling it a 'horrible place'. New Orleans, in the late nineteenth century, was a hub for artists and writers, drawn to cheap rents and the 'raffish charm' that Williams describes. Even in 1947, there was enough to inspire an artistic temperament. Music, in New Orleans, was a symbol of communication and integration, with the city producing such jazz legends as Louis Armstrong. Blanche, however, never comments on the music that is playing 'always just around the corner', hearing instead the polka from within her own mind and her troubled past. Her eyes and ears are closed to the reality of New Orleans and the popular culture of her sister's new home. Doggedly holding onto her own cultural references – operas, dances and poetry – she does not take the opportunity to embrace the modern New Orleans, where 'high culture' is incongruous and irrelevant. Blanche demonstrates a snobbery that seems to impress Mitch but grates with Stanley and, in her rejection of the reality of this new world, we see a wider rejection of reality and an attempt to hold onto what is no longer of value.

World War II

The Second World War brought thousands of servicemen and new workers to New Orleans, adding to the already diverse culture of the city. Stanley is one of these many 'foreigners' in Blanche's eyes. People of many origins – Polish, Irish, Dutch and Italian, to name a few – became inhabitants of New Orleans alongside the European and African-American populations. When Blanche insists on calling Stanley a 'Polack', she demonstrates a rejection of the very nature of this unique city, focusing on difference rather than unity. Stanley, who has fought for his country, is proud to be American. He sees his place in society threatened by Blanche, whose values grate with the ideal of the 'American Dream', which promised that success is attainable through effort and hard work, rather than being dependent on social connections and privilege.

Stella – A Bridge

The bridge, perhaps, between the old Southern way of life and the modern New Orleans, is Stella. Although she does not specifically acknowledge, or show appreciation for, the popular culture of New Orleans, she is very much part of her neighbourhood and relies on a support network that exists between the people there. Her neighbours know of her privileged past and of Belle Reve, indicating that she has not reinvented herself in order to fit in. The city does not judge her, as diversity is the essence of this place. She is as comfortable laughing 'breathlessly' on the balcony, when Stanley 'heaves the package [of meat] at her' as she is enjoying a show and dinner at Gallatoire's, the upmarket, jackets-only restaurant in the French Quarter, where Williams himself was a regular. For

Stella, the two threads of her life – sophisticated past and down-to-earth present – can exist ‘contrapuntally’, a musical term used in the play.

Blanche – An Outsider

If the life of New Orleans represents the reality of the play, Blanche’s detachment from it underlines the illusion in which she has trapped herself. To survive in New Orleans, one must accept it for what it is. Unwilling to wake from the beautiful dream of Belle Reve and her lost past, she rejects the truth of her life without money, status or privilege. These Southern ‘values’ are incongruous to New Orleans and its inhabitants. Unwilling to embrace the modern world and to attach any value to the vibrancy and ‘spirit of the life’ of New Orleans, Blanche seems to pitch herself against her surroundings, so that the strains of jazz and blues and the voices of the people of the city, are seen to compete incessantly with her internal narrative. If she had understood the impossibility of reconstructing Belle Reve in New Orleans, physically or mentally, Blanche’s experiences may have been very different and *A Streetcar Named Desire* would have been a very different play.

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This article was first published in emagazine 84, April 2019.

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