

Setting of A Streetcar Named Desire

Tony Coult argues that while it is important to place Tennessee Williams' work in its historical context, it is an appreciation of geography that illuminates *A Streetcar Named Desire*, a play that could be set nowhere else but New Orleans.

A lightning conductor

Studying a play in its context is usually about asking why a play gets written, at a particular time and for a particular culture. It is about asking what feelings and ideas are lurking in the culture, ready to be given form in the public domain by the imaginations of the playwright and actors. For instance, Tennessee Williams' 20th-century masterpiece *A Streetcar Named Desire* acted on its first audiences in 1947 as a kind of lightning conductor. Like the summer atmosphere above Louisiana where it is set, the culture was full of crackling, unresolved energies. Williams' play caused these to be grounded in powerful lightning flashes of emotional energy. It relieved a pressure by giving form to necessary truths about sexual desire, gender relations, and historically-rooted class divisions for an America pulling itself out of the trauma of war and facing a new world - industrialised and with many of the traditional social structures of family and culture disrupted. These were matters that had been dealt with before in American drama, but never before in such an emotionally raw and sexually frank way.

The historical context

One way of looking at the historical context is to see Stanley Kowalski as a symbol of this modern world, a masculine world (the women who had staffed the factories and farms in wartime were expected to ebb back into their conventional domestic roles), a world of machines and a harsh individualist brutality. This urban, working-class male, his overalls stained with grease, encounters his visiting sister-in-law Blanche duBois ('from the woods', if we translate her name) who comes from an old, aristocratic rural culture. She is 'antebellum', like many of the New Orleans mansion houses that Williams lived in. That is, she is a relic of a time before the Civil War that divided America. Her connections with that vanished world of genteel white gentlefolk presiding over a slave economy, are signalled in the name of the estate she once had a stake in - Belle Reve. A Beautiful Dream, and like a dream, insubstantial. America in this postwar world needed to face up to this old class divide but it also needed to deal with the new kinds of gender relations challenging the traditional demands of a largely patriarchal society.

The context of place

There's another kind of context that needs thinking about, though, and that's the context of place. For writers like Williams place is at least as much a part of feeling and atmosphere as is time. Williams went to live in the city of New Orleans in 1938, drawn by its liberal, sexually-tolerant ethos. (To be gay in much of America at this time was not easy.) His *Streetcar* stage directions, typically for him, are richly detailed and fluidly readable. We are in no doubt where we are, and what we are looking at:

The exterior of a two-storey corner building on a street in New Orleans which is named Elysian Fields and runs between the L & N tracks and the [Mississippi] river.

A central character

That is how the playscript starts and you'd be daft to relocate the play to New York, New Zealand or Newham. It's as if New Orleans is a character in this play, one that holds the anxieties, passions, and historical past in the fabric of its streets, levees, and riverbanks. Its 'raffish charm' and 'atmosphere of decay' (Williams' phrases) create an atmosphere and a sensual grounding for the complex interactions between Stanley, his wife Stella and her sister Blanche. There is a sensuous particularity about the space Williams wants the actors and designer to create:

You can almost feel the warm breath of the brown river beyond the river warehouse with the faint redolences of bananas and coffee.

Sex, death and desire

So what makes New Orleans so powerful and appropriate a setting? There's a rather arcane (some would say pseudo) science, called psychogeography. Look it up on the net and you find yourself in the company of all manner of pranksters and conspiracy-pedlars, as well as interesting novelists like Iain Sinclair. Nevertheless it's a handy concept for thinking about the very active role that the city plays in *Streetcar*. The very title gives a clue - out-of-towner Blanche arrives in the city and follows advice to catch the streetcar whose terminus is Desire Street. It's the one with 'Desire' on the front. She has to change to the Cemeteries Line. So that's Sex and Death, major themes pulsing through the play, marked out in terms of mass transit! She has to get off at Elysian Fields, a street in the east of the city, and the resting place, in Greek mythology, of the souls of heroes who have died. Blanche duBois, already deeply damaged emotionally, and economically vulnerable, has come in search of a hero who can rescue and protect her, only to suffer full-blown mental breakdown at the hands of Stanley Kowalski, one of the great anti-heroes of Western literature.

Queen City of the Inland Sea [...] among cities, the most feminine of women [...]

Early guidebook of New Orleans

Vitality, fertility and variety

New Orleans is a port city, historically a source of vitality, fertility and variety. In the group of men playing cards are a man with Polish roots (Stanley), Latin-American origins (Pablo), the streets have a Negro lady (unfortunately nameless), and a Mexican flower-seller. Even Blanche and Stella's surname reminds us that this part of the Deep South is steeped in French culture, as is the port's name. There's an openness, a fertility about the idea of ports, that perhaps appealed to the gay sensibility of Williams, and he certainly found it an island of anti-Puritan bohemianism in the heart of a Puritan culture when he set up home there in 1938.

The setting of a Streetcar isn't just incidental. It's right at the heart of what Williams is most interested in writing about.

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