



Marlon Brando as Stanley Kowalski, Jessica Tandy as Blanche DuBois and Kim Hunter as Stella in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.  
Entertainment Pictures / Alamy Stock Photo

# STREETCAR

## The Story of the Poker Night Painting

In telling the story of a painting, intended for use in publicity but disliked by Jessica Tandy, the actor playing Blanche, Sarah Dukes opens up fresh ideas about the characters and their lives, and how the playwright and the actors felt about them.

Whether you experience it first-hand as an audience member, watch the iconic 1951 film, or simply read it in the classroom, the visceral, raw, and physically sensual nature of Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* is palpable. The play opened in December 1947, and was an instant hit: it ran for over two years, earning two Tony awards and a Pulitzer Prize, never playing to an empty seat during the entire first year of its run.

Theatrical producer Irene Mayer Selznick worked closely with Tennessee Williams and director Elia Kazan to bring the play to Broadway. Her husband commissioned artist Thomas Hart Benton to create an original painting as a surprise gift, based on a scene that fully encompasses the two clashing forces at the heart of the play: Blanche's

lyrical fantasies and Stanley's base might – Scene 3's Poker Night.

### Comparing Painting and Stage Directions

So how does the painting compare with the opening stage directions at the start of Scene 3? Benton manages to capture the 'sort of lurid nocturnal brilliance' within the cramped kitchen, created by his palette of 'raw colors' and his close attention to details – the 'yellow linoleum of the kitchen table', the 'electric bulb with a vivid green glass shade'. He paints the poker players as specifically as Williams describes; they are clearly

men at the peak of their physical manhood

wearing

a purple, a red-and-white check, a light green



New York NY USA Whitney Museum of American Art Thomas Hart Benton, 'Poker Night' (from A Streetcar Named Desire), 1948  
Glyn Genin / Alamy Stock Photo

and while there are no vivid slices of watermelon, there's a crate of beer bottles in the foreground, with plenty of empty glasses. Looking at the painting, we can't help but hold our breath, feeling the tension mount in this moment of 'absorbed silence'.

Stanley is at the centre of the painting – he's the king around here, after all – but he isn't the painting's main focus. Pablo and Steve avert their eyes, down at the table or towards their beer; Stanley looks incredulously at Mitch; and Mitch, light shining onto his face, stares, captivated, at where the viewer's eyes are also drawn, thanks to the composition of the painting – straight towards Blanche, holding up a mirror, arms open and body on show, bathed in the light.

Along with the burnt orange curtain, Blanche's body becomes a dividing vertical line, separating the men from the women – the new world from the old world – Stanley from Stella, who's relegated to Blanche's shadows, hunched over the armchair.

## The Portrayal of Stella and Blanche

The whole scene certainly matches the mood of the poker night sequence, being as coarse and direct and powerful as the primary colors

but are all the characters portrayed in a way that matches up with our expectations?

The first misgiving is the portrayal of Stella; while she is often overwhelmed by Blanche's presence, and certainly looks up to her older sister, it doesn't seem right to show her as almost cowering – Stella is by no means meek or passive in this scene; she speaks frankly to Stanley, and is a robust character, torn between her sister and her husband, and desperately trying to balance the two.

The next is to have Blanche so suffused in light: early on in the play, Williams tells us her 'delicate beauty must avoid a strong light'; Blanche repeatedly bemoans any brightness, telling us that:

*I can't stand a naked light bulb, any more than I can a rude remark or a vulgar action.*

So how might Blanche react, then, to a vulgar dress?

When first introducing Blanche, Williams takes time to describe her outfit:

*She is daintily dressed in a white suit with a fluffy bodice, necklace and earrings of pearl, white gloves and hat, looking as if she were arriving at a summer tea or cocktail party in the garden district.*

Blanche continually asks, 'How do I look?', and Stella is quick to remind everyone to

*admire her dress and tell her she's looking wonderful [as] that's important with Blanche*

Clothes are her 'passion!'.

But in the painting, Benton paints Blanche in an extremely revealing sheer blue slip that clings to her figure; as Kathryn Potts, from the Whitney Museum of American Art (where the painting is displayed) says,

*She looks actually like she'd be the prize contestant in a wet T-shirt contest.*

Photos of the original stage version show that Blanche never wore anything like this; she was dressed in the Southern belle costumes that Williams specifies in the play.

## How Did Those Involved Receive It?

Williams loved it so much that he wanted to recreate it as a photograph, to which everyone agreed – all except for main actress, Jessica Tandy. The resemblance to the actors is clear – there's no mistaking the original cast members in the painting, the young Marlon Brando as Stanley, Karl Malden as Mitch, Kim Hunter as Stella, and Jessica Tandy as Blanche. Tandy was incredibly offended by the way Benton had portrayed Blanche – by the way he painted her.

Williams wrote a letter to Tandy with the aim of changing her mind, feeling that her

objections were purely about the dress, 'or lack of it'. Explaining that he personally did not see Blanche's portrayal in the painting as 'vulgar', Williams goes on to reassure her that in their intended reproduction her dress need not be so explicit, and then continues his persuasion by suggesting the photo would create some good publicity. Recognising how actors psychologically embody a character, he even tries to get her on side in his post-script by convincing her that although Blanche might complain at first, she would eventually agree.

But he was missing the point – Jessica Tandy's objections went much deeper. Her letter in response makes it clear that Williams misunderstood why she didn't want to pose for the photo. First, she explains how, during eight performances every week, she must convey Blanche's 'intricate and complex character', showing her privileged background, her literacy and grace, her pitiful yet resolute spirit, her deliberate mishandling of the truth – plus her 'inevitable tragedy'.

She goes on to consider the audience, explaining how the 'progressively less sensitive' theatre-goers increasingly expect to see a 'sexy, salacious play'; Jessica Tandy did not want her audience to think the play was about 'sex in the raw'. She questioned what the purpose of the photograph would be, as they didn't need the publicity – 'we have no empty seats'.

Tandy continues her letter by comparing Blanche's intricate character with Stanley's 'simple and easy' one. Brash and bellowing, he starts and ends the play pretty much the same way; the play states that he is 'strongly, compactly built' with 'animal joy' implicit in all his movements and attitudes: he's passionate, heartless, remorseless. And this makes him easier to see and understand – as Tandy says in her letter, he's the bold 'telegraph pole', more obvious than the delicate 'scrolled ironwork' of Blanche's character.

But most of all, Tandy objected because she disliked what she saw as Benton's one-sided portrayal of that night: 'the Stanley side of the picture'; an unfair, exaggerated impression of Blanche, reduced to a sexual object. Blanche is much more involved and demanding; a lover of art, poetry and music, witty and whimsical, pretentious and misplaced, often irritating and overbearing. Her difficult journey begins way before she steps off the Streetcar, and ends, after her shocking rape, with the 'inevitable tragedy'

of her being led away by a doctor to a psychiatric institution.

The painting cancels out the complexity of Blanche, her desperation, her lack of choice, offering her up instead as two-dimensional sexual bait – with the justification of rape and assumption of consent implicit within the question, 'What was she wearing?', placing the blame firmly on the victim.

So how did Williams respond?

Well, with humility:

Dear Jessica,  
Many, many thanks for your letter on the Benton picture. You are so right that it really makes me ashamed of having lent my casual support to the idea. What you say about Blanche suddenly recalls to me all of my original conception of the character and what it was to me, from which you, in your delineation, have never once drifted away...

Yes, the painting is only one side of the play, and the Stanley side of it.

Perhaps from the painter's point of view that was inevitable. A canvas cannot depict two worlds very easily: or the tragic division of the human spirit: at least not a painter of Benton's realistic type.

Well, I am still an admirer of the painting, but, believe me, still more an admirer of yours for seeing and feeling about it more clearly than I did at first, and I should have felt the same way. With love,  
Tennessee

An acknowledgement of culpability and remorse; an admission of shame. Unlike the painting, Williams's play can and does depict the 'decayed elegance and sheer unadulterated guts' of Blanche and Stanley's two opposing worlds – plus, the tragic division of the human spirit.

I wonder what producer Irene Mayer Selznick thought of her gift? I wonder, too, what the painting of the poker night might look like from Blanche's perspective? But perhaps Williams gives us the answer. Perhaps it would be: 'like one of those pictures I've seen in – anthropological studies!...':

Night falls and the other apes gather! There in the front of the cave, all grunting like him, and swilling and gnawing and hulking! His poker night! – you call it – this party of apes! Somebody growls – some creature snatches at something – the fight is on!

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