

World War II, Sex, and Displacement in *A Streetcar Named Desire*

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A Streetcar Named Desire opened in New York City on December 3, 1947. At the conclusion of the play, the audience stood and applauded for seven minutes, calling out for the author, and a shambling, shy Tennessee Williams took the stage. His play, written primarily during 1944-1945, stays in the close confines of a small apartment in New Orleans's French Quarter, a neighborhood awash in jazz, blue light, and sex. This small corner of the city and its characters resonated with Americans newly home from a war that changed the face of warfare forever. Like Blanche DuBois, American men and women alike were returning to homes they barely understood or remembered. GIs suffered from "battle fatigue," and parents came to fear nuclear annihilation. This essay will explore the relationship between *Streetcar* and the culture into which it was delivered, first as a play, then as a movie.

Director Elia Kazan had been working on Broadway since the 1930s. He was a part of the Group Theatre, a politically left group intent on creating socially relevant dramas and a troupe of actors unified in their technique. As a result of his years with the Group, Kazan was savvy in his assessment of Broadway audiences. The social dramas of the thirties, with their broad indictments of trouble at home, had lost their appeal during the war and had begun to seem limiting to Kazan. According to drama historian Ethan Mordden, "Truth, in writing and performing, was the obsession of the 1930s" (158), but that truth required a critical view of the nation and its problems. In the early 1940s the people wanted a break from issues and didacticism; instead, they opted for farces and romances or plays that spoke to the moral superiority of democracy (Mordden 191).

The tide changed again when the war ended. This new audience was less monolithic, their concerns more varied. Historian Thomas H.

Pauly has written that “Broadway harkened to the plight of the returning veteran. His reintegration into civilian life became an occasion for reevaluating the past and confronting a problem-ridden present” (66). In October 1946, O’Neill’s *The Iceman Cometh* brought back the possibility of introspection to the American theater, paving the way for Williams’s *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Mordden alleges that the play is a “brutal reply to the illusion-loving theatre of the 1930s, for Williams speaks truth to someone whose whole life is a lie, the deluded Blanche DuBois” (211).

The play introduced an ailing America to truly adult fare—prostitution, homosexuality, rape, domestic violence, alcoholism, mental breakdowns, and even, some critics argue, a transvestite of sorts. Recovering from the Great Depression, World War II, and the Dust Bowl, Americans were familiar with violence in their day-to-day lives and, to an extent, on the stage and screen. The violence was not the shocking element of the play. Critic C. W. E. Bigsby notes: “The shock of *Streetcar* when it was first staged lay in the fact that, outside of O’Neill’s work, this was the first American play in which sexuality was patently at the core of the lives of all its principal characters, a sexuality with the power to redeem or destroy, to compound or negate the forces which bore on those caught in a moment of social change” (*Modern* 51). The moment of social change had come: thousands of Americans struggled to renegotiate their places at home after the war. Women returned from work to the domestic sphere. Gender roles were changing, and, with them, expectations about sexuality.

British author Virginia Woolf claimed that “on or about December 1910 human character changed forever.” This statement invoked her belief about the power of modernism and the profound effect it was having on the world. This may have been less true for Americans, for whom many of the greatest landmark changes in thinking are linked to wartime. The Revolutionary War began with the radical idea of home rule; the Civil War tested the bounds of nationhood and the practice of slavery, pitting men against their brothers. World War I established the