



**Tennessee Williams' Cat
on a Hot Tin Roof**

Dr. Alan Haffa

Please Silence Cell Phones

**Thomas
Lanier
Williams
1911-1983**



- **Father a gambler and drinker**
- **Sister forced to undergo a lobotomy**
- **College; Nick name; Ibsen**
- **Girl friend and homosexuality**
- **New Orleans: Glass Menagerie, 45**
- **Pulitzer for Streetcar (47) and Cat (55)**

Streetcar in Context

- **1947; set in 1944-45—right after the war**
- **Introduced America to “truly adult fare—prostitution, homosexuality, rape, domestic violence, alcoholism, mental breakdowns...” (Welsch, 24)**



Sex and the Play's Impact



- **What was most shocking about the play was not the violence, but the patently explicit sex**
- **Sexuality is “at the core of the lives of all its principal characters, a sexuality with the power to redeem or destroy, to compound or negate...” (Welsch quoting Bigsby, 24)**
- **Gender roles were changing and this created an awareness and anxiety about sex**

Blanche Dubois

- **Like Belle Reve (southern plantation): vestige of the failed Southern past**
- **A southern belle who is supposed to flirt, marry and have children; she marries a gay man, he kills himself, she is childless, poor, and becomes a sexually loose woman**
- **Like the South, she is all fake**

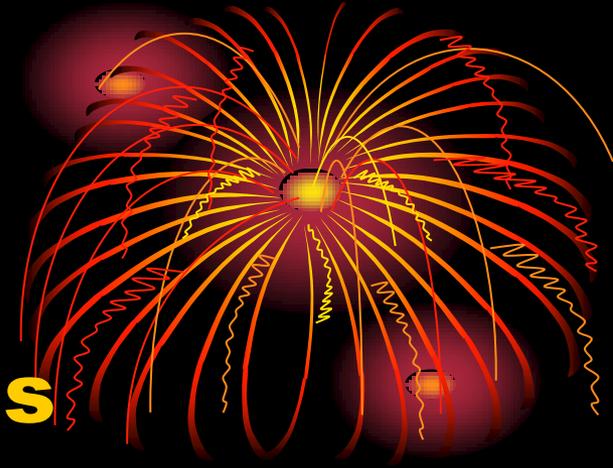


Illusion of Blanche and the South

- **The south pretends to be genteel and sophisticated and polite**
- **Blanche pretends to be a lady and culturally superior**
- **Neither are what they appear**
- **Blanche uses make up and appears to Mitch only at night to hide her real appearance**



Stanley and Male Sexuality



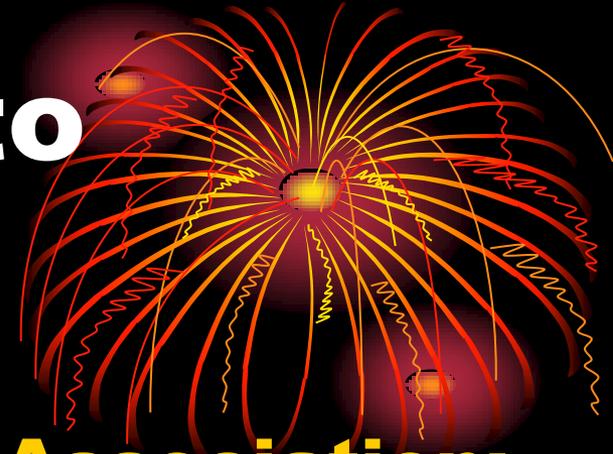
- **Stanley is not refined; he is American—a proud Pole**
- **He is physical and strong and clever in a street smart way**
- **His sexual presence is a product of his masculine power and confidence**
- **There is nothing false or uncertain about him**
- **Marlon Brando's portrayal inspired a new type of male, American star**

Desire and Violence



- **Newly returned from war, Stanley is the king of his domain**
- **He is a sensualist and loves sex with his wife, Stella**
- **The streetcar, Desire, ends near their flat**
- **This is where desire goes, but it is both overwhelming as well as violent**
- **Violence erupts in Domestic Violence and also Rape**

Public Response to Movie



- **Censorship by Motion Picture Association: Allan Grey only “tender,” not gay; Rape not shown, only implied; Stanley punished with Stella leaving him**
- **Catholic League of Decency condemned it**
- **Chicago judge called it “an immoral picture, dealing with sex, nymphomania, and liquor”**
- **5th highest grossing film in 1951— audiences wanted taboo; Kinsey**



- **Stella: But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant, [pause]**
- **Blanche: What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another ...**
- **Stella: Haven't you ridden on that street-car?**
- **Blanche: It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I am ashamed to be ...**

Comparing the Two Plays

- **A Streetcar Named: Stanley as symbol of male sexuality**
- **Homosexuality destroyed Blanche's marriage; Blanche overreacts to husband's death by becoming hypersexualized and an addict**
- **Contrastingly, Maggie is the sexual dynamo in Cat on a Hot Tin Roof. Her husband, Brick, may have sexual inadequacies because of the suicide of his homosexual friend**



Gender Roles in 1950s South

- **Southern Belle**
- **Expectations: Polite manners; Sweet; Gentle; Sexy and yet chaste at same time; Make a man feel good**
- **Compare Maggie, Mae, and Big Momma**
- **Each woman's success is linked to her man**
- **Kinsey may have started a conversation but a woman was still supposed to please her man and her value was linked to him**



Sex and Marriage

- **Big Momma: Fair or not I want to ask you one question: do you make Brick happy in bed?**
- **Maggie: Why don't you ask if he makes me happy in bed?**
- **Big Mamma: Because I know that—**
- **Maggie: It works both ways!...**
- **Big Momma: Something's not right. You're childless, and my son drinks. (Points to bed.) When a marriage goes on the rocks, the rocks are right here, right here!**



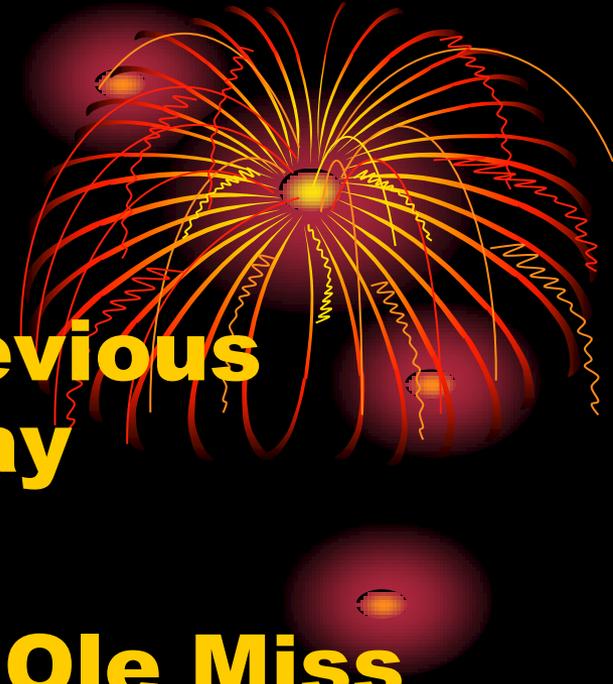
Sex and Infidelity



- **Big Daddy:** “Pleasure! Pleasure with women. Yes, boy, I’ll tell you something that you might not guess. I still have desire for women and this is my 65th birthday!”
- **Brick:** “I think that’s remarkable, Big Daddy.”
- **Double Standard:** His infidelity is a source of pride for Big Daddy but would be unthinkable for Big Momma
- **Contrast:** Brick encourages Maggie to find a lover so he won’t feel guilt

Homosexuality

- **Big Daddy is tolerant; previous owners of estate were gay**
- **Brick calls it “dirty”**
- **He tells a story about an Ole Miss fraternity pledge who was ostracized for being gay**
- **“Why can’t exceptional friendship, real, deep, deep friendship between two men be respected as somethin’ clean and decent without bein’ thought of as—fairies!” (56)**



Maggie's Love Can Save Brick



- **Maggie lies about being pregnant**
- **Throws Brick's bottles of booze away and seduces him**
- **“Oh, you weak, beautiful people who give up with such grace. What you need is someone to take hold of you—gently, with love, and hand your life back to you, like something you let go of—and I can! I'm determined to do it—and nothing's more determined than a cat on a tin roof—is there? Is there baby? (she touches his cheek gently)**

Summary



- **Sexual attitudes were changing and becoming more open**
- **But gender roles were still reinforces—Stanley as a macho man idol**
- **Maggie as the ideal woman, passionate and dedicated to her man**
- **Homosexuality is discussed, but it is a problem at the core of family conflict**