



"A Streetcar Named Desire"

Reading Comprehension Assessment

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Directions: Read the passage. Then answer the questions below.



A Streetcar Named Desire - Passage 1

A Streetcar Named Desire is a classic of the American theater. Tennessee Williams' landmark work was a tour de force in its original stage production in 1947 and continues to resonate with audiences and readers today despite—or perhaps because of—its simplistic though layered story. A faded Southern belle, Blanche DuBois, arrives at her sister's seedy New Orleans apartment where she is tortured by her brutish brother-in-law, Stanley Kowalski. Blanche puts on airs of class and happiness throughout the play, though internally she is miserable and haunted by her tragic and scandalous past. Stanley forces Blanche to face her dolorous reality with his vitriol and, finally, his act of sexual aggression, and in doing so, he causes her to lose her tenuous grip on sanity. Most have argued (correctly) that the play is about the ways the past haunts our present or (again correctly) that it is about the ways class and sexuality impact our lives. However, few have seen the play for what it is: an allegory for the theater itself.

Before Williams wrote *Streetcar*, the theater had been dominated by melodrama. A brief interlude in the 1930s brought political theater to center stage (pardon the pun), but by the 1940s, its principal playwright, Clifford Odets, had left New York for Hollywood, and the sensationalized and maudlin form of melodrama once again flourished. The theater was in limbo, and Williams had a desire to bring something new to the world. It would bring the realism of the political theater of the 1930s but without the political (read: socialist) underpinnings. To that end, he created lifelike characters who spoke in realistic dialect.

But to make his point that melodrama was flawed, he added an equally unrealistic character. Blanche, unlike the other characters, speaks theatrically, acts larger than life on stage, and uses floral language and heightened mannerisms. Blanche is a character not to be trusted. She lies about everything, and the only thing that finally exposes her lies is reality itself: Stanley. He finally forces her off the stage and into the insane asylum by forcing himself on her sexually. And with that, realism forcibly removed melodrama from the stage.



A Streetcar Named Desire- Passage 2

It is not possible to imagine *A Streetcar Named Desire* without the influence of Marlon Brando, the actor who rose to fame playing Stanley Kowalski. On the page, the part is fairly simplistic. Stanley is a monster and a beast without any redeeming qualities. But Brando and the play's original director, Elia Kazan, imagined the character as having a soft underbelly, rooted in his own sorrow, insecurities, and soulful complexity. Brando's Stanley is a brute, yes, but he is a brute who hates the fact that he is so awful. He is also unable to control himself and his passions, and this lack of control is equally embarrassing to him, even as it is also threatening to Blanche and alluring to her sister Stella.

For instance, after he hits Stella, he comes back to her, famously begging for forgiveness by shouting "Stella" outside their apartment. But in Brando's depiction on the stage and later on the screen, he is soaked from the rain and looks completely desperate, as though he needs Stella to live. He looks and seems totally helpless and weak, the exact opposite of the brute he appears later when he forces himself onto Blanche.

The play is excellent and memorable, even when read. But it is Brando's interpretation of the male lead role that makes the play indelible. Without Brando, the play would still have a deep meaning, but with Brando's interpretation, the play becomes even more profound.

- 1) Paragraph 1 of Passage 1 provides each of the following EXCEPT
- a critical interpretation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*
 - an explanation of why modern audiences connect with *A Streetcar Named Desire*
 - a brief plot synopsis of *A Streetcar Named Desire*
 - background information on the times that produced *A Streetcar Named Desire*
 - the author's main argument concerning *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- 2) It can be inferred from Passage 1 that *A Streetcar Named Desire*
- was Tennessee Williams' first play
 - is better on stage than in print
 - did not have socialist leanings
 - was not melodramatic
 - would not have been successful without Marlon Brando
- 3) According to Passage 1, the character of Blanche DuBois
- is intentionally overdramatic and theatrical
 - has never been to the city of New Orleans before
 - is recently married to Stanley Kowalski
 - is brutally honest and frank during the play
 - is firmly rooted in realism and sanity
- 4) Passage 2 argues that Marlon Brando's portrayal of Stanley Kowalski
- earned the actor great fame
 - is more nuanced than the part that is written
 - is what really made *A Streetcar Named Desire* a classic
- I only
 - II only
 - I and II only
 - II and III only
 - I, II, and III
- 5) Both Passage 1 and Passage 2 argue that
- the New York theater scene was blown away by *A Streetcar Named Desire*
 - Tennessee Williams wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire* to end melodrama
 - A Streetcar Named Desire* has more than one true meaning
 - A Streetcar Named Desire* only has power when performed on the stage
 - the character of Stanley Kowalski is simply a brute monster
- 6) The author of Passage 2 focuses on Marlon Brando's portrayal of Stanley Kowalski as being particularly memorable and powerful, whereas the author of Passage 1 focuses on Tennessee Williams' skilled writing. In your opinion, what makes for better drama: a high-quality script or unparalleled acting? Can a drama be successful with one but not the other? Why?

1) D

Question Type: Detail

In the first paragraph, the author of Passage 1 mentions that *A Streetcar Named Desire* debuted in 1947, but it does not provide any additional information about the era. That information does not come until the second paragraph of Passage 1. As such, choice (D) is correct. In the first paragraph of Passage 1, the author actually provides two critical interpretations of *Streetcar*. He or she writes that, “Most have argued (correctly) that the play is about the ways the past haunts our present or (again correctly) that it is about the ways class and sexuality impact our lives.” Because of this sentence, choice (A) is incorrect. In the first paragraph of Passage 1, the author states that *Streetcar* “continues to resonate with audiences and readers today despite—or perhaps because of—its simplistic though layered story.” Thus, it does provide an explanation of why modern audiences like the play: the story. Therefore, choice (B) is incorrect. The first paragraph of Passage 1 provides a synopsis of *Streetcar* in the middle of the paragraph. There, the author explains that “a faded Southern belle” loses “her tenuous grip on sanity” due to confrontations with her brother-in-law. As such, choice (C) is incorrect, and the first paragraph does provide a brief plot synopsis of the play. The author of Passage 1’s main argument about *Streetcar* is presented in the final sentence of paragraph 1. There, he or she writes that the play is “an allegory for the theater itself.” Because of this, paragraph 1 clearly does provide the author’s main argument, and choice (E) is incorrect.

2) C

Question Type: Inference

In paragraph 2 of Passage 1, the author argues that Tennessee Williams sought to “bring the realism of the political theater of the 1930s but without the political (read: socialist) underpinnings” when he wrote *A Streetcar Named Desire*. This implies that *Streetcar* did not have socialist leanings, as Williams would not attempt to write a play without political leanings and then make sure the play did have socialist leanings. As such, choice (C) is correct. Passage 1 states only that *Streetcar* was written by Tennessee Williams and debuted in 1947. It does not state that the play was Williams’ first play though, as it does not provide much information about Williams’ life. Because of this, choice (A) is incorrect. Passage 1 states only that *Streetcar* “resonates with audiences and readers today.” This implies that the play has power both on stage and in print, but it does not suggest that the play is better on stage than in print. Therefore, choice (B) is incorrect. The third paragraph of Passage 1 describes Blanche as an “unrealistic character” who is melodramatic. This makes it clear that aspects of *Streetcar* are melodramatic, making choice (D) incorrect. Passage 1 does not mention Marlon Brando at all. In fact, it is Passage 2 that argues that *Streetcar* was more successful because of Brando’s inclusion. As such, choice (E) is incorrect.

3) A

Question Type: Detail

To answer this detail question, look for the part of Passage 1 that describes Blanche as she appears on stage. This occurs in paragraph 3. There, the author states that Blanche “speak theatrically, acts arger than life on stage, and uses floral language and heightened mannerisms.” This makes it clear that she is overdramatic and theatrical. The paragraph also states that Williams added her “to make his point that melodrama was flawed.” This makes it clear that Blanche is intentionally overdramatic and theatrical, making choice (A) correct. The first passage states that *A Streetcar Named Desire* takes place in New Orleans and that Blanche arrives there at the beginning of the play. It does not, however, imply that Blanche has never been to New Orleans before the play. Because of this, choice (B) is incorrect. The first paragraph of Passage 1 makes it clear that Stanley is married to Blanche’s sister, as he is Blanche’s “brutish brother-in-law.” Thus, choice (C) is incorrect. The third paragraph of Passage 1 states that “Blanche is a character not to be trusted” because “she lies about everything.” Thus, she is not brutally honest or frank, and choice (D) is incorrect. In the third paragraph of Passage 1, the author writes that Blanche is the one character in *Streetcar* who is not rooted in realism. Instead, she is “an equally unrealistic character” who ultimately ends up in an insane asylum. As such, choice (E) is incorrect.

4) E

Question Type: Global

In Passage 2, the author introduces Marlon Brando as “the actor who rose to fame playing Stanley Kowalski.” This suggests that the role earned Marlon Brando great fame and supports option (I). In Passage 2, the author also writes that the role of Stanley in print “is a monster and a beast without any redeeming qualities” but that Brando “imagined the character as having a soft underbelly, rooted in his own sorrow, insecurities, and soulful complexity.” All of this suggests that Brando added nuance and complexity to the part, supporting option (II). At the end of Passage 2, the author writes that *A Streetcar Named Desire* is “excellent and memorable” but that “it is Brando’s interpretation of [Stanley] that makes the play indelible,” or completely unforgettable. Thus, he or she argues that Brando makes the play a classic, supporting option (III). Therefore (E) is correct.

5) C

Question Type: Global

The first passage presents three interpretations of the play: one from critics who have focused on the play’s theme of past and present, one from those who have instead focused on sex and class in the play, and one from the author himself or herself that the play is “an allegory for the theater itself.” The second passage presents two other interpretations, one based on reading the play and one based on Marlon Brando’s interpretation of the male lead. The author of Passage 2 argues that Brando made the play more complex, and states that the play “would still have a deep meaning” without Brando but “becomes even more profound” with his interpretation. Thus, both authors agree that the play really has more than one true meaning, making choice (C) correct. Neither passage mentions *Streetcar* blowing away audiences in New York. Instead, they both only imply that the play was a huge success without stating where. As such, choice (A) is incorrect. Only Passage 1 suggests that Tennessee Williams wrote *Streetcar* as way of criticizing melodrama, so there is no proof that the author of Passage 2 would agree with that statement. Because of this, choice (B) is incorrect. Neither passage argues that *Streetcar* only resonates with audiences when it is on stage. In fact, both imply that the play is still powerful even when read. Because of this, choice (D) is incorrect. Though Passage 1 does refer to Stanley as a brute monster, Passage 2 argues that an interpretation of him sees him as being more complex and not purely brutish. Because of this, choice (E) is incorrect, as there is no indication that both authors would agree that Stanley is purely a brute.