Zig Zag Education

English Literature AS and A Level

A Streetcar Named Desire

Advanced Learner Pack for AS and A Level English Literature

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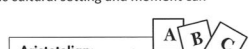
Contents

Student's Introduction

A Streetcar Named Desire remains Tennessee Williams' best known, most read and most staged play. There are very good reasons for this: even though (unlike say Shakespeare or Beckett's works) it offers very little potential to be transplanted into a modern setting or transformed into something far removed from New Orleans in the late 1940s – the stage directions are far too precise for that – it appeals because of the strength of all the central characterisations. The four principals, Blanche Du Bois, Stanley Kowalski, his wife Stella and friend Mitch, are all far more than mere stock types; they are convincingly rendered human beings both of their time but still today because their qualities and faults are made equally dramatically recognisable to any audience. Similarly, Williams combines realistic actions and highly 'unnaturalistic', **expressionistic** stagecraft in such a seamless way that we accept that while the Kowalskis' apartment could almost really be lived in, the back wall can quite easily become a transparency through which we can observe anything from the gritty life of the 'quarter' to the ghostly apparition of the Mexican flower seller as a harbinger of death. In short, the play is truly a great work of art, a brilliant twentieth-century **tragedy** which works on both a popular and a literary level.

The simplest readings that are imposed on *Streetcar* tend to be preoccupied with how it relates to Williams' own life and sexuality. These are valid and have their place but, if taken as the 'correct' interpretations, are ultimately limiting both in the sense that they exclude other critical approaches and insofar as to suggest that Blanche is merely a feminised version of the author is to simplify his greatest dramatic creation to a mere outline. It is possibly homophobic too. Rather, we should approach the text from our personal perspective but then admit a wide range of other responses, allowing them to coexist: it is quite possible to accept the play can be read from a **feminist** angle, while still seeing it as a twentieth-century take on **Aristotelian** tragedy and a dramatic response to the conflict of values between the old southern states of America and their industrialised northern neighbours. And even if we can keep all these 'balls-in-the-air' we are still only beginning our exploration of this masterpiece.

Given its 'infinite varieties' all – but especially the most able – AS and A Level students tend to enjoy the play very much. This is true whether you are reading the text, watching a film adaptation or especially if you are fortunate enough to see it as the author intended, on the stage; but beyond enjoyment you might sometimes struggle, initially at least, to see how the dramatised experience of a woman who might be well into her thirties from more than seventy years ago, living three thousand miles away in a very specific cultural setting and moment can possibly be relevant to your experience. An informed reading (or better still viewing) can however overcome any 'it-all-happened-before-I-was-born' response easily. Sixth-formers should proceed from their personal perspective but, even before considering sociohistorical factors, **intertextuality** and the views that established critics have to offer, should realise that *Streetcar* deals boldly with issues that are very much on the agenda of the twenty-first century such as mental health, dislocation from one's roots, conflict between the classes and genders, sexual violence and even self-image and immigration – the very matters that Western liberal democracies are presently struggling with on a broad level and that will shape the individual student's adult life. As a user of this resource you do not necessarily have to agree with all the conclusions it reaches but rather it is hoped that it stimulates your own thinking about *A Streetcar Named Desire*.



Aristotelian:
Aristotle was the ancient Greek philosopher who, by observing dramas, defined the rules of tragedy in his *Poetics*.

Feminism:
promotion of women's rights in the name of equality

Intertextuality:
connection between texts which generates or alters meaning

Key Questions

Here are some of the key questions that students should keep in mind while reading the text or watching the play. They are not examination questions – those come later – but rather a way of beginning to consider *A Streetcar Named Desire* as a dramatic construction, instead of a mere story. If the play is being read (or watched in film version) it might be useful to consider some of them at the end of each of the 11 scenes.

1. Why are Tennessee Williams' stage directions (including descriptions of setting, lighting, music, gesture, tone of voice, etc.) so precise? (AO2)
2. What is the importance of the names of people and places in the play? (AO2)
3. How does Williams use the style of each of the four principal characters' language to help develop their character and the differences between them? (AO2)
4. Stanley and Blanche are sometimes read as being in competition for control of Stella's affections and attention. In what different ways does Williams make this apparent? (AO2/5)
5. Why is it important that the action of the play takes place in one fixed and confined setting? (AO3/5)
6. How important is each of the four principal characters' pasts in the play? (AO3)
7. In what senses can the play be called a modern **tragedy**? (AO2/5)
8. If indeed the play is tragic there are also some comic moments: what is the purpose of **comedy** in the play? (AO2)
9. Stanley often enters a scene by intruding on spaces or conversations. Why is this significant? (AO2)
10. What is the significance of clothing/costume in the play? (AO3/5)
11. Blanche's flirtatiousness usually enables her to control men. Why is this not the case with Stanley? (AO2/5)
12. Scene 3 is sometimes regarded as encapsulating the whole play in miniature. In what ways other than in terms of action and events can this be said to be true? (AO2/5)
13. How does Williams deploy violence and references to it in the play? (AO2)
14. Why does the play begin in spring (May) and end in autumn (September)? (AO2)
15. The play is usually staged with one interval. Where should it be placed and why? (AO5)
16. At the end of each scene, who does Williams intend the audience to sympathise with, and why? (AO1/5)
17. How are some of the seemingly realistic elements of the play used to represent ideas? (AO5)
18. How is **dramatic irony** used to influence the audience's feelings for Blanche and Stanley? (AO2)
19. How far is Stanley responsible for Blanche's psychological demise? (AO1)
20. At the end of the play has anyone really 'won'? (AO1/5)

You will be reminded of these questions at various appropriate points throughout the notes and resources that follow.

Comedy:
in dramatic terms a play which is not necessarily humorous but which ultimately sees the main characters triumph and end happily; many of Shakespeare's comedies, for example, end in the marriage of the two principal characters after they have been separated

Dramatic irony:
action or speech which means the opposite of what it superficially seems to indicate; usually the audience understand the deeper meaning which has been lost on the main characters

Timeline

Biographical: The Life of Tennessee Williams

1911	26th March: Thomas Lanier 'Tennessee' Williams III born in Columbus, Mississippi to a violent, alcoholic father and an overprotective mother. In childhood he suffered from diphtheria, leaving him housebound for a year.
1928	first short story published and first visit to Europe (with his grandfather)
1929–1931	attended the University of Missouri studying journalism, but does not graduate
1934–1935	nervous breakdown
1936	attended Washington University of St Louis, but again did not graduate
1938	started studying at University of Iowa, eventually graduating with a BA in English
1939	started using 'Tennessee' as a professional name and moves to New Orleans to write professionally under the Works Programme Administration, part of the New Deal
1943	his sister Rose undergoes a lobotomy operation for her erratic behaviour
1944	publication of his first major play *The Glass Menagerie*
1947	publication *of A Streetcar Named Desire*
1948	begins a love affair with Frank Merlo which is to last fourteen years
1955	publication of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*
1959	publication of his last great play *Sweet Bird of Youth*
1963	death of his former lover Frank Merlo from lung cancer
1969	becomes a Roman Catholic
1970s	love affair with Robert Carroll, ending only upon Carroll's death in 1979
1983	Williams dies after choking on a plastic bottle cap. He is buried, against his wishes, in Calvary, St Louis.

Sociopolitical: Relevant Events in US History

1776 — Declaration of Independence, in which it is proclaimed that 'all men are created equal'

1861–1965 — American Civil War, in which the Confederate southern states break away and declare a separate nation from the Union, partly because of their desire to continue the institution of slavery

1865 — upon the Union northern states' victory, slavery is abolished and the agrarian, aristocratic way of life on which it depended in the south falls into terminal decline

1917 — USA enters First World War

1929 — the Wall Street Crash triggers the Great Depression, which will create widespread poverty in the USA throughout the 1930s

1931 — James Truslow Adams coins the term 'The American Dream', which suggests that people can achieve freedom, independence and virtually any ambition through hard work. The name of the Du Bois plantation, Belle Reve, means beautiful dream, but suggests that wealth, influence and security should be privileges which one inherits.

1941–1945 — the USA enters the Second World War after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. After the war America's influence on global affairs is dominant and hundreds of thousands of victorious servicemen return home to reclaim the primary role in society and the world of work that had been usurped by women during the years of combat.

1945 — upon the liberation of Germany and Poland by Allied troops the extermination of six million Jews in Nazi concentration camps is revealed

1948–1991 — the Cold War: USA and USSR are locked in rivalry with one another, which manifests itself through 'proxy' wars such as Vietnam and Korea and the build-up of nuclear weapons by both sides

1962 — first US state decriminalises homosexuality (this is reinforced in 2003 by a key Supreme Court ruling)

Cultural/Literary: Other Relevant Moments in America's Artistic Life

1888 first production of *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg, a play which is viewed as a precursor to *Streetcar* in the way that it deals with class conflicts which manifest themselves in sexual antagonism

1904 first production of Anton Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard*, which deals with a culture in terminal decline through the lives of mothers and daughters

1925 *The Great Gatsby* by F Scott Fitzgerald is published

1929 *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, which deals with the decline of a southern plantation family over 30 years

1936 John Steinbeck's novel *Of Mice and Men*

1936 *Gone With the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell

1939 *The Grapes of Wrath* by John Steinbeck

1940 *The Iceman Cometh* by Eugene O'Neill

1943 first production of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein's musical *Oklahoma!*. While ostensibly being a love story, the plot more broadly deals with the choices of individuals and communities between taking a brutal, regressive path or a future based on more civilised, humane values.

1947 *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller

1949 *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller

1949 publication of Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking feminist essay *The Second Sex*

1956 *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill

Events and People Referred to in the Text

1928–1932 — Huey Long serves as Governor of Louisiana

1932–1935 — Long serves as a US Senator until his assassination. Long was viewed, according to *Time Magazine,* as either 'a populist hero' or 'a corrupt dictator'.

1933 — the song 'It's Only a Paper Moon', written by Harold Arlen, Yip Harbury and Billy Rose, and most famously recorded by jazz legends Ella Fitzgerald and Nat King Cole, is published.

1943 — the landing of US army troops at Salerno in Italy, as referred to by Stanley in the final scene

Historical Overview

It is clear to see that the play fits into a very precise moment and place in twentieth-century history but we should also consider broader trends. Our twenty-first century Western world has much more liberal attitudes to gender, sexuality and race than those of Stanley, so it is easy to view him as a kind of 'dinosaur' whose views are now hopelessly outdated; likewise, it is comforting to see Blanche as ahead of her time in some ways: a liberated and independent woman who will not accept the domination of men. However, Williams' original audience were living at the time the play is set, so while the Broadway theatre audience may have 'got' the challenge that the playwright is posing to contemporary attitudes, wider society (which would be more accurately reflected in the cinema audience that viewed the first film adaptation in 1951) may very well have shared Stanley's misogyny, his friends' casual racism and the homophobia of those whose attitudes drove Allan Grey to suicide.

Timeline Activities

1. Research 'The American Dream' (see 1931 above) and draw a table to show how different elements of it are addressed in *A Streetcar Named Desire.*
2. Research the changing role of women in American society before, during and after the Second World War. How are these changes reflected in the portrayal of women in the play?
3. Read *Miss Julie* by August Strindberg. Draw a Venn diagram to show how its themes, characters and action overlap with those of *A Streetcar Named Desire.*
4. Research other plays, novels and films that were released within two years either side of *A Streetcar Named Desire.* Can you identify any common themes that authors and directors were concerned with at that time?
5. Watch the film version of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* It is a largely comic tale but it deals with similar themes to *A Streetcar Named Desire.*

Notes on Genre and Form

Stanley: We've had this date with each other from the beginning! (Scene X)

The Tragic Hero

An effective and concrete way of viewing the play is to think of it in terms of what Aristotle defined as a **tragedy**, or perhaps more as a mid-twentieth-century adaptation of the classical form of tragedy. In many ways Blanche cannot fit the strict definition of a **tragic hero**: obviously she is female and her birth does not really elevate her above the common herd because her pretensions to aristocracy are so outdated as to be a delusion. However, she does possess a **hamartia** (or tragic flaw): her inability to face up to her own reality, in particular her sexual self, as represented by the concept of 'desire'. She may be superior by education and refinement to those whom she finds living in the quarter but these 'qualities' are irrelevant in 1940s New Orleans. Her flaw is reinforced because life has changed and left her kind socially, culturally and politically marginalised. She cannot see (or at least accept) that she is not the 'southern belle' that she was brought up to be. In this sense, like any tragic hero, the seeds of her own destruction truly are a fundamental part of her own character and therefore her demise is inevitable from the very start. Worse still, she deals with her circumstances by maintaining the illusion so emphatically that it is clearly a fantasy to everyone but herself, which means that, unlike many tragic **protagonists**, the audience cannot fully identify with her because of her lies, predatory behaviour, manipulation and frequent insensitivity.

Tragedy:
a form of drama that expresses human suffering generally, but especially a play which follows some of Aristotle's rules for the tragic form

Tragic hero:
the main character of a tragedy, usually being one who is elevated above common humanity but who also possesses a great flaw or hamartia (see below) that will inevitably lead to their downfall

Hamartia:
the flaw in a tragic hero's character which leads to error of judgement and catastrophe later on

Tragic Events

When her **catastrophe** and **tragic fall** come, however, Williams makes it clear that she is very much a victim: whatever her personal shortcomings, we cannot condone Stanley's spiteful, sadistic and ultimately criminal treatment of her, particularly after we see in the final scene the utter destruction it has wreaked on her once fine mind and personality. Therefore, this modern tragedy – Williams' adaptation of the classical form – does genuinely provoke fear and pity for its tragic hero(ine) but does not grant the audience the **catharsis** it is due: the destruction of Blanche does not create a better order. Indeed, the order that is left at the end of the play is not desirable for any character because, although it superficially resembles life in the apartment before Blanche's arrival with Stanley and Stella alone (except for the baby) and another poker night in progress, in fact it is a hollow version of the past: Stella's desire for her husband has been replaced by an indifference that might be viewed as an expression of contempt.

Catastrophe:
the moment when tragic events unravel and death or destruction is usually visited on the tragic hero; the moment of greatest suffering, physical or psychological

Tragic fall:
the moment at which the Tragic Hero suffers the consequences of his tragic flaw and consequent misjudgements

Catharsis:
the release of the audience's emotions as a result of the tragic events

Further Reading Activity

1. Read a detailed definition of tragedy, perhaps from M H Abrams' *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* or other serious guide to literature in print or online. Make a bullet point list of key elements of the form and make notes answering this question: to what extent do you think *A Streetcar Named Desire* is tragic? (AO2/5)

Tragic Irony

Tragic irony:
like dramatic irony but in a form that can only lead to catastrophe and suffering

Elia Kazan, who directed the definitive 1951 film version of the play, also saw Blanche in terms of the classical tragic heroine. He believed her **hamartia** was born of her need to be special, different and superior to most of humanity, while ironically refusing to accept the very element that most made her human, her sexuality. Accordingly, she provoked pity and fear, the former because her morally dubious past made her believable and a figure the post-war audience could relate to, the latter because they quickly realised her destruction was inevitable, trapped as she is between a place and set of circumstances that knows and has already rejected her (Laurel) and another which will not accept her pretences and deceits (New Orleans); neither the old world nor the new has a place for the nostalgic Blanche Du Bois. The **tragic irony**, according to this view, is that to feel herself above that common herd she must associate with it and to survive temporarily either her past or present circumstances she can only use that part of herself which she instinctively despises, her sexual attractiveness. This is compounded by her acute awareness that even this is fading. (For a more detailed rendering of this view of the text see the introduction of the *Methuen Student Edition* of the play, as listed in the Bibliography.)

Activity

2. Read (or watch the film version of) *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, another play by Tennessee Williams. Do you find this more or less tragic than *Streetcar*? Explain why with particular reference to the Aristotelian 'rules' for tragedy. (AO2/3/5)

Modern Tragedy

Two years after the first staging of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Arthur Miller, a contemporary playwright of Williams, and the author of such plays as *The Crucible* and the definitive modern tragedy *Death of a Salesman*, published an article in *The New York Times* entitled 'Tragedy and the Common Man' in which he argued that 'the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy ... as kings were'. He believed that modern psychiatric techniques proved that all humans were subject to the same 'emotional situations' and, therefore, anyone could demonstrate similar tragic flaws to the great dramatic protagonists created by the ancient Greeks and Shakespeare. He went further and asserted that these flaws came from the individual's yearning to gain their rightful place (or discover their true self) in society, and that we become heroic by actively seeking that place rather than merely accepting society's denial of 'our chosen image of what and who we are in this world'; in other words, one's true stature is determined by one's attempt to gain a rightful place, not by birth and superficial status. This definition fits Blanche Du Bois very well: society has certainly contrived to hide what she at least sees as her true self and force her into assuming the outward demeanour of one who matches its expectations. By trying to find a way to live 'what ought to be the truth' (Scene IX, p. 204) she can be seen as engaged in that struggle to make her fantasy self real. The irony of course (as ever with Blanche) is that this 'self' is an outdated delusion. It is also compounded by the ending wherein she has retreated totally into her fantasy life but this only leads her to a kind of living death.

Activities

3. It can be argued that all four main characters – Blanche, Stanley, Stella and Mitch – endure tragic outcomes because these are determined even before the start of the play's action. How do you think this can be shown to be true? (AO2)

4. Read Arthur Miller's essay, 'Tragedy and the Common Man', and his play, *Death of a Salesman*. How does his hero Willy Loman try and fail to gain his 'chosen image ... in this world'? (AO5)

Streetcar as a Mirror of its Author

The play can also be viewed, as mentioned in the introduction, as a semi-autobiographical work by Williams. Superficially, there are parallels between Blanche and Williams' mother, herself a 'southern belle' who married a blue-collar worker whom she considered her social inferior and who denied her perceived status and heritage when he moved the family to the impersonal city of St Louis. Furthermore, Williams experienced his sister Rose becoming mentally unstable. Her behaviour became increasingly inappropriate and sexualised, a situation the family tried to cope with by submitting her to drastic surgery on the brain (known as a lobotomy) in the vain hope of correcting her condition. Predictably, it only served to alter her entire personality and leave her intellectually impaired. Williams was away from home when this happened and always carried the guilt of not preventing it. Many critics (such as Roger Boxill) have, therefore, pointed out the parallels between Williams' real-life family experiences – class dislocation, a personal tragedy leading to a kind of death, the self-blaming of one who does not act to prevent harm to someone they love – and Blanche's dramatic portrayal.

Williams' homosexuality is another factor to which critics have drawn attention when seeking parallels between the author and his tragic heroine but not because they viewed him as in any way effeminate; rather because they see a kind of projection of his self-image and circumstances on to Blanche's characterisation. It was illegal to be an active gay man in America during most of the playwright's lifetime. Therefore, like Blanche, his sexuality meant that he felt himself to be an outsider. Later writers, again such as Roger Boxill, have even considered that Williams despised himself because of his sexuality. This might suggest that both he and Blanche struggled with issues of mental health and identity because of who they were and an inability to reconcile this to the reality of mid-twentieth-century American life. This struggle, whether real or fictional, can be seen as an inevitability, so on one level *A Streetcar Named Desire* is an attempt to address this conflict and ultimately an acceptance that it cannot be resolved and is bound to end in despair for those whom it affects.

Streetcar as Expressionism

Naturalistic:
a late-nineteenth-century theatrical movement which sought to create the illusion of reality on stage

Realism:
synonymous with Naturalism

Expressionism:
a late-nineteenth-century dramatic movement which used stage techniques to distort reality, thereby expressing inner thoughts or ideas

Finally, and paradoxically, the play is both a **naturalistic** or **realist** masterpiece and an exceptional example of **expressionistic** drama. The best way of reconciling these two seemingly contradictory interpretations is to think in terms of Blanche's interaction with her fellow characters on the one hand and her inner self on the other. In the first of these the play is what might be called 'grounded': the sisterly affection and anxiety between Blanche and Stella is wholly convincing; the tension between Blanche and Stanley – social and psychological opposites existing in an intensely claustrophobic space – is utterly real; the doomed romance – when one partner finds out that the other is not what they claimed to be – is entirely familiar: we don't question the essential truthfulness of any of this nor the way that these relationships end in physical violation and psychological destruction. But this coexists with music and lighting which heightens the drama, sound effects which the audience and protagonist but no other character can hear, sets which become see-through to reveal life beyond the four walls of the otherwise self-contained world of the play and even characters whom we are asked to accept as representing ideas, emotions and even premonitions. This is possible, and entirely accepted by the audience, because Williams uses these expressionistic techniques to dramatise the inner state of Blanche's mind. Her outer life is 'real' while her inner life takes on fantastic attributes and because the two are always separate until the moment of her final crisis we never question this state of affairs. For example, music is a powerful tool, whether it is the 'blue piano' (first referred to on p. 115, Scene I) which represents the ever-present multi-ethnicity of New Orleans with which Blanche is instinctively uncomfortable or the polka tune (firstly, p. 130, Scene I) which terminates with the sound of gunshot and reminds her of the disaster of her marriage and how its consequent guilt poisons the rest of her life. Furthermore, visual effects are employed with changes of lighting which demonstrate Blanche's fear of the truth (whether actual or philosophical) being revealed and with the back wall of the apartment seemingly disappearing to reveal the chaotic nature of her existence once the veil of sanity and respectability is withdrawn. Many of these expressionistic techniques are ingeniously connected to reality (a technique sometimes called 'plastic theatre') by such devices as the Chinese lantern (Scene III, p. 150) being placed upon then later ripped off the light or the 'blue piano' merging with the neighbourhood sounds such as the jazz tunes emitting from the bar down the street. In short, the realistic and the expressionistic do not come into conflict but actually enhance and complement one another, making the sum of the play's parts much greater than its component pieces.

Activity

5. Re-read Scenes III and IX noting down all the expressionistic techniques you observe. How do they complement the realistic action? (AO2)

Whatever we view *A Streetcar Named Desire* as, be it as modern tragedy, semi-autobiography or expressionistic exploration of mid-twentieth-century urban American life, the fact that all these interpretations of form and countless others can be present simultaneously without ever diminishing one another is testament to the dramatic cohesiveness of Williams' play.

A Word on the Play's Structure

One way in which Williams rejects the classical dramatic form is that the play is not divided into five acts (which were usually themselves subdivided into scenes); nor is it arranged in three acts, the structure favoured by many twentieth-century dramatists. It does adhere to the Aristotelian **dramatic unities** of place, action and time (albeit the latter in an adapted manner) but it is organised into 11 relatively short scenes. Earlier in his career Williams had written many short one-act plays and in a sense *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a number of self-contained scenes strung together into a full narrative. The whole is given **dramatic unity** by being located entirely in the Kowalskis' apartment in the quarter, by presenting the effects of early scenes' actions in their later counterparts and by having the conflict between Blanche and Stanley played out over one summer, rather than a single day. Most scenes are based on the same principle: a relatively low-key opening is followed by rising tension, usually verbal, sometimes with a **foreshadowing** of events to come, which builds in a crescendo (often with the verbal tension transforming into physical violence), ending in a **climax** which in itself usually results in a crisis of some kind for Blanche. Across the 11 scenes, therefore, tension rises then falls rhythmically but the general trajectory of conflict and suspense is always upwards, reinforcing the audience's growing certainty that the heroine's actions, whatever they are, can only lead her to disaster. Accordingly, Blanche's crises become incrementally worse: in Scene I she is merely overcome by the unexplained memory of her young husband's death; by the mid-point of the play (Scene VI, when her salvation seems to be at hand in the form of Mitch's rather hesitant marriage proposal) the audience already suspects that any appearance of redemption for Blanche will only make her tragic fall seem greater; and the final climax of Scene XI indicates her total psychological destruction.

Dramatic unities:
Aristotle believed that to work a drama must have unity of time (with the action occurring in one day), unity of place (with the action occurring in one location) and unity of action (with every action prompting consequences and all matters being resolved in the end).

Foreshadowing:
an indication, through action or language, of future events

Climax:
the point of a drama's most intense action, not usually the end because a resolution normally comes after the climax

Scene III contains the genesis (or origin) of the whole play. It was originally written as a single-act drama entitled *The Poker Night*, and, as mentioned elsewhere in these notes, can be viewed as a microcosmic (or miniature) version of the whole text: it contains Blanche and Stanley's rivalry for Stella's attention, her doomed flirtation with Mitch and a hint that her interest in the young is sexual, a rising tide of violence, Stanley's act of aggression as a gesture of ownership, and even Stella's eventual return to her husband followed by Blanche's uncomprehending isolation. The backdrop of a poker game in the final scene harks back to Scene III and ultimately suggests that (superficially at least) life in the quarter will continue as before, regardless of its impact on individuals.

Scene III is unusual, however, in that it contains no direct mention of Blanche's first marriage and its tragic outcome. Instead, Blanche's past is echoed in Mitch's tale of the girl (who reminds us of Allan because she is sad and sweet) whom he loved and lost to death (see p. 149). This does establish Mitch as a possible counterpart to Blanche but from a structural viewpoint is one of the more interesting and cleverly constructed moments of the entire drama because tension and suspense across the whole piece rely on the gradual revelation of Blanche's past. In every other scene in which Allan Grey is mentioned or alluded to the audience learns a little more of his

life, his death and their effect on Blanche's state of mind; more importantly we see each time how these past events are affecting her behaviour in, and their impact on, the present. To omit direct reference to it in this most central of scenes suggests that Blanche has the possibility of a future with Mitch, that she could leave her past behind perhaps and stop the polka tune and gunshot returning for good. Williams then uses even this omission to increase our emotional investment in Blanche, so that when it is eroded, and momentarily reinstated, our pity for her becomes much greater when her hope of salvation is cruelly snatched away in the last phase of the play.

Activities

6. If you were directing a new production of *Streetcar*, where would you place the interval to gain maximum dramatic impact? Explain why. (AO5)
7. Apart from those parallels mentioned in two paragraphs previous to this task, in what ways is Scene III a microcosm of the whole play? (AO2/5)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 7, 8, 12, 14 and 15

Death and Madness

Blanche: They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and get off at – Elysian Fields. (Scene I, p. 117)

Death and madness are linked inextricably through the character of Blanche. In her mind they are at points almost interchangeable but on a dramatic level Williams associates death with madness through the protagonist's history, present and future. It is the death of Allan Grey that has triggered her descent into madness. The fear of the metaphorical, psychological death that is insanity drives her every action (along with the fear of ageing, but that in itself is about the denial of the approach of physical death). And that very fate, in the form of permanent committal to a psychiatric hospital, is the outcome of her retreat from life's reality.

Grey's death, and her part in it, represents a moment in Blanche's existence when her yearning for the genteel way of life of the Old South is exposed as a charade. Any rational appraisal of the marriage would not hold her, at the time a naive sixteen-year-old from a sheltered background who probably could not have conceived that her husband was homosexual, as responsible for the events that unfolded once she became aware of his sexuality. So, instead of life gradually making Blanche aware of her antiquated values, it suddenly and without warning destroys her whole way of seeing the world and plunges her into a harsher reality than she could possibly have coped with. Reality has continued to torment her in the starkest way by having her not just witness the grotesque demises of her elderly relatives at an age before anyone should have to consider mortality, but by putting her in a position where she (who in a previous generation would have been insulated by servants from even witnessing physical suffering) has to deal first-hand with all its disgusting clinical consequences. Her inability to escape 'the grim reaper' who had 'put up his tent on (her) doorstep' (Scene I, p. 127) is represented by the repetition of the polka tune in Blanche's mind always returning her to the moment that 'the Grey boy' shot himself.

Activity

1. Note down some references to Blanche's marriage and the death of her husband, Allan Grey, along with the relevant scene numbers. For each one write a couple of sentences explaining how it links to Blanche's psychological decline. (AO1)

In the 'present' of the play the prospect of death, physical or psychological, forms a kind of backdrop against which Stanley's slow but inevitable assault on Blanche's mind is played out. The 'rattle-trap streetcar' (Scene IV, p. 162) which serves such ominously named stations as Cemeteries and Elysian Fields indicates her fate. That Blanche is on a journey to the first of these stops is barely ever in doubt, albeit that her demise will be one of the mind not the body. The second-named is the neighbourhood in which the Kowalskis' apartment is located. Its name is that of the heaven of ancient mythology but Blanche is not bound for any paradise as her inability to fit into life there in any way – in terms of appearance, values, language – indicates. Desire should be the opposite of death, as illustrated in Blanche's most intimate conversation with her sister when they are discussing Stella's attraction to Stanley. Stella asks euphemistically, 'Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar?' (Scene IV, p. 162). But for once Blanche either ignores or does not understand the verbal subtlety: in her mind the uncontrollable urge that Stella is alluding to does not exist; sex for Blanche has become either a currency used to pay for her survival or it is too firmly tied in with Allan Grey's suicide, the opposite of how Stella sees it.

Activity

2. Re-read Scene I and make a list of all the ways that Blanche does not seem to fit into Stanley and Stella's neighbourhood. Consider such things as appearance, language, values, behaviour, attitudes to the locals, names, etc. (AO1/2)

Other characters in Elysian Fields also ponder death but Stanley is presented as almost immune to it: he mentions seemingly incidentally how he knew that only he would survive an action during his war service when his four comrades were killed (Scene XI, p. 216). For Mitch it is the thing that links him emotionally to Blanche: he shares cigarettes with her from the case that was a gift from a dying sweetheart and is engraved with a line from the Christina Rossetti poem *Remember* in which she considers her own death, and confides to Blanche his fears for his mother's demise. It is really the only thing that links these would-be lovers and thereby reinforces the inevitability of her fate. When the moment of her final crisis is at hand in Scene IX (on p. 205), the blind Mexican woman appears selling 'Flores para los muertos' – flowers for the dead. This is more than a reminder of her imminent destruction because the woman is an expressionistic device whose presence represents chaos and anxiety; her almost ghostly manifestation suggests the disorder of Blanche's mind which is now rapidly descending into a state which is beyond retrieval.

Activities

3. Draw a Venn diagram which explores what Blanche and Mitch have in common and what separates them. (AO1)
4. Keep a log of all the expressionistic devices (and the relevant scene numbers) which are associated with death and suffering. Can you notice any patterns? (AO2)

Blanche's vision of her own end – buried in a serene state at sea, shrouded in white (Scene XI, p. 220) – represents how she comes to see death as a form of release and escape, not just from the hell of her own reality but in terms of it cleansing her morally and restoring her purity. She is yearning for a version of death at the end of the play after having spent the previous 10 scenes or five months trying merely to salvage survival. The irony of this is that her future represents a kind of living death in the asylum: it may not be necessary for the nurse to fit Blanche in a straitjacket, giving her the outward appearance of mental incompetence, but the doctor's restoration of Blanche's dignity by leading her by the arm to their waiting vehicle is merely a mask of normality. Her life now will be a mere physical existence; her emotional and intellectual vitality, so radiant at earlier points in the play, is extinguished utterly.

Activities

5. Read again Blanche's speech about the deaths at Belle Reve (it starts *I, I, I took the blows...*). She is telling the truth but it is delivered in melodramatic language. How does this make you feel about Blanche a) at this point in the play; b) at the end of the play? (AO2)
6. Describe Blanche's state of mind at the end of Scene XI. Is it what you expect of someone who has to be removed to an asylum? Explain your answer. (AO1/2)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 2, 14, 19 and 20

Sexuality and Desire

Blanche: It brought me here. – Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be... (Scene IV, p. 162)

Sexuality for both **antagonist** and **protagonist** in the play initially appears to be something that ultimately it is not. Similarly, desire seems to be a force for creation but it leads everyone to a diminished life, albeit in different ways and to different degrees.

Antagonist:
the opposite of a protagonist (see below); a leading character who acts against the playwright's sympathies

Protagonist:
the main character of a drama who seems to represent or champion the play's themes

Activities

1. Identify some of the symbols of sex and sexuality in the play. Which character is each symbol most closely associated with and what does each one tell you about that character? (AO2)
2. Identify some of the euphemisms for desire in the play. Which character is each one most closely associated with and what does each one tell you about that character? (AO2)

Stanley's sexuality cannot fail to impress an audience in the early part of the play. We first glimpse him associated with raw meat, a magnificent sight which appeals to more than one of our senses. At this point we do not realise that his will be one of the principal parts in the play, but we cannot make the same mistake when he re-enters the scene, throwing the apartment door open and immediately dominating the action. His desire is seen to leave Stella in a state of 'narcotized tranquillity' (Scene IV, p. 156) and is associated with power through its association with the thrusting locomotive, with celebration, through the phallic image of the beer bottle's cap popping off to release its torrent of foaming liquid and with nature, by being echoed in 'jungle voices' (Scene X, p. 215) of the quarter. It creates life in the form of his son and, in a Darwinian sense, seems at first to be wholesome in comparison with that of his vulgar friends, especially the hypocrite Steve who visits the neighbourhood prostitutes and then returns to his wife apparently full of affection. Here in Stanley is a man who immediately categorises women into those whom he would and would not sleep with but at the same time refuses to kiss his wife in front of Blanche, the character whose sexuality and desire would seem to most contrast his own because it seems degenerate when taken at face value. (The implication is that Stanley thinks that to demonstrate his love for Stella in front of her sister would somehow sully or contaminate it.) As we shall see, however, Stanley's sexuality, like most others in the play, is not as straightforward as it is first presented.

Even at the beginning of the play, we never bring the same ill-founded certainty to our understanding of Blanche's sexuality nor what desire means to her. We immediately know that she is deceptive by nature, so her initial playful flirtation with Stanley occurs in the shadow of two lingering doubts: she is a woman who is already shown to be deceiving and even lying to all those around her; and her attitude to her brother-in-law may not be as harmless as she would have him believe, practised as it is only when out of her sister's view. Even if the audience views her early behaviour as unthreatening, they may very well realise that in the face of Stanley's cogent and unadorned sexuality, her mild flirtations make her seem flimsy and vulnerable. Where her seductive demeanour has failed with Kowalski, it does however succeed with Harold 'Mitch' Mitchell. She is initially much less subtle with him; upon their first meeting she 'stands in her pink silk brassiere and white skirt in the light through the portieres' (Scene III, p. 146). Moreover, her actions are somewhat clichéd and predictable: any viewer of movies from the 1930s and 1940s would have recognised a man and woman sharing or lighting each other's cigarettes was shorthand for sexual attraction. Still her approach is not threatening: Mitch is a grown man, albeit one who is slightly emasculated by his preoccupation with his 'sick mother' (who is first mentioned in Scene III, p. 144). There are, however, in this exchange hints that Blanche's sexuality is something far more sinister, such as when she seems to have taken pleasure in voyeuristically observing her high school students' 'discovery of love' (Scene III, p. 151). This foreshadows the predatory nature of her sexuality in the last part of Scene V, when the virginal boy from the *Evening Star* is backed into a corner and kissed, just once. Here we witness the tarantula-like behaviour that she describes to Mitch later.

Activities

3. To what extent do you think Stella and Mitch are driven by their sexuality and desires? (AO1). Answer by writing one paragraph on each with supporting quotations.
4. Compare the way that Blanche flirts with Stanley in Scene II and Mitch in Scene III. Which scene contains the most tension? Why is this? (AO1/2)

On the face of it then Blanche's character becomes incrementally more sexualised and driven by desire but this in itself is undermined by what she says about sex. Her conversations with Stella in Scenes I and IV are the nearest she comes to frankness about her sexual history until she confides in Mitch after their date. In those sisterly confidences she comments that she does not understand how Stella can be left to 'cry on his lap like a baby' (Scene I, p. 125) upon her husband's return from a short absence, but more importantly she also regards sex as 'brutal desire' (Scene IV, p. 162) and would laugh in her sister's face if she had the temerity to suggest that raw physical attraction was the most important element of a relationship. Conversely, Blanche does have to admit reluctantly that sex was the force which 'brought [her] here' (Scene IV, p. 162), and therein lies the key to her character. She is caught in the hopelessly torn position of feeling sexual desire and at the same time hating herself for feeling it. Sexuality was the thing that, in her teenage naivety, she blamed for the death of Allan Grey, so it is subconsciously but intrinsically linked to guilt in her mind. It is both the cause of the death and destruction of beauty and the thing that she uses to punish herself for her part in that destruction. Her imperative to go on punishing herself indicates that in many ways she is still that innocent sixteen-year-old who was so disgusted when she witnessed unrestrained desire for the first time.

Activity

5. Why is the end of Scene V, from the entry of the paper boy until the very end of the scene, so significant in our understanding of Blanche's character? (AO2). Prepare a presentation for your fellow students which answers this question.

In this context, Stanley's changing attitude to her, which is finally expressed by rape, indicates that his sexuality is indeed not the admirable and straightforward trait it seemed when he threw the meat to Stella, and was described as the 'gaudy seed-bearer' (Scene I, p. 128) or when it seems to have liberated his wife from Belle Reve and a life that would have shadowed that of her sister. Indeed, we can read his ever-more-aggressive response to her as a reaction to her reluctance to fit into the binary view that he has of women: if she had been asexual in her response to him or revealed her true sexual self with no hint of deception he would have been able to categorise her as he does all others. Her sexuality, like her history and intellect, are much more complex than any female he would normally meet, so despite his apparent fear that showing affection to his wife in front of this 'tainted' woman will somehow infect his marriage, ultimately he reverts to being the Stone-Age brute that Blanche describes him as and uses his sexual power to destroy her and protect his physical and emotional territory. Ironically, his actions also sexually neutralise the real object of his desire – Stella – and leave only the suggestion that their marriage is tainted anyway. Sexual desire is used by Stanley as a weapon and Blanche as a shield. Ultimately, they both suffer permanent wounds because of this.

Activity

6. Stanley's rape of Blanche at the end of Scene X is shocking but not really surprising. On a table plot the events and speeches earlier in the text which indicate that it will happen. (AO2)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 3, 4, 6, 11, 13, and 16

Illusion and Reality

Her delicate beauty must avoid a strong light. (Scene I, p. 117)

All literature is on some level illusion and not reality. This is especially true of drama: real life does not fit neatly into Aristotle's three **dramatic unities** and yet great playwrights can present **naturalistic** action as if it does. *A Streetcar Named Desire* is one such example in that it functions simultaneously and seamlessly as a work of art which relies on illusion and as a realistic portrayal of life. One element of this is Williams' use of names: Stella, Elysian Fields, Cemeteries, especially Desire itself, are all strong indicators of symbolic meaning but all are accepted by the audience as simply being what they happen to be. This is most true of the name of the play's protagonist Blanche, derived from the French adjective *blanc*, meaning white. Her whiteness, as reflected in the very dress she first appears in, is associated with a fake purity; she almost could have chosen her own name as part of the elaborate fantasy that she has created to protect herself from the reality that she finds unbearable.

Williams uses stage direction liberally to establish Blanche's fragile illusions in the audience's minds. He describes her as resembling a moth, and if her first appearance is suggestive of vulnerable deception then virtually her first significant action – the secret drinking and replacement of Stanley's whisky – is a well-practised and outright lie. In short, the audience is in no doubt that nothing she says or does can be taken at face value. When, therefore, she starts to regale Stella with the elaborate explanation of her reasons for leaving her teaching job in Laurel and visiting New Orleans, we are immediately sceptical. Indeed, her excuses are so clichéd as to encourage us to realise that Stella herself must see through them and is only playing along because she knows from past experience that challenging Blanche will jeopardise the little trust her sister is placing in her. Stella's willing belief itself is an act of compassion.

Activities

1. Re-read the first and the last scenes of the play and draw up a table to compare Blanche's dress, language, actions and interactions with Stella and Stanley in these two scenes. (AO2)
2. Read Scene IX again. Blanche's language is very figurative – it is full of metaphor, personification and simile – and it is distinctly melodramatic, but it conveys some real truths about her past. Why does Williams choose to have her speak honestly but in language that is not straightforward at this stage? (AO2)

Stanley, on the other hand, is immediately established as a kind of champion of reality, a man who, as Blanche comments later in Scene II, puts his 'cards on the table' (p. 137). Dramatically, he immediately (but unintentionally at this stage) starts to reveal Blanche's reality by asking about her marriage. Even an innocent inquiry is enough to push Blanche towards crisis point and Stanley has inadvertently set in progress a chain of events that will lead to her destruction. At this point no blame or fault can be laid at his door. In fact, audiences often sympathise with him more than Blanche initially because he is presented as likeably straightforward (Roger Boxill notes how viewers initially prefer Stanley to his sister-in-law because he has all the jokes): his matter-of-fact acceptance of reality seems a more endearing quality than her self-deception and the way she calculatedly misleads even one who loves her.

Activity

3. Do you think that Stanley is guilty of creating any illusions? If so, what are they and is he justified in doing so? (AO1)

The unfortunate thing about Stella's desire to protect her sister is that it makes her complicit in Blanche's illusions to some extent and, therefore, by extension, compromises her loyalty to Stanley. This is not initially a problem even when she is defending the loss of Belle Reve. To him this is an annoyance but nothing more because his perception of Blanche as a threat is not yet consciously formed. He argues with Blanche but does not act against her. He can see through the illusion on a simple level, although he is too unsophisticated to realise that the jewels are fake and the furs are cheap, but significantly he firstly confronts Stella (and not Blanche) with this deception. It is the events at the end of Scene IV (pp. 163–164), when he overhears Blanche's personal attacks, that are the catalyst to Stanley's actions. These events also complicate the use of reality and illusion in the play because Blanche's conversation with Stella about Stanley and his 'apes' is one of the few times in the play when

she is being frank, but perhaps a greater irony is that in order to get back at Blanche, Stanley must himself use one of her main strategies: deception. Up to this point Stanley has only represented reality to his sister-in-law in a subconscious way by being the most visible embodiment of life in the quarter; after this he deliberately assaults her psychologically by forcing her to confront the reality of her past.

Blanche responds to this unavoidable truth by retreating further and further into illusion as the play progresses. She conjures the image of Shep Huntleigh (who is first mentioned in Scene IV, p. 159), whose very past existence is only verified by Stella's memory, and comes to rely more and more on the fantasy that she will be joining him on some romantic escapade. Stella reinforces her sister's belief in this by becoming more like the sibling she was in the past: 'I like to wait on you, Blanche. It makes it seem more like home.' (Scene V, p. 170). She means well by protecting Blanche through little actions such as putting fewer candles than Blanche's actual age demands on the birthday cake, but this can only ultimately strengthen Stanley's resolve to banish their house guest. The other front on which the two principal characters fight – Mitch's attention and loyalty – also adds to this because he helps maintain Blanche's illusions, albeit subconsciously. His attempts to play the beau or 'Rosenkavalier' (an operatic romantic hero) are wholly unconvincing and doomed to failure – as evidenced by his arriving for their date full of optimism with the flowers but returning disappointed with a cheap, inverted effigy of a movie idol – yet they fit well enough temporarily into the world of 'what ought to be the truth' (Scene IX, p. 204) that Blanche is trying to sustain. Ultimately, Mitch's arrival in the 'blue denim shirt and pants' (Scene IX, p. 200) and 'unshaven' appearance of a labouring man hurts Blanche not because it is the social insult she mentions but because it negates the flimsy fantasy image she has projected on him since they met. It anticipates his tearing down of the Chinese lantern, calling her a liar and attempted rape.

Blanche's retreat into illusion also increases Williams' use of expressionistic techniques, which have previously been external threats to her but now become projections of her internal state of mind. They both occur more frequently and become more intrusive until her fear of reality is exposed by the transparent back wall revealing prostitution and muggings and her fear of death takes on a flesh and blood form in the person of the blind Mexican flower vendor. Up until this point the visual and aural manner in which Williams has revealed her illusions has not been so stark. Scene VII, for example, might be viewed almost as ironic comedy when Blanche is singing 'Paper Moon' as a counterpoint to Stanley telling Stella about her life in Laurel. However, it does not take very close analysis of the song's verses, with their references to Barnum and Bailey's circus and penny arcades, to realise that the juxtaposition of what she sings with what he says is a precursor to a much more direct confrontation of illusion and reality in the next scene. Indeed, the chorus insists that *'it wouldn't* be make believe, *if* you believed in me' (p. 186), suggesting that Blanche is complacent that her illusion can be permanently sustained *if* she is able to 'win' Mitch from Stanley by marriage. (This is a fine example of how skilfully Williams blends illusion into the 'reality' of the play because the song is not a mere contrivance created to fit the scene: it was a popular hit before the play was written and, therefore, would be familiar enough for the audience to either see it as mere background to Stanley's revelations or, in the case of the more perceptive viewer, appreciate how beautifully, ironically appropriate it is and how even such a 'saccharine ballad' is being used to increase the tension of the scene.)

Activity

4. Three people can read aloud (or better still act out) Scene VII. A fourth should indicate every point at which irony is created by the contrast of the words that Stanley is speaking and the words that Blanche is singing. (AO2)

By Scene X all the elements of Blanche's fantasies have started to combine: her dress is a parody of what she wore at the start; her proposed trip with Shep Huntleigh is both imminent and planned in detail; her language is at its most melodramatic. These of course are a reaction to twin assaults of Stanley's perversely ironic birthday present and romantic rejection from Mitch. The reality that Stanley forces on her here is the cruellest expression of the nature of their relationship: he will always overpower her, not just physically but because society has everything stacked in his favour whether it is because he is male, working class or just more 'of the time' than Blanche. By Scene XI her illusion has become total *delusion*: her belief in the fantasy she created has become absolute and indeed has extended beyond mere escape from the present into an escape from life itself with a description of her death and internment which is simultaneously and equally romantic and macabre (meaning horrific). The doctor becomes crucial to this because he is willing to play along with her fantasy. His portrayal of

the decorous gentleman is superior to Mitch's but is also an easier role to play because Blanche is willing to give herself over to it totally now that her illusion has *become* her reality. Throughout the play she has unsuccessfully tried to project her illusion onto men like Mitch, Stanley and the paper boy but they have all ultimately insisted that reality must prevail. Now at last Williams allows her a kind of release by being escorted off stage on the arm of a man who knows enough about her mental state to realise that it is hopeless to try to make her confront reality. The kindness that this stranger shows is in giving Blanche a place that she can finally run to.

Activity

5. Why does Blanche respond so negatively to the nurse in the final scene but so positively to the doctor? (AO1) Present your answer in the form of a comparative table.

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 1, 3, 10 and 17

Gender

Stanley: Mitch is a buddy of mine ... We work in the same plant and now on the same bowling team. You think I could face him if – (Scene VII, p. 190)

Simplistic views of gender in the play tend to categorise Stanley as an extreme example of masculinity and Blanche as his counterpoint, a polar opposite model of femininity. This is a starting point but is insufficient and too binary to hold up to close scrutiny. Patricia Hern in her excellent introduction to the Methuen Student Edition of the play, provides more sophisticated analysis by pointing out how gender 'types' in the text are influenced by cinema, particularly the western/cowboy genre, which was extremely popular in and before the 1940s and largely reflected and even influenced how America saw itself. In such movies the greatest attributes of the masculine hero were presented as loyalty to his friends and the ability to protect home and family from any manner of attack. These are not difficult to recognise in Stanley who from Scene IV onwards is actively repelling the threat posed by his sister-in-law to his physical territory and his marriage, and, when put to the test, puts his loyalty to Mitch before his affection for Stella on the grounds that they served in the army together in the 'Two-Forty-First Engineers' (Scene VII, p. 190). Similarly, the women in the text can also be categorised by the moral world view of the kind of movies that featured cowboys fighting North American Indians: Stella represents the kind of woman who fits into this world's domestic complacency: she has stifled her individual self and her heritage to become mother and homemaker. Blanche is ostensibly the 'whore' type (which also had a role in the westerns). This would not be a cause of conflict if she simply stuck to this role thereby fitting into one of Stanley's acceptable 'pigeonholes' for women, but she goes beyond such convenient definitions with her attempts to 'feminise' the Kowalskis' apartment. This is part of the real threat because it parodies and begins to usurp the role that Stella is playing. Even Eunice does this to some extent because her marriage to Steve acts as a dramatic premonition of what Stanley and Stella's relationship will be like once the passion is spent.

Further Reading

Read Patricia Hern's introduction to the Methuen Student Edition of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. (AO2)

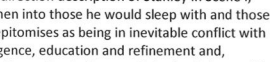
If the men in the play are a kind of dislocated projection of 'western' heroes, they can simultaneously be viewed as standing for a much more modern, urban, industrial masculinity that is produced by and embraces new technologies – the car, the radio, the refrigerator, the automated commercial bowling alley, the locomotive. Blanche's antebellum (i.e. before the American Civil War), aristocratic version of femininity, on the other hand, opposes this: she cannot even cope with the telephone on the two occasions that she tries to use it. Indeed, it is quite realistic to view the central **protagonist/antagonist** dynamic in the play as the inevitable triumph of the masculine over the feminine in a typically patriarchal and misogynistic world in which soldiers returning from action in the Second World War are resuming the domestic and professional roles which have temporarily been populated by women. This view of the action is certainly sustainable if we only consider the first two scenes. Even in the third 'Poker Night' scene (which is so often taken to be a microcosm or scaled-down version of the play), it seems that masculinity is vulgar, aggressive and violent by instinctive habit, while the feminine influence is one which is a distraction from macho pursuits and is liable to shape the action towards effeminacy. When actual violence does break out this world made in Stanley's image retains its integrity because his friends do not sanction his behaviour, they rush to his aid and comfort him; moreover, his sexual potency is the factor that allows him to re-establish rapidly his seemingly hyper-masculine version of normality when he carries the submissive Stella to bed.

Activities

1. Do an Internet search on Napoleonic Code and Huey Long. How do the results help extend your understanding of Stanley? (AO3)
2. Do an Internet search on Edgar Allan Poe, Christina Rossetti and the song 'It's Only a Paper Moon'. How do the results help deepen your understanding of Blanche? (AO3)
3. Look up a range of textual references to Steve and Eunice's marriage. How is it different from Stanley and Stella's relationship (at the moment)? (AO1)
4. Compare Blanche's image of Shep Huntleigh with the way in which Mitch is presented. (AO1/2) Present your thoughts in the form of a table.

The one character who does not, however, quite fit into any of these neat boxes is of course Mitch. Even though Stanley claims him as his 'best friend', he is, as Hern also notes, 'weak and insipid', a sentimental and at times maudlin mother's boy. He may seem to treat Blanche with the respect that she is soon to be denied by Stanley, and this seems admirable at first, but ultimately this 'gentleness comes out of weakness not strength', and his social clumsiness and unease make Stanley seem admirably natural and appealingly self-confident. Ultimately, Mitch's ineptitude and personality act as a contrast to Stanley because the former's version of masculinity makes the latter's seem all the more powerful and (before the violence begins at least) attractive. This is compounded in a way by Mitch's attempt to assault Blanche in Scene IX: this act, as much one of 'deliberate cruelty' as Stanley presenting his sister-in-law with the bus ticket on her birthday, is no more an admirable image of masculinity than Kowalski's attack on his pregnant wife. Indeed, the only thing that distinguishes Mitch's sexual offence from Stanley's is that it does not 'succeed'; it is the same in intent.

If we accept, as a valid version of masculinity, Williams' initial stage-direction description of Stanley in Scene I, which animalises him and suggests that he basically categorises women into those he would sleep with and those he would not, we must also see the kind of femininity that Blanche epitomises as being in inevitable conflict with this: her gender is more than pure sexuality, it is tempered by intelligence, education and refinement and, therefore, represents a clear threat to his physical and emotional territory. Stanley's masculinity (and the world view it is manifest in) is tested to breaking point in Scene IV when Blanche begins to act behind his back (defining him as an 'ape' – on p. 163 – when she thinks he cannot hear). Confronting Blanche head-on with words or actions will clearly no longer be enough to protect what is his and he must revert to methods which are more like hers, deception and scheming. At this point it might seem that femininity is bound for at least a moral 'victory' even if the main female protagonist is inevitably destined to be destroyed. However, when Stanley presents his ***coup de theatre*** in Scene VIII – the action is bracketed by his telephone conversation with 'Mac' in which he bellows about the 'noisy woman' (p. 197) and his changing into a gaudily coloured, celebratory bowling shirt – it is apparent that it is Stanley's superior physical masculinity that dominates and underpins his primacy. Any use of Blanche's feminine methods was merely a convenient tactic.



Coup de theatre:
a sudden, unexpected but wholly believable development of a play's plot or action

Activity

5. How far do you think Blanche's description of Stanley in Scene IV is a) accurate and b) fair? (AO1/2)

This apparent masculine victory, however, is somewhat pyrrhic or empty because Stanley's adherence to nostalgic and traditional 'manliness' is seen at the end of the play to cost him Stella's emotional and physical loyalty when she does not respond to his overtly sexual form of comfort – she will not be carried to bed this time. This implies that she has been reduced to a woman like Eunice and he to a man like Steve: their affection has become fickle and their marriage, therefore, has lost its passionate emotional keystone. Ultimately then, Stanley's form of masculinity is as costly for men as it is for women. This is why Steve's character gets the final line in the play: 'This game is seven-card stud' (Scene XI, p. 226). He is oblivious to others' feelings; life in the quarter goes on; and ultimately their lives, just like Blanche's (albeit in a different way) will be *'El pain de mais sin sal'* (Scene VIII, p. 199) – life without flavour.

Activity

6. Make a list of all the stage directions and expressionistic techniques that contribute to your understanding of Blanche's femininity and Stanley's masculinity. (AO2)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 3, 4, 9, 10, 11 and 19

Beauty and Cruelty

Blanche: Physical beauty is passing... (Scene X, p. 211)

Williams makes it clear in his opening stage direction that physical beauty can be found in New Orleans when he writes that '...a kind of lyricism gracefully attenuates the atmosphere of decay' (Scene I, p. 115) in the quarter. This seems to chime with Blanche's professed belief that physical beauty is transitory and temporary but at the same time she equates beauty with what 'ought to be the truth' (Scene IX, p. 204) and describes the need to beautify herself and her surroundings as 'magic'. For example, when she is at her lowest ebb she appears in a colour that she insists is 'Della Robbia Blue' (Scene XI, p. 219), the shade of the Virgin Mary's robe in so many paintings of her holding the baby Jesus. She accordingly equates cruelty with the exposure of the truth, which, in her mind, destroys beauty. This apparent contradiction is wholly convincing to the audience because it, like her perception of everything, stems from her discovery of Allan Grey with another man, a moment which she implies ended the 'blinding light' (Scene VI, p. 182) of their young love. Her reaction to this was her one act of 'deliberate cruelty', the only thing that she considers a sin and the 'one unforgivable thing' (Scene X, p. 212). Explicitly, she uses these terms to criticise Mitch's thoughtlessness and Stanley's spitefulness, but in fact she is mostly describing herself and articulating for the audience the prism through which she views the world. All of her superficial attempts to embellish herself or her environment – from the constant bathing and pure white dress she arrives in to the Chinese lantern and the light cover she puts on the bed – are merely ways of veiling the cruelty of the real world with the illusion of visual beauty. She tries to beautify the world in the first seven scenes of the play but this insulation from reality is stripped away by Stanley (and to a lesser extent Mitch) in the last four.

Activities

1. Tabulate and consider all the colours associated with each of Blanche and Stanley. What patterns do you notice? (AO2)

2. Tabulate and consider all the colours associated with each of Belle Reve and New Orleans. What patterns do you notice? (AO2)

This use of beauty as a protective illusion which makes the world tolerable is seen elsewhere in the play, most notably in the idea of Belle Reve, a lavishly attractive mansion, the opposite of the squalor of the quarter, which had for generations given shelter to the Du Bois family and insulated them from the cruelty of life. Of course, by Blanche's time the illusion of beauty has entirely crumbled and the reality it lets in involves unspeakable physical suffering and moral decay which can only be described in euphemistic terms. Williams is then perhaps suggesting that Blanche's inability to deal with cruelty springs not from a single event but from historical inevitability. This predictably contrasts with Stanley for whom, if beauty exists at all, it is almost incidental and always bright, obvious and unsubtly lurid. Belle Reve for him is visualised as 'them columns' (Scene VIII, p. 199) with no detail; any decoration that life has is in the gaudy shades of his pyjamas or bowling shirt; even the beauty of expressing his love for Stella is described simply as 'flashing lights' and 'noises' (Scene VIII, p. 199). In his mind the plain truth is paramount. Therefore, Blanche's 'magic' is swept aside by his pseudo-forensic investigation into her past and then the itemisation of her lies to Stella in Scene VII. Without trivialising the rape in Scene X, it can be argued that his greatest 'deliberate cruelty' is the presentation of the bus ticket to Blanche as a mockery of a birthday present in Scene VIII. This is because of its timing partly but mainly because it sends her back to the very place where her suffering originated; it is telling her that she cannot escape her past. She is to return also in the most humiliating fashion 'on the Greyhound' bus (Scene VIII, p. 198), the cheapest form of transport available and one which the original audience would have recognised as being frequented by drunks and derelicts, those who could afford no other choice. This act is echoed by Mitch's cruelty in Scene IX: his attempted rape is vindictive enough in itself but doubly so when prefaced by the insult that she is 'not clean enough to bring in the house with [his] mother' (Scene IX, p. 207). He, like his old army buddy and workmate, uses her past to destroy any prospect of even superficial beauty in the present or future.

By the end Blanche is describing death with a sort of macabre (or gothic) beauty when she talks about how she will be buried at sea, wrapped in a pure white shroud and attended by a young doctor. She craves this as a preferable end to the one she is facing in reality. It is only a genuine act of kindness, namely the willingness of the real doctor to go along with her fantasy, which will insulate her from the cruelty of the world until she finds that release. He has chosen, albeit momentarily perhaps, to accept 'what ought to be the truth' and avoid the cruelty of forcing her physically to retreat to the asylum.

Activities

3. List all the acts of kindness that Blanche experiences (from Eunice asking her if she needs help to the doctor leading her away politely). How does she respond to each one and why? (AO1)
4. List all the acts of cruelty that Blanche experiences (from Stanley rifling through her valise to his rape of her in Scene X). What motivates each one? (AO1)
5. In what senses is it ironic when Blanche says she has 'always depended on the kindness of strangers'? Think about her marriage, her life at Belle Reve and her life in Laurel, as well as what she experiences in New Orleans. (AO1/2)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 10, 13 and 19

Conflict of Values

Blanche: I think it's wonderfully fitting that Belle Reve should be this bunch of old papers in your big, capable hands. (Scene II)

The play articulates a conflict between the values of nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, in which, needless to say, the present must logically and inevitably win out over the past. On the one hand what might be called the Du Bois' ways are (or more precisely, *were*) traditional, nostalgic, agrarian and aesthetic; on the other, the Kowalskis' are modern, aspirational, urban and materialistic. In the world of the play both are tied closely to place. The Old Quarter of New Orleans is both Stanley and Stella's home and the territory on which this conflict of values is to be fought out; you might say they have home advantage. Having said that, Stanley is not fundamentally of that city or neighbourhood – no place so diverse could be personified by one individual – instead, it seems to accommodate merely him along with his Hispanic friends and African American acquaintances. Conversely, Belle Reve is epitomised by Blanche: she wholly believes in what it represents and yearns for the world in which it stood at the centre, but, ominously, it is now completely gone physically, just as she will be gone socially and psychologically at the end of Scene XI.

Activities

1. Look at all the speeches of the minor characters (with the exceptions of the doctor and the nurse). What do they tell you about life in the quarter? (AO1)
2. Design a set that would be capable of staging every scene of the play. This does not have to be a drawing of draughtsman's quality; a rough sketch will suffice. (AO1/5)

If these places are emblems of the values they represent it is equally telling that Belle Reve is referred to always in the past tense (except when it is mentioned as a mere legal possession), whereas the quarter is not just entirely mentioned in the present tense but is the sole setting for the drama. The demise of the plantation has the temporary benefit of allowing Blanche to refer to it (if not the recent events that took place there) in a highly romanticised manner. She need not, for example, dwell on its shortcomings such as the near certainty that as a plantation its workers would have been transported slaves and their descendants. The same is true of how she promotes her beliefs and values, protesting that what 'ought to be the truth' (Scene IX, p. 204) is more important than what is or that 'cruelty' is never forgivable. Thus, Williams can initially present those values which the audience associate with Blanche in a relatively uncritical light. Both the house and its last surviving unmarried daughter can, therefore, be portrayed as victims; both have suffered from the 'epic fornications' (Scene II, p. 140) of generations of men and witnessed the terminal diseases of women. Stanley's home, on the other hand, is literally painted in the most vivid colours, suggesting both the apparent liveliness and dynamism of his values. His apartment in the quarter is a place, like his values, to be won and protected, literally from Blanche's feminising influence, but also from regression into a past which would see his kind dispossessed, impoverished and disenfranchised. It is clear by the end that his values have prevailed, the most powerful signal of which being the birth of his first child which coincides with the guardian of the previous generation's backward-looking beliefs being led away to the asylum. Perhaps most significantly, the stage direction informs us that the infant is wrapped in a 'blue blanket' (Scene XI, p. 225): Stanley's firstborn is a boy and, therefore, most like him, entirely Kowalski with not a hint of Du Bois: it will face the future with confidence not pine for the past with regret.

Activity

3. Write in detail about how the two homes, Belle Reve and the Kowalskis' apartment, reflect their 'native' inhabitants' values. (AO1)

If these homes and locations signify adversely opposing values, then Stella represents both the battlefield on which this conflict takes place and the prize to be won at the end of it. It is she who has consciously rejected the 'white columns' (Scene I, p. 119) of Belle Reve and replaced them with the 'flashing lights' of New Orleans. (Indeed, she, unlike her husband, does not care even that the plantation house is lost to the family.) She presumably also rejects the abhorrent archaic and racist beliefs indicated by Blanche's sentiments that the Polish

are 'something like Irish' (Scene I, p. 124) and her virtual snubbing of the African American neighbour. Her loyalty sways between Blanche and Stanley, defending him when his behaviour is condemned as ape-like but protecting her when aspersions are cast on her sexual history. However, she must finally make a choice, and Stella seems ultimately to reiterate the choice she made in marrying Stanley before the play's beginning: she believes his version of events in the penultimate scene over Blanche's accusation of rape. However, she pays possibly the highest price of anyone in the play for this: the constant guilt of condemning her sister to the living death of the psychiatric ward. And this is our greatest clue to deciphering where Williams' sympathies lay in terms of the conflict of values.

Activity

4. Draw up a graph, divided into 11 stages, and plot on it where Stella's loyalties lie at the end of each scene. (AO2/5)

For Blanche beautiful things are a kind of antidote to modern, urban life and all its ugliness. This is true of objects, in the shape of her valise's contents, behaviour, in the form of her expectation of 'proper' etiquette, propriety and 'tender feelings' and even her language, laced as it is with references to literature and poetry and allusions to music and art. Of course, Stanley stands for the opposite of all this in every way. The weakness of this situation for Blanche is that all her beautiful possessions are fake in one way or another: the white dress she first appears in belies her impurity; the jewellery is made of paste; the fox pieces are faux fur; even the Chinese lantern is only a piece of cheap tat. Likewise, her desire for good manners is lost on the population of the quarter and her language loses what influence it had when the constant need to explain it only makes those to whom it is addressed feel inferior and resentful. In the face of Stanley's values Blanche's desire for beauty to prevail over reality (whatever it looks like) is doomed: he cannot tell fake fur or diamonds from the real thing, and, as with the ownership of Belle Reve, he only cares about them in monetary, materialistic terms. He knows he is entitled in law to half of everything and cares only about this, not any sentimental or nostalgic attachments the property might have, nor what it may have stood for. Williams is then showing us that while his sympathies can only lie with Blanche's values, he also realises that they are not without fault and, more importantly, that modern ways of living and beliefs doom them to be crushed by the so-called progressiveness of the Stanley Kowalskis of this world. Brutality destroys the fragile ones who do not bow to its will, just as Allan Grey's beauty and talent are destroyed by Blanche's reactionary intolerance of his true nature.

Activitiy

5. Find a quotation for each of the four main characters which could act as a motto, demonstrating their core beliefs. (AO1/5)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 1, 4, 5 and 19

Time

Blanche: ... Physical beauty is ... ` transitory possession. But beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart ... aren't taken away, but grow! Increase with the years. (Scene X, p. 211)

Time can be considered in a number of ways in the play. Williams, as we have seen, adapts the Aristotelian tragic concept of **unity of time**, organising the action over one summer rather than one day; events in the past, before this summer commences, have a tangible impact upon the present action itself; finally, there is the inevitable process of ageing, such a crucial factor in Blanche's self-image, and, therefore, one of the main drivers of that action. These forces relate to and affect each other dynamically.

Blanche's arrival in May, late spring, can be linked to hope, albeit a slim one of redeeming herself and finding some shelter from the tempestuous events that have characterised her life. This hope fluctuates through the 'spring' phase of the play (Scenes I–VI) but once her birthday arrives and Stanley has shared his selective findings about her past, there is only a rapid decline into despair and catastrophe during the 'autumn' phase of Scenes VII–XI. The past threatens to intervene throughout the earlier part: we literally hear this expressionistically through the polka tune and gunshot in Blanche's mind. Once it really features in the play's reality events quickly overwhelm Blanche's mental stability. Roger Boxill links this closely to the two poker game scenes noting that Stanley is losing the card game in Scene III and ends up 'isolated from the group' and reliant 'upon the clemency of his wife'. This is reversed, however, in Scene XI when he is winning money and she, Blanche, 'thrown upon the kindness of strangers'. In short, the past has destroyed Blanche's future. Each scene is a kind of miniature version of this with Blanche (notwithstanding the rising arc of tension in the play overall) repeatedly starting in a state of relative calm and optimism and ending in hopeless pessimism after being in some way reminded of her life at Belle Reve or Laurel. Aptly, the birthday party reflects this shift in hope too: for Blanche it is a celebration which guests do not attend and in which the candles of the cake mock rather than mark her real age, while for Stanley it transforms into a reminder of his great conquest of Stella and which he intends to celebrate in the same way with gaudy pyjamas and random acts of destruction.

Activities and Further Reading

1. Imagine you have been asked to produce a two-hour TV adaptation of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. You must insert four commercial breaks. Where would you put them to best help convey the importance of time passing? (AO2)
2. Choose at random and reread one scene from the first phase of the play and one from the later part. How are the ideas of spring/rebirth and autumn/dying conveyed through stage directions, characters' language and other expressionistic devices in each of these two scenes? (AO2/5)
3. Read the Roger Boxill chapter (*Tennessee Williams; Macmillan Modern Dramatists* (London: Macmillan, 1987)). How does it affect your understanding and personal response to the play? (AO5)

If Scene X marks Stanley's ultimate victory over his sister-in-law, then it, and indeed the whole play, can be read equally as the triumph of the modern, urban America over the ancient, rural one. Blanche's 'southern belle' demeanour is dismissed as fake by Stanley but it is real in her own mind and is created by what she has inherited from her ancestors: a belief in the importance of gentility, propriety, etiquette and social hierarchy. Even today, part of the American psyche looks back on that world with a kind of sentimental nostalgia. The sticking point of course is that that world ended with the south's defeat in the American Civil War, 80 years before the action of the play begins and probably about half a century before the Du Bois sisters were born. Its values, like its wealth and social structures, were swept away. In the material world it was safe, even comforting, for Americans to look back fondly and with a selective memory on that era, secure in the knowledge that it had been replaced with more progressive and enlightened ways. The slavery, snobbery and decadence of antebellum society could be ignored in the popular consciousness while its superficial qualities could be romanticised. Blanche, in her dramatic reality, has no such luxury: insofar as she functions on a day-to-day basis it is thanks to the belief in and practice of some of the outward modes of behaviour of her nineteenth-century ancestors' world view. Therefore, her destruction is a historical inevitability: unlike Stella, she refuses to be 'pulled down' from those columns; on the contrary she clings onto them. She may be able intellectually to realise that the house at Belle Reve was lost by the 'epic fornications' of generations of 'improvident' male ancestors, she may even appreciate the irony that

it now exists in name only and as a sheaf of paperwork in the hands of a blue-collar worker who represents the unsentimental egalitarianism that has replaced her own mawkish yearning for aristocracy, but instinctively she desires nothing more than to retake her birthright as the daughter of such a home. She, however, like anyone, cannot outrun reality or swim against the tide of history for long and this is signalled at the end when the next generation (whose existence has begun symbolically the day after Blanche's final psychological destruction) is swaddled in a blue blanket, suggesting that the Kowalskis continue into the future while the Du Bois are left behind in the past.

Blanche's desire to hang on to her antebellum illusion is perhaps most eloquently and poignantly expressed just before she is most under threat from Stanley, alone in the apartment in Scene X, when she delivers her 'beauty of the mind and richness of the spirit and tenderness of the heart' speech (on p. 211). This is a sentiment with which no feeling audience could disagree but simultaneously it is a signal that she is an anachronism and is historically out of place. In the context of Stanley's imminent fatherhood it sounds like a dying plea for her values and it comes, ironically, on what might, by some calculations, be Blanche's thirtieth birthday. Such a significant anniversary would certainly make her fear of ageing all the more acute. She tries to fend off the physical signs of age by hiding in the half-light and shading the harsh glow with the Chinese lantern but she cannot so easily protect herself from the outside world's perception of a woman who (in the 1940s) would have been regarded as reaching the start of middle age and passing the end of youth. Such a woman, unmarried and childless, would be considered as having missed the roles of wife and mother for which she had been 'naturally' intended and as such she would be viewed as marginalised and irrelevant. Whatever personal qualities she may possess, Blanche knows that the things that matter in a world made in the Kowalski image are the things that her sister has acquired at a point five years earlier than the one she herself is at. In this context, all her behaviour can be interpreted as an attempt to use the one thing she still just about has – her fading sexual allure – to stave off the consequences of ageing: she has 'put out' (Scene V, p. 171) for the young recruits from the army base to temporarily disregard it; she preys on the young boys (be they her own students or collector for the *Evening Star*) as a kind of insulation from it; and worst of all her relationship with Mitch is a way of avoiding its social consequences for good, albeit one that would be based on a kind of tepid parody of love and passion. In such a marriage she could at least keep up the illusion that time would not defeat her on all fronts. Such a marriage would have kept up the illusion of Belle Reve for another generation, just as it would also have made Blanche's advancing age irrelevant. However, it would also have suggested a future for her and this would have undermined Williams' carefully constructed unity of time.

Further Reading

4. Read or watch some of the films or texts mentioned in the 1930–1950 part of the Timeline, such as *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Gone with the Wind* or *The Iceman Cometh*. Think and make notes about how these cultural products of the mid twentieth century present America, especially its antebellum southern states. Are they more realistic or do they romanticise the life for which Blanche yearns? (AO3/4)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 1, 5, 6, 7, 14 and 15

Social Class

Blanche: I have to ask him to close the bathroom door. That sort of commonness isn't necessary.
(Scene VI, p. 181)

In American literature of the mid twentieth century, social class is rarely a major theme in the way that it was on the other side of the Atlantic, for example in the novels of D H Lawrence or the plays of J B Priestley. When it does feature it is rarely rendered in such a straightforward way as British writers addressed it. After all, America was (or at least aimed to be) a society where 'all men are created equal'. This might be a problematic statement when viewed through the prisms of race or gender (which are considered elsewhere in these notes) but is nonetheless quite a useful one when considering how relative social classes affect the action of *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

Activity

1. In terms of social class (i.e. disregarding race, gender and sexuality for the purposes of this task) are all men and women in the text 'created equal'? (AO1/3/5)

It might be said that the conflict between Blanche and Stanley does not so much spring from their differing social positions as from the relative importance they each place on that subject. Stanley ignores class (insofar as he is allowed to), declaring that 'Huey Long said – 'Every man is a King!'' Scene VIII, p. 195). This is a clear rejection of the idea that the individual is created by the circumstances they are born into and a strong assertion that one determines one's own place in society. Blanche on the other hand pigeonholes people according to their social position from the beginning of the play, replying in monosyllables to Eunice's friendly conversation because she looks down on her, and this in a city that seems to accept all people and give them an opportunity regardless of their status. Perhaps what isolates Blanche is not the class she comes from but the importance that she alone places on class in the first place.

It is easy to explain the difference in Blanche's class by saying that she arises from the declining rural aristocracy and insists on hanging onto a version of that identity, while every other character in the play is of the rising 'blue collar' working classes, or, like Stella, has willingly joined its more egalitarian community. This is expressed in the first meeting between Blanche and Eunice when they discuss Belle Reve: the prosaically named Mrs Hubbell responds to it as merely a material place and sees the practical problems of it being 'hard to keep up' (Scene I, p. 119), rather like a servant (or more likely a slave) would; on the other hand, for Miss Du Bois, a far more poetic name, the plantation represents a kind of dream that has protected her and her family for generations. This exchange anticipates other episodes which separate Blanche from her fellow inhabitants of the quarter. The first of these is Stanley's response to the contents of her valise when he is unable to distinguish false pearls from the real thing and cheap fox furs from their high-quality equivalents. More tellingly still, Mitch, unlike his former army comrade, attempts to play the role of the gentleman but does so in such a way as to accentuate rather than bridge the social chasm that divides him from Blanche: he is socially awkward, tries to dance with Blanche but ends up resembling a bear more than a beau, talks about topics which would be deemed unfit for polite conversation back on the plantation such as sweating and, worst of all, his questions about Blanche's weight would be taken as an insult were she not so desperate to secure a proposal from him. These actions and comments, mainly from Scene VII, could be viewed as comedic but his costume in Scene X is a far less ambiguous and powerful statement of his working-class identity and as such a strong rejection of the roles that she has tried to project upon him.

Dress, indeed, along with language, is a significant discriminator of class in the play. Stanley and Blanche both use the former to make statements about themselves, he by the gaudy and primary colours that assert his territorial rights, along with his unconscious attitude to his working clothes and their removal in front of any company, she by her deliberately dainty wardrobe of choice which so distinguishes her from every other character in the play. Linguistically they are equally poles apart: her speech is laced with educated **allusions**, references and even French sayings, beautifully constructed and wittily deployed; his speech is **figurative** to some extent but essentially earthy and ungrammatical. Stella could be said to be neutral when it comes to both language and dress: she presumably has a similar education to her sister but favours a more straightforward though still grammatically correct mode of speech; her dress is rarely described in the stage directions (whereas the two principals' costumes are always a detailed focus for Williams).

Allusions:
an expression or action that reminds the audience of something without explicitly mentioning it (such an explicit mention would make an allusion a reference)

Figurative:
action or (more typically) language which represents an idea by metaphorical means

Activities

2. Find the first detailed description of both Blanche and Stanley's appearance. What clues are you given to their social classes? (AO2)
3. Create a flow diagram of Mitch's appearances in the play. For each entry note down observations about how Mitch is trying to fit into the role of a gentleman that Blanche tries to impose on him. (AO1/2)
4. Find all the literary references and allusions that Blanche makes and all the clichés and obvious metaphors used by Stanley. Look closely at the ones that they use in each other's presence. What effect does each statement have on the listener? (AO2)

Outlook, interaction, language and dress are all indicators that Blanche cannot leave the past behind, not just on a personal level but on a far more general political one. To believe in the centrality of social class in 1940s urban America is to be a historical anachronism and as such links Blanche automatically to her ancestors' 'epic fornications', their distressing deaths and the moral decadence and unwholesomeness which led the Du Bois family to such a state of decline in the first place. She may believe that a dose of Kowalski blood could somehow renew their vigour and relevance but this in itself is a hopelessly dated aristocratic view that reduces human beings to the level of the animals they would have owned and bred on the plantation: birth and inheritance do not matter, it is one's own initiative and drive that count in Stanley's world. For his part he points out the hypocrisy of such views as Blanche's when in Scene VIII he challenges (ungrammatically of course) the sisters' seemingly resurgent Belle Reve sensibilities: 'Pig – Polack – disgusting – greasy!' Them kind of words have been on your tongue ... too much around here! What do you two think you are? A pair of queens?' (p. 194). His world is one which is encapsulated in the poker game. It is competitive, unsubtle and ultimately self-centred. Moreover, it is ordered according to personal strength (sometimes physical but always in a way material) not birthright and the appearance of civility. Stanley's 'commonness' far from being unnecessary, is irrelevant.

Activity

5. Research the culture of the plantation-owning aristocracy in the pre-Civil War southern states of the USA. How does their way of life no longer fit in with twentieth-century urban values? (AO3)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 3, 4, 7 and 10

Violence

Blanche: ... Don't – don't hang back with the brutes! (Scene IV, p. 164)

Violence is certainly not an unusual occurrence in the quarter, let alone the Kowalskis' apartment. The transparent back wall in Scene X reveals the true nature of New Orleans street life with a prostitute fighting a drunkard. Even when Stanley attacks Stella, none of their friends or neighbours is shocked. They allude to similar episodes in the past but do not see it as anything other than an unremarkable part of Stanley and Stella's relationship. Indeed, the rapidity with which Stella returns to her husband's bed suggests that even she sees it as the obverse side of the same feelings which make their marriage so passionate. The incident does however reveal the real Mitch behind the gentlemanly pose he has adopted for Blanche's benefit. Firstly, he is impotent in the face of violence, only capable of uttering the same placatory phrase about poker not being played in front of women over and again. Secondly, his readiness to assure Blanche that it meant nothing in the wider context of her sister's marriage suggests that he has seen it many times before and that at heart it means little to him. He is wrong, of course, about its significance to his friends' relationship because it is one of a few hints that suggest that the Kowalskis' marriage is taking on a similar pattern to Steve and Eunice's and is destined to turn out the same.

More significant than this one incident, however, is the pattern of which it is part: violence is a rising tide in the play. Indeed, the level of physical aggression and destruction accelerates throughout, albeit not always at the same rate. The first hint of it is very near the beginning of Scene I, when Stanley tosses the bloodstained packet of meat to his wife. This is almost an affectionate gesture and foreshadows other acts but from this point the aggression builds in both intent and symbolic significance up to the point where it is used to physically violate and mentally destroy Blanche: the 'playful' slap Stanley gives Stella is meant to be a fond gesture but it is one that humiliates her as an act of possession; this is quickly followed, still in Scene III, by the aforementioned offstage blow that Stanley inflicts on his pregnant wife out of sheer uncontrolled anger. There is then no more actual physical violence until Stanley hurls the plate on the ground in Scene VIII; this, too, is an act of possession which asserts his territorial and marital primacy.

Activities

1. Identify the most violent moment in each of the 11 scenes. Do you notice any patterns? (AO2)
2. Women are nearly always the victims of violence in the play. Is this true of every example? Explain your answer. (AO5)
3. What effect does each violent episode have on the perpetrator? (AO1)

Taken as a simple motif, the violence indicates that Stanley is fundamentally aggressive and unafraid of using his physical superiority to claim his space and assert that '[he is] king around here' (p. 195). Furthermore, its nature generally increasing in magnitude and ill-intent, reinforces the idea that the only logical (and, therefore, inevitable) climax of the play is tragic destruction. However, the lull in the onstage violence between Scenes III and VIII suggests something more subtle is at work. The void it leaves is filled with Stanley's moves against Blanche: his investigation of her past, his hints that he knows about her promiscuity, and ultimately the presentation of the bus ticket that would send her back to Laurel. Williams has convinced the audience in the first three scenes that the play's protagonist is a brute who only needs to strike out physically to enforce his will on both women and on his peers. This is bad enough but when we realise Stanley can inflict unnecessary pain and suffering in a psychological manner too (by sending Blanche back into the very situation which caused her original turmoil) we completely lose sympathy for him. Moreover, we now know that he can be extremely calculating and this shows the rape as not just an abhorrent physical act but as a deliberate gesture of psychological sadism. Ironically then, the absence of violence ultimately presents the play's most violent character in an even worse light: he is more responsible for his calculated actions in Scene X than he is in Scene III when his loss of control is so complete that he does not even remember going berserk and assaulting his pregnant wife.

Activities

4. In the first nine scenes, what is worse in your view, physical violence or emotional cruelty? Explain your answer. (AO5)
5. In which of the two poker scenes (III and XI) do you think Stanley behaves worse? Explain your answer. (AO2/5)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 7, 13, 16 and 17

Race and Ethnicity

Stanley: I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is one hundred per cent American, born and raised in the greatest country on earth and proud as hell of it... (Scene VIII, p. 197)

Famously, Stanley's speech from Scene VIII was cheered and wildly applauded by the original Broadway and cinema audiences but this probably tells us more about America in the 1940s than it does about the play. Race and ethnicity are not key themes in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, but they are instructive in terms of how we perceive the clash of values between the protagonist Blanche and her **counterpoint**, the antagonist Stanley. Firstly, both characters would perceive themselves in the terms laid down by Stanley: they are unquestionably Americans but, like virtually all their countrymen and women, their family heritages come from elsewhere and in terms of their conflict, that is at least part of the crux of the matter. Blanche hails from French Huguenot immigrants, who probably came to America in the eighteenth century or before and whose financial success enabled them to buy Belle Reve, and run it as a plantation (almost certainly holding slaves). This, combined with their religious and highly cultured traditions, means that she perceives herself as part of a genteel aristocratic class which would have sat atop a social hierarchy until its demise at the time of the American Civil War in the early 1860s. The fact that this culture has been dead for 80 years before the start of the play's action does not register in Blanche's consciousness; instead, she wears it proudly and expects others to be impressed by it, and show her respect according to it. Stanley, on the other hand, is presumably the product of far more recent Polish arrivals; probably the parents of a real-life Stanley would have been born in Europe. He does not deny his origins but, as we see above, asserts that they are not as relevant as where he was born and raised and how he identifies. Therefore, their own ethnicities have really been translated into ways of seeing the world: she in terms of class stratification and all the deference that implies, he in terms of social equality and individual liberty.

Counterpoint:
strictly a musical term referring to complementing harmonies but in drama used to mean two characters who oppose one another by also bearing complementary similarities on some levels

Williams may give both characters surnames which strongly link them to their cultural origins – both *Du Bois* and *Kowalski* leave the audience with no doubt where their bearers' families started from and that the two would have very 'different notions' – but this is done to accentuate their different views and values. Similarly, he may want us ultimately to sympathise with Blanche and hear her plea for 'what ought to be the truth' but he initially uses the pair's conflicting attitudes to race and ethnicity to influence the audience in Stanley's favour. Blanche is undoubtedly racist. This is most obviously verbalised by the terms that she uses to describe her brother-in-law, such as 'Polack' (Scene VIII, p. 196), which she does not even use in a consciously insulting way; it is merely a part of her vernacular. When she is being deliberately demeaning towards Stanley – when he is overhearing the sisters' conversation in Scene IV – the terms she uses dehumanise and animalise him. She may not make explicit reference to his ethnicity at this point but the idea of ethnicity as an influence on the individual's character is so strongly part of her world view that the two ideas cannot be disconnected by the audience. It is put most plainly when she describes Stanley as an evolutionary throwback who is 'sub-human' (Scene IV, p. 163). No member of a 1940s audience could possibly have heard this and not been put in mind of the language that less than five years before the Nazis had been using to justify their 'final solution' to the Jewish 'question': the holocaust. Blanche's racist stance manifests itself in other subtler ways too: clearly part of what disconcerts her about the blind Mexican flower seller in Scene X is her ethnic 'otherness' and her attraction to the boy from the *Evening Star* is based in part on what she perceives to be his 'exotic' Eastern origins. Moreover, her reaction to the 'Negro Woman' in Scene I is to withdraw from the offer of friendly conversation even more definitively than she does with Eunice. In Blanche's world the daughter of white plantation owners would not ever be addressed as an equal by any African American, and this episode heavily underlines Blanche's incongruity with her surroundings.

Activities

1. Blanche is usually viewed as the protagonist but might be seen at first as the play's antagonist. Explain why? (AO5)
2. Similarly, explain why Stanley might be seen at first as the play's protagonist. (AO5)
3. What do you find out about Blanche's family background? Why might these factors make them think they were superior to other Americans? (hint: researching social Darwinism will help you to answer this question) (AO3/5)

Stanley, on the other hand, seems virtually oblivious to race. While his friends' language makes casual reference to African Americans unaffectedly using the most offensively racist terms, such words do not come from his lips. Indeed, he sees Pablo, the Hispanic American, as a friend just as much as Mitch or Steve Hubbell, both of whose Anglo-Saxon names suggest they are, like Stanley himself, Caucasian. Therefore, when judged by their racial attitudes Stanley seems a much more acceptable character (especially to a twenty-first-century audience) than Blanche. However, all these moments occur in the first eight scenes of the play, before either Mitch or Stanley attempts sexual assault. They have been used as dramatic techniques by Williams to harden slightly our view of Blanche and (despite his clearly sadistic and violent tendencies) soften our view of Stanley, so that when he does attack her the impact of our change in sympathies is all the greater and, while still disapproving of her racism, we are likely to view it as a symptom of her disturbed and defensive mentality rather than an active evil for which she should be held personally responsible: we still disapprove of such an archaic view of humanity but pity the person who holds it. Stanley's psychological cruelty and physical actions meanwhile – the increasingly violent lashing out, culminating in the rape of Blanche – easily cancel out any positive interpretation we could have placed on his characterisation.

Activities

4. Research racial laws and relations in America in the 1940s. Why does Williams' depiction of New Orleans make it seem different from the rest of the country? (AO3)
5. Why might Blanche's description of Stanley in Scene IV have resonated so negatively with an audience immediately after the end of the Second World War? (AO3)

Relevant Key Questions to this section: 6 and 16

Revision Tips and Themes

1. Although it is very important to know which AOs your examination board will be rewarding when you sit the test, one of the things that they will all be rewarding highly is an extensive knowledge of the play and the ability to embed appropriate quotations into answers frequently to support points. There is absolutely no substitute for this and the only way to acquire this ability truly is by learning a wide range of them, perhaps as many as 50 or more for the entire play. Some candidates find flash cards very useful for this, others write them on sticky notes and post them around the house, some even record them and listen to them on a constant loop.
2. In the examination it is vital that you use your knowledge to answer the question. Practise writing introductions to different past and sample questions. A good introduction will answer the question in a single paragraph, without going into much detail but in such a way as to signal the main arguments to come. Quotations can be used in this section but there is no need to analyse them closely as you would do later in the essay.
3. As with any literary text, many different interpretations of *Streetcar* are possible. For that reason alone you should avoid using definitive language in examination answers. For example, it is much better to say 'Williams seems to be suggesting...', than 'Williams means...'. Any response to a text is ultimately a matter of opinion which is influenced by the time, place and culture that the reader or audience comes from; we can never know precisely what a writer has in mind when they commit a text to publication.
4. The same is true when you are commenting on the context in which a text is produced. It is much better to suggest that Williams' contemporary audience 'would possibly have felt more sympathy for Stanley than Blanche' during the early part of the play, rather than state this as a point of fact such *as 'Williams was writing at a highly misogynistic time so Broadway audiences would have reacted against Blanche's deceptiveness'.*
5. Because the four principals are so dominant in *Streetcar*, it is easy, as an examination candidate to rely too heavily on knowledge of them when you revise or sit the examination. A little more obscure material goes a long way with examiners. For example, use Steve and Eunice's marriage to exemplify contemporary attitudes to gender relations rather than the far more 'spotlighted' Stanley and Stella's.
6. It is always difficult to know whether to quote from specific critics (or schools of criticism – feminist, Marxist, etc.) when answering an examination question. There is no compunction to do so, indeed no mark scheme ever demands such an approach. However, it is useful to be able sometimes to allow a critical quotation to express an argument more succinctly than you are able to yourself. In short, only use material in this form if it suits your argument (or if it opposes your argument and you wish to counter it); it should form an 'organic' part of your own essay and not be something you use just to show an examiner that you have done some critical reading.
7. Similarly, it is acceptable to refer to different film or stage versions of the play but do not allow these to 'drive' your essay. Firstly, films are often significantly different from the published version of the text that you have studied. It can be worth mentioning why this is – Kazan 'softened' the ending of his 1951 version by having Stella's rejection of Stanley's advances made crystal clear, a resolution which was much more acceptable to the contemporary film censorship rules – but this is only valid if it serves analysis of the text itself. So it would be okay to suggest that this ending confirms that Stanley has paid a high personal price (losing Stella's affections) but it would not be appropriate to then go off on a tangent that basically considered the film itself or the rules that Kazan was working under.
8. Finally, writing practice essay answers, whether based on past questions or questions from this pack, is important but can be overdone. When you write one you should ideally ask your teacher to read it and give feedback before attempting another. There is no point doing multiple essays and making the same mistake every time; this just reinforces the error.

Some 'Top Tips' to attain A or A*

- Essay style is very important: read all the sample answers in this pack (not just the ones that apply to your specification) to gain a feel for how to write in a detached, academic and appropriate style and register.
- Always keep the question in focus.
- Less can be more: the candidate who writes a little less but convinces an examiner that they knew exactly what they wanted to say in an answer will do better than one who writes pages and pages but seems to be extemporising (i.e. developing their thoughts as they write the essay).
- To that end it is better to spend some time thinking and jotting down broad headings before starting to write your examination essay.
- Often candidates' best points arise in their conclusions. Avoid this by deciding what you are going to say at the start and signalling (or signposting) your main points in the introduction.
- The introduction should also strongly express your opinion but hint that other views also exist. You can then explore these 'other views' briefly in your second paragraph before returning to your own argument having dismissed them.
- This approach is always better than writing an essay which seems to be dealing equally with both sides of an argument before 'making your mind up' in the conclusion.
- For a conclusion, try to focus on how the specified character or theme is left at the end of the play. (To do this of course you will need to avoid dealing with the ending earlier in the essay but this also is a part of planning your answer briefly before starting the essay proper.)
- Spend any time at the end of the exam checking your essay. Proofreading to correct technical errors (missing apostrophes, for example) does not hurt but a better use of these precious minutes is to try to make your expression more precise so as to ensure that your argument is as clear as you can possibly make it.

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