

A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Tennessee Williams

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams in Columbus, Mississippi, on 26 March 1911. Williams's childhood was not a happy one and, at the age of 14, he 'discovered writing as an escape from the world of reality' in which he felt 'acutely uncomfortable' [1]. Plagued by childhood illness and regarded as a 'sissy' by his father, Williams developed an 'excessive attachment' to the female members of his family, and his female characters are clearly drawn from his close observations of these women.

Williams worked for a time as a clerk in a shoe factory, a period he later described as a 'living death'. His interest in writing re-emerged when he met a group of poets; he enrolled at the University of Iowa and began to write plays. He left home at the age of 28 and settled in New Orleans where he changed his lifestyle and his name. His new name dissociated him from early inferior work published under his real name, and had also been a college nickname, chosen because his father was from Tennessee. In 1940, Williams began working on a play called *The Gentleman Caller*, which evolved into *The Glass Menagerie*. It opened on Broadway in 1945, revolutionising American theatre. In 1947 his second masterpiece, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, won him his second New York Drama Critics' Circle Award and his first Pulitzer Prize. Williams died in 1983, at the age of 71.

OVERVIEW

A Streetcar Named Desire provides an intense and dramatic account of a woman's struggle with the effects of devastating loss and with her own fragile mental state. 'Streetcar' suggests a journey, and Blanche's arrival and departure at the beginning and ending of the play represent stages of a journey that is both physical and psychological. Through the confrontation between

Blanche DuBois and Stanley Kowalski the play 'tracks' Blanche's tragic journey towards exclusion, insanity and her ultimate destination, death: as she observes, death is the 'opposite' of desire (p.206).

Stanley sets out to expose and evict Blanche, resenting her intrusion into his territory and her flirtation with Mitch. After Mitch rejects her, Blanche slips further into her fantasy world. Being raped by Stanley drives Blanche over the brink, leaving her with nowhere to go except a mental institution. Stanley's triumph over Blanche is also a metaphorical representation of the inevitable demise of the romantic, gracious and decadent 'old South'. Yet Stanley's victory is a hollow one, as the tensions unleashed by the conflict between Blanche and Stanley are only very tenuously resolved by her departure.

BACKGROUND AND SETTING

Historical and social context

The 'easy intermingling' of races in Elysian Fields (stage direction, p.115) suggests a degree of racial tolerance in a society where racist attitudes still exist, and institutionalised racial segregation was only ended as an official practice after the prolonged efforts of civil rights activists. Many of the activists' efforts were acts of civil disobedience, such as Rosa Parks's refusal in 1955 to give up a seat in the black part of a bus to a white person. As of 2005, not all racial segregation laws had been repealed in the United States. For instance, the Alabama Constitution (Section 256) still mandates that:

Separate schools shall be provided for white and colored children, and no child of either race shall be permitted to attend a school of the other race.
[2]

Cultural setting

The postwar period in the United States was a politically conservative one. When WWII ended in 1945, women who had entered the workforce during the war were expected to return to their homes or to their traditional 'women's jobs'. Powerful 'cultural forces, the mass media and government policies [worked] to limit American middle- and upper-class women to the roles of housewife and mother only' [3]. These roles are highlighted by the values of the female

characters in *Streetcar*. Stella willingly embraces a traditional domestic role and Blanche is desperate for the 'protection' of marriage.

Patriarchal society

The play's 'larger' cultural setting is, of course, patriarchal society, with its restrictive gender roles and fear of 'the other'. While New Orleans is represented as tolerant, the values of patriarchal ideology, with regard to gender, are clearly endorsed. Stanley is stereotypically male: sexually potent, physically strong, competitive and assertive (to the point of aggressiveness). Blanche reminds us of the attributes traditionally valued in women. Recognising the value placed by society on beauty, youth and virtue in women, she is obsessive about her appearance, lies about her age and maintains a facade of virtue. Blanche is a tragic victim of her adherence to society's expectations of women.

Sexuality

The culture of homophobia was strong in the 1940s and 50s. The tragic fate of Blanche's first husband, whose desperately inappropriate marriage fails to 'cure' his homosexuality, is an indication of how strongly homosexual men felt compelled to conceal their identities. When the film was released in 1951, the two major changes demanded by the censors related to Stanley's rape of Blanche and the homosexuality of Blanche's husband, Allan Grey. Nevertheless, we can assume that film audiences at the time understood the meaning of Blanche's statement that she had 'lost all respect for [Allan]' [4].

GENRE, STRUCTURE AND STYLE

A Streetcar Named Desire is a powerful, one-act play of eleven scenes. The action takes place largely within the cramped space of Stella and Stanley's apartment, emphasising the claustrophobic atmosphere created by Blanche's presence. The action occurs in the present, although the past is strongly evoked through Blanche's dialogue and often intrudes through sounds such as the 'Varsouviana' and the gunshot.

Structure

The narrative events unfold over about six months (from Stella's early pregnancy to the birth of her child) although steadily rising tension and a sense of impending crisis compress the action and make the time span appear much briefer. Each scene has a moment of dramatic climax and an uneasy resolution, increasing in intensity as the play progresses and leading inexorably to the rape scene. Blanche's departure signals the end of her journey, and unresolved tensions from the previous scene linger beyond the ending of the play.

Language

Perhaps the most noticeable feature of the play's language is the difference between the dialogue of Blanche and Stanley. Blanche's dialogue often contains sexual innuendo but it is also poetic and is littered with references to literature – poetry in particular. Blanche's complex and often ambiguous language evokes not only the decadence but also the grace and charm of the 'old South'. Williams's own style is poetic, particularly in his descriptions of setting, where he continually evokes the senses in describing the sounds and sights of New Orleans.

In contrast to Blanche, Stanley is outspoken to the point of bluntness. His colloquial language and working-class vocabulary separate him from his higher-class wife and sister-in-law but he is perversely proud of his humble social status, equating it with his virility. Williams demonstrates the strong connection between language and status, and indeed between language and identity, as the characters define themselves and others through the ways in which they use language.

Style

Many elements of Williams's style are evident in his use of language but other stylistic features are connected with the ways in which he challenges the conventions of the genre. Williams experiments with non-naturalistic representations of human experience through stage effects, particularly those which represent Blanche's descent into madness. This forces audiences to look beyond the plight of individual characters and to consider the wider implications

of the issues being explored on the stage. Insistent polka music, sinister jungle noises, blaring trumpet sounds and ‘shadows and lurid reflections’ invite the audience to experience Blanche’s terror as Stanley menaces her. In the rape scene, the walls of the flimsy apartment ‘become transparent’ and a violent exterior world merges terrifyingly with a threatening interior one. Departures from ‘naturalism’ also draw audience attention to the play as a ‘construct’, again looking beyond the characters and commenting on the poignancy of the human condition.

Other significant elements of Williams’s style include detailed stage directions with strong sensory imagery; the background sounds of tamale vendors and flower sellers; the constant ‘tinkling’ of the blue piano and the roar of locomotives. These elements all help to create a vibrant (and often threatening) sense of place. Colour imagery in Blanche and Stanley’s clothing highlights differences between them and intensifies a sense of foreboding, as these two diametrically opposed characters embark on a tragic collision course.

THE PLOT AT A GLANCE

- Desperate and lonely, Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields in New Orleans to seek refuge with her sister Stella.
- Stanley resents her presence and her interest in Mitch. He and Blanche engage in a struggle for Stella’s loyalty – a struggle which Blanche cannot win.
- Stanley reveals the sordid details of Blanche’s past to Mitch: she has been fired from her job and driven out of Laurel. Mitch later refuses to marry Blanche.
- On her birthday, Stanley presents Blanche with a one-way ticket back to Laurel and Blanche’s instability veers towards madness.
- Alone in the apartment when Stella goes into hospital to give birth, Blanche is raped by Stanley.
- Blanche is forcibly escorted to an asylum as Stanley plays cards and Stella weeps inconsolably.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Blanche

Blanche is vain, snobbish and condescending but always heart-rendingly vulnerable. Married at a young age and with impossibly romantic ideals, and discovering that her young husband was homosexual, Blanche is plagued by guilt and shame: she feels responsible for having 'failed' him (p.183). She is also ashamed of her (socially unacceptable) sexual desires. Increasingly desperate for affirmation of her worth, and finding temporary refuge in 'the kindness of strangers' (p.225), Blanche is sympathetically constructed as a tragic victim of society's expectations of women and her own adherence to these expectations.

Stella

As Blanche's sister and Stanley's wife, Stella is caught between powerful opposing forces and she fulfils the traditionally female role of trying to maintain domestic equilibrium. Her loyalty to Stanley always overrides her loyalty to her sister, partly because Stella has strong sexual desires which Stanley is able to satisfy but also because Stella is totally dependant on Stanley; she is trapped by economic necessity in a marriage which will inevitably become unfulfilling. Her 'luxurious' sobbing at the end of the play (p.226) suggests not only grief for her sister, but also her awareness that Stanley is more than capable of having raped Blanche. Eunice, who comforts Stella after Stanley strikes her, represents the type of woman Stella might one day become.

Stanley

It is easy to see Stanley as the villain of the play, but to do so would be to oversimplify the character and the play. Stanley might initially be seen as a 'working-class hero' and an embodiment of the American dream. He has 'the drive' (p.147) to improve his life and has married an impoverished heiress. Nevertheless, Stanley is a flawed hero, if indeed he is a hero at all; he is a violent bully who hits his pregnant wife and rapes his mentally unstable sister-in-law. Stanley's virile sexuality is his most defining characteristic. Like Blanche, Stanley clearly endorses society's attitudes to gender attributes, and it might be

argued that he, too, is in some ways a victim of social expectations. However, it is difficult to sympathise with Stanley as he shows no remorse for his actions and, in the end, he symbolises the resilience of an oppressive patriarchal ideology which subjugates or expels 'the other'.

Mitch

Mitch is the unlikely romantic hero but there is a degree of awkward gallantry about him which responds instinctively to Blanche's flirtatious 'southern belle' facade. The comic difference between Mitch and more desirable romantic heroes is conveyed in Scene 6, where Mitch refers to his tendency to 'sweat' (p.178). Yet he, like Blanche, is lonely and he initially defends Blanche against Stanley's accusations. Mitch's sympathetic nature responds to Blanche's distress in the final scene. His attachment to his mother also makes him the butt of poker-night jokes, as he, too, departs from a rigid stereotype of masculinity. Blanche sees Mitch as sensitive; he is an honourable character who is simply not strong enough to challenge the conservative values of his society.

VALUES

In any play, the playwright's values can usually be discerned by the way in which characters are either rewarded or punished. In this play, no-one is really 'rewarded', although Stanley might be seen as victorious at the end of the play. He has evicted his enemy and reclaimed his territory. Many of the values he embodies are those that we might sympathise with: for example, his respect for honesty and hard work, his loyalty to his friends, his belief in the sanctity of home, his patriotism and belief in social equality. Stanley dislikes Blanche's pretensions and is proud of pulling Stella 'down off them columns' (p.199). Yet Stanley's apparently acceptable values are tainted by patriarchal ideology, summed up by his belief that 'Every Man is King' (p.195). He 'acts like an animal' (p.163) and is punished by the audience's condemnation, the erosion of his friendship with Mitch and the loss of his wife's trust.

Blanche, on the other hand, loses everything but gains the audience's sympathy. Unlike Stanley, her values are not those we find readily acceptable. She values 'high culture', the past and a world of comforting illusions. She

avoids reality through alcohol and self-deception; she is vain, manipulative and condescending. Yet Blanche's vulnerability, her sheer desperation and her fleeting moments of honesty tip the scales in her favour. Ultimately, Williams invites us to endorse the value of compassion for and acceptance of the outsider. His own status as a sexual outcast might partly explain why, but Williams's appeal for sympathy encompasses all social outcasts whose 'otherness', like Blanche's, maps out a bleak future.

THEMES

Sexual desire

As the title suggests, sexual desire is the driving force of the play: the roles and personalities of the characters are largely defined by the ways in which they express or seek to restrain their desires for others. Stella's strong sexual desires transcend class boundaries and old family loyalties, and her marriage to Stanley allows her to express her sexuality while conforming to social expectations. Mitch's desire for Blanche is temporarily contained by his 'gentlemanly' demeanour, but his frustration with the restrictions she places on their physical intimacy becomes increasingly evident. Stanley's sexuality is a central feature of his character; his inability to contain it within the limits established by conventional moral (and legal) standards is shown when he assaults Blanche at the end of Scene 10.

The exclusion of the sexual outcast

Blanche's sexual desires have made her an outcast in a society which finds female sexuality destabilising, particularly in unmarried women, who are categorised as 'morally unfit' (p.205) if their behaviour is perceived as being excessively promiscuous. Once Mitch learns of Blanche's past he refuses to marry her, leaving her vulnerable and alone – the significance of which is exposed in the following scene when she is raped by Stanley.

Allan Grey is also a sexual outcast: a 'degenerate' (p.190) whose self-loathing (and Blanche's 'disgust') drives him to suicide. He cannot reveal his sexuality but neither can he suppress it. Although Blanche is disgusted, she also feels guilty, not only for precipitating his death but also because of her failure to help

him. In the world of this play, homosexuals, like the mentally ill, threaten society's values and must be either be 'cured' or banished.

Family and society

Blanche: 'You're all I've got in the world, and you're not glad to see me!' (p.121)

The three central characters are linked by strong family ties: Blanche and Stella are sisters from a conservative Southern family, while Stanley and Stella are married and become parents near the end of the play. Yet family is depicted less as a source of comfort and well-being than as a cause of conflict, loss and unhappiness.

Family has clearly been crucial in shaping Blanche's aspirations and personality. The decline of the DuBois family's fortunes and the tragic death of her husband have left her not only with a deep sense of loss, but lacking emotional and financial security. She responds to this situation by acting impulsively and, at times, recklessly, betraying a lack of sound judgment and moral sense. Her desire to cling to an element of glamour in her life leads her to deceive Mitch about her age and her recent life, a deception that ultimately destroys any chance of happiness she might have with him.

Stella, on the other hand, displays more independence and resourcefulness by building a new family with Stanley – although the long-term success of the marriage appears rather doubtful by the end of the play.

Family responsibility

Family responsibility operates on many levels. Blanche's care of her dying relatives, Stella's support of Blanche, her loyalty to Stanley, her maternal responsibility for her child at the end of the play and Mitch's care for his dying mother all affirm the importance of family obligations as well as the difficulties they impose. The play sets up an irresolvable conflict between Stella's loyalty to her sister and to her husband, and questions the values that underpin these conflicting loyalties.

Family and patriarchal values

Mitch articulates the values of patriarchal society regarding uncontrolled sexual desire in women: he insults Blanche by declaring, 'You're not clean enough to bring in the house with my mother' (p.207). The same condemnation does not apply to Stella (who is married), Stanley (whose virility is celebrated), or to Steve Hubbel (whose infidelity is tolerated). The play thus depicts a society which endorses the idea of a nuclear family in which the proper role for a woman is to be a dutiful and subservient partner to her husband, who in turn is very much in command. As Stanley declares, 'I am the king around here, so don't forget it!' (p.195). However, the play repeatedly exposes the flaws and conflicts inherent in such a model – and the harsh way in which this society judges those who do not fit easily into it.

Surviving conflict

Each of the main characters experiences some form of conflict. For Blanche this conflict is primarily internal and psychological, whereas Stella experiences domestic violence. Both are forced to confront a reality that is very different from the circumstances of their upbringing: Stella has been able to fashion a new life for herself, whereas Blanche, who has been more exposed to the deaths of family members and the loss of Belle Reve, struggles to cope. The tension between Blanche and Stanley causes her to become increasingly fragile and vulnerable. When her inner conflict is exacerbated by losing Mitch and being raped by Stanley, she loses the last vestiges of control over her life.

Psychological conflict

Blanche is haunted by scenes of loss and death in her recent past, and she continually seeks to suppress these memories by constructing a world of fantasy and illusion for herself. She covers light bulbs to disguise her true appearance (and age); she lies about why she left her school; her clothes reflect the glamorous style and comfort of the old (white) South rather than her present circumstances and needs.

Blanche's anxiety and insecurity are only worsened by her time living with Stella and Stanley, leading to her eventual incarceration. In effect, the play points to

the cruelty of a society that treats those who are mentally unstable as worthy only of further isolation and exclusion.

Domestic violence

The dark side of Stanley's sexual potency is physical violence, and in appreciating one, Stella is forced to endure the other. She is quick to forgive, however, as Stanley atones through sexual passion. Steve and Eunice's relationship is also occasionally quite violent, and this is perceived as normal, even relatively comical. Society's implicit endorsement, or at least acceptance, of domestic violence is challenged by the play. Stella endures this conflict, but her distress at the play's end suggests that she may not be able to survive it indefinitely.

KEY SCENES

Scene 5

Located almost at the midpoint of the play, Scene 5 occurs immediately after a crucial moment in the power struggle between Blanche and Stanley, where Stella declares her allegiance to Stanley.

Fantasy and reality

The scene opens with Blanche writing to Shep Huntleigh, constructing an imaginary world of 'entertainments, teas, cocktails and luncheons ...' (p.165). Reality, in the form of a violent domestic argument between Steve and Eunice, provides an ironic contrast with Blanche's escapist fantasies. For the first time in the play, Blanche is honest about herself, admitting that she hasn't been 'so good' for the 'last two years or so' (p.169). It is Stella who steers Blanche away from the uncomfortable truth here, accusing her of being 'morbid' (p.169).

Blanche's underlying feelings of guilt and her anxieties about the future are clearly evident – as is Stella's inability to genuinely help her sister. Stella continues to offer support and encouragement, but her commitment to family is primarily to her husband.

The loneliness of the sexual outcast

Blanche redefines her promiscuity as the need to 'court the favour of hard [people]' because she is not 'hard or self-sufficient enough' (p.169). More alarming for Blanche, however, is the existential void she faces following the loss of her home, her family and husband and her job: making love seems to be the only way 'to have your existence admitted by someone' (p.169).

Sexual desire: its impropriety in (single) women

The rowdy departure of Stanley, Stella, Steve and Eunice leaves Blanche alone to await the arrival of Mitch. The stage directions here emphasise the intimacy of their relationships. The interaction between the Negro Woman and the Young Man also resonates with sexual overtones and arouses Blanche's own sexual desire. Her behaviour with the Young Man is highly provocative. Blanche's comment about the cherry soda making her 'mouth water' is deliberately suggestive and finally, unable to restrain herself, she 'presses her lips to his' (p.174). The Young Man's discomfort suggests the impropriety of Blanche's actions, and also establishes a context for Stanley's subsequent assertion that Blanche has been sacked for having a relationship with a seventeen-year-old boy.

Scene 1

- The opening scene establishes several of the main forms of conflict explored by the play: the tension between Blanche and Stanley; Blanche's fragile emotional state; the loss of Belle Reve and related financial pressures; Stella's attempts to please both her sister and her husband.
- Family obligations have been overwhelming for Blanche as various family members have died: for Blanche, family is painfully associated with loss, whereas Stella has married and now occupies a very different social class in order to create a new family.
- The two streetcars Blanche catches to Elysian Fields are called 'Desire' and 'Cemeteries': the play's interest in the dangerous or threatening elements of desire is thus immediately signalled.
- The reason for the early death of Blanche's husband is left unexplained, generating interest and tension.

Scene 11

- The play's final scene only partially resolves its conflicts.
- Blanche succumbs to the combined pressures of internal and external conflict – especially that exerted by Stanley, who has been seeking for months to remove Blanche from his life.
- Stella survives with her family intact, but her future is uncertain and she is inconsolable at the play's end.
- The poker game serves to separate the world of men from that of women, suggesting that the social divide between men and women can cut across family units.
- The 'lurid reflections' that appear on the bedroom walls and the distortion of the 'Varsouviana' music convey the troubled state of Blanche's mind.
- The final line – Steve's 'This game is seven-card stud' – suggests both the men's indifference to the women's suffering, and the notion that life itself is a game rather like poker: characterised by a combination of deception and chance.

TABLE OF EVENTS, CHARACTERS AND THEMES

Narrative Event	Characters	Themes
<i>Scene One</i> Blanche arrives at Elysian Fields; Blanche and Stella discuss the loss of Belle Reve; Stanley arrives home	Blanche, Stella, Stanley, Eunice, Negro woman, sailor, vendor	Threat posed by the outsider Decay of the 'old South' Family conflict and divided loyalties Inevitability of death Threat of female sexuality Enduring effects of the past
<i>Scene Two</i> Stella and Stanley discuss the loss of Belle Reve; Stanley and Blanche's first confrontation	Stella, Stanley, Blanche Tension between Blanche and Stanley is immediately apparent	Destructive effects of family conflict Clash between illusion and reality Clash between the old and the new South

Narrative Event	Characters	Themes
<i>Scene Three</i> The Poker Night: Mitch and Blanche talk; Stanley and Stella fight then reconcile	Stanley marks his territory, pointedly excluding the women Mitch, Steve and Pablo defer to Stanley's authority	The need to conform to social expectations of masculinity Fear of ageing and its implications for unmarried women Power of sexual attraction Domestic violence and its effects on women
<i>Scene Four</i> The aftermath of the poker night; Blanche and Stella discuss Stanley	Stella, Blanche, Stanley Stanley and Blanche compete for Stella's loyalty	Contrasts between civilisation and savagery The loneliness of the outsider Sexual conquest as affirmation of existence
<i>Scene Five</i> Stanley confronts Blanche with evidence of her past indiscretions in Laurel; Blanche kisses the young man from the <i>Evening Star</i>	Blanche, Stella, Stanley, Negro woman, young man Blanche becomes more fearful and desperate	Clash between illusion and reality Fear of ageing and death Sexual conquest as affirmation of existence Dangers of adhering to gender stereotypes
<i>Scene Six</i> Blanche and Mitch return from a date; she tells Mitch about her husband's death	Blanche and Mitch Blanche uses stereotypically 'feminine wiles' to 'ensnare' Mitch	Sexuality: Blanche's seductive femininity and Allan Grey's 'difference' Blanche's 'failure' as a woman and a wife and the lingering effects of shame and guilt Ageing and the need for financial and emotional security
<i>Scene Seven</i> Stanley prepares to expose and destroy Blanche	Stanley, Stella, Blanche Blanche is happy about the prospect of marrying Mitch	Clash between illusion and reality Need to protect the sanctity of home Need to expel the sexual outcast
<i>Scene Eight</i> Mitch fails to arrive for Blanche's birthday dinner; Stanley gives Blanche a one-way ticket back to Laurel; Stella's labour begins	Stanley, Stella, Blanche Blanche becomes increasingly unstable	Clash between reality and illusion Unresolved family tensions and the potential for domestic violence
<i>Scene Nine</i> Mitch arrives and confronts Blanche; Blanche becomes hysterical and Mitch leaves	Mitch, Blanche, Mexican woman The confrontation with Mitch destroys Blanche's hopes	Truth and lies: the difficulty of establishing clear boundaries Inevitability of death Loneliness and vulnerability of the outsider
<i>Scene Ten</i> Stanley rapes Blanche	Stanley, Blanche The violent rape is a brutal assertion of Stanley's power over Blanche	Shattering of illusion and its catastrophic effects Destruction of the outsider The punishment of the 'sinner'

Narrative Event	Characters	Themes
<i>Scene Eleven</i> Stella packs Blanche's bag; Blanche is escorted out by the doctor; Mitch angrily confronts Stanley; Stanley soothes Stella	Blanche, Stella, Eunice, Stanley, Mitch, card players, doctor, matron Entire cast witnesses Blanche's eviction	Restoration of stability through the expulsion of the outsider

TABLE OF IMAGES, IDEAS AND VALUES

Key images	Ideas	Values
<i>Scene One</i> 'Blue piano' music; the polka 'Varsouviana' Package of meat Blanche's 'dainty' white clothing; her 'moth'-like appearance Alcohol 'Richly feathered male bird' and 'gaudy seed bearer' (Stanley)	Importance of appearances Differences between civilisation and savagery, the poetic and the prosaic, past and present	Community, comradeship, an easy-going lifestyle; these values are endorsed by the play The refinement and gentility of a gracious past is set against the vitality and egalitarianism of a new social order 'Home' as the man's territory – asserted by Stanley and endorsed by Stella
<i>Scene Two</i> Perpetual 'blue piano' music Blanche's continual 'bathing' Clothing and jewellery Cigarettes Legal papers Love letters Tamale vendor	The need to belong Sexual tension The old and the new South Past and Present	The need to 'belong' and the preoccupation with 'papers' and documents reveals the values of both sexual and political refugees American society's capitalist values
<i>Scene Three</i> Poker game Van Gogh's painting Alcohol, cigarettes Coloured paper lantern 'Paper Doll' played on the 'blue piano', dissonant brass and piano sounds	Conflict between the masculine and the feminine Appearance and reality Violence	The clash between 'civilised' values and the vitality of the 'primitive': the playwright clearly values the civilised and the poetic, but also recognises the power of the primitive
<i>Scene Four</i> Street cries resembling a 'choral chant' Stella's exotic appearance Stanley's 'gaudy' pyjamas Smashing of light bulbs The train (sound) 'Blue piano', trumpet and drums	Inevitability of fate Sex and romance Loyalty	Clash between the poetic and the prosaic

Key images	Ideas	Values
<p><i>Scene Five</i> Astrological signs Butterfly wings Alcohol Negro woman Young man Cigarettes</p>	<p>Family tension Need for belonging Youth and aging Sexual desire Desperation of loneliness</p>	<p>The 'invisibility' of ageing women</p>
<p><i>Scene Six</i> Alcohol French language The train (sound) Polka music Light and dark</p>	<p>Seduction Need for security Loneliness</p>	<p>Society's attitudes to ageing, unmarried women: objects of pity or derision in a patriarchal society Need for unmarried women to create illusions</p>
<p><i>Scene Seven</i> Bathing 'Paper Moon' and 'blue piano'</p>	<p>Importance of home and family Women's salvation through marriage</p>	<p>Society's condemnation of sexual desire in unmarried women as destabilising to the sanctity of home and family</p>
<p><i>Scene Eight</i> Sunset Birthday candles 'Varsouviana' Fading light</p>	<p>Inevitability of fate Retribution against the sinner Ejection of the outsider</p>	<p>Society's condemnation of sexually active women</p>
<p><i>Scene Nine</i> 'Varsouviana' and 'blue piano' Alcohol Sound of a gunshot Light and dark Paper lantern Blind flower-seller</p>	<p>Inevitable triumph of reality Punishment of the sexual outcast Death</p>	<p>Society's condemnation of unconstrained female sexuality and the dangers of illusion are reaffirmed The play's questioning of these values is implicit in the sympathy evoked for Blanche</p>
<p><i>Scene Ten</i> Alcohol Vivid green silk bowling shirt, red silk pyjamas Honky-tonk piano music, jungle noises, 'blue piano' Prostitute and drunkard Negro woman Telephone</p>	<p>Sex and violence Unsustainability of illusions Punishment of the sexual outcast Ejection of the outsider</p>	<p>Dominance of the masculine over the feminine and the resilience of repressive patriarchal values The play's condemnation of the enforcement of patriarchal values</p>

Key images	Ideas	Values
<i>Scene Eleven</i> Poker game Blanche's red satin bathrobe and Della Robia blue jacket The 'Varsouviana', 'blue piano' and muted trumpet Chiming cathedral bells Jungle noises Paper lantern	Kindness of strangers Mental illness Importance of home and family Women's financial dependence on men Damaging effects of unreconciled tensions	Values of patriarchal society are questioned – with Williams highlighting both its resilience and its oppressiveness

WRITING ACTIVITIES

The following writing activities will provide ideas or a draft for something that you can develop for your final writing pieces later. Write your notes in your journal or blog and make sure you head them clearly to show how they relate to the theme or idea you are studying.

- Using one of the themes 'Family and society' or 'Surviving conflict', create a table showing how this theme is developed in each of the play's eleven scenes. Note any key images associated with the theme and the characters primarily used in each scene to explore its different facets.
- Rewrite part of the first scene, relocating the action to the present day and a place similar to where you live. Use the everyday language that you use and hear and features of the setting that are familiar to you. How do these suggest aspects of the families and social groups of the area? How will you represent the 'Blanche' character as an outsider?
- Write a letter to Blanche following her institutionalisation. Show your sympathy based on your understanding of her experience of conflict and loss; or criticise her behaviour.

MINOR THEMES

Class difference

Stanley: 'I'm afraid I'll strike you as being the unrefined type.' (p.130)

Proudly lower-class, Stanley has the virility and drive to succeed. He is contrasted with Blanche, whose moral 'decadence' symbolises the degeneracy of the old Southern aristocracy. Yet Stanley is also coarse and violent while Blanche is elegant and refined. In his characterisation of Blanche, Williams reveals his regret for the loss of culture but recognises the inevitability of social change.

The fear of the other

Stanley: [In Laurel, Blanche is] 'Regarded as not just different but downright loco – nuts.' (p.187)

'The other' is the individual who challenges, or who cannot conform to the values of the dominant cultural group – in this play, white, heterosexual men. In order to protect the interests of the dominant group, the 'other' is always demonised and usually evicted.

Property ownership and the notion of territory

Stanley: 'In the state of Louisiana we have the Napoleonic code ...' (p.133)

In post–World War II America, Stanley Kowalski, a war veteran, represents both the brash confidence of victorious America, and the insecurity of the European immigrant seeking to establish 'territory' in the new world. His 'territory' is his home and he defends it with animal tenacity. Blanche's 'territory' is Belle Reve, and its loss leaves Blanche adrift and vulnerable, clinging desperately to a battered trunk which is filled with reminders of a more glamorous and affluent past.

The blurred boundaries between fantasy and reality

Blanche: 'I tell what ought to be truth.' (p.204)

Blanche constantly slips between fantasy and reality, becoming less connected to reality as her chances of marriage diminish. Stella, too, prefers to ignore the truth when it becomes too uncomfortable, while Stanley lives in a world characterised by the illusion that male dominance is 'normal' – an illusion constructed as 'reality' by patriarchal society.

Alcoholism

Stanley: 'Some people rarely touch it, but it touches them often.' (p.129)

Alcohol is a recurring image throughout the play; it dulls Blanche's pain and soothes her nerves. The connection between alcohol and a fantasy world – and Blanche's constant need for both – establish her as an alcoholic and subject her to moral censure. Stanley drinks heavily too, but heavy drinking by men is deemed socially acceptable (even 'manly'), despite a connection between alcohol and violence.

The need for recognition and acceptance

Blanche: '... you've got to have your existence admitted by someone, if you're going to have someone's protection.' (p.169)

As an ageing, unmarried woman, Blanche experiences a kind of existential angst, or deep anxiety, resulting from her confrontation with nothingness, which for Blanche is 'not having your existence admitted by someone'. The choices she makes about being 'seductive' temporarily reaffirm her existence, but she is unable to sustain her efforts to 'shimmer and glow' and faces a terrifying existential void.

The importance of appearances

Blanche: 'I won't be looked at in this merciless glare!' (p.120)

Blanche is not the only character concerned with her appearance. While Blanche seeks to conceal the effects of age, Stanley's appearance loudly proclaims his virility. His green and scarlet silk bowling shirt, worn before he

rapes Blanche, and the red silk pyjamas worn on his wedding night, symbolise his masculinity and sexual potency. Both Blanche and Stanley recognise the importance of appearances in constructing a socially acceptable facade.

ESSAY QUESTIONS

- 1 “There’s something downright – bestial – about him ...”
How accurate is Blanche’s assessment of Stanley?
- 2 “Afterwards we pretended that nothing had been discovered ...”
‘Blanche is not the only character who refuses to face up to reality.’
Discuss.
- 3 “We’ve had this date with each other from the beginning!”
‘Blanche is a manipulative woman who deserves what she gets.’ Discuss.
- 4 “Inside and out, all lies.”
‘Mitch rejects Blanche not simply because she lies, but because she is essentially an outsider.’ Do you agree?
- 5 ‘What is most interesting about the play is not the story itself, but the way it is told.’ Do you agree?
- 6 “I tell what *ought* to be truth.”
‘The play shows that telling the truth is not always the best thing to do.’
Discuss.
- 7 “Life has got to go on. No matter what happens, you’ve got to keep on going.”
‘The play reveals the dangers of holding on to the past.’ Discuss.
- 8 “‘Every Man is a King!’ And I am the king around here, so don’t forget it!”
‘The women in the play are all victims of a male-dominated society.’
Discuss.

- 9 “... wasn’t it all okay till she showed here?”
‘The play shows that outsiders are a threat and must be expelled.’
Discuss.
- 10 “What have I done to my sister?”
‘The play shows that the family is more important than the individual.’
Discuss.

SPRINGBOARD IDEAS

- Stella is just as lost in a fantasy world as Blanche is.
- We care about Blanche because she symbolises the loneliness of the outsider.
- Is Blanche’s story about Stanley raping her just another one of her inventions?
- Reality will always triumph over fantasy and illusion, and this is the way it *should* be.
- The play is essentially about the eternal conflict between masculine and feminine values.
- Elysian Fields is an appropriate name for where Stanley, Stella, Eunice and Steve live because ...

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

- 1 As the director of a new production of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, tell the actress playing Blanche how you want her to deliver her lines in one of the key scenes, and explain why. You might also refer to other production elements such as lighting, costumes and props.
- 2 Write and present two brief scenes – one in which Mitch tells his sick mother about Blanche after first meeting her; the other (after he finds out ‘the truth’) in which he tells his mother why he cannot marry Blanche.
- 3 Write an extra scene in which Stella visits Blanche at the asylum.
- 4 Write some letters from Blanche to Shep Huntleigh.

- 5 Using props, sound effects, costumes and a PowerPoint set design projected onto a screen, act out a short passage from a key scene and present an analysis of it to the class.
- 6 Working in groups, design a PowerPoint presentation, looking at the imagery in the play. Find symbols or illustrations which represent particular images and include relevant quotes on your slides.
- 7 As the character of Stella, deliver a monologue expressing your feelings about Stanley and Blanche at a significant moment in the play.
- 8 After Blanche leaves, Eunice and Steve Hubbel discuss the events leading up to her departure. What would they say? Write the script (showing an awareness of the characters' and the author's values), act the scene and then present a brief analysis of the scene to the class.
- 9 Design a poster for a new production of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and present it to the class, explaining how your visual imagery highlights key aspects of theme and character.
- 10 Draw a character map, showing your understanding of the characters' relationships and the ways in which the characters embody some of the play's concepts and values.
- 11 Make a 'showbag' of either the key images in the text, or attributes of one of the characters, and analyse the contents of your showbag items for the class.
- 12 Find examples of the 'blues' music and the 'Varsouviana' and other music referred to in the play such as that of the drums and the trumpet. Play them for the class, explaining how they contribute to our understanding of the characters, themes and setting.
- 13 Track the visual and sound imagery through the play. Present your findings to the class, explaining the significance of these images in terms of what is revealed about theme and character.
- 14 As director of a new film of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, look closely at a key scene, explaining how it should be filmed. Discuss features such as music, lighting, sound, *mise en scène*, camera angles and costume.

- 15 Write a review of the film version of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Make brief comparisons with the written text.

ENDNOTES

[1] Tennessee Williams 1962, 'Foreword' in *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics, London, pp.9–10.

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Racial_segregation#USA

[3]

<http://angam.ang.univie.ac.at/roads02/50ies/The%20Political%20Situation%20in%20the%20US.htm>

[4] Steffen Blaschke 1999, *A Streetcar Named Desire – play in comparison with movie*,

<http://stud-www.uni-marburg.de/~Blaschke/williams/asnd.htm>

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Text

Williams, Tennessee, *A Streetcar Named Desire and Other Plays*, Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics, London, 1962.

Film

A Streetcar Named Desire, 1951, Warner Bros. Dir. Elia Kazan, starring Marlon Brando, Vivian Leigh and Kim Hunter.

Websites

http://www.gradesaver.com/classicnotes/authors/about_tennessee_williams.html

<http://www.etsu.edu/haleyd/xch2.html>

This site contains chapter 2 of a dissertation on Tennessee Williams. The chapter is titled 'Promiscuity and Penance: sexual outcasts in A Streetcar Named Desire, Suddenly Last Summer, Orpheus Descending, Sweet Bird of Youth and Confessional'.

http://www.paneris.org/paneris/messageboards/attachments/bibliomania_editorial/Streetcar_NamedEDITED.txt

A study guide on A Streetcar Named Desire.

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Sue Sherman teaches VCE English, Literature and IB English. She has been an assessor of VCE English; currently she is an assessor of VCE Literature and a member of the Literature examination setting panel. Sue has been an Education Officer with VATE, a member of the VATE Curriculum Committee, and a presenter at VATE Literature Conferences and Student Revision days.